

Church attendance major factor in student faith maturity

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WACO—While peer influence is the top factor that leads Baylor University students to attain higher levels of faith maturity, attending a local place of worship also is a powerful predictor.

Those are key research findings from Baylor’s ongoing Faith and Character Study, which tracks the long-term impact of a Baylor education on a person’s faith and character.



The Baylor seal is seen at the quadrangle on campus. (Photo / Baylor Marketing and Communication)

The study—[“Factors Associated with Vertical and Horizontal Faith Maturity at a Christian University”](#) in the Journal of Research on Christian Higher Education—investigated the influence of peers, programs and professors on students’ faith maturity using data from the Baylor Faith and Character Study, which began in 2018.

Each year, surveys on religion and character are administered to new

students, seniors and alumni. The current research focused on the Senior Religion Survey administered online to graduating seniors in March 2020 to April 2020.

The latest findings measured faith maturity with survey items distinguishing between vertical faith maturity—centered on engagement with God—and horizontal faith maturity—the application of faith in service to others.

Survey items measuring vertical faith maturity included “I have a real sense that God is guiding me,” and “I am spiritually moved by the beauty of God’s creation.”

Sample items measuring horizontal faith maturity included “I give significant portions of my time and money to help other people,” and “I care a great deal about reducing poverty in the United States and throughout the world.”

“Our study points out the common and contrasting ways that students can cultivate commitment to God and commitment to others,” said lead author J. J. Burtt, who earned his doctorate in sociology from Baylor in 2022 and now is an assistant professor at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia. “Both of these expressions of faith are important outcomes for Christian colleges and universities.”

The researchers found Christian colleges can promote faith maturity most effectively through peer relationships and intentional programs.

Predictors for faith maturity

The study showed significant predictors for students’ vertical faith maturity are:

- Discussions with peers about religious/spiritual matters.

- Spending time with people who share one's religious views.
- Attending a class, workshop or retreat on matters of religion/spirituality.
- Participation in community food or clothing drives.
- Attending a racial/cultural awareness workshop.

Significant findings measuring students' horizontal faith maturity are: discussions with peers about the purpose and meaning of life; attending a class, workshop or retreat on matters of religion/spirituality; participation in community food or clothing drives; performing other volunteer work; and attending a racial/cultural awareness workshop.

Although faculty can serve as facilitators and role models for students' faith maturity, the study found peer influence on faith maturity is stronger, matching findings from prior research on religiosity in college.

Since contact with professors largely is limited to classes, students spend much more time with their peers—in myriad ways—than with professors.

One of the most powerful predictors of both the vertical and horizontal faith maturity of students is attending a local place of worship, the research revealed.

"In every model, religious service attendance was positive and statistically significant. Seniors who attended religious services more often expressed higher vertical faith maturity and higher horizontal faith maturity, net of other influences," the researchers wrote.

"Like on-campus student organizations, congregations are a context for relationships and service. Students develop bonds with others in a way that deepens their faith and encourages them to act on their faith to serve others."



Kevin Dougherty

“This is important news for parents,” said study co-author Kevin D. Dougherty, professor of sociology in the College of Arts & Sciences at Baylor. “To help your college daughter or son have a vibrant faith, encourage them to find a local place of worship and attend regularly.”

The implications of these findings extend beyond religious universities.

At colleges and universities where faith is not an explicit part of curricular and co-curricular programs, the researchers suggest they can offer classes on meaning and purpose, support the formation of student-led religious organizations, promote acts of community service and offer racial/cultural awareness workshops, all associated with increased faith maturity.