

HOW COLLEGE STUDENTS VIEW THE
CHRISTIAN'S ROLE IN THE BUSINESS WORLD:
A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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Christians should try to avoid working in a non-Christian business (Christian values are not explicitly incorporated into company decisions).

Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a place to succeed and grow professionally, as long as their faith is not compromised or weakened.

Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a "mission field" in which they can share their faith with co-workers, etc., when opportunities arise.

Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a place in which they can try to influence company decisions so that they reflect Christian principles.

Mann-Whitney U and Chi-Square tests showed statistically significant differences in responses between freshman and senior year. The most striking survey result was that while 75 percent of freshmen "most agree with" the statement that Christians should view the business organization as a "mission field," by senior year, only 56 percent of the students chose this statement, and 30 percent of the seniors chose instead the statement that Christians should view their workplace as a place to succeed and grow professionally, as long as their faith were not compromised or weakened.

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Introduction

How do Christians view the business world? What is the appropriate Christian response to the business world as vocation? Should the business world be a place in which young Christian college graduates use their talents? Underlying the response to these questions is one's perception of how Christians should interact with the culture around them. H. Richard Niebuhr (1951) wrote the seminal work on this issue in Christ and Culture, in which he developed a typology of five ways throughout history in which Christians have addressed the tension between Christ and culture: "Christ of culture," in which Christians experience no inherent tension between themselves and culture; "Christ against culture," in which Christians view the world as inherently evil; "Christ above culture," in which Christians who, while interacting with nonbelievers, retain the distinctiveness of their Christian faith in their lives; "Christ and culture in paradox," in which Christians live in two worlds – with Christ in the beauty of God's creation and with fallen man in everyday activities; and finally the position that Niebuhr espouses for all Christians – "Christ the transformer of culture," in which Christians work towards the redemption and transformation of the world.

Niebuhr's typology has become a often-used model to explain Christian behavior in various arenas. In the area of business, for example, Addington and Graves (2000) used Niebuhr's typology to formulate their own categories of how Christians view their vocation: "withdraw" (Christ against culture) in which Christians work only at Christian companies; "acquiesce" (Christ of culture) in which Christians go through their work day merely hoping that "nothing negative rubs off on them"; "mandate" (Christ above culture) in which Christians try to force their beliefs on others; and "influence" (Christ the transformer of culture) in which Christians try to influence and persuade the people around them to join Christ by being salt and light. Another example of an adaptation of Niebuhr's typology is by Siker (1989) in his work on Christian business ethics: Christ against business; Christ of business (Christ subsumed by business); Christ above business (Christ subsumes business); and Christ the transformer of business. A more recent example of a Niebuhr adaptation is Smith and Steen's (1996) four descriptions of how Christians might regard the business world: Christ against culture – a Christian sees business activity as ungodly and chooses not to work in the business world; Christ above culture – a Christian sees business activity as subsidiary to the salvation of others' souls; Christ of culture – a Christian admires businesses that are successful by traditional measures; Christ the transformer of culture – a Christian uses the business vocation to

transform both business and the world.

For the purposes of the study presented in this paper, Niebuhr's typology was modified yet again to formulate four statements that describe different opinions about a Christian's role in the business world:

Statement A (*Christ against Culture*)

Christians should try to avoid working in a non-Christian business (Christian values are not explicitly incorporated into company decisions).

Statement B (*Christ and Culture in Paradox*)

Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a place to succeed and grow professionally, as long as their faith is not compromised or weakened.

Statement C (*Christ above Culture*)

Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a "mission field" in which they can share their faith with co-workers, etc., when opportunities arise.

Statement D (*Christ the Transformer of Culture*)

Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a place in which they can try to influence company decisions so that they reflect Christian principles.

These four statements formed the basis of the survey in which college students were surveyed, first in their freshman year and then three years later in their senior year, on their opinions of how a Christian college graduate should view a career in the business world upon graduation.

Methodology

The survey that was developed from the adaptation of Niebuhr's typology is presented in Figure 1. The purpose of this survey was not only to assess students' opinions about the role of a Christian in the business world, but also to determine if those beliefs changed during their education at Wheaton College, where all students profess their Christian faith in their admittance applications. The survey was first administered to all freshmen in the 1997-98 academic year during the first month of their required "Freshman Experience" class and then again to the same cohort of students as seniors in the 2000-01 academic year in their department's required "senior seminar" capstone course. Although the survey responses are not "matched" for each respondent, they are from the same group of students three years apart, most of whom would have completed the survey as freshmen and then again as seniors. There were 368 useable surveys from the freshman respondents in 1997-98 and 337 useable surveys from the senior

respondents in 2000-01.

The survey had two sections: one section in which students indicated their level of agreement/disagreement with each of the four statements using a six-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree; 6= strongly disagree); and the other section in which students rank-ordered the four statements, with the first choice being the statement that most agreed with their opinion of “how a Wheaton College graduate should view a career in the business world upon graduation” and the fourth choice being the statement with which they least agreed.

Results

Levels of Agreement with the four statements. Table 1 lists the mean level of agreement with each of the four statements for both freshman and senior respondents. Both freshmen and seniors had the highest level of agreement with Statement C (view organization as a mission field), although freshmen had a higher level of agreement; both groups had the next highest agreement with Statement D (try to influence company decisions) and then with Statement B (view organization as a place to grow professionally). For all three of these Statements, freshmen had a higher mean level of agreement than did the seniors. Both groups strongly disagreed with Statement A (avoid working in a non-Christian business), although the seniors had a stronger level of disagreement.

Figure 2 contrasts the relative frequency of responses for freshmen and seniors for the four statements. Each statement’s distribution of responses shows distinct differences between freshman and senior years. For Statement A (avoid working in a non-Christian business), the most common response was “strongly disagree,” although a much larger proportion of seniors chose this response (69 percent of seniors, compared with 55 percent of freshmen). For the other three statements, not only was “strongly agree” the most common response for freshmen, but a much larger proportion of freshmen chose this response than did seniors. For Statement B (view organization as place to grow professionally), although most students in both groups chose either “strongly agree” or “agree” (about 70 percent of both freshmen and seniors), a much larger proportion of freshmen chose “strongly agree” (46 percent of freshmen, compared with 34 percent of seniors). For Statement C (view organization as a mission field), not only did 73 percent of the freshmen choose “strongly agree” (compared with 48 percent of the seniors), but almost 92 percent of the freshmen chose either “strongly agree” or “agree” (compared with 80 percent of the seniors). For Statement D (try to influence company decisions), while “strongly agree” was the most common freshman response (42 percent),

only 19 percent of the seniors chose “strongly agree.” Almost 68 percent of freshmen chose either “strongly agree” or “agree,” compared with 53 percent of seniors.

Two statistical tests were run on the levels of agreement with the four statements to test similarity between the freshmen and the senior responses. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine whether the relative frequency distributions of the two groups were identical, and the Chi-Square Test of Independence tested whether the students’ year (freshman or senior) was independent of the level of agreement with the four statements.

Results for the Mann-Whitney U test showed a robust statistical significant difference between the two groups’ responses for Statement A (p-value = .0007), for Statement C (p-value = .0000), and for Statement D (p-value = .0000); the results for Statement B results were also statistically significantly different but not quite as robust, with a p-value = .0883.

The results from the Chi-Square Test of Independence were very robust. For all four Statements, the year of the student and the level of agreement were not independent; p-values for all four Statements were either .000 or .001. These Chi-Square results indicate that the students did statistically significantly change their opinions about each of the four Statements between freshman year and senior year.

Statement “most agree with” and “most disagree with.” In addition to asking the students to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the four Statements, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 2, students were also asked to identify which of the four Statements “most agreed” with their “opinion of how a Wheaton College graduate should view a career in the business world upon graduation” and with which Statement they “least agreed.” Table 2 shows the results from these questions. Statement C (view the organization as a mission field) was the view with which the majority of freshmen and seniors “most agree”, although more freshmen (75 percent) chose Statement C than did seniors (56 percent). By senior year, 19 percent fewer students chose Statement C as “most agree with”; about three-fourths of this group switched to Statement B (view organization as place to grow professionally) and about one-fourth switched to Statement D (try to influence company decisions). Both groups overwhelmingly (94 percent of freshmen and 93 percent of seniors) “least agreed” with Statement A (avoid working in a non-Christian business).

Figure 3 graphically depicts the change in responses between freshman and senior years for Statement “most agree” with and Statement “least agree” with. For freshmen, Statement C (view organization as a mission field) was

the overwhelmingly first-choice statement with which most freshmen “most agree” (75 percent). Only 16 percent chose Statement B (view organization as a place to grow professionally), and less than 9 percent chose Statement D (try to influence company decisions). By senior year, however, the responses are markedly different. Although Statement C is still the most-agreed with Statement (56 percent compared with 75 percent of freshmen), Statement B (view organization as a place to grow professionally) was chosen by almost twice as many seniors as freshmen (30 percent, compared to 16 percent); and Statement D (try to influence company decisions) was chosen by over 13 percent of seniors compared to less than 9 percent of freshmen. For Statement “least agree with,” the responses are virtually the same for the two groups of students.

The Chi-Square Test of Independent was again used to test where the students’ year was independent of which Statement they “most agree with” and “least agree with.” For Statement “most agree with,” the test result was robust ($p\text{-value} = .000$), which means that students’ responses are dependent on their year; in other words, the freshmen’s responses are statistically significantly different from the seniors’ responses. For Statement “least agree with,” however, the Chi-Square test statistic showed that students’ responses were not dependent on year; their responses did not statistically significantly change between freshman and senior year.

Conclusion

Even though the Mann-Whitney U and Chi-Square Test of Independence results show statistically significant different responses for levels of agreement for the four Statements, the most striking difference between freshmen and seniors was in their choice of Statement “most agree with.” Although Statement C (view organization as a mission field) was first choice for the majority of both groups of students, a sizeable proportion of the students changed their opinion between freshman and senior years and chose as first choice either Statement B (view organization as a place to grow professionally) or Statement D (try to influence company decisions).

That three-fourths of all freshmen chose Statement C (view organization as mission field) as the Statement with which they “most agree” is not surprising, since many Wheaton College students come from conservative, evangelical backgrounds; the view expressed in Statement C is probably a reflection of these students’ very passionate faith upon entering a Christian college and their strong desire to serve Christ with their life choices.

These survey results would most likely be somewhat discouraging to Niebuhr, who believed that the primary

Christian worldview should be that of “Christ the transformer of culture,” which in a business context implies influencing and changing organizational behaviors and decisions so that they reflect Christian values and principles, which closely fits with Statement D. However, Niebuhr would probably be encouraged that as students progressed through their college education, more of them chose Statement D by senior year (9 percent of freshmen and 13 percent of seniors).

Niebuhr would probably also be alarmed at the degree to which students accept the business world as a place to succeed professionally as long as faith and values are not compromised (Statement B) and especially the degree to which so many students accepted that Statement as “most agree with” by senior year (16 percent of freshmen compared with 30 percent of seniors). Although Statement B was meant to reflect Niebuhr’s “Christ and culture in paradox, “ or a dualist view of the world in which a Christian lives life in two spheres – religious/spiritual and vocation/secular, he might argue that the sentiment expressed in Statement B more accurately reflects “Christ of culture,” as he might legitimately be concerned that entering the business world as a neophyte with such an attitude is but the first step towards the slippery slope of living a life with no clear demarcation between secular and Christian principles and lifestyles.

On the other hand, with more than 90 percent of both groups of students choosing Statement A (avoid working in a non-Christian business) as “least agree with”, many Christians already in the business world might welcome this affirmation by evangelical students that the business world is not such an evil place after all and that a person can both serve God and be legitimately successful in the business world without the vocation being the primary focus of his/her Christian ministry and service. Probably discouraging to Christians in the business world, however, is that these results also mean that more than 5 percent of both groups did not pick that Statement as “least agree with.” Yet, other Christians might have expected that four years at an evangelical Christian college might have decreased, not increased, the percentage of students who view the business world as a place to grow professionally, as long as faith is not compromised.

A major, unanswered question arising from the results of this study is not knowing what is happening between freshman and senior years that caused so many students, all professing Christians, to change their view of the business world from that of a mission field to one of using the workplace to grow professionally as long as faith and values are not compromised. This increasing acceptance of the business world as students move toward

graduation is intriguing, primarily because the reason for the shifting views is unknown. Are students losing their “fire” for working for the Lord in their secular vocations? Are seniors more accepting of the business world because that is where they anticipate finding post-college employment? Are students perceiving that this dualistic view is one that Christians must adopt in order to be accepted and to succeed in the business world? Do students know of Christians who have been able to “transform” business culture? Are students perceiving the futility of trying to change business norms and practices? These are all questions that beg further research.

References

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Figure 1

Survey

The purpose of this survey is to learn Christians' opinions about working in the business world. Please be honest in your responses; results will be anonymous.

Major? _____ Male/Female? _____

Year in School (Freshman, Senior)? _____

I. Please indicate the degree to which you agree/disagree with each of the following statements by putting the appropriate numeral in front of the statement:

1	2	3	4	5	6
strongly agree	agree	somewhat agree	somewhat disagree	disagree	strongly disagree

- _____ A. Christians should try to avoid working in a non-Christian business (Christian values are not explicitly incorporated into company decisions).
- _____ B. Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a place to succeed and grow professionally, as long as their faith is not compromised or weakened.
- _____ C. Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a "mission field" in which they can share their faith with co-workers, etc., when opportunities arise.
- _____ D. Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a place in which they can try to influence company decisions so that they reflect Christian principles.

II. Which of the above four statements most agrees with your opinion of how a Wheaton College graduate should view a career in the business world upon graduation?

Please rank-order all of the above four statements (A,B,C,D).

1. _____ (most agrees with my opinion)

2. _____
3. _____
4. _____ (least agrees with my opinion)

Table 1

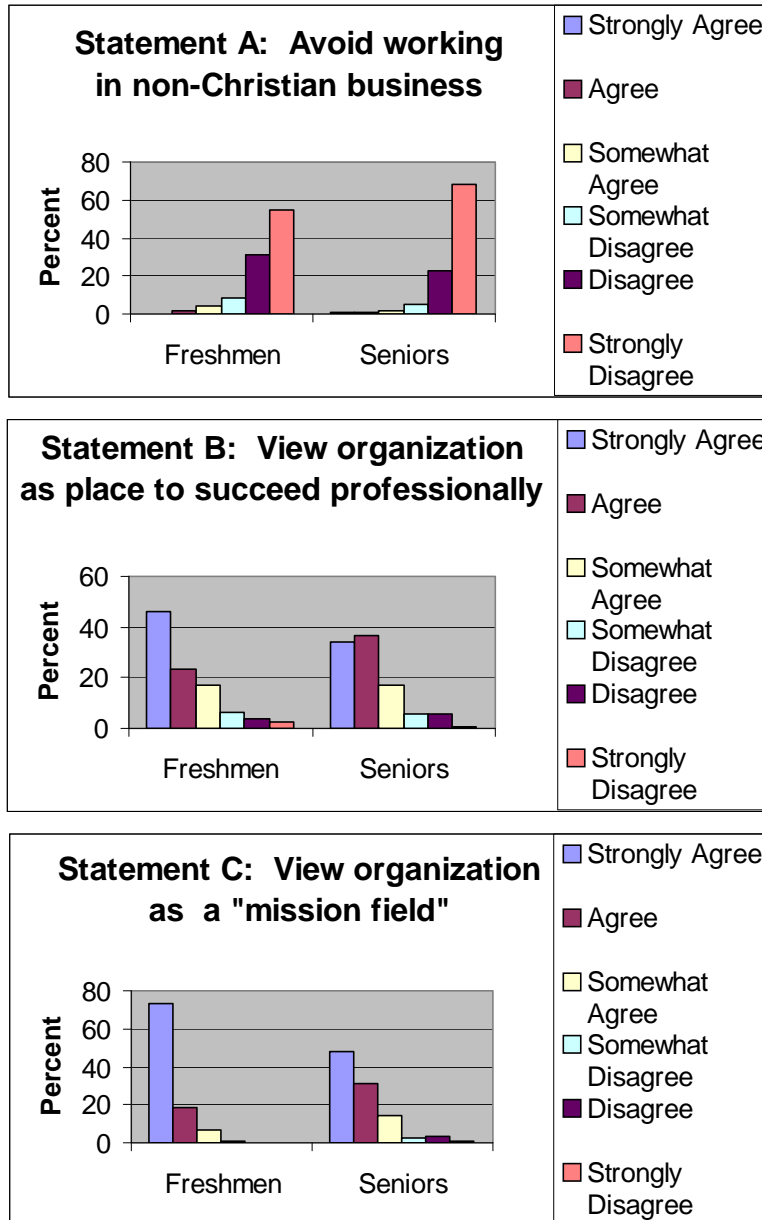
Levels of Agreement for Statements A, B, C, D

Mean Level of Responses
(1 = strongly agree; 6 = strongly disagree)

	Statement A	Statement B	Statement C	Statement D
Freshmen	5.33	2.07	1.37	2.13
Seniors	5.54	2.14	1.83	2.53

- Statement A: Christians should try to avoid working in a non-Christian business (Christian values are not explicitly incorporated into company decisions).
- Statement B: Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a place to succeed and grow professionally, as long as their faith is not compromised or weakened.
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Figure 2



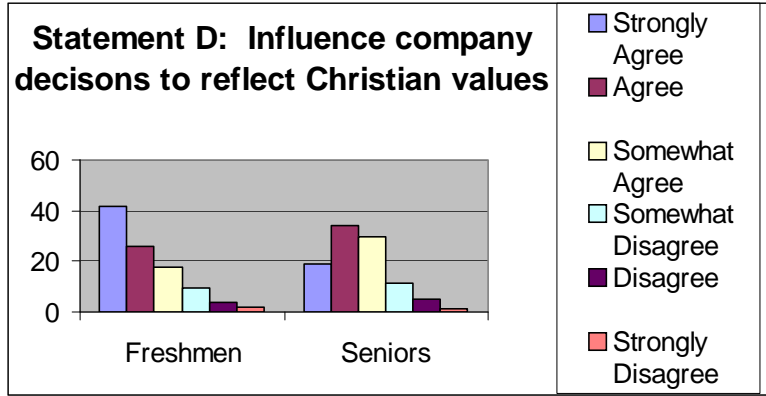


Table 2

Statement “Most Agree With”

	Statement A	Statement B	Statement C	Statement D
Freshmen	0.27%	16.03%	75.00%	8.70%
Seniors	0.89%	29.97%	55.79%	13.35%

Statement “Least Agree With”

	Statement A	Statement B	Statement C	Statement D
Freshmen	94.29%	3.53%	2.17%	0.00%
Seniors	92.58%	2.97%	0.59%	3.86%

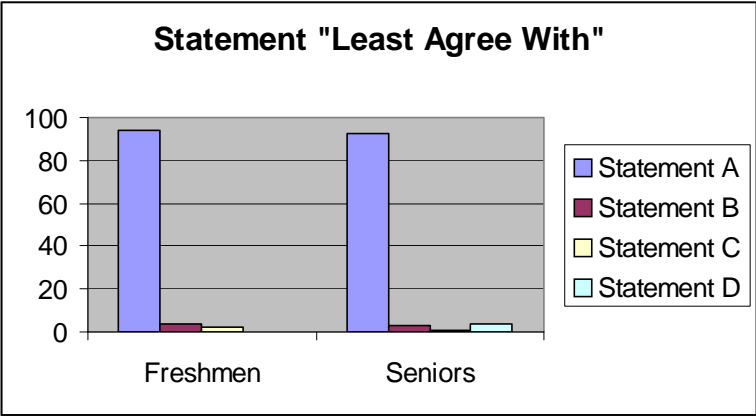
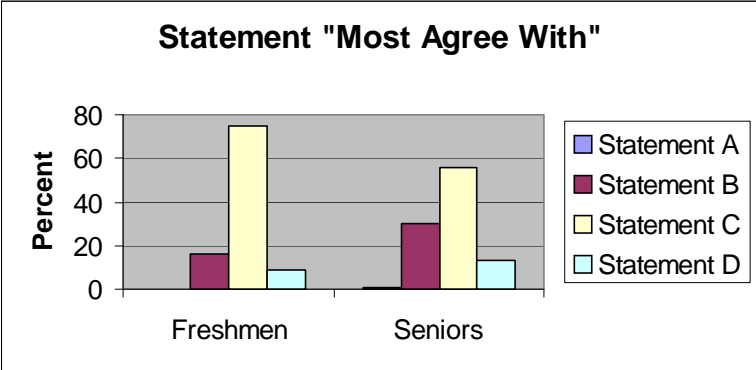
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Figure 3



Statement A: Christians should try to avoid working in a non-Christian business

(Christian values are not explicitly incorporated into company decisions).

- Statement B: Christians who work in a non-Christian business should view the organization as a place to succeed and grow professionally, as long as their faith is not compromised or weakened.
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