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The Demographics of Spiritual Growth in the School of Religion at Southern Adventist
University

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Independent Research Paper
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When students attend Southern Adventist University, they are required to take ten percent of their academic course load in the School of Religion. As such, all Southern graduates and current students have taken classes in this department, and a significant priority of the School of Religion is fostering and promoting spiritual growth. Previously, this spiritual, academic component of education has been targeted to students en masse. No research or study has been conducted to determine how students best relate to God or personally learn to build a relationship with Him. There is an opportunity within the School of Religion to learn how class assignments can be structured to better relate to the personal preferences of students in striving to better understand and get to know their personal Savior.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research project is that students participating in religion classes in the School of Religion have a unique identity, and can differ from their peers in how they grow spiritually. These differences in religious opinion and education can be quantitatively ascertained. The guiding idea of this research is that by understanding more clearly how students learn about God and grow spiritually, a more focused effort can be made to accommodate their spiritual growth. The objects to be measured in this project are the different disciplines of spiritual growth and the different percentages of students that practice these disciplines. The relationship that will be looked for is the comparison of student percentages between the different spiritual disciplines to determine which disciplines are more effective in the context of student demographics.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this independent research project is to provide an insight into the spiritual growth trends within the student demographics of Southern Adventist University. The application of these findings can be given to the faculty of the School of Religion for use in adapting class assignments to better suit the spiritual needs and personal growth of their students.

Literature Review

A setback in the process of forming this research project is that there are no existing academic literature or research projects that have specifically focused on measuring the different spiritual growth disciplines of college students. In conducting a literature search, there is to be found literature covering the psychological makeup of individuals and how this relates to spirituality, and spiritual growth factors affecting church growth but no emphasis on the individual. As such, this project is original in opening this subfield of religious research on the college campus.

Methodology of *Demographics of Spiritual Growth*

This section describes the methodology for the study. The approach and rationale for selection of the design are presented within the context of the research problem and the theoretical framework. The participants, sampling procedure, ethical considerations, instrumentation, variables, data collection, statistical analysis, and limitations are discussed.

Research Design

The decision to conduct a descriptive study was based on the finding that evaluation of undergraduate spiritual growth has not been studied previously. The design

of the search study allows the integration, comparison, and contrast of quantitative data in answering the research questions for this study.

Students received an online questionnaire containing quantitative questions. The data was then collected and analyzed. As a result of the analysis, inferences were drawn. The inferences gleaned may bring the researchers back to the data for re-analysis. Lastly, the inferences from quantitative data were integrated into a final inference for this study. This inference was compared with the data from the questionnaire.

Participants

A sample of Southern religion and non-religion students were used for this research study. Participants met the following inclusion criteria: (a) currently attending Southern (b) taking a class in the School of Religion (c) be willing to participate. The sources for identifying potential subjects included the email list of the School of Religion and the religion faculty who are willing to open their classes to the survey.

Sample Size

The number of registered students limits the sample size of this study this current semester in the School of Religion. This is not an ideal situation, but what is realistic and available. According to records, the online questionnaire/survey reached 100-150 students, however only 68 students responded to the online survey.

Sampling Procedures

A non-probability convenience sample was used in this study. Although not as strong as a random sample, advantages of this method of sampling include lower cost and ease of implementation. Students who meet the eligibility criteria were sent an email with the research project investigator explaining the research study and inviting their

participation in this study. A link in the email directed them to the consent form and survey on Survey Monkey, an online survey software tool. Participation was voluntary. Participants did not receive any incentive or direct benefit from completing the survey. A targeted response rate of 50% is considered to be acceptable in social science research, and this was approximately the response rate received for this project.

Ethical Considerations

Applications for research approval were submitted to the Institutional Review Board Committee at Southern Adventist University. Prior to completing the online survey, participants were presented with a link providing information about (a) the purpose of the study; (b) what participation in the study involves; (c) benefits from participation in the study; and (d) confidentiality and anonymity issues. Checkboxes for agree and disagree served as participant consent, and allowed them to proceed to the survey. There were no foreseeable risks involved in participating in the study.

Confidentiality was carefully protected throughout the study. Participant responses to survey questions were sent to a link at SurveyMonkey.com where data was stored in a password protected electronic format. Survey Monkey did not collect identifying information such as participant name, email address, or IP address. Therefore, responses remained anonymous. Data was stored electronically on a password-protected computer and backed up to a password-protected folder on the Southern Adventist University server. Only the researcher had access to the passwords.

All data collected from the exit interviews and surveys will be used solely for research purposes. Data analysis will be presented in group form only. Individual participants will not be identified in publications or presentations.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in this research was a survey consisting of Likert-scale questions regarding student perceptions of spiritual growth in the religion classes within the School of Religion. The use of a survey rather than focus groups overcame a significant obstacle in data collection. Since students are scattered across campus, their participation in focus groups would have been difficult if not impossible to obtain. Additionally, the survey enabled the researcher to ask questions uniquely related to the educational experience at Southern.

The survey is divided into two sections. Section one contained questions related to demographic information. Section two consisted of Likert-scale questions regarding the perceived effectiveness and value of the five professional courses.

Variables

The independent variables in this study included the following: gender, ethnicity, age, attendance at Seventh-day Adventist high schools, and class rank.

Data Collection

Survey data was collected by use of an online survey by eligible participants through Survey Monkey during a two-week from March 16 to March 31 in the spring of 2016.

Statistical Analysis

The research department within Southern Adventist University's Administration was instrumental in this process of research. They were kind enough to host the religion survey online and analyze the data after the survey was closed. The research investigator was given an analysis of the research and survey questions by Southern's Institutional

Research and Planning department. These results are presented in the results and discussion section.

Limitations

As with all research, methodological limitations exist and bear mentioning.

Following are several limitations that apply to this study:

1. **Sample Size:** The size of the sample was 68 students at Southern, due to the small number of eligible participants (approximately 200). This may not be representative all students currently at Southern Adventist University. Additionally, an inadequate sample size may limit the ability to detect statistically significant relationships between variables, resulting in a Type II statistical error.
2. **Convenience Sample:** A convenience sample will be used in this study, which limits the generalizability of the study findings. In addition, students who chose to participate may have differences in demographic data and/or perceptions of the value and effectiveness of the academic courses taken.
3. **Incomplete and/or Missing Data:** Some questions in the survey may not be answered by the respondents, which could cause some limitations to the study. Missing data can reduce the representativeness of the sample or distort the conclusions drawn from the study.

Results and Discussion

Research findings. The demographic trend of the students was towards: senior class standing (42.42%), 23 years old or older (39.39%), male (77.27%), white (53.03%) or Hispanic (28.79%), and from Seventh-day Academies (46.97%). Of the spiritual

growth trends under observation and research, the favored disciplines of spiritual growth were: Bible study (58.73%), prayer (73.02%), devotional life (72.58%), and quiet time with God (50.00%). The least favored disciplines of spiritual growth were: learning Biblical languages (17.74%), creating/appreciating art (32.36%), journaling (12.70%), class projects (7.94%), getting exercise (8.06%), and having a spiritual mentor (8.06%).

Discussion. In looking at these results, a general composite can be seen from the answers given and demographics. The demographics skew towards older, male students from a Caucasian or Hispanic background who attended a Seventh-day Adventist or public school. Starting from this general composite it can be seen that the favored spiritual disciplines of growth center on individual pursuits; the group spiritual activities are not mentioned in this favored category. Also, the individual disciplines revolve around an objective pursuit of truth and relational aspect of spirituality. These results speak to a desire of students to experience spiritual growth in an intimate form and experienced on an individual basis.

The least helpful spiritual disciplines have a common aspect of focusing away from a Bible-based growth and centering on a secondary component (art, exercise, language, writing). This observation speaks to a primacy of relating to God in a personal, experiential manner without resting on the convenience of distraction from a related human pursuit. This desire for an intimate, personal relationship with God is balanced with the objective pursuit of Biblical truth (devotional life, Bible study).

Implications

The implications of this research are hopefully to be felt in the teaching of religion in the School of Religion at Southern Adventist University. The demographic

profile in this research project parallels the demographics of the theology program (higher probability of male and older students). Implied in the findings of this research project is that class assignments in the School of Religion should focus more on independent spiritual assignments where students are encouraged to spend quality time in searching their Bibles, being lead through a devotional, or spending quiet time in contemplation or meditation on Heavenly attributes. It is a popular mentality to pair spiritual growth objectives with novel approaches such as writing a song, painting or drawing a picture, or exercising in nature. However, the nature of these responses speak to student hearts that are looking for a relational connection with God, and have a background in religion that stresses the importance of the Bible in learning objective divine truths. To best apply this data, it is recommended that religion teachers that wish to better help students grow spiritually they should elevate the importance of building a personal relationship with God, and provide opportunities outside of class to personally experience the theory and practice being taught in the classroom.