

# Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

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Volume 22 | Number 22

Article 4

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2023

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Harold Goss  
*University of Alabama*

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### Recommended Citation

Goss, Harold (2023) "The Lived Religious Experience of Black Students at a Southeastern CCCU Institution," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 22: No. 22, Article 4.

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# The Lived Religious Experience of Black Students at a Southeastern CCCU Institution

Harold Goss, Ed.D.

The University of Alabama

## Abstract

The overall purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the religious experiences of Black students at a Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) institution. The researcher interviewed 22 participants at a private Christian university and analyzed the data using in vivo coding, constant comparison, and thematic analysis. Findings suggest formal religious activities that are required and presumed by the institution to be nurturing can have the opposite effect for some Black students at the institution. The researcher identified three major themes regarding how Black students perceive and experience religious activity. The themes provide helpful insight regarding participants' thoughts related to dissatisfaction and concerns, acknowledgment of personal growth, and feedback on religious programming. The themes are presented and discussed along with implications for practice.

## Introduction

Black students continue to be underrepresented at higher education institutions and persist at lower rates than their White peers. Unfortunately, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) can be unsupportive and unresponsive to the needs of Black students (Bimper, 2017; Lewis & Shah, 2021). While this is a challenge for PWIs in general, the issue is even more pronounced at Protestant institutions with strong evangelical cultures (Smith, 2010; Young, 2015; Westbrook, 2017). Institutions with evangelical missions promote inclusion and justice yet continue to struggle with racial inequity as it relates to retention, persistence, and graduation rates (Smith, 2010; Young, 2015; Westbrook, 2017). This begs a simple question: Why? Is there something about such institutions that contributes to these less than desired outcomes?

Because graduation is one of the outcomes the higher education community desires for all students, a better understanding of the Black student experience is necessary to create environments that will more likely lead to persistence and degree completion. Understanding the experience of Black students is critical as lower graduation rates for Black students can be attributed at least in part to the environment and support services that do not adequately meet their needs (Goings, 2017). To succeed academically, Black students need to be supported holistically in environments that promote positive experiences (Luedke, 2017). When students are comfortable with the university environment and nurtured emotionally, they are more likely to remain at the institution and graduate (Le et al., 2021). An important component for Black students being comfortable at Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU) institutions centers around religion and religious practices. Does that part of campus life contribute to their experience in a positive manner? Do campus religious traditions serve Black students in ways that are nurturing?

Scholarship on issues related to diversity in evangelical Christian higher education is limited (Kratt, 2004; Smith, 2010; Young, 2015). There is an opportunity and need for more research that addresses diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at CCCCU institutions. This study will contribute to the body of literature from the perspective of Black students and their individual experiences at a CCCCU school. Specifically, it will give voice to 22 Black students at an evangelical Christian institution. There is currently very little in the literature that reports on the personal experiences

of Black students at this type of institution. The findings of this study will provide evangelical Christian institutions of higher education data directly from the perspectives of Black students regarding how they experience religious life at a CCCU member institution.

Can what makes some CCCU institutions distinct also create challenges and barriers for Black students? If the answer is yes, we need to know. We need to better understand so that we can address this important question in a thoughtful and honest way. Culturally sensitive religious programming and innovative approaches to improving the experience for Black students needs to include input directly from them. Religious fit, or lack thereof, may play into the retention and graduation challenges CCCU institutions are confronted with regarding Black students (Longman & Schreiner, 2010; Young, 2015).

#### Religion on Campus

The literature clearly demonstrates the importance of religion for many Black students and the profound impact it can have on wellness, experience, and academic performance. The literature also sheds light on possible characteristics at some CCCU campuses that can serve as negative or positive influencers regarding the religious experience of Black students. Religion can certainly serve to establish and build positive relationships as it can directly contribute to a sense of community for students on a college campus (Astin, 2004). Unfortunately, students who attend private Christian-affiliated institutions can be more inclined to have difficulty with religion than students who attend private institutions that are non-religious (Bryant & Astin, 2008). This may happen because of the prominent role religious organizations play at CCCU institutions, and when there is not alignment between student religious values and institutional values, discord may occur (Longman & Schreiner, 2010).

Higher education research on Black students at PWIs is extensive and provides insights into several areas. A few worth noting are lack of representation in higher education; gaps in achievement, social experiences, and academic outcomes; and ways they navigate various challenges. There needs to be more research focused on Black student experiences at predominantly White CCCU institutions. Such research is needed to bring better understanding of Black student experience and factors that might improve retention, persistence, and graduation rates. Scholarship focused on evangelical Christian higher education and issues related to DEI is limited and needs to be expanded (Kratt, 2004; Smith, 2010;

Young 2015). This study will contribute to that need by documenting the religious experience of Black students at one CCCU institution using their voices.

## Methodology

The research question for this study was: How do Black undergraduate students at a CCCU institution experience religious activities? The primary objective was to better understand how Black students experience religion at a CCCU institution. A qualitative descriptive case study was the overall research approach used to address this question. The most appropriate methodology for this research was a qualitative methodology study for a few reasons. First, qualitative inquiry facilitates exploration and provides a pathway to make sense of lived experiences (Savin-Biden & Major, 2013). It can also allow for the researcher to grow and develop an in-depth understanding of an individual or context (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is also an ideal mechanism to describe how people understand experiences, their surroundings, and the meaning associated with connecting the two (Merriam, 2009). As such, qualitative inquiry was ideally suited for this study.

### Site and Participant Selection

The site selected for this study is a university that is a CCCU member institution located in the southeastern United States. The site will be referred to as Private Christian University (PCU) for purposes of this study. As part of its strategic plan, PCU has clearly stated DEI objectives to improve programming for all students. Diversity numbers for both tenured faculty and students are low in the Southeast for CCCU institutions (Reyes & Case, 2011). Related studies on the experience of Black students at CCCU institutions have been conducted in other regions of the United States (Young, 2015). As such, a CCCU institution located in the Southeast was appropriate for this inquiry.

The student body at the selected institution consisted of approximately 3,300 undergraduate students. Black students represented 9% (300) of the overall undergraduate population. The sample included 22 undergraduate Black students who were currently enrolled at the institution and had completed at least one full-time semester. The sample of Black undergraduates included student athletes, non-student athletes, high academic achievers, low academic performers, and a variety of majors. Of the 22 students, there was one freshman, six sophomores,

five juniors, and 10 seniors. There were 14 female participants and eight male participants.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection included semi-structured in-person interviews (Creswell, 2013) with each of the 22 participants. Participants shared personal stories from their unique perspective through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013) with open ended questions. Participants were given options for scheduling the interview at times convenient to them. Interviews occurred in a private and convenient location in an academic building on-campus and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Following each interview, the researcher recorded noteworthy observations, including body language and tone. Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed professionally. Transcripts were then provided to each participant for review and to ensure accuracy.

Follow-up interviews occurred via phone with each participant. During those discussions I thanked each participant, asked them to clarify any comments I needed additional thoughts on, and allowed them to provide any additional information they thought might be helpful. I also observed students on multiple occasions in social settings on campus. I observed students on five occasions in the cafeteria at various meal-times. I attended chapel services on three occasions, and I also observed students in the social outdoor space on campus between class periods three separate times. During each field observation, I jotted down my thoughts that I later wrote as field notes. I then coded those field notes in the same manner as the interview transcripts.

The data collected were transcribed and initially coded manually with the in vivo coding method. Codes were then organized using constant comparison and thematic analysis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Findings from in vivo coding, constant comparison, and thematic analysis revealed the study's themes. Applying constant comparison and thematic analysis to the collected data allowed transcripts to be organized and classified systematically into phrases, perceptions, and ultimately themes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This led to the identification of patterns and trends that emerged from the participants. This systematic approach contributed to a better understanding of Black undergraduate student religious experiences in the context of a CCCU member institution.

## Results

As the research question was addressed with the interview protocol, and transcripts were reviewed, codes began revealing themselves. After identifying codes and employing the constant comparison method, three broad themes became prominent. As a result of detailed coding and data analysis, the following three noteworthy themes emerged:

1. Dissatisfaction with weekly convocation
2. Personal growth and other positive experiences
3. Desire for more inclusive and varied programming

This section includes the terms “chapel,” “worship,” and “convocation” or “convo.” Participants used these terms interchangeably to describe the formal religious services all undergraduate students are required to participate in. All undergraduates are required to earn a certain number of convocation credits prior to graduation. The primary way most students earn these credits is through attendance at these weekly religious services on campus.

### Theme 1: Dissatisfaction with Weekly Convocation

Students used strong language to describe feelings about the more formal religious services on campus. Participants used the word “hate.” One student “hated it with a passion.” For some it did not really feel like church in that it was in the morning, in the middle of the week, and not practiced in the way they are accustomed to. For example, some students were more accustomed to a pastor or preacher figure dressed in a more formal way with a suit or pastoral robe. That type of figure was not present at many campus services. The person leading often had a more casual appearance. This added to the perception of services not feeling like church for some study participants. Additionally, the perception of “required religion” was problematic for sixty percent of participants.

One prevalent critique was the style of music. Several students preferred either a gospel or more contemporary style as opposed to what they heard at typical campus services. It was clear this was a serious concern. Students talked about music being a favorite part of the worship experience and looking forward to attending church growing up because of that. They indicated not being familiar with some of the songs and not relating to the performance style. Students commented on the repetitive nature of the songs in that the same songs were recycled and used frequently. This can end up being quite discouraging for students and in some cases; they end up completely tuning out what is being presented.

Such a pattern can result in students getting little out of the services. This quote captures the essence of feedback from several students:

I mean, definitely, I am a Christian and I do go to church off campus. Attending convo, I guess, would be my only experience with spiritual life on campus. I have learned a lot through that but it hasn't particularly been my favorite aspect of PCU.

One of the reasons the student quoted above went to church off campus was to enjoy music familiar to her. Some students had also been a part of churches that engaged the congregation in ways that allowed for unscripted verbal response and audible feedback to the preacher during the sermon. Campus services were not that way. As indicated earlier, they were more formal and certainly not infused with audible expressions of feedback from those in attendance. The absence of that feedback was a difficult hurdle for some students to deal with. They found the traditional approach off-putting, boring, and sleep-inducing. In some cases, students could not articulate exactly why they didn't like the services: they simply didn't. The formal outlets to practice faith on campus did not connect with some participants. In fact, one student indicated not ever going willingly.

Students also talked about the services being segregated and feeling obligated to attend. They experienced students sitting with peers based on race. They also noted simply not seeing much diversity in worship. In fact, one student noted worship felt segregated like "everything else on campus." As such, he indicated getting very little out of the service and simply attending to earn the required credits. This was a very common sentiment—simply attending to earn credits required for graduation. In some cases, students were "churched out" by the weekend and would not attend service even at a church of their own choosing.

While some students enjoyed religion being integrated formally and informally across all aspects of campus life, others found it overwhelming at times, especially if they had attended a public school where religion was not a typical part of classroom discussion or social activities. Students that did not come from an environment where religious practice and faith were a part of daily activity in the way it was at the institution talked about how challenging it was to get accustomed to that particular environment.

Theme 2: Personal Growth and Other Positive Experiences

Study participants indicated the university does a good job of incorporating faith into many areas on campus, not just in the formal

religious gatherings, but also in social activities, the classroom, and informal gatherings. In the classroom for example, students talked about professors praying before class or reading scripture and doing a short devotional. This was noted as being the case in many classes that did not necessarily have anything to do with religion. They liked seeing faith being integrated and practiced in their normal activities. It indicated to them that religion is not relegated to a lecture, sermon, or worship service but can be experienced as you go about your day.

Faith being modeled in authentic ways was valued, appreciated, and respected. It also nurtured trust with some professors, which opened doors for personal conversations and in some cases led to close relationships. Participants reported liking conversations about religion and faith occurring casually in the classroom and on-campus in general. Several students went into detail about the importance of these relationships with faculty members that started in the classroom. Some students developed rapport with faculty members in the classroom and felt safe expressing themselves regarding their faith. In some cases, this expression might be a question, an observation, or a statement that differed with other students in the class.

52

Professors that responded with patience, grace, and kindness were highly valued by participants. Students mentioned staying after class, meeting with professors during office hours, or even developing relationships outside the classroom. In each case where this was discussed, the relationships contributed to retention, personal growth, and acted as a bridge for positive academic outcomes. For some students, these professors contributed to the overall feeling that religion was not being forced upon them. It was instead viewed as an aspect of the campus culture that was a part of student life in both formal and informal ways.

Students also reported an appreciation for being in a space full of peers openly seeking to grow in their faith. They talked about the value in being on a faith-based campus in terms of the opportunities to grow through those relationships. In some cases, students found themselves in more of a mentor role where they were able to encourage, guide, and share with someone at an earlier stage in their faith journey. Students expressed how important upperclassmen were when they were new students. They found tremendous value in being on a campus with so many people at different points with whom they could have conversations and share experiences. Students talked about how much they enjoyed hanging out with friends and enjoyed conversations naturally going from just

about any topic, to faith, back to another topic, and so on. This was reported as a common occurrence and appears to be a significant factor in the religious experience for students in the study.

Some students developed friend groups through these relationships rooted in exploring faith. In some cases, students reported building deeper relationships with other Black students. They also talked about doors being opened across racial lines and creating friendships across racial lines. In some cases, ideas about religion were affirmed, in other cases challenged, but each contributed to growth. Students would challenge one another to get more involved, dig deeper for themselves, or help other students. Students also talked about reading more scripture than in the past and reading books on theology, faith, and religion. One student had never read the Bible all the way through. In fact, he was very proud of that fact that he finally read the Bible and indicated it was a formative exercise for him.

Students also talked about relationships on campus serving as gateways to attending churches off-campus. Students would develop relationships and through those relationships get invited to churches they would not have otherwise attended. In some cases, the invitations welcomed them to churches that were more in line with their own traditions which was reported as being comforting. In other cases, students were invited to services that were different than those on-campus and also different than their own churches. Either way, students discussed these opportunities in positive terms. Churches were viewed as a way to learn, grow closer to friends, and develop off-campus community relationships. In fact, students attributed attending a religious-affiliated institution with the exposure to friends and classmates inviting them to other churches. Those opportunities came out of the fact that students openly discuss religion and faith on a regular basis.

One other advantage of students exploring off-campus churches was allowing them to find somewhere comfortable—or even somewhere they were excited—to attend church. In some cases, they discovered something new that they liked. In other cases, they found something familiar that represented experiences to which they were more accustomed.

An overall sentiment expressed was an acknowledgment of many opportunities to participate in formal and informal activities that could cultivate personal faith. Students acknowledged not being in the place they wanted to be spiritually when they came to PCU and ultimately growing as a result of the experience. Being in an environment with

frequent reminders was a positive motivating factor for some to engage with religious matters when they might not have otherwise done so.

Participants spoke about the noticeable impact experiencing campus had on them outside of school. They referenced examples like simply discussing their faith more, being more curious about religion, and praying more frequently. One student had never journaled but was encouraged to do so while attending a church service. Being able to reflect on documented thoughts has been very helpful for the student in navigating challenges of various kinds. Again, students attributed spiritual growth to their time at the institution and the opportunities to practice their faith. Some students had never been around a peer group so saturated with people willing and able to discuss their faith and religious beliefs. The students indicated that they appreciated and valued this quality of their community.

#### Theme 3: Desire for More Inclusive and Varied Programming

The students in the study indicated a desire for more varied worship services. Specifically, the music issue needs to be addressed along with incorporating more relevant topics. The participants indicated they would very much appreciate music more familiar to their tradition and culture. They argue that style can vary without compromising content, core values, or biblical beliefs. Students spoke about alternating styles of service to include traditional, contemporary, and gospel. They indicated feeling like that would convey openness and invitation as opposed to appearing rigid and being off-putting. The participants also talked about programming and a desire to hear issues important to them addressed from the pulpit. That could include issues around diversity, voting rights, social justice, and racism to name a few. They also spoke about wanting to see diversity from the pulpit and from worship leaders:

And I feel like it could also go both ways. I mean, maybe we haven't stepped out and said something about it and made it clear for them how we feel about it. But I just feel like it's really like White.

While visual diversity doesn't address all the issues mentioned earlier, seeing diversity was clearly important to participants. They would also like to see an emphasis placed on community service. Included in that sentiment is the notion that the institution is respected, has the resources, and should use them to serve others. Students also talked about creating more opportunities that are interactive. They desired opportunities to not only be taught about faith but to engage in conversations. The

participants also mentioned enjoying speakers that were more transparent. Personal testimony was highlighted as something these students appreciated and almost always helped them relate to the speaker and the message.

Creating space for convocation credit to include more student-led worship opportunities was important to the study participants. Students suggested allowing the gospel choir to perform more frequently, not just around diversity events or Black History Month. Students that have had opportunities to lead in formal and informal ways also highlighted the benefits they personally experienced. Those benefits included feeling affirmed, feeling valued, building new relationships, and having more confidence in themselves and their personal faith.

Creating partnerships with local churches to give students “credit” for attending services they are excited about going to was discussed. One student mentioned being a part of a dance ministry that is sponsored by the school. She recommended more opportunities like that with an emphasis on inclusion. Religious mentors were very important to study participants. Those mentors can take the shape of peers, professors, staff, or coaches. Several students talked about how much they value those relationships, how much they learn, and even how those relationships contributed to them staying at the institution.

There was certainly an acknowledgement that finding a single church or style of worship that satisfies everyone is not an easy thing to do. Some students talked about enjoying church at locations off-campus, which helped address the frustration of feeling pressure to conform to a way of worship that was not always comfortable. This quote highlights the impact spiritual life can have on a student:

I feel like being at PCU puts so much emphasis on spiritual life. Me, personally, it's personally made me not want to participate in the spiritual activities that they have. I feel like I'm being forced to do it. I don't feel like it helped me gain any more spirituality. I think it's just something that's been tacked on to the university and it forces students to align with a certain core value or core curriculum that says it has to line up with Christian values which, I know I'm a strong believer in Christianity but being here at PCU is like, “Wow, this is making me not want to participate in the Christian activities that they do promote on campus.”

This section concludes with this quote intentionally. This student's thoughts underscore the importance and urgency of CCCU practitio-

ners taking Black students' perspectives into account.

### Discussion and Implications for Practice

Practitioners at CCCU institutions perhaps should freshly be reminded that Black students want to practice their faith in ways that are familiar. Issues related to religion can be more challenging at institutions like PCU as compared to public institutions where students can choose whether or not to participate in campus sponsored religious activities. Embracing diversity and making sure Black students don't feel forced to participate in gatherings they do not enjoy might help create a stronger sense of inclusion. There are several steps Christian colleges can take. If students are required to earn a certain number of credits related to participating in religious activities, institutions could broaden the range of options that can be counted, such as service projects. Attendance and engagement in local churches could also be included in meeting institutional requirements. It is also important for leaders at CCCU institutions to create ways for students to openly discuss how they are experiencing religious activities on campus. This open dialogue would allow Black students to provide suggestions regarding their preferences that could be incorporated to make religious experiences more enjoyable. CCCU colleges and universities need to address faith preferences so that what is intended to nurture students does not instead cause frustration and resentment.

56

It is also important to note many institutions that require several chapel or convocation credits do provide a variety of options for students to earn those credits ranging from programming on-campus, approved events off-campus, and a variety of service-related activities. One reason Black students at PCU attended the traditional worship services on-campus was for the sake of convenience. Chapel services on-campus were at an hour during the week when there were no class conflicts. Furthermore, students that worked, did not have transportation, or were athletes frequently did not have the time or means to participate in alternate options on a regular basis. Practitioners should take these factors into account when planning programming, as access to those options may be an issue for some.

### Conclusion and Reflections

The objective of this study was to better understand how Black students experienced a CCCU member institution. This was accomplished

through a descriptive case study that included in-depth interviews with 22 Black students. Short follow-up interviews with each participant, and field observations of students in various settings on campus. Study findings indicated that Black students at PCU faced several academic and social challenges. They relied on relationships with peers, faculty, and staff to help navigate these challenges. In many cases, participants were able to look back on their challenges in constructive and positive ways.

A better understanding of how Black students experienced this CCCU institution might help practitioners create programs and initiatives that improve student experiences. Educating faculty and staff regarding the importance of relationships with Black students should be a priority. Regardless of race, gender, or age, faculty and staff who are informed and caring can make a significant difference in the experiences of Black students. This study also identified opportunities for practitioners to reconsider how religious services on campus are represented. Mandatory religious services that students must attend on a regular basis should consider students' varied expectations from different faith traditions. Planning services that are more inclusive can be more welcoming to Black students but could also enrich the religious experiences of all students. No doubt many practitioners across Christian higher education have worked hard in recent years to create convocation experiences and options that are inclusive. Findings in this study highlight how important those efforts are and continued emphasis on providing students an array of options to meet convocation requirements are important for students from underrepresented populations.

As practitioners, we are all concerned with student development and personal growth. If practitioners continue to develop inclusive religious programming, perhaps more students will reflect on their undergraduate experience in terms such as this:

I just feel God's presence like at PCU. It's just very rooted in faith and not something that was really important to me coming to college. So, it's a confirmation that I chose the right place or rather that like God led me to the right place. Faith has just been awesome, how available it is to grow in it and how you can kind of like customize your faith experience to like how you want to grow.

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