

“I was there for the free food”: Accidental Conversions in College

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How and why do some college students have conversion experiences, while others do not? To answer this question, we inductively analyzed in-depth interviews with 30 students at a residential college in the southeast who had varying conversion experiences: some never began a conversion (n=16), some started toward conversion but ultimately did not convert (n=4), and some completed a religious (n=5) or nonreligious conversion (n=5). We conceptualize conversion as socialization into new beliefs and practices, as evidenced by reorganizing daily behaviors. We extend conversion to experiences not generally understood as such. We find religious and nonreligious conversions follow the same process during college, facilitated by student organizations, demonstrating that religious conversions are not a unique transformation. Furthermore, we find that organizational context matters in conversion processes: the structural context of college allows some students, who share biographical ability, a desire to make new friends, and openness to new groups, to unintentionally join student organizations that seek to change their daily practices and worldviews. However, many students face constrained choices or structural barriers that prevent the conversion from being completed. Our research has important implications for conceptualizing conversion and for understanding the role of organizational context in conversions.

Key Words: conversion; religion; college students

Three students enter college. One man identifies loosely as Christian but does not intend to act on that identity in college. However, after stumbling across an event with free food, he joins a Bible study. This religious organization encourages him to develop new practices and values; during his senior year, he fundraises \$40,000 to participate in a religious service program after college. A woman transfers to college sharing her father's conservative practices and values until she is handed an opportunity for an international service trip. She begins new practices like water reduction and develops a new worldview focused on helping others—a change derogatorily labeled “hippie” by her father. A third student attends a religious group after being invited by friends. He joins leadership, incorporates new practices, and starts reorienting his values. However, after taking two breaks from college, his social connections to the group disappear and so he does not rejoin the group. He is not involved in any religious activities by graduation. These vignettes inform our research question: Why do some students experience conversions, but not others?

Most research on conversion focuses on religious conversion, perhaps due to common perceptions that conversion is a “unique” social experience unlike other transformations (Bryant and Lamb 1999; Gooren 2010). However, this narrow focus suggests that scholars have yet to fully explore how transformative and impactful experiences can reshape secular worldviews and daily practices. Similar conversion language is used for other transformative events, including coming out as LGBT (Bryant and Lamb 1999) or becoming a committed bodybuilder (Coquet, Ohl, and Roussel 2016). Thus, our first contribution comes via our extension of conversion to secular transformations: instances where students adapt new practices and beliefs in their secular identities that parallel changes experienced by religious converts. We show that changes in

behaviors, beliefs, and worldviews can occur in religious and secular groups, suggesting that conversion should not be understood as a uniquely religious phenomenon.

To study conversion, most scholars either sample on the dependent variable (conversion) or conduct an ethnography of a particular religious group (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Machalek 1994). These approaches provide nuanced looks into the conversion process, and the latter allows ethnographers to compare and contrast people who ultimately convert with those who are only marginally involved (Balch 1980; Lofland and Stark 1965). However, such studies cannot fully explain how and why some people first interact with a conversion-oriented group while most do not. Building on Smilde (2007), who studied the role of social networks in the conversion experience, additional work should compare how people in similar situations come to convert (or not). Rather than taking religious groups as a starting point, in this paper we sample people in a shared situation (being students at the same residential college) and analyze the social forces that move some people toward conversion but not others.

Additionally, we analyze how the organizational context of a residential college shapes students' experiences. Students who are biographically available, seeking friends, and open to the diverse array of student groups may end up in groups that seek to change their behaviors and worldviews, but other students in the same organizational context do not (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001; Munson 2010; Perry and Armstrong 2007). We compare and contrast those students who have conversions (either religious or nonreligious in nature), those who move toward conversion but ultimately fall short, and those who never move toward conversion. These comparisons give a more robust understanding of when and how social context matters for conversion, our second contribution.

To answer our research question, we use in-depth interviews with thirty college juniors and seniors. The interviews were conducted such that religious or secular identities and experiences were only discussed if students mentioned them. Likewise, we analyze a variety of conversion outcomes: completed religious and nonreligious conversions, attempted but missed conversions, and no conversions begun. Because we do not sample on conversion, we have more opportunities for comparison to demonstrate how and why conversions occur and to demonstrate the similarity between secular and religious conversions (Jindra 2011; Yang and Abel 2014). We now discuss our conceptualization of conversion before reviewing existing research on conversions and on the organizational context of college.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Conversion

Historically, scholars understood conversion as a transformative, immediate shift in a person's worldview, based on Christian conceptualizations of conversion (Gooren 2010). Early studies of New Religious Movements relied on a "brainwashing model" of conversion that portrays converts as "dupes" naively taken in by radical groups, in which conversions are largely forceful and involuntary (Richardson and Kilbourne 1983). Recognizing this paradigm as problematic, scholars began to examine the interplay of individual agency and of social and cultural forces in conversions.

The process model, first elaborated by Lofland and Stark (1965), theorized that rather than being brainwashed, converts are religious seekers looking for a group that can provide stability, meaning, and friendship in a time of crisis. This model challenged the passivity of previous conceptualizations of conversion, but some scholars stressed that it did not go far enough in theorizing an agentic actor (Roberts and Yamane 2015). In response, the supply side

framework emerged, which posited people are rational actors who make decisions about religious participation that maximize their benefits while minimizing their costs (Stark and Finke 2000). This theory assumes that religious demands in a society are fixed, and organizations compete in a religious marketplace to appeal to religious seekers; individuals join congregations they believe best address their religious needs while imposing the fewest costs for membership (Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000). Conversions occur rarely, as they often impose a high cost on individuals (Stark and Finke 2000). This approach has been thoroughly critiqued for assuming that religious preferences are relatively unaffected by social and cultural factors (Gooren 2010; Hamilton 2009). However, the concept of the religious marketplace is useful for exploring how conversions come to occur on college campuses.

Most theories of conversion place social networks as central to conversion experiences. Social networks influence involvement in diverse secular and religious groups, including New Religious Movements (Smilde 2005, 2007), social movements (Munson 2008; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 2011), and more, yet scholars have only recently worked to specify when, how, and why social networks play a role (Jindra 2014). Being close friends with someone who is already a member of such a group can result in an introduction to that group (Jindra 2014; Smilde 2007), but social ties can also prevent a conversion when joining a demanding group would force someone to sever strong preexisting ties (Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 2011).

To analyze the interplay of structural, cultural, and individual factors on conversion experiences, Gooren (2010) introduces the “conversion career” to conceptualize how people may differentially move through five phases of religious activity across the life course: preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation. By analyzing significant changes in behaviors and identities over a period of time, and recognizing how behaviors may precede

changes in beliefs (Gooren 2010; Yang and Abel 2014), Gooren (2010) joins other scholars in asserting that many religious converts solidify their beliefs only after sustained participation in new religious groups (Balch 1980; Long and Hadden 1983; Richardson and Kilbourne 1983). Thus, practices and behaviors are central to conversions (Galonnier and De Los Rios 2016; Gooren 2010).

Continuing in this vein, we understand conversion as socialization into a new set of beliefs and practices, as evidenced by changing and reorganizing daily behaviors and routines. We analyze how people reorganize their daily lives as a result of their new commitments and how their beliefs change as their involvement in the group continues; we contend that conversion should be understood as an ongoing, continuing process of socialization (Johnston 2013; Winchester 2015). Thus, conversion should be applied in some circumstances to “switchers,” who move from one denomination to another within a broader religious tradition (Sherkat 2014), and to “returnees,” who had nominal contact with a religious tradition in their childhood but who rejoin with a renewed sense of devotion and practice as adults (Davidman and Greil 1993; Jindra 2011). Just as Jindra (2014) studies “renewal” and Gooren (2010) studies “intensification” as processes of conversion, so too do we examine cases where people who experienced religious socialization as children nevertheless reorient their behaviors and eventually their worldview as part of a conversion experience.

However, we argue that this practices-based understanding of conversion should be extended beyond religious conversions to other similarly impactful transformations in nonreligious behaviors and identities. Studies of veganism show that people who adopt a vegan lifestyle report changes in their worldviews and daily behaviors (Fox and Ward 2008), with some characterizing this change as a conversion; for example, in striving for an animal-free life,

vegans may alter their diets, adjust their wardrobes, and rethink their use of medicine (McDonald 2000). Furthermore, learning to be vegan requires practice; just as converts to Islam learn how to recite daily prayers (Galonnier and De Los Rios 2016), converts to veganism learn how to respond to negative comments or how to frame veganism as political rather than dietary (Christopher, Bartkowski, and Haverda 2018; Fox and Ward 2008). Similarly, in a study on bodybuilding, Coquet, Ohl, and Roussel (2016) contend that people transform themselves into bodybuilders by changing their lifestyle practices and by reorganizing their daily lives around their workouts; they must learn how to eat differently, how to prepare for meets, and how to work out to maximize their gains while forming new worldviews to understand themselves and their bodies differently than “ordinary” gym users. Thus, our definition of conversion includes socialization into any new set of beliefs and practices (religious or nonreligious) that is evidenced by changing and reorganizing daily behaviors and routines around this new identity.

We also consider the importance of an organizational marketplace in facilitating conversions in two ways. First, many residential colleges foster a vibrant and diverse marketplace of both religious and secular student organizations. According to a supply side perspective, these groups must develop specific niches to attract students, and often desire to foster a sense of belonging and commitment for interested students. We seek to understand how this type of organizational marketplace may facilitate conversions. Second, we know that organizations often play a key role in encouraging new behaviors and later new beliefs. In a religious setting, classes for converts emphasize learning the rituals and the daily practices over memorizing particular beliefs (Galonnier and De Los Rios 2016). Similarly, some people develop strong beliefs only *after* they become engaged in a social movement organization. For example, Munson (2008) finds that pro-life activists became involved via their social networks

and developed pro-life beliefs as a result of their socialization into a pro-life organization's worldview. We expect that organizations that socialize participants into new behaviors may have similar impacts on a residential campus.

Our study focuses on college students at a residential university, and research suggests they may encounter three structural forces in their transition to college that make them open to potential conversions: biographical availability, campus structure, and a need to form new friendships. While a small percentage of college students experience conversion, the number of students structurally available to do so is much larger, as our results show. Thus, we focus the remainder of our literature review on theorizing how the structure of residential universities creates a pool of people who are available for conversion.

Biographical Availability

Historically, conversion was considered most possible following a crisis, but recent scholarship also suggests the critical role played by periods of transition and change (Jindra 2011). Similarly, social movement scholars find that people are more likely to explore new groups when they have "biographical availability" due to fewer responsibilities, such as lacking children or a full-time job (McAdam 1986). Students at residential colleges leave their parents' homes and move to campus, which facilitates openness to conversion in two ways. First, students must develop new routines as they adjust to college life. Second, students encounter numerous opportunities to meet new people. First-year students in residential colleges generally share biographical availability: they have fewer external obligations, more time to explore new groups, and a desire to make new friends (Munson 2010).

Campus Structure

The campus structure also shapes students' experiences and exposure to student groups. Students must make major decisions for themselves, including how to spend their time, without parental supervision (Astin 1999; Munson 2010). College institutions support diverse student groups, shaping the types of activities in which students engage. Furthermore, some student groups enjoy additional support from national organizations. For example, conservative political groups, interested in developing the next generation of leaders, invest heavily in student organizations and leadership training (Binder and Wood 2012). Likewise, many evangelical parachurch organizations receive material support from outside groups, allowing them to have paid staff to organize frequent events (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001). Many college organizations seek to create a shared identity with their members, such as Greek organizations. However, some religious, cultural, political, or activist groups go beyond a shared identity to also reinforce, refine, or develop worldviews for their student participants (Binder and Wood 2012; Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001; Munson 2010).

To connect students to groups, colleges often organize fall activity fairs where first-year students familiarize themselves with the clubs offered (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001; Greene and Maggs 2015). We contend that the presence of so many groups in the organizational marketplace, coupled with students' beliefs that they should be involved in extracurricular activities, exposes students to opportunities that can lead to conversion experiences. Students who join a group that already aligns with their identity, such as Christians who come to campus determined to join a Christian group, may find their existing identities strengthened (Lee 2002; McFarland et al. 2011). However, students who join groups focused on cultivating a new identity and set of practices may enter a resocialization process that ends in conversion.

Seeking friendship

Leaving home for a new setting creates weaker social ties, as people may become more distant from their social networks at home, creating a need to form new friendships (Stuber 2009). Friendships play a pivotal role in shaping college life, from how students spend their time (Charles et al. 2016), to how students learn about campus groups (Munson 2010), to motivating people to stick with a group they randomly found (Hall 2006; Wang and Yang 2006). Knowing the importance of friendships, student groups promote friendship-building activities and offer regular events to encourage student involvement (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001; Perry and Armstrong 2007). For example, Chinese students at U.S. colleges sometimes convert to evangelical Christianity because they seek out groups for Chinese students, make friends in the group, and then stay even after they learn the group is a Chinese *Christian* one (Hall 2006; Wang and Yang 2006).

Such fellowship opportunities help new students feel involved in a community and make friends, which contribute to their decision to stay. Other times, friendships act as the point of introduction to new groups, which again reveals the importance of social networks in facilitating engagement in new secular and religious groups. Indeed, scholars have shown that few people intentionally seek out the religious group to which they eventually convert. For example, Smilde (2007) argues that men respond more positively to invitations from acquaintances to explore evangelism when the men are experiencing personal problems. Davidman and Greil (1993) find that some converts to Judaism first had “accidental contact” with their eventual synagogue, such as when one respondent attended only to help his sister feel more comfortable.

In all, prior research suggests that many students at a residential college are structurally available for conversion due to biographical availability, the organizational landscape, and their need to make friends. Furthermore, based on our conceptualization of conversion as socialization

into new behaviors and beliefs, conversions should be extended beyond the religious milieu to transformations in secular identities. We now review our methodology before turning to our findings to demonstrate why some students experience a conversion while others do not.

METHODS

This study uses semi-structured in-depth interviews with 30 undergraduate juniors and seniors. The average interview lasted 100 minutes³ and data collection occurred March 2015 through April 2016 as part of the first author's study of college students who aspired to participate in service programs⁴ after graduation. The interviews focused on students' experiences before and during college, and asked about their short- and long-term aspirations for the future.⁵ The interview guide did not contain any questions asking explicitly about religious or

³ The students did not receive any incentive to participate in the interviews. All interviews were conducted by the first author. Students were recruited via snowball sampling based on the first author's prior contacts. Additional students were recruited from lower-level sociology courses.

⁴ Service programs, such as Teach for America and Peace Corps, are one- to two-year jobs. Some are secular government programs while others are run by religious nonprofits (Gillis 2017). While no data shows exactly how common participation in these programs is, Teach for America and Peace Corps are two of the university's top employers for recent graduates, according to the career service's website.

⁵ The semi-structured interview guide went through the following sections: life before college, college decision-making process, college experiences (major, extracurriculars, study abroad, summer activities), process of deciding post-college plans, description of all post-graduation plans under consideration, longer-term aspirations, and demographics.

other identities, although students often mentioned them when talking about their college experiences. At the conclusion of the interview, students were asked about their religious affiliation in a series of demographic questions.

After finishing the interviews, the first author inductively noticed interesting results regarding conversion in the sample. Both authors then analyzed the transcripts for emergent themes around religion, secular identities, and conversion (Charmaz 2014; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006). The authors separately coded the interviews and then each drafted a memo detailing how they saw the presence/absence of particular social and cultural features shaping the conversion experience (or lack thereof) of each student. Building on this analysis, we systematically compared individual pathways through college to understand critical factors or experiences that helped explain why some students converted, why some students started to convert but did not, and why some never began a conversion.

This study design has a number of strengths. First, conversions and religion were not the intended subject of data collection. Discussion of religion only emerged if students viewed it as an important part of their college experience. Unlike most studies of conversion, students gave these narratives without any prompting or signaling by the researchers—reducing the likelihood of telling a rehearsed conversion story and allowing us to better trust their interview accounts (Snow and Machalek 1984). Second, this study does not sample on the dependent variable, allowing us to compare students who experience conversions with students who experience no conversion or a missed conversion. The final strength is that sampled students were drawn from numerous student organizations. Thus, instead of focusing on a single group, we demonstrate evidence of how conversion experiences occur in diverse organizations.

Nevertheless, the design has a few limitations. First, because conversions were not the focus during data collection, we have varying levels of depth for each student's changed behaviors and worldview: some interviewees discuss these topics at length while others do not provide as many details. Second, as with all interview-based studies, students' understandings of their current identity and their group experience inherently shape the narratives they construct about their past experiences. While the interviewer tried to reduce this bias by asking specific questions about how students became involved in groups instead of simply asking why, this limitation persists.

Setting and Sample

This study occurred at an elite public university in the southeast. The university requires first-year students to live on campus. It has about 800 student organizations. In our sample, students took part in five evangelical Christian organizations that facilitated their missed or completed religious conversions. Students participated in four secular organizations that facilitated their missed or completed secular conversions.

The sample is composed of 70% women. It is 70% white, 17% black, and the remaining students have varying other racial/ethnic identities. The sample varies widely by religious affiliation: 47% Protestant Christian, 10% Catholic, 13% Muslim, 3% culturally Jewish, and 27% non-religious. In total, 53% (n=16) had no conversion; 17% (n=5) had a religious conversion; 17% (n=5) had a nonreligious conversion; and 13% (n=4) had a missed conversion (went far into the conversion process but did not complete it). All students who spent their entire college experience at this college lived on campus during their first year. Five students transferred to the university during their sophomore or junior years. Throughout their college

experience, all students either lived on campus or within five miles of campus (except when some participated in study abroad programs).

FINDINGS

Conversions

The students who experienced religious or nonreligious conversions shared similar trajectories, from slightly adrift students who, through student organizations they happened to encounter, came to develop new behaviors, practices, and worldviews. The five students who experienced religious conversions in college—all through evangelical Christian organizations—came from marginally Christian backgrounds, not believing in the theology nor shaping their daily practices around their values. As Megan, a white working-class woman, explained:

I grew up in a Methodist church that my mom went to. Didn't really believe anything that they said in terms of, like, I thought there was a higher being, but that was about my extent. But I was really involved because it gave me opportunities to sing.

Megan specifically says she did not believe anything more than that a higher being exists—not the Christian God or Jesus. However, as a working-class youth, church provided free extracurricular activities, and she enjoyed these non-religious benefits. John, an upper-middle-class white man, enjoyed the social aspects of youth group:

[Youth group] was very socially oriented. A lot of games and fun, but we had also had a lot of time to spend together. And do certain content that they, I don't know, gave us some basic Biblical teaching... I loved it at the time. I mean, we would play a lot and just have fun.

Like Megan, John came from a Christian background, but being Christian was not central to his identity prior to college. Instead, Christian groups offered a place to occasionally spend time

with friends. Yet by the end of college, being a Christian was the most important part of John's identity, and he worked to convert other people throughout his college years.

Students who underwent conversions entered college without a clear plan for making friends and without predetermined ideas about the kinds of organizations they wanted to join. They sought student organizations as a way to find friends. Some attended campus organizational fairs. When some students became involved in organizations focused on changing religious worldviews, they began the conversion process, even though they had not sought out such an experience. Megan, who only believed in a higher being, explained how she became involved in the religious organization that ultimately facilitated her conversion:

I signed up for, there's the thing called Fall Fest ... it's a club fair. But I signed on their email list because I thought they were a sports club. And so I was like, Oh, sports! You know, I'll just sign up for it. And come to find out it was a Christian organization. But I met this girl in it and we became friends and she didn't try to convert me. She just talked to me about sports and life and it was very fun. She's still one of my best friends. I just became friends with her and she was involved with [religious organization]. And so I started coming and started asking a lot of questions. And I also went to a local church at first to kind of make my mom happy. But then I started to want to go, because I was trying to figure out what I believed. And then I became a Christian. And so I was involved pretty early, but not, not in terms of believing in what they believed super early.

Interviewer: Did you ever go to any of the other Christian organizations?

Megan: No. No. Because I didn't want to be involved with one in the first place (laughs) and then I accidentally got involved with one. And so, yeah... Something I never would have expected.

Many students do join religious groups due to preexisting religious identities, but for students like Megan who converted, the groups they joined just happened to be religious—a byproduct of their efforts to make friends. Rather than being agentic actors seeking a religious group during a time of uncertainty (Lofland and Stark 1965), students who had religious conversions stumbled upon a group by happenstance.

Two other students experienced similar beginnings to their religious conversions, this time by the draw of free food:

John: I guess they [religious group] kind of found me. It was the first or second week of class and they have this big picnic ... And they had free food and so I was there for the free food. But some people were holding up a sign with [dorm name] on it, and I had no idea what was going on, so I went and talked to them, cuz that's where I lived freshman year, and they actually were some junior guys involved in [religious organization] and were going to be leading a Bible study. And so I talked to them for a little while, gave them my information, and they got in contact with me and I started coming to their Bible study.

Interviewer: Okay. Were you planning on getting involved with a religious organization?

John: Ohh, I don't know if I had that planned out at that time (laughs). The first few weeks of freshman year were kind of overwhelming and so I didn't really have a plan. I don't know if I would have gone down that road or not.

Steven: "I was with [friends from his hall], and we stopped in and got free ice cream and ended up talking to some people and from there got invited to a couple other events that they were doing and invited to hang out, and so we just kind of stuck there" [white, working-class student]

John and Steven explain that their initial involvement in religious groups stemmed from their budding friendships and the offer of free food, not because of their interest in the group's religious message. Had the students simply been asked to add their name to an email list, a fairly impersonal act, it is unlikely they would have attended another event. However, when students connected with older students at these initial events—at a time when they lacked a strong social network, and thus sought friends and a sense of belonging—they gave the organization another chance. Thus, social ties to people already embedded in the group play a crucial role in drawing students to more events, ones that become more religious in nature.

Conversions that were nonreligious in nature followed a similar process of students seeking friends or new experiences that happened to lead them to organizations that taught them new behaviors and worldviews. For instance, Hope, a white lower-middle-class student who transferred from community college, was amazed by opportunities she saw around campus. After being handed a flyer from a recruiter about one opportunity, she decided to try it out:

I lived in a bubble apparently before I came here . . . I didn't see any abroad opportunities or much service opportunities in my community college. It was mainly when I got here,

everything... they were handing out these flyers that said like, In the Union, come to this. ... And the two recruiters ... talked about it and I had never been out of the country and I had never done an abroad service trip. So, I don't know. I was just like, people look at these things and they think, 'Oh this is going to be such a great opportunity. I wish I could do that' instead of *doing* it. And I was like, 'I want to actually do it.' So I set up a gofundme page, and funded the entire trip.

Hope saw many opportunities, but she never considered pursuing one until it was literally handed to her. She attended the event advertised on the flyer; heard the recruiters speak; went on her first service trip abroad; and began reorienting her values and life around service, helping others, and committing to daily practices like water reduction that she now believes can help the world. To continue with this new interest, when she returned from abroad she sought out and joined a service program run by university staff that requires 300 hours of community service, participation in skills trainings, and intensive seminars in which participants reflect on how new values learned through service can be enacted in daily life. Her changes were so obvious that they caused tension with her father, a conservative who was proud that his daughter had previously been very similar to him. She explained, "I know my dad wants, when I got back from Nicaragua, he called me a hippie. He doesn't, he says I changed when I got back. He doesn't, I think he doesn't want me to change anymore." Unlike the religious converts whose families approved of their identity changes, Hope faced resistance from her family about her conversion. Nevertheless, the organization she joined provided the structural support to reaffirm and cultivate her new identity, values, and behaviors. These proved to be crucial elements to facilitating her conversion in the face of parental resistance.

Once students are drawn into groups and decide to stay, they may increase internal commitment to the group—becoming intensively involved and joining leadership—and reduce commitments to other groups. Nicole, an upper-middle-class black woman, gradually transitioned from involvement in many extracurricular activities (religious and nonreligious) to highly involved in one religious group:

Whenever I first came I joined everything because I was like, “Oh, obviously I should do everything!” Whenever I first came I was on a Relay for Life thing for a little bit. I was part of [evangelical Christian group] for a little bit. And then I was a manager for men's soccer and then I think my junior year I kind of started narrowing down the things that I was involved in because I wanted to be really committed to a few things rather than partially committed to all these things. So that was when I narrowed it down. And then, now I'm in [different evangelical Christian organization]. And that's pretty much the only thing I'm in this year, I think. So it's just kind of gotten deeper and smaller as the years have gone on.

Nicole was involved in a variety of activities but decided to “narrow down” her interests to the Christian organization that was requiring changes to her daily routines. This reduction of external commitments allowed her to fully integrate her social life within the group, and she committed to leadership roles that completed her conversion.

By the second or third year of college, the students who underwent conversions incorporated practices consistent with their new worldview and identity. For instance, Christina, a white upper-middle-class woman, did not drink any alcohol until she turned 21, did not swear, and worked hard to not gossip—a “habit” she is still working to perfect because “that's just not uplifting to anybody.” Her Christian friends have, in her words, “pushed me to be a better

Christian,” and she returns the favor by calling her friends out for behaviors she sees as inconsistent with Christianity. She explains,

I did call a friend out about, like, he just started cussing a lot more than usual. And I was just, like, ‘Listen. Why are you even doing that? There's really no point.’ And backing it up with scriptures so it's not just, like, I think this is wrong. No, the book we say we believe says it's wrong. Also, you're a leader of other people in the ministry that you're in and that's not setting a good example for them either.

Christina seeks to convert other students, using an opportunity her second year when she was on a dorm floor without any Christian friends:

I got really close with two suites that none of them are Christians, but ... that was really cool to be able to meet them and their friends and try to share my faith with them. I grew a lot as a believer that year just because I was faced with these people that I loved and they just didn't know anything about what I believed and I wanted them to, I wanted them to know and I wanted them to love Jesus. And one of them became a Christian which was super cool.

Christina has a clear worldview and value-system based on her Christian identity that she intentionally shared with fellow students in the hopes that they would convert; furthermore, the act of evangelizing is a behavior instilled by this organization. This example is part of a broader shift in her behaviors and practices to be consistent with her new identity and beliefs.

In fact, all students who underwent religious conversions began trying to convert other students, a practice associated with their new beliefs and indicative of their completed conversions. John participated in two “summer projects” with other students from his

organization where they reached out to coworkers and young adults for possible conversions. He describes his second trip as follows:

This past summer after my junior year, I went to, I went on another summer missions trip to a country in Asia. We're not actually supposed to share, because you're not really supposed to go over there as a missionary, but I went with [organization] also. ... We did a lot of evangelistic stuff there too. It was more meeting with students over there, getting to know and make friends in a new culture. And then share our beliefs with them too.

Despite John entering college ambivalent about joining a religious organization—recall that he attended for the free food—he spent two of his three summers completing evangelical outreach to communities in the U.S. and abroad, having to fundraise \$3,500 and \$5,500 respectively for each of those two trips. He is continuing this evangelism after college in the same Asian country, fundraising \$40,000 to participate in a one-year program.

Likewise, students who underwent nonreligious conversions changed their practices and worldview as they became more involved in their organizations facilitating the conversion. For instance, Courtney, an upper-middle-class black woman, went from an uninvolved student without strong passions to a student who constructed an identity as a black woman fighting for racial equality, changing her daily behaviors and worldview accordingly. Courtney spent her first year of college, by her own admission, fairly isolated: “My first semester, I basically stayed in my room and studied most of the time and watched Netflix and Hulu.” She began feeling depressed, and when asked how she started making friends, Courtney explained:

My academic advisor. Because I was telling her what was going on, because I was like, ‘I don’t know what’s going, what’s happening. I feel really sad. I don’t like [college] anymore.’ And she was just saying, ‘Try joining clubs.’ So I joined Economics Club.

What else did I do? I played intramural soccer. ... I think that's what I did for my first year. And then by my sophomore year I was actually starting to try to make new friends. Courtney not only lacked friends, but she lacked strong interests that would direct her toward specific groups for making friends.

At the end of her first year, she received an email invitation to join an honors fraternity. However, another black student replied all to the email invitation, critiquing the organization from a racialized lens. Courtney explained,

Someone replied all to the message and basically said, 'I don't support your organization because it's, how did they word it? Basically 'there are no black, there are no people of color in it.' ... And so after I saw that, I was like, 'This is really awkward because everyone saw that.' And so then my sophomore year when I finally decided to rush, I said, 'Okay, let me just ignore it.'

Despite receiving an explicit warning from another student, Courtney was unconcerned about joining the group. She did not see it as important that there were few other black students—it was a fact she was willing to “ignore”—because she had not yet constructed a racialized identity to interpret experiences and shape her decisions.

As she integrated more into campus and made friends, she started noticing rallies about racial inequality. Given her new outlook of seeking opportunities for connections with other students, she investigated the purpose of the rallies, decided to attend one herself, and eventually came to join a group that co-organized the rallies (the largest black student organization on campus, which organized extensive social and political events on campus). This group facilitated her conversion into a black woman who prioritizes fighting for racial equality—despite initially

being highly resistant to it. She explained that even though she was desperate to make friends, she did not initially want to join:

I finally got involved in [black student organization]. My dad was really pushing for that, because I wouldn't join it when I was in my freshman year. I refused and my [older] sister [at same university] refused. But then eventually I joined it and she just graduated without ever joining it (laughs). But yeah, my dad really pushed for that one... my dad was like, 'Well, Courtney, you still need to involve yourself with students that are also black.' And, like, I was like, 'Okay, fine, I'll think about it.' But then I still didn't really want to do it. But then I started understanding why he was saying that during, I believe it was, definitely my sophomore, second semester sophomore year when you started hearing about Treyvon Martin and Michael Brown and all this other stuff that was going on. And I just, I started understanding.

As a result of her participation in this black student organization, she gained a new "understanding," causing her identity to shift. She began to interpret other events in her life through her new worldview and to reorganize aspects of her schedule to align with these changes in belief. For example, she describes how she "started pulling back from [honors fraternity] and started going more towards the political action stuff":

There were situations where [honors fraternity] just would do things that were very problematic in terms of racial issues. And so, I just pulled away from that towards the end of my sophomore year and then my junior year I just basically stopped going to meetings and told them I'm just dropping it...there was a mismatch of interest is what I would say. Although she had ignored a racialized warning a year earlier, Courtney's conversion now prompted her to reexamine the honors fraternity and realize that it was inconsistent with her new

values, and she left the group. She became more involved with the black student organization, including joining two committees, filling a leadership position in one, and organizing regular volunteer opportunities with local organizations dedicated to helping black children. She now intends to participate in a service program working toward racial equality after graduation.

All students who underwent conversions initially saw the groups as a place to make friends; after making social connections and becoming more involved, they began to change their daily behaviors and worldview. The religious converts became the students trying to convert others—a result of their socialization into new practices and new, stronger values, while the secular converts created new career aspirations to work toward these new values and put their beliefs into action.

Missed Conversions

Students who experience missed conversions begin the conversion process but face structural roadblocks and constrained choices that prevent them from completing the process. Chris, a working-class black student, took two leaves of absence after struggling academically. He entered college intending to be pre-med but failed introductory courses, and his few friends from home who entered college dropped out after a year. He took one-semester and three-semester breaks during college, because “there was so much going on with me. I just really felt exhausted.” Chris initially joined a primarily black evangelical Christian organization after being “invited” by friends; the organization began to change how he saw the world, and he became a “student leader” within the organization, describing the group as “something that changed my perspective.” However, due to the breaks from school, the social connections he had made in the group disappeared. He started over making new connections on campus, severing the possibility of completing his conversion because he did not return to that organization after his long break:

And so the next year, yeah last year, spring semester, I came back. And it was just such an interesting experience, because coming back on campus. It's, because I never, I didn't know the freshman class. And I didn't really know the sophomore class. And so, it was just, it was a different kind of adjusting environment again.

Chris was initially in place to potentially undergo a religious conversion, as he made the same changes to his daily practices and values that students like John and Christina did. However, his extended absences from the university severed his social ties, and he did not follow through on his initial changes, experiencing a missed conversion.

Sometimes students encountered roadblocks within organizations that contributed to their missed conversion. Soraya, an upper-middle-class woman of Middle Eastern ethnicity, explained: "I tried to get involved with the "[Ethnic] Cultural Society." For the first time in her life, she decided to explore her ethnic heritage, and she was open to constructing a new identity around it. However, she was unable to integrate with the other students in the organization, despite repeated attempts:

I found it really hard to be involved with them because I sort of felt like they weren't really accepting of new students. They were nice, but it was just, they didn't really have any monthly meeting. And then if they were planning an event, they didn't really encourage new people to help plan with them. So it was just very difficult for me to get involved in their planning of events... I go to their events. I'm friends with a couple of people who are on the board, so if there's something going on, they'll invite me. But I don't actually help out with the organization or anything.

Despite Soraya's seeking out the group, she did not ultimately undergo a conversion. Unlike Courtney, whose intensive participation in the black student organization helped her construct

her new racialized identity, Soraya was unsuccessful in doing so because the ethnic group created barriers to her social integration. Instead, she spent her time with other organizations that were not oriented around conversions, such as working to support fellow transfer students.

Likewise, Corey, a lower-middle-class white man, was blocked from completing his conversion in a local congregation by lacking strong social connections. Corey had a complicated religious background; he was raised Christian, but he stopped attending church because, “I didn’t like the homophobic things going on in the Baptist church at the time . . . I also kind of stopped believing in God.” However, after going “church shopping” with his first-year roommate he found a church that had “very open views on [homosexuality]” and decided to give Christianity another chance. By his sophomore year he attempted to lead his own Bible study—a significant change in behaviors that reflected changing beliefs. However, his friend stopped attending and he did not succeed at making other connections:

I didn’t have any strong friends in that church. It was mostly, I mean the only friend I had was a guy named Joe, who’s at the men’s shelter all the time. He’s homeless. He’s the only guy I consistently talked to there. I didn’t really have any strong friends. I tried to lead a Bible study and it didn’t work. No one wanted to come. And then I didn’t, I wasn’t really close with the leadership.

Thus, despite Corey moving toward conversion, the lack of social connections and support from leadership for his attempted Bible study blocked its completion. This lack of support could be because he joined a church rather than a student organization, which may not have the structures in place to support student initiatives—unlike the campus organizations that students like Christina joined that encouraged students to join leadership. As a result, he withdrew from religion again, saying “it seems pretty final this time”—a clear missed conversion.

Finally, structures internal to organizations can also prevent conversions if they force tradeoffs some students are unwilling to make. Erica, a lower-middle-class white woman, was highly involved with an evangelical organization. However, the organization required student leaders to join leadership junior year, which conflicted with her plan to study abroad. The organization constrained her ability to do both and she prioritized studying abroad over taking the leadership role, a choice that knocked her off track from completing her conversion. As she explained:

We did the Bible study once a week, and then they had a large group meeting once a week with everybody. And then I went to a couple different retreats with them to the beach and a couple weekend retreats . . . it was mainly, yeah, the Bible study, large group meetings, and then the little events that they threw along the way.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you ever take any sort of leadership capacity through that organization?

Erica: No I didn't actually. The year that I was going to I went abroad. Normally when you're a junior, that's when you move into a leadership role and I was abroad. So no I never took on a leadership role.

Interviewer: Okay. Was that something that you actively had to think about when you were trying to think about whether or not to go abroad?

Erica: No, I wanted to go abroad. No matter what.

Erica's commitment to the evangelical organization initially paralleled the experience of students who completed religious conversions in that she became involved in the group's events and incorporated some new values into her life. However, when forced to choose, she studied abroad. After returning to campus, she pursued different organizations and interests that emerged from her study abroad experience. Thus, the organization's leadership system placed a structural barrier that prevented some students from joining leadership—often a crucial step in a successful conversion—despite nearly one third of students at this university participating in a study abroad program (most during the junior year). None of the students who underwent religious conversions studied abroad, so this structural barrier did not block all students—though it did force students like Erica to make a choice and in doing so placed a roadblock that prevented her from converting. In all, sometimes structural roadblocks present students with constrained choices that can push them off the conversion path they might otherwise have completed, causing missed conversions.

No Conversions

While conversions can occur in college, the majority of students never experience one. Taking advantage of the fact that about half of our sample did not experience a conversion, we analyze the three primary reasons why students do not convert during college: they are not structurally available for a conversion, they already have a strong identity, or they join groups that are not trying to convert their members. First, to be available for a conversion, students must have time to become intensively involved in a group, which is not true of all students. Mathilde, a lower-middle-class woman whose family is from the Middle East, has financial obligations because, as she explains:

family problems. So a lot of people in my family have cancer because of depleted uranium dropped on Iraq during the war. And a lot of them don't have financial means to provide for themselves, so at that time I was supporting a lot of people.

She estimates that she worked 35-45 hours per week while enrolled as a full-time student to help support her family. When asked if she made friends, she responded:

The first two years, I barely had any friends, because I was so busy working. And I was friends with people on a very superficial level... It would be like, 'Oh hi! I know you.' Wave. Smile. And then that was it. So I didn't really have any real friend connections until more recently... I started working less. Yeah, I work 10 hours less per week.

Because of her financial responsibilities, she had little time to connect with other students or organizations, making her structurally unavailable for a conversion. Many students who attend elite residential colleges are biographically available as they transition to college, but students who have preexisting obligations are exceptions.

Second, students are unlikely to experience a conversion if they enter college with a strong identity, as they seek experiences and organizations that reaffirm this salient identity. For instance, Shabana—a black lower-middle-class woman—entered college with a strong Muslim identity and sought out the Muslim Student Association, an organization that provides individual religious opportunities, outreach events to inform the larger community about Islam, and community service opportunities. Shabana describes the following components:

We have weekly body meetings, when you have either a speaker come in or you have an activity, maybe a movie screening or even a social. And then we also have Friday prayer... Then on top of that we have different social events. We have, the community service chair, so we have a bunch of different community service events...we also have

Outreach, so that's, like, when you do different inter-faith events ... And then, then we also have more internal things, like the equivalent of a Bible study type thing, but not necessarily with the Quran, but you have, just different discussions about faith issues...

And then we also had, like, nightly prayer services which I usually liked to attend.

When asked how she became involved in MSA, she responded:

Actually one of the things when I was picking a college, was I wanted a university with a strong MSA. Just because I did have friends from back home who were older than me and they were really involved in their MSAs and it always was cool to see the events they put on and stuff like that . . . And so I just sought them out and I found them and just started going to a lot of the events.

Because Shabana already had a strong identity as a Muslim, she intentionally found this organization to reaffirm her identity, making a conversion unlikely. She served in various time-intensive, high-level leadership positions in MSA, further refining her cultural and religious Muslim identity. Had a Muslim student organization not existed on the campus, she may have sought friends through other organizations that could have led to a conversion. For instance, she initially joined an ethnic organization for students from Africa that could have facilitated a conversion by helping her build a strong identity as the child of African immigrants, but due to her intense involvement in MSA, she dropped this organization and her Muslim identity remained most salient. Her pathway differs sharply from the students who experienced conversions: Shabana joined the group intentionally to reaffirm her identity and act in a way consistent with her preexisting beliefs, while the students who experienced conversions joined their groups ambivalent about the content and instead primarily interested in making friends. Those other students lacked the strong identity that Shabana had when she entered college.

Finally, even students who are structurally available, and who lack strong identities to direct their membership in organizations, may not experience a conversion if they join organizations that do not seek to transform values. Sarah, an upper-class white woman, joined a sorority. She had little reason to pursue additional organizations that could have been conversion-oriented because she already had strong social connections:

My mom was in a sorority here. ... I thought it would be a great way to create an instant community for myself and a way where I could structure my social life. Because I didn't know anyone, I didn't really understand how frat parties worked or anything like that or how I could have a social life when I didn't really know people. So to have a place where they organize for you, the philanthropy, the social life, meals was very appealing to me...

While Greek organizations have strict norms for their members (such as requiring them to dress a certain way during recruitment) that create a sense of identity, the programming and events are not focused on changing participants' values—which is necessary for a conversion to occur. Sarah entered without a strong identity to orient her pursuit of organizations and may have converted under different circumstances, but because she joined an organization that was not conversion-oriented, she did not experience a conversion.

Similarly, Michelle, a working-class white woman, did not connect with many people her first year in college, but unlike Sarah, she lacked a clear plan for establishing new friendships. However, her randomly-assigned suitemates second year were involved in a charity organization called Dance Marathon, which inspired Michelle to participate in low levels her sophomore year and join leadership her junior year. When asked how she got involved, she responded:

My suitemates all did it [last year, before I met them], so they were doing it again sophomore year...they raise money for the Children's Hospital. So yeah, it just seemed

like a good cause... that's why I did it. All my friends did it and so I stuck with it sophomore year and junior year. And I didn't do it this year because it was a bit much of a time commitment. With my work schedule it didn't really work out this year

Michelle's quote demonstrates that she saw the event as a "good cause," but participating did not require significantly changing her daily practices or developing new values; ultimately, she took no concrete steps to avoid it conflicting with her work schedule her senior year. Michelle could have stumbled into an organization that was oriented around transforming values, such as an evangelical Christian organization or the service program Hope joined, which could have begun the path toward a conversion. Instead, because she joined an organization not seeking to convert its members, she experienced no conversion.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we analyzed how some students have conversions while others do not by considering the interplay of organizational context and individuals' agency. By emphasizing a practices-based definition of conversion, we show that diverse religious and secular experiences entailing changes to daily life and significant changes in worldview can be construed as conversions. We demonstrated that for some students, the organizational context of college—which includes biographical availability, diverse student groups, and the desire to make new friends—facilitates unintended conversions, whereby people develop new practices, reorganize their daily lives, and ultimately establish new worldviews and beliefs, often via their accidental involvement in student groups. We consider first how our extension of conversion offers new analytical insights before discussing how the ability to compare people who convert to those who do not (or who begin but do not finish a conversion) provides a more nuanced glimpse into the role of organizational context.

First, by extending the definition of conversion, our findings simultaneously corroborate and further develop existing research on religious conversions that shows the significance of friendship and of developing social networks for facilitating conversions (Smilde 2007). All students who experienced conversions had the same general introduction to the group that ultimately facilitated their conversion, in that they gained preliminary information about the group during a brief initial interaction. For example, Megan signed up for an evangelical group thinking it was a sports group, while Hope received a flyer for a service trip that advanced her toward conversion. All students who experienced missed or completed conversions shared the extrinsic motivation to make more friends.

Although friendship-making is a shared strategy, it can have divergent outcomes. For those with strong identities, friendship-making strategies may focus on meeting people similar to them who likely have shared interests. As Shabana's experiences show, someone entering a new setting with a strong religious or cultural identity may intentionally seek out a group that reaffirms that identity; it is both this identity and this intentionality, however, that set Shabana and others like her apart from the students like Megan or Hope, who found their groups largely by happenstance and were ambivalent about the content of the organization. For those without a clear identity, friendship-making strategies also entail openness to new groups and a willingness to try new things. While the nonreligious conversions in this paper were confined to conversions around community service, social justice, and minority racial/ethnic identities, this conceptual extension of conversion could help us explain other similar transformations. For example, we suggest that the recent rise in white nationalism warrants additional study using conversion as a framework; young whites, particularly men, who reorient their behaviors, their practices, and

eventually beliefs to a worldview grounded in white supremacy, would be understood as converts using our definition of conversion, whether in person or online.

Second, we find that high levels of engagement are imperative to keeping students invested in the group and to supporting a conversion. What is key, however, is that these groups must be focused on promoting change at the individual level, including developing daily practices and creating new worldviews; other student groups exist that require commitment to the group but not necessarily commitment to altering one's behaviors. For example, Michelle, who became involved in Dance Marathon via her suitemates, did take on a leadership role, but helping to raise money for a "good cause" did not require her to change everyday behaviors. In contrast, as Christina became more involved in her evangelical Christian group, she did engage in new behaviors, such as calling out her friends for behaviors that she now saw as inappropriate and trying to curtail such behaviors (like swearing) herself. Similarly, Hope did more than participate in a single service trip; she also became engaged in seminars that pushed her to rethink her water use, leading to changed daily behaviors meant to conserve water.

Furthermore, by comparing people who do convert to those who have missed conversions, we gain a better understanding of how organizational support may fall short. For example, although Erica was in position to join leadership, reflecting her high level of involvement, her group's inflexibility about committing to leadership during all of junior year conflicted with her desire to study abroad. She started to change her beliefs and her behaviors, but these new beliefs had not solidified enough to motivate her to rejoin the organization upon her return. Initial classes for new converts, then, may be insufficient for prompting ongoing engagement with the group and for solidifying a conversion (Galonnier and De Los Rios 2016).

Instead, groups focused on conversion must prioritize sustaining ongoing involvement within the group in addition to teaching new behaviors.

In addition to applying conversion to religious and secular experiences, this study provides important insights into how organizational context can make conversion possible. By studying how people in a similar environment do or do not have conversion experiences, we are able to better understand what social processes and individual-level characteristics matter for conversion. All students in the study shared the transition to college and most the biographical availability, but the majority did not begin a conversion process. Nevertheless, some students who lack a strong identity, who need to make more friends, and who are open to encountering new student groups may, from their perspective, accidentally end up in a group that will motivate them to take on new practices, to reorganize their daily routines, and to ultimately change their worldview and beliefs. In other words, the students who had either religious or secular conversions were not experiencing distinctive crises compared to other students, nor were they intentionally seeking out groups that involved high levels of commitment, that cultivated a particular worldview, and/or that would resolve ongoing personal issues or troubles (Lofland and Stark 1965; Smilde 2007). Instead, they came upon these groups largely as a result of the organizational structure of a residential campus: by traversing common pathways through campus and by attending student organization fairs, they found themselves interacting with members of groups they would likely not have intentionally sought out. Drawn in by free food and initially motivated to stay by their budding friendships, these students then engaged in new practices and reshaped their beliefs, ultimately ending in conversion.

Many studies of conversion focus on adolescents and young adults, yet the finding here suggest that another age group may be exposed to similar structural factors: retirees. In

particular, retired Americans who relocate to a retirement community may encounter similar structural and cultural forces that could increase the possibility of a conversion experience (Streib 2002). Retirement communities are a form of “age-segregated congregate living,” meaning that, like college students, retirees live with people of a similar age, in similar settings, and may opt to share meals in a central dining location (Moen, Erickson, and Dempster-McLain 2000: 560). These retirees may have biographical availability, given that they have left the workforce and are less likely to be in a caregiver role. Also, although we tend to think of retirees as being settled into their roles (Moen, Erickson, and Dempster-McLain 2000), leaving home may disrupt social networks and identities, and as they settle into their new community, they may change how they spend their time as they search for new social connections (Kestin 2002; Longino, Perzynski, and Stoller 2002). Retirement communities offer diverse activities for members, and although these generally have a social or leisure focus, there may be religious groups (such as Bible studies), local activist groups, and more (Jenkins, Pienta, and Horgas 2002). It may be, then, that a retired person without a strong religious identity who moves into such a community may, in their efforts to establish new social networks, accept an invitation to attend a Bible study, and thus begin toward a path of conversion (Kestin 2002).

Returning to our discussion of college students, what else can help us understand how some have a conversion while others do not? Despite generally sharing in similar experiences in the transition to college, we do find one major structural constraint that shapes how students navigate life at a residential college: coming from a lower socioeconomic background. Such students appear more likely to encounter structural barriers that prevent them from beginning or completing a conversion. For example, Mathilde describes working a full time job in addition to being a full-time student; her need to seek paid employment limits her availability, as she lacks

the time to become involved with campus organizations. Although she wants to make new friends, her socioeconomic position constrains the options available to her. Similarly, Erica, who has a missed conversion experience, could not afford to study abroad during the summer, which would have made it possible for her to join leadership her junior year. Thus, although Mathilde wanted to make new friends and Erica wanted to join leadership, their financial constraints precluded them from having sustained levels of involvement with conversion-oriented groups.

Studies of conversion often find that people from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to experience a religious conversion, given that joining such a group may introduce new meaning (Yang 2005); help them overcome drug addictions (Smilde 2007); and provide the opportunity to realize their true self (Winchester 2015). In a university setting, we find that socioeconomic status does matter, but, in this case, having financial constraints often leads to a focus on academics and on paid work, leaving far less time for learning about student groups or for becoming fully committed to one in such a way that a conversion could occur. Thus, scholars should do more to unpack how the effects of socioeconomic status on conversion may vary by social context. A quantitative study could examine these questions to see if it replicates these findings about work, socioeconomic status, and likelihood of conversion.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes how the structural context of a residential college and the actions of newly arrived college students can result in some students experiencing unintended conversions. Although most students who experienced nonreligious conversions would probably not use the

word “conversion” to describe their experience,⁶ we have demonstrated that these students implemented changes in their daily lives, became perceived differently by those close to them, and developed new worldviews and beliefs, in a process that parallels that of religious conversions. These students did more than spend considerable time participating in their respective campus organizations; rather they transformed how they understood themselves and the world and took actions consistent with their new worldviews and identities. For example, many students who converted created post-graduation aspirations around their newly constructed identities. Given that first job out of college can critically shape the trajectories of young adults, these college conversions will likely have lasting consequences for students, regardless of how salient the identity remains after they are removed from the structural context that facilitated and reinforced their conversion experience.

This study has two limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, given the small sample size of students overall—and the fact that they were not sampled on having a conversion experience—our analyses stem from a relatively small number of cases. The results should still be analytically generalizable in that the parallels examined here between religious and nonreligious conversions would exist in other samples, there may be some nuanced

⁶ Because conversions were not the focus of the interviews, we are unable to know what the respondents think of the term conversion or what they would call these transformations themselves. However, because conversion is generally associated with religion and often has a negative connotation, we feel safe in speculating that our secular-conversion respondents would likely not identify with the term. As demonstrated in this paper, we nevertheless believe conversion is a useful concept to explain these transformations.

differences between religious and secular conversions that these results cannot capture. Likewise, the participants in this study were all selected because they were considering participating in a service program after college, which limits the types of conversions that would be captured to those that in some way relate to a kind of service program. Additional studies can help scholars better understand how the conversion process works when building different kinds of identities and could examine whether the religious conversion process documented here is unique to evangelical Christianity or whether it can be applied to all religious conversions. Second, this study was based entirely on interviews with students, but, as we show, student organizations play a significant role in the conversion experience. Thus, future studies can build off these findings with ethnographic data from the campus organizations that facilitate these conversions. How might different structures of student organizations affect the conversion process? How do participants in campus organizations believe conversions occur? What strategies do different organizations use to maximize conversion opportunities?

Overall, this study provides an interesting case for demonstrating how structures at a residential college can lead to unintended conversions. We show that the presence of diverse student groups creates a unique environment that can facilitate conversions. Finally, our research demonstrates that religious and nonreligious conversions occur through similar processes on college campuses and that these conversions may have lasting impacts on the trajectories of young adults.

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