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Cody Wilcoxson

Concordia University, Saint Paul

Kelley Spencer

Concordia University, Saint Paul

Savannah Nolen

Concordia University, Saint Paul

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A COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS OF RELIGION IN EDUCATION

By:

Cody Wilcoxson, Kelley Spencer, and Savannah Nolen

Concordia University- St. Paul

Advising Professor:

Dr. Kim Flottemesch, PhD

THE UNIVERSITY (as it will be referred to in this paper) is a Lutheran faith-based institution of higher education in a metropolitan region of the Midwestern United States, but not all of its students share in the Lutheran faith traditions. 1,238 students are currently studying for their undergraduate degree, but only 35 percent of them are Lutheran. Recently, the researchers have begun to study how the faith-based aspect of THE UNIVERSITY influences student's--both Lutheran and non-Lutheran--decision to attend THE UNIVERSITY. The researchers have also taken an in-depth look at the way students adapt to the faith-based learning style that is used at THE UNIVERSITY. These studies are a comprehensive examination of the decision to attend THE UNIVERSITY, and the communication adaptive behaviors to life at a faith-based university.

INTRODUCTION

The researchers chose to examine religion as a factor in the decision to attend a university and the way that students adapt communicatively to faith-based universities. The concept brought many aspects of communication into play, but only a specific group of theories were applicable to the research findings. The researchers selected two theories to help explain the data: Communication Accommodation Theory and Symbolic Interactionism Theory. Both, Communication Accommodation Theory and Symbolic Interactionism Theory, focus on the decision-making and adaptation aspects of the study.

The researchers posed two main questions for the project: 1) What role does religion play in student's decision to attend a faith-based university? 2) How do students adapt to the faith-based environment of THE UNIVERSITY? After careful study of related research on the topic, the researchers hypothesized that the religious aspect of THE UNIVERSITY would not be a major factor on student's decision to attend, but that Lutheran students would adapt to the faith-based learning environment easier.

The researchers found this topic to be extremely valuable for a variety of reasons. Initially, the researchers saw the importance in the study because of the lack of data available on the subject prior to the researchers study. Secondly, the researchers found the study important because it gives an insightful look into the motivating factors behind students at THE UNIVERSITY. The researchers felt that the data collected would be beneficial to administrative members at the university. Finally, the researchers believed in the importance of the study because the decision on where to attend college is something that roughly two million Americans face each year.

To produce the best possible study on this topic, researchers reviewed past studies and literature, conducted a survey to collect new data, and examined future possibilities for research on religion's role in college decision-making and student's adaptation process at faith-based universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Choosing the right college is one of the biggest decisions that a person will make in their life. Several factors come into play when making the right choice. For students looking at THE UNIVERSITY one of the factors to be considered is the religious affiliation of the university, and how the student might adapt to the faith-based learning that happens. Prospective students need to understand THE UNIVERSITY; religious institutions and the way they function; the factors that are affecting their college choice; and the way they will adapt to the university lifestyle.

THE UNIVERSITY

“THE UNIVERSITY is a comprehensive Christian liberal arts university, one of 10 operated under the auspices of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod” (About ‘THE UNIVERSITY’, 2011). THE UNIVERSITY was founded in 1893 to prepare students for successful careers and lives (2011).

The campus of THE UNVERISTY is set on 51.5 acres in a metropolitan area of the Midwestern United States. Located in a metropolitan area of 18 Fortune 500 companies, THE UNIVERSITY provides opportunities for all of its 1,171 undergraduates (Facts and statistics, 2009). THE UNIVERSITY draws students from 42 different states and three foreign countries, but 86% of students are from the state of origin (2009). The student population is made up of 56% woman and 44% men (2009).

THE UNIVERSITY is considered “one of the best values in private colleges in ‘it’s state’” (2009). According to the University’s website, “100 percent of the freshman who applied for financial aid received assistance in some form for the fall semester 2009” (2009).

THE UNIVERSITY is a multicultural campus with students of several ethnicities: Caucasian (65%), African-American (11%), Asian/Pacific Islander (10%), Multiracial (3.2%), Hispanic (1.7%), American Indian (0.7%), and undisclosed ethnicity (8.4%) ("Big world. Big," 2011).

While THE UNIVERSITY is a Christian liberal arts university, founded in the Lutheran religion, there are several faith traditions represented on campus: Lutheran (35%), other Protestant faiths (7.8%), Roman Catholic (10.7%), other faith traditions (19.4%), atheist/no religious affiliation (5.2%), and faith not disclosed (21.9%) (2011).

Religious Institutions

According to the U.S. Department of Education, there is over 4,000 degree-granting institutions of higher education in the United States. These include 1,600 private, nonprofit campuses, about 900 of which define themselves as religiously affiliated ("About ccu: Context," 2011).

Religious universities are distinctly different from secular universities. Author Naomi Schaefer Riley penned the book *God on the Quad* (2004), exploring the rise of religious colleges in the United States. She described the differences by saying, “I think the whole understanding of the purpose of higher education is different at religious colleges. Our culture enforces the idea that college is a time for rebellion, and that students are supposed to spend their time protesting or experimenting in behaviors their parents wouldn't approve of. At religious colleges, students

by and large seem to think their parents brought them up pretty well, and they're in college because God wants them to develop their intellect” (Q&a: Exploring the, 2005).

There are several advantages to attending a religious university. Campus Corner, a website dedicated to helping students find their perfect “college match” discusses the advantages to religious colleges and universities. The website states that students are drawn by the opportunity to explore their faith more deeply, be in a more serious academic work environment, and a place where peers share similar values (Colleges & universities, 2011). The website ended with, “Attending a religious school does not mean you are planning to make religion your profession. However, if religion is an important part of your life, then a religious school lets you continue your education in an atmosphere where that is respected” (Colleges & universities, 2011).

History of College Choice

According to Kinzie et. Al. (2004), prior to the 1950s less than two of every ten high school graduates pursued college, with the decision to attend left on personal values or a college’s reputation. This left unwealthy students, women, and students of color off the map in the pursuit of a college degree. When the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, the “GI Bill” was established, and the Brown v. Board of Education decision occurred there was an easier access to higher education to a wider array of students. The increased number of students attending higher education forced the College Board to agree to a common application date in order to create consistency in the application process, and take a step towards standardizing policies nationwide. Once again, growth occurred when half of high school graduates were accepted into colleges when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965

were established. This led to colleges and universities attempting to attract more students through marketing efforts in order to achieve their enrollment goals (2004).

Financial aspects in choosing a college occurred in the 1990s when tuition and fees at colleges increased. Students began looking for better financial aid packages and colleges began using early-admission and early-decision discounts for prospective students (Kinzie et.al., 2004). This earlier decision process has led for students from all economic backgrounds to consider and attend colleges and universities. Leading students to choose colleges that are closer to home since it cuts costs if they have the option to live at home.

College Choice

The college search is “a rigorous process based on a reciprocal relationship between students and institutions, as both actively search to meet their own needs and aspirations for the best education and student body, respectively” (Shaw, E., et.al., 2009). College institutions strive for in -depth information on how prospective students choose higher education. This knowledge is often used for marketing purposes as institutions highlight their competitive advantage. From a student’s point of view, it is essential to have sufficient college information available in order to make an educated decision. Consumer behavior is essential to the exploration of college choice factors and decision-making (Simoes & Soares, 2010).

Researchers agree there are a wide variety of choice factors influencing a student’s preferred higher education institution (Simoes & Soares, 2010). Studies indicate the top choice factors for prospective students are: location (geographical proximity and distance from home), academic reputation, degree programs, cost (tuition and financial aid), athletics, and campus facilities (Simoes & Soares, 2010). Previous literature is incomplete on the exploration of religion in college decision- making. Less common choice factors include: school size, diversity,

campus environment, safety and male to female ratio. Researchers are conscious that choice factors differ among particular student groups such as transfer, non-traditional, freshman, athlete, and by club/organization (Simoos & Soares, 2010).

Previous literature identified five clusters of students: privileged high achievers, disadvantaged students, average students needing more guidance, mostly female academics, and privileged low achievers (Shaw, E., et. al, 2009). Clustering the student population provides an understanding of student's unique needs and how to serve them. Students are divided into clusters based on academic performance, demographic characteristics, home and school characteristics, involvement in school activities, and the number of colleges they apply to (Shaw, E., et. al, 2009).

Students categorized as privileged high achievers apply to multiple colleges and play sports (Shaw, E., et. al, 2009). This cluster is equally male and female. Disadvantaged students come from low-income families, speak another language, and have the lowest GPA (Shaw, E., et. al, 2009). Average students have the second lowest family income. These students have an average GPA and participate in extracurricular activities (Shaw, E., et. al, 2009). The mostly female academics cluster is comprised of students with the highest GPA and less involvement in sports. The last cluster, privileged low achievers, are students who attended wealthier high schools, participated in the least number of extracurricular activities and have the second lowest GPA (Shaw, E., et. al, 2009). The disadvantaged student cluster is often overlooked when it comes to receiving help from universities (Shaw, E., et. al, 2009). These students need special attention and preparation in order to be successful in college and deal with challenges (Shaw, E., et. al, 2009). There is limited published research on gender differences in college decision-making.

Gender plays a role in which factors are most important in choosing a college institution. Women rated academic reputation, programs of study, and safety among their top priorities (Dolinsky, A., 2010). Men rated campus life and athletics as primary determinants (Dolinsky, A., 2010). Women were more concerned with campus size, location and attractiveness of campus than males were (Dolinsky, A., 2010). Dolinsky discovered that religion was of lower importance to males and it was greater importance to females (2010).

Other studies have claimed that the primary factor when it came to decision making was financial issues, as it was discovered that “The importance of cost in choosing college hit a high of 39.9 percent in 2008” (Clark, M., 2008). Many students chose not to attend their first-choice college (even though they were accepted) and instead opted for a school that was more affordable. In 2008, the number of students attending their first-choice school dropped to a 34-year low of 60.7 percent (2008). The survey discovered that financial issues are most likely to motivate a student to attend a second-choice school and decline their first-choice (2008). This becomes increasingly true in recent years with a rapidly declining economy and job scarcity. The use of financial aid packages and offers have become essential in the decision-making process for most prospective college students in today’s society. Students are using multiple outlets to pay for college and denying their first-choice school in order to pay for their education. This also shows that college rankings aren’t the main reason students choose a particular school. In the same survey students were asked to rate the factors that were important contributing factors in their decision and college rankings finish in 11th place out of 21 rankings (Morse, B., 2009). The rankings were based off of a 240,580 freshman students at 340 colleges (Appendix: Figure 1.)

It is also important to note that studies from this survey have found that a large percentage of incoming freshmen found it extremely important to have “green initiatives” and

based their decision on what college to attend off of the school's initiatives. Practically a third of incoming freshman, 29.5 percent, reported that helping to clean the environment was an "essential" or "very important" (Pryor, 2008). As well as 45.3 percent reporting that adopting green practices in order to better protect the environment was also essential or extremely important, with 74.3 percent reporting that global warming being addressed should be a federal priority (2008). With global warming reportedly on the rise and at its highest point in history, it's interesting to see that incoming collegiate students are ready to take the initiative to making a significant change in the right direction and that it actually effects their decision in which college to attend.

THE UNIVERSITY'S student rankings from 2008 were similar to the national survey, though the order of importance was different. These rankings proved that once again, the religious affiliation was not a major factor in choosing THE UNIVERSITY as it ranked ninth out of 11 on the rankings list. (See Appendix: Figures 2 & 3.) Research Findings from the Price Sensitivity Analysis (Noel Levitz 2008)

There is limited published research on the impact of religion in college choice but some studies suggest that it does not play a large role in decision-making (Dolinsky, A., 2010). Researching the influence of religion on student's choice of higher education and examining their adaptation to religious institutions may provide pertinent information to universities.

College Adaptation

The first year of college can be especially difficult due to social integration, academic pressure and disengagement from families (Clark., M, 2005). Challenges vary between traditional students and non-traditional students. Traditional students experience challenges from family disengagement and non-traditional students experience challenges with social integration

(Clark., M, 2005). The college experience causes believers to reexamine their faith and core beliefs because of academic and social encounters (Mayr & Oeur, 2009). Students may adapt to professors who are more liberal or conservative than they are used to and to others whose religious beliefs are different than their own.

Students attending a Religious University may adapt to faith-based learning, chapel and changes in communication such as language. Previous literature indicates there are four themes among these challenges faced by students: overcoming an obstacle, seizing an opportunity, adapting to a change or pursuing a goal (Clark, M., 2005). Overcoming an obstacle can be dealing with a difficult professor or socializing with peers. Seizing an opportunity can be joining FCA (Fellowship for Christian Athletes) or another extracurricular activity.

Adapting to a change can be dealing with new class schedules, commuting or time management. Pursuing a goal can be striving for good grades and a GPA. Acculturation is an adaptive process of adjustment into a new environment which takes the individual through different phases of life. Researchers view college life as a culture in which students have to adapt to in order to be successful; if they can't adapt they will likely drop out of school (Mena, F., et.al., 1987). College used to be viewed as a "faith killer" because it challenged and questioned student's beliefs until they didn't believe anymore (Mayr & Oeur, 2009).

Previous literature examines student's adaption to college with regards to stress and coping mechanisms. Coping is how one deals with and reduces the negative effects of stress. Their ability to cope in difficult situations relies upon past experiences and personality characteristics. Researchers Pearlin and Schooler divided coping mechanisms into three forms: psychological responses, social resources, and specific coping responses (1987). Psychologists agree that various ways of coping with stress are unique to the individual (Pearlin & Schooler,

1987). Psychological resources are personality characteristics used to cope with the outside environment. Social resources are support and encouragement provided by family and friends as a way to reduce stress and anxiety. Students with religious beliefs who undergo stress may seek emotional support in small groups through prayer.

According to researchers Damon and Ouer, students who participated in worship, meditation and prayer were more satisfied with college than those who did not (2009). Specific coping responses are personal strategies used in order to deal with challenges and relieve the tension of stress (Pearlin & Schooler, 1987). Eight coping mechanisms used for adaptation to college are: to find out more about the situation and take action, discuss the problem with others, change one's mindset, keep busy with activities, prayer, seek professional help, draw upon similar situations, and reduce tension through exercise or relaxation (Pearlin & Schooler, 1987). Researchers discovered the most frequently used coping mechanisms for students are discussing problems with others and finding out more about the situation and taking action. Students use human resources such as peers, family, and college personnel to help generate ideas and make decisions (Pearlin & Schooler, 1987). Less frequently used coping strategies include reducing tension by exercise or relaxation, prayer, and seeking professional guidance (Pearlin & Schooler, 1987). For example, if a Muslim student is faced with the challenge of having an ethnocentric Christian professor, they can choose a variety of coping strategies to utilize for their particular situation. The student may seek support from friends and family, pray, talk to their professor, or choose to look at religion from a different perspective.

A non-traditional student may face a challenge with social integration and choose to become more involved with clubs and organizations on campus or push themselves to become more outgoing in class. Strategies students use are influenced by both perceptions and

personality traits. A student's perceptions of their options and the personality traits of persistence and confidence can either strengthen or inhibit the strategizing process. Self-motivation during challenges often comes from setting long or short term goals for themselves (Clark, M., 2005). Researchers Mayr and Oeur found that college seniors discussed religion less often, attended services less frequently, and considered themselves less religious than they did during their freshman year (2009). Students changed their language during college by saying they consider themselves spiritual rather than religious to avoid being associated with a religious denomination (Mayr & Oeur, 2009).

College brings obstacles which force students to strategize. In addition to stress at college, problems from home (divorce, financial concerns) may still have an impact on a student along with psychological issues. Students may struggle adapting to a religious University both academically and socially. A non-Lutheran student attending a Lutheran University may have difficulty understanding religious language in faith-based learning. Coping mechanisms are unique to the individual; students decide which coping mechanism will be most effective in their situation to solve the problem and reduce stress. Students may strategize by seeking input or advice from their friends, family, peers, or professionals. A student's ability to cope in difficult situations determines their success in college. If they cannot adapt to this new environment, they will most likely drop out. Personality traits and perception influence the strategizing process making it easier to cope or more difficult. Colleges offer programs to assist students with academic and personal issues: wellness programs, health education, counseling, tutoring and mentoring, transition programs, and career services (Ratanasiripong, P., et. al, 2010) Studying the process of college adaptation, specifically to religion, may lead to discoveries about what

resources should be made available on campus or what academic changes should be made to help students adapt to the college life.

Conclusion

A student's choice to attend a religious University does not necessarily mean they share the same belief system. There are various reasons for choosing a university including: location, academic reputation, degree programs, cost, athletics, and campus facilities. Previous literature is inconclusive in determining the impact of religion on college decision-making. The transition to college can be stressful and challenging. Students must adapt to the college environment and utilize coping mechanisms to ensure their success. Students who chose to attend THE UNIVERSITY without a religious background will have difficulty adapting to the faith-based learning. These students must adapt to theology classes from a Lutheran perspective and learn to socialize with peers who have beliefs different than their own. Gathering data regarding the religious adaptation and attitudes of THE UNIVERSITY students would be beneficial to all professionals at the University.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS/HYPOTHESIS

Literature is not complete regarding the role of religion in college decision making. Previous research has studied student adaptation to college life (Mayr & Oeur, 2009). However, researchers have not explored college adaptation in relation to religion. College professionals may use this research to improve campus services available for students. Communication and Theology professionals may use this data to further research religious adaptation.

R1: What role does religion play in student's decision to attend THE UNIVERSITY?

R2: How do students adapt to religion at THE UNIVERSITY?

The researchers' hypothesize that religion will not be a major contributing factor in student's decision to attend THE UNIVERSITY and that those students with a Lutheran background will adapt to THE UNIVERSITY'S faith-based learning easier than others.

METHODOLOGY

To gather information on students' college choices, the decision was made to conduct a survey using the internet. The survey was written on Survey Monkey, a convenient survey generating website that allows for researchers to reach a large audience. The survey was disseminated to the student body of THE UNIVERSITY through the school's email system.

Participants

The participants of the study were college students attending THE UNIVERSITY. Of 1,238 surveys distributed, 253 were completed, providing the researchers with a 20.4% response rate. 164 of the respondents were between the ages of 19-24 years old, with 46 being male respondents versus 118 female. 44 respondents were females 18 years old or younger versus 14 males 18 years old or younger. 31 of the respondents were 24 years of age or older, with 19 female respondents and 12 male respondents.

Procedures

The survey was created through Survey Monkey and administered via THE UNIVERSITY's student email system. Students self-administered the survey and submitted their answers. The survey was sent out on Monday, November 14, 2011 and the data was retrieved on Monday, November 21, 2011. The survey contained both directive and non-directive questions, and gathered information about the students: age, department of study, type of enrollment, college decision factors, religious affiliation, religious influence in their lives, views on religion at THE UNIVERSITY, preferred coping strategies, and personal changes since

attending THE UNIVERSITY. The data was then assembled and broken down to find the statistics related to college choices and adaptability.

RESULTS

Two-hundred fifty-three individuals were surveyed asking ten questions related to student's decision to attend a college and adapting to a faith-based learning environment. Of the respondents surveyed, 61 reported to be Education majors (24.1%); 41 Science, Health, Mathematics or Technology majors (16.2%); 36 Business majors (14.2%); 28 Arts majors (11%); 25 Communication Studies or Humanities majors (9.8%); 24 Theology majors (9.4%); 15 Social and Cultural Studies majors (5.9%); 12 Criminal Justice majors (4.7%); and 49 respondents checked "Other" for their area of study (19.3%).

Of the participants surveyed, 164 (64.8%) reported coming to THE UNIVERSITY as a traditional first-year student. 66 of the respondents were transfer students (26%); 21 respondents were Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) students (8.3%); and 11 students enrolled in the university as non-traditional first-year students (4.3%).

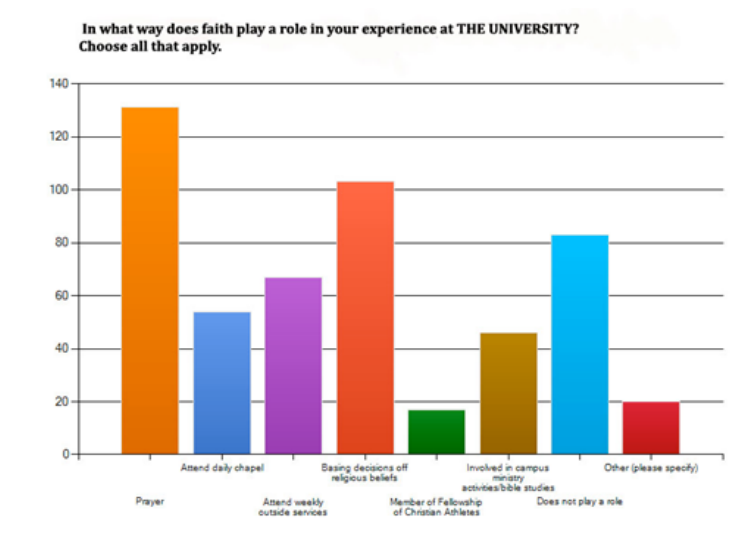
Respondents were asked to rate the importance of several contributing factors to their decision to attend THE UNIVERSITY. The factors were: cost/financial aid, location, programs of study, athletics, religious affiliation, campus/class size, and academic reputation. The survey asked for students to rate these seven factors from the most important (one) to the least important (seven) to their decision to attend THE UNIVERSITY.

Forty-seven of the respondents reported that athletics were their number one factor to attending the university (18.5%), while 39 respondents selected cost/financial aid as the most important factor (15.4%). Aside from these top two responses, programs of study was selected most important by 37 respondents (14.6%), religious affiliation by 31 (12.2%), campus/class size

by 28 (11%), location by 27 (10.6%), and academic reputation by 23 (9%). Athletics received the most votes for the most important, and also received the most votes for least important factor to the respondent’s college decision. 33.2% (84) of the surveyed students said that athletics was the least important factor to their college decision. Other respondents had different factors that were least important: 43 responded religious affiliation (16.9%), 23 responded cost/financial aid (9%), 21 responded academic reputation (8.3%), 20 responded programs of study (7.9%), 12 responded campus/class size (4.7%), and 10 responded the location (3.9%).

When asked about their religious affiliation, 52.2% of respondents (132) answered that they were of the Lutheran faith. 38 respondents were Roman Catholic (15%), 30 reported being a different Protestant faith (11.8%), 17 reported being atheist or having no religious affiliation (6.7%), 10 selected that they practiced other faith traditions (3.9%), and 36 respondents (14.2%) identified that they were of another religious affiliation outside of the ones listed.

Respondents were asked to identify all of the ways that faith plays a role in their experience at THE UNIVERSITY. The survey offered the actions of: prayer, attending daily chapel, attending weekly outside services, basing decisions off religious beliefs, being a part of Fellowship of Christian Athletes, involvement in campus ministry/bible studies, or does not play a role, and asked to check all that applied.

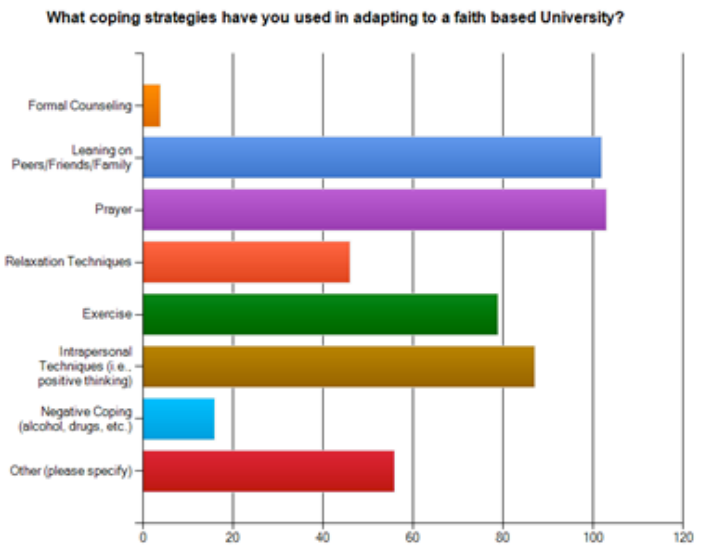


One-hundred thirty-one of the 253 respondents (51.8%) selected prayer, contrary to 83 respondents (32.8%) that selected that religion does not play a role in their university experience. 103 surveyed

students selected that they base their decisions on their religious beliefs (40.7%), 67 responded that they attend weekly services outside of THE UNIVERSITY (26.4%), 54 reported attending daily chapel service on campus (21.3%), 46 students were reportedly involved in campus ministry or bible study (18.1%), and 17 students were active participants in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter on campus (6.7%). 20 students reported that faith played a different role in their university life from the options that were given (7.9%).

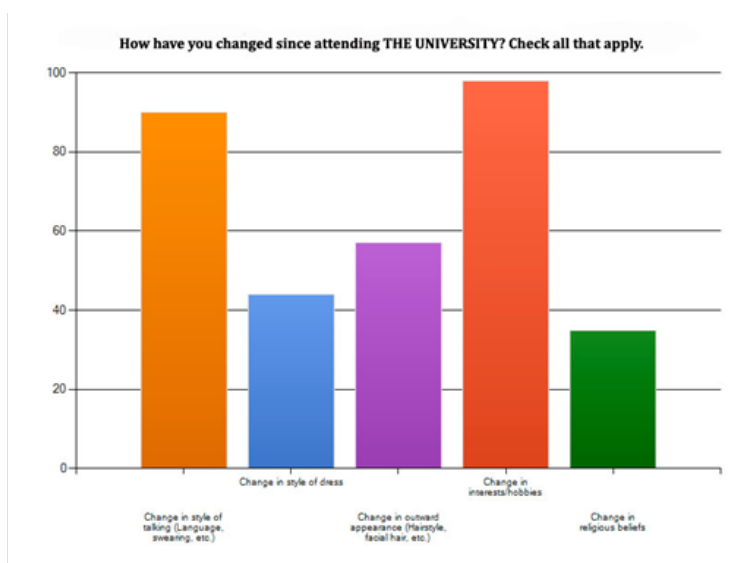
Away from their own personal faith, 38.7% of respondents (98) felt that THE UNIVERSITY embraces all other religions, versus 9.9% of students (25) that felt that THE UNIVERSITY does not embrace any religions other than the Lutheran faith. 77 students reported that the university embraces some other religions (30.4%) and 30 students responded that the university embraces only Christian-based religions (11.8%). 37 students selected the choice of other for this question (14.6%).

When asked whether the Lutheran faith was pushed upon them at THE UNIVERSITY, 171 respondents (67.6%) stated no, in contrast to the 58 respondents that felt that, yes, the Lutheran religion was pushed on them (22.9%). 26 students chose to not answer this question (10.2%).



Respondents were asked to select all coping strategies that they used while adapting to a faith-based university. 103 surveyed students (40.7%) reported prayer as one of their coping strategies. 102 students (40.3%) selected leaning on family, friends or

peers. 87 respondents (34.3%) utilized intrapersonal techniques—such as positive thinking—to adjust to the faith-based university environment. Other responses included 79 respondents using exercise (31.2%), 46 using relaxation techniques (18.1%), 16 using negative coping strategies (i.e., alcohol, drugs, etc.) (6.3%), and four students that reported seeking formal counseling (1.5%). 56 students responded using a coping strategy not on this list by using the response line available next to the “other” selection (22.1%).



59% of respondents (98)

reported a change in their interests or hobbies since attending THE UNIVERSITY. 54.2% of students (90) reported a change in their style of talk/communication or language usage. Students, also, reported a change in outward appearance by 57

respondents, change in style of dress by 44 respondents, change in religious beliefs by 35 respondents, and 69 respondents reported other changes from the options listed on the survey.

DISCUSSION

Communication Accommodation Theory

When people from different ethnic or cultural groups interact they may adjust their communication style to match the style of the other person. People from various cultural groups differ in their speaking rate, pitch, accent, pauses, and language (Griffin, 2009). A newcomer to a group can stick with their own style and remain an outsider or adapt to the conversational style of the new group to better fit in. Speech accommodation is an attempt to become more similar to

the group by gaining approval. Accommodation is the movement towards or away from others by adjusting their communication and behavior (Griffin, 2009). Since college students have their own cultural entity, the same principals can be applied to young adults adjusting to college life.

Students need to adapt to the culture in order to be successful both academically and socially. Religious institutions have their own communication style especially in terms of language. Students with a Lutheran background understand religious jargon while others do not. Consequently, students with different faiths will have difficulty understanding each other unless they are able to adapt to one another in their communication style.

Students were asked how they have changed since THE UNIVERSITY and 54 percent indicated a change in their language. This suggests students have adjusted the way they speak and what to say according to the culture. This doesn't necessarily mean that students try to conform but rather fit in with their peers. Researchers Mayr and Oeur discovered that students changed their language during college by saying they consider themselves spiritual rather than religious to avoid being associated with a religious denomination (2009). Prior to college, students may have cursed and spoke mostly about surface-level topics. Now they have adjusted their language by mitigating curse words and using religious jargon, instead.

Attending a religious institution may cause students to discuss deeper-level topics about their beliefs, especially in required Theology courses. The challenge is bridging the communication gap between Lutheran students or faculty and people of other denominations or religious faiths. 39 percent of respondents think THE UNIVERSITY embraces all other religions and 12 percent think THE UNIVERSITY embraces only Christian-based religions. One respondent stated, "I feel fairly comfortable at THE UNIVERSITY being a Muslim." Another respondent said THE UNIVERSITY is "very negative towards other religions and doesn't

recognize Atheism as a valid life choice.” This data can be explained by student’s ability to fit in and adjust within the culture of THE UNIVERSITY. 68 percent of respondents believe the Lutheran faith is not pushed upon students at THE UNIVERSITY. One respondent stated, “Embracing other religions is a pretty fine line to walk.” The challenge of Communication Accommodation Theory is one adjusting conversational styles to others yet maintaining one’s own identity. This balance of communication can be further explained by the two forms of communication intercultural speakers’ use when interacting: convergence and divergence (Griffin, 2009).

Convergence is a strategy by which one person adapts their communicative behavior to become more similar to another person (Griffin, 2009). Students at religious universities may unconsciously adjust their behavior during class to match the style of their professor. They may use different vocabulary and adjust their rate and tone to speak more similar to the professor. When students converse with their peers their conversational style may change again to become more similar to the group’s way of speaking. This may explain why some of THE UNIVERSITY students feel comfortable interacting with students of other religions and why others do not. If Lutheran students use convergence when interacting with Muslim students there is greater understanding, appreciation and positive responses. The same concept applies to non-Lutheran students taking a required Theology course. If the professor uses convergence to adapt his/her communication style to students from other faiths, these students feel accommodated, understood, and view the interaction in a positive light. The idea is to create person-centered messages so that the interaction is sensitive to people from other cultures or religions. The main motivation for using convergence is the desire for social approval (Griffin, 2009). When students or faculty interact with others from different faiths, it is natural to seek respect, similarity, and

understanding. Personal identities are constantly being shaped by others; the two step cause-and-effect process of convergence demonstrates this. The motivation is desire for approval which leads to convergence and adapting a similar communication style (Griffin, 2009). Using a convergence speaking style fosters a positive response from the other person and these interactions shape personal identity. This may explain why 39 percent of respondents feel that THE UNIVERSITY embraces all other religions. One respondent stated, “I notice there is respect for people who practice other religions.” This respect only comes from positive interactions between people from different faiths. Convergent speakers are perceived as competent, warm, attractive and cooperative (Griffin, 2009). While some use convergence as a way of narrowing the gap between cultures, others use divergence and maintenance, instead.

In contrast, divergence is the act of moving away from another’s communication style rather than closer together (Griffin, 2009). It is emphasizing the differences between each other within an interaction. Divergence is the norm or natural tendency in communicating with people from other cultures (Griffin, 2009). This could help explain the 12 percent of respondents who feel like “an outsider” at THE UNIVERSITY because the intercultural communication differences are not being bridged together. The 58 respondents who feel that the Lutheran faith is pushed upon them may not have had positive interactions with students from other faiths; they may not feel accommodated or understood in any way. This may occur in Theology courses when students emphasize these differences by using Lutheran terminology rather than a language others would clearly understand. This could lead to negative responses because there is no clarification, understanding and respect. There is a societal expectation that people with less power will adapt their communication style to those who have more power (Griffin, 2009). Professors may chose not to adapt their communication style to students because of differences

in power. Maintenance is a more subtle form of divergence where a person is persistent in using their own communication style rather than adapting it to others (Griffin, 2009). When people use either of these divergence styles, the other person is likely to perceive them in a negative light of being closed minded, stubborn, and unreceptive to new ideas (Griffin, 2009). This may explain why some respondents feel under-accommodated in their interactions with peers and faculty. The motivation for using divergence in interaction is a concern for maintaining their identity (Griffin, 2009). The respondent who claimed that “embracing religions is a fine line to walk” may have implied that being too accommodating in communication style differences can stray from their own identity and core beliefs. This theme is evident with other responses such as “embracing Christianity is justified” and “it should only stress Lutheranism.”

This use of divergence in interaction may explain why some respondents feel uncomfortable because they do not believe in the Lutheran faith. Another respondent said, “I don’t feel welcome by the church group.” Divergent speakers are perceived by listeners as insulting, impolite, or down-right hostile (Griffin, 2009). This evaluation of the speaker’s intent is important because it ultimately shapes their response when interacting (Griffin, 2009). One respondent stated, “The Lutheran students are rude and cliquy.” This individual may have had negative interactions with students from different beliefs. Another explanation is that they are using stereotypes to generalize students from a particular faith. Stereotypes come into play because communicators may adapt their speaking style to another by changing language when they may be far off from reality (Griffin, 2009). The distressing history of interaction dimension says, “If previous interactions were uncomfortable, competitive, or hostile, both interactants will tend to ascribe that outcome to the other person’s social identity” (Griffin, 2009). The respondent who feels that Lutheran students are rude could be assigning meaning to a group rather than to

the individual. Non-Lutheran students who transition to a religious University must strategize in order to fit in with the culture. Respondents were asked questions about how they coped with adapting to a faith-based university and how they practice their faith.

Researchers Pearlin and Schooler stated that coping strategies are unique to the individual and depend upon past experiences and personality characteristics (1987). Specific coping responses are personal strategies such as prayer which are used in order to deal with challenges and relieve the tension of stress (Pearlin and Schooler, 1987). Prayer may be done by themselves silently or may take place within a group setting through interaction. 52 percent of respondents practiced their faith through prayer and 41 percent used prayer as a way of adapting to a faith-based University. College student's identities are constantly being shaped by the people around them through both negative and positive interactions. This data can be explained by a basic human need to fit in and find similarities with others in the process. Students from other faiths or a lack of faith may have adapted their communication style to peers and faculty by using prayer. One may use convergence by changing language, tone and rate to adapt one's prayer style to others.

Social resources are support and encouragement provided by family and friends as a way to reduce stress and anxiety (Pearlin and Schooler, 1987). When respondents were asked their ways of coping in adaptation to THE UNIVERSITY, 40 percent of them responded with "leaning on peers/friends/family." Students may have adopted similar coping strategies with the people around them who also look to emotional support when faced with challenges. Students may use convergence by changing their communicative behavior to discuss family and friend support systems. Interactions with other students may have shaped one's unconscious adoption of seeking advice and support. Researchers Pearlin and Schooler discovered that the most

commonly used coping strategy among college students was discussing the problem with others (1987). The 41 percent of respondents that chose prayer as a coping strategy have adapted to a faith-based University and become similar to other students. These positive interactions result in understanding, respect and attraction which shape personal identity.

The college experience causes students to question and reexamine their belief system (Mayr and Oeur, 2009). When respondents were asked how they have changed since attending THE UNIVERSITY, 21 percent of respondents said they have changed in their religious beliefs. The college experience can either pull students towards religion or push them away from it. One respondent stated, "I have grown deeper in my faith." Yet another respondent stated, "I'm reminded of why I stopped going church." While some students claimed their faith has stayed consistent throughout college. Researchers Mayr and Oeur found that college seniors discussed religion less often, attended services less frequently, and considered themselves less religious than they did during their freshman year (2009).

One possible explanation for why some students have negative attitudes towards religion is that their experiences with others during college have helped to shape their belief system. Researchers Mayr and Oeur discussed the college experience being a "faith killer" for a lot of students who didn't know what they believed anymore (2009). One respondent said, "I don't talk or associate with religious people on campus." This student recognizes intercultural communication differences among students and faculty yet may not feel comfortable interacting with someone from a different faith. Students from different faiths will have to learn how to adapt their communication style to others while maintaining their own identity. "Intercultural communication is devilishly complicated. Let's not pretend it isn't" (Griffin, 2009).

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

The civilizing influence of language becomes apparent when humans talk to each other. When conversations occur, people begin to form meaning, language, and thought that lead to the creation of a person's self and how they will socialize in a larger community (Griffin, 2009). An individual will act towards another person(s) based on the meanings that they assign to them (Griffin, 2009). In an essence, people need to learn how people communicate, what their actions means, and what they expect out of them in order to survive and thrive in a community. This proves to be true in a collegiate setting where students are thrown into a new environment and must learn the language styles of others in order to create their own communication style. This especially is proven to be true when it is a campus that is religious affiliated, such as THE UNIVERSITY.

In this study, when students were asked, "How have you changed since attending THE UNIVERSITY?" the results came back as the following: 54.2% had a change in their style of talking, 26.5% changed in style of dress, 34.3% changed in their outward appearance, 59.0% changed their interests/hobbies, and 21.1% changed their religious beliefs. Symbolic Interactionism has helped form these changes in students based off the exchanges students have had with other individuals on campus. More than half of respondents changed their style of talking which helps support the researcher's claim that symbolic interactionism has occurred within THE UNIVERSITY, and the other changes students made are probable outcomes of the change in the way that students communicate between one another. This has helped students develop their sense of self within their new community.

In different communities, symbolic naming is used as a way to create meaning to society (Griffin, 2009). Some "naming" that is significant to a college community is a particular major

or activity to identify oneself. One of the most common questions a college student is asked is, “so what do you do?” The usual response is their major and what activities they are involved with; “I’m a Criminal Justice Major on the baseball team and am involved in business club.” This is an example of symbolic naming that helps in forming the basis of communication with another person, and creating designated civilization. “...The extent of knowing is dependent on the extent of naming,” (Griffin, 2009). Symbolic naming is used to develop the way that individuals choose to communicate with a person or group of people. One respondent stated, “It is difficult to talk (to) another Christian denomination with the Theology department and have it an open discussion, rather than being told that Lutheranism is perfect and has everything correct.” This response reflects how some students have “named” the Theology department as a group of people, and have developed meaning that they know that open communication with them is not a comfortable environment. This may lead students, with this particular viewpoint, to believe that they need to interact with persons who identify themselves with the Theology department in a particular way, if they interact with them at all.

This thought process leads into how an individual’s interpretation of symbols is modified by his or her own thought processes (Griffin, 2009). People use inner dialogue to test alternatives, rehearse actions, and anticipate reactions before responding in a conversation (Griffin, 2009). This practice helps students with different viewpoints on important matters, such as religion, better converse with one another, which in turn creates a better sense of shared language within a community. One respondent said that they, “Became (a) bit more social,” after coming to THE UNIVERSITY, while another respondent stated that they “Don’t talk, or don’t associate (with) religious people on campus.” According to survey responses, it appears there is a disconnect between students who affiliate themselves with the religious aspect of THE

UNIVERSITY and the people who do not, and that impacts the language that students use to communicate with one another.

This disconnect may even go as far as influencing people's religious beliefs as one student responded that they were, "Pushed further from religion after my experiences here." Another student answered, "Lutheran faith isn't pushed, but I feel like you're not really welcomed into the chapel community without it. It's like; if you're not them you're shunned. They mentally try to force you and belittle you, but they aren't willing to give you the time of day." The previous statement is an example of the looking-glass self where someone's mental self-image results from taking the role of the other (Griffin, 2009). This student is viewing themselves through what they view as the chapel community's "eyes" and has shaped their perspective of how they chose to interact (or not interact) with that smaller community at THE UNIVERSITY.

"Symbolic interactionists are convinced that the self is a function of language. Without talk there would be no self-concept, (Griffin, 2009). Self-concept develops even further when one is put into a community and others social expectations occur. When looking at a community's actions, what these actions mean, and what they expect, adapting language and attitudes to match that group, occur (Griffin, 2009). This may explain why 166 of the respondents reported a form of change after attending THE UNIVERSITY. Students may begin to change their language, hobbies, beliefs, and even appearance as they learned their new communities' expectations and deepen their sense of belonging to their new groups. One respondent even stated that their change was due to, "the friends I've made," which supports the concept that a person shapes their language based on the idea that the language in their new community influenced how they communicate now. Another student disputed that, "These

changes are not the product of me attending THE UNIVERSITY, but the product of being around people, being in society.,” which also supports the concept of changing one’s language and self to have better interactions in communication in a new environment.

Limitations

Several limitations occurred during the researching of the project and finding the results needed to answering the researchers questions, which resulted in new research questions being formed.

The researchers were limited to the distribution of surveys to one private faith based institution. Being able to examine a variety of faith based universities would have yielded substantial data beyond the examination of only one religious affiliation. A cross examination of various faiths and the communicative coping strategies would have provided the researchers with insight on potential differences among faith based strategies.

Another limitation the researchers had was that of time. The researchers were not only limited to one semester of data collection and analysis, but were faced with multiple surveys distributed to the same respondents during the course of the semester. The influx of surveys distributed to the same population could have influenced the response rate of this study.

Suggestions for Future Research

The preliminary results of the research findings are insightful to one’s understanding of student’s coping strategies and overall college choice. However, there are further areas of exploration that still exist.

An exploration of other private, faith-based universities would allow researchers to see the changes in perception and adaptation at multiple schools, and how they may differ from, not only place to place, but from faith to faith.

Further research should explore what more specific coping strategies are utilized by students when adapting to faith based institutions. One might explore how successful certain strategies are versus others and what type training is necessary for student success in the utilization of certain strategies.

While researchers were able to gain valuable insight into the way that students view, adapt and cope with the faith-based learning environment THE UNIVERSITY, there is still so much to be learned about this unique interaction.

Researchers discovered how students change and grow in this environment in a number of different ways that match with the Communication Accommodation Theory and the Symbolic Interaction Theory. This is not only influenced by the religious aspect of the university community, but many other factors that should be explored and researched.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1:

- College has very good academic reputation 64.7 percent
- This college's graduates get good jobs 54.2 percent
- I was offered financial assistance 43.0 percent
- A visit to the campus 41.4 percent
- The cost of attending this college 39.9 percent
- Wanted to go to a college this size 38.5 percent
- College has a good reputation for social activities 38.4 percent
- Grads get into good grad/professional schools 35.1 percent
- Wanted to live near home 20.1 percent
- Information from a website 18.9 percent
- Rankings in national magazines 17.6 percent
- Parents wanted me to go to this school 14.7 percent
- Admitted early decision and/or early action 11.8 percent
- Could not afford first choice 11.2 percent
- High school counselor advised me 10.2 percent
- Not offered aid by first choice 8.5 percent
- Athletic department recruited me 8.4 percent
- Attracted by religious affiliation/orientation of college 7.5 percent
- My teacher advised me 6.9 percent
- My relatives wanted me to come here 5.8 percent
- Private college counselor advised me 3.6 percent

Figure 2:

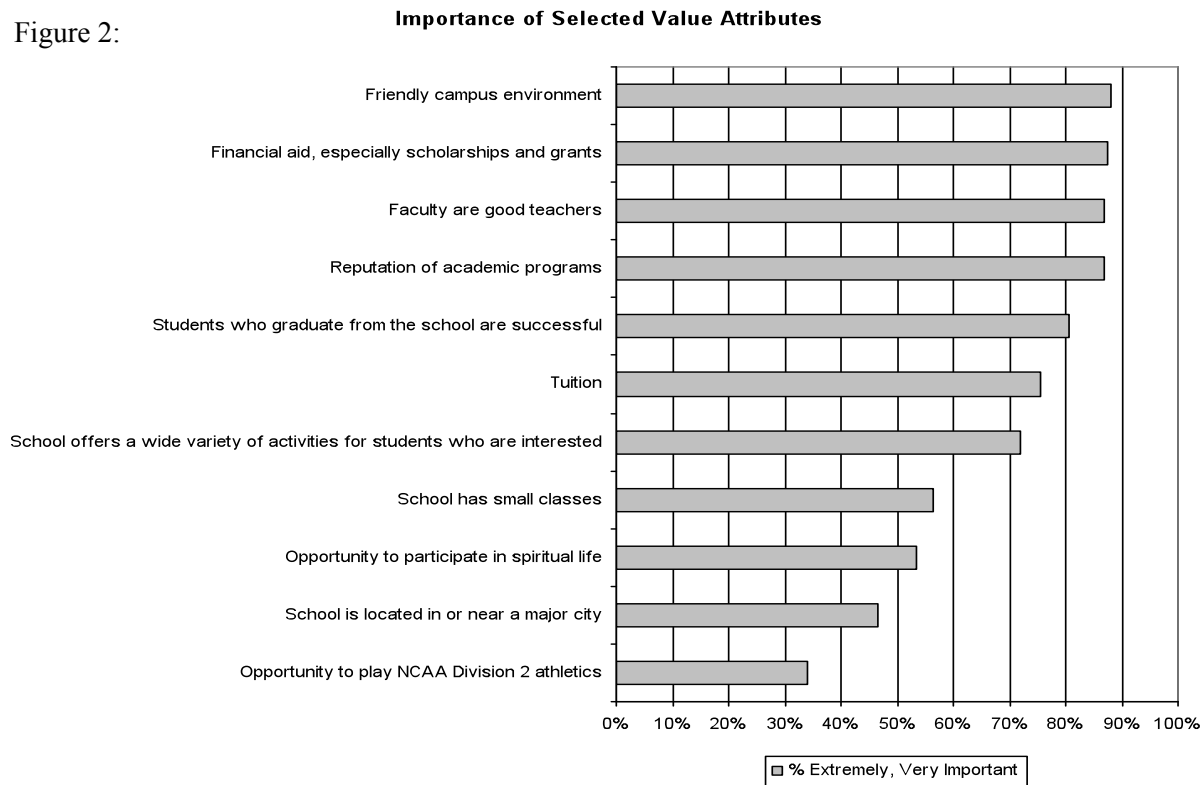


Figure 3:

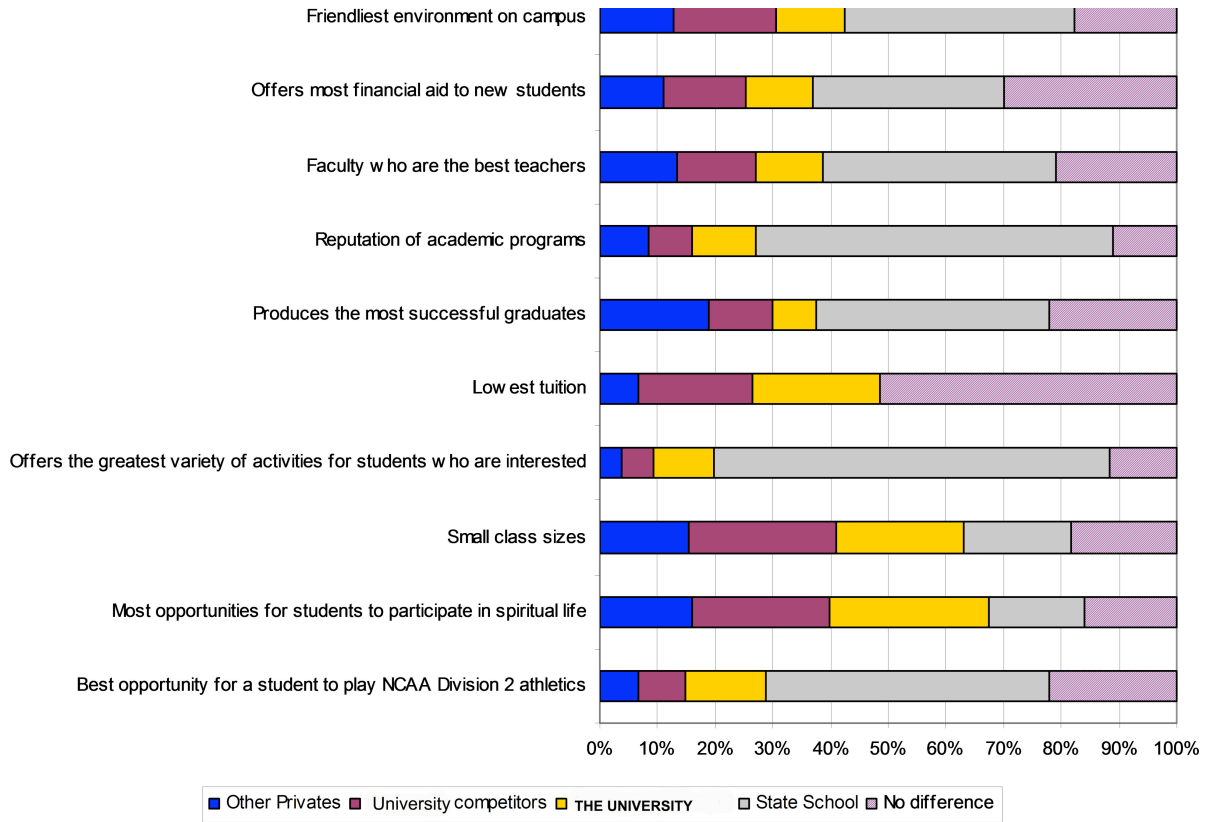


Figure 4:

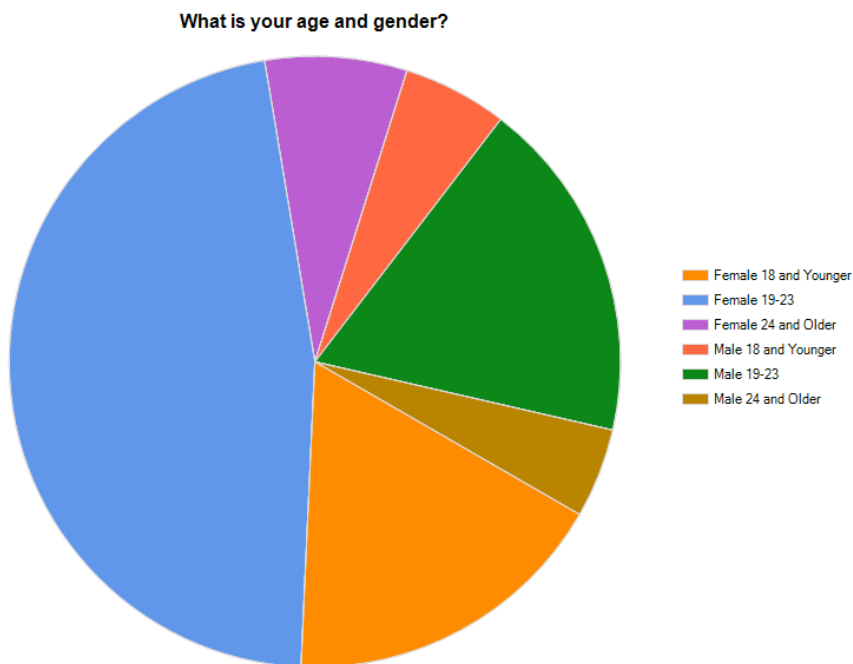


Figure 5:

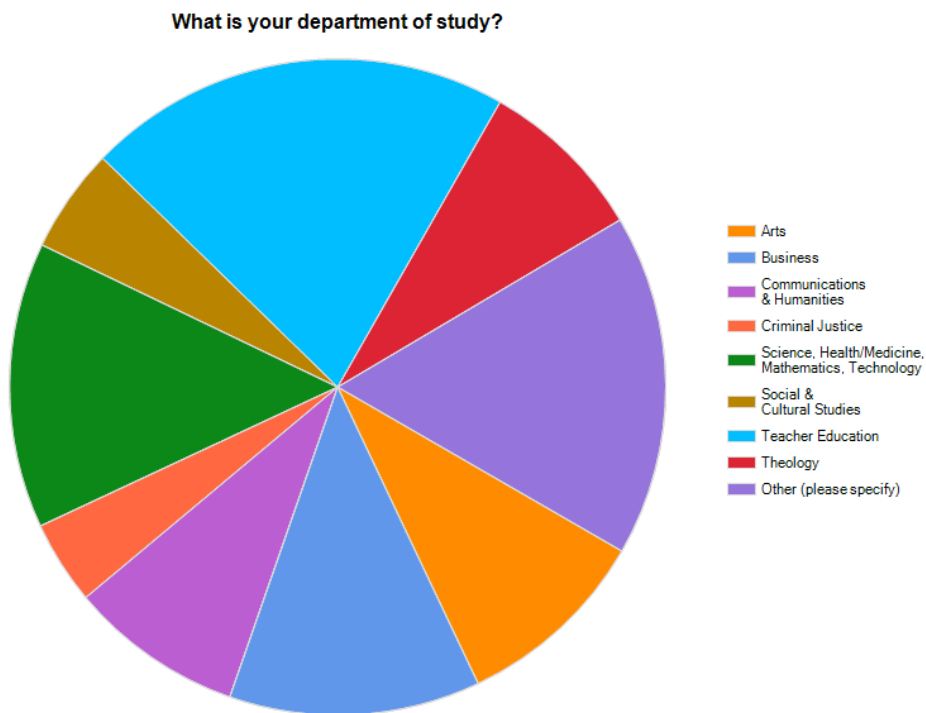


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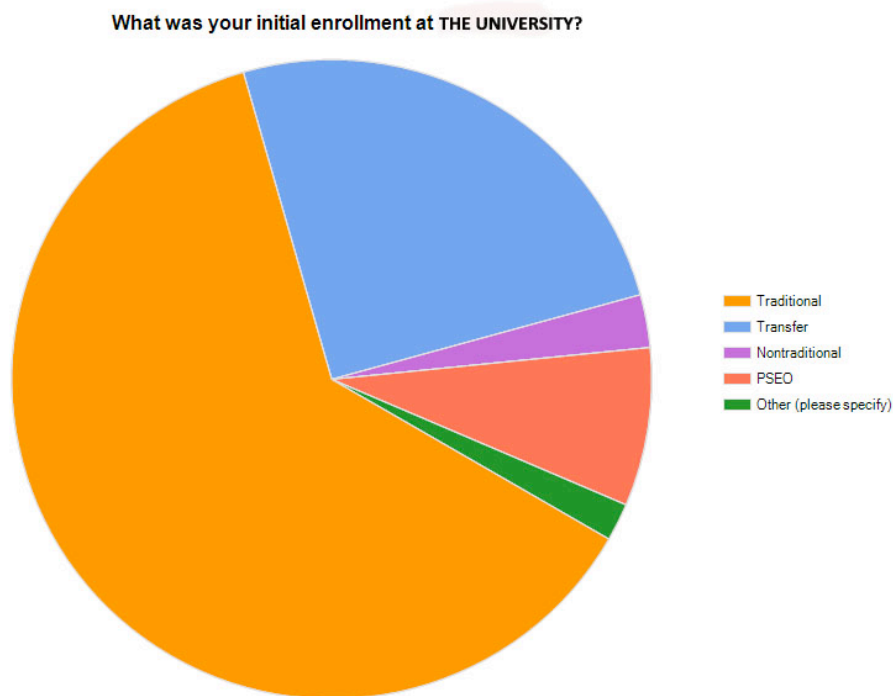


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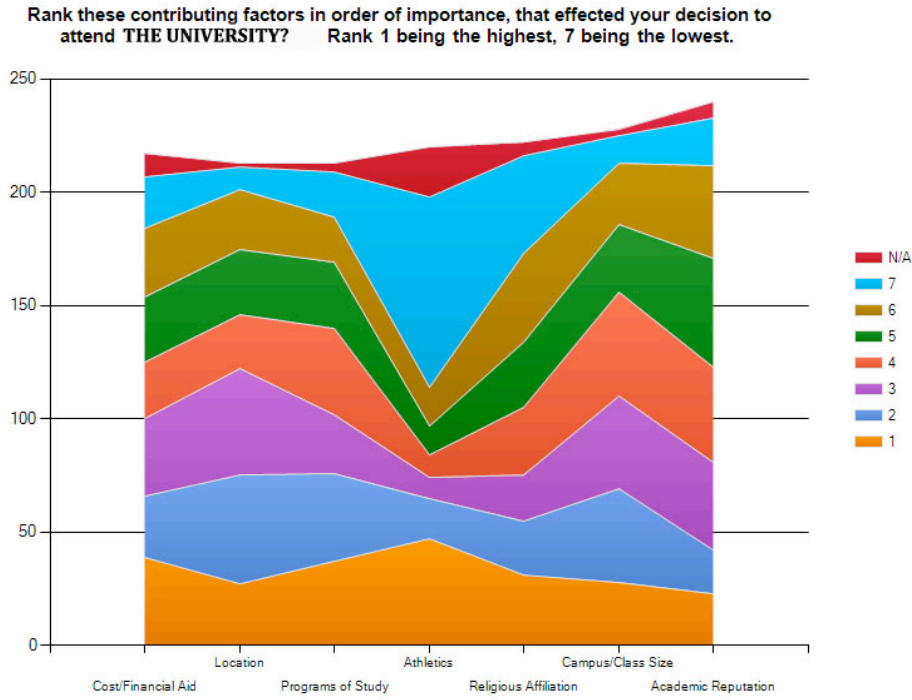


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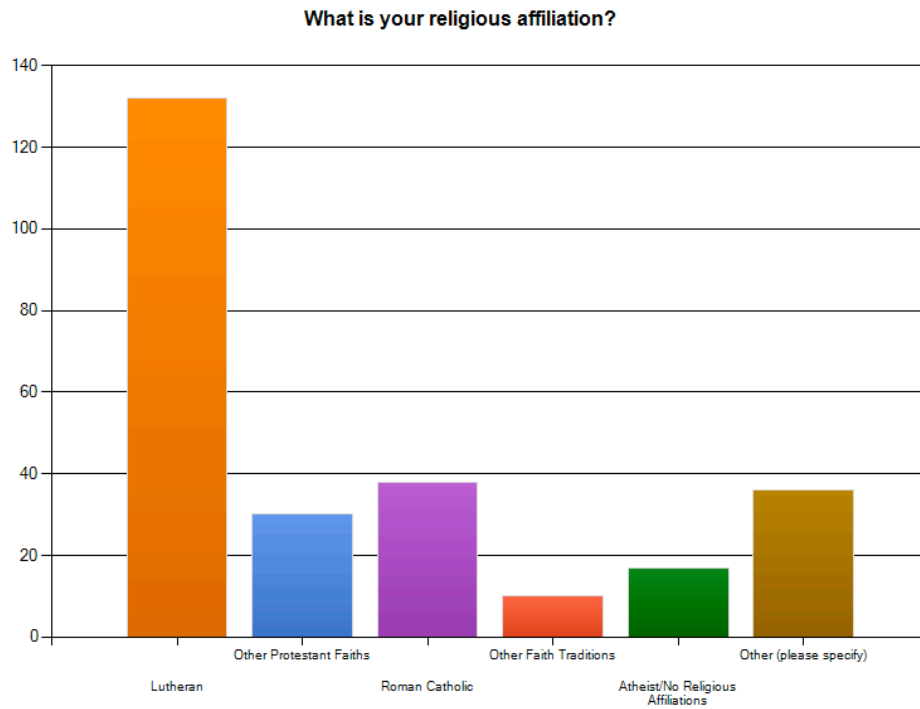


Figure 9:

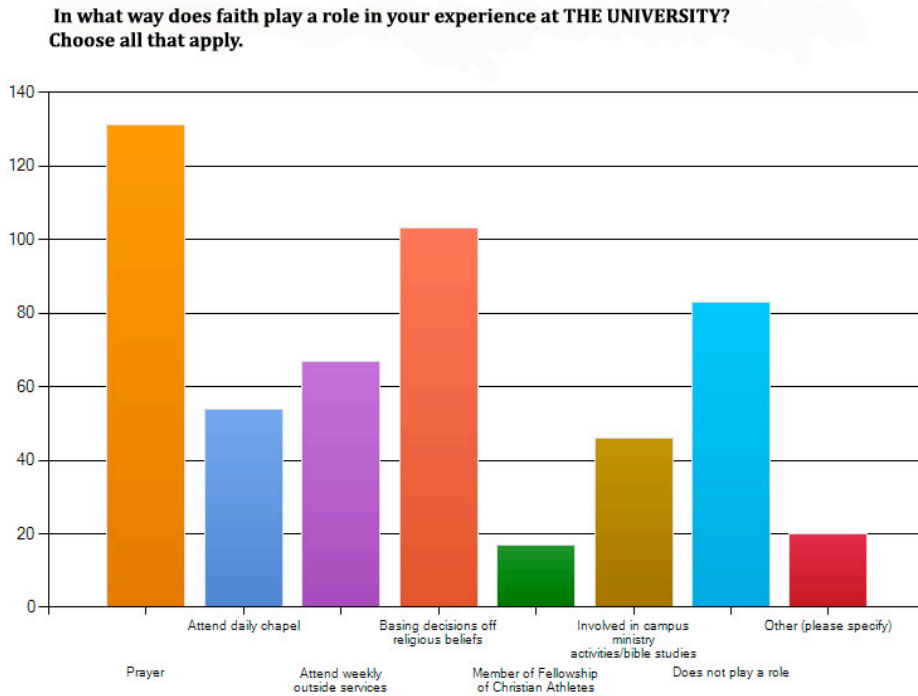


Figure 10:

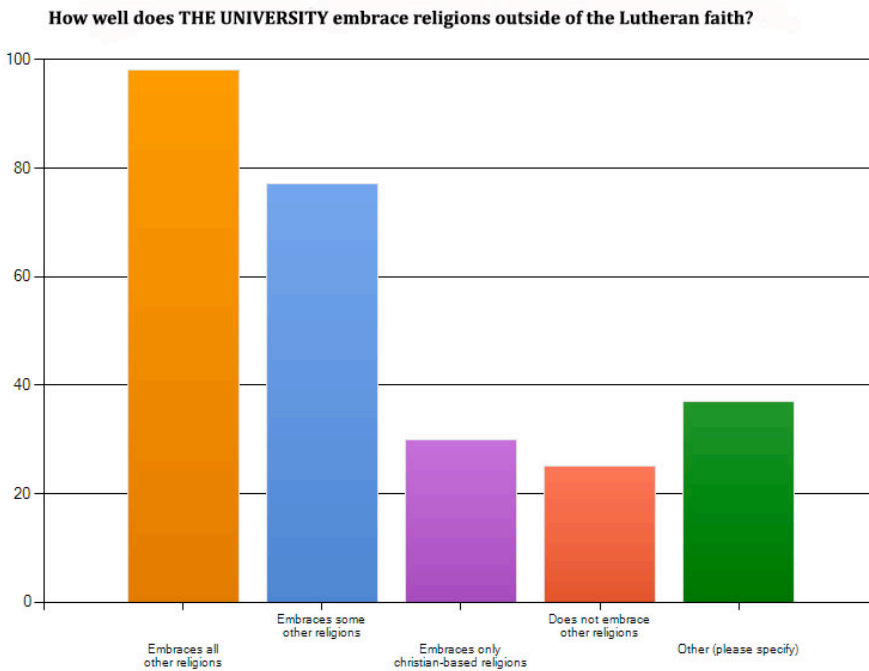


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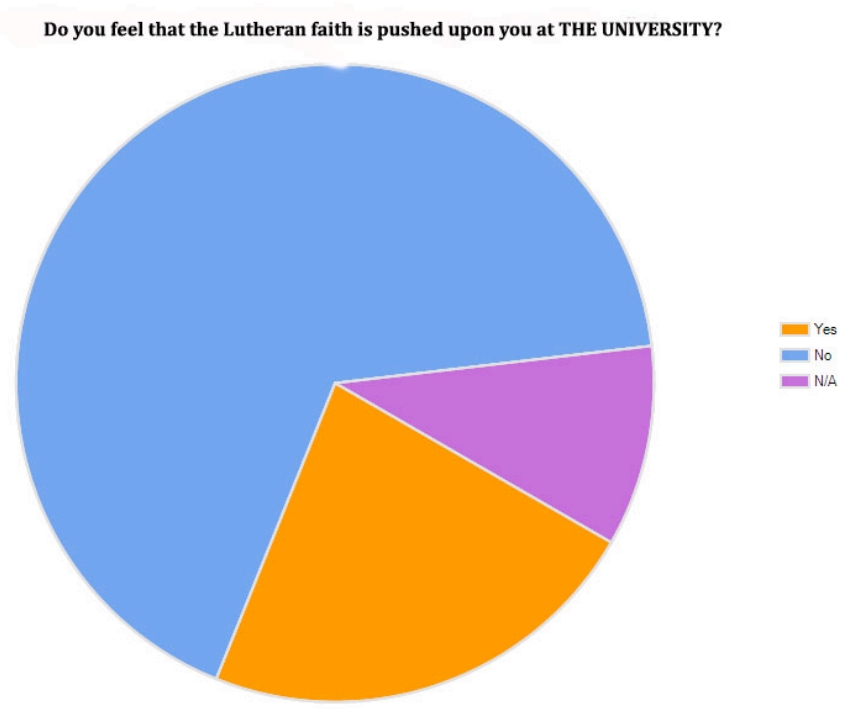


Figure 12:

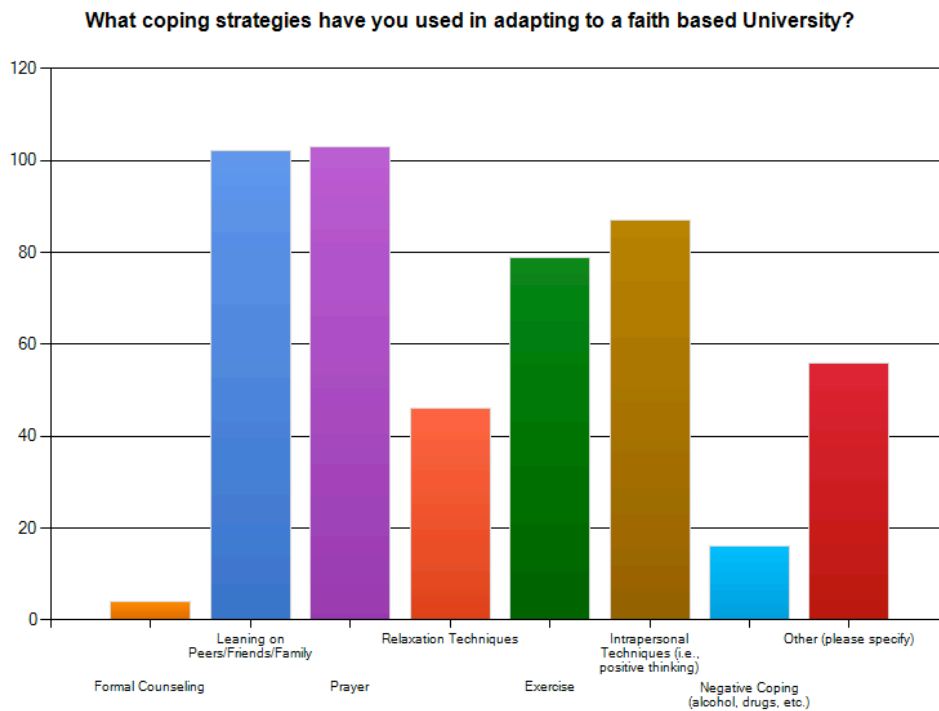


Figure 13:

