

Religious and social influences on well-being among university students

Purpose: To evaluate the influence of religious beliefs on general well-being in university students.

Methods: A survey conducted at a large, southeastern public university including: evangelicals, social Christians, Roman Catholics, religious non-Christians and atheist/agnostics.

Results: 247 students participated. All groups noted good well-being with evangelicals reporting the highest levels ($P=0.004$). All groups perceived well-being was enhanced by: good health, university coursework, family/friends, a love interest, and career goals. Evangelicals who adhered to their faith showed better well-being than less adherent ($P<0.0001$). Feelings of guilt differed between groups with 40% of atheist/agnostics noting strong guilt; while Catholics and evangelicals indicating mild guilt ($P=0.02$). While all groups found hope in the future in a committed relationship or family, evangelicals (80%) and Roman Catholics (60%) more likely took hope (admittance to heaven) in being saved by grace through Jesus Christ ($P<0.0001$).

Conclusion: College students demonstrate good well-being with evangelicals reporting the highest levels. Overall well-being and hope generally come from maintaining good health, relationships with family and friends as well as career pursuits. Evangelicals especially are distinctive in their relationship with God through grace.

Results

In total, 247 students participated and their characteristics are listed in Table 1. The participant profile consisted of more Caucasian, females, and senior class level students with an average age of 23 ± 6 years. The full survey results can be viewed online (supplemental).

Well-being - All groups generally noted 'agreement' or 'strong agreement' that they possessed good well-being with the highest ratings in the evangelical group and lowest in the religious non-Christian group ($P=0.004$). In addition, evangelicals had the greatest sense of purpose ($P<0.0001$, Table 2).

Improving well-being - To maintain well-being, the majority in each group relied upon: good health, university coursework, family and friends, a love interest, or professional career goals (Table 3). However, a difference still existed between groups; evangelicals more frequently noted a relationship with God and family as well as community service helped well-being ($P<0.0001$). Importantly, only a low minority of all groups (14%) indicated drugs/alcohol, social media interactions (21%) or sexual relations (23%) as a source of improved well-being. However, looking specifically at different groups, approximately 40% of atheists/agnostics noted sexual relations as important. Nonetheless, in the atheist/agnostic group no characteristics were found that identified those with better well-being. In the evangelical group, there were 13/104 (13%) students who did not 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that they had good well-being. Of these, 7 (54%) depended on drugs/alcohol or sexual relations to maintain their well-being compared to 16/104 (15%) who indicated they had good well-being ($P=0.003$).

Adherence - Evangelicals who were more adherent to their faith (religious activity, Bible study, prayer, praise, Bible study) were more likely to have good well-being than those less adherent to these actions ($P<0.0001$). Evangelicals were generally more adherent to their faith than other religious groups in our sample ($P<0.0001$).

Guilt - Feelings of guilt strongly differed between groups with 40% of the atheists/agnostics noting strong guilt; while Catholics and, less frequently, evangelicals indicated mild guilt ($P=0.02$). The reasons for guilt among all groups were mostly due to past actions or speech that were harmful to others.

Self-education about beliefs - Self-education about beliefs differed among groups with the atheists/agnostics and other religions less likely to educate themselves because they 'knew what they believed' ($P<0.0001$). Evangelicals especially read for education and discussed issues with friends.

Expressing beliefs - Evangelicals were more likely to demonstrate their beliefs than other groups through individual/group activism, church attendance and, along with Catholics, by monetary contribution ($P<0.0001$; Table 4). All groups equally indicated they tried to present a lifestyle consistent with their beliefs; while atheists/agnostics and non-Christian groups more frequently avoided demonstrating their beliefs.

What gives hope - Students' reasons for hope for the future varied markedly between religious groups ($P<0.0001$). While all groups found hope in the future through a romantic committed relationship or family; evangelicals and Roman Catholics took hope in being saved by grace through Jesus Christ. In contrast, atheists/agnostics were more likely to place their hope in a government job, in a one world government or local activism to achieve social justice (Table 5).

Admittance to heaven - What students believed regarding entry into heaven varied markedly between religious groups ($P<0.0001$). Approximately 80% of evangelicals and 60% of Catholics believed they would be admitted

to heaven by faith in Jesus Christ. In the atheists/agnostics group 50% indicated there was no heaven, but the rest were unsure and a minority thought they would be admitted through works or grace.

Table 1: Respondent characteristics (N=247)

Question	Choices	N	%
Average age (years)	23 +/- 6	247	100%
Race	Caucasian	172	72%
	Asian	30	13%
	African American	16	7%
	Multiracial	12	5%
	Other	17	7%
Gender	Female	183	74%
	Male	64	26%
Grade	Senior	96	40%
	Graduate student	78	32%
	Junior	42	17%
	Sophomore	21	9%
	Freshman	10	4%
Major	Education	60	25%
	Life Sciences/Allied Health	52	21%
	Business/Accounting	41	17%
	Communications/Journalism	28	11%
	Engineering	18	7%
	Psychology	16	7%
	Liberal Arts	11	5%
	Other	19	8%
Religion	Evangelical Christian	104	42%
	Social Christian	66	27%
	Atheist/Agnostic	32	13%
	Roman Catholic	14	6%
	Other	31	13%

Other had under 5% incidence; blanks were excluded

Table 2: Well-being and sense of purpose ratings by religious groups

	Religion	N	Disagree		Indifferent		Somewhat agree		Agree		Strongly agree		P-value
Well-being	Evangelical Christian	104	0	0%	1	1%	12	12%	47	45%	44	42%	0.004
	Social Christian	66	2	3%	4	6%	10	15%	34	52%	16	24%	
	Atheist/Agnostic	32	0	0%	2	6%	5	16%	12	38%	13	41%	
	Roman Catholic	14	0	0%	1	7%	2	14%	7	50%	4	29%	
	Other (<5%)	31	5	16%	2	6%	5	16%	11	35%	8	26%	
Purpose	Evangelical Christian	104	0	0%	0	0%	8	8%	30	29%	66	63%	0.0001
	Social Christian	66	3	5%	2	3%	10	15%	24	36%	27	41%	
	Atheist/Agnostic	32	1	3%	3	9%	3	9%	11	34%	14	44%	
	Roman Catholic	14	0	0%	0	0%	5	36%	5	36%	4	29%	
	Other (<5%)	31	4	13%	1	3%	7	23%	9	29%	10	32%	

Table 3: Overall responses to what improves well-being (N=247)

Response	N	%
A close relationship with friends	210	85%
A close relationship with family	207	84%
Maintenance of good health and/or sporting activities	191	77%
Satisfaction with my professional career goals	151	61%

A close relationship with God	147	60%
A close relationship with a love interest	137	56%
Satisfaction from university course work	123	50%
Maintaining a high GPA	118	48%
Satisfaction with current job	111	45%
Community service	100	41%
Sexual relations	57	23%
Social media interactions	52	21%
Mind altering experiences through drugs or alcohol	34	14%
Other	2	1%

Table 4: Popular ways to 'express beliefs'

Religion	N	Group activism consistent with my beliefs		Individual activism consistent with my beliefs		Verbally sharing or convincing others of my beliefs		Monetary contributions		P-value
Evangelical Christian	104	52	50%	57	55%	49	47%	36	35%	<0.0001
Social Christian	66	20	30%	27	41%	20	30%	12	18%	
Atheist/Agnostic	32	4	13%	9	28%	4	13%	2	6%	
Roman Catholic	14	4	29%	4	29%	4	29%	4	29%	
Other (<5%)	31	5	16%	11	35%	5	16%	4	13%	

Table 5: Popular responses to 'what gives hope'

Religion	N	Satisfying family life		Committed relationship		Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ		Govt employment		One world govt		Local activism		P-value
Evangelical Christian	104	75	72%	72	69%	89	86%	12	12%	5	5%	30	29%	<0.0001
Social Christian	66	38	58%	45	68%	25	38%	10	15%	11	17%	28	42%	
Atheist/Agnostic	32	15	47%	23	72%	1	3%	8	25%	4	13%	15	47%	
Roman Catholic	14	9	64%	11	79%	11	79%	2	14%	1	7%	3	21%	
Other (<5%)	31	16	52%	18	58%	0	0%	5	16%	7	23%	13	42%	

This is internal data, under review for publication in peer-reviewed journal. Please do not distribute without permission from Teleios, Inc.