# The Invisible Wall: Exploring the Experiences of African-American Students at CCCU Institutions

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## Abstract

African-American students who attend a CCCU institution do not complete their degrees as frequently as other student groups. The average gap at CCCU institutions between "overall and Black graduation rates is more than 19%. This is greater than the gap at other private institutions" (Smith, 2009a, p. 80). While the six-year graduation rate for African-American students at private universities averages 51%, colleges and universities in the CCCU average only 36%. CCCU graduation rates are 9.5% lower than other private institutions due to CCCU affiliation alone. "CCCU affiliation was the only variable to have a significantly more negative association with Black graduation rates than with overall graduation rates" (Smith, 2009a, p. x).

This study examined the experiences of African-American students within the context of Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) institutions. While previous research explored African-American graduation rates, the unique spiritual context of Christian colleges and institutions in the CCCU had not been adequately studied. The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of African-American students regarding their experiences at CCCU institutions in order to identify the barriers and hindrances encountered by these students in their pursuit of a degree.

A qualitative, case-study methodology was utilized to conduct nine focus groups with African-American students at three CCCU institutions in the

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Western region. The sample was comprised of 51 African-American students who had completed at least four semesters at the institution. Themes unique to each school were identified and a cross-case analysis was conducted. The findings indicated the experiences of African-American students at CCCU institutions were similar to other predominantly White institutions without a spiritual affiliation. The unique context of the spiritual environment did not create an environment that promoted African-American student success and did not positively impact African-American students according to their expectations. The findings indicated there are aspects of the environment at CCCU institutions which can be improved to enhance the experiences of African-American students.

## Introduction

African-American[1] students who enroll at a college or university in the United States do not have a high probability of graduating. Nationally, less than half of all African-American students who start college at a four-year institution graduate in six years or less (Carey, 2008). The average number of African-American college students in the United States who complete a college degree at four-year colleges and universities in the United States is nearly 20 percentage points less than their White peers (Lynch & Engle, 2010). African-American students also "typically graduate at a lower rate than their White peers at the same institution" (Carey, 2008, p. 2). Although an increase in the number of African-American students enrolled in colleges has occurred and some gains in degree completion have been achieved since the Civil Rights Movement, enough progress has not occurred. Legal, historical, and structural disadvantages prevent many African-Americans from receiving the socioeconomic advantages associated with college degree attainment (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009).

One of the most accurate ways to compare educational effectiveness between institutions is to analyze the gaps in graduation rates between various ethnic groups at the same institution (Carey, 2008, 2004; Lynch & Engle, 2010). Six-year graduation rates are typically utilized because they are perceived to be more accurate due to student "swirl," the practice of students enrolling in multiple schools at one time, stopping out for a semester, transferring, and ultimately returning to complete a degree (Adelman, 2000; Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Carey, 2008; Oseguera, 2006). To understand the graduation rates of various ethnic groups, Oseguera (2006) explored the variance in graduation rates for White, Asian, Mexican-American, and African-American students. Utilizing four- and six-year graduation rates, there were "significant racial disparities at every institutional type for African-American students" (Oseguera, 2006, p. 28).

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1 The terms "African-American" and "Black" are often used interchangeably in the research. However for the purposes of this research, the term "African-American" will be used. It refers to Black students who have a primary identification with the United States and will exclude international students. If a quote utilizes the term "Black," it will be maintained in its original form.

**African-American Students Graduation Rates and CCCU Schools**

Private universities are the most effective at graduating African-American students and typically do so at a higher rate than the national average (Lynch & Engle, 2010; Oseguera, 2006; Smith, 2009a; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). While private universities in general have the smallest graduation rate gaps between African-American and White students, private universities with a Protestant affiliation or background are generally less successful (Oseguera, 2006; Smith, 2009a).

To study this phenomenon at Protestant institutions, Smith (2009) conducted a quantitative analysis of more than 400 private, Protestant, and Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) institutions. CCCU schools are "an international association of intentionally Christian colleges and universities" and most are predominantly White institutions (CCCU, 2012).

In this research, African-American graduation rates were highest at secular and religious private institutions and lowest at CCCU institutions. For the institutions included in this research, the overall graduation rates for African-American students were 51% at private institutions, 40% at Protestant institutions, and only 36% at CCCU institutions. Overall, "Black graduation rates were 11% lower than the overall graduation rates at Protestant institutions and 15.1% lower at CCCU institutions" (Smith, 2009a, p. 83). The gap between African-American and overall graduation rates at private institutions in this research was 10.6%. An even larger 19.2% gap existed at Protestant institutions with a CCCU affiliation (See Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1 Gap in Graduation Rates at Private, Protestant and CCCU Institutions**

|  | Overall | African-American | Gap |
|---|---|---|---|
| Private | 61.3% | 50.7% | 10.6% |
| Protestant | 52.3% | 39.7% | 12.6% |
| CCCU | 54.8% | 35.6% | 19.2% |

(Smith, 2009a)

While the six-year graduation rate for African-American students at private universities averages 51%, colleges and universities in the CCCU average only 36%. CCCU graduation rates are 9.5% lower than other private institutions. "CCCU affiliation is the only variable to have a significantly more negative association with Black graduation rates than with overall graduation rates" (Smith, 2009a, p. x).

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## Methodology

This study built upon the findings from Smith's research and examined the experiences of African-American students within the context of Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) institutions. While previous research explored African-American graduation rates, the unique spiritual context of institutions in the CCCU had not been adequately studied. The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of African-American students regarding their experiences at CCCU institutions in order to identify the barriers and hindrances encountered by these students in their pursuit of a degree.

A qualitative, case-study methodology was utilized to conduct research with African-American students at three CCCU institutions in the Western region of the United States. The sample was comprised of 51 African-American students who had completed at least four semesters at the institution.

**Site and Participant Selection**

Three CCCU campuses in the Western region were chosen as the research sites for this study. The sites were selected on the basis of membership in the CCCU and at least a 10% gap in the six-year graduation rate between African-American and overall graduation rates. Each of the sites was a private, liberal arts, predominantly White institution, and had less than 8,000 undergraduate students. Outside of academic success, the three institutions also emphasized personal development and growth as a primary goal for students. The identities of the schools were confidential and pseudonyms were used for students.

The first institution, [school #1 redacted], is a small liberal arts college in California with less than 3,000 undergraduate students. [School #1 redacted] is a denominationally affiliated CCCU institution with a mission to develop students who live out the values of the university and serve the community. The small size allows for close personal attention and creates an environment where it is difficult for a student to get lost. The university enrolls fewer than 20% Latino students and approximately 5% of the student enrollments are African-American students. In 2010, the six-year overall graduation rate was 59% for all students, 62% for White students, and only 27% for African-American students. The gap at [school #1 redacted] between African-American and overall graduation rates was 32% in 2010 (Collegresults.org, 2012). Students who enroll at [school #1 redacted] are required to complete the SAT or ACT, have a personal faith commitment, and must either actively attend a church or receive a pastoral interview to be admitted. There are few faculty of color at [school #1 redacted] and chapel is required for all full-time undergraduate students.

The second institution, [school #2 redacted], is a liberal arts university with less than 3,000 undergraduate students. The mission of the university is to provide excellence in higher education and to train students to engage in service. In 2010, the six-year overall graduation rate was 53% for all students, 57% for White students, and 46% for African-American students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The gap between African-American students and White students at [school #2 redacted] was 11% in 2010. [School

#2 redacted] enrolls 15% Latino students and 4% African-American students. [School #2 redacted] has a student to faculty ratio of 15 to 1. To be admitted to the university, being a Christian is not required. However, a faith fit is preferred. Involvement in church, school, and community activities are reviewed as a part of the admissions process. Chapel is not required but encouraged for all full-time undergraduate students.

The third institution, [school #3 redacted], is also a predominantly White private institution with approximately 4,000 students. [School #3 redacted] is not associated with any specific denominational affiliation. In 2010, the six-year overall graduation rate was 65% for all students, 68% for White students, and only 30% for African-American students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). [School #3 redacted] views itself as having an academic basis broader than that of the standard college of arts and sciences. [School #3 redacted]'s mission focuses on implementing biblically centered education and scholarship. An emphasis is also placed on developing Christian thought and character. Students who enroll at [school #3 redacted] are required to be an Evangelical Christian believer and fulfill basic GPA and academic requirements. Students are also required to submit a pastoral reference, which comes from the pastor of their church or its equivalent. To graduate, students are required to complete at least 25 theology units. Neither of the other two sites have these requirements.

### Discussion of Themes

Three central themes emerged in this research common to African-American students at the three CCCU institutions. They were: 1) The Invisible Wall, 2) Swimming Upstream, and 3) Awkward Spirituality.

**The invisible wall.** The first theme, "The Invisible Wall," refers to what many African-American students encountered when they arrived at a CCCU institution. Students could feel a wall but they could not see it, especially when their White friends were not experiencing the same barriers. Others examining the environment may also not be able to detect the wall without closely listening to the experiences of non-majority students. Yet the wall hinders African-American persistence, marginalizes them, and enhances their loneliness and isolation. This theme may be a strong contributor to the lower-than-expected graduation rates at CCCU institutions for African-American students (Smith, 2009b).

This theme was first articulated by Kayla when asked what it was like to be an African-American student at her institution. She drew a picture, Figure 1.1, which portrays her, the lone African-American, on one side of the wall. The other individuals are on the opposite side of the wall, which as she described her picture, was a barrier she was able to see but could not reach through. The picture depicts the resistance encountered by African-American students in classrooms, residence halls, and around campus. Racism and microaggressions strongly contribute to the invisible wall.

The surprising aspect of this theme was how strongly it was felt by African-American students and how little was being done to remove the barriers that contributed to the

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wall. The students perceived that non African-Americans were not aware of or did not care about their challenges. Again, the Christian mission of the school was not adequately influencing the racial experiences of African-American students who were isolated by this wall and separated from others. For the wall to be removed, the entire community at each institution must first acknowledge its existence and then work together to dismantle the barriers to success for African-American students.

**Figure 1.1 The Invisible Wall**
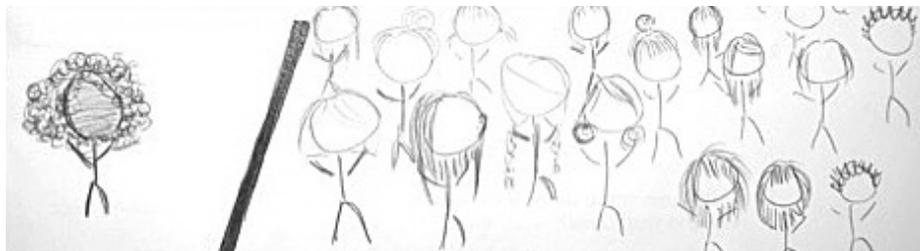


*The façade.* This research confirmed that the campus environment significantly impacts the experiences of African-American students (Davis, 1998; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Students at three institutions described the environment as a façade. They believed the institution wanted to be inclusive of their experience but also perceived the individuals in the environment were not equipped to successfully understand how to relate to their experience. The support structures and allocation of resources were not focused on retaining African-American students, further enhancing the barriers (Oseguera, 2006).

Each of the three institutions intentionally recruited diverse students, presumably because they believed it was important to enroll a diverse student population. Unfortunately, though, institutional behavior did not go beyond recruitment. According to participants at all three institutions, many of their African-American friends left after their freshman year due to the resistance they encountered once they arrived on campus. This façade was an unfortunate reality for private institutions, which would do well to focus on degree completion for all students. Consistent with previous research, participants also frequently felt misunderstood or devalued by the predominantly White culture (Allen, 1992; Kuh, 2001; Museus, 2011). While CCCU institutions can remove this barrier by engaging in diversity training, there does not currently seem to be great openness for change.

*Stereotypes, microaggressions, and racism.* This research confirms that cultural challenges, racism, and microaggressions negatively impact African-American student success (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). While each institution had an identifiable African-American community, there was variance in the extent to which support and encouragement were offered. As the literature review indicates, a positive racial environment, largely free from negative racial stereotypes, microaggressions, and racism, is essential for success (Allen, 1988; Bennett & Okinaka, 1984). For administrators and leaders at CCCU institutions,

the goal of intentionally diminishing the quantity of microaggressive statements should be a priority. Unfortunately, students at all three institutions reported the prominence of stereotypes, microaggressions, and racism and perceived their culture was not respected, valued, or seen as relevant to the larger university experience, further contributing to the invisible wall (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

While the presence of microaggressions was not a surprising finding, their pervasiveness and the extent to which they created a negative racial environment for African-American students was. During the focus groups, many racial incidents were reported only after hearing other participants recount their experiences. This surprised me but also indicated that many of the students in the focus groups had not adequately processed the impact of these racial experiences. It was clear that sufficient support of students as they respond to difficult racial situations was lacking from the three institutions. Previous research indicates this support is essential for African-American student success, as individuals within the environment who help students process and understand their experiences may help to remove the barriers contributing to the invisible wall (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

**Swimming upstream.** The second theme, "Swimming Upstream," refers to the ways African-American students perceived themselves working harder than White students to achieve the same results. While this may not be the reality, in an environment where there are so few African-American students, it is easy to understand why this was a strong perception. In one focus group, Halle was asked to describe what it was like for her as an African-American student at her institution. She drew a picture, see Figure 1.2, of African-American students in a river with a strong current. Ahead are White students, swimming together in unison. Behind, are fewer African-American students, unable to stay with the group. This image was a strong depiction of many of the experiences described by students in the focus groups.

Three factors which contributed to African-American students feeling as if they were swimming upstream were the academic environment, the lack of effective support services, and ineffective funding. Previous research indicates that academics, support services, and effective funding are vital for African-American students to succeed (Bensimon, 2005; Carey, 2004; Harvey-Smith, 2002). This research confirmed that both academic experiences and funding were strong barriers for African-American students and that extra support services are necessary for African-American students, who may arrive on campus less prepared than other students (Lee & Ransom, 2008). These three factors were perceived by participants to put them at a disadvantage and behind the majority students. This caused them to "swim upstream," further alienating and isolating them.

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**Figure 1.2 Swimming Upstream**
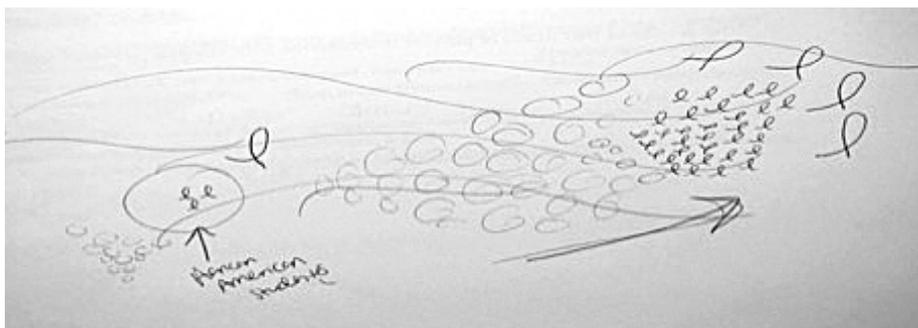


*Academic experiences and classroom challenges.* Faculty and student interaction powerfully impacts African-American student success (Museus, 2011). This research confirmed African-American students were deeply impacted by their professors and also confirmed the conceptual framework. Faculty and staff do contribute to the lower-than-expected graduation rates for African-American students, who perceived faculty lacked the ability to effectively work with students from various cultures within the classroom. Students also perceived faculty were not accustomed to navigating difficult racial and cultural experiences. This further isolated African-American students from the experience that White students had with professors, another reason they were swimming behind White students.

The participants perceived the majority of faculty members to be interested in being inclusive in the classroom. However, their attempts at being inclusive often resulted in further isolation. Improving the classroom environment for African-American students may not require a significant undertaking; providing better training to faculty regarding how to be culturally sensitive in the classroom might significantly improve the classroom experience.

Participants also reported they were frustrated when their professors did not confront microaggressions in class. While students may have experienced racial tensions in classrooms in previous high school or college experiences, they did not expect to experience this dynamic at a private Christian institution. While their expectations were not explicitly communicated, students expected professors in a Christian environment to treat them differently than they would be treated in a secular classroom. This lack of teacher advocacy further increased the feeling of working against the current and isolation from the majority. Again, to improve this reality for African-American students may simply involve empowering majority professors to be aware of their experiences and encouraging them to confront racism and microaggressions when they occur in their classrooms.

*Support services.* This research indicates the three CCCU institutions did not provide adequate support services. Previous research indicates effective support services are essential components of both closing achievement gaps quickly and promoting success for African-American students (Carey, 2008; Longman & Schreiner, 2010). To promote persistence, support services should be implemented in the midst of a campus community which is widely aware of the challenges of minority students. CCCU institutions that want to immediately and quickly improve the African-American student experience must highlight their challenges and provide adequate funding for support services.

Subsequent to providing services, they must be promoted by all members of the community. The types of services which have been demonstrated to help African-American students succeed include expanding offices of multi-ethnic programming, enhancing financial aid, developing minority leadership scholarships, expanding campus clubs, enhancing advising, and recruiting more African-American students, to name just a few. These changes would help to reduce the isolation felt by African-American students "swimming" behind the massive school of White fish.

**Awkward spirituality.** The third theme, "Awkward Spirituality," refers to what many African-American students encountered in the spiritual environment at CCCU institutions. Students who selected a Christian college for the spiritual environment were disappointed once they arrived on campus because they encountered a reality different from what they expected.

**Figure 1.3 Awkward Spirituality**
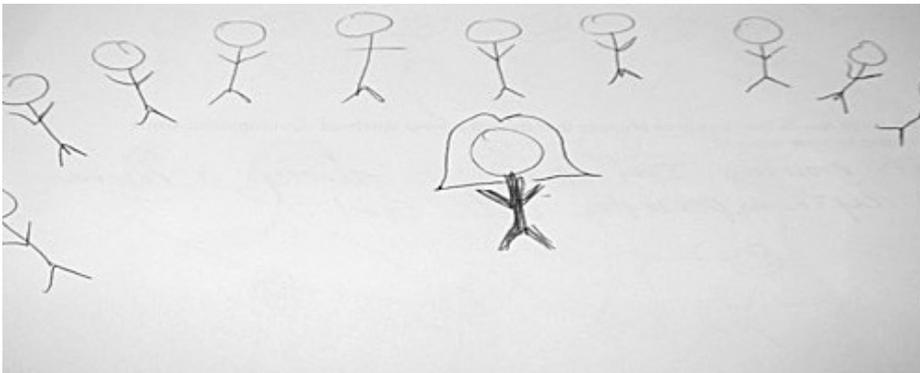


Lisa was asked to describe what it was like for her as an African-American student on campus. She drew a picture of herself, alone, surrounded by other White people in the middle of a chapel experience, see Figure 1.3. In the drawing, she is separated from other people and is standing alone. In the focus group, she talked about how this drawing represented her experience of the "Awkward Spirituality" at her institution.

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*Spiritual environment.* Previous research indicates the fit between spirituality and faith is important for African-American student success. The majority of students who attend a faith-based institution do so intentionally (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). However, participants at all three institutions wanted something from the spiritual environment they did not experience. [School #1 redacted] and [school #3 redacted] students were disillusioned by the spiritual environment and [school #2 redacted] students, while not a primary factor in their college selection, still desired an improved spiritual environment. CCCU institutions have an opportunity to develop a spiritual environment which promotes the success of students from a variety of cultures but to do so requires effective processes of evaluation and planning.

As the main difference between CCCU institutions and otherwise similar private institutions is the spiritual environment, one would expect to see a stronger impact of spirituality on student experiences. However, this was not what students encountered. This is a troubling reality for CCCU institutions. Successfully integrating spirituality and faith into the curricular and co-curricular experiences of African-American students does not happen by chance; it requires changing what has been done in the past in order to meet the needs of students today and in the future. As student demographics continue to change, the spiritual environment must change as well.

Students did report spiritual growth amidst the spiritual environment at the three institutions, but it was often in spite of the environment, not because of it. At predominantly White institutions, it is common to assume the experience of the majority culture is the same as what minority cultures experience. However, this is often not the case. Administrators and other campus leaders who believe the spiritual environment impacts all students in the same ways may be surprised to hear the actual experiences of minority students. Indeed, it would benefit all administrators at CCCU institutions to seek out and listen to the spiritual frustrations of their African-American students. Seeking to listen to and hear the experiences of non-majority students is the first step toward positive change.

*Spiritual environment and expectations.* Previous research indicates that spirituality helps or hinders African-American student persistence and success based on whether or not he or she feels included or excluded (Watson, 2006). At institutions like [school #3 redacted] and [school #1 redacted], students who selected the institution primarily for the spiritual environment and are required to engage in mandatory spiritual practices are negatively impacted when these spiritual experiences marginalize and exclude them. This reality can be changed, however, by developing spaces on campus where the voices and spiritual practices of minority students can be expressed. By implementing consistent, methodical and progressive improvements to the spiritual environment, minority students and specifically African-American student experiences can be more included in and supported by the spiritual environment.

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Intentional efforts are necessary to create space for African-American students to feel welcome. Students whose pre-college worship experiences were similar to their institution's were more able to fit into the spiritual environment. This finding has implications for the types of students recruited and for the support offered to students once they arrive on campus. As recruiters become cognizant of the spiritual experiences of students, they will be more equipped to recruit students who are a better fit and who feel less disconnected spiritually. As campus ministers begin to understand how their non-majority students are isolated by their spiritual practices, they will be more open to change. If CCCU institutions desire to enroll and retain diverse students, they need to ensure the spiritual environment is inclusive.

**Opportunities for Future Research**

This research focused on successful students who had completed four semesters and survived in the environment in spite of barriers. To further explore the experiences of African-American students at CCCU institutions, perspectives from freshman and sophomore students should also be considered. It was not clear what, if any, differences existed between the perspectives of first-year students and those who were on track to graduate. Freshman and sophomore students may have provided a different perspective on the African-American student experience at CCCU institutions.

A second opportunity for future research is to study the experiences of African-American students who do not persist. While students who leave a school are difficult to find, the information gathered from them would be valuable. A fuller picture of what it is like to be an African-American student could be developed. This line of research would inform administrators regarding why students leave and would give insight into how decisions to leave are made. Although this information can be difficult to obtain, it is essential to understand more fully the experiences of African-Americans at CCCU institutions.

Research supports that spirituality helps some African-American students cope with their college environment and may provide the necessary support to increase student retention (Stewart, 2009; Watson, 2006; Watt et al., 2008). Further research can also be conducted into the spiritual experiences of African-American students at CCCU institutions. Participants in this research reported they were negatively impacted by their spiritual experiences but these students did not leave. A more thorough and nuanced investigation into how spirituality impacts the persistence and success of African-American students would provide helpful information for administrators.

Discussion and Reflections

The findings raise questions regarding how Christian colleges should best respond to race and racism in a way that improves the experiences of non-majority students in the future. Historically, Evangelical culture has ignored structural issues of racism and often has not perceived "a societal or institutional responsibility to make up for the history of racism and inequality in America" (Smith, 2009a, p. 10). As Emerson and Smith (2001) discussed, Evangelicals, the majority of whom are White, typically do not see structural

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issues of inequality. Evangelicals also typically offer individual explanations for success or failure. This prevents White Christians from seeing or acknowledging structural issues of racism and contributes to denying the existence of racism within society.

This research occurred within the context of Christian colleges. It is important to note that the spiritual environment at these schools is the primary difference between CCCU institutions and other predominantly White institutions. The findings provide evidence that Christian colleges have not sufficiently met the challenges of race and racism. What is most troubling about the findings is how little the institutional mission and Christian environment positively affected African-American students' perceptions of their educational experiences.

A typical Evangelical response is to attribute success to individual choice and hard work. Failure is perceived to be a lack of effort. This perspective places the onus of responsibility for success or failure on the individual but does not consider from where a person has come, what challenges he or she has encountered, and whether or not he or she is able to influence any external or structural barriers. Previous research supports the idea that "certain religious belief systems, namely Evangelical Protestantism, promote values of individualism which shape Whites' understanding of the logic of inequality generally and the logic of racial inequality more specifically" (Eitle & Steffens, 2009, p. 507; Hinojosa & Park, 2004). It is this individualistic attitude that removes any organizational or structural responsibility from churches or colleges to improve the reality of African-Americans. This is shortsighted and damaging to students of color. However, it has historically been the approach of the church and many institutions of Christian higher education as well. This difference between the mission of CCCU schools and the inability to provide racial equality and social justice is an ongoing and serious issue and was a central focus of this research.

Evangelical Christians perceive themselves as welcoming to everyone, including others, and accepting differences. This research confirms, however, that at Christian colleges, acceptance, openness, and appreciation of differences was not a reality that African-American students perceived. The findings provide a unique opportunity for Evangelicals to reflect on how open, accepting, and welcoming they are to non-White people in both churches and Christian institutions of higher education.

The findings also reveal another aspect of Christian culture that contributes to the African-American student experience – the segregation of churches. Unfortunately, the current racial tension within the spiritual environment at CCCU institutions parallels and reflects the historical tension between principles of faith and race in this country. Many Evangelical churches in the United States are not diverse institutions. Although it is cliché, it is true that Sunday mornings are the most racially segregated hours of the week. During the Civil Rights Movement, when many barriers to African-Americans were removed legally, many churches did not quickly change. Christian colleges are comprised of Christian individuals who frequently attend White Christian churches with little exposure

to diversity. Christian higher education parallels the reality of Evangelical Christianity and solutions to one will impact the other (Gilbreath, 2008).

The campus and racial environments at the three research sites reflect the culture of the predominantly White Evangelicals who run them. Unfortunately, this culture does not create an environment which helps African-American students succeed. While CCCU institutions are obviously not churches, they do share similar traits and characteristics; Evangelical leaders often do not see or understand the challenges of non-White individuals and are often not aware that racial challenges still exist. For CCCU institutions to develop capacity to meet the needs of the next generation of college students, these perspectives on race and ethnicity need to change.

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