

Integration of Faith and Business Among Business Undergraduates: An Empirical Study of Business Students at Christian Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT: This quantitative report presents the results of a survey of 700+ undergraduate U.S. and Canadian business majors attending twelve unique faith-based institutions regarding attitudes about their faith and career plans. Results show that students believe a career in business can simultaneously support both career and faith goals. While students feel supported by faculty, both inside and outside business schools, seniors feel the least institutional support for studying business.

KEYWORDS: faith integration, business undergraduates, business, Christian, faith and work

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, when discussing the amount of time television programming showed businesspeople and practices in negative situations, Novak called big business “television’s favorite villain” (p. 7). Based on feedback heard on some U.S. Christian college campuses, one wonders whether the same could be said of business majors. That is, are they Christian higher education’s “favorite villain?” Faculty at some institutions report facing attitudes such as business, as a major, feeds student greed and careers in business have little Kingdom value.

However, in the United States, we continue to award more business undergraduate degrees than any other major (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). This is, in some way, related to recent trends of parents pushing their students to gain degrees that have immediate marketplace value to justify the investment in tuition. There is marketplace demand for the major, but do students in the business major have a Kingdom perspective for their degrees?

Even though Christian colleges and universities focus on a higher mission than marketplace viability, critics

contend that rather than encourage Christian virtues, business encourages vices such as materialism and greed. Anecdotal evidence suggests that non-business faculty at Christian institutions argue that business as a discipline offers no spiritual worth aside from the fact that business as a career can provide a venue for evangelism or to generate income in order to support the ministry of the Church.

In light of such criticisms, business faculty at Christian institutions lament whether business undergraduates hear of and understand the Kingdom-value of marketplace vocations. Furthermore, business faculty express concern that the messages students receive elsewhere on the campuses of Christian colleges and universities are often antithetical to the view of the marketplace as ministry. As faculty face the challenges of assessing faith integration among business students in Christian higher education institutions, what messages are the students integrating?

The purpose of this paper is to explore results of a survey designed to investigate the messages undergraduate business students are internalizing related to the Kingdom value of a career in business. In addition, another focus of the survey is on students’ perception of the impact of their

career field choice on their faith and vice versa. Continued use of this survey could provide Christian colleges and universities business program with unique insights to assist in assessment of their faith integration efforts. In the remainder of the paper, we provide a conceptual framework for faith integration, the specific research questions addressed in the study, a review of the prior literature, with sections describing the methodology of the survey design, results, and limitations of the research. We close the paper with a discussion of the key implications revealed by the results with some practical suggestions

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

When addressing the question of what message(s) students are integrating, one of the challenges researchers face is identifying “what is faith integration within the field of business?” Different authors have struggled with the definition of what faith integration means. Smith (2005) proposed the following definition for faith integration:

The scholarly pursuit to interrelate chosen elements in the business literature/world to Truth given to us by God, primarily in the Bible, but also in life and in church practice and history (p. 155).

Another challenge professors of business at Christian higher educational institutions face when measuring faith integration is clarifying the role of business within Christianity. Many individuals hold to the pre-Reformation view of work proposed by Aquinas that work exists solely to provide for one’s family and to support the Church. In this view, careers in business are of lesser spiritual value than careers in vocational ministry, such as pastor or missionary. While one of the key components of the Reformation was the recognition that all legitimate work was equally spiritual and honors God, post-Reformational thinking has drifted from this perspective. Instead, we tend to “spiritualize” work by slotting it to one of the following categories starting with the letter “E”: 1) Ethics, which focuses on the ethical impact Christians can have on an organization, 2) Evangelism, where adherents work in secular jobs in order to evangelize co-workers, 3) Experience, in which the challenging experiences in the workforce are seen as means to help believers grow in their faith, and 4) Enrichment, wherein individuals view work as a venue to focus on personal transformation and spiritual growth through the exercise of disciplines such as prayer and meditation on the job (Miller, 2007).

Underlying the work of Miller is the Faith and Work movement, which states that work in business, like all legitimate work, is honoring to God and has spiritual value in

and of itself. This perspective, which Miller estimates began about 1985, holds that work is a place where we integrate all aspects of God’s calling in our lives. Further, it recognizes the value of work in business in particular. This perspective outlines the positive role businesspeople had in the Bible and continues to expand on the positive role business has today, such as creating jobs and causing economic growth to support human flourishing.

Research Questions

Based on the conceptual framework of faith integration within the business education field, the following research questions were developed:

- Research Question 1: What personal and spiritual goals do Christian college and university business undergraduates see their major as fulfilling?
- Research Question 2: How do Christian college and university business students view the spiritual value of work in business?
- Research Question 3: Do Christian college and university business students see the campus experience as supportive of the business major?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The perception that business majors tend to be non-altruistic in their motives is not unique to Christian academia. In his literature review of business undergraduates’ motives for studying the discipline, Fatoki (2015) summarizes that “many people view business students to be mostly ‘me-oriented’ and less ‘other oriented’ especially when compared to students pursuing non-business degrees” (p. 6634). He indicates that business majors score higher than other majors on the love of money index, as developed by Tang and Chiu (2003). Tang (2016) reports that even lectures on ethics did not decrease economics majors’ love of money. Another study shows that the love of money increases when subjects were rated high on social exchange theory, i.e. “I’ll help you if you help me;” however, it does decrease when respondents demonstrate altruistic helping behaviors (Tang et al., 2008).

For Christian educators, one would hope to find a moderating effect of a student’s faith on the love of money. This is demonstrated somewhat in a comparison of students from U.S. Jesuit and State universities (Burns & Gupta, 2014). However, while students from the Jesuit universities did score lower on their love of money, they also showed higher materialistic envy.

Studies have found that business majors may be more self-focused than students from other majors. For example, in a comparison of social science, business, and technology majors at three different institutions, Myyry (2008) notes that while all majors had equal regard for concepts related to social justice, business majors were more likely to embrace goals related to individualistic values. They were less likely to resonate with values associated with spiritualism and universalism. Additionally, these majors negatively viewed self-enhancement goals such as pursuing maturity, self-esteem, and integrity.

Why Undergraduates Study Business

Researchers have identified that undergraduates tend to choose their major in business for a number of reasons. In one of the earliest published studies of why students choose to major in business, Hafer and Schank (1982) identify the top three reasons students gave for studying business were personal interest in the topic of business, job security provided by business, and financial rewards. The reasons were moderated by two factors, 1) school related, such as instructors and core courses, and 2) reference groups including parents, siblings, and peers.

Later studies show the choice to major in business is impacted by personal characteristics. Malgwi et al. (2005) note a gender difference with women being more motivated by interest in the topic whereas men are motivated more by compensation, job opportunities, and career advancement. Similarly, Leppel et al. (2001) note that students' desire for financial success increases the chance of choosing business as a major.

Researchers also report that different student characteristics impact their choice of emphases within business. Those with strong quantitative skills tend toward Accounting and Finance, while others are more likely to choose emphases in Management, Marketing, and Management Information Systems (Pritchard et al., 2004). Accounting majors are further motivated by perceptions of self-efficacy and self-interests, whereas others are more motivated by extrinsic career prospects (Owusu et al., 2019). Entrepreneurship majors, alternatively, while also having strong perceptions of self-efficacy, are more likely to be outgoing, action oriented, and creative improvisors (Hmieleski & Corbett, 2006).

Interestingly, little research has been conducted on students' perceived outcomes from their majors, i.e. what are their career and life expectations after graduating with a chosen major? Likewise, the authors to this study were unable to locate any empirical studies among Christian university business students as to how they perceive their faith impacting their careers. Since faith integration is an

important objective of any major at a Christian academic institution, this is disappointing.

METHODOLOGY

In order to understand what motivates Christian undergraduates to study business as a major and to assess their understanding of the role of business in Christianity, undergraduate business majors at twelve Christian colleges and universities in North America (10 U.S. and 2 Canada) took a self-administered online survey. The schools represented seven different states and two provinces. Undergraduate enrollments at these schools ranged from 450 to 8,100 students, with a mean enrollment of 1,980 and a median of 1,318. Participating schools were recruited during a meeting of the Christian Business Faculty Association (CBFA) and via cold calls to the head of business departments at member schools of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). The 185 schools in the CCCU share a common doctrinal statement which emphasizes biblical centrality. To enlist schools' participation, the authors of the study provided each school with summary statistics from the survey for their particular institution for use in its program assessment efforts. Program administrators sent out recruitment emails to all currently enrolled students. In exchange for their participation in the survey, students were offered the chance to be included in an institution-specific \$100 gift-card drawing.

The 62-question on-line survey covered students' attitudes about their choice of major and their perception of its congruence with biblical principles on business. The forty survey questions on faith and work were based on the content of the book, *Every Good Endeavor* (Keller & Alsdorf, 2014). These were pretested by 640 members of the first author's home church: a large mega-church in the Chicago area. The work was overseen by a committee containing the first author and was an internal effort as part of the church's faith and work initiative where the committee studied the Keller and Alsdorf book. Other questions to this survey were developed by this study's authors based upon their literature review. The entire survey instrument was pretested by a panel of 12 business faculty members. With the exception of demographic data, most of the survey's questions used a five-point Likert scale with 5=agree, 4=somewhat agree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, and 1=disagree. The average completion time for the survey was under nine minutes.

RESULTS

Respondents under the age of 18 and those who appeared to misuse the survey instrument by practices such as straight-lining were disqualified. The overall response rate was 26%, with 705 qualified respondents. Of these, 91% indicated they were traditional undergraduates, not online or blended delivery students. By academic years 19% were freshmen, 16% sophomores, 24% juniors, and 27% seniors. The balance either classified themselves as “other” or did not report. In addition, 7% of respondents indicated they were international students, 14% indicated they were transfer students, and 45% indicated female. Interestingly, with the exception of international students, these figures are comparable to national trends with 15% of business undergraduates being international students (Stewart-Rozema & Pratts, 2023), 13% transfer students (NSC Blog, 2024) and 41% female (AACSB, 2021)

Most students were from the traditional business emphases of marketing, accounting, finance, and management. Twenty eight percent did not indicate an emphasis stating only “Business Administration” as their major. Twenty percent indicated they were emphasizing in marketing or related disciplines such as public relations, fourteen percent each in accounting and finance, and eight percent in management and related emphases. Others were from a variety of specialized emphases such as ministry management, sport management, international business, real estate, and agri-business.

Research Question 1: What personal and spiritual goals do Christian college and university business undergraduates see their major as fulfilling?

Table 1, which shows a rank order of the mean and standard deviation results of subjects’ response to the question “I believe my major will allow me to have a career where I can...,” indicates that participants at Christian colleges and universities see their majors as a venue to pursue both their interpersonal and spiritual goals. Except for the overarching goals of “Be successful” and “Reach My Personal Goals,” students showed strongest agreement to goals that would have a spiritual impact. These included making decisions that have a positive influence on people, making decisions that will have a positive impact for God, serving God, and helping other people be better off. Counter to the more “worldly” goals identified by authors in the literature review, students at these institutions were less likely to embrace more materialistic goals such as making a lot of money, having nice things, impressing people, and having power.

Additionally, as shown in Table 2, which lists the ranked means and standard deviations of subjects’ responses to questions on the future value of their work, respondents largely agreed with the statements relative to the spiritual value, rather than commercial value, of their future jobs. Students supported the idea that their business career will please God, be a blessing to others, and that they would personally be more joyful because of their faith. Students’ disagreement with the statements that it is important to keep faith separate from your work and that neither their salary nor advancement would be hindered because of their faith, indicate they believe their faith will not adversely impact their careers. Attitudes were mixed on whether students saw their work as ministry and on whether they would need to make decisions at work that would conflict with their faith.

To assess whether attitudes differ by class, the authors compared the scores of seniors to freshmen on all these factors. They found no statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the two groups on the items in Tables 1 and 2.

Research Questions 2: How do Christian college and university business students view the spiritual value of work in business?

While holding to traditional views of faith and work, students tend to recognize the spiritual value of work in business in particular. As shown in Table 3, which is a rank order of the questions on the role of faith and work derived from the text *Every Good Endeavor* (Keller & Alsdorf, 2014), student respondents generally agreed with traditional views of faith and work, showing agreement to the concepts that work is a venue to provide for one’s family, provides income to donate to the church, and allows one to demonstrate one’s faith by both performing well at work and evangelizing. While not rejecting these traditional views, they also agreed with statements consistent with the faith in work movement including agreement to the statements that ethical business practices help people and improve human flourishing. They believe that the Bible supports the careers in business, that work allows one to obey God, and that work in business is no more selfish than other type of work. There was less support for concepts of economic flourishing through disagreement with the statement that “businesses can do more to help the poor than aid programs can.”

To a lesser extent, students supported ideas counter to the traditional notion that some jobs have more spiritual value than others. Respondents generally agreed that jobs in vocational ministry are equally important as other types of jobs and that helping professions such as nursing or teaching do not do more to serve God than jobs in business.

To assess the impact of faith integration efforts at the schools, the authors examined the differences in the scores of freshmen and seniors, removing any respondents who identified as transfer students. Only three items showed significant differences between the two groups' scores. Freshmen were more likely to believe that work in business is more unethical than other types of work and that it hurts society when businesspeople focus on making a profit. Seniors were more likely to agree that work in business can help improve human flourishing. For all other items measured, including career expectations and attitudes toward faith and work, there were no statistically significant differences between the scores of the two groups.

Research Questions 3: Do Christian college and university business students see the campus experience as supportive of the business major?

Table 4 summarizes the mean and standard deviation of student perceptions of the campus experience relative to being a business major. Overall, students embraced the ideas that Christianity was supported by professors in their major as well as the topics taught in their major courses. Contrary to stereotypes, students also felt that their general education professors supported their major in business, although they did feel their general education courses offered lower levels of spiritual content than their major courses. There was wide variation of opinion whether other areas on campus were supportive of the business major as evidenced by mean scores about 3.0 reporting "neither agree nor disagree" and wide standard deviations for the following items: "I feel people on this campus put more value in careers in vocational ministry than in business," "I feel others on campus believe business people are greedy and/or unethical," "I feel students from other majors on campus think I am not as spiritual because of my major," and "Chapel of other spiritual experiences on campus are not supportive of jobs in business."

When comparing freshmen to seniors, seniors were statistically more negative about the Christian university experience as being supportive of their major (Table 5). While seniors were more likely to appreciate the value of their business professors, they were more negative about the overall campus experience relative to their careers in business. Seniors were significantly more likely to indicate that chapel and other spiritual activities on campus were not supportive of business, that others on campus felt businesspeople were greedy/unethical, and that overall, the campus community valued jobs in vocational ministry over jobs in business. Seniors also indicated that they believed others on campus felt they were less spiritual because of their major.

DISCUSSION

While past research has shown that undergraduates majoring in business are motivated by extrinsic factors such as the potential for success and money, this study seems to indicate that undergraduate business majors at Christian colleges and universities are more motivated by Kingdom values. Overall, they do not see a conflict between their chosen careers in business and Christianity. While students showed support for the ideas that their career would allow them to reach traditional goals, such as to be successful, to be respected, to make a difference, and to reach their personal goals; they also equally supported ideas that their careers will help them reach spiritual goals, such as to serve God, to make decisions that have a positive impact for God, and to help other people be better off. They did show moderate but mixed support toward the appeal of the trappings of successful careers. Attitudes varied the most widely on the ideas that their jobs would allow them to make a lot of money, have nice things, impress people, and have power.

Rather than seeing faith as a handicap, respondents largely viewed their faith as having a positive impact on their future careers. They felt that their work would be a blessing and please God, allowing them to be more joyful at work. They disagreed with ideas that their faith will negatively impact their career potential. Respondents indicated that they believe that neither their salary nor advancement potential will be hindered because of their faith. In addition, most indicated that they should bring their faith with them into the workplace, i.e. not keep their faith separate from their work. This supports the results of Lynn et al. (2010) showing people do not compartmentalize their faith and work. This can be seen as a positive from a faculty perspective. While it is impossible to state a cause-and-effect relationship, it does appear that classroom faith integration efforts are noticed and internalized. Students largely did not support the more holistic view espoused by the Faith and Work movement, but instead most students hold to the more traditional values of Christians' participation in the marketplace coined by Miller (2007)—ethics, evangelism, experience, and enrichment. There was directional support of the concepts related to work allowing one to donate to the church, perform well on the job to demonstrate one's faith, and share their faith with nonbelievers. Feelings about whether all legitimate work was equally spiritual varied. There was a slight tendency for respondents to see spiritual jobs and helping professions as providing more Kingdom value than jobs in business.

The lack of a difference in attitudes between freshmen and seniors about the role of work and the value of careers

in business is of concern. It may be that our faith integration efforts, as a faculty, while having an impact, are having less impact than hoped, given we are not seeing a marked difference in attitudes between the grade levels. It is also disheartening to note that as students' progress in their college career at a Christian institution, they seem to view the institution as less supportive of business as a major. The rest of the campus experience, including chapel and general opinions on campus, are seen as less supportive of business. This is an opening for business programs to offer events or other opportunities to help bridge this perceived viewpoint across the campus. However, it is encouraging to note that this attitude did not carry over into the classroom experience. Students see their professors in both their general education classes and their major as equally supportive of their major and their faith.

LIMITATIONS

As with all survey research, this study shares certain challenges. There is a self-selection bias among the subjects. Since students had already selected business as a major and to study at a Christian college, subjects were already "pro-business" from a Kingdom perspective. The selectivity bias probably led to a more positive view of faith and work.

The sample in this study was not random. While a census of business students was approached within each participating institution, the institutions themselves were selected based on the willingness of each school's business faculty to work with the researchers. Most of these faculty are members of the Christian Business Faculty Association (CBFA), which supports the idea that work in business is valued by God. Since these faculty probably address this view in their faith-integration efforts in the classroom, students may be more aware of the ideas investigated in this study than students studying with professors who are not CBFA members.

Furthermore, the institutions participating were members of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), a group of over 185 institutions. All institutional members of the CCCU share a common doctrinal statement. It is probable that students' understanding of their personal faith is impacted by this doctrinal foundation and therefore the attitudes reflected are influenced by this.

As with all survey research, respondents may not have interpreted questions in the same way as the authors intended and reported attitudes may not reflect students' actual feelings. While all efforts were made to protect student confidentiality, students may have biased their answers toward what they felt researchers wanted to hear versus

what they really felt. The fact that the invitation to take the survey came from within the students' institutions and not from an outside research firm may have contributed to this perception. It is also because of the fact that the authors did not have access to student emails, so they were not able to calculate a non-response bias.

IMPLICATIONS

This study seems to offer promise for Christian business educators as they try to assess faith integration among their students. Unlike previous studies where researchers only looked at students' motivations for choosing to major in business, this study focused on students' career expectations after graduation given their major in business. Business programs can use their results in promotional materials to encourage enrollment in a program that promotes students' career and faith objectives. In addition, whereas previous studies focused on assessing traditional values of working in business, such as money and power, this study focused on students' perceptions of the spiritual value of work.

Future research is recommended in several areas. Longitudinal studies are recommended to assess the impact of faith integration curricula over time. Additionally, the study should be expanded to include more schools to see if results remain consistent. Such studies are recommended in order to identify the impact of institution-specific faith integration curricula on student attitudes toward work and their faith. Important to this endeavor is each student's understanding of the biblical narrative about work and the contribution that work in business can make to the Kingdom. This perspective seems particularly important to disseminate to the larger Christian campus community in general so business majors can feel fully supported. To facilitate this result, deans of the business programs could engage in more cross-campus activities, speaker series, and similar events to demonstrate the Kingdom value of business done from a Biblical perspective. All students, no matter the vocation pursued, should feel appreciated for their contribution to Kingdom calling.

Table 1: Student Views of Career Goals Rank Ordered by Mean

Agreement with the statement, “I believe my major will allow me to have a career where I can...”	M	SD
Be successful	4.7	0.5
Make decisions that have a positive impact on people	4.7	0.6
Reach my personal goals	4.7	0.6
Be respected	4.6	0.6
Serve God	4.6	0.8
Make a difference	4.6	0.7
Help other people be better off	4.6	0.7
Make decisions that have a positive impact for God	4.5	0.8
Influence people	4.5	0.8
Help the economy	4.4	0.8
Reach my spiritual goals	4.3	0.9
Donate a lot of money to good causes	4.3	0.8
Serve the poor	4.2	0.9
Make a lot of money	4.1	0.9
Have nice things	4.1	0.9
Impress people	3.7	1.1
Have power	3.4	1.1

Table 2: Student Views of Personal Faith and Their Future Ordered by Mean

Survey Item	M	SD
I think my work will please God	4.4	0.8
I feel my work will be a blessing to others	4.3	0.8
I think I will be more joyful at work because of my faith	4.3	1.0
I think my work will be a part of my ministry	3.7	1.3
I think I may have to make decisions at work that conflict with my faith	2.8	1.4
I feel my impact for God could be stronger if I did not have to work for a living	2.2	1.3
I think it is important to keep your faith separate from your work	1.9	1.2
I feel like my salary will be negatively impacted because of my faith	1.9	1.1
I feel my advancement at work will be hindered because of my faith	1.8	1.1

Table 3: Attitudes on Faith and Work Rank Ordered by Mean

Survey Item	M	SD
Work allows you to provide for your family	4.8	0.5
Ethical business practices generally help people	4.4	0.8
Work in business can help improve human flourishing	4.4	0.8
The Bible supports the idea of careers in business	4.3	1.0
Work allows you to demonstrate your faith by performing well on the job	4.3	1.0
Work allows you to obey God	4.3	1.1
Work allows you to make money to donate to the church	4.1	1.1
Work allows you to meet nonbelievers and share your faith	4.0	1.2
Religious jobs, such as pastor or missionary, are more important to God than other types of jobs. ¹	4.0	1.2
Work in business is more selfish than other types of work. ¹	3.9	1.3
Jobs focused on helping people, such as nursing or teaching, do more to serve God than jobs in business. ¹	3.8	1.3
Some jobs are more spiritual than others	3.7	1.3
Businesses can do more to help the poor than aid programs can	3.5	1.1
Work in business is more unethical than other types of work ¹	3.3	1.3

¹ Reverse coded.

Table 4: Perceived Institutional Support for Business Major Rank Ordered by Mean

Survey Item	M	SD
The professors in my major help me understand how Christianity relates to my field of study	4.5	.8
The professors in my general education courses are supportive of business as a major	4.3	.9
The courses in my major support ideas that are consistent with Christianity	4.3	1.0
My general education courses help me appreciate how Christianity relates to life	3.8	1.2
I feel people on this campus put more value in careers in vocational ministry than in business	3.0	1.3
I feel others on campus believe businesspeople are greedy and/or unethical	2.7	1.3
I feel students from other majors on campus think I am not as spiritual because of my major	2.3	1.3
Chapel or other spiritual experiences on campus are not supportive of jobs in business	2.3	1.2

Table 5: Campus Experience T-Test Freshman versus Seniors

	Freshmen n=124		Seniors n=181	
Survey Item	M	SD	M	SD
Chapel or other spiritual experiences on campus are not supportive of jobs in business	2.1	1.3	2.5	1.2
I feel others on campus believe businesspeople are greedy and/or unethical	2.5	1.4	2.9	1.3
I feel people on this campus put more value in careers in vocational ministry than in business	2.8	1.3	3.3	1.3
Most of my friends on campus are business majors	2.6	1.3	3.4	1.4
My general education courses help me appreciate how Christianity relates to life	3.9	1.2	3.8	1.2
I feel students from other majors on campus think I am not as spiritual because of my major	2.1	1.3	2.7	1.4
The courses in my major support ideas that are consistent with Christianity	4.2	1.1	4.3	1.1
The professors in my general education courses are supportive of business as a major	4.3	1.0	4.3	0.9
The professors in my major help me understand how Christianity relates to my field of study	4.3	1.0	4.6	0.7

Bold indicates significant difference between groups, p<.05

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