



The Influence of Religion on a Young Woman's College Decision

Setting the Stage

Utah Women and Education Project researchers conducted in-depth research in 2010 to discover why more young women around the state were not attending and graduating from college. Findings suggest that religion, values, and overall culture do influence the decisions young women in Utah are making about attending college. Approximately 80.5% of the participants in this study were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), 13% had no religious preference, and 6.5% reported belonging to other religions. Because we received very little qualitative data from non-LDS participants, most of the results in this snapshot focus on findings from women in the LDS church.

Study participants included 245 women between 18-32 years of age. They were White (89.9%), LDS (80.4%) married (44.1%), and from 16 different counties (Salt Lake/Utah, 56.2%).

The following three open-ended questions proved to be central in determining religion's impact on participants:

1. *What does your religion teach you about continuing your education after high school?* Approximately 73.5% of the sample stated that their religion taught them that higher education is very important (55.1%) or moderately important (18.4%).
2. *What messages do you think are given from your top church leaders (e.g., Pope, Prophet) about women earning college degrees?* 71% said that their top church leaders encouraged them to attend college.
3. *Do your local church leaders (e.g., youth leaders, minister, bishop, rabbi) talk to you about your education? If so, what do you think they are encouraging you to do with your educational and career choices?* Although results are not as striking as the findings from the first two questions, the majority of young women in this sample did say that they were being encouraged (20.4%) or strongly encouraged (33.5%) to get a college education. It was primarily the less active LDS or non-religious participants who said local church leaders did not encourage them to attend college or even discuss the subject.

Participant Quotes

A current student stated: "I am LDS and my religion really advocates continuing your education after high school.

Even though we are encouraged to get married and start a family, the importance of getting a college education is also emphasized."

Another student said: "My religion (LDS) is very proactive on college and continuing education. We do biannual church-wide conferences and many of the talks are about education and the importance of it for men and women. They push learning all of the time!"

A final respondent who dropped out of college remarked: "My religion teaches education is not merely a good idea; it's a commandment...They encourage getting education but do not expect us to get a degree."

Factors and Religious Beliefs

Researchers found factors associated with religious beliefs and how they influence a young woman's decision to attend and graduate college:

- LDS participants generally believe that learning, knowledge, and higher education are important. They believe their religion supports women *attending* college, but many do not feel they need to *graduate*.
- Many LDS women do not see the urgency in obtaining their college degrees; they believe that finishing them "someday" is fine.
- Many LDS women cannot envision a life of integration. They cannot imagine being simultaneously married, having children, and continuing college (even one class at a time). Some believe that women need to "give up" or "sacrifice" college for their husbands/families. Several participants said it was their "duty" to drop out of school.
- In the minds of many LDS participants, "going to college" gets lumped into the same category as "going to work." If they believe they should not work, they also believe they should not attend college.
- Marriage or the birth of the first child is the end of college for many young women.

Key Takeaways

Religious activity was one of the strongest statistical predictors of all the positive college variables in this study. This means that young women who were *most* active in their religions were also most likely to:

- Have parents who encouraged and/or supported them toward college
- Decide at a younger age they would attend college
- Have one or more leadership roles during high school
- Participate in more college preparation activities during high school
- Attend college longer and graduate

Participants who were most likely to prepare for, attend, and graduate from college believed that a woman's college education is *strongly* encouraged by all three religious variables: 1) teachings of the LDS church, 2) top LDS leaders, and 3) local LDS leaders. However, of these three the most powerful statistical predictor of college preparation activities and decisions is encouragement from local church leaders—primarily LDS bishops and Young Women leaders. Young women who had group *and* one-on-one encouragement from at least one of their local leaders were significantly more likely to attend and graduate from college.

There was an apparent disconnect between the importance participants said they place on getting an education to “be prepared” or to “have a job to fall back on” before marriage *and* then their ultimate decision not to attend and/or finish college. Education is the top priority for many until marriage, and then priorities quickly change. Some participants struggled with understanding why there is so much emphasis placed on education *before* marriage and then why they “must give it up” *after* they are married.

Values

Participants in our study were asked a series of questions associated with values:

- When asked “What values are most important to you?” participants responded with answers that fit into the following categories:
 - Honesty/integrity/responsibility (68.9%)
 - General virtues (53.9%)
 - Family (46.1%)
 - Work/self-reliance (30.7%)
 - Education/learning (28.2%)
 - Spirituality/religion (24.5%)
 - Service/community involvement/charity (19.5%)
 - Other relationships (non-family) (14.9%)
- Participants were asked to choose the three MOST important values from 15 choices. The top results are as follows: family (85.1%), learning (40.7%), ethical

behavior (40.7%), responsibility/dependability (31.5%), and hard work (31.1%).

- Participants were asked to choose the three LEAST important values from 15 choices. The top results are as follows: power/influence (78.4%), recognition (66.4%), pleasure (38.6%), challenge (29.6%), and achievement (28.6%).

Taking an Active Role

There are many ways church leaders and influencers can help young women attend and graduate from college. Here are several approaches:

- Help local church leaders understand that they play a particularly important role in encouraging young women to attend and graduate from college.
- Take time to ask young women questions about their college plans. Share your positive college experiences and talk about the challenges and how you dealt with them. Discuss the broad value of a college education.
- Make efforts with young women, one-on-one and in group settings, to discuss how they can integrate marriage, family, and college.
- Present realistic data (e.g., need for life preparation, divorce rates, economic challenges) in church settings so that young women will more fully understand the importance of family *and* completing degrees.
- Talk to young women about the urgency and importance of attending college right after high school; help them feel the urgency of obtaining degrees rather than thinking it is okay for them to graduate “some-day.”
- Help all youth and young adults understand that graduating from college is critical today for both women and men. Getting a degree is just as important after marriage as it is before.

Conclusion

For many young women in Utah, religion and values influence their decision to attend college, but many do not feel the need to graduate. As church leaders and influencers, it is essential that we discuss the value of a college education with young women as this will positively impact women in communities and in the state as a whole.

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