Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education

Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 4

2020

Welcoming Unfamiliar Voices in Familiar Spaces: How Can Christian Colleges and Universities Respond to Their Graduate Populations Whose Faith Affiliation Is Different from That of the School's?

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Recommended Citation

Givens, R. (2020). Welcoming unfamiliar voices in familiar spaces: How can Christian colleges and universities respond to their graduate populations whose faith affiliation is different from that of the school's?. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education*, 10(1), 5-24. <https://doi.org/10.31380/sotlched.10.1.5>

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WELCOMING

UNFAMILIAR VOICES IN FAMILIAR SPACES:
HOW CAN CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES RESPOND TO THEIR GRADUATE
POPULATIONS WHOSE FAITH AFFILIATION IS
DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF THE SCHOOL'S?

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*Journal of the Scholarship
of Teaching and Learning for Christians in
Higher Education* 10.1 (2020) 5–24
http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/sotl_ched/

Key Words *graduate education, undergraduate education,
Christian, faith, belief*

Abstract

This grant project surveyed students' experiences from different faith affiliations (or none) who attended Christian graduate programs, asking how they navigated the university's Christian worldview and language in light of their own beliefs (or non-belief). The goal was to conduct a small pilot study to explore how Christian universities with a definitively Christian ethos could maintain their identity but shift their paradigm from discipleship in their undergraduate schools to a mission field in their graduate schools. This project targeted schools with a definitively Christian undergraduate program but who opened their

enrollment to graduate students of all faiths. To access student feedback on their views and experiences at a Christian university, the research method relied on questionnaires for and interviews of graduate students who did not profess Christian faith. The results reveal that non-Christian graduate students often feel disenfranchised and suggest that engaging students in an open and honest dialogue about faith issues will help create an atmosphere that is more inclusive.

Introduction

Although Christian universities generally draw from a specific population among undergraduates, some also open their doors to graduate students who have little or no faith affiliation. These schools too often assume that the students will assimilate to the evangelical environment, leaving them to figure out where they have landed and how to maneuver in a strange (to them) environment. Being unaware of—or ignoring—students who are outside the vocabulary of faith and the life of the spirit is to lose the point of the Great Commission.

The study was designed to recognize the experiences of these graduate students, particularly to understand whether or not they felt welcome and included in a faith-based educational environment. My intentions were to gather enough data to suggest ways in which Christian colleges and universities could cast a wider net by listening to students' experiences and by using language that is both comprehensible and inclusive. Although the quantity of data was disappointing, the study began questions that will create opportunities for more inquiry regarding students whose faith affiliation differs from the faith-based institutions which they attend.

Statement of Purpose

The Problem

My interest in the perspective of students outside the Christian faith began when I moved from teaching undergraduates to graduates. Because my former universities required a faith statement from their

undergraduate students, I was accustomed to an atmosphere accommodating faith discussions among faculty and students. However, when my role changed to teaching graduate school, so did my students. Older and more experienced, they based their advanced degree choices on different criteria, like the program's fit, cost, or convenience. Their application process was unlike undergrads' applications from the same institutions. For example, the graduate applicants were not required to sign faith statements, nor were they informed about faith integration expectations in their program.

Some of the students had attended the same college as undergraduates or knew that they were choosing a Christian school; however, others found themselves unprepared for assignments that seemed disconnected from their program. Unprepared for the expectations and assumptions germane to faith integration activities, many students felt uncomfortable and kept silent or decided to make up something rather than speak out. Overall, the faith integration experience was often disingenuous for these students unfamiliar with the language shared by evangelicals.

Aims and Specific Questions

This study seeks to identify—through self-identification—the faith backgrounds and worldview perspectives of graduate students in effort to encourage Christian colleges and universities to recognize and respond to their graduate populations who are from different faiths or whose faith affiliation is distant or nonexistent. It is important for administrators and faculty to understand the diverse backgrounds their students come from so that students are not inadvertently excluded from classroom discussions or put in awkward situations among their peers. This research aims to better understand non-Christian graduate students who have chosen to attend a Christian university. More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- Where do the students categorize themselves in terms of their faith? (e.g., no interest in any faith, affiliated with a non-Christian faith)
- What do students know about the university's religious

affiliation before enrolling?

- How does the university environment acknowledge or affirm its religious affiliation?
- What reasons do graduate students give for choosing to attend a Christian institution?
- Which adjectives describe the religious ethos of the school? (e.g., religious identity is evident, not at issue, too extreme)
- How do students feel the university treats students whose beliefs differ from the school's?
- How do students feel when among their peers? (e.g., welcomed, uncomfortable)
- How do students feel about sharing their differing views in class?
- Do students feel that assignments geared toward integrating faith and learning are helpful?

Limitations

Originally, this research was intended to survey graduate students from four Christian universities, but two did not follow through when asked if they would be willing to allow their students to participate. Consequently, students from only two universities—Azusa Pacific and Seattle Pacific—were surveyed, and due to focusing on students who did not profess Christianity and to procuring permission to survey only half of the intended graduate schools, the sample size is reduced to only 23 students. However, this study, despite the small number of student participants, serves as a pilot study for further research into how Christian graduate schools can more readily welcome non-Christian or nominally Christian students into a Christian educational institution.

Review of the Literature

This study is based on a grant examining students' experiences from different faith affiliations (or none) who attended Christian graduate programs. Because millennials aren't as familiar with the vocabulary of faith as previous generations have been, it is important to understand how their constructs inform their understanding of faith. Even

those who were raised in Christian homes or who are familiar with Christianity live in an environment where secularity pervades the culture around them. Without this understanding, the gap between college students and faith-based institutions will continue to increase in scope.

In his comprehensive book, *The Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes the historical shift from an accepted transcendent belief, which interprets reality in light of the metaphysical and supernatural, to the modern immanent order, where a buffered individual operates within a practical context, relying on self-sufficiency and objectification of social reality (Smith, 2014).

This shift, from transcendence (i.e., that which is beyond comprehension) to immanence (i.e., that which inhabits the here and now) characterizes the underlying presuppositions of both believers and non-believers. In other words, we are all moderns, according to Taylor.

In his interpretive reading of Charles Taylor's book, James K. Smith describes in his book *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* our shift from a view of an ordered natural "cosmos," where meaning is construed *for* us to a "universe," where meaning is construed by us. Smith explains that these changes evolved over hundreds of years, whereby our perspective shifted from meaning and significance beyond us to an "autonomous, independent 'meaning' that is unhooked from any sort of transcendent dependence" (Smith, 2014, p. 34).

This modification of meaning doesn't preclude belief completely; religion has not thoroughly lost its footing in the secular environment in which we live. Rather, believers live in what Taylor identifies as cross-pressured space, where belief is individualized and unbelief has become the default option. This perspectival shift is not altogether ruinous, according to Walker Percy, who welcomed the diminishment of Christendom's cultural power, stating, "If Christians believe in the kingdom, that's their business, but they should realize that the world has by and large turned away" (qtd. in Smith, p. 12).

What we have now is Individualized belief, which characterizes much of the Christian world, according to Taylor, and if that is so, how should Christian universities address this kind of culture? Too often, the effort to change non-belief to belief has been interpreted in light of evidence, but Smith suggests that "the Christian response to unbelief is

not to have an argument about the data or ‘evidence’ but rather to offer an alternative story that offers a more robust, complex understanding of the Christian faith” in which the goal of this story would be an invitation to sacramental, historic Christianity (Taylor, 2007, p. 77).

Methods and Materials

Exploring the essence of a central phenomenon, the research for this grant sought to understand the experiences of graduate students whose faith preferences were not the same as the Christian institution they attended (Creswell, 2014). The methodology used for this study was a phenomenological case study that addressed these concerns through surveys for graduate students in education programs—both Christian and non-Christian students—who were willing to share their experiences while attending a Christian university. I also created surveys for faculty who were willing to share their experiences teaching faith integration in their classes to both Christian and non-professing Christian students, although these surveys never materialized.

Before creating and distributing surveys, four graduate education schools in Christian universities that admit non-Christian students were asked for permission to allow their students to receive the surveys. Two of the four universities, Seattle Pacific (SPU) and Azusa Pacific (APU), followed through beyond an original response and agreed to participate in the study. Consequently, the target group was smaller than hoped. From this point forward, the two participating universities are referred to as Institution A and Institution B, respectively.

The students were informed that the study was investigating the level of comfort they felt among their peers and professors as non-professing graduate students, and students receiving the online surveys had the option to answer the survey questions or not. Those who participated were added to a drawing for a \$100 Amazon card.

Of the 66 total responses, 23 students indicated little or no Christian affiliation (see question 1 below), and these 23 provide the research data presented in this research article. Of these 23 students with little or no Christian background, four students additionally

participated in one-on-one interviews with me to discuss their experiences further; these students were each given a \$10 Starbucks card as a thank you.

Results and Discussion

The data here display the responses of graduate education students enrolled in either Institution A (SPU) or Institution B (APU), but not professing Christianity.

Question 1

Where would you place your faith affiliation?

- a. Nonexistent interest in any faith
- b. Somewhat interested
- c. Of a different faith, not interested
- d. I am nominally Christian.
- e. I am a former Christian.
- f. Other (Please explain.)

Fig. 1: Where Would You Place Your Level of Interest in the Christian Faith?

Student Comments from the Survey

- I grew up Catholic, but do not practice a religion. I consider myself to be agnostic. I am spiritual, but my beliefs and values do not align with any organized religion.
- Disappointed in Christian culture and people, indifferent to

Christianity as a whole now. Would not say I am a Christian and seriously doubt some of the Biblical stories.

- I'm interested in faith intellectually, but I have not found it myself.
- I was an Evangelical Christian when I started the program, but I became an atheist during my studies at Institution B. I felt free to discuss Christian faith. I did not discuss my emerging atheism.
- I slowly transitioned from being an evangelical Christian to becoming an atheist during my doctoral program. I do not credit or blame Institution B with my transition to atheism. I read books that were critical of religion so that I could become a better Christian apologist. These books helped me to leave religion. I did not "come out" as an atheist before graduation.

Researcher Comments

These comments reveal the disturbing fact that unbelief exists, not only among non-believing students, but also among former believers. Included in the above responses are two who considered themselves evangelicals and abandoned their faith *while they were attending* the Christian university. Here we might consider Taylor and Smith's discussion of the crisis of faith among all sorts of people who find themselves "caught in the face of opposition between orthodoxy and unbelief" and who are looking for another way (Smith, 2014, p. 64).

If we accept both Taylor and Smith's position that individualized belief dominates the Christian conscience, the responses, though few and representing a slim margin, can serve as a harbinger of what students may be deciding about their beliefs in the future.

Question 2

What did you know about your university's religious affiliation before enrolling?

- a. I was completely unfamiliar with the school's faith connection.
- b. I was vaguely aware that it was religious.

- c. I knew of the school's faith affiliation, but didn't care.
- d. The school's faith connection was intriguing to me.
- e. I am religious myself, but I practice a different faith from Christianity.
- f. My understanding of the university's religious affiliation is different from those mentioned above. (Please explain.)

Fig. 2: What Did You Know about Your University's Religious Affiliation before Enrolling?

Student Comments from the Survey

- I knew of the school's faith affiliation and was uneasy about it from the beginning. I was very uneasy signing all the consent forms that specified "moral" behavior, and I researched things such as SPU's stance on LGBTQ identity beforehand.

Researcher Comments

In the graduate education program at Institution B, students are required to write a faith and learning paper in every class, so they often "fake it" just to fulfill the assignment. Many of the students are from different cultures and unfamiliar with the evangelical environment there, even though they many have had religious experiences that they would call Christian.

Question 3

In what ways does the school environment recognize and affirm its religious affiliation?

- Activities and school functions do not include a faith-based component.
- Activities and school functions offer ways for Christian students to affirm their faith, but they are not required.
- Activities and school functions require that all students attend some religious functions.
- Activities and school functions assume that all students share the same religious values.
- Activities and school functions stressing Christian faith integration make me uncomfortable because I don't share their faith.
- I would describe the school's environment differently. (Please explain.)

Fig. 3: In What Ways Does the School Environment Recognize/Affirm Its Religious Affiliation?

Researcher Comments

This question sought information about the school's proactive affirmations, or lack thereof, regarding their faith affiliation. Since the question's purpose was to gather university information, students didn't feel the need to make additional comments.

Question 4

What was the strongest reason for choosing to attend this institution?

- a. Convenience
- b. Reputation
- c. Cost effective
- d. Degree I wanted
- e. Attracted to a value-based school
- f. My reason is not included among the above. (Please explain.)

Fig. 4: What Was the Strongest Reason for Choosing to Attend This Institution?

Researcher Comments

This question sought information about the participants' reasons choosing the institution. Since the question's purpose was to gather somewhat objective information, students didn't feel the need to make additional comments.

Question 5

How would you describe the ethos of the school in terms of its religious identity?

- a. Religious identity seems moot, not an issue.
- b. Religious identity is evident among artifacts and in print, but not discussed openly.

- c. Religious identity seems mixed among students and faculty.
- d. Religious identity is clearly evident among students and faculty.
- e. Religious identity is far too extreme for my comfort.
- f. I don't feel free to express my own religious identity because it is different.
- g. I would describe the school's religious identity different from those listed above. (Please explain.)

Fig. 5: How Would You Describe the Ethos of the School in Terms of Its Religious Identity?

Researcher Comments

From the above pie chart one can see that 52.2% of the graduate students surveyed feel that the religious identity is clearly evident, which is good news for Christian schools. However, 17.4% find the religious identity too extreme for their comfort. Taylor's suggestion that "being in on or [having] another perspective" can create potential dialogue rather than confrontation, or in some students' case, marginalization (Smith, 2014, p. 81).

Question 6

Given that the graduate programs do not limit their enrollment to students of faith, how would you say the school treat students whose beliefs differ?

- a. They do not address anything about our differences.
- b. There is no evidence of differences because faith is not discussed in classes.
- c. They make efforts to be inclusive to students who do not share their faith or whose faith may be different.
- d. They assume all students share the faith of the institution, despite their claims to include students whose faith perspective does not match the school's.
- e. They treat non-Christian students differently.
- f. I would describe their treatment of non-Christian students differently. (Please explain.)

Fig. 6: How Would You Say the School Treats Students whose Beliefs Differ?

Researcher Comments

Although, again, the pie chart's 52.2% positively represent inclusive behavior towards students with different beliefs, 26.1% of students feel the school ignores the differences among student beliefs supports a need for awareness and sensitivity among faculty and administration.

Question 7

Although the graduate students in your cohort include faith-based and non-faith-based students, how would you describe your comfort level among both groups?

- a. I feel accepted by all students, and religious preference makes little difference within my cohort.
- b. The students in my cohort seem to cluster among believing and students of other faiths or non-believing students.
- c. Most of the students are inviting, but a few keep their distance when they find out I'm not a practicing Christian or profess a different faith.
- d. Faith is never discussed among my cohort.

Fig. 7: How Would You Describe Your Comfort Level among Both Groups?

Researcher Comments

The higher, more positive response, represented in the pie chart above reveals another potential for Christian educators to consider. The non-professing Christians seem to feel more comfortable among their peers. More telling, the two options (21.7%, 8.7%) pointing to a distancing from the believers to the nonbelievers is disconcerting. Taylor and Smith recognize that these modern times require a different way of relating to others, where understanding the fragility of what all of us face in term of belief and unbelief, opens us to more possibilities (Smith, 2014, p.127).

Question 8

When discussions over the Christian faith occur in class, how open do you feel sharing differing views?

- a. I haven't experienced any discomfort in class discussions over Christian faith because my professors and peers welcome differing views.
- b. When I express differing views, I feel alienated.
- c. When discussions over the Christian faith occur in my class, I just keep quiet.
- d. I have heard students who are more outspoken about their beliefs marginalized by faculty and students.
- e. My experiences are different from those listed above. (Please explain.)

Fig. 8: How Do You Feel Sharing Differing Views?

Student Comments from the Survey

- I have not felt comfortable declaring myself as an atheist. I honestly am a little afraid of the repercussions. I don't want that information to go in my permanent student record.
- This class was neither about theology nor about morals, and furthermore was not academic, just preaching to the choir of Christian beliefs, with a required text that cites only from the Bible, and an evangelical professor who proclaimed statements such as "the ancients [in Biblical times] did not know about homosexuality."

Researcher Comments

The need for more genuine communication propelled my research, and the responses from this question validate the importance of honest dialogue, which means listening to the views of opinions outside the school's religious paradigm. According to Smith and Taylor, this kind of dialogue would require including a wide range of spiritual and semi-spiritual beliefs and casting our nets even wider by discussing students' religion as the shape of their ultimate concern (Smith, 2014).

Question 9

Are You Willing to Participate in a Focus Group or One-on-One Interview?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe: Please send me more information.

Fig. 9: Are You Willing to Participate in a Focus Group or One-on-One Interview?

Researcher Comments

Although 39.1% of the survey respondents stated that they were willing to participate in a focus group or interviews and 26.1% stated that they could consider it, only five students answered the follow-up letter—even with the promise of a Starbucks gift card. I was able to meet four of the five who answered the request for an interview. The

fifth participant was on maternity leave and needed to wait. She was the only respondent from Institution A.

Student Interviews

Because she had been born and raised in church, Student A easily connected to the evangelical ethos that pervaded Institution B, although she found herself juxtaposed against other Christians who declared a faith position without much thought behind it. She found a pervasive assumption among faculty and students that they were spiritually on the same page, when actually many denominations and faith practices were represented at the school. For example, some of her peers made blanket statements about LGBTQ as sin, when she knew that two women in the class were gay. Silence was the only answer available to those outside the evangelical paradigm. Most disconcerting to her was the general sense of “group think” in her on-campus classes, where professors and students shared the same presuppositions that Christianity embraced the same political, moral, ethical, and spiritual beliefs when she knew from personal experience that it wasn’t true. There seemed to be what she called “consensual ignorance” that everyone could find interchangeable answers to moral issues just by reading the Bible. These experiences served to distance Student A from faith exploration rather than draw her in that direction.

Student B’s experience included both regional and on-campus classes. He preferred the regional center’s open atmosphere where faith integration seemed more like conversations instead of assignments. Most disconcerting to Student B was that it seemed like Christians thought they had the monopoly on caring and that non-Christians weren’t as capable of becoming caring teachers. He told me that there seems to be an ego that comes with faith, even among members of his own family.

Student C told me immediately she was a Christian, but when I told her about my research, she seemed to change her tone and opened up about growing up as a Jehovah’s Witness. She wanted to attend a Christian school but felt like an outsider because she didn’t have the background. She has experienced a great deal of pain from her family’s

rejection, but she didn't feel safe to share about it at Institution B. Everyone assumed they shared the same beliefs, so she just kept quiet.

Student D's experience with faith integration was positive. Although he stated that he was a spiritual person, he said he didn't believe in Jesus as his Savior. He appreciated the faith integration conversations and said they were one of the activities he enjoyed most.

Researcher Comments

The interpersonal nature of the interviews resulted in extended responses that were particularly helpful in articulating the general themes identified in the surveys. Despite the small number, these interviews appear to provide a reasonable sample of graduate students' experiences, especially since they resembled the answers on the survey.

Interpretation of the Results

The following themes emerged as I compared the answers to surveys and interviews, which can serve as blueprints for educators and administrators in Christian higher education to use when considering their graduate students whose faith practices differ from the school's mission position.

- *Being Outside:* One theme that pervaded many of the surveys and interviews was the sense of being outside the norm. Several expressed a sense that they needed to hide themselves from what seemed to be mainstream belief, even if they were Christians.
- *Being Heard:* One theme was the desire to be heard. Genuine interest in students' faith positions might be more inviting to the uninitiated. If faith integration provided a platform for students to share their faith journey rather than regurgitate it, faith integration might be valuable to the students who are unfamiliar to the language and practices germane to evangelical Christianity.
- *Feeling Awkward:* Even among Christian students, several admitted that they didn't like to share their faith in a classroom setting or in front of people. One student wrote that because

everyone believes differently, it's hard to open up. Another wrote that it was "a little weird" because he/she did not affiliate with a particular religion.

- *Being Uninformed:* Several said that the school needs to be more proactive and inform incoming graduate students that faith integration is part of the course requirements and that they will be required to respond to questions where they will apply biblical principles to their pedagogical practices.

Implications for Further Research

Although all of the surveys among students (there were 66 among the Christian and non-professing Christian participants) have been collected and assessed, I still hope to collect surveys from faculty and conduct more interviews. Student comments indicate that many students appreciated the faith integration efforts, and their willingness to participate in the study indicated that they wanted to share their opinions.

For Christian academics and universities, welcoming non-Christian students should be something faculty, administration, and university/college boards address directly. Without an intentional effort to understand the students' faith backgrounds, universities may miss many opportunities to help non-Christian students feel welcome in a Christian environment, understand a Christian worldview, and support students questioning their belief systems. Failing to do this almost certainly leads to missing opportunities to minister and to heed the Great Commission.

This study has surveyed a small sample of non-Christian graduate students in two Christian universities but has opened the door for further research along this line. This study suggests the need to survey graduate and undergraduate students attending other Christian colleges and universities and learn how widespread it is to have student populations who are not acquainted with basic Christian tenets.

Listening to our students is the first step in faith integration and opens the door for genuine communication to begin.

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