

Religious Commitment and Prosocial Behavior: A Study of Undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame

by Thomas A. Trozzolo and Jay W. Brandenberger

In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that the Christian religion was a “doers” matter, especially in America. Notre Dame students appear to take that claim seriously, with over seventy-five percent participating in social service activities during their undergraduate years, largely attributable to programs affiliated with the University’s Center for Social Concerns.

The University of Notre Dame continues to be a deeply religious university. In 1949, Evelyn Waugh told the student magazine, the *Scholastic*, that he felt Notre Dame students were highly devotional Catholics. While the campus landscape is now a less homogeneous one, students at Notre Dame are presented numerous opportunities for religious and spiritual involvement. Over eighty percent report affiliation with the Catholic faith.

This report explores the association between religious involvement and prosocial behavior. Are those who express greater religious commitment more likely to be involved in community service and social action? Research has generated mixed results in this realm. In a large-scale exploration of altruism, Kohn (1990) summarizes studies of adult populations showing limited associations between religious affiliation and prosocial activity. In contrast, research among high school youth (Yates and Youniss, 1996) and college students (Serow, 1989) showed positive associations between community service involvement and measures of religiosity. Similarly, in a study at Notre Dame, Weigert and Johnson (1984) found that among 1552 graduating seniors, those who felt closest to their church and who agreed that social justice involvement is an intrinsic part of the Christian commitment were more highly involved in service and social awareness activities.

The relationship between faith and service, religion and prosocial behavior is relevant to secular as well as faith-based colleges and universities. Higher education is increasingly being called to engage students in meaningful social contexts for learning purposes. Understanding students’ motivations for service and the outcomes of engagement are critical in the process.

Methodology

As part of a larger study, a representative cross-section of 698 undergraduates completed the Notre Dame Student Life Survey, a comprehensive instrument that examines student attitudes, beliefs and participation in various activities. The sample was drawn from the general student population, and not framed in service-learning or religious contexts. The demographic characteristics of the survey participants were comparable to the general student population at the University.

We classified students into one of three mutually exclusive groups. Low service participants (34.9% of the sample) were those who indicated no service participation or only a few activities per year. Medium service participants (26.1%) were involved in at least one activity on a

monthly basis but less than weekly. High service participants (39.0%) were involved in at least one service activity on a weekly basis.

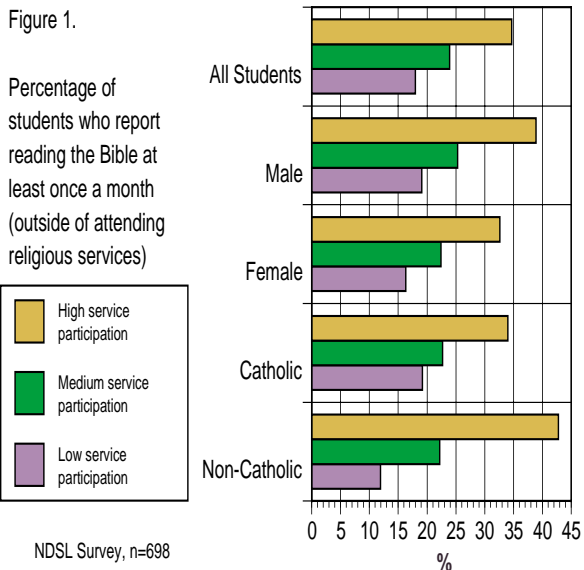
We examined religious variables in two broad categories. The first, religious behaviors, included self-reported frequency of Bible reading, church attendance, and prayer. The second category, religious values, involved beliefs about religion's guidance for life and the impact of church teachings on social views. The relationship between service activity and religious variables was examined via standard t tests and similar statistical analyses. Most of the reported findings are statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. Further information on the research design is available from the authors.

Religious Behaviors and Service Participation

Our results show significant associations between religious behaviors and service involvement, as presented in Figures 1-3.

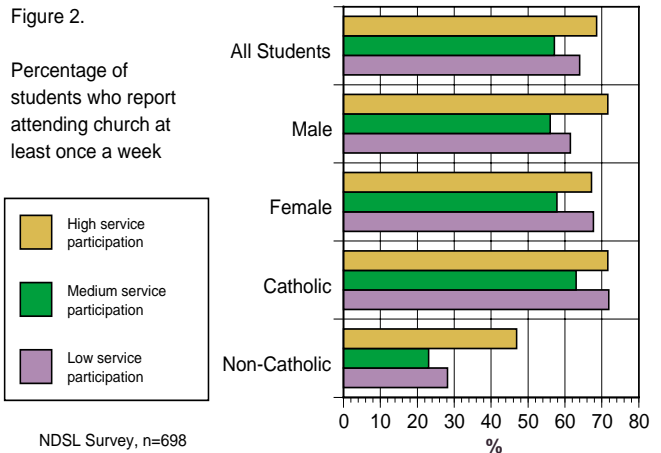
Bible Reading

Figure 1 shows that Bible reading is a salient correlate of service involvement among both Catholic and non-Catholic students, and among both males and females. Overall, 26.0% of Notre Dame students report reading the Bible at least monthly, compared to 34.7% in the high service group and 18.1% in the low service group. Males report more frequent Bible reading than their female counterparts at all levels of service involvement.



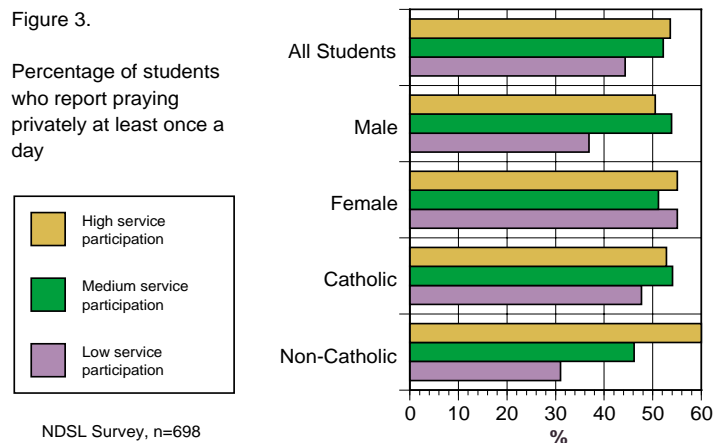
Church Attendance

An interesting relationship is noted between service involvement and church attendance. The distribution is bimodal. Students at both the high and low levels of service participation indicate more frequent church attendance. This finding holds within each demographic distribution, as indicated in Figure 2. Such a trend may help explain the inconsistency of findings noted in the literature review. For some, religion is agentic, focused on personal salvation in a vertical manner. For others, religion may be more horizontal and communal, focused on an ideal of service or social transformation (Leege and Trozzolo, 1985).



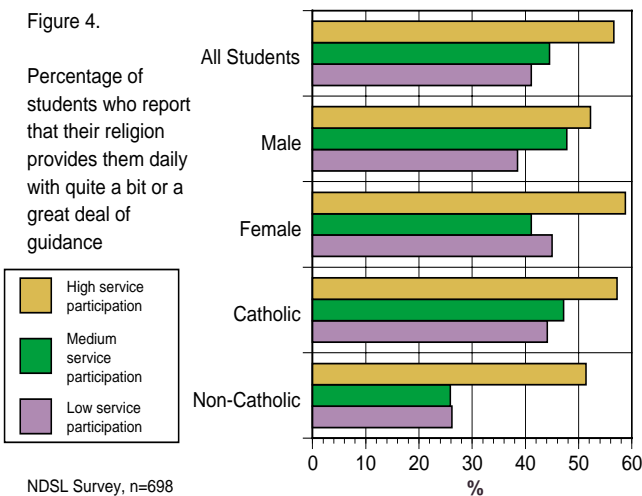
Prayer

Reported frequency of personal prayer and meditation is also significantly associated with higher service involvement (Figure 3). Overall, 50.1% of Notre Dame students reported praying on a daily basis. Female students pray more frequently than male students, but among males, increased frequency of prayer is associated with higher levels of service participation. As with Bible reading, the association between frequency of prayer and service involvement appears stronger among non-Catholic students than among Catholic students.



Religious Values and Social Concerns

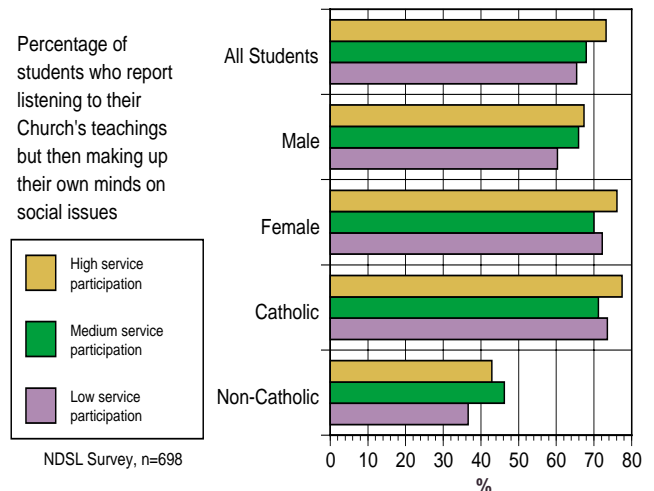
Our data indicate that a significant correlate of service involvement is reported agreement that religion provides substantial guidance for day-to-day living (see Figure 4). Nearly half (48.1%) of our sample of 698 reported that religion provides them with “quite a bit” or “a great deal” of daily guidance; another 42.2% reported “some” guidance from their religion; while 9.8% reported that religion was not important in their daily lives. Among each of the demographic groups identified, those classified as high service were more likely to agree that religion is a guiding factor in their lives.



We also surveyed students about the role of religious teaching in shaping their social views. When asked how they form views on social issues, 69.1% chose a middle option: “I listen to my church’s teachings but make up own my own mind;” another 7.1% reported forming their views more directly “according to my church’s teaching;” while 23.8% indicated that “church authority has limited influence on my conscience.” Figure 5 demonstrates that students classified as high service participation were more likely than others to choose the middle option, considering church teaching but forming their own views on social issues. They were also more likely than lower service participants to follow church teaching directly, and less likely to claim that church authority had limited influence.

On two additional survey items, 67.9% of Notre Dame students expressed belief that the Church provides clear ethical guidance on social and political issues, while 67.3% agreed that religious beliefs and convictions are best expressed in performing good deeds rather than in attending religious services. No differences with respect to service participation were observed on these items.

Figure 5.



Summary and Implications

Various measures of religious behavior (including church attendance, prayer, and Bible reading) are statistically associated with service involvement. Similarly, students who report that faith has a daily impact on their lives are more involved in service-related activities, as are those who report greater consideration of church teaching when forming views on social concerns. The data suggest a closer link between faith and service involvement than found in some previous studies, and raise further questions. What is the result of campus climate and institutional character? How may Notre Dame’s significant encouragement of all students to participate in both religious and service initiatives affect findings? Additional research may help answer such issues.

Another important question that arises concerns the direction of the relationship: does religious conviction stir social commitment, or does service involvement prompt religious behavior? The current research design does not warrant conclusions in this matter, but it seems safe to suggest interactive effects in both directions. For some students, religious convictions may lead naturally to service and work for the common good (see Serow, 1989). For others, the relationships formed through service to neighbor may stir faith exploration. In a large-scale national study of over 1500 service-learning participants at 20 colleges (many of them secular), Eyler and Giles (1999) found that 46% claimed that “spiritual growth” was a “very important” or “most important” outcome, even though the service-learning experiences were not framed in religious contexts.

Data from the current research prompts faculty and staff at all types of institutions of higher education to consider student propensity to be involved in service initiatives in light of faith development. All young adults face the challenge of developing a mature understanding of life that can frame their personal and social commitments. Parks (2000) richly describes the process by which young adults compose either a Faith informed by religious values, or—perhaps more common in a world less influenced by religious traditions—a faith (with a small f) built upon convictions about what is real, worthy of trust, and worth giving one’s life to. How students compose patterns of meaning, begin to value service and justice, and develop commitments of purpose is an area ripe for future research across institutions and contexts.

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