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# Religious Groups and the Freshman Experience

## Tess Culton

This study examined the benefits provided to first-year students by religious based organizations on university campuses, with an emphasis on the campus of Illinois State University. It also looked at the relationship between the university and these groups. Individuals involved with these groups, both freshmen and adults affiliated, were interviewed. There was also a great deal of observation of group meetings and discussion with university representatives.

Note: This paper was completed for the course Anthropology 302, Ethnography, in affiliation with the *Ethnography of the University Initiative*, [www.eui.uiuc.edu](http://www.eui.uiuc.edu). Research was conducted in compliance with IRB Protocol

## **Introduction**

How important is student well-being to a university? Would they do whatever it took to ensure student success? What if that included welcoming and sustaining religious organizations on campus? How important should these religious groups be to public education? When everything is new, and everything is daunting, possessing the knowledge that nothing will be the same again can be altogether debilitating. Starting at a new university is often an important and exciting time in a young person's life. It can be a time of great change and even greater personal reflection. Some new students have an easy time adjusting to college; they find it seemingly effortless to make new friends, stay active in the community, and do well in classes and at work. Other new students, however, have a much more difficult time adjusting to college. They seem to need to find solace in other things in order to make it through that first year of college. Some students will try university sponsored activities such as joining clubs or trying out for sports, while others may just go to parties to try and meet people (Wingler 2011). I found that another way that many freshmen cope is to join a group or organization that is dedicated to their particular religion or belief system.

In this paper, I discuss how important religion can be imperative to student success, how concerned the university is with this notion, and how the university should become more involved with religious groups on campus.

### **National Trends in College Student Religiosity**

According to a nationwide study conducted by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), college students tend to have more success academically and socially when they are involved with or participating in student services or other activities (McCormick 2010).

This finding was backed by a statement from Ryan Smith, who is from the University Assessment Office at Illinois State University which conducts academic program assessments. During a classroom discussion Mr. Smith affirmed the NSSE finding stating “students will almost inevitably learn more when they are ‘engaged’ or participating in academic services and other activities. The NSSE study also found that when students became involved with religious organizations, they tended to become more actively involved with other clubs and campus life activities.

It was found that students’ mental and emotional health may hang in the balance as well. A rather common notion is that the first semester of college is the most vital for a student; that semester has a propensity to determine the relative success of a student for the rest of his/her college career. For example, “if a student has a good first semester, with good grades and an active social life he or she is much more apt to get good grades and be happier overall for the rest of his or her college years” (Gonyea & Kuh 2006). This statement indicates that on the converse, a student who has poor grades and a sub-par social life will be less accomplished through the years. It is said that “students have a need to feel like they ‘belong’... [and that] with a religious group, students are provided with that sense of community they so crave” (Gonyea & Kuh 2006). I feel it was well put by one of my interviewees that “a social life isn’t all about going to parties, getting drunk, hooking up, or any of that stuff; it’s really about finding people who you have something in common with, and becoming like a second family. They are there with you for everything, and it’s nice to know that.”

The NSSE study not only looked into the involvement of students with religious organizations on campuses, but also at how the religious groups’ involvement compared with

that of other student groups. This nationwide study compared participation and popularity of campus groups that focused on aspects such as religion, fitness, environment, academia, athletics, etc. It was determined that aside from Sororities and Fraternities, which far surpass all other organizations in involvement and recognition, religious groups on campus were the most sought after and populated.

### **Religious Organizations at Illinois State University**

Illinois State University is a relatively large public university. Its population consists of roughly 20,000 students, which are primarily undergraduates. The demographic is not particularly diverse with a majority of its student body being white, Christian, and of “traditional” ages. The university’s main campus is located in central Illinois in the town of Normal. Students also live in and frequent the neighboring town of Bloomington, as well.

There are approximately twenty Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) on the ISU campus that are based on religion. Perhaps the most active of which, being a Christian group called Encounter. Encounter has an active presence on campus including things such as advertised events, group meetings, and recruitment for new members; they even have their group’s building located on campus very near to the Bone Student Center. Encounter is accompanied by other religious based RSOs including groups devoted to Paganism, Islamism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and various others. All of these groups on campus provide new students with a place to turn to in order to aid them in the many adjustments that are part of becoming accustomed to college life. All of these groups are registered with the university as a legitimate organization.

As would be expected the number of students involved with each group varies greatly. The Christian groups have a much higher number of students involved than a Buddhist group. The co-ed Christian fraternity Zeta Phi Zeta reported their group had a little over 200 members in 2011, where the Pagan group says they currently have between 20 and 30 members. Though their numbers vary from year to year, religious groups remain one of the most popular on ISU's campus; ISU is not widely known for being a big sports school, and has never had a strong Greek tradition either. Although these groups continue to be popular on campus, according to Ryan Smith "ISU is less involved, spiritually, than other campuses nationwide".

## **Methods**

### **Observations**

I involved myself in about five separate observations of particular religious groups on campus. Although I did not personally participate in the groups' meetings, I did sit in on them and observe their behaviors and interactions, as well as what the content and structure of each meeting was.

First, I went to observed a few meetings held by the Christian group Encounter. I found out about the meetings through flyers and announcements posted around campus and on the group's website. The meetings were typically held Monday evenings or Fridays in afternoon. Each of the four meetings I attended was held in one of the various rooms in the Bone Student Center on campus; the group also had regular meetings and Mass at their building which I did not attend. The first meeting I went to was, by far, the most informative about the group itself. They had held the meeting as a sort of recruitment information session; any student, freshman or otherwise, who was interested in joining Encounter had been encouraged to attend this get

together in order to learn more about what the group does. Current members, adults and students alike, led an information seminar about the group, while answering any questions participants had, as well. They described themselves as a laid back, and more contemporary alternative to other religious groups. They spoke about how they were involved with things like volunteer work for anyone in need, particularly children and soldiers. They related stories of going on group outings to anywhere from the park to places across the country. The people representing Encounter were very eager to appear to new students as a place of comfort and stability, as well as one of fun and excitement. The other Encounter meetings I attended were much smaller in size and seemed to be more about planning trips, volunteer opportunities and advertisement for potential members.

Secondly, I attended a group meeting held by the Pagan organization. Their meeting, interestingly, was not much different from Encounter's. There was little talk about the religion itself, and seemed to focus primarily on plans for the group's future. They discussed plans for an upcoming Pagan ceremony, and how they would set it up and get people involved.

What I found most surprising about both groups' meetings was the lack of religious talk. There was no semblance of a church-like atmosphere or attempt to convert or convince others of their beliefs. It seemed to me that the members' religious beliefs are, at least for some part, just the thing that ties these people together. There is an unspoken understanding that they are all there in the first place because of their related religious affiliation, but beyond that they stay because of the community and friendship.

## Interviews

I conducted 8 interviews total with members of religious groups on ISU's campus. 3 of those interviews were with adults who are affiliated with the religious groups. These people have families and job outside of their particular group, but choose to volunteer a great amount of time (roughly thirty hours a week in one man's case) to helping out these student groups. When I asked one of the leaders why he helped so much he replied, "I just love college kids. I was there too and I know how hard it is to juggle all the emotions as well as other things going on in a twenty-something's life." I also asked if the time allotted to the group was ever an issue for him. He laughed and replied, "This is what keeps me young! Some guys my age like to go play golf or grab a quiet beer and a football game; but me, I like to be involved and see how these kids are growing and changing. I like to be a part of something that these students will remember forever."

The other 5 interviews were with freshmen students who had found and joined a religious group on campus. The general consensus among all of them was that without their particular group, they would not be as happy or outgoing as they were at present.

One of the girls I interviewed was particularly vehement on the idea that without her group she would "only be sneaking down to the commons area of the dorm to get food," and then lock herself in her room once more. I questioned her on her behaviors and emotions before joining the group, to which she replied, "I would literally just go straight to class, then back to my dorm room; I wouldn't really talk to anyone and the only reason I would come out was to take food back to my room. I was kind of depressing really; I was sad a lot, and very homesick." When I questioned further on the cause of these emotions she replied, "I was just scared, you



know? This is the first time I have been on my own, and it was almost like I didn't know how to act towards people or make new friends. Believe me, I wanted to get out more, and do things but I just had no confidence." I asked her how, if at all, joining her group had changed that behavior for her. She gushed, "It is a complete one-eighty! I am going out to eat and shop with my new friends that I met here, and I can come down out of my room to eat and study all over campus without feeling lost or worried. It's like they [the religious group] had my back, you know? Like, once I knew I had someone to fall back on, and someone to take care of me, I wasn't afraid to go out and discover myself."

### **Findings: How Religion Matters at Illinois State University**

After talking with many freshman students involved in religious organizations on campus I discovered many of the ways they struggle and how they cope with their various stressors. Many of the students, no matter which groups they were involved in, seemed to possess the same fears and experience the same hardships of experiencing a new portion of their lives. Of the many challenges that come with being a new student on a college campus it seems that one of the most prevalent is the ability to "fit in" or make new friends. Of the students I talked to it seemed that many felt "lost" or "alone" when they first move to ISU. According to Jan Patterson, Dean of Students at Illinois State University, "ISU wants to give students the feeling that they are coming to a university that is able to provide them with all the benefits a larger school could give them, along with the sense of security and comfort that comes with having that 'small campus' feeling...ISU wants its students to feel a sense of community and camaraderie here, and sometimes, with 20,000 students, that can be hard to do." I think this fits perfectly with what the students I spoke with were trying to say. It seems that when a student comes to ISU for the first

time it can be very difficult on them; this leads to potential mental and academic failure. Students want that feeling of community just as much as the university wants to provide it, but that common goal does not always get met.

I found, through NSSE research and backed by my interviews, that incoming freshman students tend to cling to their religion much more than graduating seniors. Their religion is something that is determined and set, prior to their transition to a university. It is something they know about themselves and something they are comfortable with. According to the Encounter representatives they want to appear as a more “modern” and “family-based” community for that exact reason. One interviewee stated “a lot of new students are scared and want conformation and support like they received from their families. We can provide those feelings here...without the monotony or rigidity of waking up and going to church every Sunday.”

### **Recommendations for the University**

During a class discussion Jonathan Rosenthal, ISU’s College of Arts and Sciences Associate Dean, stated that Illinois State University is “affiliated through a handshake relationship” with its religious RSOs, meaning that there is no official supervision or rapport between the two. I find this to be a deplorable fact; it has been proven time and again through studies and personal accounts that religious organizations are a saving grace to many freshmen students. Without these organizations to help, many students could potentially fall through the cracks of the academic system.

I feel that the university should do as much as they possibly can to ensure these groups stay afloat and are helping their students in whatever ways are needed. To begin with, I would

suggest that the university should take an initiative and find out what organizations its students are most drawn to, and which provide the most support both mentally and spiritually. Once that is known the university could offer scholarships, rewards, or aide to students involved with particular groups. ISU could also collaborate, and become more involved with the groups' fundraising and volunteer efforts. This would show students that the university has an existent relationship with its RSOs as well as providing the clubs with a way to advertise themselves and potentially help even more students. Overall, I feel that the religious RSOs and the students involved would not be the only ones benefiting from this connection. I feel the university would better itself in the eyes of its supporters, its faculty, and most importantly its students.

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