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Higher Education and Religiosity: Does College Weaken or Bolster Students' Religious Beliefs?*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the impacts of higher education on religiosity among young adults. Much of the literature on this topic points to a secularizing effect among college-aged individuals. Scholars have pointed to theories such as emerging adulthood, moral community, and secularization to explain this relationship (Davignon and Thompson 2015; McFarland, Wright, and Weakliem 2011; Schwadel 2015). This research uses the third wave of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), which was collected in 2008 and produced a sample of 1,464 cases, to test the widely held belief that college students exhibit less religiosity than non-college educated emerging adults. Age was also held constant as the survey only interviewed 18 to 24-year-olds. Running a regression analysis while controlling for the respondents' gender yielded results that confirm one hypothesis and disconfirm the others. College attendance is not a significant predictor of three of my four measures of religiosity: frequency of prayer, frequency of religious service attendance, and perceived decline in religiosity. The assumption that a college education is secularizing might no longer be true, especially for young women who report greater levels of religiosity than young men on two of the religiosity measures at the $p < .01$ level. However, this analysis revealed college attendance as a significant predictor of one's doubt in religious beliefs, but at a lower alpha level ($p < .05$). Although religion is certainly changing shape in the 21st century, it may not be shifting in the way scholars have long predicted, and these changes certainly vary among different social groups.

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Religiosity in the United States has decreased over recent decades; however, many Americans still consider themselves highly religious and are actively involved in spiritual organizations. What influences the shift towards cultural secularity is widely debated among sociologists (Hill 2009). I seek to explore how attending college affects one's level of piety and religiosity. We know that attending college has immense influences on one's life course, especially in areas like political views and socioeconomic class. Scholars have found evidence that suggests higher education can both uphold and erode religious beliefs, and these different outcomes are due to a variety of factors (Schwadel 2011). For example, an individual's religious affiliation or their university's religious affiliation can immensely affect how their religiosity might change after receiving a college education. Students attending religiously affiliated institutions are likely to attend religious services more frequently and express greater belief in God (Schwadel 2011). Diving deeper into how a college education affects religiosity can teach us important lessons about what fuels religion and the direction of spirituality going forward.

Although sociologists have studied it before, there is a lack of consensus as to the direction of the relationship between higher education and religiosity. There is evidence which suggests that college can both intensify and erode religiosity among young people (Schwadel 2011). It is important to understand why some go in one direction rather than another. Additionally, attending college is often viewed as a way to climb the social ladder and get ahead in the world financially, however we do not as deeply consider how higher college attendance nationwide is affecting the level that people practice religion and identify with being religious. Unpacking this relationship can help us to understand more about how religion is changing over time, especially when evaluating past research that is potentially outdated. There is an array of research that has been done to understand how religion and college education affect political

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views, but not enough research that considers how these two variables affect each other. In my research, college education will be the main independent variable. Respondents' change in religious beliefs and frequency of religious practice will be dependent variables to measure overall religiosity.

Receiving a college education has become more common every year, and I predict that higher education can shatter certain conservative religious conceptions in a significant way, thus affecting the shift towards secularity. In college, students are exposed to a breadth of ideas and cultures that exist outside of their immediate sphere. These new understandings might conflict with previously held religious ideas and cast doubt on young people's religious beliefs. Furthermore, college students are often busy balancing the many aspects of emerging adulthood; establishing one's identity, advancing in schoolwork, and thinking about future careers and opportunities. These factors might affect the time one can spend on their spirituality and create a gradual shift towards lower levels of religiousness. I hypothesize that respondents enrolled in college will report lower frequencies of religious service attendance and prayer than non-college enrolled respondents. Additionally, I predict that college enrolled respondents will report higher levels of decline and doubt in their religious beliefs than respondents not enrolled in college.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Studying the effects of education on religion is important because we can observe trends in religion and better understand what these changes mean on a broader scope. Themes such as emerging adulthood, moral community, and secularization theory frame this research to better understand how individuals ages 18 to 25 operate in the 21st century regarding religion. Religion has seen some radical changes in the last century, and its deeply rooted stance in history and

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society is often juxtaposed by an altogether shift away from religious participation in the modern era. Analyzing this change allows us to see how these theories take shape in a measurable way.

Previous literature studies the way education changes the strength of people's religious beliefs and the way they practice religion (Schwadel 2011). The theory of emerging adulthood is often called upon to explain this relationship, specifically to better understand how religion is impacted by higher education. Emerging adulthood is a term that sociologists use to describe the period of 18 to 25 in one's life. This period is important because this age period used to be the beginning of adulthood, but now these expectations have lowered, and emerging adults are still able to explore and alter their identities. They are not expected to have established themselves in the workforce, get married, or have children during this period (Arnett and Jensen 2002). Their identities are still malleable, which makes them a relevant population in this research because I aim to study the ways religion changes during emerging adulthood. The years 18 through 25 in one's life have become more widely accepted as formative and there are fewer rigid expectations that this age group matures into adulthood during this time (Arnett and Jensen 2002). The shift observed by sociologists in the past two decades is consistent with secularization theory, which posits that as civilization has industrialized and modernized, we have moved away from being a society guided by traditional religious doctrines and more towards the pursuit of new knowledge.

Durkheim's theory of moral community offers an explanation as to how and why groups share values related to morality and behavior. He wrote about how rural civilizations were built on shared religious beliefs, and these beliefs created the mold for hierarchies which organized society. Social theorists have used this concept to understand how religion binds individuals together, creating widely accepted norms, behaviors, and beliefs (McFarland, Wright, and Weakliem 2011). After studying the literature related to these theories, I chose to examine them

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by focusing on concepts related to strength of religious beliefs and frequency of religious practice. To operationalize these concepts, I used similar variables to those in the religion studies that I have examined thus far, for example, variables that measure self-reported change in religious beliefs and religious doubt in addition to interval level variables measuring frequency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this research, I seek to explore the effects of higher education attainment on religiosity. More specifically, this research aims to understand how religious beliefs and practices change when an individual receives an education. Many theorists and studies have explored the effects of college attendance on various facets of young people's lives. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) found that college has a liberalizing effect on beliefs related to spirituality, and this relationship has been studied through various themes. This study explores educational attainment and religiosity through the themes of emerging adulthood, moral community, and secularization. Scholars like Hill (2011) have attempted to refute the claim that college education liberalizes young people, but most are not able to conclusively determine if college is the main factor eroding or uplifting students' orthodox beliefs.

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a recently developed term to describe an age group that has come about with much distinction since industrialization, bridging the gap between adolescence and young adulthood. In the past century, college attendance has risen while reproduction and marriage are being postponed. The period of emerging adulthood opens one up to new ideas and world conceptions because self-exploration and identity formation are prioritized over raising children and getting married (Lee 2002). One's college years are typically aligned with their

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entrance into the period of emerging adulthood, and radical identity transformations are likely to occur as routine childhood traditions are called into question (Barry et al. 2010).

The so-called “age of possibilities” for emerging adults can bring on a burgeoning sense of disillusionment and identity transformation, as their transformations often lead them to turn inwards, reassessing their beliefs and values (Stoppa and Lefkowitz 2010; McKinney and McKinney 1999). Scholars found that emerging adults report lower frequencies of religious service attendance and assign less importance to the religious beliefs they do hold. However, certain longitudinal studies found that these declines in religiosity significantly reversed in mid and late adulthood, suggesting that religion becomes salient again later in life (Hayward and Krause 2013; Stoppa and Lefkowitz 2010).

Moral Community

Moral community is a term first written about by Emile Durkheim in the early 20th century. Moral communities bolster certain ideologies to achieve social control (McFarland et al. 2011). This theory is often studied in the context of religion, as religious groups have acted as moral communities for many centuries. Higher learning institutions often act as moral communities, encouraging certain behaviors while condemning deviant behaviors. At secular institutions, moral communities act secularly as well, encouraging less religious participation among students (Davignon and Thomson 2015). However, at religiously affiliated colleges, moral communities serve to uplift and encourage religious participation. The religious affiliation of a school is an important factor in determining levels of religiosity (Hill 2009). The common practices of college students are highly influenced by their environment, or moral community. If religion is not salient to the greater community, new college students might adopt this belief as well, leading to lower levels of religiosity and religious practice (Bryant, Choi, and Yosuno

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2003; Hartley 2004). The drive for homogeneity that exists within moral communities leads students to practice religion in the way that they see it practiced around them. The effects of this can be corrosive to campus religious participation in highly secular schools (Schwadel 2015).

Secularization and Modernization

With the transition to modernity, scholars have identified shifts in thought and behavioral patterns that suggest the adoption of secularized beliefs and frameworks (Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). Secularization is both codified in government and other institutional doctrines and adopted by academics to remove bias. Mayrl and Uecker (2011) suggest that secular colleges are more likely to decrease orthodoxy in students' religious practices and beliefs as well as open them up to embracing religions other than their own. A secular education is likely to introduce students to ideas that may conflict with or cast doubt upon previously held religious beliefs (Albrecht and Heaton 1984). Elite universities are likely to purport more secularized frameworks, and those with relatively low religious participation are more likely to self-select these institutions (Schwadel 2015). However, shifts in religiosity can still be observed from students who grew up in religious households, and it is important to determine where the cause of this shift originates.

In recent years, there have been more drastic negative shifts in religious practices in college students majoring in the humanities (Reimer 2010). Furthermore, sociologists have claimed that the natural sciences are inherently secular and clash with bible theory (Johnson 1997). Scholars have explored the secularizing effects of a college education through specifically examining changes across majors, finding that students majoring in any natural science were more likely to believe the Bible was “a book of fables.” College students are likely to be exposed to new conceptual, historical, and scientific frameworks in nearly any major they pursue, and

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these frameworks may clash with Bible theory and other ideologies students might have learned from studying religion as a child (Schleifer, Brauer, and Patel 2018: 316).

The relationship between education and religiosity remains unclear, as scholars have found evidence to suggest both positive and negative effects of higher education on religious beliefs and practices (Hill 2009). However, there is a clear negative trend in much of the research done on this topic. Scholars have tried to find an alternate explanation for the drastic religious decline among college-aged students but can concede that to some extent, higher education has a secularizing effect on the malleable population of emerging adults (Lee 2002).

METHODS

Data

The data set used in this research is the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). This data set is comprised of survey responses from 3,290 English and Spanish-speaking individuals (Smith 2008). The NSYR is an important tool for studying religion because this data was collected in three waves over the course of 5 years, using the same sample for all waves so that individual changes could be tracked over time, specifically before, during, and after college. I only used the third wave because the sample were all within typical undergraduate school age, allowing me to more clearly restrict my study to measuring religiosity among college-aged students. The first wave of data was collected in 2003 and the second wave in 2005. The third wave interviewed the same respondents as in waves one and two to the most feasible extent, as some were in the military and unreachable, from September 2007 to April 2008.

All respondents in the third wave fall between the ages of 18 and 24, capturing a range of college-aged individuals. The sample was gathered in 2002 when the first wave of data was collected through a random generation of telephone numbers. Eligible cases included a

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household with a child between the ages of 13 and 17, who became the 18-24-year-old respondents interviewed again in 2007. The sample is meant to be nationally representative of the college-aged population, including cases from all 50 states. The data was collected by phone at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and the unit of analysis is individuals. The combined response rate for all three waves of this survey is 43.9 percent, with a wave three retention rate of 77.1 percent. This data measures the intensity of young people's religious beliefs, how they express their spirituality, and how their religiosity changes over time. Another conceptual focus of this survey that I will not be using for my research is a focus on beliefs and behaviors related to sexual activity. This subsection of data is included in the survey because the NSYR is often used to examine sexuality among religious youth. Without focusing on sexuality, this dataset includes the necessary variables to explore the effect of higher education on religiosity. For further information on how the data were collected, see The Association of Religion Data Archives.

Variables

My independent variable, college attendance, is a combination of two questions asked on the NSYR that I recoded to capture specifically college students or respondents not enrolled in school of any kind. The survey asks respondents, "are you currently enrolled in school of any kind?" If the respondent answers yes, a follow-up question asks, "what type of school are you enrolled in?" By selecting responses of "College/university" and applying these cases to the dummied enrolled in school variable, I can compare the difference in responses among respondents specifically enrolled in a college or university versus respondents not enrolled in school of any kind. Responses to the school attendance question appear nominally, with answer values of "Yes, enrolled in school," "No, not in school," and "Home schooled." I excluded home

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schooled respondents from my study, which did not significantly affect my number of cases. However, after excluding responses to the school enrollment question that were not “college/university,” I shrunk my sample size in half, from 3,290 to 1,464. I dummied this variable, labeling “No, not in school” as zero and “Yes, enrolled in college” as one, and the level of significance is .01.

My dependent variables are used measure frequency of religious practice and intensity of religious beliefs among respondents. Two of my dependent variables are frequency of religious service attendance and frequency of prayer alone, which were recoded into interval-ratio variables to provide more precise information regarding exactly how many times per year respondents practice their religion. The service attendance variable increases in frequency from “a few times a year” to “more than once a week.” The service attendance variable is also recoded from four to 156 times per year on a six-point scale. A score of four on the service attendance scale indicates that the respondent attends services approximately four times per year. The prayer variable is recoded from zero to 1,000 times per year, with seven response options increasing in frequency from “never” to “many times a day.” In this case, a score of 1,000 indicates that the respondent prays alone multiple times a day. These variables are phrased as questions, such as “how often, if ever, do you pray by yourself alone?” and “about how often do you attend religious services?”

The other two dependent variables that capture decline in religiousness and doubt in religious belief remain ordinal-level variables. The first of these variables asks respondents, “in the last year, how much, if at all, have you had doubts about whether your religious beliefs are true?” The second variable asks respondents, “Over the past two years, have you become more religious, less religious, or stayed about the same?” The doubt variable is measured from one to

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four, indicating few religious doubts to many religious doubts. The decline in religiosity variable is measured from one to three, one indicating an increase in religiosity and three indicating a decline. These variables capture respondents' religious practices as well as the intensity of their belief. Missing data were deleted list-wise, most of those responses being legitimate skips. Some “Don’t know” responses were present in the data, but not enough to significantly change the number of cases.

FINDINGS

Univariate Analyses

According to Figure 1, the frequency at which respondents report being in college is 33 percent. This is the independent variable used in this research, indicating that most respondents are not enrolled in school of any kind.

****INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE****

Figure 2 reports the frequency of responses for the gender variable, indicating that 55 percent of respondents identify as women.

****INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE****

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 for the dependent variable “Frequency of religious service attendance” show that on average, respondents attend religious services about 37 times out of the year, or about three times a month. However, it is important to note the modal response of four days, indicating that most respondents do not go to religious services on a frequent basis, but the high numbers reported by some cause a slight skew in the data. This is supported by Figure 3, which indicates that most of the respondents, about 29 percent, attend religious services only a few times a year.

****INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE****

****INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE****

As shown in Table 1, the mean for the dependent variable “Frequency of prayer alone” is 315 days per year, suggesting that on average, respondents pray alone almost every day. I recoded this variable from ordinal to interval-ratio to reflect the number of days a respondent prays alone out of the 365 days of the year. The standard deviation of 368 days indicates a high level of variance in these responses. Although this variation exists, the modal response of “About once a day” suggests that the sample used in this study generally prays frequently. Figure 4 shows that 21 percent of respondents pray alone about once a day.

****INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE****

Figure 5 shows frequencies for my first ordinal level dependent variable, “Decline in religiousness.” The mean of the responses to this question suggests that 53 percent of respondents said they stayed about the same in terms of how religious they were within the last two years. 14 percent of respondents reported becoming more religious and 14 percent reported becoming less religious. This variable exemplifies a normal distribution.

****INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE****

The final dependent variable in this research, “Doubt in religious beliefs,” has a mean response of two, indicating that on average, respondents report a few doubts in religious beliefs over last two years. According to Figure 6, 57 percent of respondents report no doubts in the last two years. However, 14 percent of all respondents report having some or many doubts in the past two years. Why these doubts occur is central to my research problem.

****INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE****

Bivariate Analyses

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Bivariate analysis revealed a lack of strong statistical significance between college attendance and the four dependent variables in this research. Running a Pearson's (r) correlation between my dependent variables, shown in Table 2, we observe that there are many statistically significant relationships between these various measures of religiosity.

****INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE****

All relationships between my dependent variables are significant at the .01 level. Frequency of religious service attendance is positively associated with frequency of prayer alone, and the strength of this relationship is moderate. This indicates that as frequency of religious service attendance increases, as does frequency of prayer alone. Furthermore, as frequency of religious service attendance increases, the decline in religiousness variable decreases, indicating that respondents who attend religious services more frequently report less decreases in religiousness over the past two years. This relationship is weak to moderate. Frequency of religious service attendance is negatively associated with doubt in religious beliefs, and this relationship is weak. Therefore, as respondents report increased frequency of religious service attendance, they report less doubt in their religious beliefs over the past two years. Frequency of prayer alone has a moderate, negative association with decline in religiousness. A similar relationship exists between frequency of prayer alone and doubt in religious beliefs, but the strength of this relationship is weak rather than moderate. This means that as respondents report a greater frequency of prayer alone, they report less decline in their religiousness and less doubt in their religious beliefs over the past two years. Finally, the decline in religiousness variable has a positive, weak relationship with doubt in religious beliefs, indicating that as respondents report greater declines in their religiousness, they also report greater doubt in their religious beliefs. These bivariate findings between my dependent variables align with the literature I have

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reviewed on the topic of trends in religiosity among emerging adults. Furthermore, the high level of significance between all of the dependent variables is in an indicator that they are an accurate measure of overall religiousness.

There is no statistical significance between being a woman and frequency of religious service attendance, nor is there between being a woman and decline in religiousness.

Additionally, there is no statistical significance between my two independent variables, in college and gender, which was recoded to represent women. On the other hand, there is a weak, positive, significant relationship between being a woman and frequency of prayer alone, suggesting that women are more likely to pray alone than men. Additionally, there is a negative, weak, and statistically significant relationship between being woman and doubt in religious beliefs, indicating that women are likely to report less doubt than men. Finally, for my main independent variable, in college, there is no statistically significant relationship with three of my dependent variables: frequency of religious service attendance, frequency of prayer alone, and decline in religiousness. However, there is a statistically significant relationship at the .05 level between in college and doubt in religious beliefs. This relationship is weak and positive, indicating that those in college are more likely to report increased doubts in their religious beliefs over the past two years. This finding, although weak, is central to my synthesis.

Multivariate Analyses

Running an OLS regression of service attendance, prayer, decline in religiousness, and doubt on both independent variables produced varying results, some of which disconfirm my hypotheses, and some of which bring up unexpected points for discussion and further research. College attendance has no effect on frequency of service attendance and decline in religiousness therefore producing non-significant regression equations. The R^2 for the equation with frequency

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of prayer alone in Table 3 showed that one percent of the variance in the dependent variable can be explained by whether one attends college and their gender. This is a low R^2 value but represents the highest of the four regression equations I ran. This equation was significant, with an F value of 7.631 ($p < .01$). Additionally, although my main independent variable, in college, did not produce a significant relationship with frequency of prayer, gender had a significant relationship with frequency of prayer ($\beta = .1, p < .01$). According to this result, young women are more likely to report higher frequencies of prayer alone than young men.

****INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE****

The equations that produced significant results with both my independent and control variable appeared when I entered these variables in an OLS regression predicting doubt in religious beliefs, my final dependent variable. The equation was significant with an F value of 6.902 ($p < .01$). Controlling for gender, the unstandardized coefficient of in college against doubt in religious beliefs produced a value of $\beta = .064$ ($p < .05$). The R^2 value for this equation is .009, indicating that less than one percent of the variance in one's doubt in their religious beliefs can be explained by college attendance and gender. It is important to note, however, that this coefficient is significant at the $p < .05$ level. Controlling for gender and age, the regression equation in Table 3 produces the result that respondents in college are more likely to report increased levels of doubt in their beliefs over the last two years. Furthermore, the gender variable yielded some significant results as well. Women are less likely to report doubt in religious beliefs over the last two years, and this variable produced a stronger effect than being in college ($\beta = -.074$). This regression analysis confirmed my hypothesis that college students would exhibit more doubt in religious beliefs than non-college students but nullified my hypotheses that

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college students would exhibit more decline in religiousness and lower frequencies of religious service attendance and prayer.

DISCUSSION

The regression results are consistent with the results of the correlation matrix shown in Table 2. As seen in Table 3, women ages 18 to 24 are generally more religious than young men, however controlling for gender did not strengthen or weaken the relationship of college attendance with the dependent variables. These results create room for interpretation in a way that I did not originally anticipate, allowing for important advancements in the discussion over the factors that cause or prevent decline in religiosity among emerging adults. Although I did not hypothesize about the direction of women's religiosity, this finding relates back to a compelling relationship that I came across in the literature on this topic, emphasizing its importance in the discussion of religion in the 21st century. Risk-taking behavior is significantly correlated with non-religiousness, and women are likely to engage in less risk-taking behavior than men on average (Hoffmann and Miller 1995). This helps to explain why women pray more often than men and have less doubt in their religious beliefs, as women are less likely to challenge these traditions and moral communities, since these behaviors might be deemed as risk-taking.

Perhaps higher education institutions function as moral communities, but not in the way I predicted based on previous literature. Moral communities may still exist on college campuses in the traditional way, bolstering religious ideas and serving as a guide for 'proper' behavior and beliefs. This aligns with the finding that women practice religion more and exhibit less doubt in their beliefs, as women might seek out these religious moral communities more than young men. As we have seen throughout history, women often exist at the mercy of powerful groups and might feel more comfortable in these communities. This helps to explain why women are

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significantly less likely to report doubt in their beliefs, as they are statistically less likely to engage in socially deviant behaviors (Hoffmann and Miller 1995).

The findings of this study are both supported and refuted by the literature on the topic of higher education and religiosity. A breadth of research suggests that higher education has a corrosive effect on religiosity among young adults, but my regression results suggest that there is no relationship between college attendance and three of the four measures of religiosity (Arnett and Jensen 2002). Although this contrasts much of the research done prior to this study, there is a body of literature which aims to counter the notion that college is secularizing (Schwadel 2011). The theory of secularization, especially as an effect of modernization, might not hold true in the rapidly changing environment in which we currently live. Arguments by early and mid-20th century scholars propose that modernization increases alongside education (Glock and Stark 1965; Albrecht and Heaton 1984). This may still be true, but their proposition that modernization causes secularization no longer holds up.

Despite shifts in the last fifty years which have changed the way religion is practiced, my last measure of religiosity, doubt in religious beliefs, was significantly negatively related to college enrollment. College students are more likely to report doubts in their religious beliefs over the past two years than non-college educated 18 to 24-year-olds.

There is statistical evidence from the past decade which posits that a college education has a significant liberalizing effect on religiosity (Uecker et al. 2007; Arnett and Jensen 2002). There is also plenty of research that suggests the opposite, depending on what population is being studied and what variables are being controlled for (Schwadel 2011; Hill 2009). Clearly, this relationship is highly nuanced, specific to various social groups, and ever-changing. The relationship between college and doubt in religious beliefs confirms one of my hypotheses,

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suggesting that college introduces information to students which leads them to question their religious beliefs, creating doubt. Furthermore, since college campuses often act as moral communities for students, a culture of inquisition and intellectual dispute foster increased skepticism in one's beliefs, permeating one's religiosity. However, the rest of my findings disconfirm my other hypotheses, indicating that there is no significant relationship between college attendance, prayer, religious service attendance, and religious decline.

CONCLUSION

This research examines the relationship between a college education and the level of religiosity among emerging adults. Many factors determine an individual's religiosity, and these factors change over time (Hill 2009). This research used the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a dataset collected over the course of eight years in three different waves, designed to assess changes in young adults' religious practices, beliefs, and habits. This research uses the third and final wave to test my hypotheses. I hypothesized that for 18 to 24-year-olds, attending college would be a significant predictor of religiosity. More specifically, I predicted that college students would pray less and attend religious services less often than individuals not enrolled in college. I also predicted that college students would report more doubt and decline in their religious beliefs. The only one of these hypotheses for which the regression analysis provided support was between college attendance and doubt. Doubt stood out as being significantly affected by college attendance, which aligns with the literature suggesting that a college education introduces students to ideas which lead them to question long-held religious beliefs (Mayrl and Uecker 2011). There were no significant relationships between college attendance and frequency of religious service attendance, frequency of prayer alone, or decline in religiousness. Although college attendance may not cause individuals to experience a decline in

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their religiosity, it may lead them to challenge beliefs that are usually learned during socialization in early childhood, which is supported by the theory of emerging adulthood.

When most people leave home to attend college in new and unfamiliar place, they seek out communities that may provide comfort and familiarity in this new environment. This idea extends beyond college attendance, too—it is often that case that we are drawn to people and groups that share similar values and beliefs as us, because around these people we feel the most accepted and nurtured. As comforting as it is, this kind of behavior can be harmful, perpetuating social divides and a lack of understanding between seemingly dissimilar groups. College is a peculiar place in that it both exposes students to new, possibly disruptive ideas, while perpetuating the clumping of similar identities and belief systems through interest groups and social clubs. The complex nature of an American college campus can lead to many outcomes, and depending on one's identity and previous life experience, this outcome might look like an openness to new ideas, religions, and cultures, or it might manifest in the way of sticking closely to what we know, what we feel comfortable with, bolstering our traditional thought patterns.

Limitations

Despite the comprehensive nature of this survey in its attempt to capture the religiosity of young people, there is not a variable in the NSYR that accounts for the religious affiliation of respondents' academic institutions. This causes a limitation in my research because the preexisting literature suggests that an institution's religious affiliation has a significant effect on student religiosity (Schwadel 2011). With this variable present in the data, I could have controlled for religious affiliation and perhaps seen more significant results. However, without accounting for this variable, I was still able to analyze the changes and habits of college students regarding religion. Furthermore, I was not able to control for as many variables as I think are

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necessary to thoroughly evaluate the relationship between higher education and religiosity. The NSYR did not ask respondents about their race or income, which are two major influences on just about every aspect of social and cultural life. Without these control variables, my analysis is not as robust as it could have been with a more wide-reaching dataset.

Future Implications

Further research on this topic would use a more comprehensive dataset to thoroughly capture the race and income of respondents, which would potentially alter the results of a statistical analysis of these variables. With more time and resources, I would control for the religious affiliation of the college that the respondent attends. This could be one of the most important predictors of religiosity among college-aged individuals. Since I did not control for this variable in my research, I grouped all types of institutions into one category, potentially causing my results to yield no significance between college attendance and religiosity. If I were to control for institutions with no religious affiliation, for example public colleges and universities, I would be able to more robustly analyze how college students express religiosity without the interference of the institutions' policies. Some colleges with a religious affiliation mandate service attendance and actively discourage ideas that challenge core religious beliefs like creationism. This might be skewing my results towards non-significance, as it may prevent the frequency of prayer and service attendance variables from accurately representing how the individual truly expresses their religion, without outside influence.

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Table 1. Means, Modes, Medians, and Standard Deviations for Variables ($N = 1464$)

Variable	Mean	Mode	Median	SD
Attends college	.325	.00	.00	.496
Women	.546	1.00	1.00	.498
Frequency of prayer alone	314.942	360.00	144.00	368.168
Frequency of religious service attendance	36.970	4.00	12.00	45.658
Doubt in religious beliefs	1.600	1.00	1.00	.806
Decline in religiousness	1.810	2.00	2.00	.657

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Table 2. Correlations (*r*) between In College and Four Variables (listwise deletion, two-tailed test, *N* = 1464)

Variable	Frequency of prayer alone	Decline in religiousness	Doubt in religious beliefs	Women	In college
Frequency of religious service attendance	.407**	-.321**	-.108**	-.017	-.015
Frequency of prayer alone		-.338**	-.177**	.099**	-.020
Decline in religiousness			.180**	-.009	.030
Doubt in religious beliefs				-.073**	.062*
Women					.016

p* < .05; *p* < .01

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Table 3. Regression of Service Attendance, Prayer, Decline, and Doubt on Two Variables

Variable	Frequency of Religious Service Attendance β	Frequency of Prayer Alone β	Decline in Religiousness β	Doubt in Religious Beliefs β
In College	-.015	-.022	.030	.064*
Women	-.017	.100**	-.009	-.074**
R^2	.001	.010	.001	.009
$F(2,1461)$.385	7.631**	.713	6.902**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

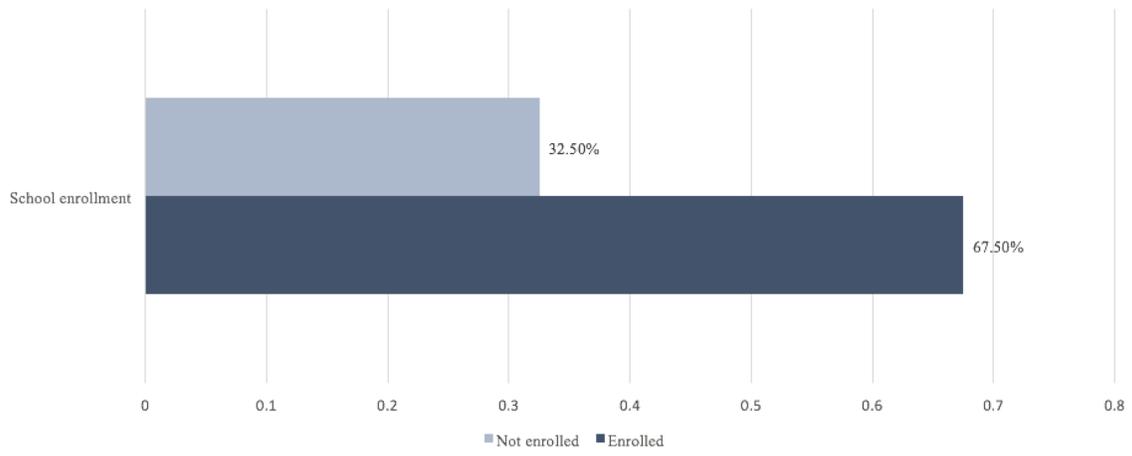


Figure 1. Bar Graph of In College

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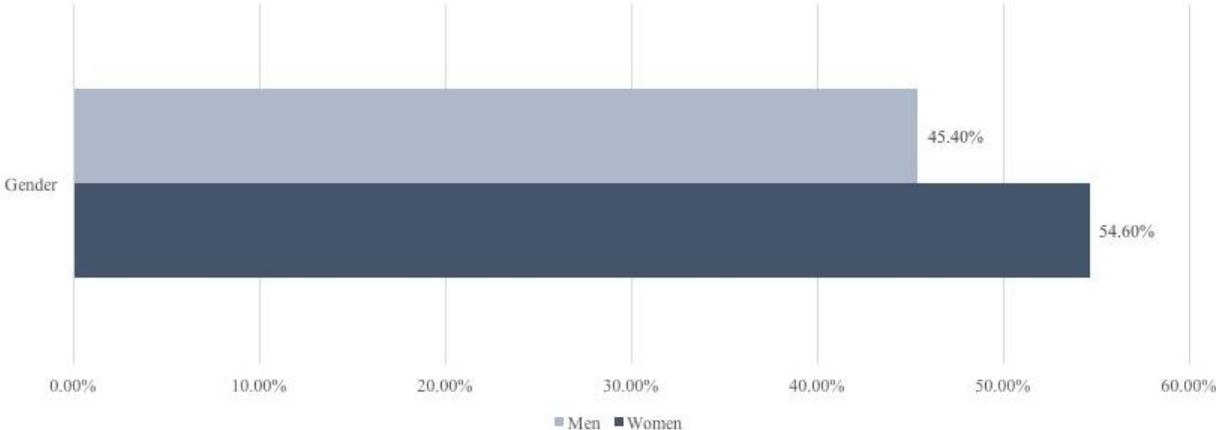


Figure 2. Bar Graph of Gender

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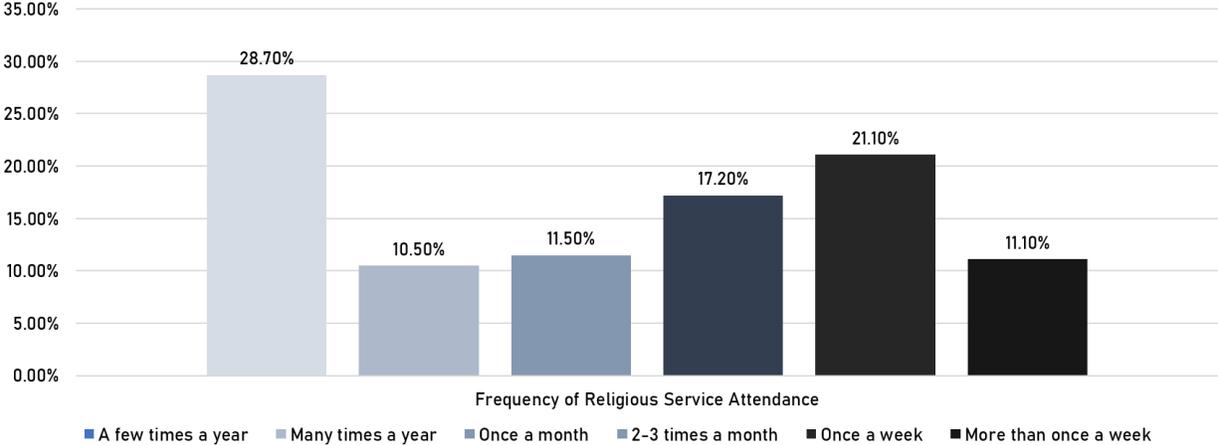


Figure 3. Bar Graph of Frequency of Religious Service Attendance

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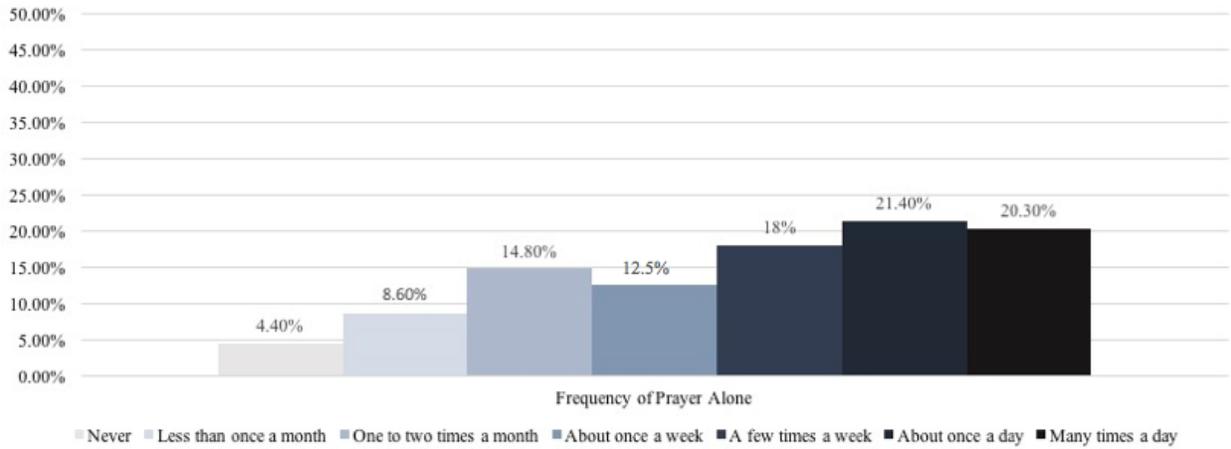


Figure 4. Bar Graph of Frequency of Prayer Alone

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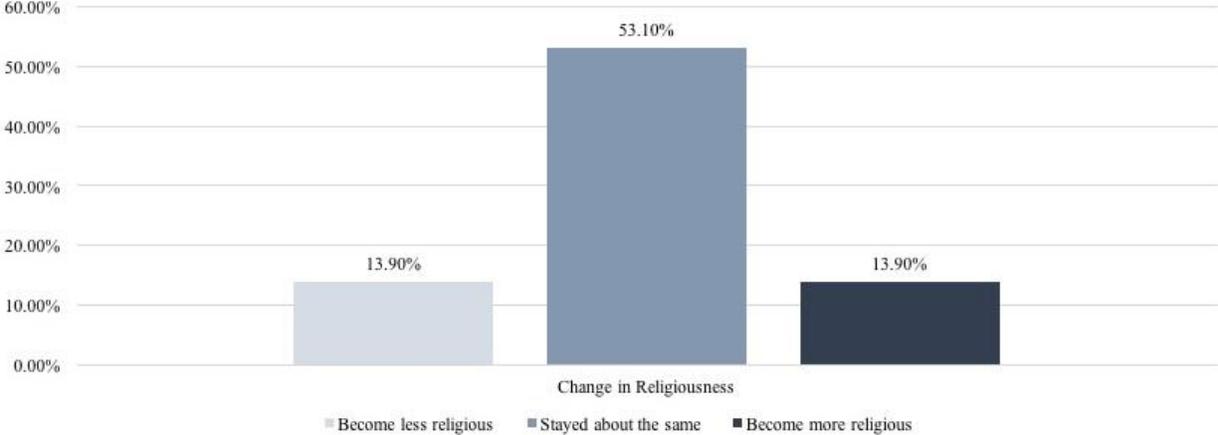


Figure 5. Bar Graph of Decline in Religiousness

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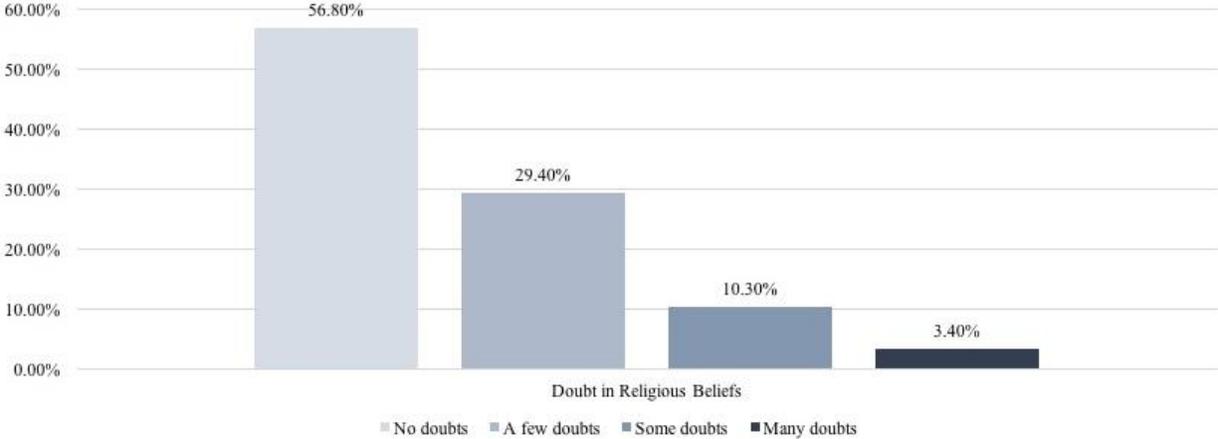


Figure 6. Bar Graph of Doubt in Religious Beliefs