

Religious Schools, Gender Roles, and College Choices¹

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While religious and public schools are similar in many ways, cultural differences provide important distinctions between the sectors. Many religious schools educate young people in academic subjects in the context of a religious tradition. The religious tradition—be it Catholic, evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Muslim, or Jewish—often shapes the specific context and approach to education, socializing students in a faith tradition within a specific worldview. Many religious traditions delineate specific gender roles and as students are socialized into the religious tradition, they may be subject to gendered ideas that could impact educational and life decisions as they transition into adulthood. In this report, I examine Catholic and evangelical Protestant school graduates and their likelihood of earning a bachelor's degree as well as their choice of major in college, specifically looking for differences by gender, in order to consider whether religious schools are influencing women's postsecondary choices.

Evangelical Protestant schools place a high priority on religious formation, with academics considered an important but secondary objective (Pennings et al 2011; Vryhof 2012). The evangelical Protestant community has evidenced some speculation regarding the content and environment of college campuses. While this may be changing, particularly with increasing numbers of Bible

and Christian colleges now available (Joeckle and Chesne 2011), skepticism of higher education along with a secondary emphasis on academics suggest that graduates of evangelical Protestant schools, overall, may be less likely to earn a bachelor's degree. Further, concerns about how science is taught in most colleges, particularly related to the ethical and religious implications of evolution, might mean that students in the evangelical Protestant sector are less likely to enter into study and careers in the sciences.

When we consider potential differences by gender, evangelical Protestantism places emphasis on traditional gender roles, with husband as head of household, breadwinner, and spiritual leader, under theological ideas known as headship (Gallagher 2004). Women are expected to provide support for their spouses, focusing on life tasks related to the home, including raising children and managing the household. To the extent that girls attending evangelical Protestant schools are socialized in these beliefs and practices, they may be less likely to plan for a career and thus less likely to complete a college degree. With religious ideas about women's proper roles in care and domestic labor, women attending these schools who do earn a college degree may be influenced into areas of study such as education or nursing which are more compatible in nature with traditional gender and family roles.

Catholic schools have traditionally placed a high priority on academic excellence. Several studies in the 1980s found that students in Catholic high schools outperformed students in public high schools on standardized tests of achievement (Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982). While more recent studies using more sophisticated statistical analysis find this effect to be smaller and perhaps isolated to mathematics achievement at the high school level (Carbonaro and Covay 2010; Gamoran 1996; Morgan and Sorenson 1999), Catholic schools continue to place an emphasis on college preparation and enjoy a strong academic tradition. Some scholars have attributed the upward mobility of recent generations of Catholics to the extensive system of Catholic schools built in the U.S. over the course of the previous century (Bryk, Lee and Holland 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Following previous studies that demonstrate some advantage in postsecondary outcomes (Grogger and Neal 2000; Neal 1995), coupled with an emphasis on academics, we would expect that Catholic school students may be equally or more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree compared to public school students. With less direct conflict perceived between religion and science in the Catholic tradition, we would not expect attending a Catholic school to influence students away from the study of science.

From a gender perspective, while gender roles are not as highly prescribed as in the evangelical Protestant tradition, there may be elements of Catholic belief and teaching that could influence different postsecondary decisions by gender. The Catholic Church is hierarchical in nature with leadership and sacramental positions held by men, particularly in the role of priest. While religious positions are available to women as vowed religious sisters, their position in the church is much different than those of religious priests. However, Catholic

schools in the U.S. were built in large part by congregations of religious sisters, and their influence and example as educated women may socialize women toward further education. Teachings related to the sanctity of human life and in opposition to artificial means of birth control and abortion, however, may influence women's choice of field of study, as they may consider some careers to be incompatible with family roles as wife and mother. Therefore, women who attended Catholic high schools may be more likely to consider careers related to education, nursing, or other care-related careers that may have more flexible schedules and better fit with the needs of the family.

Methods

I examine data from the Cardus Education Survey 2014, a nationally representative dataset containing an oversample of private and religious high school graduates, aged 24 to 39 (N=1,572). These data allow an examination of the associations between attending a religious high school and young adult outcomes related to postsecondary choices and achievement.

Binary logistic and multinomial logistic regression models are used to estimate the likelihood of earning a college degree and choice of major, using statistical controls to isolate the association of attending a religious high school with postsecondary outcomes. In all analyses, public school graduates serve as the comparison category. The college completion outcome variable is coded 1 if a respondent reported earning a bachelor's degree or more and 0 if less than a bachelor's degree. The college major outcome is coded according to a schema devised by Barone (2011) which classifies college majors across two divides: humanistic versus scientific and care versus technical. Within the humanistic/scientific divide, majors are coded as either part of the humanities, the sciences, or neither. To

consider the care/technical divide, the same majors are recoded as care-related, technical, or neither. Barone found that women are more likely to major in fields of study that could be classified as humanistic or care, and this schema is used to consider whether attending a religious school also predicts pursuing college majors across traditionally gendered divides.

Results

Bachelor's Degree Completion. In a baseline model, I examined college degree completion by gender and school sector. I found that there was no statistically significant difference between men and women in college completion. This means that both men and women are equally likely to receive a college degree in this sample when school sector is held constant. Considering school sector, I found that students attending a Catholic high school were 2.55 times as likely to earn a college degree compared to students attending a public high school, a difference that is highly statistically significant ($p < .001$). Evangelical Protestant high school students were equally likely to earn a college degree as public high school students. When full controls for individual, family, and religious background were included in the model, students attending a Catholic school were only twice as likely ($p < .01$) and evangelical Protestant school students remained equally as likely to earn a college degree compared to public school students.

To consider whether attending a religious school had an added effect on college degree completion by gender, I added an interaction between gender and school sector in the next model. Surprisingly, I found no statistically significant differences by gender. This suggests that attending a Catholic or evangelical Protestant school does not impact college completion differently for men or women.

Choice of College Major. Gender differences in choice of major were striking across both the scientific/humanistic and care/technical divides. In models where only gender was included, women were less than half as likely to major in scientific majors compared to humanistic majors and about one-tenth as likely to major in technical fields compared to care fields. When school sector was added into the models, there were no significant differences by school sector for either divide, suggesting that school sector did not play a role in choice of major across the humanistic/scientific and care/technical divides. This was confirmed by the lack of significant interaction effects between gender and school sector in subsequent models. When full controls for individual, family, and religious background were included in the model, women were one-third as likely as men to major in a scientific field compared to a humanistic field and one-tenth as likely to major in a technical field compared to a care field.

Discussion

Although there are quite a few null findings, this analysis provides important information to consider regarding high school sector, gender, and postsecondary outcomes. First, results related to college completion affirm findings of previous studies that demonstrate a higher likelihood of completing a college degree after attending a Catholic high school. Somewhat surprisingly, these results also demonstrate that evangelical Protestant school students are just as likely to earn a college degree as public school students. Second, while there are attainment differences by sector, there do not appear to be differences in choice of major by sector. This, too, is somewhat unexpected as we might consider evangelical Protestant students to be less likely to enter into scientific fields than students in other sectors. Third, attending religious schools does not have an additional impact

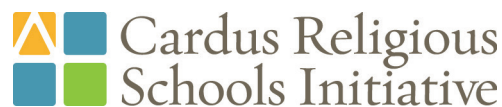
on choice of college major for women. However, differences in choice of major appear to be strongly gendered, suggesting that gendered messages related to study and career are similar and stable across schooling environments. This suggests that gender socialization may not play out differently in public compared to religious school contexts, or perhaps that the college environment diminishes whatever socializing effect the high school setting might have had. Finally, from a school choice perspective, these findings suggest that students in religious schools are being prepared as well as or better for postsecondary study compared to public school students and without any negative differences by gender, a finding which provides some support for the public funding of religious schools from an academic quality perspective.

Notes

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