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### Engagement of Faith-Based Institutions in Diverse Communities: A Phenomenological Study

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ENGAGEMENT OF FAITH-BASED INSTITUTIONS IN DIVERSE COMMUNITIES:  
A PHENOMONLOGICAL STUDY

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Michael Miller

May 2022

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Michael Miller

entitled

Engagement of Faith-Based Institutions in Diverse Communities:  
A Phenomenological Study

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2022

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### **Abstract**

Diverse community engagement in faith-based institutions is potentially lacking faith-based intentions. Though community engagement is a well talked about topic within Christian higher education and conversations on diversity are rapidly growing, there was no previous research on the intersection between faith-based institutions, diversity, and community engagement. Thus, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to find how faith-based institutions implement diverse community engagement within US communities and then show the implications that engagement has on increasing diversity on campuses. Results revealed many shared themes through the institutions and how they are working to increase racial and cultural awareness. However, the participating colleges and universities shared their challenges with their diverse interactions on and off campus. The discussion introduces opportunities for future research while providing faith-based institutions questions to engage with while seeking to heighten diversity support initiatives.

## **Acknowledgements**

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I would also like to thank Nate Chu and Kelly Yordy for pushing me to achieve more and not letting me settle for complacency; without them I would never have thought of continuing my education.

To my children, Myles and Brightyn, I hope that I can inspire you to be more. To understand that the heights you can reach are limitless and know your mother and father support you in all that you do. My hope coming into this was that I can help you surpass the potential that you can't even see in yourself, as your mom and others have done for me and that hope remains the same.

And to my wife Sydney. Thank you for all the sacrifices you have made. The stress you have taken on, the late nights, the days, weeks, months and years you've given for me to complete this journey. I hope to give even a sliver of the love and grace that you've given me. You are my world, you deserve the world and I will work to give you more than that. Thank you!

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Alex, a high school senior from Denver, Colorado, hopes to attend college next fall. Alex would be a first-generation student, and his knowledge of college only extends to his guidance counselor. He has every ounce of determination to go off, graduate, and do what has never been in his family line. Alex grew up in the Christian faith and would go to a Christian university if he knew more about them. However, all he knows are the state universities that come on visits to his school and the gear he sees people in the community wear. These are the same universities that some of his friends decided to attend. Once Alex decided on a state school and was ready to leave, he found a prestigious Christian university just thirty minutes from him, but it was too late. He was shocked never to see any representation of them in his community—not at any college fairs, church, or high school.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Alex's story is not unique. Almost all Christian universities make community engagement a point of emphasis in who they are. As stated by Fitzgerald et al. (2012), "Engagement is essential to most effectively achieving the overall purpose of the university, which is focused on the knowledge enterprise" (p. 223). Christian universities act upon community engagement well and show the importance of engagement by traveling abroad through missions or other learning experiences. The understanding is that there are learning opportunities that cannot be done in a classroom, and students need

to gain this experience elsewhere. This experiential learning is performed in society, primarily internationally, and is used for the mutual benefit of students and the community in which they are engaging. Service-learning and community engagement help in the technical, cultural, political, and antifoundational fields (Butin, 2010). The issue does not lie within the lack of community engagement, and it does not lie within diversity. Christian universities travel to diverse areas all the time. The issue is that Christian higher education institutions seem to overlook the engagement needs in diverse communities within the United States.

### **Domestic Community Engagement**

Community engagement is defined as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 632). Many universities involve their students in community engagement because research shows that it fosters a more active citizenry and supports a more equitable society. Butin (2010) states that emphasizing real-world learning “seems to serve as a powerful counterpoint to contemporary positivistic educational trends that deprofessionalize teaching, narrowly focus on quantifiable outcomes, and maintain instrumental conceptions of teaching and learning” (p. 4). Universities engage in the community in many different ways: financially, spiritually, and emotionally through food drives, missions, children’s programs, or other activities.

## **Diversity**

In this study, we focus not just on any community but on diverse communities. Diversity can be a broad term and defined in many different aspects such as cultural, racial, socioeconomic, and geographic. This study will mainly look at racial and socioeconomic diversity. Students of color from rural and diverse communities at Christian universities tend to come from below the average household income. The diversity of the student body will be defined by the statistical data on Christian higher educational institutions' diverse enrollment.

When it comes to university engagement, many find it imperative to engage in diverse partnerships (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). However, as we will see in the literature, this diverse engagement may be portrayed on a larger scale internationally. Mainly, we see the engagement in diversity as study abroad or missions trips outside the country and find a lack of realization that diversity can also be domestic.

## **Purpose of the Study**

As Alex found a Bible study group at his state college, he discovered that his story was not a singular case. Many of his friends also stated that they did not have any community engagement by Christian colleges and universities in their neighborhoods. As he wanted to dive deeper into his story, he asked his friends at Christian institutions if they saw this pattern. He was not shocked to hear that they did. They stated that their school did a lot of travel abroad but not much engagement in their surrounding neighborhoods. Alex sensed that it was not that they were not trying; maybe they were just missing the mark.

The literature discussed further in Chapter 2 has shown that community engagement and service-learning are widely practiced in faith-based and non-religiously affiliated institutions. This study aims to create a clearer understanding of whether and how Christian higher education institutions engage in diverse communities their student body represents, not just their local surroundings. It is not so much what the literature says; it is what the literature does not say. Fitzgerald et al. (2012) lay out practices for higher education and community engagement, as does Dostilio (2017). The fact is that the literature does not cover diversity, community engagement, and Christian higher education interacting together. Suppose findings reveal that there is, in fact, a lack of engagement in diverse domestic communities. In that case, this information could be valuable to Christian higher education in seeking to engage in the communities of which their own student body represents on a domestic scale, not just a larger or international scale.

### **Conclusion**

Currently, no research intertwines the aspects of community engagement in diverse domestic communities within Christian higher education. The research on community engagement mostly looks at how it is beneficial for the students and has rarely expressed the concern for the community, except for Butin (2010), who asks if it is “an institutionalized mechanism fostering student’s growth and self-awareness concerning issues of diversity, volunteerism, and civic responsibility? Or, as some critics note, a voyeuristic exploitation of the ‘cultural other’ that masquerades as academically sanctioned ‘servant leadership’” (p. 4).

Community engagement in higher education is addressed in the literature. Still, a lack of diverse community engagement in Christian higher education is addressed, and that is what this research will aim to bring to light. There is a belief that Christian colleges and universities practice community engagement well; but is it complete? The completeness of community engagement in Christian higher education comes from not only traveling abroad but engaging in diverse domestic communities and, at the least, engaging in the diverse communities which their own student body represents.

The research will follow a phenomenological study of multiple faith-based colleges and universities and their community engagement practices, searching to see if this literature gap is accurate. Therefore, the guiding research question for this study is: How are Christian higher educational institutions implementing diverse engagement in US communities?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Community engagement, Christian higher education, and domestic (United States) diversity are all constructs that have been studied and written about a plethora of times. Diversity, especially in higher education, has been a hot topic around the United States.

Though these ideas have been re-emerging as popular topics to discuss, there has been a missing intersection between the three in the literature. That being said, these topics intersect with each other in pairs on many occasions. On the rare occasion community engagement, diversity, and higher education appear together, it is almost exclusively about studying abroad. This chapter will discuss these topics individually by reviewing the literature and discussing the intersection between community engagement, diversity, and higher education.

#### **Community Engagement**

The phrases “experiential learning,” “service-learning,” and “community engagement” are interchangeable throughout the literature. That will also be the case for the present study unless otherwise specified. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse defines this as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (Bandy, 2011).

There is a wealth of literature on service-learning and community engagement. The idea came about in the 1990s when there was a shift from the 1980s emphasis on co-curricular volunteering in higher education (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). Many campuses quickly created offices to associate with community-based teachings because “Substantial infrastructure in the form of a community engagement unit (office, center, division) is a key organizational feature of a highly engaged campus” (Zlotkowski, 1998, p. 25; Etienne, 2012; Hollander et al., 2002; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013; Walshok, 1999). These experiences serve to attain different outcomes depending on the entity using them. “Some treat service learning as a single curricular approach; and others focus on differing conceptions of the attitudes, skills, and knowledge associated with developing citizens” (Kahne & College, 2000, p. 43).

### **Community Engagement in Higher Education**

Many Christian colleges and universities provide community engagement program experiences to students, faculty, and staff. When done right, this engagement is beneficial to all parties involved, whether the university, the participant, or the community. Each reaps some reward in the experience. It can be a way for students to engage in communities outside their own. “Christ-centered liberal arts experiential education can prepare students to engage diverse perspectives without disintegrating or forcing others to assimilate to what they are comfortable with, while also encouraging them to lean into their faith” (Battle-Walters Denu, 2020, p. 13). They may also have positive outcomes in their life’s social, personal, and learning aspects. In terms of their learning, students can apply real-world things they are taught in the classroom. Socially

they can gain connections with the community and network for possible careers later on (Bandy, 2011).

The community benefits from the engagement by having “valuable human resources to achieve goals, enhanced community-university relations, satisfaction with student participation, and new energy and enthusiasm applied to community work” (Bandy, 2011, p. 2). As for the benefits of the faculty, they receive “satisfaction with the quality of student learning, new avenues for research and publication via new relationships between faculty and community, networking opportunities with engaged faculty in other disciplines or universities, and a stronger commitment to their research” (Bandy, 2011, p. 2).

The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2010) reported the best practices of service-learning centers on campuses. They came up with six best practices that have proven effective in promoting this learning style in both curricular and co-curricular programming. As stated by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2010):

Many institutions of higher education continue to encounter challenges within and outside the academy. Internally, centers may lack the infrastructure or resources necessary to maintain quality programs and partnerships. Defining features such as organizational structure, reporting lines, funding, student programming, faculty professional development, community partnership development, and policies and procedures are critical elements for a successful center (p. 27).

The best practices found in this report could be divided into six categories. These categories consist of: “(a) institutional architecture/policy, (b) center infrastructure, (c)



center operations, (d) center programs for faculty, (e) center programs for students, and (f) center programs for community partners” (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013, p. 29).

Depending on your preference, these practices work from either the bottom-up or top-down approach. Starting with institutional architecture, this includes touchpoints such as a campus-wide commitment to this type of learning, budgeted institutional funds, strategic plans, reporting lines, and institutional leadership that promotes community engagement. Under the center infrastructure best practice category falls office spaces, an advisory board, a vision and mission statement for the center, annual reports, administrative assistants, center director and faculty, and support programming staff. Items like assessment mechanisms, resource materials, evaluations, publications, risk management, and databases fall under the umbrella of center operations (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013).

The following three categories of best practices represent center programming for the faculty, students, and community partners. For faculty, this includes fellowships, professional development programs, mentor programs, and one-on-one support. For the students, opportunities play a significant role in research, leadership, internships, and study abroad. When it comes to community partners, the center programming involves presentations and publications, awards, grant proposals, engaged pedagogy, site visits, and community incentives (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). These best practices have laid the groundwork for many centers for community engagement and will continue to provide insight and blueprints for those to come.

## **Diversity**

The topic of diversity is vast and vague, ranging across many different topics and spectrums. The term diversity can describe differences in race, political stance, religion, socio-economics, and more. Cuseo et al. (2007) define diversity as “the variety that exists in humanity” (p. 207). This study will primarily discuss racial diversity. Racial diversity can be defined as “persons sharing distinctive physical traits, such as skin color, or facial characteristics” (Trotman, 2019, p. 16). The close relationship between the terms diversity and minority is quickly growing apart. “Several states already contain a majority of people of color, and children of color are expected to compose the majority of Americans younger than 18 years old within the next 15 years” (Bowman, 2010, p. 4). Furthermore, the United States is said to switch from a White majority to a White minority by 2045, and by 2060 one in three Americans will be a race other than White (Frey, 2018; Vespa et al., 2018).

### **Diversity in Higher Education**

Campuses around the country are honing in on diversity efforts as we continually see schools updating or creating diversity statements. We also see universities and organizations diving into the topic together. A significant aspect of diversity inside higher education is enrollment. Colleges and universities are working to attain a more diverse student body. The drive to increase diverse enrollment is for multiple reasons, one of which is student growth. In the research done by Bowman (2010), the results indicate that frequent diversity interactions on campus are associated with growth in leadership skills and intellectual engagement. Another reason for increased diverse enrollment is student and community perspectives. Having a diverse environment, such as within residence

halls, enables students to see parts of life that they may not be familiar with. Helping them engage in and understand situations other than those they grew up with causes students to stretch and challenge their ways of life while living with one another (Petryk et al., 2013).

There is evidence that these diverse perspectives carry into the classroom, not just the residence halls. Packard (2013) states that “students’ race fundamentally impacts the kinds of things they say in class discussions” and that the diverse classrooms “leverage the differences in life experiences” (p. 145). These situations would drive institutions to enroll a more diverse student body as it enhances the learning perspectives that students receive just by sitting in class. Packard’s research shows that students of different races engage in course material very differently. Packard then gives the example of the topic of social class discussed in the classroom stating,

White students were significantly more likely to connect course material with social class. In fact, over one-fourth of all white students wrote about this intersection in Race and Ethnic Relations. Most entries dealt with the perceived lack of justice concerning class inequality. However, while students of both races lamented class disparity, black students were much more likely to address social class issues in a way tied explicitly to racism. (pp.147–148).

Preferential treatment for those considered part of an underrepresented racial group has been seen in diverse enrollment efforts. In the 2003 lawsuits against the University of Michigan, the Supreme Court upheld the use of race-based admissions (Bowman, 2013). This upholding was only in terms of what the Court ruled a “plus factor,” meaning that students could not be given baseline points due to race, which was

ruled in the *Gratz v. Bollinger* case in 2003 (Bowman 2013). Due to the ruling that race could be a plus factor in admissions decisions, other schools began using this strategy to diversify their campus.

In an attempt to move to a more diverse campus, universities are also creating avenues to help train staff, faculty, and students to prepare to engage with the various differences (Trotman, 2019). At the University of Michigan, a class develops leadership within the campus community to become supportive of diversity efforts and general leadership (Petryk et al., 2013).

Not only does diversity offer connectedness and growth on campus, but it also helps with career preparedness. Career development happens through an increase in self-awareness and knowledge. By thinking outside of their perspectives, students can critically think of what they and others have to offer (Trotman, 2019). Cuseo et al. (2007) explain that interactions among different groups allow the brain to engage in deeper, active thinking. Active thinking significantly impacts the depth of a person's diverse learning depending on the engagement, or lack thereof, in these interactions.

Outside of campus, diversity and cohesion can be very difficult to come by. Distrust is very prevalent, making it challenging when entering a community as an "outsider.", Portes and Vickstrom (2011) found in multiple studies across the United States

a negative association between contextual diversity (measured as the proportion of residents who are a "visible minority") and social trust, but argue that the effect is greater for majority (white) respondents and that those who regularly interact

with neighbors are less susceptible to the negative effects of community heterogeneity. (p. 51)

This distrust tends to come from the communities that do not have diverse social networks that are currently functional. In a different study done by Sturgis and Smith (2010), it was found that diversity plays a role in distrust and neighborhood deprivation. Social capital is driven down significantly due to unequal diversity, meaning high inequality and spatial segregation. As an outsider looking to engage in a community where trust issues can be a big factor, it is important to understand the proactive listening needed to gauge what it is that community needs.

### **Conclusion**

Discussions on community engagement and diversity will continue for a long time within faith-based higher education. These concepts do not seem to be going anywhere fast. Interestingly enough, finding where these concepts intersect with Christian higher education is nearly impossible. By creating diversity on campus and engaging in diversity off-campus, universities can help create a deeper level of thought in their students while enhancing their self-awareness and well-being. Not only does this engagement help those in the university, but it is imperative to understand the true needs of the community that is being engaged in and to share the building of said community in diverse social networks, capital, and trust. The literature shows a need to study further the research question: How are Christian higher educational institutions implementing diverse engagement in US communities?

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

After reviewing the literature and identifying and defining concepts within the research gap of community engagement by Christian higher educational institutions in diverse US communities, future study was deemed necessary. This study will show how administrators at Christian colleges and universities work to implement community engagement through different efforts and programming that enhance the community and the student while identifying the implications of increasing diversity on campus. The research question was explored through a qualitative phenomenological study.

Qualitative research is a method of research that explores an understanding of the meaning behind how or why individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2018). The research process includes “emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participant’s setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2018, p. 204). Qualitative research focuses on how things occur. Researchers conducting this method look at the process and outcome of the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993; Kieffer, 2021; Merriam, 1988). In this phenomenological study, the researcher explored the research question utilizing a qualitative research methodology to gain further understanding.

## **Research Design**

This study used a phenomenological qualitative research design to understand better the implementation of engagement in diverse communities by administrators at Christian colleges and universities. “The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description for the nature of the particular phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 147). This type of qualitative research study was conducted by interviewing participants to gain a picture of the research question by looking at the day-to-day experiences of a given group (Creswell, 2018). Further, in phenomenological research, the researcher studied a particular group over a prolonged time by collecting interview data. For this study, the researcher examined information from the interviews conducted with top administrators responsible for co-curricular, outside community engagement, and diversity at Christian institutions. The researcher explored how the different institutions implement or program community engagement within diverse US communities as well as sought out information for implications on increasing diversity on campus.

## **Context**

To ensure that there are multiple cross-references of Christian colleges or universities, the researcher used institutions within the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU) for research and data collection. The CCCCU is a group of more than 180 Christian colleges and universities with over 150 located across North America. The CCCCU is committed to the mission of “advancing the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth” (CCCCU, n.d.) The CCCCU was established in 1976 and fulfills its mission by providing experiences focusing on experiential education, public

advocacy, and professional development & scholarship (CCCU, n.d.). The CCCU, through many initiatives,

promotes the development of high-quality academic research projects, provides opportunities for faculty to conduct innovative research with peers from other campuses, and provide administrators with opportunities to gain the most current information in order to lead highly successful campuses that employ best practices for student thriving and academic success. (CCCU, n.d.)

All institutions within the CCCU are of the Christian faith and state that they participate in community engagement, though the how varies. Getting a cross-section of Christian institutions with a shared mission is important to this study and was achieved by studying eight CCCU institutions. The research data were collected in the late winter of 2022 through interviews with CCCU institution administrators via video conference and written response.

### **Participants**

To collect the data that would answer the research question most effectively, the researcher needed to identify administrators at each of the eight CCCU institutions that would be knowledgeable in existing community engagement programs and the stance that the institutions take on diversity engagement.

The participants in this study included administrators such as vice presidents of the eight different CCCU institutions. The participants also included professionals involved with diversity and community engagement aspects of campus at an upper decision-making level. One person from each one of the eight schools spoke on behalf of



their respective institution, and each was identified using an institution number ranging from 1 to 8 to protect confidentiality.

### **Procedure**

The researcher identified participants regarding their community and diversity engagement programming work on their respective campuses. The researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board and then contacted participants to participate in the study. After the participants had accepted, the researcher scheduled the interview times based on availability between December 2021 and March 2022. These interviews were conducted through video conference and written response. A higher education professional in the researcher's graduate school program tested the semi-structured interview process.

Each participant received a copy of an informed consent document at the beginning of each interview. The informed consent included potential risks, ensured confidentiality, and informed the participant that they would be able to withdraw from the study at any point with no consequence (see Appendix A). The researcher explained this document verbally and presented it through email to each participant.

The interview style was semi-structured and consisted of questions regarding the participants' involvement in engagement programming, the overall direction of the institution's community engagement, and hopes to increase diversity. The semi-structured style of the interviews left the ability to explore more in-depth and an openness to other issues regarding the topic that the participant wanted to describe (see Appendix B).

## **Data Analysis**

After all the interviews, the data analysis process began. The researcher recorded and transcribed data and then analyzed it through the coding process. This process was done by segmenting and labeling text into themes in the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). Labels were then given to help aid the coding. The labeling was part of the goal of coding, which was used to make sense of the data.

To ensure validity, the strategy of triangulation was used, cross-referencing the data with that obtained from the interviews. Another strategy that the researcher used was member checking. This process consisted of a continued conversation between the interviewer and interviewees to see that information was recorded correctly and leave an open communication line for any further questions.

The phenomenological study by the researcher helped to answer the research question of how Christian higher education institutions implement community engagement in diverse US communities. The researcher found themes shared in the CCCU through the coding and theming.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The purpose of this study is to examine how faith-based institutions implement community engagement in diverse domestic communities, creating opportunities for their respective students to engage. Furthermore, this study dives into how community engagement provides cultural and racial understanding, awareness, and benefits to prospective stakeholders for the institution.

Post analysis of the data, multiple themes emerged from the shared phenomenological group of professionals at CCCU institutions including: 1) there is a lack of cultural and racial awareness from the entirety of campus; 2) community engagement is primarily facilitated by the students; 3) community engagement is tied to service-learning; 4) racially diverse representation in staff and faculty is important; and 5) there is a homogeneity of the voices discussing the conversation of diversity in higher education.

#### **Lack of Campus-Wide Cultural and Racial Awareness**

The first theme identified was the lack of cultural and racial awareness across the entirety of campus. This theme describes the level of cultural and racial awareness of the staff and faculty on campus. All eight of the representatives from the participating institutions mentioned the difficulty this aspect created when trying to implement and have discussions around diversity and community engagement. The lack of awareness posed a threat to how the institutions were viewed and their ability to make an impact.

For example, an interviewee from institution #1 stated:

We really need to press into our cultural competency further so that we are better equipped to meet the needs, serve and be a welcoming environment. If you don't have that cultural competency, you don't necessarily know if you're not as welcoming as you think you are.

In a comparable manner, an interviewee from institution #3 offered:

Diversity tends to only speak to our non-white students, even though its unintentionally doing so. Also, at times it does leave out our international students. I think that we think about diversity in terms of Hispanic students and Black students without much regard for socioeconomic status, religious differences, etc. Like you can be white and still be diverse because we have international students who are white, but they're from Denmark so the way they experience culture differs from us Americans. So just because you're white, doesn't mean you're all the same.

All eight institution representatives also shared that the lack of awareness also showed up in how diversity was defined on campus and how the student body was seen. This understanding emerged from the way in which faculty and staff engaged enrolled students and how they were, or were not, supported. The definition of diversity was almost exclusively synonymous with students of color.

### **Community Engagement is Primarily Driven by the Students**

Another theme is the fact that the community engagement is primarily facilitated by and for the students. Five of the eight institutional representatives addressed the concern that the student service organizations are becoming less organic in their ability

for students to recruit other students to continue that organization. The institutions are having to battle which clubs and organizations will have institutional backing to continue.

An interviewee from institution #2, for example, acknowledged:

It's more student driven and you're sort of asking a question that's an ongoing challenge. I think because some of what we've noticed in the past couple years is that students come in with a deep desire to serve, they're mentioning this right on their admissions applications. And so, we almost anticipate them getting here and, you know, filling these positions really easily. Like, yeah, we have these great organizations that you can join, but then they don't actually end up joining them.

A representative from institution #1 shared:

We have different opportunities that that students engage in, one in particular was actually launched by a class. 30 years ago, an instructor saw a need and launched a program... now our students predominantly staff that program.

A continued fear exists that without students facilitating the organization, there will not be opportunities unless the university does the recruiting and filling of the organizational positions.

### **Community Engagement is Tied to Experiential Learning**

The third theme that emerged from the data was that community engagement and service-learning had an impact on the way institutions interact with the larger community. Though most institutions, seven of the eight, noted that the terms were synonymous, one institution worked hard to portray a stance of service without the need to learn, thus creating a subtheme of community need.

The representatives from the seven institutions that focused their engagement on experiential learning all agreed on the fact that the experience helped the students engage with the content. Though there was an element of service, these students had requirements either for a class or a degree. To that point, the representative from institution #1 stated:

We just know that students learn more when they've had an experience that they can tie to that then reinforces why they maybe need to learn more about the content... so it's built into their coursework where they have to find different ways to serve.

Another participant, the representative from institution #3, added:

We are always trying to make learning more experiential that gets students out of the classroom and out into the world, helping people. We want to make sure there is always some educational component.

It is important to note that all of the institutional representatives emphasized the appreciation of the service aspect found within the experiential process.

One institutional representative made it a point to note that not only do they have an aspect of experiential learning, but that it is not necessarily how they define community engagement. In particular, that interviewee stated:

We're in essence broadening our definition of diverse community engagement. We are bringing multiple programs for the community on campus for children, adults, and churches that are predominantly of color... we are doing projects and getting in the community while also posting that we're available for coming out and participating in any type of service project you may have.

This CCCU, faith-based institution representative continued to name six more programs outside their coursework that they currently have to engage with their culturally and racially diverse communities.

### **Importance of Representation in Staff and Faculty**

When asked about representation of people of color on campus, all eight interviewees expressed the desire and need for more representation, not only in the staff and faculty but also in the student body. Three of the participants stated that although there was desire, there was no real strategy in place to accomplish the desired outcome. Each institution spoke about the fact that hiring more representation aided not only students on campus but played a pivotal role in community engagement and recruitment. Multiple participants also explained that hiring representation is the first step that should be taken to build an internal community that can provide support for all students. For example, the representative from institution #8 contended:

So, we have to hire people in these roles that understand diverse communities so that as they're doing the admission work, they can authentically and engage the other... you gotta prepare your house for guests to come over. Right? You know, and if your house ain't ready for guests, stop sending out the invitation.

The representative from institution #2 offered:

It's changed the conversation. It's changed the dynamic. I think, even in talking with students, because they can see for years we've said, we're trying to do a better job recruiting faculty and staff of color. But there's a number of challenges because from a student perspective, you can maybe get yourself to the argument, I can do this for four years. I can go here for four years. I, want make sure that I

study this and this looks like a good school. I'll be there for four years. Faculty and staff, it's sort of like, well, do I want to settle down here? Do I want to raise my kids here? Where am I going to go to church? Where am I going to get my hair done? Like, there's a number of factors that faculty and staff have that students don't think about that makes it hard. But, the college, isn't just saying that we're trying to do this, but we actually are starting to change. It's slow but yeah, starting to.

Each participant expressed the difficulties that they face when recruiting staff and faculty of color to their respective institutions. Though they all are currently struggling to recruit, half of the institutions expressed details about how bringing guests of color on campus is a strategy to hopefully spark interest for when a position does come available.

### **Homogeneity of the Conversation**

The final theme that emerged from the data came from a single participant discussing the homogeneity of the conversation on diversity and community engagement. Though the frequency of this theme is low, the magnitude is high as the institutional representative gave their closing remarks of what can be improved upon in this area of faith-based higher education with considerable conviction and vigor. In particular, that interviewee stated:

I'm increasingly worried about the homogeneity that we tend to be promoting, even as we're sort of talking about issues related to diversity... That, it feels a little bit like, for lack of a better word that white people are really driving the conversation about how to serve students of color... Like, if we were truly



centering the voices of the people who we're trying to serve, then service would be our number one issue.

The participant elaborated on the fact that the conversations feel very homogenous and that institutions are centering learning and other things that are not central to the conversation. The importance of this theme lays in the fact that the participant is the only to acknowledge the conversations on diversity not including more people of color. This then alludes to the aspect of hiring more diverse faculty and staff.

### **Summary**

During the analysis of the data from the eight institutions that participated, the themes that emerged included: 1) a lack of cultural and racial awareness from the entirety of campus; 2) community engagement is primarily facilitated by the students; 3) community engagement is tied to service-learning; 4) the importance of racially diverse representation in staff and faculty; and 5) homogeneity of the voices discussing the conversation of diversity in higher education. In Chapter 5 the aforementioned themes will be further examined along with limitations of the research and the implications for future practice and study.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

Diversity tops most institutions' list of priorities. How that subject coincides with implementation, strategic planning, hiring, and enrollment are the main focuses. But are we missing a vital component of a potential best practice? Chapter 4 includes how faith-based institutions are or are not intertwining diversity and community engagement within a Christian college context. The themes found in the research include: 1) a lack of cultural and racial awareness from the entirety of campus; 2) community engagement is primarily facilitated by the students; 3) community engagement is tied to service-learning; 4) the importance of racially diverse representation in staff and faculty, and 5) homogeneity of the voices discussing the conversation of diversity in higher education. Though each participant iterated the importance of this topic, the research supplemented that gap in the literature, seeing that there was not literature found that intertwined the constructs of diversity, community engagement, and faith-based institutions, as previously stated. This chapter discusses the themes mentioned above, implications for future research and practice, and the study's limitations.

### **Discussion**

The themes found in Chapter 4 provide further insights into where faith-based institutions are trying to connect diversity and community engagement constructs. As seen throughout the data, the primary focus starts from within.

When it comes to the theme of cultural and racial awareness on campus, or lack thereof, we can see the necessity for implementing development opportunities. These opportunities come with the almost universal notion that a drive exists to increase enrollment and hiring of people of color. Cultural and racial awareness must increase to support the campaign for the growth of people of color on campus. Wide-spread cultural competency can be seen as beneficial as all participants expressed the struggle this brings when trying to have discussions around diversity and how it is defined.

The lack of cultural and racial awareness coincides with how campus constituents interact with the student body. Participants explained how their campuses defined diversity and that they, along with many other institutions, see the term as synonymous with students and employees of color. The definition may result in a misaligned strategic plan revolving around diversity, thus creating a trickle-down effect as institutional movement flows from top to bottom.

As the data suggest, community engagement is primarily driven by the students. Within higher education, plenty of opportunities to get involved exist. Most organizations or clubs that have continued success on campus come from a desire by the students to uphold these things as valuable, but as the participant from institution #2 suggested, what happens when these things do not hold value to students anymore? As we continue to want to provide multiple learning opportunities, institutions will need to prioritize what is important. Some institutions offer ways for students to engage in diverse communities, but most come from student-led organizations or clubs. If diversity and education about diversity are important, then providing opportunities for community engagement is also important.

The theme of community engagement being tied to experiential learning was also prevalent among the participating institutions. Several of the individuals who were interviewed explained the importance of the learning aspect. Of course, learning is essential and should not be devalued. However, for faith-based institutions, are priorities switched? Should colleges and universities put the needs of their own acquiring of knowledge above the service of others? The argument is sustainable either way, as many often say that the purpose of higher education is to teach and learn. Thus, the need for putting the learning first prevails.

However, as faith-based Christian institutions follow their desire to be servant leaders as Christ was, it creates a tension between the two. The aspect of service-learning is not bad in itself and can create opportunities. Still, administrators must well define the institution's priorities to make it clear what truly comes first. The definition of service-learning, much like diversity, can then be used to plan how to progress moving forward and potentially instill institutionally backed programming that separates the two.

One note needing to be made is that institutions have stated they want to increase diversity on campus to represent the Kingdom of God better. Though a valid reason, no participating institution elaborated on the question that is left unanswered: Why now? The timing of this statement used by multiple institutions is what drives the question. If this is a faith-based institution, it should have always been a goal to represent the Kingdom of God. The danger of this account is it can quickly lead down the rabbit hole of the theologically back-filling their commitment to diversity, as well as the aspect of ignoring the narrative of the past.

## **Implications for Practice**

The results of the study reveal at least three implications for practice. Given the previously discussed theme of the representation of faculty and staff of color, it is important that implementing hiring procedures that bolster these numbers either is created or remains intact. This representation then adds support for racial minority students on campus as well as the employees of the institution by bringing more diverse voices to conversations revolving around diversity along with any number of other topics. Given the difficulty in hiring and retaining racially diverse employees, the question remains simple: How do we show care and support? Institutions can hire individuals who live close to campus by demonstrating its heart for service and collaboration with the local community. Employees must participate in the service with an implementation backed by the university rather than fully student-driven.

Another implication for practice is having an institutional definition of diversity and community engagement. These definitions will allow progress from a strategic plan moving forward to implementing various opportunities on campus and implementing racial awareness training sessions to heighten the institutional constituents' racial awareness while providing the opportunity to understand how they can support students of color. The definitions also add to how students are recruited and enrolled as they could better feel supported during their conversations with any stakeholder of the institution throughout their admissions process.

One final implication for practice is to have service requirements in diverse communities for students. The act of service, however, must not be set by the institution but by the specific needs that the community brings forth. The requirements also aid in

the backing of the institution for engagement in diverse communities, showing the prioritization of serving over the personal needs of experience and learning.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The data and results from this study may help inform further implications for research. Though the emerging themes speak of different actions of faith-based institutions in a broad sense, the minute details are not explored in-depth.

The data suggest the hiring and recruiting of more culturally and racially diverse faculty and staff is needed. However, it does not speak on the practices of the recruiting and the hiring processes to accomplish the goal. Likewise, the data suggest that institutions must implement structure to support more diverse students, though again, best practices for implementation are not offered. Future research may explore how time in the community can help institutions learn how to create a supportive campus.

As one of the participants explained, having a place where the local community can input service requests helps identify the community's needs. This example may provoke further research as an in-depth analysis of the local community-initiated communication and collaboration with different institutions.

A final implication for future research is a study on how predominantly White campuses provide opportunities for racial and cultural awareness development for university stakeholders. Furthermore, research on how historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) conduct the same type of opportunities, if they practice diverse community engagement, and what that "diversity" entails. With the use of the term diversity being synonymous with people of color, what does it look like for an institution predominantly made up of people of color to engage in diversity? Further research can

explore how HBCUs define diversity and utilize that definition to engage, or not engage, in communities that differ from themselves. The further research would help to see if HBCUs have a definition of diversity that resembles other places in higher education where diversity is synonymous with minority or people of color, then see the implications of that definition in how they go about diversifying their respective campuses. The focus of such a study would prove to be beneficial because the drive to increase diversity does not stop at predominantly White institutions, and HBCUs also are looking to diversify.

### **Limitations**

At least three limitations emerged during the research that should be considered. The first limitation of the study was the sample size. There were a smaller number of institutions than was preferred. Initially, the study focused on institutions within the Christian College Consortium, including 13 colleges and universities. This sample group proved difficult to secure as the majority of institutions denied to participate. Due to that challenge, the researcher needed to move to a wider circle of schools affiliated with the CCCU. Multiple institutions and employees then stated they were not ready to be on record for conversations about diversity. A second limitation of the research was the existing gap in the literature. As stated in Chapter 2, no literature intersects with faith-based institutions, diversity, and community engagement. Due to the lack of literature, it proved easy to back the nature of the research from previous work.

The final limitation is researcher's bias. As the researcher has already spent extensive time involved in this area of community engagement and diversity at a faith-based institution, the researcher remains intrigued by the concept. Furthermore, the lack of previous research and literature can lead to a bias in creating this study. In essence, the

researcher may have needed to depend unduly upon his own inclinations due to the absence of ideas in the literature from which he could draw.

### **Benefits**

There are multiple beneficiaries of the research and data collected by this study:

1.) Christian higher education as a whole seeking to continue their efforts in diversity engagement, 2.) the institutions and their administrators who participated in this study, and 3.) any other higher education professional interested in how community engagement in diverse US communities could be viewed and implemented differently.

### **Conclusion**

As institutions continue to strategically plan how to navigate discussions regarding diverse engagement and support, it is essential to understand what efforts Christian higher education is presently making to that end. Through the data collected from participating institutions, there are good intentions. The researcher, however, proposes a few questions to ponder and potentially determine whether good intentions are leading to good practices

### ***What is the driving purpose for wanting more diversity?***

Throughout the research, this question was never answered in much detail. Most participants stated that becoming more diverse was, as previously noted, to become more representative of the Kingdom of God. However, the factors not addressed remain prevalent, such as the upcoming enrollment “cliff” and the need for institutions to keep doors open. There is a need for relevance and appeal, including having a more diverse population to attract more students besides the formerly “traditional.” Societal pressures have driven a lot of organizations to update their policies on diversity. To have more



diverse students and employees is not a negative, but the deep-rooted intentions to increase must first be addressed to find long-term success moving forward.

***Have you defined what it means to serve diverse communities?***

Christian colleges and universities must define what it means to truly serve when engaging with diverse communities on and off campus. As the data inform, many institutions tie community engagement to experiential learning, having learning be the driving force behind the engagement.

It is essential to understand that the service should always be prioritized above learning regarding experiential learning or serving the community. If you are serving without learning, then your serving is feeble as to where you have not learned about serving. As institutions look to engage with diverse communities, they must first listen to find what is genuinely needed. Beginning with a preconceived plan may result in the attempt to provide something unnecessary or provide something that the community already has or does not need. Without understanding what is truly needed, service is flawed and potentially damaging. This service can show a lack of care to listen, attempt to understand, and value in the voices of others. Thus, it is important to bring in voices central to the conversation and realize that if you are not serving well, you are not learning well. To engage in diverse communities, especially with a hopeful impact on things that may benefit the institution, it is a necessity to make learning a byproduct of service.

On predominantly White campuses, a tension between serving students of color and educating the majority exists. This tension comes in the form of increasing the number of students of color to help educate others on diversity. A participant in the

research stated, “The priority is serving your students of color well, and a great byproduct of that should be educating the entire campus population about issues related to diversity.”

Service also includes reconciliation and acknowledgment. Knowing that a college or university may have excluded, not participated in, or negatively impacted a diverse community helps bring an understanding that you cannot have engagement and growth by ignoring the narrative of the past. Without looking back at what has been done previously to create a negative relationship, institutions are not able to reconcile the community relations leading to a poor or false foundation that the future is built upon. This foundation may lead to future hurt as growing pains occur and can expose a greater problem of a lack of accountability and acknowledgement by the college or university.

***Is your institution built to support more racially diverse students?***

Providing more representation among faculty and staff can be helpful when working to increase the number of racially diverse students on campus. Increased representation, however, is not the only element of successful support for multiple reasons. Not all students will identify with the same race of employees. For example, we work to recruit international employees but fail to understand the disconnect between them and American ethnic students. Working to increase diversity without creating stability may do more harm than good. The instability can affect retention rates and the recruitment of future students. This increase will also lead to more conversations on race and diversity. Building a structure that supports more students will take a lot of time and significant change. Combining these conversations and changes, it is imperative that institutions engage in active listening and the ability to accept perspectives that differ

from their own, seeing them as valuable and not only welcoming a “different” perspective that fits the institutional agenda without truly seeing it as valuable. Lastly, to have an institution that is supportive is to have one that invigorates and fuels students to be their best selves, not their best you.

In conclusion, it is important for faith-based institutions to normalize the fact that true diversity includes more than just students or employees of color. They must look at the makeup of their university as a whole and make progress toward a place where all enrolled students can find and build value in themselves. They must progress to a place where service in the community exudes a heart for Christlikeness and learning becomes a byproduct that is a driving force towards more service. They must progress to a place where they acknowledge a negative past narrative and not let that be the headliner of discussions but focus on celebrating the desired future. They must progress to a place where the Kingdom of God is what they continually strive to provide on-campus and not a term that is used lightly as a lens to distract from where they have gone wrong and a buzzword that may falsify the deep-rooted intentions. Institutions must progress to a place where when their campuses are seen holistically, what comes to focus is the *Imago Dei*.

As for Alex, he continued to dive deeper into his story and the one of Christian institutions. Though he did not end up attending a Christian college or university, he looked for ways in the summers to connect his community to faith-based higher education. Alex started doing internships with the Christian university down the street which led him to furthering his education. With a master’s degree, he now works for the

city of Denver, partnering with colleges and universities across the state and providing opportunities for community engagement.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent**

You are invited to participate in a research study of Diversity and Community Engagement at Faith-Based Institutions. You were selected as a possible subject because you are either the President of the Institution or the person in charge of diversity, community engagement at your CCC institution. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Michael Miller for his master's thesis research at Taylor University.

#### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to provide an exploratory examination into how faith-based institutions implement community engagement in diverse domestic communities as well as the quality of said engagement.

#### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 13 subjects who will be participating in this research. If you agree to participate you will be asked to conduct an individual interview with the primary researcher.

#### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

1. Agree to participate in an individual interview lasting approximately 40-60 minutes.
2. Agree to have your responses recorded during the interview.
3. Agree to be quoted and/or have your experience referenced in the results of the researcher's study under a pseudonym.
4. This study will take place during the fall 2021 semester, but your participation will simply consist of your individual interview.

#### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

There is minimal risk involved with taking part in this study. While participating in this study, there is the risk of discomfort or an emotional response associated in reflection of institutional decisions. For this reason, participants may choose to not answer any interview question.

#### **BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

The benefit to participation is the opportunity to reflect on the community engagement implementation of multiple institutions, seeing not only ways that could build diverse enrollment but also increase retention.

#### ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

There is no alternative to taking part in this study.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published. Only the researchers will have access to the recordings of the interviews or focus groups and the recordings will be deleted following the completion of the research study. Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### COSTS

There is no cost to participate in this study.

#### PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher or faculty advisor:

##### **Researcher:**

Michael Miller  
(310) 531-3847  
[michael\\_miller2@taylor.edu](mailto:michael_miller2@taylor.edu)

##### **Faculty Advisor:**

Todd Ream  
[todd.ream@taylor.edu](mailto:todd.ream@taylor.edu)

Inquiries regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu) or the interim IRB Chair, Edwin Welch, at 756-998-4315 or [edwelch@taylor.edu](mailto:edwelch@taylor.edu)

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University or any of the researchers involved in this study

**SUBJECT'S CONSENT**

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Intro: Each Interview**

Thank you for taking part in this research study. The purpose of this study is to explore how institutions implement community engagement in diverse domestic communities as well as the quality of said engagement. Your participation is voluntary and you may opt to stop at any point in this process. Your participation will be kept confidential and at no time will your name or any identifying information about you be reported to anyone outside of the research group.

All interviews are being audio recorded and then transcribed. The researcher will analyze the transcriptions and only the researcher will have access to any of this information. The results of the analysis will be reported in aggregate form with the use of unattributed quotations for support (i.e Staff Member B, Student Personnel C, etc.). Code names will be given to the quotations with no individual identifying information reported.

The use of an audio recording for this study has been chosen in addition to written notes in order to assist with accurately documenting your responses. You have the right to withdraw from this study if you choose to not be audio recorded. In order to ensure confidentiality, the researcher will take the precautions listed in your informed consent form. The researcher would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and to not discuss questions asked outside of the interview.

If at any time during the interview you have any questions, please ask. Do you have any questions before we begin?

#### **End of Interview:**

Thank you again for your participation in this research. If you have any questions regarding this project, please address them to me, Michael Miller and I will be happy to respond.

