

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOSITY IN ACADEMIC SUCCESS:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of RICHARD T. ELMS find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Chair

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between religiosity and academic success in first-year college students. The study employed qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to accomplish this purpose. A purposeful sample of ten first-year college students was selected as participants, five from a community college in eastern Washington state, and five from a major research university. They were asked to describe, from their own experiences, the connection between religion and academic success.

As the study proceeded four major themes emerged from the data. The first theme had to do with the perceived expectations placed upon the students by parents, religion and God. The second theme was concerned with the idea that adherence to religious values and behaviors allowed the students to focus their attention on academic pursuits and not on academic distractions such as partying, sex, drugs, or alcohol consumption. The third theme had to do with their perception that individual religiosity acted as a support system during school. That is, God was always there to assist them to accomplish their school work. The final theme related to the belief that

religion allowed them to see the big picture and how educational success fit into the overall scheme of things.

This study is significant in that it contributes substantive knowledge of the role religiosity plays in academic success. Conclusions and implications resulting from this study may be useful to both college and high school professionals as well as religious leaders.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The college experience is a time of educational, emotional, physical, social, and religious adjustment and change for first-year college students. For the college freshman who is also religious, it can be a time of spiritual exploration and growth, religious self-examination and discovery (McNamara & Nelson, 2005). Religious beliefs that have gone unquestioned under the guidance of parents may become challenged in the halls of academia. Studies show that the college experience tends to “liberalize” students’ views, and this liberalization is often related to weaker religious beliefs that can affect a students’ religiosity (Lee, 2000). College life may bring a deluge of new choices and opportunities that are incompatible with the moral environment in which the religious student was raised. First-year college students often have difficulty adjusting to the rigorous academic demands that accompany higher learning as well as the social pressures to experience the typical college “party” atmosphere.

It is in this atmosphere of college life that many students fail to succeed academically. College dropout rates are alarming high, especially among first-year college students. In some institutions the dropout rate is as high 46% and even higher among Black and Hispanic students (Kelly, 2006; Barefoot, 2004). However, studies show that first-year college students who maintain high levels of religiosity, that is, participate in and conform to the religious beliefs and requirements of a particular denomination, tend to out perform their college peers academically (Jeynes, 2003).

In an effort to understand this phenomenon, this study examines, through qualitative, phenomenologically-oriented inquiry, the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of first-year, academically successful college students who are also religious concerning the connection of academic success and religiosity. Qualitative inquiry was chosen as the method of inquiry because it allows for the researcher to explore how participants interpret real life experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Background

Research indicates that religion plays an important role in the lives of American youth and that there is an observable and measurable association between the religiosity of a student and academic success (e.g., Jeynes, 2002; Markstrom, 1999; VanDenBerghe, 1994). Moreover, studies have shown that individual and familial religiosity correlate with a number of positive attributes, such as self esteem and familial cohesiveness, which directly and indirectly influence a student's potential to succeed academically (e.g., Jeynes, 2003; Loury, 1997; Poston & Turnbull, 2004). For example, the National Study of Youth and Religion (see Smith, 2005) found a significant difference in the attitudes of religiously devoted teenagers compared to religiously disengaged teenagers. Religiously disengaged teenagers were more likely to cut classes, smoke marijuana, drink alcohol, participate in sexual activities, play violent oriented action video games, and receive poorer grades than their religiously devoted counterparts. Furthermore, religiously devoted teenagers were found to be less rebellious, less moody, more physically fit, more goals oriented and enjoy a greater sense of overall personal happiness.

A 2001 master's thesis study (Elms, 2001) discovered that high school students who actively participated in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' (LDS) religious instruction while enrolled in public high school out performed their classroom peers academically. Although the study looked at only one high school, the findings were compatible with other studies that suggest religious students out perform their non-religious peers across a wide range of demographic variables such as race, religion, socio-economic status and gender. The 2001 study showed that the average cumulative GPA for all grades in the high school studied was 2.70, while the cumulative GPA for the LDS students attending religious instruction was 3.36, or .66 points higher than the high school average.

Research Problem

Research has established a relationship between religiosity and academic success in students. Both individual and familial religiosity have been found to correlate positively with academic success. Moreover, this relationship holds constant across the different ethnic groups studied. Previous qualitative research, such as the National Study of Youth and Religion (2003), which explored the religious experiences of adolescents, has not addressed the specific topic of religiosity's relationship to academic success through phenomenological exploration of college students' experiences. Therefore, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between religiosity and academic success, phenomenological inquiry is needed to obtain a richer and broader understanding of this phenomenon.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of academically successful first-year college students who are also religious regarding the connection between religiosity and academic success. Specifically, this study will address the following questions: (a) What are the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of academically successful first-year college students regarding the role of *individual* religiosity in academic success? (b) What are the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of academically successful first-year college students regarding the role of *familial* religiosity in academic success?

Research Methods

Consistent with the purpose of the study and the research questions, this study employs qualitative, phenomenologically-oriented research methods for data collection and analysis. Qualitative research methodology is effective in exploring and portraying the attitudes and perceptions of individuals (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This research methodology allows the researcher to explore, through open-ended questions and dialogue, the complex experiences and attitudes of participants (Creswell, 2003).

The main purpose of phenomenology is to investigate, understand, and describe the meaning of the lived experience of an individual or the lived experiences of a specific group who share a common specific phenomenon. The researcher is concerned with entering the participant's world-view in order to understand the meaning of the phenomenon from the participant's perspective. The researcher then distills the data to collect the essence of the meaning of the lived experience of the

phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

In regard to this study, ten first-year college students were asked to respond, through face-to-face, one-on-one interviews, to questions regarding religiosity's connection to their academic success. Such an approach allowed the researcher to explore the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of these religious students as they related those experiences in their own voices. Specific application of the qualitative research design and methodology will be further described in Chapter Three.

Limitations of the Study

The data for this study were gathered through interviews consistent with the qualitative process of data collection and analysis. Care was taken so that the interviews were conducted in a way that would provide accurate and reliable data. Because the focus of the study was on the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of first-year college students regarding the connection between religiosity and academic success, it was not possible to confirm the accuracy or validity of the participants' perceptions by triangulating with other data sources. An effort was made to overcome this limitation by looking for consistency within and between interview comments. Another possible limitation may be in the selection of participants. Although an attempt was made to find non-Christian participants, none volunteered for the study. The study was also limited to only ten participants.

Significance of the Study

This study is particularly significant in the current educational policy environment of high-stakes testing and accountability legislation such as the federal

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which has called for higher standardized test scores and accountability for educators and schools. Educators have been pressured to raise student scores with the threat of punitive consequences if basic minimal standards for improvement are not met. Furthermore, in Washington State, high school diplomas may be withheld from seniors who do not pass the current Washington Assessment for Student Learning (WASL). In this environment research is needed that addresses the connection between academic success and other factors.

This study contributes substantive knowledge regarding the association between academic success and individual and familial religiosity in first-year college students as well as insight into religiosity and academic success in high school through qualitative inquiry. This knowledge may provide researchers and secondary school administrators with a deeper understanding of the lives of academically successful religious students and the role religion plays in academic success.

Report of the Study

The report of this study consists of five chapters in standard dissertation format. Chapter One is an introduction to the study including a discussion of the research problem, purpose of the study and research questions, limitations of the study, and significance of the study. Chapter Two contains a review of pertinent literature. Chapter Three describes the research methodology, design, and procedures. This chapter also describes site and participant selection procedures. Chapter four contains the analysis of the data and synthesis of the themes that emerged from the data. Chapter Five summarizes and synthesizes the findings of the study, reports

conclusions and implications, and suggest implications for further study. This final chapter includes a list of references that are cited in the text followed by an appendix.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a selective review of the literature that relates to the relationship between individual and familial religiosity and academic success. Topics included in this chapter are: The Relationship Between Individual Religiosity and Academic Success; The Relationship Between Familial Religiosity and Academic Success; and, The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR).

The Relationship Between Individual Religiosity and Academic Success

Religiosity plays an important role in the lives of high school and college age students in the United States with a majority of such students perceiving themselves as religious. Eighty percent of teenagers report a personal belief in God and as many as 55 percent report that they attend religious services weekly (Smith, 2005).

Although selected studies show that college students become less “religiously active” during their first year of college (Lee, 2002), they often remain committed to their religion (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003) and actually increase in personal spiritual conviction (Lee, 2000).

The correlational relationship between religiosity and the academic success of students has been investigated and studied extensively. These studies indicate that religion directly and indirectly influences a variety of factors which contribute to academic success. For example, Jeynes (2003) found that religiously committed

urban youth performed better on most academic measures than their less religious counterparts, even when controlling for socio-economic status (SES), race, and gender. Markstrom (1999) concluded that “school self-esteem,” which was defined as how students feel about themselves at school, was directly connected with higher grades, and was associated with more frequent religious attendance, involvement in a youth group, and involvement in a Bible study group. Similarly, Bagley, Mallick, and Kanka (1997) concluded that high levels of self-esteem were associated with religious participation regardless of the denomination with which the student was affiliated, and high levels of self-esteem directly and positively contributed to high academic success. Johnson (1993) reported that among the most prevalent factors relating to the academic success of African American male undergraduate students were self-esteem, self-concept, and individual religiosity.

DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka (2004) maintained that the freshman year of college presented a stressful transition for students with a multitude of social, academic, and emotional stressors that most college students face regardless of gender, race or socioeconomic status. One strong predictor of academic success and college retention during the freshman year was found to be the ability to identify with a successful subgroup of students such as student athletes or student religious groups. Moreover, Low and Handal (1995) reported that various religion dimensions, such as prayer, Sunday worship, Bible reading, and forgiving others of their faults were significant predictors of various adjustment subscales in college freshmen.

In a survey of youth (age 14-18), VanDenBerghe (1994) concluded that the

more spiritually committed the youth, the more committed they were to future goals such as education and employment. Furthermore, additional studies revealed that religious students graduated from high school and college at higher rates than their non-religious classmates (Park, 2001). Each of these studies suggests a direct positive correlation between individual religiosity and a students' academic success.

Other studies have found that individual religiosity is associated with various factors that have also been shown to *indirectly* influence academic success. One such study found that religiosity was associated with intellectual development, creativity, and prosocial development (Thomas & Carver, 1990). Gallup and Jones (1992) found that an increase in religious practice resulted in an increase of overall happiness among youth; while Cheng and Furnham (2002) reported that student happiness positively correlated with academic success. Landale and others (1998) found a correlation among Mexican and Non-Latino White adolescents between religious affiliation and school-work idleness. They discovered that adolescents reporting higher levels of religious commitment worked harder and were less idle than those who reported having low levels of religious commitment.

When gathering data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (1979), Loury (2004) discovered a correlation between church attendance and years of schooling. Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, and Catholics averaged more years of schooling than those who did not report affiliation with a denomination. Loury concluded that each additional week of church attendance raised schooling by .016 years. In addition, Loury contended that church attendance

increases the likelihood that individuals will complete high school and the likelihood that they will attend college.

Conversely, other studies indicated that there are attitudes and behaviors connected with decreased individual religiosity that contributed to low levels of academic success. For example, low levels of individual religiosity have been shown to correlate with numerous “at risk” behaviors, such as alcohol consumption, illicit drug use, illegal behaviors, and premarital sexual experiences in high school and college students (Larson & Larson, 2000; Sun, 2001; King, Vidourek & Davis, 2002). These “at risk” behaviors were directly correlated with academic under achievement in high school and college students. One example of the prevalence of alcohol consumption on college campuses reported that over three-quarters of first-year University of Alabama students were drinkers, with many of them having alcohol related problems (Lo & Globetti, 1993). On the other hand, the decision not to drink alcohol at a mid-South state university was found to correlate with individual religiosity (Slicker, 1997).

In a study of church involvement and crime rates, Pettersson (1991) discovered an inverse relationship between religion and violent crimes, drug abuse, property crimes, and moral offences in teenagers. Baier and Wright (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of 60 previous studies regarding crime’s relationship to religion. It was found that religious beliefs and behaviors exert deterrent effects on an individuals’ criminal behavior. In addition, a study conducted of 2300 black males raised in poverty in Chicago and Philadelphia found that church attendance has a

significant inverse effect on non-drug illegal activities (Johnson, et al., 2005). In other words, higher religiosity correlates with lower rates of criminal and immoral behavior.

Additional studies have demonstrated a negative correlation between low levels of individual religiosity and alcohol consumption (National Commission on Children, 1991; Stewart, 2001), premarital “risky” sexual behaviors (VanDenBerghe, 1994; Hollander, 2003; Zaleski & Schiaffino, 2000; Poulson, Eppler, & Satterwhite, 1998; Thorton & Camburn, 1989), student drop-out rates (Astin, 1975; Wells, 1990; Wehlade, et al. 1989), marijuana and illicit drug use (Jeynes, 2003; Miller, Davies & Greenwald, 2000; Johnson, Larson, & De Li, 2000), clinical depression (Lau & Lau, 1996; Wright, Frost & Wisecarver, 1993), crime (Benda & Corwyn, 2001), high school and college truancy (Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003), and suicide rates (Clarke, Bannon & Denihan, 2003; Walker & Bishop, 2005).

Dunn (2005) discovered that high religiosity tends to act as a “protective factor” against high-risk behaviors among adolescents, such as alcohol consumption and drug abuse. Zaleski and Schiaffino (2000) described religious identity as a “protective buffer against sexual risk-taking” behavior in first year college students. Good and Willoughby (2006) found that religiosity (defined as church attendance) was related to more positive adjustment satisfaction in youth than was spirituality (defined as personal belief in God or a higher power), and that individual religiosity was associated with lower levels of risk behaviors. Individual religiosity decreases the likelihood of “at risk” behaviors (Poulson, Eppler, & Satterwhite, 1998) and

therefore directly and indirectly supports academic success.

The Relationship Between Familial Religiosity and Academic Success

Numerous studies have been conducted which have established the connection of familial religiosity with academic success in pre-adolescent, adolescent, and post-adolescent students. Familial religiosity has been shown to correlate with various pro-social traits which also foster an environment conducive to academic success (Bean, Bush, McKenry, & Wilson, 2003; Jeynes, 2003; Williams & Lawler 2003). For example, the level of familial religiosity correlates positively with family cohesiveness (Canniff, 2000), marital satisfaction (Williams & Lawler, 2003; Heaton & Pratt, 1990), marital stability (Rambo et al. 1980), socioeconomic success (Loury, 1997), less parental conflict, and academic success among children with developmental disabilities (Poston & Turnbull, 2004). These familial attributes, which have been shown to be connected to religiosity, influence a student's opportunity to excel academically (Bahr & Maughan, 1998).

One study reported that a summary of research on the topic of family and academic success revealed that of all the ingredients necessary to educate youth, the most important component to increasing academic success is parental and family support (Faucette, 2000). Familial religiosity enhances family cohesiveness (VanDenBerghe, 1994), which in turn enhances the likelihood of academic success in students (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005).

Brody (1996) tested a model linking parental formal religiosity to early adolescents' academic competence and socioemotional adjustment. It was found that

greater parental religiosity led to more cohesive family relationships, less interparental conflict, and fewer externalizing and internalizing problems in adolescents. Brody concluded that religiosity indirectly influenced self-regulation through its positive relationship with family cohesion and negative relationship with interparental conflict. Pettersson's (1991) study summarized that religion had a profound effect, both directly and indirectly, on the lives of teenagers. For example, religion was shown to directly affect peer associations and attitudes regarding premarital sex, but had an indirect effect on parental monitoring and alcohol consumption. Moreover, the study revealed that highly religious teenagers appear to be doing much better in life than less religious teenagers.

In attempting to understand the growing gap between the academic success of Black and Hispanic students and the academic success of White students, Jeynes' (2003) used the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) to examine the combined effects of student religious commitment and parental family structures on academic success. Over 24 thousand eighth grade students from 1,052 schools participated in the longitudinal survey over a four year period. The primary purpose of this study was to compare the academic success of Black and Hispanic students who were devoutly religious and who also came from intact families, versus those Black and Hispanic students who did not fall into this category. Although family structure varied, Jeynes concluded that when accounting for all other variables, Black and Hispanic students who came from highly religious families performed as well as White students in standardized tests and outperformed their Black and Hispanic

counterparts. Jeynes surmised, “Religious commitment appears to help academic outcomes of Black and Hispanic students, this may indicate that the moral and character-oriented emphasis of religion may help students academically” (p.52).

Research on familial religiosity and its influence on children and adolescent development suggest that levels of familial religiosity correlate negatively with risk factors that inhibit academic success. Low levels of familial religiosity are associated with higher divorce rates (Wineberg, 1994), higher marital dissatisfaction (Rosen-Grandon, Myers, & Hattie, 2004), higher rates of infidelity (Vandenberghe, 2001; Cullimore, 1971), higher spousal abuse (Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, Swank, Aaron, et al. 1999), higher interfamily conflict and depressive affect, and the lack of positive familial experiences (Lau & Lau, 1996). These negative familial social issues correlate with a multitude of reasons why students fail to thrive academically (Bean, Bush, McKenry & Wilson, 2003). VanDenBerghe (1994) suggested that deteriorating familial support, accompanied by the waning influence of religion in the home, has created a host of social ills for today’s adolescents. “Many are now sexually active at younger ages, resulting in what studies call ‘epidemic proportions’ of teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. They experiment with drugs at younger ages, and ten to fourteen year olds have tripled their suicide rates since 1968” (p. 38).

The National Study of Youth and Religion

In 2003 The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a ground breaking, four year study of the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers

(see www.youthandreligion.org), published its findings (Smith, 2005). From July, 2002 to March, 2003 the NSYR conducted a national, random-digit-dial survey of over 23,000 U.S. households containing at least one teenager age 13-17, surveying one household parent for about 30 minutes and one randomly selected household teen for about 50 minutes. Then in the spring and summer of 2003, 17 trained project researchers conducted 267 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a subsample of telephone respondents in 45 states. The data were analyzed over a two year period and the results portray American teenagers as predominantly religious and committed to their beliefs. Furthermore, an important finding suggested that although many teens cannot see it, or are not able to articulate it, the differences between more religious and less religious teenagers in the United States are actually significant and consistent across every outcome measure examined: risk behaviors, quality of family and adult relationships, moral reasoning and behavior, community participation, media consumption, sexual activity, and emotional well-being.

The following quotes represent conclusions made by the NSYR regarding the importance of religion in the lives of America's youth.

There are a significant number of adolescents in the United States for whom religion and spirituality are important if not defining features in their lives. Millions of different kinds of American teenagers embrace particular religious beliefs and engage in deliberate practices of faith that seem to significantly affect their lives. Any adequate understanding of American adolescents must recognize and account

for these religious and spiritual realities in many of their lives. (p. 27)

Despite their frequent confusion and inarticulacy about religion, American adolescents as a whole exhibit a positive association between greater teen religious involvement and more positive outcomes in life. In general, for whatever reasons and whatever causal directions, more highly religiously active teenagers are doing significantly better in life on a variety of important outcomes than are less religiously active teens. (p. 28)

According to the NSYR, a significant statistical difference exists for high risk behaviors and getting into trouble across four ideal religious types: Devoted, Regulars, Sporadic, and, Disengaged. It was discovered that the more religiously involved teens were, the less likely they were to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or smoke marijuana. By comparison, it was the least religiously active teens that smoke, drink alcohol cut classes in school, and receive poorer grades.

The NSYR findings illustrate that there is a statistically significant correlation between the religiosity of students and a range of positive prosocial attributes. Table 1 illustrates NSYR's findings relating to at risk behaviors and four religion types: Devoted (attends religious services weekly or more); Regulars (attends religious services two to three times a month); Sporadic (attends religious services a few times a year); Disengaged (never attends religious services).

Table 1. Risk Behaviors of Getting into Trouble by Religious Ideal-type U.S. Adolescents, Ages 13-17 (percentages).

	U.S.	Religious Ideal Types			
		Devoted	Regulars	Sporadic	Disengaged
Smoke cigarettes daily	7	1	6	9	14
Drinks alcohol					
Weekly or more	5	~	4	7	11
Never	63	88	62	50	49
Has gotten drunk every few weeks or more in the prior year	5	1	4	9	10
Smokes Marijuana					
Regularly	4	~	2	6	8
Occasionally	7	1	6	9	13
Tried once or twice	14	6	13	19	16
Never	75	93	78	66	63
Cut class in school last year					
Six or more times	7	2	5	10	12
Never	64	76	67	61	48
School grades are C's or D's or F's	10	3	8	13	14
Suspended or expelled from school four or more times	5	1	3	6	9
Parent reports that teen is fairly or very rebellious	13	3	13	13	17
Parent reports teens has a somewhat or very bad temper	43	32	36	46	49

Source: National Survey of Youth and Religion (2002-03, p. 222).

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding and unreported don't know and refused answers, and omission of some middle-range answers. Cells of <1 are reported as ~. Differences between devoted and regulars compared to the Disengaged are statistically significant at the 0.05 level after controlling for teens' age, sex, race, region of residence, parental and marital status, parental education, and family income using linear regression techniques; differences between Sporadics and the Disengaged are statistically significant at the 0.05 level with those controls only for the "cuts class" variable.

Not only do religiously devoted teens, in general, avoid "at risk" behaviors, but they also seem to have different perceptions about themselves and their future.

Table 2 illustrates the differences between Devoted, Regulars, Sporadic, and Disengaged youth in regard to feelings of self-worth.

Table 2. Emotional Well-being and Attitudes about Life and the Future of Religious Ideal-type. U.S Adolescents, Ages 13-17 (Percentages).

	U.S.	Religious Ideal Types			
		Devoted	Regulars	Sporadic	Disengaged
Feelings about own body and physical appearance					
Very happy	42	54	42	36	29
Very unhappy	3	1	2	3	7
How often feels sad or depressed					
Usually or always	7	2	5	7	8
Never	19	23	21	17	14
Feels alone and misunderstood					
A lot	9	6	7	9	13
Never	39	52	40	37	32
Feels invisible					
A lot	4	3	3	3	6
Never	59	69	60	56	54
Feels cared for by people responsible for teen					
A lot	80	92	81	78	73
Never	1	~	1	1	3
Feels guilty about things in life fairly or very often	14	7	12	12	12
Thinks about and plans for the future					
Very or fairly often	75	87	74	71	60
Rarely or never	6	~	6	6	13
Thinks about the meaning of life					
Very or fairly often	40	47	35	33	26
Rarely or never	29	20	32	34	43
How often life feels meaningless					
Always or usually	7	3	6	9	8
Never	40	56	40	37	30

Source: National Survey of Youth and Religion (2002-03, p. 225).

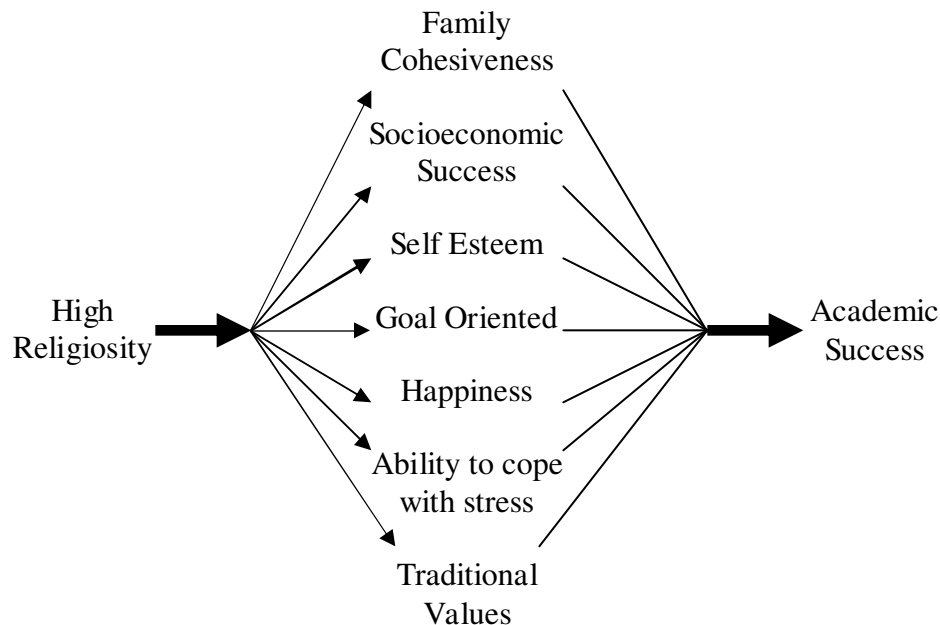
Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding, unreported don't know and

refused answers, and omission of some middle-range answers. Cells of <1 are reported as ~. All differences between the Devoted and the Disengaged are statistically significant at the 0.05 level after controlling for teens' age, sex, race region of residence, parental marital status, parental education, and family income using linear regression techniques, except the "feel guilty" variable which is significant at the 0.10 level; differences between Regulars and the Disengaged are statistically significant at the 0.05 level with those controls for all but the "feel guilty" and "invisible" variables; differences between Sporadic and the Disengaged are statistically significant at the 0.05 level with those controls for the "feel sad," "plan for the future," and "think about meaning" variables.

Summary

Research shows that individual and familial religiosity play an important role in the lives of American youth and have both a direct and an indirect effect on factors that contribute to academic success, such as self esteem, commitment to future goals, creativity, happiness, marital stability, family cohesiveness, and educational goals. These attributes, individually and collectively, positively influence a student's ability to succeed academically. This relationship is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. High religiosity influences various pro-social factors, which in turn, also influence high academic success.



In conclusion, research indicates that religion has a significant role in the lives of high school and first-year college students. Although a causal relationship has not been established between religiosity and academic success, the argument that individual and familial religiosity plays an important role in adolescent academic success is compelling. Research asserts that the relationship between religiosity and academic success occurs across different ethnic, cultural and gender groups. Furthermore, studies indicate that an inverse relationship exists between low levels of religiosity and other social factors which tend to inhibit academic success. However, these relationships have not been explored through in-depth phenomenologically-oriented inquiry into the perceptions and attitudes of students themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design and methods used in this study of first-year college students' perceptions of their religiosity and its connection to academic success. This chapter includes sections on research methodology, research design and methods, limitations of the study, and research ethics and validity concerns.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative, phenomenologically-oriented research design to explore the perceptions of academically successful first-year college students who were also religious regarding the connection between religiosity and academic success. Phenomenological research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) seeks to explore and describe phenomena as they present themselves in the lived world from the participants' point of view. It is a discovery-oriented method wherein the researcher has an attitude of openness to let the unexpected meanings emerge (Giorgi, 1997). Phenomenology deals with persons as opposed to subjects. A person is a whole being, complete with past experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values. Persons live in a world of experience, replete with both cultural and social influence (Willis, 2001; Van Manen, 1990; Caelli, 2000). A major task in phenomenological research is to allow the participants to reconstruct their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of a particular phenomenon in their own voice (Seidman, 1998).

Qualitative, phenomenologically-oriented interviewing was the primary means of data collection. Creswell (2002), Weiss (1994), Seidman (1998), Price (2002), and Bogdan and Biklen (2003) offered helpful suggestions, insights and recommendations for conducting interviews that were used in the design of this study.

Research Design and Methods

Site Selection

Participants for this study were selected from the student populations at two institutions in Washington State. The institutions were selected based on accessibility to the researcher and to provide for some comparison across institutions. Therefore, one community college and one comprehensive research university, both in Washington State were selected.

The first site, Northwest Community College (NWCC) (a pseudonym), is located in southeast Washington State and serves a growing community of 250,000 people. According to the schools' internet home page, it has a yearly average enrollment of just under 7,000 students, with a diverse student body (25% Hispanic/Latino, 2% African American, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander and 65% white). The college is fully accredited and offers associate degrees in science as well as general studies. NWCC does not offer any type of on-campus or off campus housing, therefore, first-year NWCC students primarily live at home. Many NWCC students work full-time or part-time jobs as they attend college.

The second site, North West University (NWU) (a pseudonym), a major research institution, has an average enrollment of over 23,000 students. The student

population at NWU is 84% white, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% Hispanic/Latino, 3% African American, and 1% Native American. NWU offers numerous undergraduate and graduate programs in both the arts and sciences. Students attending NWU came from all over the state of Washington as well as from other parts of the country. NWU also serves a large number of international students. Most of the students attending NWU live in the dorms or off-campus housing. This setting offered a good opportunity for the researcher since these students could, if they chose, discontinue their religious practices without immediate parental consequence. For many first-year NWU students, it is the first time in their lives that they find themselves away from the rules and restrictions of their parents.

Participant Selection

Three criteria were used to select participants for the study. First, the participants had to claim to be religious with an affiliation to a particular denomination. The term religious was neither qualified nor quantified. If the participant declared himself or herself to be religious, then he or she met the criteria. The researcher understands that the term “religious” is an ambiguous term and can mean different things to different people. Nevertheless, since the study was concerned with the perceptions of religious first-year college students regarding the connection between their professed religiosity and academic success, if they perceived themselves to be religious, by whatever definition they wanted to use, they were eligible for inclusion in the study.

The second criterion was that the participants had to be first-year college

students. This was determined simply by asking prospective participants how many college credits they had earned. If they stated that they had less than 30 quarter hours of on-campus credit then they qualified. No attempt was made by the researcher to investigate their claims further because there was no reason to believe that prospective participants would deceive the researcher in regard to this criterion.

First year college students were chosen as participants in this study for two main reasons: (a) First year college students are not far removed from high school, so they were able to reflect on their attitudes and experiences regarding religiosity and academic achievement during high school as well as college; and, (b) first year college students could provide insight important to the study regarding some of the challenges religious students face in adapting to the new environment of college.

The third criterion was that the participant had to be academically successful. In order to determine their academic success, participants were asked to demonstrate their achievement by presenting transcripts to the researcher for both high school and college. For the purpose of the study it was required that the participants carried a cumulative high school GPA of at least 3.5 and a current college GPA of at least 3.2. No other criteria were used in determining academic success.

Although not a specified criteria, per se, it was important to the researcher to find participants who were both male and female, in order to compare and contrast their experiences. As discussed in Chapter Two, research has established that college students undergo change in their attitudes regarding religion and tend to become less favorable towards church and conservative values, especially male students (Lee,

2000). Selecting both male and female participants allows the researcher the flexibility to also explore this phenomenon further.

In order to select first year college students who were academically successful and also religious, purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were used to locate participants that met the required criteria. In purposeful sampling the researcher intentionally selects individuals who have experience with the phenomenon in order to answer the research questions. Snowball sampling occurs when the researcher asks participants, or non-participants, to recommend other individuals whom they know who might be interested in participating in the study (Creswell, 2002).

Finding first-year college students who met the criteria proved to be difficult at NWU, the research university. I began my search during the summer of 2006 and contacted several campus clubs through telephone calls and email seeking participants. Academic advisors for the clubs informed me that there were very few students involved in the clubs during the summer and that finding participants might have to wait until fall quarter. Next, I called several churches in the NWU community and spoke directly to the campus outreach directors. These directors were cooperative but stated that they couldn't help until summer ended because very few students meeting the criteria were available during the summer break. Next, I emailed several churches near the NWU campus seeking assistance. The only respondent was from the local Catholic Church. I was given several names and email addresses of potential participants attending college during the summer.

Continuing my search, I made contact with the student life center at NWU,

who directed me to a non-denominational outreach center for Christian and non-Christian students. There I met the director, who gave me several more names of potential participants. In addition, I spent two full days walking around campus and stopping individual students to ask them if they or someone they knew would be interested in participating in a study. This proved the least successful. While walking around campus, however, I stopped at a campus crusade for Christ booth and began talking to several students. One of the students met the criteria and I was able to interview her. In all, five participants were selected and interviewed from NWU.

My experience finding participants at North Western Community College proved to be even more difficult than at NWU. NWCC didn't have written policy concerning outside research conducted with NCWW students on campus. When I contacted the school with my initial request to conduct academic research, I was immediately denied access to the students and informed that NCWW did not allow outside research. I met with several counselors and professors to discuss the research topic and the method of data collection. Upon further inquiries I was granted a meeting with the acting President of Admissions and the Dean of Research, Planning and Assessment. At the completion of our meeting I was informed that the school would contact me regarding their decision. Eventually, access to the students was granted and permission to begin research on campus was approved. I was informed that because of my inquiry the college was writing policy to allow further academic research to take place in the future.

Participants at NCWW were located primarily through the assistance of an

academic counselor who was instrumental in providing names and telephone numbers of students who met the criteria. Three participants were referred by the counselor and two were found by snowball sampling. Five participants were selected and interviewed from NCWW.

An attempt was made by the researcher to interview participants from both Christian and non-Christian religions. It was of particular interest to the researcher to interview a non-Christian in order to determine differences or similarities in their perceived experiences regarding religiosity and academic success. I contacted a local Jewish Synagogue and a Muslim house of worship, and I solicited Asian international students walking on campus. However, because the study employed student volunteers as participants, and no non-Christian students came forward, nor were any referred, all of the participants in the study considered themselves to be Christian. In all, ten participants were chosen, five from each institution.

Participants

The ten participants, five males and five females, are described in this section along with their family circumstances, religious affiliations, and high school and college grade point averages. Throughout the study, pseudonyms are used in every case to identify the participants. This information is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Participant information

Name	College	Religious Affiliation	H.S GPA	College GPA
Susie	NWU	Catholic	3.97	3.85
Natalie	NWU	Catholic	4.0	3.9
Samantha	NWU	LDS	3.9	3.5
Thomas	NWU	Born Again Baptist	3.88	3.7
Shawn	NWU	Calvary Chapel Christian	3.95	4.0
Luke	NWCC	LDS	3.5	3.2
Ashley	NWCC	Baptist	3.7	3.5
Joshua	NWCC	LDS	3.5	3.6
Kim	NWCC	Baptist	3.7	3.5
Paul	NWCC	Seventh-day Adventist	3.6	3.4

Suzie was raised as a Catholic in a home with six children. She was home schooled until high school and was always involved in Girl Scouts and religious education groups. In middle school and high school she became involved in volunteer work. She taught Sunday school to fifth graders and three year olds, taught vacation bible school, worked with habitat for humanity, helped run rugby youth clinics, took three separate trips to Mexico to work with the poor, served food and washed dishes at the community kitchen, provided childcare, directed day camps, did yard maintenance and cleaning for elderly citizens, and was a teen leader for youth

groups. In high school she also participated in Club Rugby and Life Teen, a Catholic youth program. Suzie participated in the Running Start for the last two years of high school and graduated with an Associate of Arts degree at the same time she received her high school diploma. When I met Suzie she told me that she has continued to remain actively involved in the Catholic Church and extracurricular activities while attending NWU. She stated, "I currently have no just-for-fun activities besides the local Oldham (pseudonym) Center, a student-oriented Catholic church, where I am only involved once in a while because my major is so time consuming." Suzie's high school GPA was 3.97 and her college GPA at the time of our interview was 3.85.

Like Suzie, Natalie grew up in a Catholic family. Her father was Catholic and her mother converted to Catholicism from a Protestant church when she married. Natalie and her one sister (16 years old) were raised as devout followers of Catholicism. Natalie attended a private Catholic school from kindergarten to the ninth grade, when she entered public high school. Natalie's high school GPA was 4.0. She was ranked number 1 in her graduating class, and she was the high school valedictorian. She described herself as a Type A person, very ambitious and driven to succeed. Natalie was referred personally by a Catholic Priest at a church near NWU.

Samantha was raised as a devout Mormon. She reported that she was baptized when she was eight years old as customary in the LDS religion. Both of her parents were active in the church as she was growing up, but Samantha admitted that she questioned her father's sincerity to the religion. Her mother and father divorced when she was 15. After the divorce her mother quit attending church regularly. Samantha's

mother remarried a non-Mormon who was learning about the Mormon faith during the time of this interview. Samantha admitted that her mother believed in the church but attends Sunday church services only occasionally. Samantha has two younger sisters who were raised in the LDS faith, but after their parent's divorce, they stopped attending church regularly. Samantha's educational goals include majoring in elementary education with a Spanish minor and eventually receiving a Masters Degree in education. Her career goals include teaching in an elementary school and eventually working in administration. Samantha attended the Running Start program and graduated from the local community college with an Associates Degree at the same time she graduated from High School. Samantha was a referral from the LDS Institute of Religion at NWU. Samantha's high school GPA was 3.9 and her college GPA was 3.5.

Thomas was a friend of Susie, also attending NWU. He stated that he was a "Born again Christian." When I asked him what that meant, he stated, "I've been saved by the mercy and blood of Christ alone and I am born again." At the time of our interview Thomas was attending a local Baptist church but made a point to tell me that church affiliation and attendance were not necessary for salvation, only a belief in Jesus. Thomas' major was undeclared, but he felt like he might be interested in going into pre-med. Thomas' parents both attended a Baptist church "most of the time." He said that religion wasn't really that big of a deal in their family growing up. Thomas said that it was while he was in high school that he "found Christ" and he

began from that time forward to live his life for God. Thomas' high school GPA was 3.88 while his college GPA was 3.7.

Shawn was referred to me by an on-campus Christian organization leader at NWU. Shawn appeared to be hesitant to answer questions about religion at first, but after a while opened up more. He informed me that he was raised as a Christian but his parents "bounced around" looking for just the right church until he was a junior in high school. Shawn stated that it was then that he and his family joined the Calvary Chapel Christian Church. Shawn has one older married sister. Shawn's high school GPA was 3.9 and his college GPA was 4.0

Luke was raised as a devout Mormon. He was the oldest child with two brothers and two sisters. At the time of our interview, Luke's father was a Bishop in the Mormon Church. Luke served a two year mission for the LDS church. At the time of our interview he was 21 years old. He attended NWCC. He maintained that both parents' ancestry went back 3-4 generations as Mormons. Luke's high school GPA was 3.5, and he maintained a college GPA of 3.2.

Ashley was 19 years old. Her high school GPA was 3.7 and her college GPA was 3.5. Ashley was home-schooled until the 8th grade. At the time of the interview her parents were the owners of a Christian book store. Growing up in a home-schooled environment her mother taught 70% of the time and dad 30% of the time, "mostly when it came to the math stuff." Ashley attended NWCC. Her educational/career goals were to attend a Christian college after her experience at NWCC was over, then transfer to a law school to get her law degree. Ashley was

raised as a devout Baptist. She was referred to me by an academic advisor at NWCC. Ashley was very outgoing and open during our interview.

Joshua was raised LDS. He lost his father to suicide when he was just 12 years old. As a teenager he struggled with his religious convictions and academic success. He remained active in the Boy Scouts of America through the LDS church, and it was there that he said he found the support and structure needed to propel him into high school to become a successful student. Although he was raised in an LDS family, he admitted that his wasn't the best of childhoods, especially concerning his father's death. Joshua served a two-year mission for the Mormon Church and was the only married-with-children student who participated in the study. At the time of the interview Joshua was just beginning college at NWCC as a 25 year old freshman. When asked why he waited so long to begin college he said that he didn't think at first that he wanted to go, and it was his wife who pushed him out the door. His high school GPA was 3.5 and his college GPA was 3.6.

Kim said that she was a Christian without a specific denomination, although she attended a Baptist church for much of her life. She considered herself a "Salvation Christian." Kim's father died when she was just two years old. Her mother was an alcoholic. Kim spent some time in foster homes when she was young until her maternal grandmother gained custody and raised her. I met Kim at the NWCC library while I was waiting to interview a different participant. When I told her what I was doing she expressed interest. When I discovered that she met the criteria we set up an

interview. Kim's high school GPA was 3.7 and her college GPA was 3.5. She attended a private Christian high school.

Paul was a member of the Seventh-day Adventist church. He was the youngest of three boys all raised as active Adventists. Paul said that his parents were "extremely strict" in their faith and that growing up as a devout Adventist was "very hard." He said that although he believed in the church, he wasn't sure if he wanted to raise his future family in such a stringent environment. Paul attended public high school. His high school GPA was 3.8 and his college GPA at NWCC was 3.6.

Data Collection

Individual, phenomenologically-oriented interviews were conducted with each participant following guidelines outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (2003), Creswell (1998), and Seidman (1998). The purpose of the interviews was to gather descriptive data in the participants' own words in order to develop insights on how these participants perceived the relationship between religiosity and academic success in their own lives. Each of the interviews was held in conference rooms in the NWU and NWCC libraries. Each interview consisted of unstructured, open-ended discussions meant to elicit views and opinions from the participants (see Interview Guide, Appendix). The interviews were tape-recorded to ensure precise and accurate data collection. The interviews included questions such as: (a) What does it mean to you to be religious? (b) What is it about your religion that has helped you become academically successful? (c) Help me understand how your religious beliefs promote your academic success, and, (d) Describe how your religious beliefs have influenced

you during your first year of college. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher which enhanced familiarity with the data and aided initial analysis.

Analysis of Data

Data analysis procedures used in this study followed techniques consistent within the qualitative research approach. A constant comparison (Creswell, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) method for analyzing data was found useful in the analysis process. This inductive approach to data analysis involves generating categories of information (open coding) and selecting categories within a theoretical model (axial coding) and then reporting findings from the interconnection of these categories. The specific procedures involve reading the transcripts to gain a sense of the interviews, coding the data into manageable working chunks of information, clustering coded excerpts together with similar topics, looking for emerging themes, and categorizing data by grouping topics that relate to one another, constantly comparing themes according to similarities and differences (Creswell, 2003). Throughout this process, the researcher is constantly comparing new information with emerging categories and measuring it against other data in a back-and-forth manner. Constant comparison analysis leads to the development of themes, which represent patterns regarding attitudes and perceptions of participants. The final step in the analysis was to identify central themes, or core phenomenon (Creswell, 2002) resulting from the study.

Limitations

This study focuses on the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of first-year college students regarding the connection between religiosity and academic success.

Limitations include the fact that it was not possible to confirm the accuracy or validity of the participants' perceptions by triangulating with other data sources. An effort was made to overcome this limitation by looking for consistency within and between interview comments. Another limitation had to do with the selection of the participants. Finding participant volunteers only during the summer quarter limited the scope of possible participants. This study is also limited to only Christian students. An attempt was made to find non-Christian participants, however, none volunteered for the study. Third, exploring the student's perceptions and attitudes regarding religion and other factors that lead to academic success was limited to a small group of individuals.

Research Ethics and Validity

The subject matter of this study is concerned with the individual and familial religiosity of participants and their families; therefore, it was a primary concern to the researcher that the religious views expressed by the participants be respected, valued, and protected. The anonymity and integrity of each participant was also of primary importance to the researcher. For the purpose of the study each participant is identified by a pseudonym and school identity and location remain undisclosed. In addition, before each interview, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the process of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, at any time during the interview each participant had the power to withdraw from the study for any reason.

Contemporary ethical research practices were employed in this study (Bogdan

& Biklen, 2003). These included specific strategies that support ethical approaches in performing research, such as, honoring the participant's privacy, honoring the participant's time, treating the participant with respect, and telling the truth in the final report. In addition, since the researcher is male and some of the participants were female, in order to protect the integrity of the researcher and the participant alike, an open-door policy was utilized in each interview where a female was present.

Religious beliefs and affiliation can be a very emotional subject (Nord, 1990), therefore, prior to each interview, the participants were made aware of the purposes of the study and there was no attempt on the part of the researcher to deceive or manipulate the participants or their responses. Although unintentional, the religious orientation of the researcher may have had an effect on the expected outcome of the study. To prevent participant or researcher bias, the religious orientation of the researcher was not discussed.

Finally, academic success as measured only by GPA may only be one part of the educational experience. High academic achievers may fall far behind their peers in sports, art, music, or the social aspects of high school.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to describe the research methodology and design used in this study. Site selection and participant selection were also addressed. The appropriateness of the use of a qualitative methodology, including interview procedures, analysis process, limitations of the study, and research ethics and validity have also been described and explained. The discussion of research methodology and

design found in this chapter is essential in understanding the analysis of data presented in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of academically successful first-year college students who are also religious regarding the connection between religiosity and academic success. The data analysis resulted in four major themes that cut across all of the participant's experiences and perceptions.

The first major theme has to do with *expectations*. These were expectations that participants felt were held for them by their families, their extended families, their religions, and by God. These expectations seemed to guide their educational and religious pursuits through high school as well as into their first year of college. The second major theme is *focus and moral conduct*. This theme relates to the experiences that these students had with a personal value system by which they chose to live. This value system, as they explained it, like living the Ten Commandments, allowed them to focus more closely on their studies both in high school and college, because they were not distracted by drugs, alcohol, or sexual relationships. The third theme has to do with the students' perception of personal, spiritual, and academic *support*. This support came in the form of feelings of encouragement from family, peers, and church, but especially from their perceptions of God. Support was manifest in the context of positive role models, positive peer pressure, church attendance and participation, personal prayer and perceived answers to prayer. The fourth major

theme, which related to the other three, is the *big picture*. The students seemed to indicate that by having family and church expectations, a code of moral conduct which allowed them to remain focused, and a system of support that they were able to see more clearly the big picture, that is, life and school had purpose and meaning. Each of these themes will be discussed in the sections that follow.

Expectations

As participants expressed their perceptions of religiosity's effect on their academic success, a distinct theme emerged relating to expectations, both religious and academic. These expectations emanated from four main sources: (a) family religious expectations, (b) family educational expectations, (c) religion's expectations (meaning church or denomination), and (d) God's expectations. In every case the participants reported that these expectations were an important underlying factor which motivated them to succeed academically.

Family Religious Expectations

Of the ten participants, six were raised by both biological parents in a traditional family, three came from homes where the mother was single and head of the household, and one was raised by her divorced maternal grandmother. The students' perceived familial expectations were not limited to their primary care giver but also came from grandparents and extended family members. Although there were obvious differences in family structures, a common factor was that each of the heads of the family was active in a religion and expected the children to follow suit.

Ashley, an attractive and energetic devout Baptist, who stated that she could

never see herself as anything other than a Baptist, illustrated the theme of familial religious expectation in her home by stating:

I always just knew growing up that we were going to go to church every week. There was never a time in my life that I can remember when I questioned my parents' faith, or belief in God. It was just always expected of us, and we never really questioned them. It's just what we did.

Samantha, a member of the LDS church, also discussed her experiences regarding family's expectations concerning religion. She seemed to imply that the parental expectations regarding church attendance and religious adherence were to some degree "forced" and that religion, for her, at least while she was young, was all about parental expectation.

Religion was more about my parents' expectations for me. I've been a member of the LDS church my whole life. I was baptized when I was eight years old as customary and we did all the things that you are supposed to do like read the scriptures together as a family and go to church every Sunday. There was never a doubt or question about church. It was just automatic. Everyone in the family was expected to do it whether they wanted to or not.

Luke, who was also LDS, discussed his parent's expectations, acknowledging that while he and his siblings were not coerced, they embraced their parents' religious convictions as their own.

They (Luke's parents) attend church regularly. They believe wholly the doctrines that the church upholds. Their children have adopted those beliefs for themselves because they have gained that belief for their own personal use. That belief has been passed on from generation to generation all the way from the start of the church on both my mom's side and my dad's side.

Thomas, at times, seemed to resent that his parents pressured him to be religious while he was growing up. Although he remained committed to his belief, and even stated that he was grateful now that his parents forced religion on him, he gave the impression that he did not always appreciate parental expectations regarding religion:

My parents constantly talked about God and the Bible and Hell and stuff like that, especially my dad. In my mind there was never a question about whether God existed. It was just a fact that my parents drilled into my head ever since I can remember. Going to church and reading the Bible was... there was just no option in my family.

Family Educational Expectations

All but one of the participants (Joshua) indicated that there was an explicit as well as an implicit expectation regarding education within their family. They said that their parents, and in some cases grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings expected, and even required, that they succeed academically. These expectations were explicitly enforced through family rules and consequences and implicitly modeled by the

educational attainments and expectations of their parents and other family members.

Ashley, the Baptist attending NWCC, illustrated both explicit and implicit expectations within her family in the following statement:

My parents always told me that in order to be successful in life that I had to do good in school. The higher grades, the better chance you'll get to go into a better college and get a better degree. My dad always said to try to get an A. Try to do the best you can. Both my parents graduated from college with honors, so I have a lot to live up to.

In the following excerpt, Samantha seemed to make the connection between academic success and self esteem as she discussed her mother's educational expectations. She also believed that these expectations emanated from religion:

As far as school, I have always felt that my school work is a very real reflection on who I am, and I want it to be as perfect as I can make it. My mom was a stickler for education. I learned it from her first. Her making that a priority I'm sure had to do with religion.

Kim, a member of the Community Christian Church attending NWCC made an explicit connection between family religiosity and educational expectations:

I think that my family religious practices, like going to church every Sunday, has helped my studies. Like I said before, it just gave me a good foundation of things like work ethic. It got me to a place where continuing my education was encouraged and supported.

Extended family expectations also played a role in the academic success of

these students. Throughout the interviews, it was common to hear a participant talk about his or her grandparents' or aunts and uncles' involvement in their education as well as religion, as Susie illustrated:

My family pushed me when I was young to always do my best. Especially my grandparents; my grandpa is really big on education and he has been really generous with me helping me to get one. Running-start chemistry--I remember thinking to myself that I am doing this for grandpa, otherwise I wouldn't care; I'll take the B- or whatever. My grandpa expects me to get an education, that's why I am going to put in the extra effort for this class, work harder than other classes to make the grade.

Joshua, brought up in the LDS Church by a single mother after his father committed suicide when he just 16 years old, offered a different perspective on the role of familial educational expectations growing up in his home. Although there was not a high degree of educational expectations placed upon him by his mother, it was his religious community that seemed to act as voice for educational success. When asked, "how was education encouraged in your home growing up?" he stated:

Not so much in my home because neither of my parents have college degrees. But I think going to church I saw others that had degrees, and that was a big motivation for me. When you go to church and see that the majority of people have degrees, there are a lot of successful

people in the church, and I think that's been a good influence for me.

I looked up to them that way.

The familial educational expectations of these students not only motivated them to succeed academically, but were also adopted into their personal value system as summed up in Samantha's concluding remark: "I think that I was a successful student when I was little because my parents valued it, and I am one now because I do."

Religion's Expectations

Many respondents affirmed that their chosen religion expected that they not only succeed spiritually but that they also succeed academically. In other words, their church taught, over the pulpit, that getting a good education and doing well in school academically was an important part of their religion. As Samantha stated:

My church values education a lot. Just last Sunday we had a conference on career development for women, and it was around 80% about getting a good education. Our church leaders talk about it constantly. I never had any doubt that I would go to college, it was just a given. I believe that was related to hearing great information and getting trained in how much education does for you from a young age.

Ashley acknowledged that her "church community" acted in a supportive role along with her parents by having high academic expectations for the youth:

Right now I'm going out to a pretty big Baptist church, and it's so much fun. It's like a small community out there. It's a fun group to be around, you know, they're uplifting. They hold you up. I should say they hold you accountable, which is really good because your parents can only do so much, and you are who you hang out with, so it's nice to find that group of people to be around who want what's best for you in school and everything else you do in life.

Paul, the Seventh-day Adventist, expressed explicit expectations of his religion, not preached over the pulpit, per se, but through the comments and attitudes perpetuated by members of the congregation.

People in my church are always saying stuff like, "God can't use you as well in this life if you're not willing to go to college and sacrifice some time and money to get a good education and become someone who can make a positive contribution where you live." It seems like every time the youth group gets together for an activity, say volleyball or something like that, they always get around to talking about school and getting good grades, or what school assignment are you working on this week, or things like that. We can't get away from it.

Kim, a member of the Community Christian Church, offered a more practical view of her religion's expectations:

It's kind of like my church, which is really just a group of believers, expects the younger generation to do well in school so they can all get

good jobs or careers or whatever. I don't know, maybe the church says that because if you are poor, and don't have any money, you can't really be of service to others or to, say, do missionary service or pay your tithes. You are just a drain on society.

Each of the participants seemed to understand their religion's expectations and, for the most part, embraced and appreciated the guidance that was given to them beginning at a very young age. While these expectations were not specific as to vocational or professional degrees, they were nonetheless, important motivators in their lives and facilitated a desire to succeed academically.

God's Expectations

The respondents indicated that they believed that God expected them to be successful, not merely in things pertaining to religion, but also in academics and other secular pursuits. They believed in a personal God who was concerned with their daily lives, who was willing and able to assist them with their academics. The belief that God expected them to succeed religiously and academically seemed to produce an internal desire to work harder in order to please God. Anything less than doing their best would, in some degree, offend God, as Shawn, the Calvary Chapel Christian, explained:

I think that God is disappointed with me when I don't do my best in whatever it is, sports, work, or school, or anything that I am doing. He (God) is everywhere at all times and knows everything. He knows if you are giving 100% or just sort of coasting by. I believe that God

expects me to always give, whatever it is I'm doing, that 100% effort.

Luke offered a kind of testimonial regarding his understanding of his personal relationship with God and his expectations. Luke believed that God wanted him to be successful in school and that the relationship he had with God helped him become academically successful.

My relationship with God is an actual relationship. I believe that he is really there. I would say that it goes beyond belief. He is really there. He is an actual person. He is all-knowing, all-powerful. And has a plan for me and wants me to be happy and successful in life and in school. He knows what he wants to accomplish but he also knows each of us personally.

Kim attributed, at least to some degree, her academic success to her perception of God's expectations for her. Getting good grades in school was, in some way, important to God, and that by doing well in school, she would be prepared to serve God.

I want to have good grades because I know that God put me down here on this earth for a reason. I want to know what that reason is, and if I'm going to have any idea what that reason is then I want to work hard for it. And so I want to work hard to glorify him (God) and to please him (God). I want to give him (God) reason to be like, "she's prepared for this" instead of twenty years down the road, where if I had dropped out of school and gone through all these hardships, to

learn the lessons that I've learned in the last couple years with hard work and determination.

Ashley's perception was that God had a "will," or expectation for her regarding her school work and an eventual career. Her perception of his "will" influenced her to have the desire to do what she thought he (God) wanted her to do:

I know with God I can accomplish anything. I mean, I know that when I read that in the Bible and I hear it countless times at church, you know, "you can be successful with God," or if you know God doesn't want you to be successful in school, you still have that peace, because God knows what's best for you. It's just so relieving to put your hands in someone's...your hands...your life in someone else's hands cause, well, you know a lot of times it's scary to be thinking about where you'll be headed, but you know, I know, that I want to become a lawyer, I mean hands down that's what I want to be, but if God doesn't want that then I know he wants what's best for me, so He can make me, you know, a teacher at some elementary school. It's nice to know that where ever I'll be it's where God wants me to be, and you know where God wants me to be is more important than where I want to be.

Susie's perceived expectation of God's desire for her success assisted her as she discussed a particularly difficult time just prior to entering college when she was feeling overwhelmed with school and friends. She stated that she felt lost and isolated

with nowhere to turn for the answers she was seeking. Although her statement doesn't address education specifically, it does reveal that her belief that God expected her to be successful inspired her through a challenging ordeal.

Some of it is I got tired of the way that I was feeling and the way that I looked at my life. I knew that God wanted something more of me than just being a Sunday Christian or whatever. I knew that God wanted something more than that.

Although the participants varied in their religious backgrounds and perceptions of God and the attributes God possesses, their belief that God wanted them to succeed academically and in other ways did not vary. To them God was a very real and essential factor in their lives who directed and assisted them on a daily basis.

Focus and Moral Conduct

As the participants discussed religiosity and academic success, a second theme emerged regarding the values, rules, and morals taught within the different religions. It became apparent that what they were saying was that religion supported, and even mandated in some cases, a lifestyle free from alcohol, drugs, or premarital sexual activity. While drinking, drug use, and sexual activities are a common pastime on many college campuses and in some high schools across the country, adherence to these values produced within these participants the ability to more easily focus on their academic studies by eliminating avoidable distractions. This focus meant less time worrying about what they did the night before and more time concentrating on

school.

Luke (LDS) admitted that he was considered a “geek” in high school and was proud of the fact that he never even held a girl’s hand. He said that he never used drugs, drank alcohol, coffee, tried tobacco, or even drank caffeinated soda. When asked about the connection between his belief in religion and academic success, he stated:

I think as a whole, because of my religion, I was more focused on my schooling, career, and things that were pertaining to getting that diploma instead of, what type of drugs am I going to get, or how am I going to pay for them? The relations that some people had in high school with sleeping around and stuff like that, we didn’t have to worry about that type of stuff because we were living the guidelines that our church has put out for us, and it made life simpler for us and more focused toward our academic career. And so therefore, it helped our grades because we were focusing on our schooling; and my friends also had high GPA’s. My friends were salutatorians and they were all really smart because they were focusing on learning and not on all the other things that people associate with high school that aren’t part of the academic high school experience. I personally have A.D.D., and when I am doing the things I am supposed to do with my religion, that seems to be able to keep that in check better than if I don’t have it. I am able to stay more focused on whatever I am doing

than if I don't have that extra aid and assistance. It just really... you can stay focused on your school work with that extra aid and assistance that I wouldn't have otherwise.

Similarly, Natalie (Catholic) maintained that it was her set of personal values, supported by her religion, that kept her focused in a difficult trial during her first semester at NWU:

Well, at the beginning of the year I didn't have an architectural studio and so I had some easier classes that semester. I think that it would've been a lot easier to goof off since I had more time. It would have been easy to go off and party. I'd say that I didn't even consider that. It wasn't even an option for me. I was tempted with that once. I ran into this guy at the dining center and he invited me to some parties and I was like, "it's not something I want to do, not something that God wants me to do." I prayed about it and he kept calling and calling and calling and calling. I just kept praying about it. It was like, "okay I'm a little bored right now, a little homesick, being surrounded by people would be nice instead of being here without anything to do, not a whole lot to do in this town." But I think that God really gave me strength there, and that was in the first couple of weeks since school started in the Fall, so I think that if I didn't have that faith that sustained me during that point that it would have been a lot easier to get sunk into that semester, and it would have been really hard to get

out what I needed for my classes; and so it was just a lot easier, because of my faith, to make friends with the people on my floor and hang out with them.

Natalie (Catholic) seemed to have an awareness already of the connection of religiosity and academic success in her life. When asked, “From your perspective and experiences, how has religion helped you in your academic pursuits,” she responded:

I’d say that it has really helped my educational success, both directly and indirectly. Indirectly because it is through my faith and religion I have a set of morals that I don’t get distracted by partying or by doing something else that would distract me from my studies. With architecture that is very important because you don’t have the time to go out and party because you are working a lot. I think for my final project I worked on that for about 70 hours one week, and I had two other finals, and I thought I was going to die. I’d say that eliminating all those distraction is probably one of the hugest parts of it. I think that having a strong faith gives you a foundation that it’s easier to achieve academic success once you have foundation because you have something to base that on. You get some strength from that. Also, you have that foundation that has these morals that allows you to focus on your academic, and that’s huge, because a lot of people’s focus isn’t on academics, and that’s probably when you don’t have that academic success. I’d say that eliminating all those distraction is probably one

of the hugest parts of it, and then the relationship with God, just knowing that with God all things are possible so I can do this even when I don't think that I can. Just knowing how things worked before, knowing that there is hope, it's just really huge.

Like Natalie, Mary (Catholic) acknowledged religion's influence on basic decisions that aided her ability to remain focused in her academic pursuits. She seemed to understand the "non distraction" effect of religious affiliation. When asked how her religious beliefs have assisted her in her academic success, she stated:

Definitely the morals that I was brought up with have played a part in me not becoming distracted from school or whatever. I don't drink or smoke or mess around with guys. I like to read the Bible a lot. There is a lot of things in there that...attitudes that people have mostly that I think are not what God would want me to have, and so I try to steer away from those and that has kept a lot of the party atmosphere away, not that... I don't have anything against like going to a party, it's just what you do there you have to be careful about. Who needs that crap? I don't.

Samantha (LDS) specified that adherence to the LDS practice of abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and from all sexual contact before marriage made it easier to focus her attention on school and academics, as well as enabling her to participate in extracurricular activities which permitted her to be of service to others.

Well the Mormon faith really is a way of life. It's not a Sunday

attendance only type of deal. My faith affects every decision that I make, from my friends to my choice in recreational activities. It is a part of my life on a daily, and I may even say hourly level. I go to church on Sunday, but the whole Sabbath day is sacred to me. I spend about an hour in the morning on personal study of the gospel. Throughout the day I try to live in a way that honors the values and morals that I have. I live the word of wisdom, no drinking, no smoking, no drugs, etc. I live the law of chastity, no sexual contact before marriage. For me service to others is another big part of my religion. It fills my cup to do things for others. In high school I was in a number of community service clubs: Key club, FCCLA, etc, and I did service projects with the church. Now that I'm in college I've found it even easier to stay focused in my schooling and find ways to be of service to the community and to individuals.

When asked how religion has assisted in his academic success, Joshua (LDS) added, "It's really been a guidance for me, that's one of the biggest things. When I've been tempted to do something that's wrong. I know that it has allowed me to live a life that allows education to flourish."

Support and Comfort

Making the transition from high school to college can be an emotionally difficult experience for many first-year college students (Leana, 2006). Students often feel isolated, lonely and disconnected as they begin college life. Many religious

students also report that during this period they question their religion, faith, and belief in God (Hartley, 2006). The students interviewed clearly indicated that it was their belief in God that supported them through the challenging adjustment to college life. Over and over they said in the face of difficult times, that God was there to help them make it through. This “divine help” came, in part, by perceived answers to prayers, and through a belief that God has all knowledge and power to help, guide, comfort, protect, and assist them during their college experience. It was through God’s ability to assist during school projects or while taking tests that provided these participants comfort and support. In other words, they believed that God was watching out for them, and even if they failed, God was there to catch them.

Ashley (Baptist) was asked how God helped her to succeed academically. She believed that God was accessible every day through prayer and that God could communicate personal answers to her whenever she needed His divine help..

What I like about prayer is that you can talk to God anywhere. You can talk to Him in the privacy of your car, you can talk to Him in front of a good amount of people, when you pray over your food, you know, it’s just talking to God. You can tell him how you feel, what your day’s going like, because you need to have that one on one time with Him too you know. He loves hearing about your day as much as you like to talk to your friend about your day. And it’s just a big comfort. I’m on debate and so before I get ready, you know, it’s just a nice comfort knowing that the creator of the Universe is going to be

with you when you go and speak about one-child policy in China. That's the best part. I guess it's just a nice reminder that He's always with you. That feels good.

When asked about her relationship with God and how it has specifically helped her academic success in a practical way Ashley continued:

I view it very much as a secure resource for love and affection. You know you have a bad day, or you break up with your boyfriend, or something, you can always turn to him. It may not be easy but, you can turn to him. He's definitely my number one protector even though I have a big dad and two big brothers, but you know, they can only protect you so much of the time. Yeah! It's just, you know, if He was able to have Moses part the Red Sea, I think he could probably give you a few answers on your business law final.

Luke (LDS) expressed that prayer gave him "peace of mind" while he struggled with a difficult situation. Luke's perception was that God had the ability to help him when he was feeling overwhelmed.

There have been many experiences in my life when I was wondering, "Where are you? I need your help. Can't you see what's going on in my life? I've been doing all I possibly can, and nothing is happening the way I think it should. Can't you help me? Isn't there something that you can do?" And I felt this over whelming feeling of peace and love that everything was going to be okay. I felt that feeling multiple

times. It is beyond anything that I can compare. There are other experiences that I have had in my life those little experiences that built my faith in God. For me, faith is trust in God, a trust that he is there, a trust that he can help you. That trust and belief has been tested in my life, and I feel like he has answered my prayers. Sometimes, when I have needed help with a small problem, suddenly the answer pops into my head. I've been working on it forever, hours and hours. Then I prayed to ask God for help, and the answer came.

When Luke was asked further, "How has a personal belief in God influenced your academic success in a practical way?" He stated the following:

I would say because you are not alone. That increases your confidence in what you are doing, because he wants everyone to succeed, and he makes it so that way if you do all you can, and ask for help, he will help you. It will be what is best for you. He will help you in ways, like maybe budgeting your time, or remembering that question that you cannot remember. Someone said that as long as there are tests there will always be prayers in school. I believe that's true. Just the feeling and the Spirit, if you have it, you just seem to do better, if you don't have it you don't have that aid.

Natalie (Catholic) believed that God supported her academic success by helping her when she was burned-out with school and homesick.

I think just knowing God. Just knowing that he was there, knowing that he would see me through this, and that he was going to continue to see me through things. There are a couple of times where I go homesick or I'd miss my family. I have a really close family and I am really close to my parents, and my sister now, and so that was hard because I'm used to being with them all the time, and then all of a sudden they are four hours away. Overall, I did really well with not being homesick, but there were a couple times where I just so burned-out from school and everything and I wanted to go home. I would lay on my bed saying, "I want to go home, why can't they (family) be with me?" But God is here with me, and he is never going to leave me-- That's huge!

Those perceived feelings of support and comfort seemed to be paramount among the participants. In their own way each of them discussed, some in great detail, how God, or their personal religiosity, had helped them through a specific trying time during their first year of college, as the following from Susie demonstrates:

At that time I was so mixed up inside and it wasn't worth it to me. Life just kind of sucked, and I wanted to take a break and not be there. It was a horrible time in my life. Everyday just sucked, and God is definitely what got me through that. If I hadn't had faith in God and been able to unite myself to Christ's suffering on the cross, and think

about that and everything that was going on; so that was definitely key in getting through that time. Nothing made sense to me in my life. I didn't understand why things were happening, and I was a little resentful that God wasn't making things more clear to me. I felt like all I wanted was to just love him, and I couldn't emotionally feel him near to me. I felt like I was reaching out through this fog and I could just vaguely see his figure in the distance, but every time I took a step closer he receded. All I wanted was to be close to him. I'd wake up in the morning and just put my sweatshirt over my head and just pretend that I was still asleep while I was in class, because sleep was safe, and so I would think about religious songs and sing them in my head, and think about Christ's death and how much he went through, and how horrible that must have been for him and how everybody turned away, and how also his disciples must have felt when he died. I mean, they left everything to follow this guy for three years, and then he dies. And then the resurrection happened, and then everything was true again. Like suddenly all these doubts that they'd been having were put to rest, and they had something that they could really believe in. Everything had been shattered when he died. But when he rose again everything was... How much peace and joy they must have had in their hearts when they saw him again. And I thought about that and that feeling of being totally abandoned and alone, and then how the

resurrection happened, and the resurrection always comes, and in my life when I have dark times like that, I like to think about the resurrection, and I keep telling myself that the resurrection will come.

Big Picture

The final theme can be described as the “big picture.” It became clear in the data that what the participants were saying about their religious beliefs was that it gave them a sense of purpose in education and in life. This purpose, from their perspective, allowed them to see things from a broader point of view. They strove to be successful in education and life because they had clarity in purpose and a clear understanding of what they were doing in school and life. Luke stated:

For me religion isn't something that you just go to church and do Sunday only and then you are done. It's a way of life. It isn't anything in particular that can be studied, but is a complete lifestyle that can be studied, and so I think that every religion has a lifestyle, and the fruits of that lifestyle can be seen. People who have religion in their lives, in my mind, seem to have a lifestyle that promotes something to a certain point. They have a reason for doing the things that they are doing. Those who don't have that, may spend more time trying to figure out why they want to do the things that they do, because they don't have a reason. Money is important but it can only go so far, it can't tell you where you are going to go after you die, or it can't tell you to put your fears aside. It can't help you with love, or answer

questions why you are here, or what your meaning is, and religion helps you answer those questions, and those who are religious, I think, on a whole have more opportunity to be confident in who they are because they have a lot of the answers right there in front of them... it helps a lot in shaping their actions, who they are because they are not just learning for themselves but they are also doing it for their family and for their God.

When Luke was asked, “How has your religion helped you through some of the difficult times in your academics?” he responded:

It helps you put it into perspective. It makes it so that what when you have a challenge and get stressed, religion helps me to put things in perspective. It will pass, everything will be okay, and everything will be alright. There is a reason to do what I am doing, even if I fail. It gives me another opportunity to learn it all over again.

Samantha (Catholic) readily identified that her religion gave her the “big picture” perspective. When asked, “What role has religion played in helping you through difficult times in education?” she responded:

It most defiantly has. Looking at things from a big picture perspective is another thing I’ve learned through my faith. That is always really helpful when you are stressed in life, or for a final, or for whatever is going on. When my parents got divorced, I didn’t take it so well. Now looking back with a more broad perspective, I can see how that

experience has helped me in my life. Every finals week is hell. I don't sleep, or eat well. I get super nervous, but praying and taking time to read my scriptures, even when I'm most busy, just calms me down and brings me back to that big picture. Everything comes back into line and I can do the tasks at hand.

When Natalie (Catholic) was asked why she didn't party or drink alcohol like many of her high school friends, she stated:

I knew that that wasn't going to get me anywhere, and it didn't seem to be making them happy at all, so I didn't really understand why they were doing it; but also the things that they were doing I knew that God didn't want me to do. They weren't going to help my relationship with God; they weren't going to help my relationship with my family. I couldn't see any good that was going to come out of it. I'd say that having a strong faith has given me a better outlook on everything. You are more likely to look at things positively, even if others don't see them that way.

When asked to give an example Natalie continued:

My final project in architecture was so huge. I was so stressed out. I didn't sleep. I think that it was Holy Week that week too, and that helped a lot, because we had Masses a lot that week, and being able to focus on something that wasn't school related, and something else that was this huge joyous occasion, that was really helpful in lowering the

stress and focusing on something else, that was huge. It helped me look at the big picture and say, “Okay, this is one project for one class.” And the big picture beyond school even really helps you realize that this school project isn’t really that huge. It will still be okay and then it doesn’t have to be perfect.

When Susie was asked, “From your perspective, how has your religious belief benefited your academic success?” She stated:

It helps me not get too stressed-out about stuff. I just know that there is a bigger picture and so it doesn’t really matter how well I do on a test, and the reason I try hard is because of my family. I know that God can work with whatever mistakes I make, and how ever stupid I am. I just have a lot of faith in his ability to work with me. So I don’t get stressed-out too much.

Joshua (LDS) discussed what his life was like when he couldn’t see the big picture in a particularly difficult time while in high school:

I think I viewed religion as a bunch of rules telling me not to do something. When I wasn’t into church I noticed that my grades really dropped. It was only after I decided to become more religious that the grades did go up. I think that when I didn’t care about religion, I didn’t really care about myself. I didn’t care about my future. I believed that I was destined to become just a McDonalds worker for the rest of my life. I just didn’t believe in myself and my grades

showed that. Becoming involved in church again has helped me to see the big picture.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of academically successful first-year college students who are also religious regarding the connection between religiosity and academic success. Data analysis discovered four central themes that were discussed in this chapter; these themes were: (a) Expectations; (b) Focus and Moral Conduct; (c) Support; and, (d) Big Picture. Following a discussion of the themes, excerpts from participant interviews were used to illustrate their attitudes and perceptions of religiosity's connection to academic success in their own voice.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of academically successful first-year college students who are also religious concerning the connection between religiosity and academic success. Questions that guided the study were: (a) What are the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of academically successful first-year college students regarding individual religiosity's effect on academic success? and, (b) What are the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of academically successful first-year college students regarding familial religiosity and its influence on academic success?

This study employed qualitative, phenomenologically-oriented methods for data collection and analysis to accomplish this purpose. Ten students were interviewed and asked to describe and reflect on their academic and religious experiences both in high school and in college. Analysis of interview data resulted in a set of four major themes: (a) Expectations; (b) Focus and Moral Conduct; (c) Support and Comfort; and, (d) Big Picture. These themes were developed and discussed in Chapter Four.

This final chapter presents the conclusions and implications of this study and a discussion regarding possible significance to educators and religious leaders of various denominations.

Conclusions

Four conclusions, related to the four major themes, can be stated: 1. Parental expectation, religion's expectation, and the perceived expectation from God promote academic success in first-year college students; 2. Adherence to strict moral conduct codes or behaviors promoted by religion, such as sexual abstinence and refraining from drugs and alcohol, fosters an environment where increased focus and attention to academic studies can thrive; less attention is paid to academic inhibitors or distracters which have been shown to decrease academic success; 3. A belief in religion and an individual relationship with God functions as a support to students pursuing high academic success. This perceived support also functions to sustain students during personal challenges and trials in college; 4. Religion can give meaning and purpose to life allowing students to see the big picture and to put in perspective reasons behind the "whys." That is, there is a higher purpose for doing well academically, and that life and school have purpose and meaning beyond the moment.

These conclusions were found to be consistent across gender with no obvious differences between the male and female participants. These conclusions, connections to the literature, and the unique contributions of the study are discussed in the following sections.

Expectations

The first conclusion is that parental expectations, religion's expectations, and individually perceived expectations from God contribute to academic success. Each

of the participants in this study indicated that they perceived a high level of academic expectation from at least one of these three sources, in most cases all three. It would seem that students' academic success is raised or lowered based on the perceived expectations placed upon them by family, religion and God. This conclusion is supported by research. Jacobs and Harvey (2005) found that parental expectations of their children's educational level made the strongest prediction of high achievement followed by the length of time they had maintained their expectations. Another study revealed that parental involvement had a moderate relationship to student outcomes, while parental expectation for educational achievement had the strongest relationship (Fan & Chen, 2001). In a study of sixth and seventh graders, it was discovered that the most influential impact on academic success was parental expectation of students' capabilities (Hoge, Smit, & Crist, 1997). In a recent study of college freshmen, Astin (2004) revealed that familial expectations and value placed on college education in the home had the greatest effect on a students' success. Moreover, first-year Asian college students reported that of all the reasons to strive to excel academically, fear of disappointing their parents was high on the list (Schneider & Lee, 1990). Additional studies indicate, however, that unrealistic expectations can act as a deterrent to academic success and parents should be cautioned not to require too much (e.g., Smith & Wertlieb, 2005; Jones, 2004; Krallman & Holcomb, 1997).

In contrast to high expectations, lower academic expectations have been shown to correlate with lower academic success across gender and race. Treiber and others (1982) revealed that lower to middle class parental groups that exhibited lower

educational expectations resulted in lower academic success among first-year college students. Redd, Brooks and McGarvey (2002) found that parents who were not college educated were less likely to become involved in their college-aged child's academic pursuits and had lower academic expectations. They concluded that lower academic expectations lowered the graduation percentage among those students.

The unique contribution of the present study is that, for religious students, this sense of expectation can originate not only in parental expectations, but also in religious beliefs. For example, Joshua stated that after his father committed suicide, his family was very poor. His mother did not demonstrate high levels of academic expectation; in fact, she did not care if he didn't go to college at all. It was Joshua's involvement in his religion, and the associations he developed with other adults, whom he respected, that motivated him to enter college and achieve academic success.

Moral Conduct Code and Focus

The second conclusion is that religious students who adhere to moral codes of behavior as taught by their particular religious denominations find it easier to focus their attention on academic success, with less attention spent being focused on academic distractions which can inhibit academic success in college. This conclusion contributes additional understanding into the relationship between religiosity and academic success and is supported indirectly by research. For example, one study (Rapaport, 1984) reported that higher grades were associated with lower levels of drinking and partying. Another study revealed that high academic, first-year college

students, differed from low academic performers in terms of their reported level of self-control, that is, high achievers refrained from impulsivity and risk-seeking behaviors that impede academic learning (Mansfield, et. al., 2004). The ability for college students to focus their attention during test taking was studied by one researcher, who concluded that students could improve their performance on multiple-choice exams through focusing and re-focusing, blocking-out distractions, remaining calm, and concentrating (Herman, 2000).

Results from the Harvard School of Public Health 1999 College Alcohol Study (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000) revealed a significant difference between students who regularly binge drink and those who don't. Students with a religious affiliation were six times more likely to abstain from alcohol in highly competitive universities than non-religious students. Furthermore, it was discovered that college students who binge drink miss class at a rate of seven times more than non-binge-drinkers; get behind on their school work at a rate of five times more than non-binge-drinkers; do something that they regret at a rate of four times more than non-binge-drinkers; forget where they were or what they did at a rate of five times more than non-binge-drinkers; engage in unplanned sexual activities at the rate of five times that of non-binge-drinkers; do not use protection when engaged in sex at the rate of six times more than non-binge-drinkers, and; get in trouble with campus or local police at the rate of eight times more than non-binge-drinkers (p. 207).

Religion Provides Support

The third conclusion of this study is that religiosity aids in the academic

success of first-year college students by providing a system of support and comfort that enables them to succeed academically. This conclusion is a unique contribution of this study. While previous research has shown that first-year college students often feel lonely, homesick, insecure, stressed, afraid, and worried (e.g., Kuh & Gonyea, 2006; Ponzetti, 1990; Sundberg, 1988; Rajapaska & Dundes, 2003) and that religion and spirituality positively correlate in coping with stress (Graham, Furr, Flowers & Burke, 2001), the dynamic of this relationship has not been previously clarified. This study establishes that students feel supported and comforted by the ability to turn to God for help.

Meaning and Purpose: The Big Picture

The fourth conclusion of the study is that religion can give meaning, perspective, and purpose to life, allowing students to see the “big picture.” Throughout the interviews, participants consistently remarked that their religious beliefs allowed them to see a purpose for academic success that reached beyond the here and now. It was as though these participants believed that God was in charge of their lives and that they were being led to fulfill some greater objective in life, and academic success was necessary in order to accomplish God’s “purpose” for them. They also seemed to believe that no matter what happened in their life, that God had a plan for them, and in the end, everything would work out according to God’s will. This ability for these students to “put things in perspective” seemed to have had an influence on the decisions they made. This “big picture” concept was not represented in previous research and is another unique contribution of this study.

Implications

Implications of this study relate to policy and practice concerning religion in public high schools as well as on college campuses. The findings seem to indicate that religion is valuable in the lives of first-year college students, and that religious students who embrace their religious teachings succeed academically. Educational institutions and student affairs professionals might consider ways to support the religious practices and development of students and to collaborate with churches in supporting academic success.

This study has supported previous research concerning the relationship between religiosity and academic success, and has added new information regarding that relationship. Additional studies could be performed to understand those relationships in more depth. For example, this study was limited in scope to ten first-year college students. Longitudinal research could explore these relationships over time with more participants. Additional studies could be conducted to examine interdenominational differences concerning specific teachings that contribute to academic success. Specifically, further work is needed to understand this relationship as it relates to non-Christian religious students as well the non-religious academically successful student.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

- 1) You are a religious person. Help me understand what that means to you?
 - a) Religious background?
 - b) Individual religious activities?
 - c) What does it mean to you to be religious?
 - d) Can you be more specific?
- 2) Can you tell me about your family religiosity?
 - a) Family religious background?
 - b) Family religious practices in the home?
- 3) You are a successful student. Can you tell me about that?
- 4) Why do you think that you are a successful student?
- 5) Are the two related for you? In other words, do your individual religious beliefs influence your academic achievement?
 - a) Tell me about that? Can you be more specific?
 - b) What are some of those beliefs?
 - c) In what way do those beliefs influence academic achievement for you?
- 6) Do you think that your familial religious practices have helped you become a successful student? If so, how and why?
 - a) How have your family's religious practices/rituals influenced your academic success?
- 7) Is there anything that I haven't asked regarding this subject that you would like to

share, or that you think would be important to this study?

Because this study explored the religiosity of college students and how it is associated with academic success, several important validity questions must be addressed. The first was concerned with defining religiosity in measurable terms. For this study, religiosity is defined as: (a) frequent participation in organized church services; (b) high expressed level of devotion to a chosen religion; and, (c) frequent private individual and familial religious expressions such as prayer, scripture reading, religious meditation, or other personal religious observances. Defining religiosity in these terms may create potential challenges for researchers since this may exclude potential participants. Furthermore, allowing participants to self-select may have weakened the study since all of the participants were considered Christian. This definition may not indicate internal spirituality or religiosity. Conversely, a lack of church attendance or outward piety may not indicate a deficiency of religiosity. This issue cannot be directly addressed in the design of this study, but was taken into consideration when interpreting the data.