Classroom Climate, Academic Success, and Intent to Persist among Non-Christian and Christian Undergraduate Students

Christy M. Craft
Yang Yang

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/christy_moran_craft/19/
Classroom Climate, Academic Success, and Intent to Persist among Non-Christian and Christian Undergraduate Students

Christy Moran Craft and Yang Yang

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of classroom climate held by 3,900 undergraduate non-Christian and Christian students at 1 large Midwestern university and to determine whether those perceptions influenced their academic success and intent to persist. The results suggested that Christian students held more positive perceptions of classroom climate than non-Christian students. Moreover, regardless of their perception of classroom climate, Christian students were more academically successful and had higher intentions to persist than non-Christian students. For all of the students in the study, positive perceptions of classroom climate advantageously impacted academic success and intent to persist.

KEYWORDS
Classroom climate; academic success; persistence; Christian; non-Christian; religious; spiritual; nonreligious; college; undergraduate; religion; spirituality

Over the last 15 years, the religious, spiritual, and nonreligious beliefs and practices of college and university students have attracted the interest of many scholars and practitioners in higher education. One of the landmark studies about college student spirituality was conducted through the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles and provided scholars and practitioners with rich insights into the salience of religion and spirituality to many college and university students. Once the salience of that social identity was unveiled, a number of other scholars turned their attention to investigating the experiences of religious, spiritual, and nonreligious students on campus.

Much of the recent literature about religious, spiritual, and nonreligious students is focused on their perceptions of the campus climate. Rankin and Reason defined campus climate as “the current attitudes, behaviors,
standards, and practices of employees and students of an institution.” Understanding students’ perceptions of the campus climate is important, because research suggests that those perceptions may influence their academic experiences and academic performance. Though scholars have conducted studies in which students of different religious, spiritual, and nonreligious identities have reported their perceptions of the overall campus climate, no one has investigated their perceptions of the climate within specific areas on campus (e.g., classrooms, residence halls, student unions). Because the classroom is a “critical sphere where many aspects of the campus climate materialize,” it is imperative that those who work in higher education understand students’ perceptions of those spaces on campus as well as some of the outcomes related to those perceptions.

The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in the literature by examining not only how students of different religious, spiritual, and nonreligious identities perceive the classroom climate but also some of the outcomes related to those perceptions. In particular, we addressed the following three research questions: (1) Do non-Christian and Christian undergraduate students perceive the classroom climate similarly? (2) Do these students’ perceptions of the classroom climate influence their academic success? and (3) Do these students’ perceptions of the classroom climate influence their intent to persist? In the following sections, we first review the literature about how students of various social identities experience the classroom and/or overall campus climate. Then, we discuss the conceptual framework that guided this study. Next, we present the method we used to conduct the research before discussing the results of our study. We conclude the article with implications for practice and research.

**Literature review**

To date, no one has investigated perceptions of the classroom climate held by students of differing religious, spiritual, or nonreligious identities in higher education. However, research does exist that highlights how some students of other social identities (i.e., gender, race) have perceived and experienced the classroom climate. Furthermore, there are some researchers who have investigated religious, spiritual, and nonreligious students’ perceptions of the overall campus climate. Both bodies of literature provide valuable insights for the current study. What follows is a review of the aforementioned literature.

**Classroom climate in higher education**

Classrooms can serve as optimal spaces for learning and development to occur if the climate in those spaces is positively perceived by the students
therein. According to Barr, the classroom climate reflects not only students’ comfort level in the classroom but also how they feel about their instructors and peers in the classroom setting. Understanding students’ perceptions of classroom climate is important, as such perceptions can influence their overall satisfaction with college and their academic performance. Moreover, research suggests that students who experience their classrooms as unwelcoming environments are at risk for psychological stress, decreased self-esteem, reduced participation, and decreased persistence. Unfortunately, studies have demonstrated that some women and racially minoritized students have reported negative classroom climates.

A “chilly” classroom climate for women
In the higher education literature, most of the classroom climate research has been focused on the experiences of women. Much of this work has highlighted the “chilly” classroom climates faced by many women in higher education. Years ago, Rowe wrote about the “microinequities” experienced by women and how even seemingly minor incidents could have a cumulative negative impact in the classroom. For instance, unwelcoming classroom climates for women can be created by the following: behaviors that communicate lower expectations for women than men, excluding women from class participation, treating men and women differently when their behavior or achievements are the same, singling out women, and student-to-student hostility and harassment. Such behaviors create uncomfortable, and sometimes even harmful, classroom climates for women.

Racial microaggressions in the classroom
The other significant body of literature pertaining to classroom climate in higher education focuses on microaggressions that some racially minoritized students have reportedly experienced. Microaggressions are defined as subtle or nonverbal communications, intentional or not, resulting in harmful consequences to members of marginalized groups. Both peers and professors can be perpetrators of racial microaggressions, which can have damaging effects on students. Given the aforementioned research that describes how students of some minoritized social identities (e.g., gender, race) perceive the classroom climate, it seems reasonable and important to ask whether or not certain religious, spiritual, and/or nonreligious students who could be classified as minoritized in that regard (e.g., non-Christian students) experience similar negative classroom climates.
Non-Christian and Christian students’ perceptions of the overall campus climate

Though there is no research that examines the perceptions of classroom climate held by students of various religious, spiritual, and nonreligious identities, a growing body of work has unveiled perceptions of the overall campus climate held by some of these students. In many of those studies, students are classified in one of the following ways: religious majority (i.e., identifying with some Christian denomination), religious minority (i.e., those who identify with a religion other than Christianity), spiritual but not religious students, or nonreligious students (e.g., atheists, agnostics). What follows is a synthesis and analysis of that literature. To be consistent with the nature of the groups analyzed in our study, we have organized this review into two sections: the literature that pertains to students who represent religious, spiritual, or nonreligious identities other than Christian (henceforth referred to as non-Christians) and that which pertains to Christian students.

Non-Christian students’ perceptions of campus climate
One body of literature suggests that some students who identify as religious minorities or who identify as nonreligious perceive the overall campus climate in higher education as being negative. For instance, some researchers have written about how Muslim students, in particular, frequently report feeling alienated, marginalized, and unsafe on campus.15 And still others have written about the negative perceptions of the campus climate held by Jewish students on campus—perceptions that have resulted in large part due to instances of anti-Semitism.16

Nonreligious students have also reported negative perceptions of the campus climate. For instance, Goodman and Mueller17 found that many nonreligious students reported feeling marginalized, oppressed, stigmatized, and invisible. In addition, Gorski18 wrote about the existence of negative stereotypes that characterize nonreligious students as bad people. Some nonreligious students are so concerned about the negative reactions of others that they are hesitant about “coming out” as nonreligious to their peers.19 Given the aforementioned research, it is not surprising that in Bowman and Smedley’s20 study of undergraduates, students from marginalized religions or no religion at all had the lowest levels of satisfaction about the overall campus climate.

Christian students’ perceptions of campus climate
Interestingly, some Christian students have also reported negative perceptions of the overall campus environment.21 Research has revealed that some evangelical Christian students, in particular, experienced negative
stereotypes about their religion and often felt ostracized on campus. Some even felt misrepresented by professors and peers.

Even more recent research has revealed similar findings. For instance, using the same dataset, Rockenbach and Mayhew and Mayhew, Bowman, and Rockenbach found that Christian students perceived the campus climate less positively than other religious students and nonreligious students on campus and were less satisfied about the spiritual climate on their campus than were all others. Also, in a study by Riggers-Piehl and Lehman, Christian students shared that they were hesitant to talk about their own religious beliefs due in large part to the negative speech of their peers with regard to religion and spirituality. Taken together, then, the literature suggests that both non-Christian students as well as Christian students sometimes hold negative perceptions of the overall campus climate. The question remains about their perceptions of the classroom climate, in particular, and what impact those perceptions have upon various academic outcomes.

**Conceptual framework**

The framework guiding this study draws on conceptual work related to the impact of campus social-ecological settings upon student outcomes. The social-ecological setting of the classroom is referred to as the *classroom climate*, and it encompasses its social and emotional aspects. In other words, how students feel about themselves and how students and their instructors relate to each other within the classroom influence students’ perceptions of the climate therein. This conceptualization aligns with the operationalization of our perceived classroom climate variable as students’ comfort level in the classroom along with the degree to which they felt valued by their professors and by other students.

A number of years ago, Moos concluded that “the social-ecological setting in which students function can affect their attitudes and moods, their behavior and performance, their self-concept and general sense of well-being.” Given the wide array of outcomes associated with varying types of social-ecological settings, it is important to understand how specific settings on campus influence key educational outcomes. This study was designed with that goal in mind by focusing specifically upon the impact of the classroom setting.

Moreover, existing literature suggests that perceptions of classroom climate might impact both academic success and intent to persist among students. For that reason, we investigated those two variables in relation to students’ perceptions of classroom climate. This research study, then, was designed to build upon the aforementioned conceptual work to investigate how non-Christian and Christian students’ perceptions of one social-
ecological setting (i.e., the classroom) influence two specific educational outcomes (i.e., academic success and intent to persist).

Method

Data source and participants

The study took place at a large Midwestern land grant research university. Approval for the study was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board. The Campus Climate Assessment Project (henceforth referred to “climate survey”) was designed to assess various aspects of campus climate including that related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. The climate survey was administered in 2015 to all undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff at the research site ($n=7,411$). The study presented here focused on one subset of the larger dataset: the undergraduate students. A total of 3,900 respondents provided usable data. Students who self-identified as Christians represented 74.5% of the sample; those affiliated with religious minority traditions (i.e., other faith-based affiliations) represented 2.2% of the sample; those who identified as spiritual, but no faith-based affiliations represented 6.3%; and students who identified as having no affiliation represented 17%. Because our sample consisted of very small groups of students representing other religious, spiritual, and nonreligious identities, we focused our analyses on comparing the entire group of students who do not identify as Christian (henceforth referred to as “non-Christians”) with those who do (henceforth referred to as “Christians”).

Measures

Perceived classroom climate was measured by three dependent variables, namely overall comfort level with the classroom climate, feeling valued by instructors in the classroom, and feeling valued by other students in the classroom. These three variables examined related but separate constructs on classroom climate. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). We reversely recoded the scale to make it more intuitive to comprehend. Higher scores suggest a student held a more favorable view of the classroom climate.

The fourth dependent variable, academic success, consisted of seven items regarding undergraduate students’ self-perceived success and intellectual development (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.87$). For instance, a couple of those items were “performing up to full academic potential” and “satisfied with the extent of intellectual development.” The reliability and validity of the measures can be found elsewhere. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). We reversely recoded
the scale to make it more intuitive to comprehend. Higher scores suggest a student perceived herself/himself to be more academically successful.

The fifth dependent variable, intent to persist, consisted of two items regarding undergraduate students’ persistence and their intention to graduate from the institution (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .75$). Those items were “I intend to graduate” and “I intend to withdraw.” The reliability and validity of the measures can be found elsewhere. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). We reversely recoded the scale for the second item to make it more intuitive to comprehend. Higher scores suggest a student was more likely to persist.

For the independent variable, religion, the extremely low number of religious minority students violated the assumption of parametric inferential statistics, thus it was inappropriate to use in the inferential analyses. Instead, as mentioned earlier, we combined all non-Christian groups together and recoded religion into a dichotomous variable, 1 = religious majority (i.e., Christians), 0 = religious minority (i.e., non-Christians) in the following inferential analyses. All analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) package Windows version 23.

**Limitations**

There are a couple of limitations to this research that are due to the fact that we used existing data rather than using data that were specifically gathered to answer the research questions. First, given the small number of students who identified with non-Christian religious, spiritual, or nonreligious identities, we were not able to disaggregate the data to determine differences in perceptions of classroom climate, academic success, and intent to persist between students of non-Christian identities. For that reason, caution should be used when generalizing from the findings of the current study. Second, we only examined students who responded to and completed the climate survey. It is unknown whether or not the students who did not respond to or complete the climate survey are different from the sample we had, which could have resulted in a biased sample and limited the generalizability of the findings. In spite of these limitations, this research provides valuable insights for all who work in higher education.

**Results**

**Question 1: Do non-Christian and Christian undergraduate students perceive classroom climate similarly?**

Three dependent variables were used to measure perceived classroom climate: overall comfort level with classroom climate, feeling valued by
instructors in the classroom, and feeling valued by other students in the classroom. The means of each construct are presented in Table 1 with higher scores indicating more favorable views of classroom climate. Because the abovementioned three dependent variables showed moderate to substantial correlation (Table 2), a multivariate analysis was used to control for the family-wise Type I error inflation.\(^3\)

All statistical assumptions were checked and have been met. A multivariate analysis of variance was first conducted on all three dependent variables of classroom climate using religion as the dichotomous independent variable. Religion was statistically significant in explaining the overall model, \(F(3, 3896) = 15.885, \text{Wilks' } \lambda = .998, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .012.\)

We further decomposed significant analysis of variance effects on each of the three dependent variables (Table 3). The independent variable, religion, significantly predicted the overall comfort level with the classroom climate. Specifically, Christian students (\(M = 4.12, SE = .014\)) felt more comfortable with the classroom climate than non-Christian students (\(M = 4.05, SE = .024, p = .007\)).

Religion was a statistically significant predictor of feeling valued by instructors in the classroom. Christian students (\(M = 3.25, SE = .012\)) felt more valued by instructors in the classroom than non-Christian students (\(M = 3.14, SE = .021, p < .001\)). Religion was also a statistically significant predictor of feeling valued by other students in the classroom. Christian students (\(M = 3.15, SE = .012\)) felt more valued by other students in the classroom than non-Christian students (\(M = 2.99, SE = .021, p < .001\)).

---

### Table 1. Average ratings of student views on classroom climate by religious affiliation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Non-Christian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall comfort level with the classroom climate</td>
<td>4.12 (.753)</td>
<td>4.05 (.825)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel valued by instructors in the classroom</td>
<td>3.24 (.641)</td>
<td>3.14 (.692)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel valued by other students in the classroom</td>
<td>3.15 (.639)</td>
<td>2.98 (.701)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. For each entry, means are presented first, and standard deviations are in parentheses. Higher scores indicate more favorable views.*

### Table 2. Correlations among outcome measures on classroom climate (\(N = 3931\)).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome measure</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Overall comfort level with the classroom climate</td>
<td>.390***</td>
<td>.366***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Feel valued by instructors in the classroom</td>
<td>.390***</td>
<td>.572***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Feel valued by other students in the classroom</td>
<td>.366***</td>
<td>.572***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.\)

### Table 3. Analysis of variance: religion for ratings on three classroom climate measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>(F)</th>
<th>(p)</th>
<th>(\eta^2_p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Overall comfort level with the classroom climate</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel valued by instructors in the classroom</td>
<td>20.30</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel valued by other students in the classroom</td>
<td>47.15</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^4\text{Degrees of freedom are } 1, 3898 \text{ for all analyses.}\)
Question 2. Do these students’ perceptions of the classroom climate influence their academic success?

In the second research question, a hierarchical ordinary least squares multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict academic success using several groups of independent variables. Specifically, the predictor in Block 1 (the first model) was religion. In Block 2 (the second model), we entered three additional predictors of perceived classroom climate: overall comfort level with the classroom climate, feeling valued by instructors in the classroom, and feeling valued by other students in the classroom. In Block 3 (the third model), the interaction terms between religion and each of the three perceived classroom climate variables were computed and entered into the model (Table 4).

The Block 1 model of the regression analysis indicated that religion significantly predicted academic success, $R^2 = .007$, $F(1, 3897) = 25.86$, $p < .001$. Although it is a small effect, Christian students tended to have higher academic success than non-Christian students, $\beta = .081$, $t = 5.085$, $p < .001$.

The Block 2 model overall was significantly related to academic success, $R^2 = .33$, $F(4, 3894) = 478.61$, $p < .001$. More importantly, the increase in $R^2$ showed that the combination of the three perceived classroom climate variables accounted for significant incremental variance of academic success beyond and above religion ($\Delta R^2 = .323$), $F(3, 3894) = 625.39$, $p < .001$. Each perceived classroom climate variable made unique positive contributions to the model, including overall comfort level with classroom climate ($\beta = .227$, $t = 15.633$, $p < .001$), feeling valued by instructors in the classroom ($\beta = .350$, $t = 21.272$, $p < .001$), and feeling valued by other students in the classroom ($\beta = .130$, $t = 7.939$, $p < .001$).

In Block 3, three interaction terms between religion and each of the three perceived classroom climate variables were examined. The 0.1% increase in $R^2$ was not statistically significant. The interaction variables did not add...
meaningful incremental variance to the previous model, and thus, did not contribute to the prediction of academic success.

**Question 3. Do these students’ perceptions of the classroom climate influence their intent to persist?**

In the third research question, a hierarchical ordinary least squares multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict students’ intention to persist. The same predictors were added into the models in the identical order as in Question 2. Specifically, the predictor in the Block 1 model was religion. For the Block 2 model, we entered three additional predictors of perceived classroom climate: overall comfort level with the classroom climate, feeling valued by instructors in the classroom, and feeling valued by other students in the classroom. In the Block 3 model, the interaction terms between religion and each of the three perceived classroom climate variables were computed and entered into the model.

As shown in Table 5, the Block 1 model of the regression analysis indicated that religion significantly predicted intent to persist, $R^2 = .015$, $F(1, 3896) = 59.98$, $p < .001$. Although it is a small effect, Christian students were more likely to intend to persist than were non-Christian students, $\beta = .123$, $t = 7.745$, $p < .001$.

The overall Block 2 model was significantly related to intent to persist, $R^2 = .091$, $F(4, 3893) = 97.87$, $p < .001$. The increase in $R^2$ showed that the combination of the three perceived classroom climate variables accounted for significant incremental variance of intent to persist above and beyond religion ($\Delta R^2 = .076$), $F(3, 3893) = 108.84$, $p < .001$. Each perceived classroom climate variable made unique contributions to the model: overall comfort level with the classroom climate ($\beta = .174$, $t = 10.315$, $p < .001$), feeling valued by instructors in the classroom ($\beta = .094$, $t = 4.880$, $p < .001$), and feeling valued by other students in the classroom ($\beta = .08$, $t = 4.207$, $p < .001$).

### Table 5. Regression predicting intent to persist from religion and views on classroom climate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
<th>Step $\beta$</th>
<th>Step $F$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>.015***</td>
<td>.123***</td>
<td>$F(1, 3896) = 59.98$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>.076***</td>
<td>.174***</td>
<td>$F(4, 3893) = 97.87$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall comfort level with classroom climate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel valued by instructors</td>
<td></td>
<td>.094***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel valued by other students</td>
<td></td>
<td>.080***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Religion was entered as 1 = Christian students, 0 = Non-Christian students. The three religion and classroom climate interaction terms (step 3) did not add significant variance to the model. For the full model, $F(7, 3890) = 56.98$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .093$. **p < .001.
In Block 3, three interaction terms between religion and each of the three perceived classroom climate variables were examined. The 0.2% increase in $R^2$ was not statistically significant. Interaction variables did not add meaningful incremental variance to the previous model and thus did not contribute to the prediction of intent to persist.

**Discussion**

The results of this study present insightful information about the perceptions of classroom climate among non-Christian and Christian students. For instance, Christian students felt more comfortable with the overall classroom climate than non-Christian students. Christian students were also more likely to feel valued by their instructors and by other students in the classroom than their non-Christian peers. Furthermore, Christian students tended to have higher academic success and higher intention to persist than non-Christian students; although in both cases, they were small effects. The overall comfort level with classroom climate, feeling valued by instructors, and feeling valued by other students in the classroom all positively significantly contributed to academic success as well as to intent to persist; these effects applied to all students regardless of their religious affiliations. In the following sections, we discuss these findings in relation to the existing literature.

**The impact of perceptions of classroom climate**

For all of the students in this study, perceptions of classroom climate contributed to their academic success and intent to persist. In other words, students who felt comfortable in the classroom and who felt valued by their professors and by other students in that setting were more likely to be academically successful and to plan to stay in college. This finding is congruent with existing research about perceptions of the overall campus climate that has demonstrated that such positive campus climate perceptions are linked to a variety of desired student outcomes: well-being, sense of belonging, cognitive and affective outcomes, and persistence and completion. Existing classroom climate research, though scant, also supports this finding but in different ways. For instance, Hotchkins and Dancy found that students who did not perceive the classroom climate as welcoming were less likely to persist. Regarding academic performance, Norton’s research aligns with ours, in that students who perceived the climate as welcoming performed well academically. Taken together, the importance of students’ perceptions of classroom climate should not be minimized given the impact of those perceptions on their academic success and intent to persist.
Religious differences in perceptions of classroom climate

In our study, non-Christian students’ perceptions of the classroom climate were less positive than those of Christian students. Specifically, the non-Christian students in this study felt less comfortable and less valued by professors and by other students in the classroom. This finding aligns with that of some other research about perceptions of the overall campus climate. For instance, in a survey study at one southwestern, nonsectarian private university, Cragun, Blyde, and their colleagues\textsuperscript{42} found that those who identified with minoritized religious identities (i.e., non-Christian) reported more instances of marginalization than those who were privileged (i.e., Christian). And, as mentioned earlier, other studies have shown that nonreligious students as well as those who identify with a religion other than Christianity have also reported negative perceptions (e.g., low satisfaction, feelings of alienation and/or marginalization) of the overall campus climate.\textsuperscript{43} Interestingly, this finding in our research contradicts the results of other some studies which suggested that some Christian students, particularly those who self-identify as evangelical, reported negative campus climates by experiencing marginalization and/or discrimination on campus.\textsuperscript{44}

How, then, do we make meaning of the finding that the Christians in this study experienced the classroom climate more positively than non-Christians? The existing literature provides at least one plausible explanation. Siefert\textsuperscript{45} defined Christian privilege as “the conscious and subconscious advantages often afforded the Christian faith in America’s colleges and universities.” Examples of Christian privilege in higher education include the following: the curriculum represents one’s religion widely and positively, and academic breaks likely coincide with one’s religious practices.\textsuperscript{46} A common belief is that Christian privilege continues to be used as a vehicle to silence and to marginalize students holding non-Christian views.\textsuperscript{47} Where our research is concerned, it is possible that students who do not identify as Christians felt less comfortable and less valued by professors and by other students in the classroom, at least in part, due to the privileged status of Christianity in the academy.

Religious differences in academic success and intent to persist

The other primary finding in our study is that, regardless of perceptions of classroom climate, Christian students were more academically successful and were more likely to report that they intended to persist than non-Christians. Though limited, there is some existing literature that points to similar findings with regard to academic success. For instance, Broberg and Krogstad\textsuperscript{48} found that there was a positive relationship between
Christian affiliation and GPA, although it failed to reach statistical significance. Moreover, several other scholars have documented the role that Christianity plays in the success of African American college students in particular. Unlike research about academic success, though, there is no existing literature that links students’ religious identities with their intentions to persist in college.

What might be an explanation for this finding that Christians were more academically successful and had stronger intentions to persist than non-Christians, regardless of perceptions of classroom climate? It is possible that the answer to that question could be found in thinking about the Christian religion. For instance, some researchers have documented Christian students’ “inspiration for excellence” that flows from their religious beliefs and values. To be sure, the pursuit of excellence is promulgated in Colossians 3:23-24 (NIV) in the Bible:

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Similarly, Elms discovered that Christian students communicated expectations from God that they sought to meet, that their adherence to their religious values and behaviors allowed them to focus their attention on their academic pursuits, that their religion acted as a support system during college, and that their religion allowed them to see how their educational success fit into the big picture of their lives. It is plausible that such religious motivations could lead to the academic success and intent to persist among Christian students.

Another aspect of the Christian religious identity that some might say could explain the academic success, in particular, among Christian students relates to the idea of divine favor. A number of biblical passages communicate that God’s favor is upon those who regularly read the Bible and strive to live in accordance with what is stated in it (e.g., Psalm 5:12; Psalm 84:11; 2 Corinthians 9:8), and that whatever those individuals do will prosper (Psalm 1:1-3). An oft-cited biblical passage, from Proverbs 3:1-4 (NIV), reflects these ideas:

My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity. Let love and faithfulness never leave you; write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.

Given the aforementioned aspects of the Christian religion, it is plausible that Moos’ theoretical concepts about the powerful influence of social-ecological settings hold true even outside of the classroom setting. In this case, Christianity itself might function as a social-ecological, nonphysical
setting for Christian students—one that influences their academic attitudes, behavior, and performance.

**Implications**

College and university faculty should continue to identify ways to create positive classroom climates, with special attention to helping non-Christian students feel comfortable and valued by others in the classroom. Because faculty “play a central role in shaping both the culture and climate of their institutions,” they can be key influences.\(^{53}\) One way to create positive classroom climates is for faculty to structure time for relationship-building activities within the classroom. Small group discussions in class can lead to students having the opportunity to get to know each other along with each other’s beliefs and values. Formal and informal interactions between individuals of different religious, spiritual, and nonreligious belief systems reflect the behavioral aspect\(^ {54}\) of “worldview diversity,”\(^ {55}\) an important dimension of the overall campus climate. Moreover, in such discussions, and in other forms of interaction during classes, faculty in some academic disciplines can be intentional about providing students with opportunities to identify their religious, spiritual, or nonreligious identities with the goal of making visible the structural diversity\(^ {56}\) that exists within each classroom. Many students who are not Christians, for example, may be surprised to learn that there are others in the classroom who hold similar religious, spiritual, or nonreligious identities as they do, or at the very least, who do not identify as Christians. Such a revelation may be just what is needed for those non-Christian students to feel comfortable in the classroom.

Faculty can also play a role in shaping the psychological dimension of the classroom climate\(^ {57}\)—the aspect of the campus climate that reflects whether there is a perception that diverse beliefs and perspectives are accepted or not. One way to do this is for faculty to formally and/or informally communicate to students that they, regardless of their religious, spiritual, or nonreligious beliefs and values, are welcomed in the classroom. Tangible ways of communicating to students that they are valued and respected include positively responding to written, reflection assignments in which students are encouraged to discuss how their religious, spiritual, or nonreligious identities relate to the classroom content being studied, directly encouraging diverse viewpoints to be expressed in class discussions, and regularly reminding students that the classroom is a safe space for expressing unpopular beliefs and opinions. Given non-Christian students’ reports of feeling less positively about classroom climate, special attention should be made toward drawing out their perspectives in class. Another
way that faculty in some academic disciplines can communicate to non-Christian students, in particular, that they are valued is by diligently working to ensure that all students are exposed to curricular materials that reflect religious, spiritual, and nonreligious assumptions and beliefs other than Christianity.

In addition to the aforementioned implications for practice, the results of this study lead to the need for additional research into the impact of students’ religious, spiritual, or nonreligious identities upon their academic success and intent to persist. For example, research is needed that would unveil motivations for succeeding and/or for persisting held by students of different religious, spiritual, and nonreligious identities. Do religious, spiritual, and nonreligious belief systems function as social-ecological, nonphysical settings for students that influence their academic attitudes, behavior, and performance? If so, how do different religious, spiritual, and nonreligious belief systems function in that regard, particularly in relation to academic success and intent to persist? Also, further research needs to be conducted to ascertain the extent to which manifestations of Christian privilege may influence non-Christian students’ negative perceptions of classroom climate. Knowing more about that phenomenon could reveal ideas for how to overcome some barriers to their success.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined the perceptions of classroom climate held by non-Christian and Christian undergraduate students at one large Midwestern university and how those perceptions influenced their academic success and their intent to persist. Results of this study suggest that Christian students perceived the classroom climate more favorably than non-Christians, and they were also more academically successful and were more likely to intend to persist than non-Christians. For all students in the study, positive perceptions of classroom climate advantageously impacted academic success and intent to persist. Although these findings are insightful, there is still much to be learned about how students’ religious, spiritual, and nonreligious identities influence their perceptions and experiences in classroom settings in higher education. The more knowledge we gain in this regard, the better equipped we will be to facilitate the academic success and persistence of all.

ORCID

Christy Moran Craft  http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5209-0894
Notes


12. Ibid.


27. Jason J. Barr, “Developing a Positive Classroom Climate.”

31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
37. Sylvia J. Hurtado and Deborah F. Carter, “Effects of College Transition.”
47. Tricia A. Siefert, “Understanding Christian Privilege.”
52. Rudolf H. Moos, “Evaluating Educational Environments.”


57. Ibid.