



2005

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### Recommended Citation

(2005) "Religiosity and GPA at Brigham Young University," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal in Psychology*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol1/iss1/3>

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# Religiosity and GPA at Brigham Young University

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*While many factors influence university students' GPA, the affect of religiosity has received limited attention. This study investigates the relationship between religiosity and GPA at Brigham Young University. Participants were administered the Gorsuch IE-R, a measure of total as well as intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity. The total Gorsuch score and individual items were then correlated with GPA and personal factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, race, native language, age, sex, etc). No significant correlations were found between GPA and any of the demographical information. A significant positive correlation was found between high intrinsic religiosity and high GPA, while high extrinsic religiosity was correlated to lower GPA. Other significant correlations were found between GPA and individual test items.*

According to recent studies, many factors such as study habits, setting goals, and academic motivation influence college academic success (Robbins et al., 2004). The variable of religiosity, however, has received limited attention. One study of college-bound high school seniors found a positive correlation between religiosity and grade-point average (GPA), American College Test (ACT) scores, and class rankings (Williams, 2002). In addition, religiosity and academic success have been positively correlated in African-American college students (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Other studies have drawn less direct correlations. In a study among Texas college students, a positive correlation was demonstrated between religiosity and high levels of moral development (Clouse, 1991). Finally, another study showed that in South African university students, religiosity not only has a positive correlation with GPA, but is inversely related with substance abuse, which can impair academic performance (Peltzer, Malaka, & Phaswana, 2002).

While these studies show that there is a relationship between religiosity and academic performance within certain groups (most of the studies focused on persons of Black African descent), the ability to generalize the relationship to greater populations is limited. In order to add to the body of research and about predictors of academic performance, this study explored the correlation between religiosity and academic performance among college students enrolled at Brigham Young University (BYU), where it is estimated that multicultural students compose 12 percent (4 percent Asian and Pacific Islanders, 4 percent Hispanic, 0.7 percent American Indian, 0.6 percent black, and 3 percent other/unknown) of the student total population (Demographics, <http://unicomm.byu.edu/about/factfile/demo.aspx?lms=9>).

The present study was designed to contribute to the body of research in two important ways. Since BYU has a very large Caucasian population, if a correlation between religiosity and GPA were found, it would support previous research conducted with other

ethnic groups and enhance researchers' ability to generalize the correlation to a larger population of college students. Secondly, because the study was conducted at BYU, it allowed for tighter control of potentially confounding variables. For instance, other studies did not control variables such as drug abuse, smoking, and alcoholism. These factors, not necessarily religious practices, could have an effect on GPA scores. It is possible that only the actively religious students avoid substance abuse and that the majority of those that aren't actively religious do not. At BYU, all students, LDS or not, must adhere to the Honor Code and avoid all habit forming substances including coffee, tea, tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs (BYU Honor Code, <http://campuslife.byu.edu/honorcode/html>). The Honor Code controls these behaviors and thus eliminates significant confounding variables. The standardizing effect of the Honor Code will allow this study to more accurately measure the specific degrees that GPA and religiosity covary. In addition, all BYU students, whether LDS or not, must pass an ecclesiastical clearance from a local leader in the sponsoring LDS Church. This means that even if students are of another faith (or no faith at all), they must adhere to behavior standards that are consistent with LDS religious beliefs.

In addition, the choice of BYU as the site for the research is of interest because LDS Church doctrine itself emphasizes the relationship between learning and religiosity. In its mission statement, BYU proclaims that the goal of the institution is to "assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life" (BYU Honor Code, <http://unicomm.byu.edu/about/mission/html>). In addition, this goal distinguishes BYU as an institution concerned with the spiritual lives of its students and asserts that a "strong general education" is a key factor not only in spiritual life, but also as part of "family life, social relationships, civic duty, and service to mankind" (BYU Honor Code, <http://unicomm.byu.edu/about/mission/html>).

This study hypothesized that a positive correlation exists between religiosity and GPA at BYU. While discussing the proposed study with potential participants, many voiced an additional issue that became a focus of this study. Because BYU requires students to complete 12 credit hours of LDS religion courses, there is a

concern that students with a life-long LDS background may have an advantage over those who are not LDS or have converted later in life.

Thus, being raised in an LDS environment may therefore significantly influence a student's GPA at BYU and act as a confounding variable. To control this variable, we also pursued the question: Does being a convert to the LDS Church or a member of another faith correlate with a lower religion GPA at BYU? This addition to the study required only an addition of five items to the questionnaire and could act as groundwork for future studies.

The findings of this study will increase the field of knowledge on the subject of religiosity and academic success and could directly influence BYU's admissions protocol, curriculum, and mission statement.

## Method

### *Participants*

There were two 272 undergraduate students surveyed. The sample included students from the English, psychology, business, and math departments. The mean income for the students ranged from \$10,000 to \$15,000 a year. The ethnicities of the participants were reported to be primarily Caucasian. The mean age of participants was approximately 21. No participant reported a religious affiliation that was other than LDS, although 18 were converts. The mean GPA for participants was 3.43 on a 4.0 scale. The mean religion GPA reported was 3.65. Participants included 230 singles, 40 married students, and 2 divorced students. The most common native language reported was English (86 percent of participants). There were 166 female and 106 male participants.

### *Measures*

The Gorsuch IE-R was chosen to assess religiosity. The instrument is composed of 24 statements. Participants use a Likert-type scale to indicate their response to each question. The first

12 questions use a five-point anchored Likert scale, while the following 12 questions use a nine-point unanchored Likert scale. The Gorsuch IE-R was chosen for three primary reasons. First, the instrument is designed for a broad range of religious experience and is not limited to Judeo-Christian faiths.

In addition to its broad range of application, the Gorsuch IE-R also assesses many factors that other measures do not. Specifically, the Gorsuch IE-R assesses overt religious behavior (such as going to worship services) and covert religious experiences (such as meditation or prayer). In addition, it is also coded to identify intrinsic religiosity factors (such as "I enjoy reading about my religion") and extrinsic religiosity factors (such as "I go to church because it helps me make friends"). Further, the instrument has also been shown to have high validity and has had a widespread use throughout the psychological community.

While the Gorsuch IE-R was used to assess religiosity, it also permitted a factor analytic approach rather than a general, holistic assessment of religiosity. Specifically, the intrinsic/extrinsic and overt/covert religiosity factors were correlated Gorsuch to GPA.

Demographics were obtained by a questionnaire that included the participant's age, year in college, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, overall GPA, BYU religion course GPA, LDS Church membership, date of conversion to the LDS Church (if applicable), and years of LDS seminary attendance.

### *Procedures*

Participants were informed that they were participating in a psychological study and that participation was completely anonymous. The Gorsuch IE-R and the student data sheet were administered during regular class periods in the following classes: American Heritage, Introduction to Psychology, Economics, and Business. After the results were collected, the data were analyzed using SPSS.

## **Results**

### *Religiosity and Overall GPA*

First, the data were sorted according to intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. A significant positive correlation was found ( $r = .175$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between overall GPA and intrinsic religiosity, while a significant negative correlation was found ( $r = -.207$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between overall GPA and extrinsic religiosity. Second, the data were analyzed according to each individual item on the Gorsuch IE-R. In addition, significant positive correlations were also found between overall GPA and the following items: (1) "It is important to me to spend time in private thought and prayer," (2) "I try hard to live all my life according to my religious beliefs," and (3) "I have been driven to ask religious questions out of a growing awareness of the tensions in my world and in relation to my world." Significant negative correlations were found between overall GPA responses to the following items: (1) "It doesn't matter what I believe so long as I am good," (2) "Although I am religious, I don't let it affect my daily life," (3) and "I go to church mostly to spend time with my friends."

### *Religiosity and BYU Religion GPA*

As with overall GPA, the data were first analyzed according to intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. A significant positive correlation was found ( $r = .220$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between BYU religion GPA and intrinsic religiosity, while a negative correlation was found ( $r = -.111$ ,  $p < .05$ ) between extrinsic religiosity and BYU religion GPA. The data were then analyzed according to individual items on the Gorsuch IE-R. The only significant positive correlation with BYU religion GPA was for this item: "I do not expect my religious convictions to change in the next few years." Several negatively correlated items were found, including: (1) "It doesn't matter what I believe so long as I am good" (2) "It is important to me to spend time in private thought and prayer," (3) "I try hard to live my life according to my religious beliefs" (4) "Although I am religious, I don't let it affect my daily life," and (5) "I go to church mostly to spend time with my friends," and (6) "There are many religious issues on which my views are still changing."

A significant correlation was found ( $r = .653, p < .01$ ) between overall GPA and religion GPA. In addition, serving an LDS mission was positively correlated to BYU religion GPA.

#### *Other factors*

No significant correlations were found between overall GPA and BYU religion GPA and socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, marital status, LDS seminary attendance, year in college, major, or age.

#### *Non-LDS or Convert Status and BYU Religion GPA*

Because of an inadequate sample size it was determined an analysis would not produce reliable results; therefore these questions must be addressed in the future.

### **Discussion**

Intrinsic religiosity emerged as a significant predictor of both GPA and BYU religion GPA, whereas social or passive religiosity predicted lower GPA. Factors such as personal belief systems, happiness, behavioral discipline, and study habits may also be involved in this relationship, as they are part of both academics and most intrinsic religiosity.

Covert religious experience seemed to predict higher GPA twice as often as overt religious behavior, with prayer and an awareness of tension in the world as the internal factors that most strongly predict higher GPA. Spending time in personal prayer had the highest correlation, while response to the item "I try hard to live my life according to my religious beliefs" had the weakest correlation. In contrast, BYU religion GPA showed a significant negative correlation with time spent in personal prayer and the same item. It is possible that these discrepancies may arise from the fact that since students are enrolled in academic religion classes, their religiosity may become more extrinsic because religious learning is no longer primarily a desirable choice to the individual, but a requirement for graduation. Prayers and other religious pursuits may cease to be for the purpose of personal connection with the divine and become repetitious pleas for help on tests or assignments. This seems reasonable because both BYU religion and overall GPAs

were negatively correlated with extrinsic religiosity. Another possibility is that students who are highly religious do not treat BYU religion courses as seriously as other courses. This could stem from the fact that they are highly religious and as a result feel that they do not need to invest the same amount of time or effort in their religion courses as they do other courses.

Overall, this study has shown that not only is there a relationship between religiosity and GPA, but that the kind of religiosity is also related to GPA. Future studies may address these same factors using students from other religions, denominations, ethnic groups, and cultures. For BYU, future studies may investigate the intriguing nature of the factors found to be negatively correlated to religion GPA or the effect of coming from a non-LDS background on BYU religion GPA.

#### *Limitations and Considerations*

While this study contributes to the literature of religiosity and GPA, it has specific limitations. While the sample size was large, it drew from only a small group of academic majors. Moreover, it was also assumed that all participants were in compliance with the BYU Honor Code. As noted earlier, no non-LDS students were included, and the sample size of converts to the LDS Church was too small for reliable analysis. Thus we could investigate only our first hypothesis.

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