

Focus on Others 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 others in your spiritual life means connecting your faith to others 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 others, which demographics and other spiritual aspects of their lives affect their focus on others, and a presentation of where a college would want to concentrate their efforts if they wished to increase students’ focus on others. In essence, this is a look at what impacts a student’s likelihood to love others as themselves.

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 Others

The students indicated a high average focus on others with a value of 3.73 on the 5 point scale. They tend to have little variation in their focus on others—helping or evangelizing others 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 helping or evangelizing others is a focus point in their spiritual life. The questions we used to see if the students have a focus on others are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus on Others questions participants were asked to strongly disagree (1), disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, or strongly agree (5) with:	
I live in ways that help others as much as myself	
I go out of my way to discover the people in need around me that I normally wouldn’t see	
I have tremendous love for people I don’t know	
I go out of my way to serve	
I use what I own for others as much as for myself	
I go out of my way to get together with and understand people who are different than me	
I think about others’ well-being and want what is best for them	
I sacrifice my time, possessions and will to help others grow in their relationship with Christ	
I make an effort to learn what life really is like for people who are different than me	
I have tremendous love for people I know	
I rejoice with those who rejoice no matter how I personally feel	
Index reliability coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha): 0.84	
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 http://tucse.taylor.edu/research	

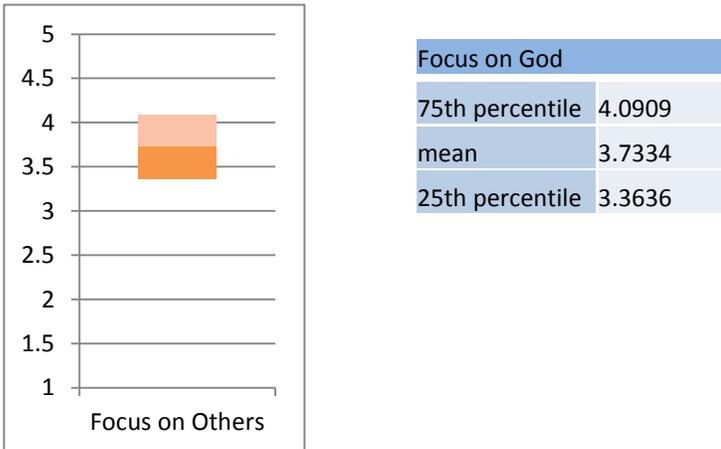


Figure 1: Students' Focus on Others

The Predictors of Students’ Focus on Others

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

Family income has the clearest predictive pattern for focus on others. The higher the students’ reported family income, the lower their average focus on others. The lowest income students had an average focus on others of 3.8 out of five, and the highest income students had an average value of 3.6 out of five. This is a very small effect but a clear direction of effect.

Gender also had some effect size for predicting focus on others with women having a slightly higher average focus on others.

Year in school

No other discreet predictor variable provided any help in predicting students’ focus on others.

It’s particularly interesting that year in school had no predictive utility. First year students’ average value was 3.74, sophomores’ average value was 3.75, and juniors’ average value was 3.74—virtually identical. Seniors had a lower average value 3.70 but that value is nearly identical to the other values. Considering the great importance that is placed on spiritual development at most Christian colleges, we might expect that students’ focus on others (love your neighbor as yourself) would increase during their time at such colleges. There are many possible explanations for this pattern. Two will be discussed here.

Table 2: Discreet Predictor Variables for Focus on Others

	mean	N	S	P	η^2
Male	3.6738	1889	0.56088	.000	.010
Female	3.7835	2252	0.51019		
First year	3.7415	986	0.54527	.196	.001
Sophomore	3.7501	953	0.51609		
Junior	3.7432	991	0.54609		
Senior	3.7058	1212	0.53722		
White	3.7217	3244	0.53365	.006	.004
Black	3.7493	84	0.48213		
Asian	3.6893	208	0.58584		
Hispanic	3.8376	130	0.52882		
Other	3.8649	69	0.47468		
Multiple	3.7887	379	0.54318		
Less than 25k	3.8389	491	0.55467	.000	.010
25k to 50k	3.7696	988	0.51372		
50k to 75 k	3.7351	1044	0.53904		
75k to 100k	3.6987	790	0.53814		
Greater than 100k	3.6578	753	0.53593		
Liberal	3.7298	778	0.51409	.007	.003
Conservative	3.7221	2304	0.54056		
Independent	3.7757	386	0.51490		
Other	3.8560	183	0.57136		
None	3.7073	478	0.54942		

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 already have a clear focus on others. 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 relatively high focus on others would have been in the sample.

Another explanation for the students from different years having the same average focus on others is that Christian colleges simply have little effect on their students’ spiritual lives beyond maintaining an already devout spirituality. Since the average focus on others for first year students at Christian colleges is already high, the colleges focus more on maintaining that focus rather than increasing it.

Index Correlations with Focus on Others

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 others and their values on the other indexes.

There are many notable correlations in Table 4 but one index stands out as having a particularly strong relation with students' focus on others: their spiritual orientation toward outreach ($r=.56$). Considering that a person's focus on others could reasonably be expected to correlate with many or all of the other aspects of their spiritual life, it's interesting that only this one index has a particularly strong correlation with focus on others.

A strong correlation between a focus on others and an orientation

toward outreach is, in a sense, not surprising. The focus on others index is comprised of questions looking at the degree to which a person thinks, feels, and acts with a focus on others. The outreach orientation index questions measure both a concern for evangelism and a concern for helping the needy. As a person has a spiritual orientation for outreach, it is plausible that they could develop a way of seeing reality that is focused on others (and vice versa).

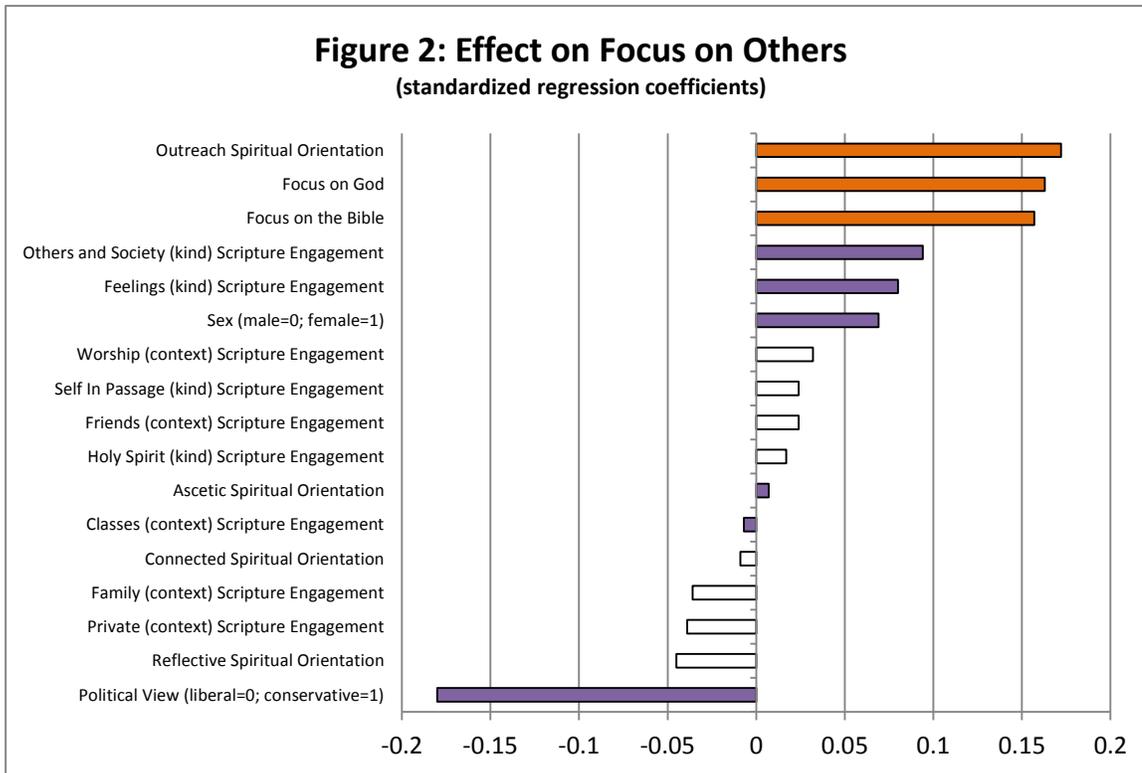
It is important to note, however, that the correlation between an orientation toward outreach and a focus on others is only moderately strong which suggests that people can and do have one of these spiritual traits (a focus on others or a spiritual orientation toward outreach) without the other. They are different aspects of spirituality though they tend to work together.

	Correlation with the Focus On Others Index	r^2
Focus on God	.350**	0.122
Focus on the Bible	.414**	0.171
Connected Spiritual Orientation	.301**	0.091
Outreach Spiritual Orientation	.561**	0.315
Ascetic Spiritual Orientation	.310**	0.096
Reflective Spiritual Orientation	.322**	0.104
Scripture Engagement Context: With Friends	.337**	0.114
Scripture Engagement Context: Class	.288**	0.083
Scripture Engagement Context: Family	.287**	0.082
Scripture Engagement Context: Private	.271**	0.073
Scripture Engagement Context: Worship	.314**	0.098
Scripture Engagement Kind: Feelings	.297**	0.088
Scripture Engagement Kind: In Passage	.334**	0.112
Scripture Engagement Kind: Others and Society	.377**	0.142
Scripture Engagement Kind: Holy Spirit	.383**	0.147

**statistically significant

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

For readers who work in Christian colleges or churches, the real question is where to put your efforts if you want to increase people's focus on others. Just what programs should you develop if you want people to have others at the center of their spiritual calling? 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 others 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 four aspects of students' spiritual lives that have weak but notable effects on their focus on others (after statistical controls). The biggest effect is negative: conservative political orientation decreases focus on others. Three effects are positive: an orientation to outreach, a focus on God, and a focus on the Bible increase a focus on others. Three additional aspects of students' spiritual lives that have small effects are scripture engagement that considers others and society, scripture engagement that connects the Bible to one's feelings, and being female instead of male.

If a college or church wanted to use programmatic efforts to increase people's focus on others, then, they would be best off to put their efforts into getting those people to develop an outreach spiritual orientation, make God a more central focus of their lives, think about the Bible in their regular daily activities and interactions (a focus on the Bible) and minimize their adoption of a politically conservative view of reality.

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 God	0.154	.000	.126	.000	.163	.000
Connected Spiritual Orientation	-0.033	.057	-.021	.212	-.009	.588
Outreach Spiritual Orientation	0.192	.000	.173	.000	.172	.000
Ascetic Spiritual Orientation	0.009	.242	.007	.389	.007	.366
Reflective Spiritual Orientation	-0.024	.029	-.040	.000	-.045	.000
Focus on the Bible	0.158	.000	.140	.000	.157	.000
Friends (context) Scripture Engagement			.021	.527	.024	.466
Classes (context) Scripture Engagement			-.013	.514	-.007	.706
Family (context) Scripture Engagement			-.045	.041	-.036	.094
Private (context) Scripture Engagement			-.036	.167	-.039	.128
Worship (context) Scripture Engagement			.025	.362	.032	.237
Feelings (kind) Scripture Engagement			.099	.000	.080	.000
Self In Passage (kind) Scripture Engagement			.022	.190	.024	.154
Others and Society (kind) Scripture Engagement			.105	.000	.094	.000
Holy Spirit (kind) Scripture Engagement			.019	.282	.017	.322
Political View (liberal=0; conservative=1)					-.180	.000
Sex (male=0; female=1)					.069	.000
Adjusted R ²	.363		.408		.423	