
The Role of Catholic Campus Ministries in the Formation of Young Adults

Project Report and Findings on Mental Health

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Project Overview

The main purpose of this research project is to better understand how the religious lives of Catholic students evolve throughout their time spent in college. Longitudinal studies of college students have demonstrated that ideological commitments generally increase from the beginning of the first year to the end of the third year.¹ However, little research has focused exclusively on how aspects of students' religious lives may change during this time. Through continual collection and subsequent analyses of this data, we hope to be able to explain in what ways campus ministries impact the lives of the students they serve and give insight into the practices that campus ministries undertake in their service to students.

Data Collection

In fall of 2017, we expanded our third survey to include Catholic first-year students from Duke University and seven other universities across the U.S. Freshmen students were contacted by their local Catholic campus ministry and were requested to be part of a new survey. As with the two previous surveys in fall 2016 and spring 2017, questions had been revised in collaboration with the campus ministries. In particular, questions about religious life and the priesthood were expanded and clarified. Further, campus-specific questions were added to the survey. Overall, more than 800 students completed the survey

Descriptive Statistics of Survey Respondents

Of the students who reported their sex assigned at birth, approximately 58% were females and 42% were males.

¹ Adams, G. R., & Fitch, S. A. (1982). Ego stage and identity status development: A cross-sequential analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43(3), 574.

Of the students who reported their race, approximately 87% were White, 7% Asian, 4% African American, and 2% Other.

Approximately 44% of students attended a Roman Catholic elementary, middle, or junior high school, while approximately 34% of students attended a Roman Catholic high school.

Overall, the students in this wave of the survey performed well academically in high school, with over 25% of respondents reporting having a 4.0 cumulative GPA in high school.

Focus on Mental Health

It has already been well-established in the scientific literature that religiously active people exhibit better physical and mental health.² However, the question remains how religion gets translated into well-being. In order to judge a student's well-being we used three metrics: depression, anxiety, and resilience. We used two short but effective mental health indices commonly used by health professionals to quickly assess patients' mental health: the Patient Health Questionnaire 9 (PHQ9)³ and the General Anxiety Disorder Questionnaire 7 (GAD7)⁴ to assess depression and generalized anxiety, respectively. Resilience can be thought of as a personality characteristic that moderates the negative effects of stress and promotes behavioral adaptation. Moreover, the quality of resilience is attributed to individuals who are able to adapt and restore equilibrium in their lives in the face of overwhelming

² Lee, B. Y., & Newberg, A. B. (2005). Religion and health: a review and critical analysis. *Zygon*, 40(2), 443-468.

³ Spitzer, Robert L., Kurt Kroenke, and Janet B. W. Williams. 1999. "Validation and Utility of a Self-Report Version of PRIME-MD: The PHQ Primary Care Study." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 282(18):1737-44.

⁴ Spitzer, Robert L., Kurt Kroenke, Janet B. W. Williams, and Bernd Löwe. 2006. "A Brief Measure for Assessing Generalized Anxiety Disorder." *Archives of Internal Medicine* 166(10):1092.

adversity, and avoid the potentially deleterious effects of stress.⁵ We used a shortened version of a 25-item Resilience Scale designed and tested to be consistently reliable and concurrently valid by Gail Wagnild and Heather Young in 1993.

T-tests allow me to compare two groups of students, such as those who attend mass weekly to those who attend mass less frequently, against a second variable, such as resiliency. For example, before analyzing the data, we may predict that students who attend mass weekly will have higher levels of resilience than students who attend mass less frequently. However, we did not find this to be true in this data set (see “Predictors of Well-Being” section).

Findings

Predictors of Well-Being

Approximately 68% of students reported that they had attended mass at least once a month at a Roman Catholic church during the past 6 months. Of these students, 52% reported that they had attended mass at a Roman Catholic church at least once a week. The following graphs provide insight into students’ average depression, anxiety, and stress levels, respectively. Students’ depression and anxiety were assessed using two validated measures used by health professionals: the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 for depression and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 for anxiety. We can see in Figures 1 and 2 that relatively few respondents had more than mild depression, and even fewer had more than mild anxiety, illustrating that the majority of respondents had good mental health

⁵ Wagnild, G. M., & Young, H. M. (1993). Development and psychometric evaluation of the Resilience Scale. *Journal of nursing measurement*.

Figure 1

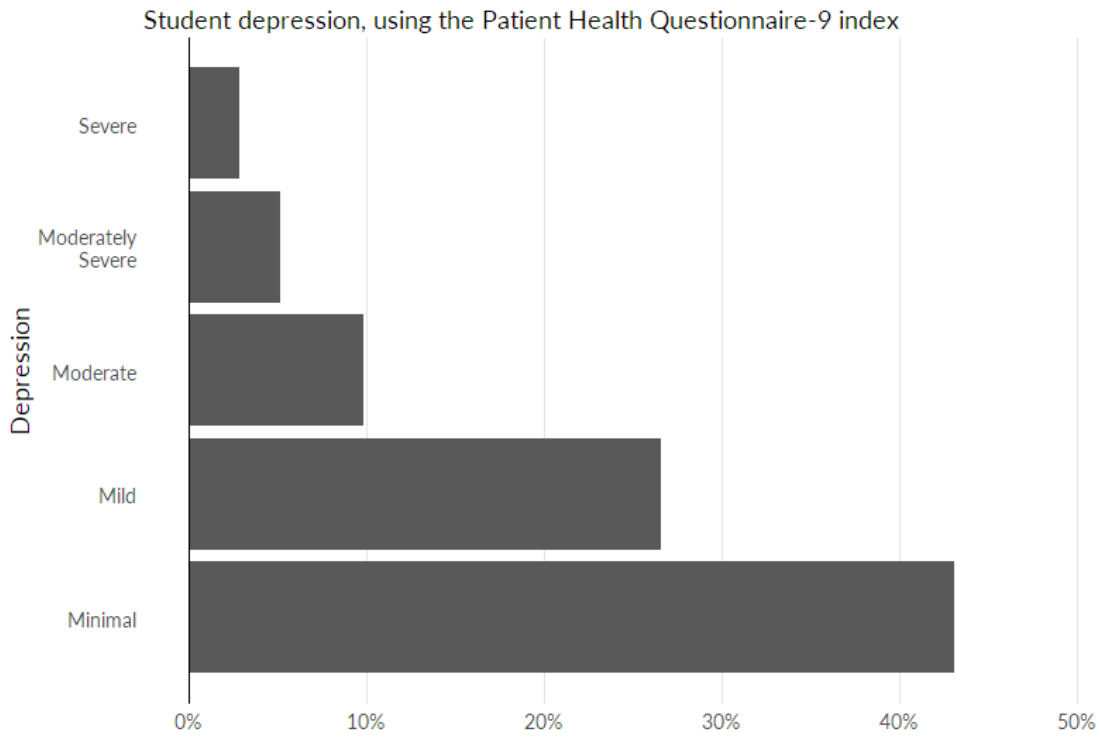
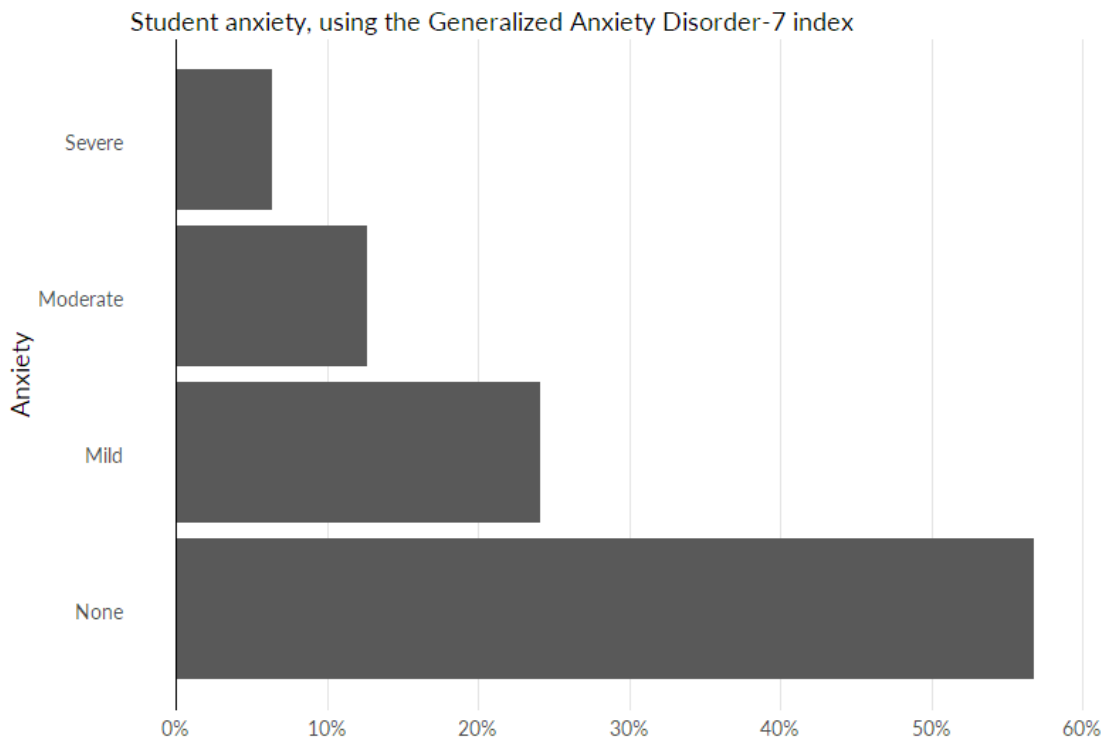


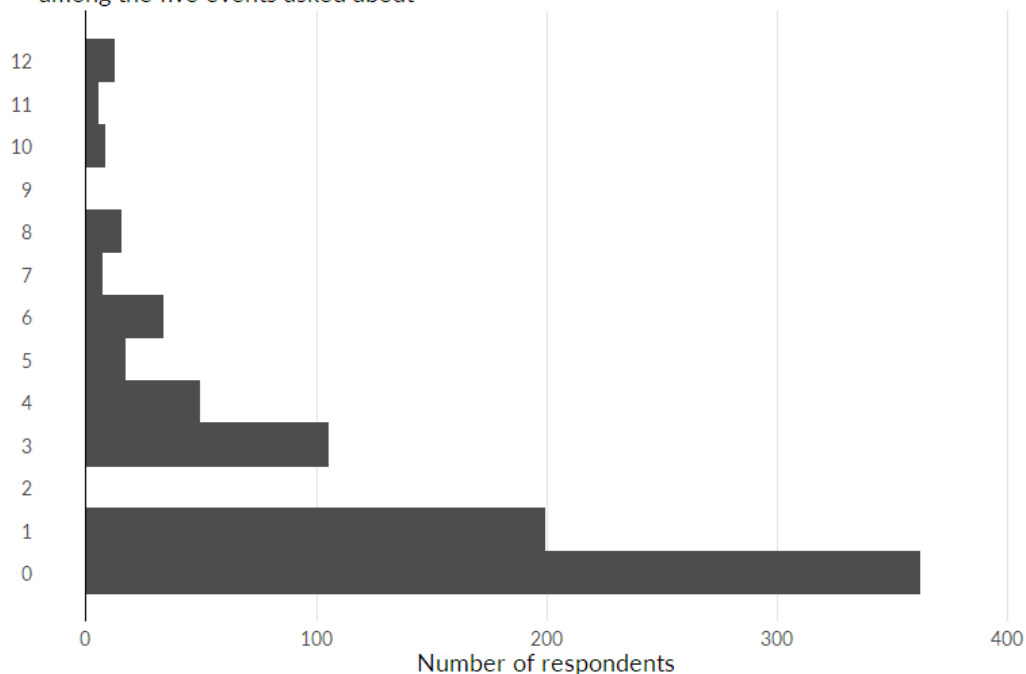
Figure 2



We also wanted to assess how stressful respondents' lives were during the time period leading up to the survey. We asked students how many times in the previous six months they had experienced a) a serious illness or injury requiring hospitalization or significant time off from work or school, b) a breakup of a serious romantic relationship, c) the death of a family member, d) a time of serious religious questioning or crisis, and e) the ending of a close friendship. We then added the number of times respondents experienced each, leading to a total number of events. As evident in Figure 3, most students had 1 or 0 stressful events, though a few students experienced 10 or more stressful events, including nearly 50 each who had three or more times of serious religious questioning or three or more close friendships that ended. So, while most students had relatively few intensely stressful experiences, the upper-limit of events experienced was quite high.

Figure 3

Number of stressful events experienced over the past six months, among the five events asked about

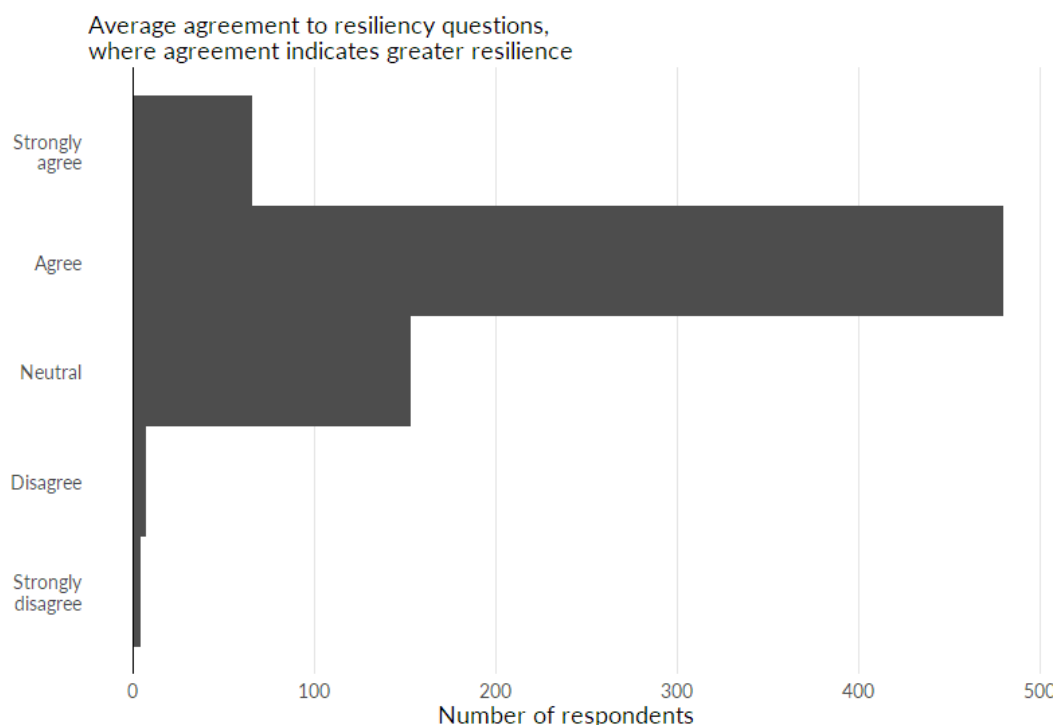


The question remains how religion gets translated into well-being. One hypothesis to explain this phenomenon is that a religiously active person will be more resilient, thus enabling him or her to better cope with stress, resulting in lower reports of depression and anxiety. For the purpose of this analysis, involvement in campus ministry was quantified

using the variable frequency of mass attendance. In order to test this hypothesis, two sample t-tests were used to determine the statistical significance of the effect size between frequency of mass attendance and resiliency, and similarly, between resiliency and depression, anxiety, and stress. The statistical significance of a t-test is measured by a p-value. It is widely accepted that a p-value less than 0.05 is considered a significant finding. In other words, the p-value represents the probability of obtaining the test result assuming that there is no difference between the means of our two variables (for example, frequency of mass attendance and resiliency). A probability of less than 5% indicates that the observed outcome is sufficiently unlikely to have occurred by chance alone. The correlation coefficient, r , quantifies the strength of the linear relationship between two variables, and is always between -1 and 1. The closer r is to -1 or 1 the stronger the relationship is, meaning that the independent variable is a strong predictor of the dependent variable. If r is equal to 0, then there is no relationship between the two variables.

Within this sample, frequency of mass attendance was not a statistically significant predictor of resilience (p -value = 0.87), nor was there a strong linear relationship between frequency of mass attendance and resiliency ($r = -0.012$). In other words, how often an individual went to mass did not have a significant effect on their resilience score. This is not to suggest that respondents were not resilient. In fact, we observe the opposite in this data. In Figure 4 below, agreement indicates that the respondent was, on average, likely to agree that they had some resilient characteristic, while disagreement indicates an average probability of saying they did not have some resilient characteristic. As the figure indicates, almost none of the respondents, on average, disagreed, while most agreed on average and a minority strongly agreed.

Figure 4



Students with high resilience differed from students with low resilience on depression, anxiety and stress. In other words, resilience scores were found to predict levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Resilience was a significant predictor of stress (p-value < 0.001, $r = -0.15$) as we hypothesized, and also depression (p-value < 0.001, $r = -0.35$) and anxiety (p-value < 0.001, $r = -0.24$). Furthermore, resilience was a negative predictor of students' well-being, meaning that the more resilient an individual is, we would expect them to report lower instances of depression, anxiety and stress. Unsurprisingly, the mean stress level of students was a significant predictor of both depression (p-value < 0.001, $r = 0.23$) and anxiety (p-value < 0.001, $r = 0.24$) as we expected.

Importance of Religion

In this wave of the survey, 34% of all respondents said that they were either not religious at all or slightly religious. However, 60% of all respondents said that religion was either moderately important or very important to them in their life. Therefore, a significant number of students may seek out religious life on college campuses. Campus ministries can play a vital role in helping students to develop or to maintain a faith life during their time in

college. While in this survey data, mass attendance was not a significant predictor of resilience, there are many other ways students can be involved in campus ministry. Larger sample sizes and further statistical analyses are necessary to be able to determine what types of ministry involvement can be reliable predictors of resiliency. However, we have already shown that resiliency is a predictor of depression, anxiety, and stress. And likewise, stress is a predictor of depression and anxiety.

Future Prospects

With a longitudinal study we will not only be able to describe the relationship between students' well-being and involvement in campus ministry, but also quantify how this relationship changes as students enter college, throughout college, and as students prepare to enter the workforce or attend graduate or professional level education. Since our data focuses on Catholic students exclusively, we can neither make comparisons across religions nor make generalizations to all college students with this dataset. However, we will be able to compare attitudes and behaviors of active Catholics to those who disaffiliate while in college. This information will be invaluable in determining what role campus ministries can play in students' support systems, as one piece in the university network to help students in their times of struggle. As we collect more data, findings of this study in regard to mental health may highlight the nuanced role campus ministries have in promoting positive coping mechanisms that can bolster students' mental health. Particularly for religiously unaffiliated colleges and universities, these findings may be useful in increasing awareness of religious life on campus and obtaining more funding for campus ministries.