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INVESTIGATING DIVERSITY

Exploring Race, Gender, and Unity in the Adventist Church

FEBRUARY 22, 2019 BY NATALIA PEREZ

Southern Adventist University ranked third most diverse college in the South. What can we learn from that history?



By Natalia Perez

Living in Tennessee for five years and attending Southern Adventist University for 4.5 of them, I've watched my university ebb and flow into different versions of itself, as did the students before me.

In 2017, U.S News & World Report ranked Southern as the most diverse university in the South, tied with Keiser University and the University of North Carolina. This year, Southern is ranked third in the region, with Keiser University in first-place and Marymount University and the University of North Carolina tied for second. Southern trails very close behind with a diversity index of .68, only .1 point lower than its second place counterparts.

I believe, along with many students who attend Southern, that we find ourselves with a very unique opportunity: We are the only institution in the state with as much cultural representation as we have. Therefore, successfully integrating could serve as an example here in the South, showing that different cultures and ethnicities can truly come together as one single tribe.

By successfully integrating, I don't just mean that we all manage to share the same campus and tolerate each other. But do we celebrate each other? Do we understand, or try to understand, each others' backgrounds, history, culture, and struggles?

While diversity has been widely discussed in higher-education, are diverse colleges and universities truly proud of that status? Or is it all about the numbers?

In the fall semester of 2018, the ethnic breakdown of Southern students showed that Whites constituted 46 percent of the university's population, Hispanics constituted 24 percent, Asians constituted 12 percent, African-Americans constituted 11 percent, Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders each constituted less than one percent of students identified with two or more races.

Compared to previous years, there is no longer a dominant ethnic majority, as all ethnicities make up nearly half of the population. While some of us may flaunt this fact, are we as well integrated as we are diverse? The timeline below shows some brief highlights of Southern's race relations history, and our efforts to culturally integrate over the years.



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Sutori



Natalia Perez

Race Relations: A Timeline

From the inception of Southern Adventist University until now.
Source: A Century of Change by Dennis Pettibone.

1800

1870s-80s



Adventist leaders struggled to have a spiritual influence on Southerners because of three things: This was right after the Civil War; Northerners were coming as evangelists and teachers and wanted to worship on the Sabbath instead of Sunday (this was illegal at the time); and Northern Adventists were coming to the South and wanted to integrate blacks and whites.

1892





Chattanooga History Column: Southern Adventist University

Dedication, sacrifice and vision mark the beginnings of what is now Southern Adventist University. With nearly 3,000 students, this institution, located in Collegedale, Tenn., is a far cry from its humble beginnings. Established in 1892, the school was founded in Graysville, Tenn., by George W. Colcord.

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Southern was founded by George W. Colcord. Industrial drive is now named Colcord Drive.

1899



First black instructor Anna (Annie) Knight taught nursing and cooking in the school's preparatory program. She worked at Southern for a summer and was the first female black missionary to go to India.

1900

1961

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists urged Southern Missionary College (SMC) to prepare for integration.

1965

Board voted to accept qualified applications "regardless of race, color or national origin."

1967

SMC made the first steps towards integrating. To remind the university of the threats that integrating posed, local Klansmen (KKK) monitored the university, including sleeping arrangements of visiting musicians from Oakwood College, and reportedly burning crosses from time to time. After integrating, the expected backlash never materialized. When the new integration policy was passed in chapel, students gave it a standing ovation. However, some constituents had difficulty adjusting to the overthrow of a long-term social custom. Ultimately, the university believed ethnic diversity was beneficial.

1969



Annie (Robinson) Brown was the first African American to graduate from Southern. She was a nursing professor for years and a director of nursing.

Southern adopted a racially nondiscriminatory employment policy.

1970s

Southern began celebrating Black History Week.

1973

Source: A Century of Change by Dennis Pettibone

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Celebrating individual cultures: A threat to unity?

Throughout Southern's race relations progress, many questions have been raised and many still remain. Although our student-body now represents several cultural identities, some may ask if all are being taken into consideration by the ones who create the structure for us to thrive and learn in. Recognizing that there are several ethnicities present is one thing, but searching for ways to provide an environment where people from all backgrounds feel deeply seen and understood is important.

An argument that's often brought up, especially in our current political climate, is that celebrating our individual cultures is detrimental to our university's unity. Celebrating cultural differences, by some, is seen as a way to isolate certain people groups from others. Validating one culture while invalidating the rest.

Brandon Beneche, recent Southern alum, thinks that cultural celebrations should be a welcome practice on any campus as long as they are inclusive, educational, and fair.

"If a celebration excludes other peoples, promotes an inaccurate and damaging depiction of an ethnic group, or fails to represent its culture ethically, then I think cultural celebrations can be harmful," Beneche shared.

"I believe one of the most effective ways our university can have better cultural integration is by developing a more understanding and accepting student body. It's easy to say that one race needs to be more understanding of another, but that's a bit shortsighted in my opinion. I'd argue that a student body that can demonstrate Christ's love and patience while having informative and, occasionally, difficult conversations about race and culture with each other can make real strides towards a healthier level of integration."

Rhidge Garcia, student association president, believes that celebrating individual cultures allows him to better appreciate the unique narratives they tell. He believes other entities and organizations on campus, other than student association and our cultural clubs, should get involved in the celebration of different cultures.

“I think it would be powerful for a student to be celebrated not only for one night a year, but also in the classroom, dormitory, professor’s office, and greater campus property,” Garcia shared. “The only reason why people might think that the celebration of cultures is divisive is because they are not willing to listen to those who haven’t been listened to. It sounds harsh, but it is imperative for us to listen to each other. And if people don’t want to listen, they will not see the importance of celebrating other individual cultures.”

Tierra Hayes, editor-in-chief of Southern’s university paper, the *Southern Accent*, says that celebrating individual cultures is something that should unite us, but it depends on our personal perspectives.

“By highlighting our differences, we can celebrate what makes each of us unique, but that doesn’t discount other cultures,” Hayes shared.

“I think people might see individual cultural celebrations as divisive because they fail to see how they play into the equation. They may also feel as if the highlighting of other cultures is meant to suppress their personal culture, while it is usually just a tool to enlighten and uplift the marginalized. We need to be able to understand and embrace others, without having to make minorities assimilate to ensure the continuance of the dominant culture. Cultural clubs shouldn’t be sequestered off to one month or even one night. It would make more sense to have such cultures reflected in different worship styles on a rotation, instead of having one culture as the default and the minority cultures solely as special features.”

I believe that true unity is able to celebrate our cultural identity as a whole while also being strong enough to not be threatened by acknowledging and celebrating our individual cultural uniqueness. However, I want to hear your thoughts. How do you think we can integrate better? What are your thoughts on cultural celebrations? Join the discussion below!

RACE RELATIONS HISTORY, UNITY