Cultural Incongruity and Social Status Ambiguity: The Experiences of Evangelical Christian Student Leaders at Two Midwestern Public Universities

Dennis J. Lang, DeVry University
Jenea Oliver, University of Missouri
Cultural Incongruity and Social Status Ambiguity: The Experiences of Evangelical Christian Student Leaders at Two Midwestern Public Universities

Christy D. Moran  Dennis J. Lang  Jenea Oliver

This phenomenological investigation highlights the experiences of evangelical Christian student leaders at two Midwestern public universities. These students perceived their public university environments not only as incongruent with, but also as antagonistic and oppressive toward, their values, beliefs, and behaviors. Besides detailing how these students navigated their culturally incongruent environments, the authors introduce the concept of “social status ambiguity” to describe how differing perceptions of the religious identity of these students may result in the concurrent existence of the privileged and oppressed social statuses in that identity domain.

In 2003, the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California-Los Angeles initiated a multi-year research study to investigate the spiritual development of undergraduate students during their college years. According to the preliminary findings of that study, today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement, and many are actively engaged and involved in religion (Astin, Astin, Lindholm, & Bryant, 2005). In fact, Nash (2001) stated that the revival of student interest in spirituality and religion represents the most vibrant aspect of pluralism on campus today. In spite of the fact that religion has been ranked as one of the most important social identities among undergraduate students (Garza & Herringer, 1986), the religious identity of college students only recently became a topic of inquiry in the field of higher education.

Of the more than 200 religious traditions currently being practiced in the United States (Eck, 2001), approximately 43% of Americans currently describe themselves as “evangelical” Christians (Gallup Poll, 2005). A personalized commitment and response to the gospel message of Jesus Christ and a belief that the Bible is the divinely inspired, infallible, authoritative guide for faith and practice are often recognized as the primary convictions of evangelical Christians (Cumings, Haworth, & O’Neill, 2001). In light of the prevalence of evangelical Christianity in society, the popularity of evangelical Christian organizations on college and university campuses (e.g., Carroll, 2002; Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; Lowery, 2001; Mahoney, Schmalzbauer, & Youniss, 2001; Swidey, 2003) is not surprising. Reports from the national headquarters of evangelical Christian student groups, such as Campus Crusade for Christ, have highlighted their increase in numbers and visibility on many campuses in the country (Hulett, 2004). For instance, in 2003-2004, Campus Crusade for Christ had organizations established on 1,298 campuses and served approximately 55,272 students. These statistics represent almost a three-fold increase in student involvement from 1995-96 (Campus Crusade for Christ, n.d.). This growth clearly indicates the centrality of the evangelical Christian religious
identity to many college and university students.

Several scholars (e.g., De Russy, 2002; Hulett, 2004; Marsden, 1997) have suggested that many college and university campuses are not welcoming of expressions of evangelical Christianity. Over the last six years, a handful of researchers have investigated the experiences of evangelical Christian students and have found that these students do, in fact, report challenges toward Christianity on various college and university campuses. For instance, in an effort to determine how students at Knox College felt about the campus climate at that institution, Hulett surveyed 301 Christian students. She discovered that many of the Christian groups on campus were regularly accused by other students of displaying intolerance and/or arrogance toward others. In Lowery’s (2001) phenomenological, ethnographic investigation into the residential and classroom experiences of evangelical Christians at Bowling Green State University, students described themselves as outside of the dominant culture and reported facing challenges to their faith both in and outside of the classroom. Similarly, Bryant (2005) conducted a case study of one campus-based evangelical Christian organization at a large university on the west coast and found that the organization encountered “elements of disdain from other segments on campus” and that students in the organization reported challenges and stereotypes faced in the classroom (p. 23). The students in her study experienced unease due to the contrasts between their own beliefs and behaviors and those of the dominant peer culture at that university. Finally, Schulz (2005), in his descriptive case study of students involved in an off-campus Christian group at a large western university, determined that “students potentially perceive the relative philosophies governing campus social environments to be chilly toward students with Biblically-inspired viewpoints” (p. 35). Furthermore, he found that these students encountered intolerance in the classroom as well.

Though the studies mentioned above have shed light on some of the experiences of evangelical Christian students, none have investigated the experiences of evangelical Christian students in the Bible belt of the nation. The Bible belt is the geographical region in the South and Midwest United States where Christianity is a pervasive or dominant part of the culture. The purpose of this study was to broaden the literature base related to college student religious identity by examining the experiences of evangelical Christian students at two public universities in the Midwest.

Conceptual Framework

For many years, scholars in higher education have used a sociological lens to investigate the degree of fit between students and their collegiate environments. Feldman (1972) laid much of the groundwork in this area of scholarship by suggesting that developmental explanations for change among students may originate in their external rather than internal worlds. Some scholars have documented that college and university environments may affect students’ perceived fit on these campuses (e.g., Cardinal, 1981; MacKay & Kuh, 1994; Mallinckrodt, 1988). Other researchers have reported that how well college students negotiate the university environment has implications for their retention rates (e.g., Astin, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strange, 2003). Specifically, Tinto (1993) found that negative experiences and interactions with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution tended to impede integration and to distance students from the academic and social communities of the institution; this lack of integration often reduced their commitments to academic goals.
and to the institution and promoted their marginality and ultimate withdrawal.

Cultural congruity is a concept used to describe the fit between students’ personal values, beliefs, and behaviors and those of the environments in which they operate (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). A person is said to “be congruent with a given environment if his or her type is the same or nearly the same as the dominant type within an environment,” and the likelihood of a person remaining in a congruent environment is quite high (Strange, 2003, p. 302). Values, beliefs, or behaviors that differ from sanctioned norms, however, are often considered deviant or abnormal. Individuals belonging to two or more cultures may experience cultural incongruity if the cultures are different in values, beliefs, and expectations for behaviors (Cervantes, 1988). For instance, both Fiske (1988) and Choi-Pearson and Gloria (1995) identified that some students of racial or ethnic minority groups experienced a cultural shock as they entered predominantly White academic institutions. This specific concept of cultural congruity has mostly been investigated in the context of racial and ethnic differences (e.g., Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996, 2001).

However, similar person-environment frameworks have been applied to various other domains of student identity and types of campus cultures. For instance, where religion is concerned, a couple of studies have demonstrated that the religious identity of Muslim college students may influence the perceived fit and types of experiences that they have on various types of college and university campuses. For example, Speck (1997) studied Muslim students and found that cultural differences and prejudice based on religious practice negatively influenced Muslim students’ educational experiences, and thus, led to feelings of academic estrangement. Similarly, in a qualitative study investigating the perceptions and experiences of seven women who veiled on a large college campus in the Midwest, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) discovered that female Muslim students identified prevalent misconceptions and alienating stereotypes held by others. Most of these students identified social and academic alienation, isolation, and visible discrimination. Other studies have investigated the impact of the religious affiliation of higher education institutions upon students and their perceived fit on campus. For example, Love (1998) found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at a Catholic college felt a “pressure toward invisibility and silence” and, thus, felt “rejected” in that particular culture (p. 307). Also, Lee (2002) investigated the perceptions of Catholic students at a public university and found that both the social and academic communities impacted the changing religious identification of these students.

In this investigation, cultural congruity was used as the framework through which to view the experiences of evangelical Christian students on two public university campuses in the Midwest. In the broadest sense, we were interested in determining the extent to which evangelical Christian student leaders, in public universities in America’s Bible belt, experienced cultural congruity. The following research question guided this study, which was part of a larger investigation about evangelical Christian student identity: How do evangelical Christian students at two public universities in the Midwest experience the campus culture?

METHOD

To understand how the students of interest at these two universities experienced the cultures of which they were a part, we used a social constructionist epistemological approach upon which to ground our study. The basic premise of this epistemological perspective is that
meaning “arises in and out of interactive human community” (Crotty, 1998, p. 55); a collective, rather than individualistic, generation of meaning forms the basis for understanding social realities. Furthermore, according to Greenwood (1994), social reality not only is constructed in, but also is sustained by and reproduced through social life. Consistent with the assumptions underlying the social constructionist epistemology, an interpretive theoretical perspective informed the methodology of this investigation. This perspective “looks for culturally-derived and historically-situated interpretations of the social life-world” and does so through an “uncritical exploration of cultural meaning” (Crotty, p. 64). Finally, a phenomenological methodology provided the framework for the design of this study. A phenomenological study “describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). The intent of phenomenology is to bring about “plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9) rather than factual representations of experiences or theoretical explanations (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). The socially-constructed meaning of the lived experiences of some of the evangelical Christian student leaders on two public university campuses was the focus of this investigation.

Participants

All participants in this study were involved in leadership in at least one evangelical Christian campus organization (e.g., Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship). Phenomenological assumptions suggest that the key informants are those who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 1998). Membership in Christian religious organizations on public university campuses implies a religious commitment and depth of faith that extends beyond nominal adherence to extrinsic practices (Frankel & Hewitt, 1994). In accordance with criterion sampling, leaders from these organizations were chosen on the assumption that they, even more than other members in their respective groups, would espouse a strong evangelical Christian identity and would have information-rich experiences to share. Maximum variation sampling is often commonly used in phenomenological research; the fullest description of the experienced phenomenon results from the intentional selection of students whose experiences are analyzed in the aggregate (Creswell). Participants in this study were 9 male and 16 female undergraduate, traditional-aged students; there was a variation of freshmen through seniors. Though diversity in terms of gender and grade level was represented in this investigation, the experiences shared by the respondents did not differ in relation to those aspects of diversity.

Furthermore, all participants were students at either the University of Missouri–Columbia or the University of Kansas. These two public, research-extensive institutions were purposefully chosen as the settings from which to draw the participants in that they are located in rural, politically conservative regions within the Bible belt. Only one student in the sample was non-White; she identified herself as African American. Though we understand the likelihood that evangelical Christian students’ racial identities may result in different campus experiences, we did not attempt to investigate the interplay between religious identity and racial identity in this study due to the lack of representation from racial minority groups within the primary evangelical Christian student organizations on these campuses. Throughout this narrative, pseudonyms are used for the participants to ensure confidentiality of their responses.
Evangelical Christians

Procedure

The first step in contacting potential participants was to contact the campus ministers from each of the evangelical Christian campus organizations on these two campuses. This contact information was gleaned from organizational websites. Upon explaining the purpose of the study, one of the study’s investigators (Moran) asked these campus ministers for the contact information of the student leaders in their organization. She then contacted these students via e-mail to explain the purpose of the study and to request their participation in it. Other students were purposefully selected through the use of snowball or chain sampling (Patton, 2002) after the identification of initial participants. Moran asked each respondent to participate in one interview. By identifying herself as an evangelical Christian at the beginning of each interview, Moran was able to establish rapport with each of the respondents, thus leading to her ability to capture open and honest perspectives. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended sampling to the point of redundancy, stopping at the point at which no new information is coming forth from participants. Saturation of data was reached after interviewing 25 students.

Interviews

Through e-mail communication, interview dates, times, and locations were established between Moran and the potential respondents. All of the interviews were conducted in quiet locations, chosen by each respondent, in the student union of each institution; each lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour and was audio-recorded. Though none of the interviews were conducted in private locations, the students seemed at ease while discussing their experiences. The background noise in the student union appeared to preclude the possibility of anyone else overhearing the interviews. Before beginning each interview, respondents signed an informed consent form on which was described the purpose of the study as well as the procedures the investigators would be using to ensure confidentiality. The interview protocol was semi-structured with open-ended questions designed to elicit the participants’ experiences of being evangelical Christian student leaders on these public university campuses. Sample interview questions included the following: How would you describe the campus culture at your institution? How do you think other students on campus perceive evangelical Christian students? What has your experience, as an evangelical Christian student, been like on this campus? How do you feel about being an evangelical Christian on campus?

Data Analysis

In an attempt to alleviate the possibility that Moran’s identity as an evangelical Christian might lessen the credibility of the results of this research, two other investigators (Lang and Oliver) provided assistance with the data analysis phase of the project. Lang and Oliver were doctoral students at the time, trained in qualitative research. Neither Lang nor Oliver self-identify as evangelical Christians; in fact, both question many of the doctrines of organized Christianity. All interpretations of the data were negotiated between the three of us. Consistent with phenomenological methodology, the investigators attempted to “bracket” (Creswell, 1998, p. 32) their preconceptions throughout the data analysis phase in order to truly unearth possible meanings of the participants’ language and experiences. The participants’ own language is used throughout this narrative to illustrate these meanings and resulting themes.

The data set for this study consisted of 25 interviews, which were transcribed verbatim. Upon completion of the transcription phase
of the project, Moran developed data charts from the transcripts. Each chart contained the respondents’ exact comments about specific topics discussed in the interviews. All three of us subsequently used these charts as the basis for the data analysis. To analyze the data, we relied upon Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) inductive method of qualitative data analysis. First, from each data chart, we each unitized the data by searching for an element (phrase, sentence, or paragraph) that was heuristic, or “aimed at some understanding” that we, as data analysts, needed to have (p. 345). Once the data were unitized, units that related to the same content were grouped together into provisional categories. This categorization was achieved through the constant comparative method. In other words, units were compared to each other to establish whether they were similar and should be put in the same category, or different and should be put into different categories. Finally, each category was reviewed for consistency, and categories were compared to make sure each was unique. The goal was to have categories that were “internally as homogeneous as possible and externally as heterogeneous as possible” (p. 349). After developing categories for each chart, we met as a group to negotiate and to reconcile discrepancies in our work. From these discussions, themes emerged that accounted for the cross-analyzed, categorized data. These themes form the headings and sub-headings in this article.

Trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced through three validity-enhancing techniques: triangulation of data sources, member checking, and the establishment of an audit trail. Triangulation is a validity procedure whereby researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study (Denzin, 1978). The two different settings from which the 25 respondents were obtained provided for triangulation of data sources. Member checking involves taking the data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To this end, respondents were each sent, via email, a copy of their interview as well as the summary outline of the final results of the study. They were then asked to provide feedback about the accuracy of our interpretations. Finally, an audit trail was established. An audit trail is the maintenance of “precise records of who said what, when, where, and under what conditions” (Whitt, 1991, p. 45). We clearly documented all research decisions and activities throughout the course of this project.

RESULTS
Feeling “Out-voiced” and “Misunderstood”

Most of the evangelical Christian students in this study believed there was a negative perception of them on campus as a result of their religious identity. The terms “out-voiced” and “misunderstood” were used to describe how they felt; many of these students described themselves as being part of a “minority group” on campus. Furthermore, most felt as though their religious beliefs and practices were not respected to the same degree as those of other students on campus.

Evangelical Christians are a “Strange Minority.” As mentioned earlier, most of the evangelical Christian students interviewed for this research described themselves as being part of a “minority group.” The use of the term “minority” to describe themselves was in the context of numerical presence only rather than in relation to broader sociological conceptualizations. Rhonda shared the following thoughts: “We Christians are a minority. It’s the minorities who are committed enough to
change things. So, it’s okay to be a minority.” The students in this study believed that there was a difference between themselves and many others who identify as being Christians and that the “authentic” Christians are far fewer in number. “Authentic” was the term most often used to describe their religious identity. The students in this study simply believed that there is a difference between those who they perceived as being more actively involved in their faith versus those who were not. This sentiment was best explained by Jeff:

I feel outnumbered as far as authenticity goes. For my first two years of school, I was a “Christian.” And, I would go to church if I didn’t have a hangover. There are a lot of Christians like that on campus. And, luckily, I’ve changed from that. But [in terms of being] a serious, practicing Christian... I probably am outnumbered.

Their lifestyle choices are other manifestations of the differences between these evangelical Christian student leaders and many other students on campus. These differences result in their appearing “strange” to other students on campus. For example, most stated that they do not go to bars. Linda shared the following story:

There’s this group of women who live in the hall that I live in who have this... they call it the “21 Club.” They take anyone who is 21 out to the bars. I don’t necessarily have a problem with drinking, but to the excess that they do—to drunkenness—I do have a problem. The fact that I don’t go out with them... sometimes I feel like it isolates me from knowing them better.

Additionally, when other students talked about their sexual experiences and/or used vulgar language in their conversations, the evangelical Christian students in this study felt as if they did not fit in as a result of their religious convictions.

Moreover, the evangelical Christian students in this study believed that they espoused values in direct conflict with those in the higher education environment. Several students described the campus culture as being “overly humanistic” and “materialistic” in that other students primarily focused on acquiring personal success and financial prosperity. Keith described how he and other evangelical Christians on campus embraced different goals than other students when it comes to their college education:

Our main goal is not to get a degree and to get a better job... and to accumulate stuff. God has a purpose for us being here. And, hopefully that comes out in the way that we live our lives, and that it’s not engulfed by getting a degree and just aspiring to a higher stage of life and society.

The “Unacceptable” Religious Identity. Another theme that emerged through the interviews was that the evangelical Christian students in this study believed that Christianity is not accepted as well as other religions and forms of spirituality on campus. Many mentioned that New Age beliefs, Paganism, and various Eastern religions are often times celebrated on campus, whereas Christianity is not acknowledged as a viable choice. Kelly stated the following in this regard:

I feel like there’s a strong wall that is put up when anything Christian is discussed. I was reading the newspaper on campus. It seems like they are a lot more open to other religions. But, if it comes to Christianity, it’s like, “Oh no. We are not going to deal with that. That’s not going to be a part of what we are doing.”

Many of the students in this study believed that one reason why Christianity was not accepted as readily as other religions on campus was because of the prevalence of “false
views” of Christianity. These students felt quite strongly that many others on campus did not understand them and may actually have had skewed impressions of Christianity in general. Susan explained one reason why this might be the case: “A lot of people have misrepresented Christianity by calling themselves Christians, by name only, and not really showing it by their actions. And, I think that has had a big effect everywhere.”

Students in this study suggested that others might have the impression that evangelical Christians view themselves as “superior” to others, are “close-minded and intolerant” of others, are “anti-intellectual” and “irrelevant” to the university campus, and are “Bible-thumping” religious radicals. Mike’s statement exemplified this belief:

I think some people think that Christians are dogmatic and condemning. Some of them may have the goody-two-shoes view. “They’re [Christians] trying to be holier than the rest of us.” I think a lot of it is just a lack of understanding. They don’t really know what a true Christian is.

According to the evangelical Christian student leaders interviewed for this study, these are misleading and inaccurate stereotypes. The respondents stated that it is these stereotypes that result in the devaluing of evangelical Christianity on their public university campuses.

**Facing Conflicting Values, Beliefs, and Behaviors**

Most of the evangelical Christian students in this study shared stories of times when they experienced what they called “antagonism” as a result of their religious beliefs and practices. Frank stated that most university personnel “make assumptions that all students live non-Christian lives” and, thus, said and did things that often led to feelings of marginalization on the part of these evangelical Christian students. The students in this study felt challenged, both in and out of the classroom, as a result of conflicting values, beliefs, and behaviors that they faced on campus.

**Intolerance in the Classroom.** The majority of the respondents in this study reported a pervasive sense of negativity towards Christianity in the classroom setting. Often, this negativity was experienced through statements made by professors and teaching assistants about Christianity as a religion. Rhonda shared the following story to illustrate how some professors attempted to convince students that the Bible is untrustworthy:

In the Religious Studies department, one of the classes is called “Understanding the Bible.” I have friends who call it “Heresy 101.” It’s very much picking apart the Bible to try to show that you can’t trust it. It’s like, “This *myth* is this way. This *myth* is that way.”

Kristin also shared her thoughts about the “subtle undertone” of negativity expressed towards Christianity in the classroom setting. In particular, she focused on her perception that other religions were much more accepted on campus than Christianity:

You can have a class where other religious identities are talked about. People talk about Eastern religions or even tribal religions. And they are talked about with respect. But Christianity is made fun of. I would say that it’s kind of the popular thing to be antagonistic towards Christianity in class.

Other students felt as though many instructors made assumptions about the lifestyles of all students on campus without knowing individual students’ beliefs, values, and actual behaviors. Regardless of the prevalence of alcohol use and drunkenness on college and university campuses, for example, the evangelical Christian student leaders in this study felt marginalized by assumptions...
that they would participate in such behavior. In fact, Rick was irate as he shared the following story:

I was in an English class where our teacher kind of joked around about how . . . “Well, of course everyone’s going to get drunk on Friday, so I’m not going to give you a test on Monday.” That was interesting. If [getting drunk over the weekend] was taken for granted.

The evangelical Christian students in this study stated that assumptions such as these, coupled with in-class discourse that discredited Christian values, beliefs, and behaviors, led to their perceptions that they do not fit in on their public university campuses.

Intolerance Outside of the Classroom. Even outside of the classroom setting, these evangelical Christian students felt as though they faced “antagonism” as a result of their religious identity. Sometimes, this animosity came explicitly from other students. Beverley shared a story that demonstrates such an occurrence:

There’s a week called “Hate Out” week where they try to bring attention to discrimination and hateful ideas and stamp them out. They had this big board, and people were supposed to write derogatory terms on it. And, some friends of mine put up there terms that are derogatory towards Christians like “Bible banger” and stuff like that. And, people were really offended that they had put Christian terms up there and that they should count as hate terms.

At other times, this antagonism was expressed indirectly. Stuart shared the following story of how flyers and posters on campus indirectly “attacked” Christianity: “There are a lot of flyers and posters in various buildings about various things that portray Christianity negatively such as, ‘How the Christians stole Christmas.’"

Unfortunately, many of these students also felt that the campus staff acted in ways that promoted anti-Christian values, or at the very least, in ways that did not recognize the values, beliefs, and behaviors of Christian students. Amber shared an interesting experience that she had:

The medical center here . . . Every time you go, they spend half of the time trying to figure out if you are pregnant or not. I went there a few weeks ago to get a medical form signed. The doctor was talking about getting a Hepatitis B vaccine, because I was thinking about going out of the country. He just kept talking about . . . “Well, you really should. All college students really should, especially because if you are in a steady relationship, you are probably going to get it from . . .” And, he’s just assuming that you are going to have sex in every relationship that you are in. That made me feel weird, because I wouldn’t do that. I don’t want to have sex until I’m married.

Coping with the Challenges

In spite of the “antagonistic” feelings and actions experienced by the evangelical Christian students in this study, these students seemed content to remain at their particular higher education institutions. In doing so, they found ways to cope with the challenges they often faced during college; coping consisted of hiding their religious identity at various times as well as remaining actively involved in a campus ministry.

Hiding Their Religious Identity. Many students shamefully admitted that they hid their religious identity at times as a result of the “antagonistic” environment that they experienced at their institutions. One student stated that he wanted to “avoid the spotlight” rather than be “ostracized” for his religious values, beliefs, and behaviors. Others stated
that they did not want to “stir up controversy” by being “needlessly antagonistic” when the subject of Christianity arose either in or out of the classroom setting. Rob stated his thoughts about hiding his religious identity:

There are times when I realize that it just really wouldn’t be worth bringing up anything. Like in class, it might not be worth making an argument . . . especially when your teacher is very liberal and very “Christians are dumb.” A lot of times, I just keep my mouth shut.

Still, others chose to hide their evangelical Christian identity at times due to the fears and insecurities that they faced. Specifically, many felt as though they might suffer repercussions from instructors (e.g., bad grades) or from students (e.g., ridicule) if they made their religious beliefs known during class. Keith shared the following story to illustrate this sentiment:

I was in an “Early Christianity” class, and we talked a lot about Gnosticism. One of the Gnostic beliefs is that it wasn’t really Christ who died on the cross but that it was a fake representation of Christ and that God was somewhere else looking down on the whole experience. People were laughing. I believe in the trinity. But, I didn’t stand up for the fact that I believed. I could’ve said more.

Some students in this study feared that they would not be listened to with an open mind. Still others decided to hide their identity at times due to a fear of “not giving a clear representation” of it or of not having answers to questions that might be asked. Finally, some students expressed the idea that they did not want to make other students uncomfortable by sharing their beliefs. Greg shared the following in that regard:

There’s a part of me that just doesn’t like to make other people feel uncomfortable. And, I know that Christianity or Jesus . . . those are some of the biggest red flags that would make someone run away or change the conversation. And I don’t like doing that to people, so for the most part, I try to avoid it I guess.

Being Actively Involved in Campus Ministries. As mentioned earlier, the students in this study all held leadership positions in various campus ministries at the time of the interviews. One of the main reasons why these students chose to become involved is due to their “need for Christian fellowship” in order to “stay strong and not compromise the faith” in the public university environment. Kelly shared the following:

It was neat to be a freshman in this ministry and not come in later, because you are kind of taken under the wings of other people, like “Hey, we are going to show you what it is like to be a Christian at this university.” It was great to have that support group. I think that from other people’s advice, I might have avoided some situations that otherwise might not have been great.

Campus ministries were described as being “like family” to the students involved in them. Additionally, the students in this study stated that this environment was one in which they could “be vulnerable” and develop “emotional bonds” with other students. It was through their involvement in these campus organizations that many of the students in this study were able to experience “spiritual growth” and “accountability” in their pursuit of serving God with their lives. Doug summed up the importance of campus ministries to many evangelical Christian students:

There are a lot of Christians here who try to do it [be successful as an evangelical Christian in a public university] alone. If you try to do it alone, it’s not going to happen. God put me in a specific circle of people to walk with for eternity. Not
Evangelical Christians

only at college, but they are going to be my friends for the rest of my life. That’s what holds me in. If I didn’t have those people, I wouldn’t be where I am at. I wouldn’t have been able to make it. I would’ve just fallen down, because I wouldn’t have people to encourage me.

In sum, the evangelical Christian students in this study stated that they have developed methods of navigating the public university environment by “hiding” their religious identity at times as well as by being involved in campus ministries.

DISCUSSION

The stories shared by the evangelical Christian student leaders in this study suggest that they experienced cultural incongruity on their campuses. For instance, their Christian beliefs led these student leaders, many of whom self-identified as “authentic” Christians, to engage in different behaviors than many other students, including some who identified themselves as Christians. For instance, they shared that they valued active involvement in their religion, such as in church attendance. Other behaviors, such as their choosing to abstain from going to bars, set them apart from many other students on their campuses. The students in this study also shared how their goals for their education differed from those of other students; they claimed that they focused less on “humanistic” and “materialistic” outcomes (e.g., personal success and financial gain) than did others.

Interestingly, many of the students in this study felt that their values, beliefs and behaviors as evangelical Christians were not only incongruent with the prevailing culture on their campuses but were also not respected to the same degree as those of other religions. Experiences both in and out of the classroom were shared to demonstrate this cultural incongruity. Specifically, many of the students in this study felt as though the assumptions held and statements made by some instructors were antagonistic toward Christianity. Furthermore, the respondents shared stories to demonstrate how staff, and other students, either explicitly or implicitly discredited Christianity. These results are not surprising in light of some of the studies described earlier that highlighted the experiences of evangelical Christian college students at various other colleges and universities (Bryant, 2005; Hulett, 2004; Lowery, 2001; Schulz, 2005). What makes the results of this study particularly interesting and unique, however, is the Bible belt location of the two public institutions in which these particular evangelical Christian student leaders were enrolled. The cultural incongruity experienced by the students on these two campuses is intriguing given the religiously conservative nature of that region.

Though the academic efforts of the Christian students in this study did not appear to be negatively impacted by this cultural incongruity, research suggests that incongruity such as this may lead to departure. According to Kuh and Love (2000), the probability of persistence in a college or university is inversely related to the cultural distance between a student’s culture of origin and the culture of immersion. Though they attended college in the Bible belt of the United States, the evangelical Christian student leaders in this study described what appears to be a cultural distance between themselves and the public university environments in which they pursued their education.

Navigating the Culturally Incongruent Environments

Though, as mentioned earlier, the probability of persistence decreases as cultural distance increases (Kuh & Love, 2000), research has shown that many students often remain in culturally incongruent environments in spite
of the challenges they face therein. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, as well as students of color, are examples of students who often remain in culturally incongruent, or even hostile, college environments (e.g., Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Love, 1998; Strange, 2003). One coping mechanism often utilized by students in these situations is involvement in “cultural enclaves” (Kuh & Love, p. 204) on campus. Cultural enclaves provide connection with others with shared values, beliefs, and behaviors. This research suggests that these evangelical Christian student leaders gained strength and encouragement through their involvement in campus ministries, which served as cultural enclaves in the midst of a culture that was experienced as being incongruent to their own. Once again, these results mirror those of other similar studies (Bryant, 2005; Hulett, 2004; Lowery, 2001; Schulz, 2005).

Interestingly, though these evangelical Christian student leaders shared sentiments alluding to their desire to resist the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the public university cultures in which they were immersed, they did not mention any attempt, or even desire, to change those cultures. Similar to Bryant’s (2005) findings, yet contrary to those of Hulett (2004), many of the students in this study mentioned that there were times when they reportedly “hid” their religious identity. This finding is surprising given that other studies have demonstrated that students in culturally incongruent environments make explicit attempts to change their institutional cultures (e.g., Love, 1998; Rhoads, 1994).

Though not in the context of investigating cultural incongruity, Magolda and Ebben (2006) recently reported that the evangelical Christian students in their study mobilized, through involvement in campus ministry organizations, in an effort to cultivate Christian ideals on campus. It follows, then, that even though the evangelical Christian student leaders in this study may have felt like they had to hide their religious identity at times, the possibility exists that they continued to manifest it, albeit less vocally. This silent manifestation may have come through their values, beliefs, and behaviors rather than through their words, as Lowery (2001) reported of the evangelical Christian students in his investigation. The students in this study may have viewed this type of silent manifestation as a complete hiding of their religious identity. If nothing else, the lack of discussions about their religious identity certainly may have resulted in the evangelical Christian student leaders in this study feeling as though they were falling short of fulfilling Jesus’ command as stated in the Bible: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19, New King James Version) The values, beliefs, and behaviors of the students in this study, though described as incongruent with the prevailing public university environment yet not recognized as explicit expressions of their religious identity, seemed to serve as mechanisms through which the students in this study silently manifested their religious identity when they were unwilling to verbally share it.

Social Status Ambiguity

In the context of how they viewed their own expressions of religious identity, the evangelical Christian student leaders in this study described themselves as “minorities” as a result of feeling outnumbered in terms of “authenticity” in the university. However, Christians cannot be identified as a minority group based on the classic sociological conceptualizations due to the fact that they chose membership in this social identity category on a voluntary basis (Wertlieb, 1985; Wirth, 1970). Furthermore, many of the statements made by the students in this study suggested that they felt as though
they were an oppressed group on their public university campuses. New (2001) conceptualizes oppression, often experienced due to being a part of a minority group, as “systematic mistreatment that is justified or excused due to some group characteristic” (p. 731). Although some of the evangelical Christian students in this study shared some isolated experiences of antagonism, as of yet, no evidence exists that evangelical Christian students are suffering “systematic mistreatment” as a result of their religious identity.

Rather, Christian students in higher education are viewed as the dominant religious group on college and university campuses (McEwen, 2003). Dominant groups are those that “collectively have power and privilege” and that hold perspectives deemed “normative” by society at large (McEwen, p. 206). According to McIntosh (2001), privilege exists when people of a dominant group hold unearned advantages and power in a given situation. The fact that the evangelical Christian student leaders in this study did not appear to recognize the ways in which they, as a group, hold privileged status, in society in general as well as in higher education in particular, is intriguing. For instance, none of the students mentioned the fact that references to God exist on United States currency as well as in the American Pledge of Allegiance, nor did they appear to notice that much of the university calendar revolves around Christian holidays. The privileged status of Christianity is even more prominent in the Bible belt, in which this investigation was conducted. Additionally, many students in this study held privileged status on an individual level as a result of other dimensions of their identity (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation).

Clearly, students may be oppressed within one domain of social identity yet privileged in other dimensions (New, 2001). For instance, a White lesbian student may experience privilege in regards to her racial identity yet oppression as a result of her sexual orientation. Moreover, certain aspects of social identity may result in an oppressed status in one setting yet a privileged status in a different setting (e.g., an African American student on a predominantly White campus during the week and in a predominantly Black church on the weekend). In the case of the evangelical Christian student leaders in this study, it appears that they might have been both privileged and oppressed in the same setting as a result of the same aspect of social identity: their religious identity. We have chosen to refer to this intriguing phenomenon as “social status ambiguity” in that the privileged versus oppressed status of these students was ambiguous as a result of differing perceptions and experiences of Christianity in higher education. In light of the current dialogue on many college and university campuses concerning various privileged groups (e.g., White privilege), the attempt by some to educate the campus about Christian privilege (e.g., “How the Christians stole Christmas” flyer) may have actually resulted in the feelings of oppression and marginalization reported by some of the evangelical Christian student leaders in this study.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations related to the design of this study that exist and should be noted. First, this study presents a limited view on the possible complexity of this subject by nature of the fact that other dimensions of social identity were not taken into consideration. The ways in which African American evangelical Christian students experience the public university environments would most likely be quite unlike the experiences of White evangelical Christian students.

Also, other limitations exist related to the
nature of the respondents and to the lack of representation from additional higher education institutions. Specifically, the respondents in this study were all student leaders in their respective campus ministries. It is likely that their leadership status alone could influence their religious identity as well as their sense of congruity on campus. Also, though generalization is not a goal of qualitative research, including respondents from more than two public universities in the Midwest may have also strengthened the study. All of the aforementioned limitations provide open arenas for future research.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In spite of the limitations mentioned above, the results of this research lay the groundwork for important implications and future research regarding college student religious identity. First, staff and faculty on public university campuses should acknowledge the various religious identities, including evangelical Christianity, represented in higher education and should learn about these various faith traditions. An increased understanding of the values, beliefs, and behaviors of students of various religious identities may lead to an increased acceptance, if need be, of those students themselves. Stereotypes and assumptions about the religious identities of students should be critically examined so that inappropriate actions are not birthed out of ignorance.

A second implication underscores the need to support campus religious organizations and to recognize their value in the context of providing safe havens for students in culturally incongruent higher education environments. These cultural enclaves (Kuh & Love, 2000) may provide the support and encouragement that many evangelical Christian students need to experience in order to persist in their educational endeavors. Cumings, Haworth, and O’Neill (2001) echoed this sentiment in stating that the common Christian bond formed between these students provides them with a comfort zone that eases their anxieties about developing a sense of belonging on campus. Moreover, the existence of safe havens that provide opportunities for students to explore and to understand their own self-expressions of their religious identity would most likely be fertile ground for further identity development in this domain.

Finally, we should attempt to create campus environments that are inclusive of students of all social identities, including evangelical Christianity. The results of this study demonstrate that students of the “dominant” religious identity in our nation, Christianity, are feeling marginalized on public university campuses. How many students of other “dominant” social identities are experiencing similar incongruent, and possibly hostile, environments? Discussions among staff and faculty need to be held in order to identify ways to increase our awareness of the perceptions and experiences of students of all social identities and to brainstorm ways to educate students about “privilege” without intentionally or unintentionally oppressing the privileged students.

Further research is needed to explore some of the unanswered questions that surfaced during this study. Do evangelical Christian students at public universities experience systematic mistreatment in and out of the classroom? What perceptions do faculty, staff, and students who do not self-identify as Christians actually have of evangelical Christian students? How does the phenomenon of cultural incongruity, as well as the related social status ambiguity, impact the religious identity development of evangelical Christian students on public university campuses? And,
to broaden this arena of research even further: To what extent do evangelical Christian faculty members in public university settings experience cultural incongruity?

Though the aforementioned implications and future research relate primarily to evangelical Christian students at public university campuses, we hope that others will consider utilizing this information in the context of addressing the existence and impact of possible incongruent environments faced by students of other religious identities. It is our hope that the results of this study will shed light on the broader phenomenon of religious commitment and cultural congruity in higher education.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christy D. Moran, Kansas State University, 1100 Mid-Campus Drive, Bluemont Hall, Room 321, Manhattan, KS 66506; cmoran@ksu.edu

REFERENCES


