

Krista Fretheim

Zach Huntley

Taylor Jacobson

Cally Reed

Andrew Sladky

Communication Research Methods

### Secularism on a College Campus

There seems to be little known about a student organization called UNI Freethinkers and Inquirers. When choosing a group to research, we thought of first researching the organization Explorers of Religion, but we decided that UNI Freethinkers had a more narrow scope of views, which would be more interesting to research and give more conclusive results as well as provide for a better research question. In addition, since little is known about the organization, we wanted to determine their mission and the impact they wish to have on UNI. Finally, there is history and culture all over the world that is behind the group's ideals of secularism versus religion, which made the organization relevant to our world and campus today. We hope that through our research, the mission of UNIFI would be revealed and any myths about their purpose debunked.

Once our group decided to do our ethnography about UNIFI we discussed our initial impressions and preconceived notions. We thought the group stood for free speech of religious beliefs of any kind, although, a common thread between the members was that there might be extreme views supporting atheism that are very set in stone. We have witnessed that the group can be very vocal on campus, sometimes outside when it is warmer, and also through tabling and spreading the word in the Union or posting signs around campus. Even though the secular

standpoint that UNIFI takes contradicts the more advertised religious groups on campus, such as BASIC or UNI Navs, we think they are proud of their beliefs and are not ashamed of who they are.

The group is called UNI Freethinkers and Inquirers, but it is commonly referred to by the acronym, UNIFI. According to their website, the group “[strives] to create a welcoming community for for skeptics, atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secular humanists, and anyone who turns a critical eye to religious and pseudoscientific claims.” The word “freethinker” is defined as a person who forms his or her own opinions about important subjects (such as religion, politics, etc.) instead of accepting what other people say. Rather than strictly focusing on deep discussions on certain topics all of the time, this group is more about community and the promotion of each other’s beliefs.

At UNIFI, it seems that the common denominator is a belief in the trustworthiness of science as the lense to view the world. A senior at Oxford who studies theology spoke about author Richard Dawkins saying, “He’s the most evangelical atheist I’ve ever met. He’s left people like me feeling very embattled and under attack. Charming when you meet him, of course, but quite certain that religion is a false hypothesis and Darwin had a better explanation” (Kohen). This feeling of being “under attack” is something that some college students may feel from a group like UNIFI on a college campus due to their vocality and seemingly “set-in-stone” beliefs. Additionally, they are not afraid to hold events to promote science, and they even hold weeklong Darwin events to promote their way of thinking.

In researching religious students versus secular students on college campuses, it was found in a study done by Barry A. Kosmin that “college-age Americans are divided among not

two but three distinct worldviews: religious, secular, and spiritual.” These views are connected with specific worldviews, explaining that “one-third of this rising generation identifies as secular, while another has rejected traditional dogmatic religion,” indicating the reason for groups like UNIFI to become present on college campuses. It was also found that secular students viewed scientists as more honest, although religious students viewed scientists and the clergy as equally honest. There were “no statistical differences between religious and secular students in choice of majors for study” (Kosmin 38-41). These last two findings relate these students’ beliefs to what they choose to study, which tells some of the background beliefs behind the reason for a freethinkers organization such as UNIFI on college campuses.

America was founded under the belief that freedom from the religious persecution and freedom from the rule of government in the matters of the church of England was important. In recent years, American culture has changed in the way that it views religion and approaches spirituality differently than the days of the founding fathers. It has become more acceptable to form one’s own views on religion and stray from the traditional “American” view. Robert Ingersoll helped this movement gain followers by giving speeches across the United States in the last part of the 19th century about his agnostic views. According to Paul Stob, Ingersoll “tore the Bible into shreds and shook his fist in the face of the Creator in a way that delighted a very large and seemingly intelligent audience and kept it alternately laughing and applauding for upward of two hours” (Stob 721).

A humanist is described as a person who believes that humans can solve all problems, according to an article by Jeff Brumley. UNIFI has many people with a variety of beliefs from atheist to humanist and much more. Even though they are all different, the main focus is that

there is no outside force that tells them to do good deeds. Heather Wellman, leader of the Humanists of Florida Association stated that “Humanist leader says humans can solve all; The group believes that morals aren’t influenced by a supernatural being” (Brumley B-4). Outside of their beliefs, humanists do a lot for the community and focus on the core of communities, education, democracy, and science. Education is looked at as a democratic right, also a fundamental for a more civilized society. UNIFI appears to associate with these same thoughts and beliefs.

Although though UNIFI here on campus encompasses a number of religious and social backgrounds, one particular group tends to be more present than the others — atheism. Being one of the most popular anti-religious mindset, the creation of this people-group is more simple than it seems. UNIFI exists solely because the idea that a ‘god’/creator/greater being exists. An article “Rhetorical Aspects of “Popular” Atheism in the United States” written by Roderick P. Hart states, “Rather clearly, organized atheism and organized religion depend on each other for significance. Without the one, exhortations about the other make relatively little sense” (Hart 36). Being that there are multiple organizations on campus revolving around Christian ideals, it is natural that there is an organization having the views of the opposite.

From this background of the UNI Freethinkers and Inquirers, we developed the research question: What does it mean to be a freethinker at UNI and how does that mission influence your personal secular views? This research question is loaded in a sense, being that there are two main premises we were trying to pull from our group. The first part, “what does it mean to be a freethinker at UNI,” encompasses the personal level of the people we were preparing to interview. Being a research project based solely on the interactions had with people in their personal

comfort zones, it was important for us to be partially personal with them out of respect for their organization. The second part of our research question is, “how does that mission impact your personal secular views?” This question is also personal, but requires the person being interviewed to respond more succinctly. By asking about the broad scope of secularism, our group was able to collectively gather a diverse, rich response, regardless of what individual questions were asked.

#### Methods:

To begin our research of the UNI Freethinkers and Inquirers, we first contacted the group to make sure we could find a time to meet with them. They offered Sunday brunch at Hy-Vee, where they meet weekly. Only three of us (Krista, Cally, and Andrew) could attend this, but luckily this is Darwin Week, a week of events that they host. The other two in our group (Zach and Taylor) were able to attend a meeting they had in regards to Darwin Week.

Next, we decided on a research question. We sat down as a group and did some background research of the group in order to better direct our focus. We determined what our preconceived notions of the organization were and what we wanted to get out of the research. Once this was determined, we were all set to create our questions individually and meet up with the organization to start our interviews.

Zach and Taylor could not attend the Hy-Vee brunch. Instead we emailed their communication director Laurelin and asked when else we could meet with them. We decided to go to one of their Darwin week events at 7:00pm in the Multicultural Center in the Union. They had a guest speaker that night and she was sharing her experience with adversity. It seemed that

she really peaked the interest of everyone and got a lot of people talking. There was a very big turn out, and after the meeting everyone kept their conversations going at Becks.

When we first arrived at Hy-Vee, we identified the group in the dining area by observing that there was a long table with many people at it, we walked over to them and asked if they were UNIFI, and they responded in the affirmative. We had arrived just as the brunch was beginning, so we allowed for the group members to eat, while we made small talk with some of the people at the table. We sat near each other at the end of the table, near the president of the group and a new-comer and other members of UNIFI. The president spoke with us about how we wanted to go about the interviewing process. We decided to allow the president to ask if anyone within hearing range of where we were seated would like to be interviewed. When we had identified our volunteer interviewees, we adjusted our seating arrangements to best suit the interviewing process. Two interviewers sat across from them at the table, and one interviewer sat next to them at the table. We proceeded to ask the questions that we had each prepared before the interview.

The two groups each had their own personal strengths and limitations going into the interview process, and those factors played an important role in how each member interacted with their interviewees. Starting with Zach and Taylor's strengths, they made sure that the freethinkers were aware of the time and location to meet at. In addition to this, the people they interviewed seemed to enjoy the conversation and questions that were asked. A couple limitations came from the lack of background knowledge they held going into the interviewing process, and they were unaware of who the certain individuals were on a personal level, making it hard to expect what situations they were getting into. It was also made known after the

interviews had been held that one of the interviewees had previously been interviewed by another member of our ethnography group. That interviewee failed to mention that she had already been interviewed by someone in a communication research methods class a few days prior to meeting with the second interviewer at Darwin week.

Strengths of our study as a whole include that the UNIFI members being in their typical group environment in places that they felt comfortable, and each member interviewed allowed us to write or type their answers as we were conducting the interviews. We also experienced weaknesses while doing this project. Only being able to interview one member and attend one meeting each gave us only a partial understanding of UNIFI. We interviewed volunteers, rather than picking somebody at random.

At the beginning of our interview experiences, each individual in our group agreed that we did not feel trusted by the UNIFI members. We introduced ourselves and explained that we were interviewing them for a class, and made sure that each volunteer would allow us to take notes or record them. After asking a question we made sure to paraphrase their answer back to them so we knew we had the correct answer recorded.

A UNIFI member at the Hy-Vee meeting passed out lollipops to each of the UNIFI members, but none to the members of our group. This conveyed a lack of trust and acceptance to us. Krista purposely left a chair open next to her so a UNIFI member could sit there, but instead somebody took it and moved to another part of the table. Krista felt very unwelcome after that. Towards the end of her interview with Aaron she felt like she had gained his trust by showing openness and interest and was having much more casual conversation.

Zach went into his interview very cheery, but was shut down when the president of the organization rudely told him to leave the room he was in so that they could lock the doors behind him. He left the room, but when he finished the interview he had with one of the members, the president and others were still in the room “cleaning up.” This whole experience made him feel unwelcomed as well, and as if he did something wrong by wanted to learn more about the organization.

Cally went into her interview with a resolve to interview in a way that showed honor to the person she interviewed, and upheld the integrity of the study. Since she was only able to speak with her interviewee for a few seconds before diving into the interview, she feels that the response she received from the interviewee was shorter than she expected or hoped to gain. But overall the integrity of the study seemed uncompromised by any lack of trust or misrepresentation of the interviewee. She finished the interview and chatted with the interviewee for a minute or so before leaving.

Taylor went into her interview confident in her questions and excited to interview. She went up to the communication officer and politely asked for a few minutes of her time. Then she proceeded to introduce herself and tell her why she is here to make the interviewee comfortable. When Taylor was asking her questions she felt she got answers that were passionate and getting a lot of good information. Overall she felt it was trustworthy environment for her to give honest answers.

Andrew felt that the interview at the Hy-Vee brunch began with a lack of trust and many comments such as, “we usually get a Communication Research Methods group interviewing us about once a month.” After we split off into individual interviews, however, he felt the



interviewee was comfortable answering questions, and showed no lack of trust. He also did his best to make the interview conversational to show his interest and care for the topic. Overall, it seemed that there was inconsistency in the amount of trust gained by those in the organization. This definitely varies from person to person, but did not seem to affect the responses too much.

When creating an ethnography it is important to keep ethics in mind. While conducting interviews, our group made sure to be respectful to the UNIFI members we were talking with. We did this by keeping our own personal opinions silent. We asked questions and recorded their responses. After we had asked our structured questions we thought it was appropriate to have a more personal conversation where we shared our views.

## Field Notes

Cally:

*Fieldnotes:* Andrew explained who we are and asked who would be willing to answer 5 or 6 questions for us. People ate brunch. about 16 people are present. Pretty well split between women and men, maybe a few more men than women.

“Freal” (Aaron) sat across from me, he is a math major and is the president of UNIFI. Freal: “we have been around for a while.” We then talked about the sword fighting group on campus, 11:24 am. We talked about Lord of the Rings after that. People joking, laughing, teasing each other at the table. Some people sported unifi tshirts/sweatshirts. There was a newcomer at this brunch, Alex, he sat at the end of the table.

I noticed that by using a computer take notes, I decreased immediacy in my interview process. Next time I interview, I’ll consider that factor, and perhaps take notes using a notebook so I avoid the physical barrier of a laptop screen.

Natalie was eating, and stopped long enough for me to ask her a few questions. She was kind, and smiled as she answered my questions. I, however, was distracted by all of the conversation happening around me, and the deep voices talking about very similar subjects next to me. So, that affected how I asked questions I’m sure, I think I probably came across as distracted and maybe a little nervous.

Interview with Natalie:

Major: Psychology philosophy double major.

Role in Organization: Public Relations Officer

*Where are you from?*

Cedar Rapids.

*When did you become interested in joining this group?*

She heard about UNIFI through a past president's younger sister. She wanted to get into it when she got here. She grew up in a youth group, but wasn't into religion, but found it nice to have community.

*Who or what led you to this belief?*

"When I was in high school didn't know if there was a God, and wanted to explore that more. Everyone was so nice, it was really refreshing. [She's smiling.] There are so many nice people that do not necessarily identify with religion."

She went to a non-denominational church before college.

*What do you think the rest of campus views you guys as?*

We had a bad reputation a few years ago, and they been working to repair that image. And they think that they are thinking being open to everybody.

*Group's mission?*

Wants to promote reason, "we're not all one certain kind of religion."

*How has this group influenced your life goals, if at all?*

Its taught her a lot about herself- they host a lot of educational events. She is the director of public relations. that's helping her become more detail-oriented.

As the PR officer of UNIFI she:

Runs the social media, she is in charge of having the table reserved at Hy-Vee, and has all of the advertising out on time- Courier, KWWL, press releases, etc. She says she has become good at spreadsheets.

*What have you gained by being a member of this group?*

Community, exploring, "it's good to ask different questions, it's nice to do so with like minded individuals."

*Does the group have a dream of what UNIFI would look like in 10 years? If so what?*

There's a really good leadership structure. It's a little more intensive. 6 other officers that handle alumni and activism. There are allot of people who have been a part of unify that have been a part of the group, but have moved away.

*Are many of your friends a part of this group?*

Basically all her friends are from this group. She's going to be living with people in the group next school year. "It's a great community."

Andrew:

Interview with Abbie:

Abbie Shew, Junior, Biology

Role in organization: Director of finance

*How do you identify yourself?*

Humanist. I care more about people and doing good things for and with people, not necessarily for a divine motivation, but because I think people are good. Religion isn't necessarily important, and beliefs are not solidified. A lot of people in the group would say atheist, agnostic, humanist, or undecided.

*Could you please define what UNIFI is?*

It's a group that is open to discussion and open to all ranges of ideas. So we do a lot of intellectual discussion events where we talk about current events or media. Allows all religions to come together. Our views are secular, not atheist, which is a common misconception. We promote free speech and branch out from there.

*Have you ever been to a Christian/Hinduism/Buddhism service?*

I grew up Christian - grew up at a church camp. I have been to a lot of Christian things, and initially was involved with the Navs here on campus.

*Who or what led you to become a humanist?*

I didn't get involved in the group until the end of freshman year when I was contacted directly. A lot of the people I grew up with in my small conservative town were judgmental. I didn't feel accepted by the religious community, and this turned me away, not from believing, but from structured religion. This group is just very accepting and willing to listen to my ridiculous questions.

*How do you think the rest of campus views your group?*

There is a better public perception of UNIFI than there used to be. The group used to be openly atheist and blasphemous. Once someone painted a picture of Jesus giving a blow job. This is not what we think today - we're not crazy. I think people are a little uncertain about our group and think "we're the atheist club sitting around bashing religion" which never happens. Skepticism is what we're all about.

*Are there any religious people a part of the group?*

One girl goes to Catholic services but still comes to UNIFI events. Some people are just questioning, and they do both [church and UNIFI].

*How do you think this group could impact this campus/what mark would you leave?*

The perception, I think, is that UNI is a religious campus, with Navs, Basic, Salt, etc. These groups are very vocal and always there, all the time. Our purpose is to provide a different group for people than that. We want to create general awareness.

*What kinds of events do you participate in through UNIFI?*

Darwin week:

- Activism, science, how to question things, how to be skeptical
- Promotes critical thinking and scientific thinking and reason

Other service projects:

- Riverside cleanup (2 or three times last semester)
- Food banks
- Hospital care packages
- Habitat for Humanity

“We don’t just call ourselves humanists. We live by that through these projects.”

Taylor:

Interview:

Laurelin Berkley, Sophomore Music Education Major, Age:20

Role: Communication Director/Officer

*Where are you from?*

Quad Cities, Illinois

*What is your belief and when did you establish it?*

Humanist. Chose to act a way to benefit humans and care about others. Even though i grew up religious i never worried about anything till 6th grade when i was really afraid of hell and

eventually going there. I met someone from Australia and she was a humanist and showed me more of the human side and caring for humans.

*Who/What interested you about this specific group?*

People who think skeptically about religion and people who talk about intellect rather than sitting around talking about religion. I view it more as a social aspect than activist that is what really interested me into joining this group.

*How long have you be in this group for?*

2 years and been an officer this year

*What is UNIFY?*

Not a religious group it's a place where you can come together and talk about your other beliefs. Not be judged because everyone has questions and different views of the world and how they look at things. It's a education and secular community.

*Why do you think people should get involved?*

It is okay not everyone to be involved because this isn't really specifically for your religious views. More of a place to explore yourself and interested about service. There are a lot of people confused who come in and that is what it's about, finding yourself and to explore.

*Does UNIFY make a difference in your life at all?*



It is a huge part of my life i have lots of friends and a boyfriend i met through here. It does take up a lot of time. Gives me a place to talk about beliefs and what i feel. I really was drawn to this group right away.

*Do you get to share this experience with anyone?*

Well it is my job to recruit and I share this with people all the time. I have friends from all over and all different types. Ex: Salt and Christian groups. I don't hate people who have different views than me. I do have friends who are christian and I do not care what they think about religion.

*What does religion mean to you?*

Beliefs people have and how they decide to exist. Also culture. Everyone is different and i feel that is a big part of religion is how different people are.

*Field Notes:*

We went to their meeting in the Union and they had a guest speaker talking about her expericene with religion and where it took her. Big turn out, i took Laurelin aside and asked her questions. She was really sweet and opened to all my questions. She had some short answers to my questions and liked to be short and sweet to the point. When we stopped to talk to people everyone was smiling and very welcoming to us being there and learn about their group.

Zach:

## Part One—Introduction:

*Name-* Natalie Kaufman *Age-* 20 *Year-* Sophomore *Major-* Psychology/Philosophy

*Where are you from?*

Cedar Rapids

*What do you recognize yourself as, personally?*

Atheist

*When did you establish your belief as an Atheist?*

Sophomore year of high school

*Who/what interested you in this group?*

Her high school friend's sister was the president of this group last year

*How long have you been a member of the Freethinkers?*

Two years

*Has this group influenced what you want to study? How?*

Yes, it taught her to think critically and find answers on her own.

*Where do you see yourself in ten years?*

Post-graduate school prison psychologist

*Do many of your peers have similar opinions/beliefs to you?*

Yes, most of her peers.

*RQ: What does it mean to be a UNIFI member at UNI; and how does that mission influence your personal secular views?*

*What defines a “freethinker” in your mind?*

Someone who is able to think critically, free from both sides of the argument.

*Would you identify yourself as Unitarian Universalist? And if so, do they have a church in Cedar Falls?*

No.

*Do you have a “mission” or goal for society (i.e. evangelistic freethinking) or are you more concerned with individualism? Explain.*

A little of both. She believes in helping others grasp what they think, know, and believe—no matter where that comes from.

*Have you ever experienced any oppression/anti-stigma from students or staff here on campus?*

Yes, only because she thinks that staff and students believe that the group is more of them forcing their opinions, when really they are just an open place of education.

*What view do you think students and staff here on campus has on you?*

She thinks that people are put off by the group, and that staff and students think that UNIFI participants think they are smarter than other people.

*How do you feel that this group could impact the campus and campus body of UNI?*

She says, "I think there are a lot of people floundering for placement." She supports the church originations on campus, but believes this is a great group for all people who wish to find who they are and learn for themselves what their views are specifically.

Krista:

Name: Aaron Friel, Age: 26, Year: Senior, Majors: Computer Science & Math

Role: President

*What do you recognize yourself as, and how did you come to this view?*

I would call myself an atheist. My parents divorced when I was young, and my dad raised me. He was never into going to church or talking about religion, so I never really talked to anyone about it. Until I got to high school, I had no idea that most families go to church.

*Do the people you spend the most time with share similar views?*

Yes. Both of my roommates are members of UNIFI. When I hang out with people who aren't in UNIFI I feel like I'm betraying the group.

*Have your views or this group influenced what you want to study or do for a career?*

No.

*What does religion mean to you?*

A shared culture and set of beliefs.

*Have you ever been to a religious service of another view?*

Yes. I've been to three. UNIFI doesn't have a book or set of beliefs to keep us together, so I'm always trying to think of how to connect us more as a community. I'm interested in how all of the religious groups that have the same book attract members.

*Do most people in this group share similar views?*

No. People are passionate about different things, so we work with other groups on campus.

*How would you like the rest of campus to view UNIFI?*

I want us to be seen as a group who doesn't subscribe to standard religious beliefs.

*Field Notes*

I attended UNIFI's brunch meeting at Hy-Vee. Initially, I did not think this group was very open or accepting to us being there. One member had a bag of lollipops that he was passing out to the people at the table, but he neglected to offer them to us Comm. Researchers. I purposely left a chair open next to me so a UNIFI member could sit there, but instead somebody took the chair to

another area where their friends were. While interviewing Aaron, I thought he was very open and willing to answer my questions. He was quick to respond to each one and had a positive attitude. I was surprised that at the end of the interview Aaron invited me to come again to any of their meetings and said to email him if I had any more questions.

## Works Cited

Brumley, Jeff. "Humanist Leader Says Humans Can Solve All"

*Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville)* (2007): B-4. *LexisNexis Academic & Library Solutions*. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

(Taylor) This article is focusing on the many different views of religion mainly humanism. How humans can solve all and it's okay to be confused on what you feel or believe in. Also it goes into great deal about what humanist do and how they make a difference in the world. Two limitations found were that this was a one sided interview and you only heard one opinion. Also never get to hear the negative side of being a humanit. Two strengths found in the article are examples of what they do for the community as a whole outside of the group. Adding that they don't judge how other people feel and really opened up for good interview.

Cohen, Nick. "Profile: Darwin's disciple; Who needs God when we've got biology? Nick Cohen meets the scourge of theologians." *The Independent (London)*. (January 2, 1994, Sunday Correction Appended): *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 10 Feb. 2015.

(Cally) This article documented the conversation between journalist Nick Cohen and British author Richard Dawkins, outspoken atheist and Reader in Zoology New College, Oxford. One of the limitations of the article was that the reader does not know the beliefs or biases of the journalist who met and wrote about Richard Dawkins. Another limitation

is that the article was published 21 years ago. However, it does have the strength of credibility because Dawkins author of *The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker*, and the leading spokesperson for atheism. It also had the strength of having many direct quotes from Dawkins and his opposition.

Hart, Roderick P. "An Unquiet Desperation: Rhetorical Aspects Of 'Popular' Atheism In The United States." *Quarterly Journal Of Speech* 64.1 (1978): 33-46. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

(Zach) This source is the mainly focused on relating atheism to religion and how they interact in the world today. Starting with the basic definition and explanation of atheist culture and what role they play in society, this article expands by contrasting and comparing its mission to different aspects of religion. By analyzing these different connotations in society, Hart builds a well-developed case for the importance of both beliefs in society. A couple strengths of this article is that it builds up religion and atheism equally, and does not have a bias for the first half of the paper. A couple limitations is that this article does not have a bias, and that it is merely a comparison and contrast between the two--not any other belief or opinion.

Kosmin, Barry A. "The secular are skeptics: the worldviews of today's university students." *Skeptical Inquirer* July-Aug. 2014: 38-41. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.



(Andrew) This study examines the finding that there are three distinct worldviews on college campuses: secular, religious, and spiritual. The article examines different studies that relate these views with things such as major, scientific beliefs, and global warming. One strength is that there are beautiful graphs included throughout the article which illustrate the statistics. Another strength is that it does its best to stay neutral and give representation to each worldview. Limitations include its lack of connecting all of the topics together until the end and its ability to summarize the findings.

Stob, Paul. "Religious Conflict And Intellectual Agency: Robert Ingersoll's Contributions To Americas Thought And Culture." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16.4 (2013): 719-751. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 11 Feb. 2015

(Krista) This article gives some insight on the life of Robert Ingersoll. He impacted the United States through giving speeches about atheism and agnosticism. This article did a good job giving examples of how influential Ingersoll was during his time. It was very helpful that the author included so many footnotes. I think the author could have included some of the negative views of Ingersoll's speeches and an introduction with more background information.