

College and Faith: What's the REAL Story?

by Dr. Jay L. Wile

Qualifications

- University Professor From 1990 - 1995
- Helped Develop Indiana's Only Residential High School for Gifted and Talented Students
- NSF-Sponsored Scientist with More Than \$200,000 In Research Grants
- Became Interested in Homeschooling Because of Excellent University Students Who Were Homeschooled
- Currently writes homeschooling and Christian apologetics materials.
- New publisher: Berean Builders

We've All Heard The Story Before

1. A young high school graduate is committed to his faith.
2. He goes off to college.
3. What he learns in college (and the freedom he experiences there) causes him to doubt his faith.
4. He leaves the faith.

After All, College Teaches

1. Science tells us there is no need to believe in a Creator.
2. History tells us that religion in general (and especially Christianity) is responsible for suppression of science, violence, and repression.
3. Sociology tells us that Christians are hypocrites and harm society.
4. Political science tells us Christians are ruining the country.

Research Shows that the Story is UNCOMMON

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) interviewed students in three waves: high school, a few years later, and a few years after that.

Jeremy E. Uecker and his colleagues found that 15,197 had been in all three sets of interviews. They focused on the results regarding their religious practices.

Note that the students were not selected based on the college they attended. Only about 8% of students attend a religious college [Naomi Schaefer Riley, *God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America*, St. Martin's Press 2005, p. 7], so most of the students in the study probably went to a secular college.

Here are Their Results

Education	Decline in Religious Service Attendance	Decline in Subject's Perception of its Importance	Subject renounced faith
Bachelors Degree or Higher	59.2%	15.0%	15.0%
No College	76.2%	23.7%	20.3%
College, no degree	71.5%	16.3%	14.6%
Associates Degree	60.3%	15.1%	14.4%

[Jeremy E. Uecker, Mark D. Regnerus, and Margaret L. Vaaler, “Losing My Religion: The Social Sources of Religious Decline in Early Adulthood,” *Social Forces* **85(4)**:1667-1692, 2007]

As The Authors State

“Emerging adults who do not attend college are most prone to curb all three types of religiousness in early adulthood. Simply put, higher education is not the enemy of religiosity that so many have made it out to be.”

This is Confirmed by Other Studies

One study surveyed college students and found that they were 2.7 times more likely to say that their faith had been strengthened in college than to say it had been weakened.

[Lee, Jenny L., “Religion and college attendance: Change among students,” *The Review of Higher Education* **25**:369–384, 2002]

Reasons offered:

- 👉 College is more like job training and less a place to grapple with the “big issues.”
- 👉 Colleges are more attentive to student views, allowing them to express themselves in class, resulting in affirmation.
- 👉 College students are simply less rebellious these days.

- 👉 There are many more on-campus Christian fellowship groups like InterVarsity, Navigators, etc.
- 👉 There are more devout Christian professors.
- 👉 (My personal addition) The more you learn about the world around you, the more it supports a Judeo-Christian worldview.

What Factors Support Retaining Faith?

The National Study of Youth and Religion interviewed more than 2,400 students at three different stages of life: 13-17, 15-19, and 18-23.

Based on the telephone interviews, they ranked the respondents as being nonreligious, moderately religious, or highly religious.

They found four extremely important factors in the first interview that predicted a highly religious result in the third interview:

1. Parents who were deeply committed to their faith and practiced it on a regular basis
2. Frequent personal prayer
3. A belief that their faith was extremely important in the day-to-day aspects of life.
4. Frequent reading of the Scriptures

“A teenager who among his or her peers scored in the top one-quarter of a scale measuring these four factors...stands an 85 percent chance of landing in the Highest category of religion as an emerging adult...”

[Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, Oxford University Press 2009, p. 220]

A Few Things That Didn't Seem Important

1. No doubts about their faith in the first interview
(This made them only 28% likely to be in the Highest category as emerging adults)
2. Went on missions trips in high school
3. Went to a religious high school
4. Wanted to continue to attend the same kind of church he or she was attending in high school

[Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 218, 221]

What About Christian Colleges?

In his PhD thesis, Steven James Henderson studied more than 15,000 students from colleges that were state-supported, private but not religious, affiliated with specific denominations, and Christian without being affiliated with a denomination.

He looked at several factors and found that overall, the affiliation did have an impact:

“In general, this study has shown that the affiliation of the college attended does appear to make a difference in the overall change in religiosity across all six change variables and the composite variable as well as adherence to the student’s incoming religious preference.”

State-affiliated and private, nonreligious schools had the most negative impact.

At the same time, I was struck by how weak the impact was.

He used a statistical interpretive method to assign the effects he saw as very small, small, moderate, or large.

Prayer/Meditation:	Very Small
Spirituality:	Small
Discussion of religion:	Very Small
Overall Religiosity:	Moderate

The largest impact was seen on the student’s view on his or her change in religious belief and convictions, and it was in between moderate and large.

[Steven James Henderson, “The Impact Of Student Religion And College Affiliation On Student Religiosity,” Doctor of Education in Higher Education Thesis, Oral Roberts University and University of Portland, 2003]

While Christian Colleges do support a students’ Christian faith more than secular colleges, the effect is not as strong as most people think.

What Do I Recommend?

1. Don’t stress out over your childrens’ college plans. Overall, college attendance supports faith.
2. Don’t send your children to college unless they
 - a) Just love to learn
 - b) Have a career path in mind that requires it.
3. DO make the decision about which college to attend keeping each specific child’s needs and personality in mind.
4. Regardless of whether you choose a secular or Christian college, make sure your children are plugged into an **on-campus** fellowship group!