Chapter 12

Sense of Belonging in Religious-Based Colleges and Universities: Predictors and Patterns among Students of Color and White Students

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ABSTRACT

Given the shifting demographic composition of the American higher education system and the need to understand how students of various backgrounds develop a sense of belonging within a normative religious environment, this chapter examines how the level and predictors of sense of belonging among students of color at Christian colleges and universities differ from those for their White counterparts. This chapter provides an overview of sense of belonging with the purpose to understand the challenges and experiences of students of color in religious homogenous settings. The theoretical frameworks of this chapter are grounded in Astin’s input-environment-output (I-E-O) model and Hurtado and Carter’s sense of belonging study. While other studies have examined similar issues in secular institutions, the structure of the religious environment suggests unique patterns and predictors of sense of belonging among both White students and students of color. Implications for scholars and practitioners are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Given the shifting demographic composition of the American higher education system and the need to understand how students of various backgrounds develop sense of belonging within a normative religious environment, this chapter examines how the level and predictors of sense of belonging among students of color at Christian colleges and universities differ from those for their White counterparts. This chapter provides an overview of the professional literature on sense of belonging and various challenges and opportunities occurring within colleges and universities when they prepare students to enter a global and pluralistic society in the 21st century. According to the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU, 2014), the largest world organization of private colleges and universities with Christ-centered missions, there are approximately 900 religious-based higher education institutions in the United States of America (U.S.A). Students’ sense of belonging is shaped within the context of their particular environments. However, most of the literature on sense of belonging focuses on students at secular institutions and relatively neglects those students attending religiously affiliated colleges and universities.

The United States continues to become more racially and ethnically diverse (Shresha & Heisler, 2011) and access to higher education is increasing for students of color (Fischer, 2007). Between 1976 and 2010, the percentage of African American students in higher education increased from the past few decades from 9% to 14%, Asian American students from 2% to 6%, and Hispanic students from 3% to 13% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). While the percentage of students of color who attend colleges and universities has significantly increased over the past decades, the increased compositional diversity does not necessarily guarantee positive feelings of community or sense of belonging among this population (Cooper, 2009; Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001). For the purposes of this chapter, compositional diversity refers to the racial/ethnic heterogeneity of a student body at an institution.

Although the compositional diversity of college campuses in the U.S.A. is increasing, the student demography of religious-based colleges and universities is still highly homogeneous with a majority of White students. In 2011, White students accounted for a little over 80% of student enrollment in Christian colleges and universities (Reyes & Case, 2011). Students of color are underrepresented at religious-based institutions and their patterns and predictor of sense of belonging might be different from those of White majority peers. Students of color is an inclusive term that comprises historically underrepresented student groups who self-identify as African American/Black, Native American/Alaska Native, Latina/o or Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, biracial, and/or multiracial. This chapter attempts to understand the nature of sense of belonging among students of color at