Whether the source is *God and Man at Yale* or any number of more recent studies, the conflict between a college education and the faith that students bring to campus (secular campuses at least) is well accepted. The more you pursue a higher education, the more likely you are to abandon your faith — at least that's what conventional wisdom holds.

“Actually we’ve just been wrong about this for quite a while,” said Mark D. Regnerus, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and one of the authors of a new study that suggests students who attend and graduate from college are more likely than others to hold on to their faith.

It’s not that colleges necessarily encourage faith, he said, but for all the talk about how intellectuals are out to destroy students’ relationships to their religions and God, the main obstacles to such relationships have to do with maturing and how young people spend their time. “Some kids were bound to lose [their faith] anyway and they do,” Regnerus said. But the evidence suggests that college isn’t responsible.

The research is appearing this month in the journal *Social Forces*. The other authors on the paper are two graduate students in sociology at Texas, Jeremy E. Uecker and Margaret Vaaler. The data that they analyze come from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which tracked more than 10,000 Americans from adolescence through young adulthood from 1994 to 1995 and from 2001 to 2002. Because the study was looking at individuals, it differs from studies looking at those attending certain colleges and includes students from a range of colleges and those who didn’t attend college at all.

The data were mined for trends on three factors of religious activity: attendance at religious services, relative importance of religion, and disaffiliation from religion. A substantial majority of young adults report a decline in attendance at religious services, while a minority report that religion has become less important and that they have completely dropped their religion. But the greatest drops come from those who are not in college.

### Percent of Young Adults Reporting Religious Declines, by Level of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Decline in Attending Services</th>
<th>Decline in Importance of Religion</th>
<th>Disaffiliation From Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t attend college</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended, but earned no degree</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned associate degree</td>
<td>60.3%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So with all the talk about supposedly liberal, anti-religious professors, why do the young adults who don’t go to college suffer more of a religious loss?

Regnerus said that what the study suggests — and his personal experience confirms — is that while there are plenty of non-religious professors around, they aren’t trying to discourage any students from practicing their faith. “Of course there are some who are hostile to religion. But they don’t teach that. They teach their discipline,” Regnerus said. The attitude, he added, is: “Whatever I think about evangelicals, when I go to teach quantum physics, I teach quantum physics.”

More broadly, so many students are in pre-professional programs, Regnerus said, that they are focused on practical matters much more than on wondering whether God exists. As a Christian who earned his undergraduate degree at Trinity Christian College, Regnerus said he spent a lot of time talking about philosophical issues in college, but that’s not the norm for many undergrads these days. (Christian colleges in recent years have experienced a boom, in part from students who don’t want to become secular, or whose parents don’t want them to become secular, and Regnerus said his study doesn’t contradict that belief. Because there is a decline in religious connection during the college years — looking at religious and secular institutions together — those at religious colleges are less likely to experience that decline.)

Behavioral factors, he said, are a better way than college status to predict whether young adults will become less religious. Those who don’t have sex before marriage are also those who don’t experience as much of a drop in religious connection. Those who have smoked pot experience more of a drop. Those who increase alcohol consumption during their young adulthood experience more of a drop in religious connection.

Those who blame college for declining religious activity by students don’t understand that it is these factors, among others, that are the influence, Regnerus said. “This is about this period of the life course where freedom and choice become paramount,” he said. “What diminishes religiosity is freedom and choice, not intellectual engagement.”

— Scott Jaschik

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/06/14/religion.

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