



Thou Shall Not: The Impact of Faith on Female Students' Decision to Engage in Risky Behaviors

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Abstract

Many college students explore risky behaviors such as alcohol abuse, drug use, and unplanned sex (Crawford & Novak, 2010). The impact of faith on such decisions has not previously been considered. College appears to be a time when students examine life's meaning and purpose (Zullig, Ward & Horn, 2006), so an understanding of this relationship is needed. Eight undergraduate female students involved in faith-based student organizations were interviewed to understand how faith impacts their decision-making process related to these behaviors.

Research Questions

1. To what degree do female students who value faith engage in risky behaviors, such as alcohol abuse, illegal drug use, and unplanned sexual activity?
2. What role does faith play in female students' decision to engage in or avoid risky behaviors?

Methods

A snowball sampling method was used to secure participants. Qualitative interviews were conducted with eight undergraduate female students involved in faith-based student groups. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Through data analysis, themes regarding the relationship between faith and risky behaviors emerged.

Findings

Faith in College

- Overall increase
- Becoming personal
- Faith practices: Bible study, prayer, retreats, service

Risky Behaviors

- Alcohol
 - Avoidance of alcohol before legal age
 - Boundaries with alcohol use
 - Intention/motivation behind alcohol use
- Drug use
 - Avoidance for health and legal vs. spiritual reasons
- Sexual activity

Motivators

- Faith community
- Mentorship
- Honoring God
- Familial influence
- Prayer

Perceptions from Others

- Decisions are supported but perceived as strange or surprising
- Feel somewhat misunderstood

Consistency

- Mixed responses about ease of being consistent with decisions
- Social challenges

Future Directions

- Further research
 - Male students
 - Religiously diverse participants
- Continue providing students opportunities to be part of faith communities
- Provide students opportunities to reflect on decision-making related to risky behaviors

Selected References

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