

Incoming Black Protestant Students

Historically, the Black Church in America has been an integral facet of Black culture, and Black people have often been monolithically mischaracterized as singularly Protestant (Hutchinson, 2011; Washington, 1971). Today, however, Black Protestants find themselves amid a cultural shift in which they arguably no longer represent the dominant narrative of Black people. Religious and secular diversification in Black communities and emerging social movements (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, Say Her Name, etc.) are helping to redefine what it means to identify as Black in America.

Despite the changing social landscape, 78% of Black Americans still identify as Protestant, easily making it the largest religious group among Black Americans in the U.S. (Sehgal & Smith, 2009). Given the cultural movement among and between intersecting religious and racial patterns, questions remain concerning how Black Protestant young adults perceive religious diversity in the United States. How do their background and racial identity intersect with their worldview? To offer insight into these questions, this report focuses on Black Protestant students' perceptions of and experiences with religious and worldview diversity upon entering college.

PRE-COLLEGE CHARACTERISTICS

In fall 2015, 549 first-year college students identifying as Black and Protestant took part in the initial administration of the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS). IDEALS, a national study of college students attending 122 institutions across the United States, gauges college students' affinity for interreligious cooperation, their appreciation for various worldview groups, and their religious diversity experiences in higher education institutions. The study also provides insights regarding how students self-identify religiously, spiritually, and politically.

Most first-year Black Protestant students identified as “religious” in some capacity. The majority (67%) described themselves as “both religious and spiritual.” Another 15% said they were “religious but not spiritual.” Also, few Black Protestant respondents identified as politically conservative. Only 13% identified as politically conservative; just over half (52%) identified as politically moderate; and the remaining 35% identified as liberal. Approximately seven percent of the Black Protestant respondents indicated that they were an international student.

PRE-COLLEGE ENGAGEMENT

Black Protestants are religiously devout, attending religious services within their own religious tradition at a much higher rate than their non-Black Protestant peers (90% to 65%, respectively). However, in terms of interfaith engagement, Black Protestants have less experience engaging across religious and nonreligious worldviews than their non-Black Protestant peers. For example, in the 12 months prior to the survey, only 27% of first-year Black Protestant students attended a religious service outside of their own tradition—a proportion that is significantly lower than the 35% of their non-Black-Protestant peers who did the same. Black Protestant students also were less likely to have participated in the following activities with someone of a different religious or nonreligious perspective: shared a meal (72.1% compared to 80.3%), studied (56.8% compared to 66.2%), or socialized (80.7% to 87.2%).

Further distinguishing them from other first-term students, Black Protestant IDEALS respondents more readily committed to their worldview. While over half of other entering students said they had talked and listened to people with different points of view (55%) and integrated multiple points of view into their existing worldview before committing to it (53%), just 39% of incoming Black Protestant had done so. Similarly, 27% of Black Protestant first-term students indicated that they thoughtfully considered other religious and nonreligious perspectives before committing to their worldview, compared to 40% other first-term students. Finally, whereas only 18% of Black Protestant IDEALS respondents described themselves as having to reconcile competing religious and nonreligious perspectives before committing to their worldview, 26% of other first-term students said the same.

THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND RACIAL IDENTITY ON WORLDVIEW

Incoming Black Protestant students identified religious beliefs/faith, family background and traditions, and racial identity as the three elements most influencing their worldview. Over three-quarters (77%) of Black Protestant students ranked religious beliefs/faith as being one of the top three influences on their worldview; this is in stark contrast to the 48% of other students that selected religious beliefs/faith as an element influencing their worldview. As was the case with their peers, nearly three-fourths of Black Protestant students (70%) said family background and tradition played a key role in shaping their worldview. Finally, Black Protestants were uniquely inclined to note the strong influence of racial/ethnic identity on their worldview (44% said it played a role in their worldview), relative to non-Black-Protestant students (13% said it played a role in their worldview).

APPRECIATIVE ATTITUDES AND PLURALISM ORIENTATION

When it came to appreciative attitudes various religious and secular worldviews, Black Protestant first-term students tended to have more positive views of traditional Christian groups (e.g., evangelical Christians) and less positive views of other religious and non-religious groups. For example, 77% of first-year Black Protestant IDEALS respondents agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement “In general, I have a positive attitude toward...Evangelical Christians,” while 70% of all other students reported the same. In contrast, incoming Black Protestants expressed significantly lower views of atheists (53%, compared to 67%); Buddhists (65%, compared to 76%); Hindus (63%, compared to 71%); Jews (70%, compared to 76%); gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (66%, compared to 73%); and transgender people (58%, compared to 68%) than other students when asked to indicate if they have a generally positive attitude toward each group.

Given the lower appreciative attitudes toward of Black Protestants toward several groups, it was not surprising to see that Black Protestants were also less likely to have high overall pluralism orientation (57.5%, compared to 65.8%). Pluralism is defined as “the extent to which students are accepting of others with different worldviews, believe that worldviews share many common values, consider it important to understand the differences between the world religions, and believe it is possible to have strong relationships with others and still hold their own worldviews” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p.2).

Overall, the data suggest incoming Black Protestants are a religiously committed contingent of students who are strongly influenced by their faith tradition, family background, and racial identity. However, Black Protestants are also a group that has yet to engage meaningfully across lines of worldview difference prior to college; for these students, the college and university environment can provide ample opportunities for growth and understanding within their own tradition and engagement with others from traditions outside of their own.

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