

## Focus on God for students at Christian Colleges

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Having a “focus” in your life means that something has become central to who you are and what you do. A focus on God in your spiritual life means God is central to who you are and what you do spiritually. This report provides insight into the degree to which students at Christian colleges have a focus on God, which demographics and other spiritual aspects of their lives affect their focus on God, and a presentation of where a college would want to concentrate their efforts if they wished to increase students’ focus on God.

**Data Collection**

In the spring of 2013, students at 13 Christian universities from across the United States were invited to complete a half-hour on-line survey that asked about their spiritual background, spiritual lifestyles, scripture engagement, love of and relation to God, love of others, and their Christian identity.

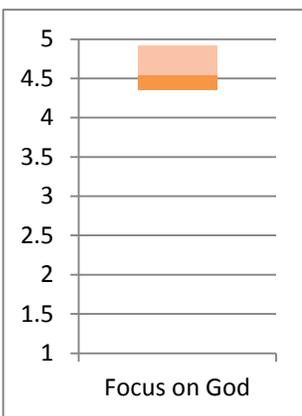
4,210 traditional-age full-time students participated. Responses to the survey were weighted for proportional representativity of gender and year in school.

### Students’ Focus on God

**The students indicated a very high average focus on God with a value of 4.5 on the 5 point scale. They tend to have little variation in their focus on God—God plays a central role in these students’ spiritual lives.**

In the process of taking the half-hour Christian Life Survey, the students at 13 Christian colleges from across the USA were asked a variety of questions about what they believe and how they live. Included in that larger set of questions were a set of questions on the extent to which God is a focus point in their spiritual life. The questions we used to see if the students have a focus on God asked, in several different ways, about their beliefs and desires relative to God. They are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus on God questions participants were asked to strongly disagree (1), disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, or strongly agree (5) with :	
What God says is what is true, right, and good.	
I want to obey God	
I believe the God of the Bible is the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit	
I believe in Jesus	
I want God to be pleased with me	
I believe God is actively involved in my life	
I have a personal relationship with Jesus	
I am drawn towards Jesus (I want to be with Him)	
I know my mission in life is to participate in the Kingdom of God.	
I believe that everything continues to exist only because of God	
I believe that God rewards those who follow him.	
Index reliability coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha): 0.93	
The analytical procedures used for the creation of the index are explained in the <i>How the indexes were constructed</i> summary brief available at <a href="http://tucse.taylor.edu/research">http://tucse.taylor.edu/research</a>	



Focus on God	
75th percentile	4.9091
mean	4.5395
25th percentile	4.3636

Figure 1: Students’ Focus on God

## The Predictors of Students' Focus on God

While there was variation in students' focus on God, it was not predicted (and so not caused) by gender, year in school, race, or family income. Students with different political views did have a very small difference in their focus on God.

The average values for students' focus on God were nearly identical for men and women (4.5 and 4.6 respectively on the 1 to 5 scale), first year, sophomore, junior, and senior students, and students of different races and from different family incomes.

### Year in school

It's particularly interesting that year in school had no predictive utility. First year students' average value was 4.6, while the sophomores, juniors, and seniors all had an average value of 4.5. Considering the great importance that is placed on spiritual development at most Christian colleges, we might expect that students' focus on God would increase during their time at such colleges. There are many possible explanations for this pattern. Three will be discussed here.

First, students self-selected into these Christian colleges and self-selected to participate in the survey. It's reasonable to assume

that people choosing to go to a Christian college have a spiritual life with a high focus on the Christ—that would be why they call themselves Christians. Also, the Christian Life Survey was presented to the students as a way to take a look at their own spiritual life. For any students at these colleges who are not Christians or who are not interested in spiritual life, they probably would not participate. This two stage self-selection process, then, would greatly increase the chances that only students with a high focus on God would have been in the sample.

A second plausible reason that there is no difference in the first year and fourth year students is statistical. Using averages as rough indicators of trends in different groups' responses is helpful because it is succinct—one simple straightforward number. But means are so succinct that they can hide important differences. The standardized variation in responses is relatively low for both first year students and seniors (the standard deviation is .53 for the first year students and .59 for the seniors) but the variation in seniors' answers is greater than the variation in the first year students' answers. This suggests that seniors—who have a slightly greater variation in their focus on God—have diverged in both directions from the first year students. There is more spread in the number of students who have a lower focus on God and who have a higher focus on God. If we assume that many students who choose to go to a Christian college arrive there with a faith that is mostly a reflection of the faith of the families and faith communities they are coming from—a relatively plausible assumption for 18-year-olds and these data are only for traditional age college students—it is reasonable to assume that being at college could expose the students to some variation in faith

	mean	N	S	P	$\eta^2$
Male	4.4965	1893	0.60906	.000	.005
Female	4.5756	2252	0.52077		
First year	4.5893	981	0.53028	.002	.004
Sophomore	4.5475	964	0.53628		
Junior	4.5351	989	0.58522		
Senior	4.4964	1212	0.59127		
White	4.5436	3243	0.55747	.008	.004
Black	4.7322	86	0.39598		
Asian	4.4985	208	0.51286		
Hispanic	4.5747	131	0.49408		
Other	4.5122	66	0.53600		
Multiple	4.4839	383	0.68655		
Less than 25k	4.5923	496	0.53259	.042	.002
25k to 50k	4.5358	981	0.59568		
50k to 75 k	4.5553	1043	0.52512		
75k to 100k	4.5279	790	0.58554		
Greater than 100k	4.4965	759	0.57669		
Liberal	4.1805	776	0.76759	.000	.114
Conservative	4.6820	2304	0.37711		
Independent	4.5209	389	0.54001		
Other	4.4965	182	0.67854		
None	4.4619	480	0.62300		

perspectives as well as placing them in a context where they do not have a primary group of long standing (like their family) to receive their faith from. In short, they will wrestle with their faith in ways they have not before. Those of us who administer the Christian Life Survey have always indicated that it does not measure whether a person is a better or worse Christian. A person can show a low focus on God (or a low value on one of the other index measures) precisely because they are, perhaps even for the first time in their life, wrestling with their faith—and that they are exactly where they need to be as a Christian. Thus, a low or high value on an index measure like a person's focus on God can go up or down as an indication of changes in their spiritual life that are positive or negative. If, then the average eighteen-year-old comes to college and wrestles with her or his faith in new ways, it is quite plausible that some will have an increased focus on God while others will have a decreased focus on God as they move through the maturation process of being a Christian. The greater variation of seniors compared to first year students could be an indication that this is what has happened with this sample of Christian college students. In fact, the variation in focus on God increases every year in school (first year standard deviation = .53; sophomores = .54; juniors = .58; seniors = .59) while their average (mean) values stay the same. This suggests that the Christian college experience is, in fact creating an environment where the students are experiencing changes in their spiritual lives (some increasing and some decreasing in their focus on God, for example). They are all maintaining a high average focus on God while each is wrestling with their faith in their own way. It is worth noting that the vast majority of seniors have a notably high focus on God—even those who have lower values relative to the other seniors—so there is no serious depreciation in students' focus on God during their college years at Christian colleges.

A third possible explanation for the students from different years having the same average focus on God is that Christian colleges simply have little effect on their students' spiritual lives beyond maintaining an already devout spirituality. Since the average focus on God for first year students at Christian colleges is so high, there simply is nowhere higher to take them!

### Political view

The one predictor variable that did have some utility for predicting students' focus on God (and so could be a possible cause of variation in people's focus on God) is their political view. While all the predictor variables had statistically significant relationships with the students' focus on God, it was just due to such a large number of cases—only one of them (political view) actually helped predict students' focus on God. Political view only has a small predictive utility (the strength of effect is only an Eta squared of .114) but it does have a predictive utility.

In the survey, students could choose five possible political orientations: liberal, conservative, independent, other, and no political orientation. Of the 4,131 students who answered the political view question, most were politically conservative but notable percentages were liberal or chose a different answer (see Table 3).

There are two important patterns to note in Table 3. First, even though all the groups have a high average focus on God, conservatives have a higher average focus on God than the other groups (the mean value is 4.7) while Liberals have a lower average focus on God than the other groups (4.2). Second. There is very little variation in the focus on God for the conservatives (the standard deviation is .38) while there is a more variation in the focus on God for liberals (.77). Conservatives have a slightly higher average focus on God and are more uniform in their focus on God. Liberals have a high average focus on God but it is lower than the average focus on God for students with other political views and they (political liberals) vary more widely in their focus on God.

**Table 3: Focus on God by Political View**

	Mean	N	Percent	Standard deviation
<b>Liberal</b>	4.1805	776	19	0.76759
<b>Conservative</b>	4.6820	2304	56	0.37711
<b>Independent</b>	4.5209	389	9	0.54001
<b>Other</b>	4.4965	182	4	0.67854
<b>None</b>	4.4619	480	12	0.62300

While we can only speculate about why political view helps predict focus on God—the measures themselves do not implicitly make it clear—it seems probably that stances on political issues are not the cause of a greater or lesser focus on God. It is more likely that political view is helping us identify particular subcultures with different views about the nature of authority and tradition which affects students' focus on God.

### Index Correlations with Focus on God

The Christian Life Survey results create 16 indexes. Three measure the degree to which a person is spiritually focused on God, others, and/or the Bible; four additional indexes measure specific spiritual orientations; and nine indexes measure a person’s scripture engagement through context and kind of engagement. The questions used in each index as well as a discussion of how they were created and their reliability can be found at the Taylor University Center for Scripture Engagement website (<http://tucse.taylor.edu/research>). All of the indexes stand alone—which is to say, every index has its own questions and the questions were assigned to each index using a technique that stops the indexes from just being different versions of one index.

The indexes, though, can correlate: while they measure different things, how people answer on one index can be related to how they answer the questions for other indexes. Table 4 provides the correlation coefficients between students’ focus on God and their values on the other indexes.

There are many notable correlations in Table 4 but two indexes stand out as having particularly strong relations with students’ focus on God: their focus on the Bible ( $r = .60$ ) and their orientation toward spiritual connectedness ( $r = .52$ ). Considering that a person’s focus on God could reasonably be expected to correlate with many or all of the other aspects of their spiritual life, it’s interesting that only two indexes have particularly strong correlations with focus on God.

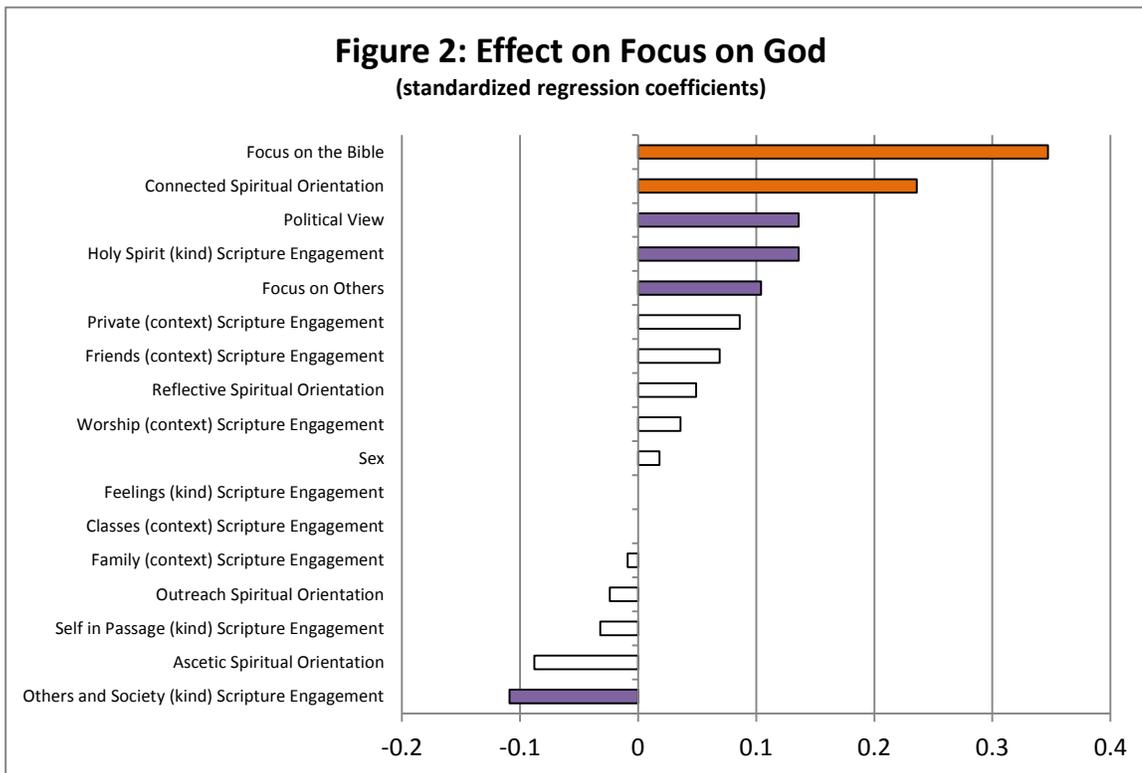
	Correlation with the Focus On God Index	$r^2$
Focus on Others	.350**	.122
Focus on the Bible	.600**	.360
Connected Spiritual Orientation	.518**	.268
Outreach Spiritual Orientation	.326**	.106
Ascetic Spiritual Orientation	.251**	.063
Reflective Spiritual Orientation	.395**	.156
Scripture Engagement Context: With Friends	.389**	.151
Scripture Engagement Context: Class	.275**	.076
Scripture Engagement Context: Family	.297**	.088
Scripture Engagement Context: Private	.381**	.145
Scripture Engagement Context: Worship	.340**	.116
Scripture Engagement Kind: Feelings	.232**	.054
Scripture Engagement Kind: In Passage	.270**	.073
Scripture Engagement Kind: Others and Society	.187**	.035
Scripture Engagement Kind: Holy Spirit	.401**	.161

\*\*statistically significant

A strong correlation with an orientation toward connectedness is perhaps not a surprise since the connectedness index measures the degree to which a person is plugged into their Christianity through worship, fellowship, and prayer. People who are spiritually connected are connected to others and to God. The focus on the Bible index, on the other hand, incorporates questions about the Bible’s authority, thinking about relevant Bible passages throughout the day, and talking about Bible passages with their friends. The focus on the Bible index does not include any questions that reference God directly or indirectly. None the less, a focus on the Bible is clearly correlated with a focus on God.

## Bang for the Buck: Most Important Predictors of Students' Focus on God

For readers who work in Christian colleges or churches, the real question is where to put your efforts if you are wanting to increase people's focus on God. Just what programs should you develop if you want people to have God at the center of their beliefs and understandings of spiritual reality? While the results that have been summarized to this point provide some suggestions of answers for those questions, analytically we need to go one step further to be confident in our answers—we need to consider all of the indexes and variables in one mathematical equation and see which ones really matter the most even when the other factors are considered at the same time. Figure 2 provides a listing of the different predictors of a person's focus on God in order from most likely (at the top) to least likely (at the bottom) to promote a focus on God. (The full hierarchical regression results are provided further below for those who would like to see the full analysis.)



As shown in Figure Two, there are two aspects of students' spiritual lives that have weak but notable effects on their focus on God (after statistical controls): their focus on the Bible and their spiritual orientation toward connectedness. Four additional aspects of students' spiritual lives that have very small effects are their political orientation, their propensity to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit when interacting with the Bible, their focus on others, and—in a negative effect (which means it slightly decreases students' focus on God)—a propensity to interact with scripture in a way that sees its relevance for others and society.

**If a college or church wanted to use programmatic efforts to increase people's focus on God, then, they would be best off to put their efforts into getting those people to think about the Bible in their regular daily activities and interactions (a focus on the Bible) and get those people plugged into the faith through worship, fellowship, and prayer.**

With a careful look at these results we can see that this is a nuanced spiritual reality these students live in. While the Bible clearly plays a central role in increasing their focus on God, it does so in a very interesting way. There are nine indexes related to kinds and contexts of Bible interaction as well as an index that considers participants' focus on the Bible.

This provides a nuanced look into just when the Bible does or does not affect focus on God. Of those 10 indexes only three help predict a higher focus on God. The way to increase students' focus on God, then, is not to just read the Bible more (since many kinds and contexts of interaction do not increase a focus on God), but, instead to specifically develop a practice of drawing the Bible into everyday behaviors and interactions (as measured by the focus on the Bible index). While other kinds of interaction with the Bible can introduce other benefits to a Christian's life, efforts to increase a focus on God are best served by specifically increasing a focus on the Bible as shown through the items listed in Table 5.

**Table 5: items in the Focus on the Bible index:**

I believe the Bible has decisive authority over what I say and do.

As I go through the normal day I think of Bible passages relevant to what I am doing.

I talk about Bible passages with my friends.

There is another nuanced finding in these results. There are three indexes that look, in one way or another, at the students' consideration of others. A focus on others index which is characterized by thinking of others as much or more so than self; a spiritual orientation toward outreach which includes measures of students' evangelistic orientation as well as their orientation to help the needy; and their disposition to think of how Bible passages matter for others and society. One of these (focus on others) increases students' focus on God, one (a spiritual orientation toward outreach) has no effect, and one (scripture engagement that considers others and society) is associated with a very small decrease in students' focus on God. While all three of these indexes have quite small effects (or no effect) it is interesting to note that how we perceive the way our spiritual lives connect us to others is more complicated than it might at first appear.

Appendix:

**Table 6: hierarchical regression standardized coefficients with probabilities**  
(This table is not intuitively clear if you don't understand statistical techniques)

	B	P	B	P	B	P
Focus on Others	.102	.000	.082	.000	.104	.000
Connected Spiritual Orientation	.299	.000	.258	.000	.236	.000
Outreach Spiritual Orientation	-.028	.250	-.020	.401	-.024	.298
Ascetic Spiritual Orientation	-.086	.000	-.091	.000	-.088	.000
Reflective Spiritual Orientation	.069	.004	.035	.138	.049	.035
Focus on the Bible	.430	.000	.391	.000	.347	.000
Friends (context) Scripture Engagement			.068	.032	.069	.028
Classes (context) Scripture Engagement			.004	.869	.000	.989
Family (context) Scripture Engagement			-.003	.894	-.009	.725
Private (context) Scripture Engagement			.088	.000	.086	.001
Worship (context) Scripture Engagement			.042	.128	.036	.185
Feelings (kind) Scripture Engagement			-.003	.900	.000	.986
Self In Passage (kind) Scripture Engagement			-.028	.254	-.032	.184
Others and Society (kind) Scripture Engagement			-.130	.000	-.109	.000
Holy Spirit (kind) Scripture Engagement			.145	.000	.136	.000
Political View (liberal=0; conservative=1)					.136	.000
Sex (male=0; female=1)					.018	.310
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.443		.477		.492	