

Study: Higher education doesn't drive people from religion

August 11 2014, by Deann Gayman

For decades, higher education has often been cast as the villain in the story of U.S. religious decline. Past research supported these claims.

But a new study by University of Nebraska-Lincoln sociologist Philip Schwadel suggests that a generational shift is taking place in how [college education](#) is affecting religious affiliation.

"There are a lot of articles and books from the '50s, '60s and '70s talking about how the college-educated are the most likely to disaffiliate, or drop out of religion," he said. "Without a doubt, older research showed that highly educated people were more likely to drop out of religion."

Schwadel's study, however, shows that in younger, more highly educated generations, this is no longer true. The study, which mined data from 38,251 respondents to the General Social Survey, demonstrated a shift has occurred for those born after 1940, with the most pronounced change occurring among Americans born after 1960.

"If you were born in the 1910s, '20s or '30s, you are twice as likely as someone without a college education to say that you have no religious affiliation, but that likelihood starts to decline for those people born in the late 1930s," Schwadel said. "By the 1960s, people born in that decade, there is no effect of education on religious disaffiliation."

In the youngest birth cohorts surveyed, the trends of education's effect on secularization are completely reversed.

"For younger generations, it's the least educated Americans who are most likely to disaffiliate from religion or say they have no [religious affiliation](#)," Schwadel said. "This study suggests that, at least at an individual level of analysis, it's not the more highly educated who are driving this change."

"If anything, the growth of the unaffiliated over the last couple of decades is disproportionally among the less educated."

Schwadel said several factors could be producing the change. He said he suspects the largest driving force is the growth in the number of college-educated Americans.

"College education has grown so much that it's also possible that who goes to college has changed and led to some of the changes we see in the study," he said. "There are a lot more opportunities to maintain your religiosity while you're in college."

Schwadel said it's important to note that when looking at the population as a whole, college education still has a large influence on religious disaffiliation or non-affiliation, but he suspects that no longer to be true in the future.

"Unless something drastic happens to change this relationship again, I would expect in 50 years, the college-educated would be no more likely, and potentially less likely, to claim no affiliation than the non-college educated," he said.

The article was published in the August edition of the journal *Social Forces* and can be found at sf.oxfordjournals.org/content/...01/sf.sou080.extract.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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