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# The Church: A Salient Support System for African-American College Students

By Odelet Nance

## Abstract

This article builds on a previous qualitative study examining the role of religion in the lives of five African-American college students at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Through a constructivist lens, the stories of first-year students revealed how their church informed their college experiences. This article describes how churches provided support for students through the theoretical frameworks illustrated by Alexander Astin, Jacqueline Mattis, and Robert Jagers. Churches and Predominately White Institutions are encouraged to form partnerships to strengthen and enhance support systems for African-American college students.

Research has shown that having an effective support system affects social and academic integration and, in turn, a student's decision on whether to persist to graduation (Tinto, 1975). Although greater access to post-secondary education exists than ever before, retention of African-Americans remains especially low. According to one study, "the nationwide college graduation rate for Black students stands at an appallingly low rate of 42%. This figure is 20 percentage points below the 62% rate for White students" ("Black Student Graduation Rates," 2004, p. 88). Multiple studies suggest that many factors—financial, social, cultural, psychological, circumstantial, personal—combine in myriad ways to derail students from their educational tracks (Ervin, 2001; Neville, Heppner, & Wang, 1997). One fact seems clear, however; a strong social support system greatly enhances a student's chances of success.

Religion is an important source of social support for African-American students (Markstrom, 1999), and an important coping resource. In fact, church attendance and prayer play an essential role in the reduction of stress (Ellison, 1991). Research findings suggest that those students who attend religious services have a more positive college experience that may lead to better retention (Zern, 1997). Quantitative studies indicate that religious involvement helps to maximize a student's potential to excel academically (Zern, 1997, 1989). Steward and Jo (1998) found that students who self-identified as religious used their spirituality as a means of coping in college settings, and religious students tend to be better adjusted and have higher academic performance. Rather than focusing on explanations for African-American students' under-representation and under-achievement at PWIs, which much past research has covered, this article will examine how the affiliation with the Christian church influences the college experience and acts as a social network for five African-American students at a large, urban, public institution.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Religion and Spirituality***

The church has long represented a system of support and survival for African-Americans. Originally an extended family for slaves taken from their families, it later became a place for educational, social, and community meetings. The church became a safe haven for African-American members and their families, creating and maintaining outreach programs that played both a direct and indirect role (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mattis & Jagers, 2001). In the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Black spirituality became a primary force of liberation. Many Black leaders of the movement were ministers and church members. Lincoln & Mamiya (1990) noted:

Perhaps one of the most important functions that Black churches performed for young people was to provide a place where they could meet older adults, men and women, who could serve as role models for them. Much of socialization for children and youth occur through the process of role modeling—observing, evaluating, emulating, and filing away for later use the behavior, examples, and values of others (pp. 312–313).

Consequently, it makes sense to explore what role Christian faith and church involvement, in particular the Black church, play in sustaining and stimulating educational pursuits.

### ***The Black Church***

While there is no official denomination known as the “Black church,” the term is used here to denote any Christian church in the United States that ministers predominantly to African-American congregations. According to C. F. Stewart (1999), spirituality has proven to be a “soul force” and liberating factor for African-Americans. He described spirituality as “a process by which people interpret, disclose, formulate, adapt, and innovate reality and their understandings of God within a specific context or culture” (p. 1). Religion is defined as a shared system of beliefs, mythology, and rituals associated with a supreme being (Mattis 2000; Mattis & Jagers, 2001).

Religion and spirituality have acted as sources of empowerment in the educational, political, and social arenas of the African-American community (Wilmore, 1998). Missionaries and freed slaves opened schools designed to cultivate morally responsible individuals while giving them literacy skills (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Wilberforce, Morris Brown, and Lane are examples of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) founded and operated by Black churches. The participants in this study reported that their churches encouraged them to go to college and that their churches provided them with opportunities to develop, grow, and cope socially, spiritually, and academically.

### ***Student Development Theories***

Student development theories seek to describe meaningfully “the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her development capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 27). Although several student development models (Baxter-Magolda, 1992a, 1992b; Chickering

& Reisser, 1993; Fowler, 1981; Perry, 1970) have explored cognitive, psychosocial, moral, ethical, and faith development, these traditional student development theories have not fully addressed the needs and culture of African-American students by exploring the most salient factor in African-American life: the church. To provide a clearer theoretical understanding, two involvement theories are described from the lens of student development and African-American religion.

The first theory is Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environments-Outcomes (I-E-O) framework. His research on such variables formed the foundation of his work on student involvement. He defined student involvement theory as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). In general, student involvement theory is concerned with the amount of time a student spends on a given activity and its effect on retention. Astin (1993) examined several types of student involvement, such as social fraternities and sororities, student-faculty interactions, athletic endeavors, and religious associations.

The I-E-O model suggests that student outcomes are influenced by *inputs* (I), which include personal, family, religious, and academic background characteristics; college *environments* (E), which include circumstances that influence what and how much a student learns or changes (e.g., student participation in various programs, enrollment in specific colleges, perceptions in and out of class activities, church attendance); and *outcomes* (O), the effects of students' college attendance and their experiences (Astin, 1993). Social networks, such as family interactions, peer groups, on-campus student support programs, student organizations, and spiritual or religious affiliation would be considered non-academic elements of student involvement (Astin, 1993). During the college matriculation process, involvement in social networks assists in the "maintenance of individual self esteem and life satisfaction; increasing social and academic competence and environmental mastery and the management of stress and coping." (Davis, 1991, p. 145). Colleges that ignore the role of support networks in the lives of Black students may be ignoring factors that assist in the success and retention of those students.

In Astin's 1993 study, religious involvement was based solely on hours per week spent at religious services and religious meetings. Although Astin (1997) stated that college attendance strengthens "hedonism and religious apostasy" (quoting Astin, 1984, p. 205), he also found a positive relationship between a student's satisfaction at college and the hours spent attending religious services. Attending religious services positively affected a student's decision to re-enroll at the same college. Church involvement holds historical and contemporary significance for African-American students and is an important social support (Gilkes, 1980; Markstrom, 1999). However, there has been little research examining the role of the church in the lives of African-American college students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998).

The second theory to be examined is the relational framework (Mattis & Jagers, 2001). According to Mattis and Jagers (2001), African-American religion is both relational and communal. The latter refers to the historic tradition of Black churches being involved in all aspects of the lives of their members, including political, economic, educational, and social concerns (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Mattis (2000) described spirituality as a journey of self-reflection, self-criticism, and self-awareness that culminates in a greater understanding of the relationship between self, God, and the larger community. For many African-American believers, the spirit and religious engagement permeate all of life, and cannot be reviewed without pointing out the relational dimension (Mattis & Jagers, 2001).

The current study (Nance, 2005) focused on how religion functions in the everyday relationships of first-year students. Similar to Park's faith development theory, this framework examines an individual's interaction with God, self, and others. Mattis and Jagers (2001) wrote the following:

Our relational framework focuses attention on the process of religious and spiritual socialization. In that regard, it attends to the roles of socializing agents (e.g., mothers, fathers, extended family members, peers) in transmission and maintenance of religious and spiritual values within and across generations (p. 521).

The new movement in Black Christian worship and church attendance has been fueled and influenced by the influence of the hip-hop culture on Black sacred music (Williams & Dixie, 2003). Members of the hip-hop generation were reared in the Black church, but research shows that they lack loyalty to a specific denomination (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Williams & Dixie, 2003). As a matter of fact, according to a report in 2000 by the National Opinion Research Center, church attendance for 18- to 35-year-olds decreased (Kitwana, 2002, p. 22). The decrease in church attendance has caused the mainstream denominations (Baptist, Pentecostal, and Methodist) to structure worship services to cater to the needs and interests of the young adult, college age, hip-hop generation (Kitwana, 2002; Williams & Dixie, 2003).

## Research Design and Methodology

### *Case Studies*

According to Yin (2003), a case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” and “relies on multiple sources of evidence” (pp. 13–14).

A case study uses intensive descriptive methods to portray persons more fully within their environments (Stake, 2000). The qualitative tradition and methods within ethnographic studies provide rich data through individual interviews, observations, artifact collection, and data analysis. A comprehensive picture of five students' experiences at a predominantly White, urban campus through interviews and observations portrayed a holistic aspect of life that other methods may have neglected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

A small sample was chosen to retrieve rich, in-depth data from study participants (Yin, 1994). The participants of this study included five first-year, African-American self-identified Christian students living in the residence halls at one large PWI in the Midwest. This purposive subset of students was chosen to reflect the traditional, African-American Christian denominations of the student population (Baptist, Pentecostal, and Methodist). Qualitative study offered a way to present a full description of participants' experiences and understand cultural norms (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Triangulated data gathering methods (e.g., observations, interviews, and artifact collection) provided opportunities to identify meaning and to make recommendations for improving institutional policies, programming, recruitment strategies and the retention rate of African-American college first-year students (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The following

four data sources were employed to conduct this case study: interviews, observations, field notes, and the examination of artifacts.

### **Data Collection**

*Ethnographic interviews.* After gaining institutional review board approval, six formal audio-taped interviews were conducted (three interviews per semester, 60 to 90 minutes each) with the five African-American Christian college students selected for the study. The interview protocol was based upon Astin's (1993) input-environment-outcome model. These interviews retrieved data concerning the students' pre-collegiate background, college experience, and religious involvement (Astin, 1993). Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the subjects in the study.

*Participant observations.* The field observations protocol provided insight about the meaning spirituality holds for many African-American first-year college students as well as the aspects of belonging to a religious organization or institution that seems to have a significant impact on their lives. Observations were undertaken at their home churches and organizations to observe religious activities (e.g., youth group meetings, concerts, and church services). The premise of the observations was to examine the participants in the environments in which they worshipped and to explore how those institutions supported educational goals.

*Church artifacts.* Church artifacts such as bulletins, flyers, and programs were collected from the observation sites. These artifacts assisted in providing a context for the students' college and spiritual experience over the nine-month study period. A critical reading of the materials was important in establishing the culture and description of Christian identification and its institutions of worship (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

*Data analysis.* All interviews were transcribed into text documents, in view of the main analytic task of establishing patterns and regularities. Transcripts, field notes, recordings and other artifacts were analyzed for both concurrent themes and disconfirming instances. Multiple opportunities for triangulation in this study were utilized to obtain and compare information about phenomena and explore research questions (religious artifacts, observations, and interviews). The constant comparative method assisted in the coding, categorizing, and the theory development process. The study did not attempt to derive conclusive statements about all minority students and all PWIs; rather, it focused on the stories of five African-American Christian students.

### **Findings**

Analysis of the information in narrative form revealed five common, recurring emergent themes: (1) All of the participants of the study stated that their educational and spiritual mentors were from their religious institutions; (2) The students were more involved in religious activities off campus than general activities on campus; (3) The students identified the gospel choir as a critical on-campus organization that did provide them with spiritual and personal support; (4) The students described themselves as being part of the "holy hip-hop generation" (consequently, the generational term "millennial" (Kitwana, 2002) did not adequately provide description of this population of college students); and (5) The students attributed their persistence in college to their spiritual beliefs and church involvement. The remainder of this article further discusses the final theme.

Mattis & Jagers (2001) stated that religious and spiritual experiences and socialization are manifested through affect, cognition, and behaviors, and the outcomes of those relationships were included here. The five students indicated that the church provided support in three areas: scholarships, academic assistance, and mentoring/personal counseling.

As one student in the study acknowledged, the scholarship he received from his church as a support factor helped him “make it through college,” compensating for the lack of financial support from his parents and family members. In terms of academic assistance, the churches also provided a number of initiatives for students enrolled in college that contributed to their confidence that they would continue their degree programs to completion. Many of the students in this study discussed the tutorial assistance and the awards they received for academic achievement from their churches. Finally, the students mentioned several ways in which their churches had helped them see college attendance as an attainable goal through college preparation workshops, college tours, and guest speakers. All of the students indicated that they preferred to speak to their mentors at church rather than speak to someone at the college when problems arose. One student admitted that it was easier to discuss issues with those who could “pray for you” than with those at the college. Forms of encouragement (phone or e-mail contact), care packages, and visits from church mentors were appreciated by students in this study.

## Discussion

### *Summary of Findings*

Schlossberg (1989) observed that students must feel as if they “matter” on a college campus and Fleming (1984) stated that a supportive community is essential in the development of successful African-American college students. In addition, Jacoby’s (1991) findings indicated that minority students who perceived their campuses as unfriendly were more likely to drop out than those who did not. Typically, HBCUs provide a more supportive environment for African-American students than PWIs, leading them to report more positive experiences there (Allen, 1991; Fleming, 1984). Based on the results of the National Study of Black College Students, Davis (1991) concluded that Black students on Black campuses are more satisfied with their college experiences than are their Black peers at PWIs, adding, “It is clear that on Black campuses Black students are exposed to caring and supportive institutional settings that foster psychological well-being and the positive direction necessary for learning” (p. 157).

Since there is a relative lack of Black role models and support systems on the typical PWI campus, the students in this study revealed the church as a critical factor in their success in college and holistic growth. The study’s specific findings affirmed the need for more research designed to acknowledge and understand the role of the church as a support system in the lives of first-year African-American college students. Such research could be extremely helpful in expanding emerging student development and retention theories and, in turn, making such changes might be necessary and practical to improve the retention and graduation rates.

Williams and Dixie (2003) described the new, hip-hop generation as wanting something more out of church; they believed that millennial college students sought “a worship experience that reflected their energy and vitality rather than what they

regarded as the often cold, lifeless congregations of their parents” (p. 291). Further, “the interests of today’s youth have crept into Black Christian worship” (p. 291). Evidence from the literature review and the findings of this study confirm that there is lack of denominational loyalty and a decrease in church attendance during the first-year students. However, participants find the church to be an invaluable resource. The participants in this study suggested the following attributes of churches that successfully supported and ministered to college students.

- A Bible class exclusively for college students, with a college-educated minister who makes the Word clear, and sound spiritual teachings so that I may be able to make it in college and in life.
- Mentors who have successfully completed college.
- A scholarship program for financial support.
- [A way to] make sure students are grounded in God before they leave for college by preparing them spiritually while they are in elementary school and high school growing up in the church.
- A van [that] will come to campus and pick students up.
- Special programs where college students can fellowship together.
- Don’t expect students to be in every service.
- Accept us the way we are [clothes, language, and music].
- If you can do anything, love. Embrace us. Be real with us.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

There were limitations associated with this study. The purposeful sampling technique used for this research project limited generalizability. The intent here was to obtain in-depth information, or rich data in Denzin’s (2000) terms, on a particular group of five African-American Christian students at a predominantly White, urban, public institution. It is unknown whether the same findings could be found among African-American students at a predominantly Black institution, at a private college, in a rural setting, or at a religiously affiliated college. Another limitation was the fact that this study examined the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of first-year students without examining other students of the college population, such as students from the sophomore class, junior class, senior class, or graduate school.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

The participants’ responses suggest some additional avenues to explore in terms of examining social support systems that might retain (as well as attract) African-American students. Overall it seems prudent to explore the possibility that churches and ministers form partnerships with institutions of higher education to provide spiritual, personal, and financial support for first-year college students. Religious institutions and colleges should work together to support the educational endeavors of college students, regarding

each other as partners rather than adversaries. For example, community churches could be a great resource for recruitment and outreach.

Retention strategists believe that integrating a student into the life of the campus strengthens that student's commitment and involvement on campus, which, in turn, leads to retention (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Several noted researchers have found that the more academically and socially involved an individual is, and the more interaction there is with other students and faculty, the more likely that student is to persist (e.g., Astin, 1984; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This research study suggests that involvement for the African-American student is different from that of other students, in a way that makes it possible to improve retention percentages. Black spirituality and religious involvement, historically a survival and coping method for African-Americans, can be effectively encouraged throughout college (Herndon, 2003; D. L. Stewart, 2002) by recognizing that students who feel comfortable with a religious component in their college experiences find that this combination leads to powerful learning (Light, 2001).

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