

Moral Community: Alcohol Use and Sexual Activity at Four Private American Universities

Jerome R. Koch
Alden E. Roberts
Myrna L. Armstrong
Texas Tech University

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jerome.koch@ttu.edu

University Enrollments:

- Large Christian University 12,000
- Middle Christian University 3100
- Small Christian University 1700
- Secular Private University 6500

The Sample

- Large Christian University n= 524 (4.4% of enrollment)
- Middle Christian University n= 111 (3.5% of enrollment)
- Small Christian University n= 124 (7.2% of enrollment)
- Secular Private University n= 151 (2.3% of enrollment)

- 83% Ages 18-20
- 66% White
- 67% Female

Total N = 910

Response Rate = 86%

The “Moral Communities Hypothesis.”

I suggest that what counts is not only whether a particular person is religious, but whether this religiousness is, or is not, ratified by the social environment. The idea here is that religion is empowered to produce conformity to the norms only as it is sustained through interaction and is accepted by the majority as a valid basis for action. ... Religious individuals will be less likely than those who are not religious to commit delinquent acts, *but only in communities where the majority of the people are actively religious.*

Stark, Rodney. 1996. “Religion as Context: Hellfire and Delinquency One More Time.” *Sociology of Religion* 57(2): 163-173.

Quotes from the Deans of Students On “Community” and “Standards”

Large Christian University

“The message that students hear when they’re coming to (LCU) is that we are a nationally ranked Christian University. And that our approach is not just on education ... It’s on transformation. Renewing of the mind, the body, AND the Spirit. So from day one, we really give that message.”

“It’s kind of an ethos. We strive for a higher community standard.”

“We believe (our students) are uniquely and wonderfully made in the eyes of God ... (And) what He’s compelling you to do, particularly in college, is to identify your calling.”

Middle Christian University

Ten years prior to our interview, 50% of MCU student were binge-drinkers. Now:

“Resident Directors are (now) known as Campus Ministers. ... I’m a big believer in the influence of the peer culture. ... (The) key focus of what I’m trying (to) empower – find the right student leaders who represent the ideals of the University, put them in a role where the freshmen especially look up to them, want to be like them, you know. And they change the culture.”

The binge drinking rate is now 30%.

MCU has no official GLTB student organization because, “Part of our heritage in (names denomination), and more conservative Christian tradition (affirms) the traditional sexual ethic.”

However, “If we change our mind after serious consideration, we can do that. There was a time when (MCU) didn’t allow women to pray in chapel. But that was re-evaluated.”

Community EVOLVES at MCU. Shepherding, not surveillance.

Small Christian University

Summary of the standards: Premarital sex and same-sex hand-holding are is forbidden. Alcohol use is defined not just by consumption, but by “being in the presence of alcohol use by other students. Any illegal drug use is grounds for expulsion.

The rationale – quoting:

“It starts with chapel, (and unlike other places who do more academic things or allow chapel credit for other church services), ... what we’ve found in order to preserve our community, we really believe that to create that community experience where we’re all worshipping together.”

“Jesus Christ IS our perspective for learning. So that’s where the very overt Christian Community comes in. ... We then reinforce that with our community standards. ... In order to live in a Christian community, there are markers, this is how we treat each other.”

At SCU, “Community” means abiding by community standards.

Secular Private University

Community:

“The students come here (because of) the weather, the (names prominent sports team), the caliber of the academic with the (unintelligible) of the social scene. And we’re not one of those (names Ivy League school), (names Ivy League school), or (names Ivy League school) where they appear too stuffy. So you get a high quality intellectual environment but you can have fun as well.”

But:

“Students here can easily compartmentalize their lives. They can work really hard during the week; they can save Friday, Saturday, Thursday nights, for partying.

“We’ve suspended students whose parents’ names are on these buildings. ... My focus is on containment.”

At SPU, students are competitive – in EVERYTHING.

Variables, Scales, and Results from Surveying Students

Religiosity

A Scale of:

- Strength of Religious Faith (Non-Existent to Very Strong)
- Frequency of Prayer (< Once/week to Several Times a Day)
- Closeness to God (Not Close At All to Very Close)
- Beliefs about God (Don't believe in God to Sure God Exists)
- Church Attendance (Never to Weekly or More Often)

Range = 5 to 25

Chronbach's Alpha Measure of Reliability = .88

Davis, J.A., T.W. Smith, and P.V. Marsden. 2004. *General Social Surveys, 1972-2004: [CUMULATIVE FILE]*[Computer File]. ICPSR 04295-v. 2. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center [producer], 2005. Storrs, CT: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut/Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributors], 2006-04-05.

Fundamentalism

A Scale of Three Questions:

I am sure that the Bible contains no errors or contradictions.

It is very important for true Christians to believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God.

The Bible is the final and complete guide to morality; it contains God's answers to all important questions about right and wrong.

Response Choices: "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"

Range = 3 to 15

Chronbach's Alpha Measure of Reliability = .91

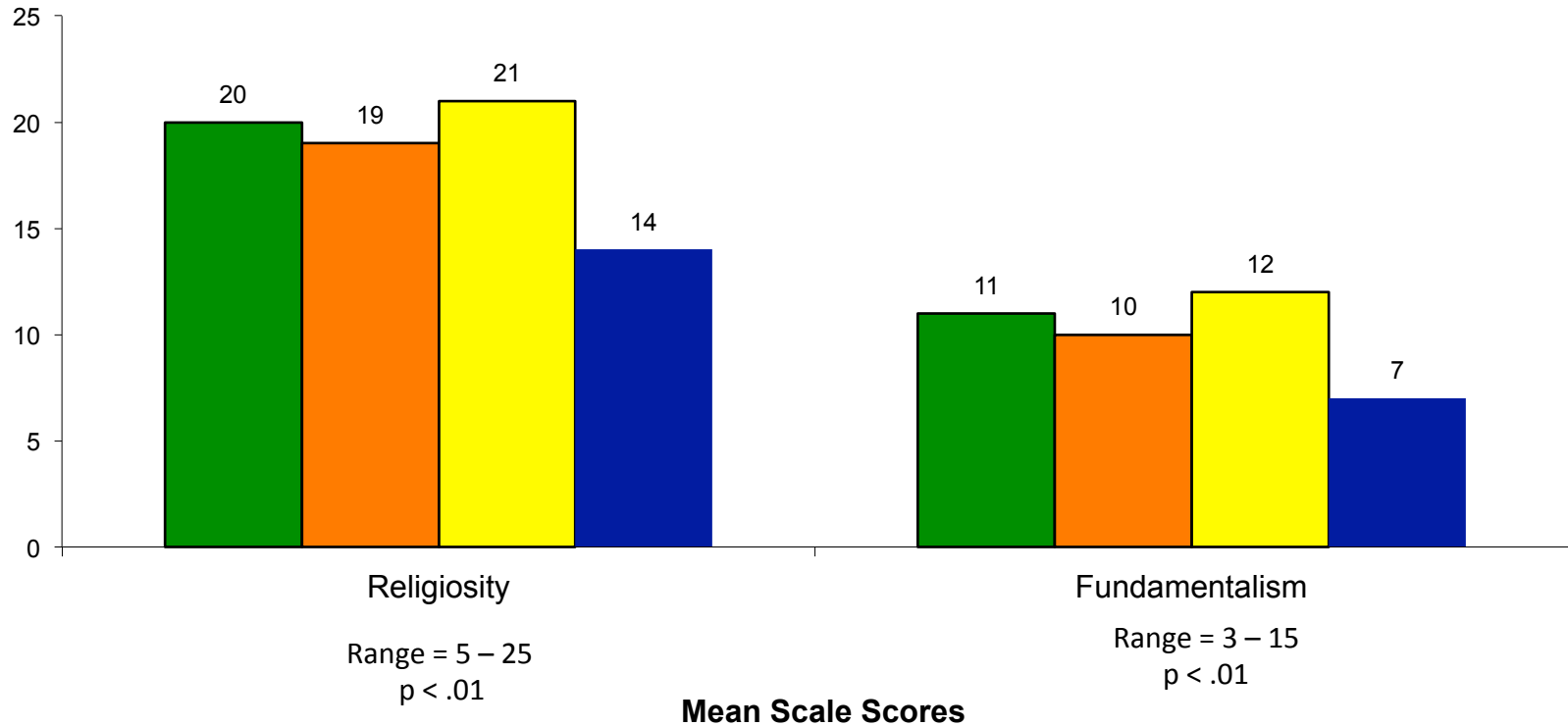
McFarland, S.G. 1989. "Religious Orientations and the Targets of Discrimination." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28: 324-336.

Behavioral Variables

- Current Alcohol Use: One or more drinks in previous month. Drink = 12 oz. beer; 5 oz. wine; 1 oz. distilled spirits.
- Binge Drink: 5 or more drinks on one occasion in the previous month.
- Had sexual intercourse – yes or no.
- 2 or more sex partners in the previous year – yes or no.

Figure 1

Religiosity and Fundamentalist Beliefs by School



■ Large Christian

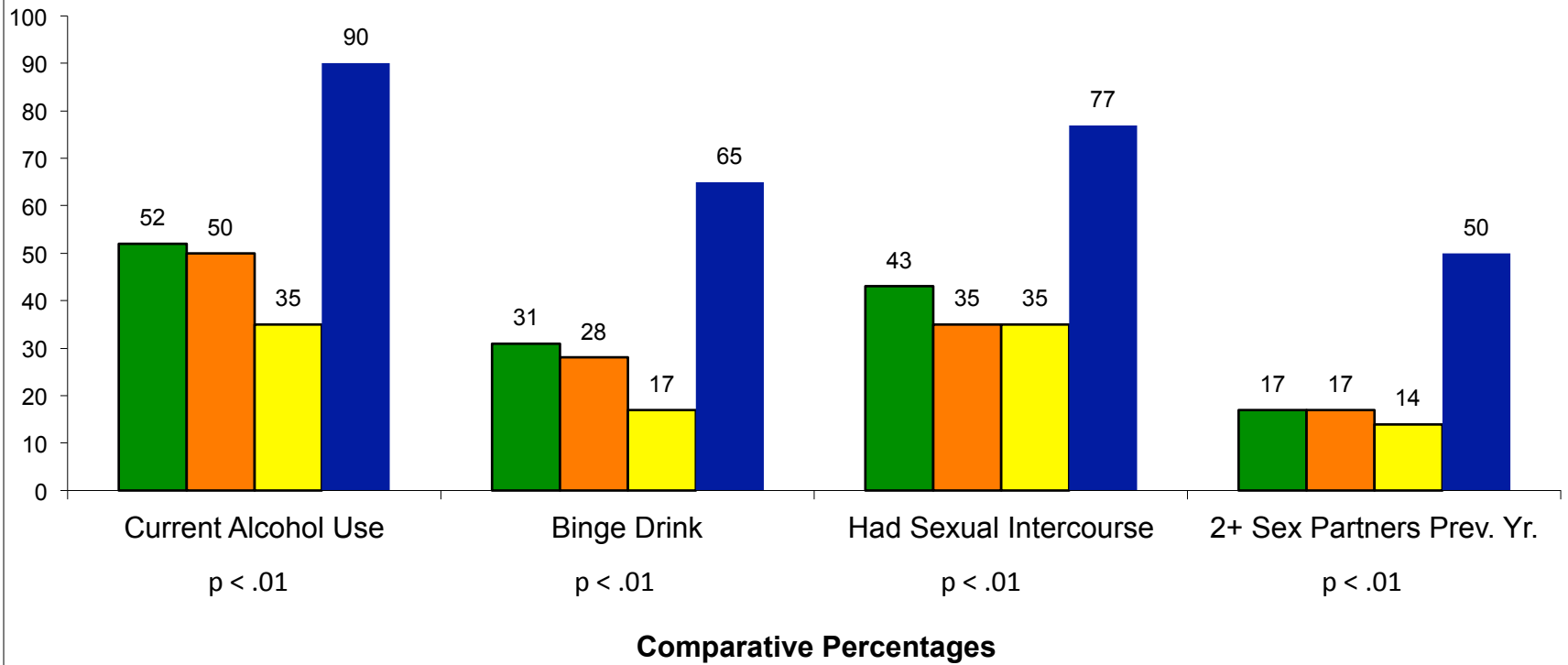
■ Medium Christian

■ Small Christian

■ Secular Private

Figure 2

Alcohol Use and Sexual Behavior by School



■ Large Christian

■ Medium Christian

■ Small Christian

■ Secular Private

Summary

- There are significant and substantive differences between the Christian schools in aggregate and the similarly selective secular private school.
- There are significant and substantive differences in (especially) alcohol use and sexual behavior within the group of Christian schools.
- ... *“in communities where the majority of the people are actively religious.”* – **Size matters.**