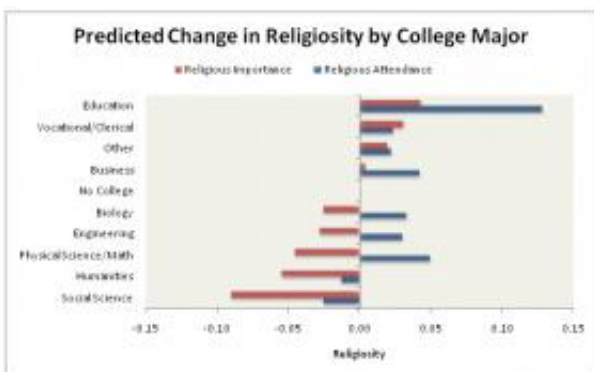


# Study shows how college major and religious faith affect each other

July 31 2009



This graph shows the predicted change in religiosity six years out from high school for different college majors compared to the predicted change in religiosity if the student had not gone to college.

Source: University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, 2009

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(PhysOrg.com) -- College students who major in the social sciences and humanities are likely to become less religious, while those majoring in education are likely to become more religious.

But students majoring in biology and physical sciences remain just about as religious as they were when they started college.

Those are among key findings of a University of Michigan study on the connection between college attendance, college major and religiosity

released this week (July 27) by the National Bureau of Economic Research. The study, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, is based on long-term data from the Monitoring the Future Study conducted by the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR).

"Education majors are clearly safe havens for the religious," said U-M economist Miles Kimball, who co-authored the study. "Highly religious people seem to prefer education majors, tend to stay in that major, and tend to become more religious by the time they graduate."

For the study, Kimball and colleagues Colter Mitchell, Arland Thornton and Linda Young DeMarco analyzed data on approximately 26,200 individuals who graduated from high school between 1976 and 1996. They reviewed information on religious attitudes and college attendance and major for a period of six years.

Among the questions participants were asked: How often do you attend [religious services](#)? How important is religion in your life? How good or bad a job is being done for the country as a whole by churches and religious organizations?

Of those who did not attend college right away, those who were more religious were more likely to attend college eventually. One of the reasons for this might be a "nagging effect" of [church](#) friends who ask repeatedly about college attendance plans, the researchers speculate.

For the analysis of impact of college major on religiosity, the researchers used business majors as a reference point. "We wanted a major that was culturally neutral and that attracted a large number of students," Kimball said. "The content of most business courses does not touch on values."

The authors theorize that three powerful streams of thought interact with choice of college majors to amplify the impact on religiosity. These are

science, developmentalism (the belief in progress), and postmodernism (the belief that everything is relative).

"There are important differences among the [college](#) majors in world views and overall philosophies of life," Kimball said. "At the same time, students recognize to some degree the differences among majors and chose a major based, at least in part, on religiosity.

"Our results suggest that it is Postmodernism, not Science, that is the *bête noir* of religiosity. One reason may be that the key ideas of Postmodernism are newer than the key scientific ideas that challenge religion. For example, religions have had 150 years to develop resistance or tolerance for the late 19th century idea of Evolution, but much less time to develop resistance or tolerance for the key ideas of Postmodernism, which gained great strength over the course of the 20th century."

Provided by University of Michigan ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Study shows how college major and religious faith affect each other (2009, July 31)  
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2009-07-college-major-religious-faith-affect.html>

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