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FEATURE

**The Impact of Spirituality
on Academic Performance**

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***Abstract:** Many studies have suggested that spirituality has a positive effect on academic performance. This small study reviews literature on performance and spirituality, and compares students' attributions of the causes of their academic success or failure across a secular and religiously affiliated colleges, finding similar results: students who do well credit their spirituality as the major cause, and students who do poorly blame their lack of spirituality as being a major cause for their poor academic performance.*

One of the goals of Adventist Schools is to provide quality education that enables students to reach their maximum potential in spiritual maturity, academic excellence, social interaction, physical development, and emotional well-being (Dudley, 1992, pp. 3-4). Gordon defines education as a “tapestry of intricate colors formed by thousands of conversations in and out of the classroom—conversations sewn into lives of students and faculty as they share the journey of life” (1998, p. 18). He believes that faith conversations should be welcomed, encouraged and intertwined with conversations of academic quality inside the classroom.

“To know Jesus Christ is the greatest need of every child. Church schools have been established with the goal of providing an atmosphere conducive to this aim” (Smith, 1994, p. 5). This is what a Christian institution should pass on to each student (Hasel, 2006, 16). Ellen White suggests that “our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range” (1952, p. 13) when we focus on academia alone. True education is learning from the “Infinite One in whom are hid all treasures of wisdom” (Col 2:3). The purpose of educational ministry is to help students develop a Christlike character. Adventists have a rich literature on Education, but the heart of the message is basically the same: the focus is on the importance of involving Christ in the process of education.

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The Impact of Spirituality on Academic Performance

Prior studies suggest that spirituality has a positive impact upon students' academic performance amongst other things. Students who take the time to commit to spiritual activities enhance their ability to excel academically. The following are some of the studies that support this trend of thought.

In his study of release time in public schools—time where students are allowed to be absent from classes to attend spiritual instruction off campus—Hodge (2007) discovered that students participating in these activities do not gain lower academic scores for missing their classes. Instead, it seems that participating in this program enhances their academic achievement (p. 169).

One study on factors that affect academic performance for African American youths found that church attendance was significant in predicting positive academic outcomes—African American youth attending church have higher academic outcomes with regards to their peers (Williams, et al., 2002).

Another study (Walker & Dixon, 2002) found that spiritual beliefs and religious participation were positively related to academic performance. Students who participated in religious activities and/or had spiritual beliefs had better academic performance. The study raised the important question of how to incorporate spirituality into academic programming

Jeynes (2002) also found that religious schooling and religious commitment both had a positive impact on the academic performance of students and also on their school-related behaviour. Students who were committed to their religion were well behaved in school and had better academic performance.

Line (2005) found a strong relationship between academic performance and personal religiosity, especially in the area of personal scripture study, living up to church standards, and personal prayer life. When students enrich themselves from scripture, abiding by their church standards (regardless of faith) and have a consistent prayer life, their academic performance responds positively. Similarly, in their sample of rural Iowa families, Elder and Conger (2000) found that religiously involved youths tended to excel in school: as their religiosity increased, so did their academic achievement.

One study of Puerto Rican students reported that “all [participants in the study] credited their religiosity as having a positive impact on their high academic achievement” (Antrop-Gonzales, Vellez & Garret, 2007, p. 248). The Puerto Rican students believed that their religiosity played an important role in boosting them from mediocre performance to academic excellence.

In a study of *The influence of religion upon the academic performance of youth in disadvantaged communities*, Regnerus (2006) found that:

- Attending church keeps students focused in school
- Church involvement helps students from high-risk neighborhoods to achieve better academic progress more than it helps those who are less at-risk.
- Church involvement appears to have a stable, protective influence which is particularly notable in high-poverty students.

In Regnerus's conclusion, he voiced a question that is directly related to this discussion:

Why does church attendance impact academic progress positively? His answer, in part, is that church attendance reinforces values conducive to educational achievement such as self confidence, academic competence, emotional health, self control, and decision making are caught through various interactions within the church institutions—family, youth group etc. These interactions positively reinforce upon students the importance of education and encourage them to higher academic achievement.

The ValueGenesis Research on Seventh-day Adventist teens is in harmony with the above response: "ValueGenesis Research supports the idea that religious education is one of the venues where young people clarify their vision for their lives, learn values and life affirming choices, and meet Jesus as a personal friend" (Gillespie, 2006, p. 34). In the light of these two statements, it seems that religiosity instills values that when affirmed and reinforced, creates an environment that motivates students to be successful academically.

As an Adventist, I am convinced of the necessity of involving Christ in education. The literature cited above repeatedly suggests an association between spirituality and academic performance. This present descriptive study looks one more time at the evidence, in both a Christian and a secular university, for I believe these questions can provide pointers that may help teachers integrate faith and learning.

This present study was done at a small Adventist university in order to explore the association between faith and academic performance. It focuses on the perceived association between religion and academic success This study can be differentiated from the above-mentioned studies in that I questioned students who excelled academically (commendation) and those students who did not perform well (probation), highlighting factors that students said helped them perform well and factors that contributed to their poor academic performance.

The Study

The study was done in 2006 at an Adventist Tertiary Institution which consisted of approximately 450 students, 25% of whom were on probation (GPA < 2.2) and less than 10% of whom were commended (GPA > = 3.0). Data was collected through the use of questionnaires, interviews,

observations, and focus groups and was analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Due to constraints on time and finances, the students in the School of Business were selected as the sample for the study. The School of Business had 131 students with 16 (12%) commendation and 39 (29%) probation students. The School of Business was chosen at least partly because it was closest to the overall school percentages mentioned above.

Data was collected from only the probation and commendation students in an attempt to find out why some students performed at commendation level and why others performed at probation level. Unfortunately, some students did not have time to participate, and others refused to be part of the study for reasons of their own. In all there were 10 commendation students and 17 probation students who answered the questionnaire. Additional data were obtained from a colleague doing a study of the worship life at the same institution and data from 31 students (not included in the 27 above) were also included and will be mentioned later in the results section. Data from 18 above average performance students who were enrolled in the government university were also collected in order to increase the sample size, and their data will be included in the results.

Data was also collected from the school registrar, lecturers of the School of Business, and the Dean of Student Services. The school Registrar provided data pertaining to the students' academic performance; the lecturers provided data pertaining to their perceptions of why certain students excel in academia and others fail to perform well; and the dean of student services provided character reference data which I used to double-check participants' responses especially concerning their commitment to spiritual activities. All in all, there were a total of 66 students from whom data was collected, not counting the cultural groups involved in the focus groups, the school registrar, the lecturers of the School of Business and the Dean of Student Services.

Limitations

The study is exploratory and requires much more research in this area before it can become conclusive. Moreover, the instruments that were used to test the students' opinions on their selection and ranking of factors affecting their academic performance as well as their commitment to Christ have not been tested for validity. In addition, the majority of the data collected were self-reported opinions, rather than test results, so caution is advised when interpreting the findings. Finally, because I am a practicing Christian, the analysis and interpretation of the data might be biased to a certain degree. Past literature supports this bias, however, suggesting that there is indeed a relationship between spirituality and academic performance.

Results

Students were directed to tick what factors on the questionnaire affected their studies and also to rank them in order of greatest impact. Table 1 shows the data that was collected from both the commendation and probation students at the Adventist Institution.

Table 1
Attribution of Greatest Impact on Academic Performance

Factors	Probation Students		Commendation Students	
	Greatest Impact	Ticked	Greatest Impact	Ticked
Incompetent lecturers/competent lecturers	12%	35%	10%	30%
Lack of family support/family support	12%	23%	30%	60%
Lack of self-discipline/self discipline	6%	58%	10%	70%
Did not budget time properly/ budget time properly	12%	82%	10%	50%
Lack of ambition to succeed/ambition to succeed	12%	58%	20%	50%
Peer pressure/good friends		35%		80%
Financial difficulties		17%		20%
Too many assessments	6%	5%		
Personal relationship problems	6%	29%		
Low spiritual life/high spiritual life	36%	58%	20%	40%
Other - please specify		5%		
Total participants		17		10

Note. Greatest Impact: The factor ranked by the student as having the greatest impact on their academic performance.

Ticked: Factors students indicated as impacting their academic performance.

Probation Students

- 82% of the participants believed that poor time management was a factor that contributed to their academic performance; however, 12% of that 82% believed that poor time management had the greatest negative impact on their academic performance.
- Lack of self discipline, lack of ambition to succeed and low spiritual life all came second in terms of contribution to probationary performance, in that 58% believed that these had an impact on their academic performance. However, because this study looks particularly at the impact of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ on academic performance, it is interesting to note that 36% of the the low performing students believed that the spiritual life factor had the greatest impact overall on their academic performance. When compared to 6% who

cited lack of self discipline and 12% who blamed lack of ambition to succeed, a lack of spirituality clearly has the greatest perceived impact on low-achieving students.

Commendation Students

- 80% believed that good friends had an impact on their academic performance, however none ranked it as the factor with the most impact.
- 70% believed that self-discipline had an impact on their performance but only 10% ranked it as the factor with the most impact.
- 60% believed that good family support played an important role in their academic achievement, and 30% ranked it as having the greatest impact on their academic performance, making it the greatest perceived influence on achievement.
- 40% believed that their strong spiritual life influenced their academic performance, and 20% ranked it as having the greatest impact.

When we combine both commendation and probation students, they would rank the factors as follows:

Factors which were most frequently ticked by the students

1. Time management – 19 participants
2. Self-discipline – 17 participants
3. Ambition to succeed – 15 participants
4. Friends and spiritual life – 14 participants each
5. Family support – 10 participants
6. Lecturers – 9 participants
7. Financial difficulties and personal problems – 5 participants each
8. Too many assessments and other reasons – 1 participant each

Factors ranked as having the greatest impact on student performance according to students' weightings

1. Spiritual life – 8 participants
2. Family support – 5 participants
3. Ambition to succeed – 4 participants
4. Lecturers and time management – 3 participants each
5. Self discipline – 2 participants
6. Assessments – 1 participant
7. Personal relationships – 1 participant

I also tried to test these students' relationship with Christ, and I used their commitment to spiritual activities as the indicator. I reasoned that if students have an intimate relationship with Christ, their commitment to spiritual activities should be greater. There is a limitation here of course in that students can be committed to Christ without being involved in spiritual activities. However, I based this assumption on James 2:14-26 which says that if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds, then that claim is to an extent invalid. Table 2 is the summary of the students' commitments to spiritual activities:

Table 2
Student participation in spiritual activities

Spiritual Activities	Commendation		Probation	
	Never or Rarely	Frequently or Always	Never or Rarely	Frequently or Always
Pray	20%	80%	47%	53%
Pay tithe	50%	50%	53%	47%
Attend prayer meetings	10%	90%	53%	47%
Attend vespers	10%	90%	41%	59%
Attend morning & evening worships	40%	60%	59%	41%
Attend Sabbath School	30%	70%	41%	59%
Attend Divine Service	10%	90%	12%	88%
Attend AY programs	70%	30%	53%	47%
Donate to charities	60%	40%	35%	65%
Get involved in other church activities (outreach, etc.)	40%	60%	59%	41%

The above data show a distinct difference between probation students and commendation students with regards to their commitment to spiritual activities. Commendation students, to some extent, are more committed to spiritual activities than probation students as follows:

1. Pray – commendation students were higher by 27%
2. Prayer meeting attendance – commendation students were higher by 43%
3. Attend vespers – commendation students were higher by 31%
4. Attend morning and evening worship – commendation students were higher by 19%
5. Attend Sabbath School – commendation students were higher by 11%
6. Involvement in church activities – commendation students were higher by 19%

Results from 31 students participating in the worship attitudes questionnaires

As previously mentioned, 31 students were questioned on worship attitudes. Two questions in their questionnaires had a direct relation to my study so I am including them here.

1. Do you think that your spiritual life is contributing to your success?
2. Explain your answer with examples.

Of the 31 students, 30 (96%) said “yes”—that their spiritual life did contribute to their success and one (4%) said “no.” In the course of their explanations of their answers, 19 of the 30 that said “yes” used academic performance success as an example of how their spiritual life contributed to their success. The one student who said “no” stated that a person’s spirituality has no effect on whether or not one succeeds in real life.

It is evident from the above data that there is a general belief amongst students in this institution that a relationship with Christ is conducive to success in life, including academic success.

Fears that Data is Biased

During the study and the data collection and analysis, there was a fear that:

1. The data might be biased because I knew the students who participated in the research.
2. Because the institution under study is a Christian school, people have a strong belief in God and would naturally say that a relationship with Christ is required.
3. The data was collected mostly from Adventist participants, and thus does not cover a wide range of denominational beliefs or commitment practices, and Adventists may be distinctively different from other Christian groups in some areas.

Due to the above concerns, I extended the study to a secular institution owned by the government which was a neighbor institution to the one in which I conducted the study. I gave the questionnaires to one of our lecturers who taught at that institution to distribute in his classes (an art teacher) to only the above average performing students. Hence, I had no contact with or personal relationship with any of the participants that filled out the questionnaires. I also changed some of the questions to make it more relevant to the students from a secular institution. For example, instead of using commendation, I used Above Average academic performance. The reason why I asked for above average students only was due to the small number of commendation students in my original study. I wanted to balance out the data set for comparison. Table 3 is a summary of the additional participants and their denominations:

Table 3
Denominational affiliation of participants

Denomination	Participants
Seventh-day Adventist (SDA)	2
Pentecostal	1
Jehovah Witness	1
United Gospel	1
Full Gospel	1
Church of the Lutheran Confession	2
Lutheran	2
Baptist	1
Roman Catholic	4
Bible Church	1
One Way	1
Muslim	1
Total	18

Of the 18 participants, only two (11%) were Adventists, which means that 89% of the participants were non-Adventists. The Muslim participant did not finish the questionnaire based on his/her beliefs with regards to commitment to spiritual activities.

Table 4 is a summary of the data collected from this second group of students from the secular university with regards to factors that according to their perceptions made their performance above average:

Table 4
Secular institution students' weighting of factors in order of perceived impact

Factors	Order of Weighting	Ticked
Lecturers up to standard	2	100%
Family support		22%
Self-discipline	3	100%
Budget time properly	4	100%
Ambition to succeed	5	94%
Good friends		89%
Financial difficulties		11%
Too many assessments		
Personal relationship problems		11%
Strong spiritual life	1	100%
Other - please specify		

From Table 4, we can see that 100% selected Lecturers; Self-discipline; Time budgeting and Spiritual life as being important to their academic achievement. When it came to ranking these factors, all the students from

this secular institution ranked Spiritual life as having the greatest impact on their academic success; 89% ranked lecturers as 2nd; 67% ranked self discipline as 3rd and time management was ranked 4th. Table 5 is a summary of their self-reported commitment to spiritual activities.

Table 5
Secular institution students' commitment to spiritual activities

Spiritual factors	Never or Rarely	Frequently or Always
Pray		100%
Donate offerings or to charities	6%	94%
Attend church functions during the week		100%
Have daily devotions morning & evening		100%
Attend Sabbath church services		100%
Get involved in church activities		100%

In the same questionnaire, I asked the following questions:

1. Do you believe that your spiritual life has an impact on your academic performance?
2. Explain your answer.

Seventeen (100%) said yes and as explanation gave the following reasons:

- The answering of academic related prayers
- The provision of relief from assessment pressures
- Claiming scripture related promises
- Keeping their focus on their studies and not being distracted by worldly things.

Upon combining all the data from the 45 students who agreed to answer the questionnaires (including secular institution participants), the factors most frequently recognized as impacting academic performance to the least frequently are as follows:

1. Time management (82%)
2. Ambition or drive to succeed and self-discipline (73%)
3. Spiritual life (71%)
4. Good friends (67%)
5. Lecturers (60%)
6. Family support (29%)
7. Financial difficulties (16%)
8. Assessments (13%)
9. Relationship problems and other factors (2%)

The ranking of the factors with the greatest degree of impact on academic performance from greatest to least are as follows:

1. Spiritual life
2. Lecturers
3. Self discipline
4. Time management

It is important to note that the ranking of these factors was done by the students themselves and is a combination of students within the Christian institution as well as students from the secular institution. Ironically, the data from the secular institution was more supportive of the idea of integrating spirituality in academia than the data from the Adventist institution. This is a finding that should be explored more in future research.

Conclusion

It seems that being spiritual is conducive to a student's good academic performance. Certainly the students see it that way—whether they study in a Christian school, or a secular one. Both this study and the literature discuss the importance of integrating faith in the learning process. It is fitting that Adventist educators bring this out quite clearly in their literature—that students should develop a personal relationship with Jesus.

I believe that the best situated persons to facilitate the integrated learning of faith and academia inside the classroom are the teachers. This is true for two reasons. First, they are the closest to the students academically and are in the position to help with the integration. Second, the lecturers were seen by students as the second most important factor in student achievement. Should our teachers fail in their spiritual endeavour, then the likelihood is that students will not perform up to their potential academically, as well.

As I reflect on the literature plus the data in this study, I struggle with this question that further studies perhaps might shed light upon: if spirituality impacts positively upon academic performance, how should we approach performance concerns in faith-based colleges? Who should be responsible for our universities and/or colleges not making the grade in terms of academia when compared with other institutions in the same country, region or right across the world? Are we looking for answers in the wrong places?

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