

The ethnic church attendance gap at Christian colleges

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Abstract

While interviewing seniors at our university, we came across a curious and disturbing trend. Students of color were less active in any local church. This finding pushed us to ask: does this gap exist throughout Christian college campuses? We answered this question using survey data from over 800 seniors at Baylor University and a national sample of over 6000 students from 34 Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) institutions. As suspected, many students of color on these campuses attend church less often than their white classmates, despite similarities in beliefs. We suggest some possible reasons for this gap.

Keywords

Christian higher education, minority students, church attendance

When a member of our research team interviewed Ebony, she was a senior who was 2 months away from graduating with an athletic training degree. She had grown up going to a Baptist church every single Sunday. Yet, at the Christian university she attended, she had not connected to a local place of worship. She admitted, “Being a part of a church is

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what you're supposed to do. I want to do it, but I think it's just getting in the habit of it." Spiritually, she felt somewhat connected through the chapel program that was required for first-year students at her university, but she confessed that after chapel ended the first-year "is where the spiritual stuff kind of slowed down" for her. Socially, she had found a sense of belonging largely through a Black sorority and other multicultural programs on campus.

Ebony's story was not unique among the students we interviewed. Other students of color shared similar stories. We started to wonder if our university had a religious engagement problem for students of color. Moreover, we wondered if this is true across Christian college campuses in the United States. Thus, we decided to take this question to two quantitative data sets that we had collected, one in 2012 and one in 2020, that asked Christian college students about their church attendance and supernatural beliefs. We asked the following research questions: does church attendance vary by ethnicity at Christian colleges and universities? If so—given the link between church attendance and belief in the supernatural (Martinez, 2013)—is the difference in church attendance matched by a similar pattern in supernatural beliefs?

These research questions are important for four reasons. First, lower attendance and belief among students of color would be an unusual phenomenon of sociological interest considering the strong patterns of church attendance for Americans of color in general (Pew Research Center, 2014). Second, if attendance is lower, it could be that Christian colleges and universities are recruiting, admitting, and ultimately welcoming minority students with different church attendance habits. That difference would need to be taken into consideration.

Third, if the gaps can be attributed to the environment (i.e., we see patterns of decline over time) it could indicate a failure on the part of the institution to cultivate moral and spiritual formation—one of Christian higher education's central purposes (CCCU, 2021)—within the growing number of students of color on their campuses (Longman, 2017). At an institutional level, this reality could indicate weak application of the distinctively Christian elements of the mission statements guiding these institutions. For example, Messiah University (2021) claims, "Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character, and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership, and reconciliation in church and society." It is hard to accomplish the mission of preparing students of color for lives of service, leadership, and reconciliation in the church, if a higher percentage of non-white students are going to church less.

The fourth reason these research questions are significant is that church attendance is correlated with many other important outcomes related to students' academic performance and sense of belonging (Dougherty et al., 2021). Thus, whether a result of the collegiate environment or not, a gap in church attendance for any reason (even if supernatural beliefs do not differ by ethnicity) could have a significant influence on educational and other outcomes for students of color.

Our analysis of church attendance and beliefs by ethnicity drew on survey data from over 800 seniors at Baylor University in 2020 and—to gain institutional diversity—a national sample of over 6000 students from 34 Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) institutions in 2012. These complementary sources of data span

time, geographic location, and institution size. They reveal a church attendance gap for students of color in Christian higher education, despite similarities in beliefs.

Literature review

Increasing racial diversity in Christian higher education

In recent decades, racial and ethnic diversity has become increasingly prized in higher education, including among Catholic and Protestant institutions. For example, the evangelical Protestant Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) has put substantial effort into promoting diversity in member schools (Hansen, 2017; Longman, 2017). Although Protestant higher education institutions continue to be predominantly white in student composition and campus culture, significant changes have been made. Administrators have implemented a host of interventions to overcome the legacy of “an individualistic, color-blind ideology” (Yancey, 2010: 11) that favored the predominantly white culture at the expense of creating a hospitable climate for students of color. In the past two decades, Christian colleges have developed workshops, conferences, reading lists, and leadership development programs, and an increasing number of CCCCU schools have a Chief Diversity Officer (Perez, 2010). Diversity courses, targeted hiring, and multicultural student organizations are other strategies that Christian colleges and universities are using in pursuit of a more multiracial student body (Yancey, 2010). The efforts have yielded results. The percentage of non-white students on CCCCU campuses rose from 18.8% in 1999 to 38.8% in 2016 (Smith, 2018).

General religious participation

As noted, the mission of Christian colleges and universities encompasses more than the transmission of knowledge. For example, Asbury University’s goal (Asbury University, 2021) “is to empower students to influence our global society in their professions, families and the church through their keen minds, servant lives and grounded faith.” One of the common markers of a vibrant Christian faith is involvement in a local church. College is a time of transition in which religious service attendance decreases for many emerging adults (Astin et al., 2010; Smith and Snell, 2009). However, Christian colleges and universities seem an exception (Hill, 2015). Students in these faith-based settings enter with high levels of religious participation and largely sustain it. Moreover, involvement with a local congregation proves influential in the faith formation and character development of students during their college years (Dougherty et al., 2021).

Ethnically stratified church attendance

Faith and church have been important sources of support and solidarity for many non-white ethnic groups in the United States. For generations, the Black Church has been a centerpiece of community life for African Americans (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). High levels of in-group commitment and participation have led the Black Church to be called a