

A “Perfect Standard?” Exploring Perceptions of Student Life and Culture at Wheaton College

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Relationships among college students develop from shared experiences, mutual interests, and a common environment. As college students seek to establish their independence, make new friends, and master complicated new surroundings, they are drawn together and create a new social cohesiveness.¹ The bonds that are formed develop into common understandings and working agreements as to what constitutes proper and reasonable behavior for students.² Among other understandings, college students develop shared perspectives on the relative importance of academic performance, extracurricular activities, social life and work.³

This relational web of peer interactions and shared perspectives contributes to the formation of student culture. Broadly stated, student culture can be understood as the values, beliefs, attitudes, rituals, and activities that shape how students interact with and make meaning of their collegiate world. It exerts a powerful force on many aspects of college life, including what a student learns, because it influences the kinds of people with whom a student spends time and the values and attitudes to which the student is exposed.⁴ An institution’s student culture shapes students’ perceptions and behaviors in multiple respects, influencing their patterns of eating, sleeping, studying, and socializing; contributing to their tacit understandings about what activities on campus are status-enhancing or status-degrading; and informing them of the norms that determine acceptable behavior in and out of the classroom.⁵ In brief, student culture becomes an all important measuring stick by which students evaluate what is useful or important in their collegiate environment.

While a variety of factors help to shape student culture in college and university environments, institutional factors are among the most influential. The distinctiveness of an institution’s mission can dictate or influence the type of student who will enroll at that institution. The more distinctive the institutional ethos, the more likely that constraints on student culture will be felt. Institutions with distinctive missions frequently attract more homogenous student populations which, in turn, mediate the types of student perspectives represented.

Interestingly, although several studies of student culture exist in the literature,⁶ only limited attention has been given to understanding the shape and contours of student life and culture at Evangelical Christian colleges.⁷ This study represents one attempt to fill that void by describing various lived realities that animate the student culture at an academically elite, Evangelical Christian liberal arts institution: Wheaton College.

Why study Wheaton? As an Evangelical Christian liberal arts institution, Wheaton is among one of several distinctive, special mission institutions in the U.S. higher education system. These institutions are most clearly identified by their membership in the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities, an association created for the promotion and support of Christian higher education that currently includes ninety-one U.S. colleges and universities. Whereas there is great diversity among Evangelical Christian liberal arts schools, all share a unique mission among institutions of higher education — the integration of Christian faith with all aspects of life and learning as expressed through a liberal arts education.⁸ Additionally, all emphasize in varying degrees core Evangelical Christian religious convictions, such as a personalized commitment and response to the gospel message of Jesus Christ as well as a view of the Bible as the divinely inspired, infallible, authoritative guide for faith and practice.⁹

Through this exploratory study, we attempt to illustrate how two intertwined features of one Evangelical Christian college's mission — Wheaton's Evangelical Christian religious heritage and its reputation for academic excellence — inform the distinctiveness of its student culture and students' responses to it. More specifically, we identify and describe the assumptions, values, norms, and behaviors that inform and animate Wheaton's student culture, a highly-selective, residential liberal arts institution of approximately 2,250 traditionally-aged undergraduate students in Wheaton, Illinois.

Guiding Perspective

Culture is implicit: cultural dynamics can be very complex and yet meanings and understandings attached to a culture can be hidden, even to its members. For this reason, it is helpful to investigate the multiple layers of culture. Accordingly, we used Schein's¹⁰ cultural properties framework as a guiding perspective in this study.

Schein¹¹ separated the myriad properties that constitute culture into three interrelated levels, ranging from more visible dimensions to those aspects of culture not immediately apparent. These three levels include: artifacts, strategic perspectives and values, and basic assumptions and beliefs. These distinctions are commonly identified in many studies of culture.¹²

Artifacts (physical, verbal, behavioral) compose the most visible level of culture and include such properties as language, rituals, ceremonies, signs, and symbols.¹³ Perspectives are normative behavior patterns that define expectations and give direction to how things are done.¹⁴ They provide a sense of what is desired and what is considered taboo within a culture. Strategic values are the ideals most important to a particular group or context. They provide a sense of “what should be” as compared to “what is.”¹⁵ Finally, basic assumptions and beliefs make up the core of a group’s culture. They are the tacit beliefs that members use to define their roles, their relationships to others, and the nature of the organization in which they live.¹⁶ They are foundational to a culture’s meaning, defining the nature of human relationships, truth, and human activity for that culture. Because assumptions are taken for granted and are so basic to the reality formation of a culture, it is often quite difficult to decipher their full meaning.

We use Schein’s framework to explore the dominant student culture at Wheaton College in four interrelated spheres of student life: religious, academic, social, and co-curricular. In each, we analyze how the assumptions of Evangelical Christianity and academic excellence exert a steady and formative influence on the expected daily behaviors of students within Wheaton’s student culture, as well as the various ways in which students choose to respond to these assumptions and expectations.

Method

In this study we sought to comprehend the complex nuances of Wheaton’s student culture through a phenomenological approach to inquiry. This research stance allowed us to focus first and foremost on understanding how students actively interpret and attach meaning to various beliefs, symbols, activities, and events that define the student culture at an Evangelical Christian college. Every attempt was made to understand students’ lived experiences with the culture from their own standpoints, or what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz¹⁷ refers to as “the native’s point of view.”

Multiple data collection techniques were used in this study. Interviewing was the primary means of data collection. Forty individual interviews with currently enrolled Wheaton students were conducted between January, 1996 and February, 1997. On average, each interview lasted sixty to ninety minutes and was audio-taped and transcribed.

Interviewees were initially identified by various residence hall assistants, who were asked to nominate students who met several purposive sampling criteria.¹⁸ After this initial selection of interviewees, snowball sampling was used to select additional study participants. After each interview, participants were asked to recommend two or three students whose per-

spectives were similar to their own and two or three students whose perspectives differed from their own. In this way, attempts were made to gather information from as many different perspectives as possible.¹⁹

Individual interviews occurred throughout the research process and were used both to discover aspects of culture and to address particular topics needing clarification or further investigation. Representative interview questions used included: “If I were a high school student who was interested in attending Wheaton College but wanted to know more about the place, how would you describe the college to me? How about student life?” “What’s really important to students at Wheaton College? What values or assumptions significantly impact student life? How have you seen these values or assumptions expressed among students?” “Before coming to Wheaton, what were some of your expectations about college life on an Evangelical Christian campus? How has your experience affirmed or altered these expectations?”

In addition to interviews, various documents were analyzed to obtain information, gain impressions, and generate more focused interview questions regarding student and institutional culture. We relied heavily on three sources of written documentation: stories in the weekly student newspaper, impressionistic accounts of student life and culture that had been written by several Wheaton College resident assistants as part of their annual training program, and various institutional documents, including student and faculty handbooks, college promotional materials, college mission statements, and institutional histories.

Finally, although participant observation was not a substantial part of our data collection effort, one member of the research team spent time observing student behavior in the residence halls, the student union, the main athletic center, the conservatory, and the chapel. Notes on these observations were likewise included in the study’s research log.²⁰

Throughout the duration of this study, data analysis followed a modified version of the constant comparative method.²¹ With its emphasis on continuous comparisons of data unit to data unit, this inductive analytical method seeks to discern patterns or emerging themes which describe and explain the material under consideration. Themes that were consistently verified in the data and across data sources (interviews, documents, and fieldnotes) were retained. Eventually, four core thematic “categories” emerged to describe Wheaton’s student culture: the religious life, the academic life, the social life, and the life of activities. Several subthemes within each of these core categories further detailed the lived realities of student life and culture in Wheaton’s student culture. Finally, in the latter stages of data analysis, Schein’s²² “cultural properties” analytical framework was applied to dis-

cern and highlight those key assumptions, strategic values and perspectives, and artifacts that cut across the four segments of student life and culture at Wheaton College.

Student Culture at Wheaton College

What is the dominant student culture at Wheaton College? Grounded in what we learned from interviewees and our review of various documents, we identified four interrelated dimensions of student life at Wheaton: the religious life; the academic life; the social life; the life of activities. Within each of these dimensions, we came to understand that students at Wheaton College reflect broader trends associated with traditionally-aged college students along with distinctively Christian commitments as appropriated from the culture of Evangelical Christianity.

The Religious Life

At Wheaton College, many students are passionate about their faith and eagerly participate in religious activities. Student-led groups related to religion include Discipleship small groups, World Christian Fellowship, Christian Service Council, and many summer ministry teams. These organized activities exist alongside numerous student-generated Bible studies, worship times, prayer meetings, ministry teams, and discussion groups. The religious life of students is a central focus of the dominant student culture. In this section, we explore the role that religion plays in the student culture, paying special attention to how students respond to and enact religious commitments in their daily lives.

A “Love for Christ:” Student Responses to the Religious Life

It is nearly impossible for students to participate in student life without responding in some way to Wheaton’s Christian ethos. Not only must students sign a statement of faith before they matriculate, but once on campus, they must also attend mandatory chapel services three times a week.²³ Although outsiders might find these stipulations burdensome, the overwhelming majority of Wheaton students do not. In 1995, 86 percent of the entering freshmen cited religious affiliation/orientation as the primary reason they selected Wheaton as their college of choice.²⁴ And while students’ religious commitments and lifestyle choices may differ, interviewed students left little doubt that almost all reveled in a shared, common love for Jesus Christ. As a first-year student explained:

Wheaton students are not all stereotypical Christian college students. We are all different but with one commonality: our love for Christ. [I know I chose Wheaton because] I wanted to be able to concentrate on other things like my spiritual growth, not downfall. And I [wanted] to share at least one common interest with every student — my love for Jesus Christ and my desire to serve him.

This “love for Christ,” respondents emphasized, was an accepted and expected norm within the dominant student culture at Wheaton College. With 98 percent of Wheaton students identifying themselves as born-again Christians,²⁵ it was not altogether surprising that Christianity is a central and unifying focus of Wheaton’s student culture. With few exceptions, students are, in the words of one senior we interviewed, very “interested in finding God’s will and finding out how they can grow as Christians and in their academic knowledge of the Bible and how they can live this out” in their daily lives.

Student Enactment of Religious Life: An Emphasis on Religious Activities and Personal Morality

In comparison to other college students, the religious activities of Wheaton students are very prevalent. In addition to required chapel, many students choose to attend weekly church services and get involved with any number of ministry opportunities. Students also give special credence to some of the basic spiritual disciplines of Bible reading and prayer. Daily devotions are a priority for many.

The religious commitment of Wheaton students is likewise expressed through their emphasis on personal morality. Evangelical Christianity calls for obedience to biblical norms, especially as exemplified through Christ Himself. How one lives and what choices one makes are viewed as indicators of one’s commitment and response to God’s love. These are, in Evangelical Christian circles, referred to as the “fruits of the spirit.” In keeping with Evangelical religious tenets, most of the Wheaton students we interviewed gave special attention to personal character traits and lifestyle decisions. Most had a fairly serious outlook on life and a strong sense of personal responsibility to the College community. As a senior said of his peers at Wheaton:

I expected students to be Christian and therefore basically good people — the implications being very widespread.

Their mouths would be cleaner; their attitudes would be a lot friendlier than what you would find at a public school. I think these [expectations] were confirmed. People at Wheaton for the most part are good people and desire the best for themselves and others. And I think there is a kind of “good person” mentality around here. And it’s not just because people are just faking it.

In Wheaton’s student culture, Christian commitment to personal morality was also reflected in what students chose not to do. Wheaton has moral and cultural prohibitions against certain types of “wrong” and “worldly” behavior. In addition to some of the biblical prescriptions against lying, stealing, and premarital sex, students also encounter some of the College’s cultural stipulations related to swearing, drinking, drug use, and dancing. Even among the minority of students we spoke with who chose to ignore or disobey many of these prohibitions, there was at least a realization among them that they were violating a norm – a realization grounded largely in their peers’ looks of disapproval or verbal reminders that they were “breaking the rules.”

Overall, the students we interviewed displayed a different disposition in their personal morality and in their participation in religious activities. These differences reflected a commitment – in varying degrees – to Evangelical Christian assumptions. Respondents suggested that for a majority of Wheaton students, faith is important, particularly when it is demonstrated through visible, public actions.

Student Enactment of Religious Life: Difficulties Incumbent with Religious Commitments

The expectation to “be real with one’s faith,” however, was often a double-edged sword for students. Several interviewees stressed that the pressure to demonstrate religious maturity was so intense that many of their peers felt compelled to achieve the appearance of “looking like a good Christian.” As this senior explained:

There’s a real focus on becoming spiritually mature [here]. Those things are good if done as a means, as long as they’re a means of saying “we want God to be glorified.” But I think it becomes “you must be spiritually mature to be satisfied.” So I think there’s almost an implicit idea [among students at Wheaton] that God won’t really like you unless

you do your devotions in the morning, unless you do service, unless you become spiritually mature, because there's such a push for doing all these things. And it's not being done in a way of saying "God loves you." Especially at a college like this, we need to hear the doctrine of grace a lot more because we will very naturally fall into the mind-set — without even realizing it — that we set out to earn God's acceptance of us by doing good things. So, because of the achievement orientation of the college in general, there's a real feeling of, "unless you do your devotions, unless you do your ministries, God's not going to be loving you quite as much."

The result of this "achievement orientation," interviewees explained, was a preoccupation among students with maintaining an image of "having it all together." Outward appearance became a basis for value judgments among students. Respondents spoke of "playing the game" or "putting on masks" — fervent attempts to hide or deny reality and provide an appearance that offered a sense of religious achievement or "maturity."

Hence, while interviewees reported that Wheaton students were frequently involved in religious activities, they speculated that their involvement had as much — or more — to do with conforming to an expectation within the student culture to "appear spiritually mature" than with anything else. This pressure often led students to present themselves in ways that were safely within the boundaries of "acceptable Christian behavior." An unwritten code of conduct developed from an emphasis on personal morality, and many students displayed tendencies of either conforming mindlessly to this code or, as other students reported, taking the code too seriously. This latter response was perhaps more troublesome than the former, since these students placed inordinate pressure on themselves to act in certain ways that would provide visible evidence to themselves, others, and God that they were being responsible with their religious commitments. Elaborating on this point, a junior stated:

What's really important for students is living a Christ-like life. That's what it comes down to, and anything that can be construed as not doing that is titled "bad." And anything you're doing toward that goal is "good." Unfortunately, sometimes that will lead to students putting on a totally false front and creation of almost a double identity because they're too afraid to be vulnerable and admit that

they're not living a Christ-like life and are struggling with this or that sin.

In keeping with this "perfect standard," respondents indicated that students also hid personal difficulties from their peers. Aware of the pervasive norm within the student culture to "have it all together," students feared that revelations about personal problems would be received by others as an admission of personal failure and, usually, spiritual failure. "That's a lot of the Wheaton attitude," a freshman said, "to keep it to yourself and deal with it on your own. They would never admit to that, but Christianity in general tends to put a mask on things. You have to say that God is taking care of everything."

The challenge of putting on a false front and conforming to an expected image was often very difficult for students to handle. Some were able to filter through the emphasis on an Evangelical Christian image and find genuine substance to their faith, even though they still "come out on the right side of the fence." Others reacted against what they saw as hypocrisy in students and a perceived facade which advocated a "don't worry, be happy" attitude. Yet by becoming less inhibited about their lifestyle, they struggled to find a "spiritual niche" and often resorted to a calloused or apathetic outlook on their religious experience. This student's frustration and agony was apparent as she tried to articulate the tensions she had experienced over her own spirituality and identity within the boundaries of Wheaton's student culture:

There seems to be this false sort of happiness in Christ. Everybody smiles at each other and everybody is fine. But there's just a sense of unreality to that. It just seems like, "but wait, you don't understand that people here are getting pregnant, there's homosexuals [here], people are struggling with drugs, they're struggling with lots of things, and yet everybody is happy." . . . The more I'm here the more I realize there isn't a typical — but there's an overt — sense that everybody's really busy, everybody's really smart, but everybody's happy. You may struggle, but you ask your brothers and sisters to pray for you, and things will be o.k. But the reality is that most of my friends are in therapy. It's not always that easy. Some people have come full circle and have found spirituality in other places. . . . But I haven't found that spiritual niche yet. . . . Here I am about to be a senior and I still haven't figured out

what I believe. You'd think after all this time at Wheaton, spiritual things would start to make sense to me, but they haven't.

This student's frustration over not having yet found a "spiritual niche" provides evidence of how pervasive and penetrating the commitment to religion is within Wheaton's student culture. Students in this study were deeply concerned about their religious lives and spiritual commitments. Most choose Wheaton for these very reasons — they wanted a Christian educational experience and opportunities to develop their understandings and commitments to Christianity. What many may not have anticipated, however, was that the normative pressures to live the "fruits of the spirit" within a high achieving, Evangelical Christian student culture were many, and that these pressures could affect their religious and spiritual responses in unforeseen ways.

The Academic Life

According to data collected by the Higher Education Research Institute,²⁶ in a list of 19 different choices only "religious orientation" scored above "academic reputation" as reasons given by first year students for attending Wheaton College. Throughout the fieldwork for this study, many interviewees underscored the importance of academics among students and faculty at Wheaton. Similar to Becker's²⁷ contentions, those Wheaton students we interviewed obtained a sense of accomplishment in their college experience by focusing upon academic achievement and success. In this section, we explore the academic life in Wheaton's student culture, focusing on the prevailing achievement orientation among students and how this value was most commonly expressed through their preoccupation with academic performance.

Academic Excellence: The Prevailing Emphasis on Academic Achievement and Success

Although many activities consume students' time and energy at Wheaton, few were mentioned more frequently than studying and earning good grades by our interviewees. Time and again students stressed the value that they placed on academic achievement as they spoke of their own — and others' — desire to succeed in college. As a freshman told us:

Generally speaking, academics is all people do around here. Compared to what my other friends going to other colleges

say, the majority of things that happen here revolve around academics. People are always studying. Play is definitely a second emphasis. . . . Students are serious-minded when it comes to academics, and they want to go far.

Students' achievement orientation was reinforced by the academic reputation of the institution. Comments from faculty and staff stating that Wheaton students are the "cream of the crop" with increasingly higher scholastic aptitude test (SAT) and American college test (ACT) scores each year did not go unnoticed by interviewees. They took to heart many of the comments about the caliber of their peers, and strove to achieve the same distinction. "A really strong success ethic is important here," said a senior. "There's a lot of emphasis placed on academic success, and emphasis on sort of the balanced Christian life — academic success coupled with being really ardent for Christianity, and somehow doing both really well. So student life can sometimes be pretty competitive as a result."

As this last interviewee's comments suggest, students' Evangelical Christian backgrounds likely played at least a supporting role in nurturing a competitive, success-oriented student culture at Wheaton. Schooled in the Protestant work ethic, many students believed that they had disciplined themselves to achieve success. As this senior explained:

I come from a Pennsylvania German Mennonite kind of culture, so all the time growing up we heard the phrase, "if it's worth doing, it's worth doing right." So there's this work ethic of demanding nothing less than your best. I took that with me into academics. I could settle for a "B" but if I just worked an hour more, I know I could get the "A" so I may as well just do it — sacrifice a little sleep, but get it done.

Interviewees told us that students who worked hard had the habit of constantly looking for areas in which to improve. As a result, work was never finished; there was always more than can be done. Because this belief was shared by many, students reported a pressure within the student culture to always be "doing more." Students who failed to meet prescribed standards expressed feelings of guilt for somehow not working hard enough. "Most students feel really bad if they don't fulfill their work," stated a freshman. "The majority of people I know always do their work and get good grades. But those that don't, it's always a very subtle, under-their-breath kind of thing that 'I just failed a test,' or 'I can't hack it.' Then, suddenly, either they've dropped out or you don't really hear about it."

According to our respondents, Wheaton students valued academic achievement deeply and took their roles as students seriously. The student culture reinforced a positive outlook on academics, and cultivated an intensity for student achievement and success. Time and again, we learned that being a “good, Christian student” was an ideal to which most Wheaton students aspired, and it was an ideal that students felt much pressure to aggressively pursue.

The Prevalent Perspective on Academic Excellence: Students’ Focus on Grades

For the majority of Wheaton’s students, acquiring “good grades” served as the standard definition of academic success. Learning, growth, maturity — these were important to students, but as a senior remarked, they were only “incidental” to the more pressing objective of obtaining an impressive academic transcript. Another student elaborated on this attitude in this way:

What’s important to students is trying to get good grades. I say that rather than saying Wheaton College students are concerned with learning and improving their minds. . . . In terms of grades, there’s just a bigger concern that the grade is the appearance of what I’ve done, so in a certain sense, most people would rather have this nice mark on this paper to show someone, to show that “Look, I got an ‘A’ in this class so I know what I’m talking about.” That’s quite a bit easier than sort of becoming that person who displays an excellence in understanding.

Many interviewees were not shy to admit that getting good grades was more important to them and their peers than “really learning something.” From their perspective, a grade provided immediate feedback and, at times, immediate gratification. It served as a powerful symbol of ability and achievement.

When asked, respondents often admitted to feeling guilty about playing the “high grades” game. Most confessed that learning was a “higher calling” and should rightly be the focus of students’ attention. Yet many reported that they continually struggled to shake what Becker²⁸ refers to as the “grade point average perspective.” In the words of a freshman we interviewed:

For me, I just like to get good grades. I think grades can reflect a lot. Here I think the fear of getting a bad grade is

bigger than learning. Because if I don't learn, that's one thing, but is that really going to be such a big deal? But I know that's probably not a good attitude to have, because it is a big deal. Because if I get good grades, when I go home I know I can get into graduate school. That's one very important thing. So grades are kind of getting more and more important to me, especially as I think about graduation and graduate school after Wheaton. Students here also go after the grade. I've never seen so many students so on the ball. I went to the best prep school [in her state], but here the students are even more amazing. I see so many doing extra credit work because that's what you need to do to get a good grade.

Accordingly, respondents observed that most of their peers succumbed to the pressures of perceived external forces. Many did whatever they could to earn good grades and meet external standards for academic excellence. Behind this competitive drive often lurked a general fear of failure. To be successful in life and avoid failure, interviewees said they often felt that they must demonstrate competency — a competency most easily identified through a grade point average. They were motivated less by personal goals and more by those they perceive others have demanded of them.

What extrinsic pressures compelled students to strive for high grades? In analyzing our interview material, students repeatedly mentioned three pressures: meeting graduate school admissions standards, meeting employers' expectations in order to ensure their future employability, and meeting parental and broader Christian community expectations.

Most students at Wheaton College have high educational and vocational aspirations. Aside from the expectations they have for themselves, many students stressed that they felt pressured by faculty, staff, and even fellow students to continue their schooling beyond their bachelor's degree. The vast majority of students we interviewed, for instance, expressed an interest in earning an advanced educational degree — preferably from a reputable graduate or professional school known for its high admission and academic standards — and earning top grades was essential to achieving this goal. Moreover, many students stated that they believed grades would be an important “selling point” in marketing themselves to future employers.

Pressure from parents and the larger Evangelical Christian community also contributed to students' preoccupation with earning good grades. “Grade point averages (GPA) tend to be the final measure sometimes with par-

ents,” a junior told us. “Parents can’t see some of the great talks that you have in your dorm room, and they don’t really know what you mean when you say that you’ve studied really hard for certain tests . . . but they can see a point value from a GPA. So if students are pressured by their parents, it’s probably the pressure that’s applied with [the] GPA.”

In addition to the aforementioned pressures was the religious expectation on campus that students should live out the “fruits of the spirit” by developing and using their God-given talents to glorify “Christ and His Kingdom.” As noted earlier, the students we interviewed at Wheaton College took their Christianity seriously and, at times, used high grades as a proxy of their religious commitment, attaching a kind of moral quality to their achievement. In commenting on this issue, a sophomore nicely summarized the various pressures that Wheaton students experienced within the student culture to “perform” well academically:

A grade is important because no matter how you put it, that “A” signifies that I’m excelling so therefore I am not a loser. In many students’ minds, you can’t be both a Christian and a loser. You have to excel in everything. And if you’re not, then that’s one area of sin in your life that you need to conquer. And also there’s the emphasis on getting into graduate school and getting a job — a job that can make you money and live like your parents live. . . . When you’re put into an environment like this, you start conforming even if you don’t want to, like me. You can get pressure upon yourself and be like, “O.k., this is what you can and cannot do.” That can be because you don’t want to be mediocre.

To be sure, interviewees pointed out that there were students at Wheaton College who valued learning for its own sake. But these students were clearly in the minority. Most students who enroll at Wheaton have an intimate knowledge of academic success from their high school years and the benefits which accompany a strong work ethic focused on earning good grades. When combined with the pressures noted above, the college’s distinction as the “Harvard of all Christian Colleges,” and students’ overwhelming preoccupations with academic, vocational, and spiritual success, it is not difficult to understand why academic achievement and performance were described as pervasive values within Wheaton’s student culture.

The Social Life

The desire to build and maintain a meaningful social life was a third prominent feature of our exploration of the student culture at Wheaton College. Students considered it very important to carry on relationships with their peers in ways that provided tangible demonstrations of their growing social maturity. Ideally, they hoped for perfect friendships and romantic relationships grounded in Christian fellowship and camaraderie. In practice, they took their interactions seriously and dedicated significant time to fostering these relationships. In this section, we explore the social life of students at Wheaton College, devoting special attention to the critical role that friendships and opposite sex romantic relationships play in the student culture.

Developing Friendships: The Value of a Christian Community

Those we interviewed at Wheaton College emphasized that close, genuine friendships among students were possible because of their assumptions about the homogeneity of a Christian institution. Shared religious commitments were expected to provide a stable foundation for the social bonds of friendship. An upperclassman, for instance, observed that Wheaton students were “more sensitive to building relationships” because they “come in with the mindset that everyone’s experience is close enough to mine [that] relating to each other shouldn’t be that difficult.”

There’s kind of the assumption that everyone is Christian, that everyone has basically the same beliefs as I do, and for that matter, that it shouldn’t be difficult to build relationships, as opposed to coming out of a public school setting where many were kind of shunned by the “in” crowd or kind of overlooked because of their faith. I think there’s kind of the assumption when students come here that things will be a lot more relaxed and easier. A lot of freshmen on my floor anticipated getting a core group of Christian friends — that was an exciting thing to look forward to.

Sharing a common Christian bond with peers appeared to provide students with a certain comfort zone that eased their anxieties about developing a sense of belonging and social acceptance in college. This common ground not only helped to promote feelings of familiarity and belonging among those we interviewed, but it also contributed to the development of the

“kind” of friendship students expected among “brothers and sisters in Christ.” As two upperclass students told us:

[Student One]: My friendships here on this campus compared to friendships among my friends at other schools who aren't Christians are different. . . . There's a common bond in Christ that allows friends here to understand certain things. I can share things with my non-Christian friends, but if I'm struggling with something my Christian friends are going to understand that, even the semantics.

[Student Two]: I didn't have any Christian friends in high school. So when I came here, it was the greatest thing, because there was a great support system with all the friends you can make. You can sit down and pray with your friends, but it goes deeper than that. With your non-Christian friends it's just kind of joy, love, peace, happiness. But when you're friends with a brother or sister in Christ, it's a lot deeper than that. . . . Christian friendship is everlasting.

Respondents reported that for many students at Wheaton, encountering and living among “believers” in a Christian setting was a welcome relief from the “secular” world. Most took comfort in knowing that they would not have to defend themselves and their faith, paving the way for friendships and contributing to a sense of Christian community on campus.

Imperfect Friendships: The Reality of a Guarded Community

The emphasis placed on Christian friendships and community in Wheaton's student culture, however, often led many students to assume that their relationships with others would always be positive. Interviewees pointed out that despite Wheaton's relatively homogeneous Christian student body; it was not a perfect Christian community. Although students sought to be accepted in a community of Christian brothers and sisters, respondents observed that such a community was hard to realize in practice. This discovery prompted them to be more cautious and superficial in their friendships, leading some to resort to “cover up” tactics as illustrated in this senior's remarks:

Here it's not easy to talk about weaknesses that you have, not so much weaknesses like having trouble doing your devotions or trouble praying all the time, but when you get

particular about things, like things that happen to you personally. That's hard. . . . If you can sound religious and sound theological, you don't have to worry about stuff like that; [it's] almost like sins like that or those kinds of struggles aren't going to apply to you because you're dealing with something like predestination or something, so you don't have time for something like the drinking problem my roommate has. I want to say it's like a cover up — a protective layer. If someone starts digging at you, you can pull out a couple big fancy words. Because people would rather talk about things like, "well how do you see Romans 8 applying to such and such," instead of sitting down with a buddy and saying, "the last couple of weeks I've been struggling with lust and stuff." This could get into some things that you may really not want to know about, but he has no one else to turn to. And he sits down and says, "I need some accountability and I need some prayer. I need your help." I think that kind of stuff frightens most students and Christians in general. So I think that's why by sounding religious you can just kind of avoid that stuff.

Despite their hopes for a more honest and forthright Christian community, so-called "cover up" tactics of this sort contributed to a "guarded" Christian community among students. For many of our respondents, such "guardedness" was related to their understandings of and expectations for personal morality within a Christian community. As we came to understand, students who felt that they somehow violated Biblical standards were far less likely to discuss their personal struggles within a community in which they believed others were living "morally pure" lives. Guilt intervened, and certain things ended up not being discussed — especially anything that resembled or was closely affiliated with sin.

Several of the students we spoke with recognized superficiality in their friendships when they reflected on how different open and honest relationships actually felt. A senior made this point when he described how he felt after attending a "spiritual revival" on campus in 1995:

Before the revival, for me it was easy not to talk about what I struggled with or what really bothered me. I had an easier time talking with my pagan friends at home who would talk about anything because they were searching for anything and they didn't really care [about revealing

personal struggles]. But here it's kind of like the Hester Prynne thing from the *Scarlet Letter* where you're kind of looked down upon. You just don't feel secure in saying things like, "I've been struggling with masturbation or I've been struggling with drinking" or something like that, whereas after the revival and through the course of those five or six days where people were just letting it all hang out and showing all because everybody was [doing that]. So it just made people so much closer. The friends that I have now I'm so much closer to them, where I feel comfortable saying that I struggle with whatever. So the revival was probably the most significant event for me in my four years at Wheaton . . . because I got to see Christianity from a different aspect. I think here you see it very intellectual and very poised and it doesn't get ruffled. Whereas at the revival it was just so simple — "I can't believe I do this stuff, I still do, help me." . . . And just to see people say that "I believe in Jesus and my life is in complete shambles right now," it was like [a big] relief.

Opposite-Sex Friendships: Pressures within the Community

Perhaps because they were somewhat afraid to take the risks necessary to develop "transparent" friendships with more than one or two individuals within a Christian community, many students we interviewed indicated that they had a strong yearning for a deeper level of intimacy in their lives. As we learned, students often sought to satisfy this "longing of the heart" by entering into a serious, monogamous relationship with a person of the opposite sex.

Finding a life partner was a prominent desire among those students we spoke with at Wheaton College. In keeping with their Christian commitments, they viewed the marital covenant seriously, and saw their college years as an important time to act on this Christian expectation. As a result, students' longing for intimacy becomes inextricably connected with finding a suitable marital partner. A senior who was not entirely pleased with this aspect of social life at Wheaton offered this commentary on her peers' "preoccupation" with marriage:

It just seems like everyone has motives. Like they're at Wheaton for certain motives, and even dating relationships have ulterior motives — people want to get married or at

least find some kind of intimacy. It's not getting to know someone just to get to know someone. People are coming in with their own expectations and motives for doing it. After a while as you mature, I think there's a lot of upper-classmen that say that they have some opposite sex friendships which are very platonic and have been very fulfilling. But when you first come in here, everyone's scoping each other out because you hear all these stories about "how I met my husband at orientation." So for the first couple of months you're wondering, "Could this be the one? Is this guy I meet and talk to — is this going to be some funny story we share ten years later?" So I think if someone's being nice to you, you start interpreting it like, "Do they want something, because I don't know if I'm ready for this. He looks like a nice guy, but I sure don't want to date him and I don't want to give him the wrong impression, so I better just back away so he doesn't get any mixed messages." So opposite sex relationships are really hard [here].

The internal pressure to get married was exacerbated by perceived external expectations. Based on their experiences in and with many "model families," students described pressures from parents and friends to initiate the beginnings of their own family while in college. Many embraced the belief that there was no better place to find a good Christian mate and the potential for a good Christian home than at a Christian college. Indeed, many respondents were fearful that if they did not act on this "urge to merge" during college, they might miss their opportunity to become "equally yoked." As a senior put it:

Everybody is trying to find a mate here. I look around and see how many people have gotten engaged this semester alone and it's amazing. They're basically like, "I found somebody that's a Christian. This person makes me happy. And we're both Christians, so it can't be bad. As least we have that. That's the one thing it says in the Bible is not to be unequally yoked." . . . Everybody's trying to find that girl because they feel like, "When am I going to be in a better situation to find Christian girls? Most likely she's here." And studies say that before you're 21 you've met your future wife and you know her. And I think everybody's trying to act upon that.

Evangelical Christian assumptions appear to play a key role in the views students have regarding opposite sex relationships at Wheaton. Biblical Christianity emphasizes the importance of marriage as a fulfillment of God's intention for humans to procreate, to have companionship, and to assist each other as "help-mates."²⁹ In becoming "one flesh,"³⁰ man and woman also experience, through a lifetime commitment, an understanding of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual unity. Thus marriage is an important reality of the Christian church, and members of the Evangelical subculture hear of its importance from an early age. As an extension of Evangelical subculture, we learned that Wheaton's culture also promoted many hidden yet powerful messages about the importance of marriage. Several interviewees told us about casual remarks made by faculty and administrators in chapel and elsewhere regarding the urgency of finding a mate. Additionally, students identified examples of how this pressure was emulated within the student culture through various cultural symbols, including the "ringing of the tower bell" in Blanchard Hall when students become engaged or the publication of engagement announcements in the "Up the Tower" section of the campus newspaper. These well-known and understood cultural artifacts reinforced a general perception among Wheaton students that fulfilling the marital covenant was a significant aspect of the college experience.

The Life of Activities

Respondents also reported that holding office or becoming involved with a campus club or organization provided another indication of student success and maturity. Hence, the last defining characteristic of Wheaton's student culture we identified was the value students placed on involvement in campus activities, clubs, and organizations. In this section, we explore student involvement at Wheaton College. Specifically, we describe the various motivating factors behind their involvement and discuss students' awareness of and concerns about over-involvement and commitment.

Extensive Involvement: Motivating Factors

It is not altogether surprising that large numbers of Wheaton students are heavily involved in campus activities. After all, for many, high achievement has become and remains a key part of their daily life. The internal drive to excel as "good Christian students," interviewees intimated, was a motivating factor behind students' involvement in campus activities at Wheaton. But there were other motivating factors as well, including

Wheaton's supportive, resource-rich learning environment. Thus, both internal and external factors played a role in prompting students to get involved and to excel in their co-curricular commitments.

Wheaton administrators, faculty, and students, however, were often the greatest influencing agents on students' decisions to become involved in campus activities. A significant part of the campus milieu, respondents observed, was the general assumption that students should be busy and committed to college life outside the classroom. These well-intentioned messages of affirmation by administrators and faculty, however, were all too often received by students as dutiful expectations for performance. According to a senior:

The motto, "For Christ and His Kingdom," and the phrase, "to whom much is given much is required," and "you're the cream of the crop" — all of these little messages get sent [to students]. It's like, "what are you going to do with being sent to a great institution, and your parents probably have a lot of money, so you really owe something back. It would be selfish to just take and take and take." . . . And so even if it isn't Biblically-based, it becomes a kind of pressure to do more.

Pressures to get involved in campus life also came from students as well. As a senior put it, "Students tend to be harder critics. . . . To only be taking classes is really considered a cop-out. . . . It's not legitimate to just be a student." Similarly, a junior said, "There's something about laziness that's just taboo around our school. Everybody has to be involved and committed, and if you're not, you're looked down upon. People notice it. . . . People say to be really active helps avoid temptation. Boredom leads to temptation."

Although a strong work ethic was evident within Wheaton's environment, the press for high levels of student involvement was not merely predicated upon this alone. Students were often driven by internal factors, including their strong desire to achieve success in many different areas of their lives. An intensity for performing well in academic and co-curricular endeavors was, with few exceptions, an intimate part of how Wheaton's students chose to define their identity.

Moreover, because Wheaton College has highly selective admissions standards, most interviewees believed that their involvement and achievement in a broad range of activities was a primary consideration in their acceptance to the institution. With this knowledge tucked in their not-so-

distant memory, these students assumed that they had to maintain the same level of activity and performance while in college to position themselves well for future employment or educational opportunities. This led many students on campus to engage in what Green³¹ refers to as “portfolio building behavior” — that is, assembling a list of skills, contacts, experiences, and credentials students anticipated would enhance their attractiveness with graduate school faculty or employers. Savvy about the “real world” and anxious about future opportunities, students often believed they would need to have more than a college diploma to compete with others in an increasingly competitive academic and job market.

For many interviewees, however, it “wasn’t enough” to simply build a portfolio; most believed that they also had to excel in those activities. This belief was probably influenced as much by students’ own competitive instincts as by the competitive nature of Wheaton’s student. As an upperclass student told us: “There’s so many high achievers here; people have to compare. . . . The Wheaton culture is a lot of people who are very good at what they do. And when you put them together it gets even worse.”

Over-Involvement: Concerns for Setting Boundaries in Campus Activities

Many of students we spoke with stressed the constant pressure they felt from faculty, administrators, and their peers to do more and more and to be the best in everything they undertook — both in and outside of class. This was clearly the sentiment of a senior we interviewed:

The faculty especially push this busyness thing. They’ll say, “Don’t get over-involved,” but then they’re the same people who assign busy work and ask you to run for president of this or that and ask you to be a Teacher’s Assistant and things like that. They’re the same people who ask you to do research for them while you’re doing applications for graduate schools. So they really perpetuate the busy thing as well as the tension to be the best. That’s reinforced by faculty and administration every day.

Although some students admitted to and recognized they were over-committed, most nonetheless remained heavily involved in campus activities. According to those we interviewed, the expectations for involvement and excellence — from faculty, administrators, peers, and themselves — were so clearly sanctioned in the student culture that students often felt

they could not disregard them. Two students described the power of these prevailing norms in this way:

[Student One]: There's a problem with busyness on this campus: people are over-committed and under-nurtured. We spread ourselves so thin that we're not really growing or learning; we're just burning out. We hear that message in chapel and in classes and from residence life. . . . but I think the students seek to be kings and queens of their domains. My freshman year I had several involvements, and my sophomore year I doubled them, and it really killed me. I was doing six extracurricular activities at once. I never knew that my life could be so stressful, and I had never been like that before in my life. I think busyness is a problem for students, and it's a combination of things that people want to have fun and more success and more Christian commitment. And the being and the doing get confused a lot.

[Student Two]: There's a lot of pressure to be excellent in everything. It's not just a one sided focus on one area like academics. It's everything. We've been told so much that we're the cream of the crop that we sort of believe it, and we feel that we have to live up to that. Some people get confused about the whole importance of being excellent. I live in a house with seven other women and we're all different. But this whole idea of excellence is very big for each of us. It's been very good to talk about that we're not perfect, that we can't do it all or do it right all the time. . . .

[But] I'm horrendously over-committed and run around with very little sleep. And perhaps busy isn't the right word. It's to produce, and that's how you show that you're producing. . . . I think that's how you show that you're fulfilling the ethos of the community is by being busy. You're either writing a paper or organizing something or applying to graduate school or doing this and that. And you always have more to do than you have time to do it. I think that characterizes the way not only that we see our lives, but I think that we think that they should be, because that's how we show that we're really worth our salt.

Discussion

Our fieldwork suggests that as students strive to make sense of their experiences at Wheaton College, they are also attempting to make sense of two cultural systems that inform and shape the institution's distinctive mission: Evangelical Christian culture and elite academic culture. Such a sense-making task often occurs as students react to one another's responses to the tacit assumptions embedded within these cultural systems on campus. In this section, we use Schein's cultural properties framework to identify and understand more fully students' interpretations of these assumptions. Additionally, we explore how these interpretations contribute to a pervasive value -- the "perfect standard" -- within Wheaton's student culture and analyze how this value informs and shapes student behavior within all four areas (religious, academic, social, co-curricular) of student life.

Assumptions Informing Student Culture at Wheaton College

Visitors to Wheaton College are greeted by an eight foot by thirty foot brick and stone sign, wherein etched are the words, "Wheaton College: For Christ and His Kingdom." This slogan is pervasive throughout the college community, including its student culture. It reflects the college's goal to integrate Evangelical Christian faith with all of life and learning. As the college's mission statement reads: "Wheaton College exists to help build the church and improve society worldwide by promoting the development of whole and effective Christians through excellence in programs of Christian higher education. This mission expresses our commitment to do all things 'For Christ and His Kingdom.'"

Visitors soon realize the pervasive influence of Evangelical Christian values and beliefs on Wheaton's campus. The rich Christian heritage of the institution is inscribed in the names of many campus buildings (including the Graham Center, named after Wheaton's most famous alumnus, Billy Graham). Many rituals associated with a Christian purpose are also apparent on campus. Yet perhaps the most important artifact of the college's Evangelical Christian heritage can be found in the institution's curriculum and co-curriculum. As the college's official bulletin states:

Committed to the principle that truth is revealed by God through Christ "in Whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," Wheaton College seeks to relate Christian liberal arts education to the needs of contemporary society. The curricular approach is designed to com-

bine faith and learning in order to produce a biblical perspective needed to relate Christian experience to the demands of those needs. The founders of the college and their successors have consistently maintained that academic excellence and evangelical Christian faith and practice are essential to that purpose.³²

Although fundamentally rooted in Evangelical Christian cultural beliefs and practices, Wheaton is more than just a Christian institution of higher learning. It is also an elite academic institution that prides itself as much on academic excellence as on its religious heritage and mission. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear references to Wheaton College as the “Harvard of all Evangelical schools.”

As we analyzed interviews from this study, we became increasingly aware of how Wheaton’s distinctive mission as an elite, Evangelical Christian institution shaped and influenced its broader student culture. More specifically, we identified two key assumptions central to an understanding of this culture: a theistic world view and an abiding commitment to excellence, academic and otherwise.

As a Christian institution of higher learning, Wheaton College embraces and seeks to uphold a theistic world view. This view is grounded in several key assumptions of Evangelical Christianity, the most foundational of which are that: God, as a sovereign being, exists and rules over all of creation; the Bible is the divinely inspired “record of God’s revelation” to humankind and, as such, is the “authoritative guide for faith and practice” in all human endeavors; through His son Jesus’s crucifixion, God unconditionally extended his loving grace to all who trust in Him, saving men and women from sin and eternal damnation; and “Christian believers” should glorify God by responding gratefully to His act of “unmerited divine grace” through their abiding commitments to honor, obey and follow God’s commands in their daily lives.³³

This last assumption has very important behavioral implications for Evangelical Christians, who believe that if a person is in a “right relationship” with God, he or she will live in a manner that pleases and honors God, thereby obediently responding to God’s call with a “heart of commitment.” As the Biblical teaching goes, those in a “right relationship” with God live out the “fruits of the spirit” (“by their fruit you will recognize them”).³⁴ If someone, however, does not demonstrate the “fruits of the spirit” in his or her daily interactions with others, this behavior may provide evidence of a “wrong relationship” with God. At Wheaton, and at Evangelical Christian colleges more generally, this theistic world view – with its emphasis on revealed truth and implied biblical standards for Christians – defines, in

very real terms, the “nature of human relationships, truth, and human activity” within its broader institutional and student cultures.³⁵

Besides embracing a theistic world view, Wheaton’s distinctiveness as a Christian higher education institution is also shaped by another important assumption: its abiding commitment to excellence. As its mission statement indicates, Wheaton has historically emphasized this assumption, upholding exceptionally high academic standards for its faculty and students. The typical student who chooses to attend Wheaton graduated in the top decile to quartile of his or her high school class, had above average SAT or ACT scores, and held leadership positions in various co-curricular activities in high school. The vast majority of students who enroll at Wheaton expect an intense, high quality, academic experience. And while their drive to excel is strongly indicative of past academic and cultural socialization processes, the emphasis students place on excellence in all areas of their collegiate lives is further reinforced by the importance Wheaton College places on high caliber student performance.

Both of these assumptions – a theistic world view and an abiding commitment to excellence -- are pervasive throughout the institutional and student cultures at Wheaton College. They combine to reinforce a generalized standard for Christian life at the institution. “To whom much is given, much is required”³⁶ is a term frequently invoked at Wheaton and the assumptions embedded in this biblical teaching provide an absolute, or universal, standard by which to challenge and assess the extent to which individuals (particularly students) are developing and using their God-given talents. Understanding how students make sense of this standard and its informing assumptions is essential to understanding the student culture at Wheaton College.

The “Perfect Standard” at Wheaton College

In reviewing interviews and other documentary materials from this study, we learned how students’ interpretations of Evangelical Christian and elite academic assumptions shape and inform various aspects of student life at Wheaton College. Specifically, we identified an overarching value within Wheaton’s student culture – what we term the “perfect standard” – and how it appeared to strongly affect students’ attitudes and behaviors toward spiritual, academic, social and co-curricular “success.” As we came to understand, Wheaton students tend to make sense of the persistent cultural emphases placed on obediently “living out the fruits of the spirit” and “achieving excellence” by viewing the combination of both as a “perfect” standard that they – and their peers – should strive to achieve. Grounded in key

assumptions within the broader Wheaton culture but socially constructed by students, this “perfect standard” provides students with an authoritative perspective for defining and assessing who they should be as academically-talented, Christian college students and how they should act as members in Wheaton’s Christian college community.

According to Schein,³⁷ “strategic values” are the ideals that a group holds most important. They provide important clues regarding what “should be” emphasized in a given cultural context. Values usually inform and shape behavior, contributing to the development of norms that define expectations for others’ actions. At Wheaton College, the “perfect standard” is an important strategic value that plays a strong role in shaping normative behaviors within the student culture. As an espoused value, it provides students with a clear description of what a “good, Christian college student” should be like at Wheaton: a “spiritually mature,” achievement-oriented individual who is committed to nurturing Christian friendships, is obedient to God’s wish to marry an “equally yoked” spouse, and is highly-involved in campus activities that further develop his or her God-given talents or “gifts.” Additionally, the standard prescribes that such a student should live out the biblical teaching of the “fruits of the spirit” daily by acting obediently on his or her religious, academic, social, and co-curricular commitments.

The urgency to strive for and achieve this “perfect standard” is intense throughout the student and broader institutional cultures at Wheaton. Although interviewees never referred to this “perfect standard” explicitly, almost all emphasized that they felt a constant “pressure” from faculty and administrators, in the words of one student, “to prove their salt” as good, high-achieving Christian college students. Students frequently noted that faculty and administrators challenged them to reflect deeply on their faith and act publicly on their faith commitments, to achieve at the highest levels in their courses, and to become involved in a wide range of co-curricular activities.

Respondents admitted that they played a role in promoting a “perfect standard” for peer behavior within Wheaton’s student culture. Not unlike college students at other institutions, Wheaton students are concerned about “fitting in” with their college friends; accordingly, many conform in one way or another to the aforementioned cultural expectations for “good, Christian student behavior” on campus. This response may be related as much to students’ achievement-oriented personalities as to their Evangelical Christian backgrounds, since most realize that active demonstration of their Christian and academic commitments to others is absolutely central to their social acceptance on campus. That is, students understand in very real terms that if they do not provide visible, public evidence of a “right relationship

with God” through various activities and achievements in their spiritual, moral, academic, social, and co-curricular lives, they may eventually experience what one student referred to as the “Hester Prynne thing from the *Scarlet Letter*:” admonishment from their peers for failing to remain obedient to their Christian commitments. Accordingly, most of the students we spoke with felt pressured to present an image of themselves as “having it all together” spiritually, morally, academically, socially, and co-curricularly, both to ensure their continued inclusion in the broader student culture and to reassure themselves that they were “successful Christian students” who enjoyed “good standing” with their Christian brothers and sisters.

The pervasive pressure among Wheaton’s students to conform to this “perfect standard” affected students differently, producing various “enacted” versions of this key cultural value. Some students, for instance, never questioned the practicality of this perfectionistic expectation. For these students especially, the inability to achieve perfection often led them to “cover up,” or hide, their wrongdoings or failures, contributing to considerable personal guilt and remorse. Other students dealt with the “perfect standard” in a cosmetic way as they sought to “do the right things” in order to satisfy their peers’ evaluations of them as “good Christians.” For these students, the “perfect standard” was an impression management³⁹ game that they played well with little remorse. Still other students (a very small minority) chose to rebel against this dominant cultural standard, openly criticizing those who either “blindly conformed” or “hypocritically mocked” it. Yet, this group also conformed to the absolutist nature of the “perfect standard,” insofar as they rejected it completely and sought to define their own absolutist version of appropriate conduct. Finally, a last group of students chose a “more balanced” response to the “perfect standard.” These students legitimately felt the pressure to perform at high standards, but were not as quick to exaggerate, placate, or disregard these expectations. Instead, they maintained their strong orientation toward high achievement while at the same time they understood that, as human beings, they had limits or boundaries. These students, in effect, found a way to manage the “perfect standard” without being mastered by it.

Conclusion

An institution’s student culture shapes students’ perceptions and behaviors in multiple respects, influencing their daily patterns of activities, contributing to their tacit understandings about what is important and valued on campus, and informing them of the norms that determine acceptable behavior in and out of the classroom.⁴⁰ In brief, student culture provides

students with “thick and thin” guidelines⁴¹ for evaluating what is useful or important in their collegiate environment.

This is certainly the case at Wheaton College. While this study just begins to explore the cultural dynamics unique to Wheaton’s student culture, it offers a useful starting point for understanding student life at an elite, Evangelical Christian college. More specifically, it sheds light on how larger cultural assumptions embedded within the institution have contributed to the development of a “perfect standard” within Wheaton’s student culture — a standard that assists students in making sense of what is valued within the culture while also defining “acceptable” behavior in it.

As noted by Becker⁴², Kuh⁴³, and Spitzberg and Thorndike,⁴⁴ even though student cultures shape all aspects of campus life and are the primary vehicles for socializing newcomers, many colleges and universities ignore their influence on the educational experiences of students. If educators are serious about providing a quality collegiate education, they must begin to study and understand the dominant student cultures on their campuses. Work of this sort will challenge educators to recognize and appreciate the cultures from which their students come, as well as help them to understand more fully the reality of the student cultures on their own campuses.⁴⁵

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18. The following minimal purposive sampling criteria were established for the selection of student respondents: (1) status (full-time status only); (2) residential status (mix of on- and off-campus residential status); (3) gender (mix of men and women); class standing (mix of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors); race/ethnicity (mix of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latino-Americans, Caucasians); Christian background (mix of Christians and non-Christians); involvement in co-curricular activities (mix of those involved and uninvolved); and major (mix of mathematics and sciences, humanities, social sciences, theology/Bible/philosophy, and fine arts/conservatory).

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23. The Statement of Responsibilities is a statement regarding community responsibilities for cultivating a campus atmosphere in which moral and spiritual growth can be fostered. The statement, commonly referred to as "the Pledge," is composed of three sections: Biblical principles, Christian lifestyle commitments, and college concerns regarding a Christian learning environment. Students, by virtue of their enrollment at the college, agree to accept the responsibilities of membership in the college community. Most student attention is given to Biblical prohibitions against premarital sex and homosexuality, the use of profanity, and illegal drugs, and college prohibitions against gambling, most forms of social dancing, and the use of tobacco and/or alcoholic beverages.

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