This study analyzes data from the National Longitudinal Study of Freshmen (NLSF) to examine whether religious affiliation and involvement are related to the outcome of interracial friendship in the fourth year of college. When controlling for students’ demographic characteristics, institutional characteristics, and previous levels of interracial friendship, being Protestant or Jewish was negatively related to interracial friendship. In addition, students who reported higher levels of religious salience and involvement in campus religious organizations were significantly less likely to have close friends of another race by the fourth year of college. Findings highlight the need for educators to understand the role of religion in shaping students’ precollege and college experiences with diversity.

**Keywords:** religion, interracial friendship, diversity, campus climate, race
to how religious and spiritual engagement affects college students’ experiences (Astin et al., 2010; Maryl & Oeur, 2009), but few of these studies have linked religious involvement or religiosity with outcomes related to student engagement with diversity. Similarly, the role of religion is largely unexamined in studies of racial diversity in higher education, despite studies on how religion affects the lives of many college students, including students of color (Kim, 2006; Stewart, 2002; Watt, 2004). In order to connect these two realms of research, this paper examines whether dimensions of religious affiliation and involvement are associated with the outcome of close interracial friendship during the college years.

An Overview of Interracial Friendship, Race, and Religion

To set a context for the study, this overview begins by discussing interracial friendship in college settings and then addresses connections between race and religion. I introduce the concept of homophily to explain why most religious communities are racially homogeneous, and explain how homophily can be shaped by historical legacies of racial and/or religious exclusion.

Interracial Friendship in College

Friendship is a critical component of the college experience. Friendships play an important developmental role in supporting students’ cognitive and affective growth (Martínez Alemán, 1997), and the peer group has been called the single most important influence on college students (Astin, 1993). Components of friendship include caring, trust, respect, depth, involvement, and duration, among other factors (Martínez Alemán, 1997). Naturally, friendships vary in depth, from a “Facebook friend” who may be a friendly acquaintance to a close friend of many years. Among the many different types of friendships are cross-group (or intergroup) friendships, which include interracial, interethnic, interfaith, cross-national, and cross-sexual orientation friendships. In their exhaustive meta-analysis of 135 studies on cross-group friendships, Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, and Wright (2011) define cross-group friendship as an “ongoing, meaningful relationship with a specific outgroup member or members that was closer than that of a mere acquaintance (in which the relationship is based solely on familiarity)” (p. 334). In the college setting, opportunities for friendship between students of different backgrounds are essential for healthy intergroup contact to occur, underscoring the role of friendship in facilitating healthy intergroup relations (Pettigrew, 1998).

There are numerous benefits specifically associated with interracial friendship, a type of cross-group friendship that includes friendship between individuals of different racial backgrounds. Benefits include empathy for a different racial/ethnic group, positive racial attitudes, and lowered prejudice (McClelland & Lindner, 2006; Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Powers & Ellison, 1995). Racial diversity in relational networks is important because “ties to dissimilar others provide access to nonredundant information, resources, and opportunities” (Wong, 2009, p. 1). Notably, not all interracial friendships are alike. In the college setting, cross-racial interaction is more likely to come from casual socializing and roommate relationships rather than close interracial friendships and dating relationships (Espenshade & Radford, 2009).

However, close interracial friendships, in particular, are associated with unique benefits. In their meta-analysis, Davies et al. (2011) found that six elements of cross-group friendships were related to positive intergroup attitudes, but that, in particular, “assessments of time spent with one’s outgroup friend and self-disclosure to outgroup friends tended to yield the largest effects” (p. 340). They note that spending time together and self-disclosure are indicators of strong emotional bonds and that individuals will, in turn, generalize positive attributes to the broader outgroup (Pettigrew, 1997). This dynamic suggests that close interracial friendships are especially pertinent to improving intergroup relations.

Close interracial friendships may be important, but they are rare. In 2004, only 15% of U.S. adults reported having a friend of another race with whom they discussed important matters (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Because most students come from racially homogeneous high schools and neighborhoods, college is a unique opportunity to break
the pre- and postcollege cycles of segregation that pervade U.S. society (Saenz, 2010). Both residential and school segregation deter interracial friendship at the K–12 level (Joyner & Kao, 2005; Mowu & Entwisle, 2006). However, besides high schools and neighborhoods, religion continues to be a major site of precollege socialization for many students, underscoring the need to understand how and why various manifestations of religion may affect interracial friendship in college.

Race and Religion: Historical and Contemporary Intersections

Race and religion have been intertwined together throughout U.S. history. For instance, many slave owners and abolitionists were devoutly religious, and both parties drew on the Bible to support their causes (Noll, 2006). In later years, Jim Crow was upheld by the deep-rooted conviction of White Southerners that the Bible opposed any mixing of the races (Hawkins, 2009). Leaders of the civil rights movement drew inspiration from the same Bible to challenge Jim Crow. These seemingly contradictory dynamics led Gordon Allport (1966), best known for his work on intergroup contact and its role in reducing prejudice, to write, “There is something about religion that makes for prejudice and something about it that unmakes prejudice” (p. 447).

Numerous researchers have addressed the paradox of how religiosity can lead adherents to perpetuate or challenge intolerance (see, e.g., Allport & Ross, 1967; Jacobson, 1998; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999). Hunsberger and Jackson (2005) argue that the social context in which religion occurs is significant, for, in different contexts, “religions can uphold legitimizing myths that explain and sustain problems such as inequality (e.g., conservative and heritage values), but may also sometimes promote and sustain traditions intended to support diversity and tolerance (e.g., multiculturalism)” (p. 818). Additionally, religion can provide a “moral force” that helps people determine whether something is wrong, along with the collective energy and momentum to challenge it (Emerson & Smith, 2000, p. 18). During the decades following the civil rights movement, major change in the United States was indisputable. Yet as recently as 2006, only 7% of U.S. churches are racially heterogeneous (with heterogeneity being defined as at least 20% of members are of a different race from the majority group) and only 2.5% of all U.S. congregations are composed of 50% of one racial group and 50% of another group (Emerson & Woo, 2006). What accounts for the continued homogeneity in churches?

A dominant trend within human relationships is homophily. The term homophily explains the phenomenon of “likes attract likes,” “birds of a feather flock together,” or “similarity breeds connection” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Homophily occurs most commonly among racial/ethnic lines because race/ethnicity is known to be a “consolidated characteristic” (Blau & Schwartz, 1984). That is, because race is highly correlated with background traits such as religion, education, income, and residential background, people who share a racial background often share other social attributes, increasing the chance that they will perceive each other as being similar. Homophily explains, in part, the low occurrence of interracial friendship in the United States (McPherson et al., 2006).

Additional dynamics affect how particular religious traditions and racial groups form interracial friendships. For White evangelical Christians, Emerson and Smith (2000) argue that the tenants of individualism (an insistence on seeing people as raceless “individuals” rather than members of a social category), relationalism (making interpersonal relationships paramount), and antistructuralism (inability or refusal to perceive or accept social structural influences) work in conjunction with each other to promote color blindness and resist race consciousness in religious and societal contexts. Relationalism and antistructuralism, in particular, work together to perpetuate color blindness, especially when evangelicals believe that individual friendships are the best way to promote racial harmony (“I have an African American friend”), as opposed to challenging structural inequality. Ironically, despite the emphasis on combating racism via relationships, interracial friendship tends to be significantly lower for college students who participate in campus religious organizations (Park, 2010).

Racial homogeneity is also prevalent in non-Christian religious settings, in part because Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are
often ethno-religious identities for adherents, paralleling how ethno-religious communities such as Korean American, African American, and White Christians, among others, use religion to maintain, transmit, and reinvent a sense of ethnic identity and collective experience (Kim, 2006). However, Muslims and Buddhists are also racially diverse populations, which may encourage interracial interaction and friendship. Cole & Ahmadi (2010) found that Muslim students were more likely to attend racial/cultural awareness workshops during college. They were also more likely to have roommates of other races and socialize with people of other races than Jewish and Christian students.

**Homophily and Racial Marginalization in Higher Education: A Push-and-Pull Dynamic**

Importantly, homophily is not neutral force. Perceptions of similarity are influenced not only by a shared sense of tradition and culture but also from a group’s experiences with marginalization and exclusion (Edwards, 2008). Religious communities in the United States remain racially divided not just because of a shared affinity for socializing with coethnics, but as a remnant of times when people of color were forbidden from worshipping with Whites. Ethno-religious discrimination may also propagate homophily because those who are being excluded or marginalized (i.e., a religious minority) will be more likely to perceive fellow coethnics as being ethnically and religiously similar (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2011). For instance, Jewish identity in higher education is shaped not only by a desire to preserve and celebrate various customs and traditions but also by the fact that Jews were both informally and formally excluded from various spheres of student life for years. While student organizations such as Jewish fraternities exist to reinforce a sense of Jewish identity, they also exist because Jews were formally barred from joining existing fraternities and sororities well into the mid-20th century (Lee, 1955).

In a post-9/11 era, anti-Muslim bias has become a particularly relevant issue in higher education. Given this dynamic, there may be a stronger sense of shared ethno-religious identity among many Muslim students, thus encouraging homophily along religious, racial, and/or ethnic lines. Ghaffar-Kucher (2011) documents the “religification” of Muslim American youth following 9/11, showcasing how religious, national, and ethnic identities for Muslims and South Asian Americans have become inextricably interconnected in the public eye, regardless of one’s actual religious affiliation. She comments on how anti-Muslim bias following 9/11 affected students’ patterns of social relations: “Most significantly, the youth circumscribed their social lives, preferring to associate with Muslim (and usually only Pakistani) students rather than their previous diverse group of friends” (p. 10).

Racial/ethnic marginalization in the university setting may also encourage homophily in religious settings. Numerous studies of Korean American and Asian American campus fellowships address why second-generation Korean American and Asian American students create separate evangelical campus fellowships apart from existing majority White organizations (see, e.g., Abelmann, 2009; Kim, 2006; Park, 2011), and how ethnic identity continues to permeate their lives, particularly in the area of religion. Such trends persist even when students are native English speakers and born in the United States, unlike their immigrant parents. Various studies document how the desire for majority status, marginalization within the university, and the desire for a sense of community, among other factors, spurs Asian American students to maintain their own campus fellowships (Abelmann, 2009; Kim, 2006). It is important to note that, for students of color, racially homogeneous religious communities can provide vital social support, providing a sense of community for students who are often isolated and marginalized at traditionally White institutions. Such organizations allow students to experience majority status among same-race peers, in contrast to other realms of campus life where they may experience isolation as minorities (Strayhorn, 2011).

Even when religious organizations achieve some semblance of diversity, heterogeneity in voluntary organizations can be difficult to sustain due to organizational and/or structural dynamics (Christerson, Edwards, & Emerson, 2005). The racial homogeneity of campus religious communities has key ramifications on interracial friendship, or lack thereof, for students who participate in such groups. An analysis of
the NLSF found that out of seven cocurricular activities (Greek, ethnic, service, arts, intramural sports, career, and religious student organizations), participating in a religious student organization had the strongest association with not having a close friend of another race during college (Park, 2010). The effect persisted even when controlling for students’ precollege friendship groups and the racial diversity of the institution.

The aforementioned study (Park, 2010) found that religious group participation is negatively related to interracial friendship, and, like previous studies of interracial friendship, it also found that variables such as the racial diversity of an institution, students’ precollege friendship diversity, and Greek life participation are predictors of interracial friendship (Fischer, 2008; Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009). However, no studies, to date, have examined whether other forms of religiosity or religious affiliation are related to the outcome of interracial friendship during college. Thus, unanswered questions remain regarding whether variation in interracial friendship is explained by involvement in a religious subculture during college. Therefore, in what follows, we examine whether other forms of religiosity or religious affiliation are related to the outcome of interracial friendship during college.

### Hypotheses

This study tests three hypotheses. First, given past research documenting that Protestant congregations, in particular, are hypersegregated (Emerson & Chai Kim, 2003; Emerson & Smith, 2000), it is thought that students who identify as Protestant will be significantly less likely to have friends of other races during college. Both the racial composition of students’ precollege environments and precollege level of interracial friendship are predictors of interracial friendship or cross-racial interaction (Milem et al., 2004; Park, 2010; Saenz, 2010). Students who identify as Protestant most likely attended religious services in racially homogeneous environments prior to college and thus are likely to have more homogeneous friendship groups prior to college. In addition, given that evangelical Protestant campus fellowships are generally racially homogeneous (Kim, 2006), it is likely that if Protestant students participate in a collegiate religious community, such groups are racially homogeneous, lowering the likelihood of interracial friendship. These points undergird the first hypothesis of the study.

**Hypothesis 1:** Protestant students will have significantly lower levels of interracial friendship.

Second, “religious salience”—a construct that captures self-rated religiosity, frequency of religious service attendance, and self-rated religious observance—is anticipated to be negatively related to interracial friendship. Controlling for religious salience is important because doing so will clarify whether actual religiosity is related to interracial friendship or whether the religious influence on interracial friendship is more a by-product of affiliation or participating in a religious community. In many cases, greater religious service attendance is likely reflective of how important a religious community is to an individual. Because the vast majority (approximately 90%) of religious institutions are racially homogeneous, greater religious service attendance and higher self-rated religiosity likely lower the likelihood of students having close friends of other races during college. This effect will persist even when students’ religious affiliations are held constant.

**Hypothesis 2:** Religious salience is negatively linked with interracial friendship.

The third hypothesis concerns student participation in campus religious organizations. Many campus religious organizations function as student subcultures, which are characterized by persistent interaction, tight social bonds, and close relationships among members (Magolda & Ebben Gross, 2009; Newcomb, 1966). Subcultures generally require a high level of commitment, which intentionally or inadvertently discourages students from forming relationships outside of the subculture. Racially homogeneous student subcultures discourage the formation of interracial friendships because there are simply fewer people of different races within the subculture to potentially befriend (Blau & Schwartz, 1984), and the tight-knit nature of subcultures discourages the formation of close friendships outside of the subculture. Logically,
sustained student participation in racially homogeneous subcultures lends itself to racially homogeneous friendship groups (Antonio, 1998). Furthermore, student subcultures are ripe venues for peer group socialization, wherein groups set normative expectations for behavior (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). Depending on the norms and values within the group, certain student subcultures may intentionally or unintentionally discourage interracial friendship. These points support the final hypothesis of the study.

**Hypothesis 3:** Students involved in campus religious organizations will have significantly lower levels of interracial friendship. Due to how campus religious organizations function as subcultures, this negative effect will persist even when religious salience and affiliation are controlled for.

**Method**

**Participants**

Data for the study come from the NLSF, which annually surveyed a cohort of White, Black, Latino/a, and Asian American students from 28 selective institutions from 1999 to 2004. The current study excluded students from the one historically Black university in the sample because its context for racial demography in student organizations differed markedly from the rest of the sample. The analytic sample was 3,008 students who participated in all waves of data collection: 26.7% White (n = 804), 24.7% Black (n = 742), 23.6% Latino/a (n = 710), and 25.0% Asian American (n = 752) students. Fifty-nine percent were women (n = 1,774) and 41% were men (n = 1,234). The religious breakdown of the sample was as follows: 36.8% Protestant (n = 1,107), 31.9% Catholic (n = 960), 11.3% None (n = 341), 6.0% Jewish (n = 179), 5.8% Other (n = 175), 3.9% Hindu (n = 118), 2.5% Buddhist (n = 75), and 1.8% Muslim (n = 53).

During their fourth year of college, students were asked to “think of the four people at (name of most recent college attended) with whom you have been closest during your college years.” Students were also asked to list the race/ethnicity of each of the friends. The variable was coded 1 if the student did not have any friends of a different race/ethnicity, and 2 if the student had at least one friend of a different race/ethnicity; this was the dependent variable for the analysis. Relevantly, the dependent variable measures close interracial friendship, which has been identified as especially foundational to positive intergroup attitudes (Davies et al., 2011). Of students in the sample, 75.3% had at least one close friend of another race.

**Analysis and Variables**

Using logistic regression, the study ran three models. Logistic regression was the appropriate analytical method due to the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable. Model 1 contained pertinent background variables (sex, mother’s education, race, high school racial composition, students’ precollege friendship diversity) and religious affiliation (Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist; Catholic affiliation was not controlled for because of a strong negative correlation, −.532, with being Protestant, although Catholic students remained in the sample.). To test the second hypothesis, Model 2 added “religious salience” to the regression equation. Religious salience combined three variables (Cronbach’s alpha = .819). The first variable asked students during their first year of college to self-rate how religious they were on a scale of 0 to 10, the second variable asked students their frequency of religious service attendance, and the third variable asked students to self-rate their religious observance. Model 3 included all of the variables from the first two models, along with the racial diversity of the student’s college and variables indicating participation various types of student organizations. Included is a variable for participation in a religious student organization in order to test the third hypothesis. Table 1 contains descriptive statistics and coding information for non-categorical variables and Table 2 contains correlations for all variables.

**Results**

Results from the logistic regression are presented in Table 3. Log odds are presented, and odds-ratios indicate effect size. Odds ratios greater than 1 indicate a higher likelihood of an event happening, and odds ratios of less than 1 indicate a lower likelihood. In Model 1, only one religious affiliation—Protestant—lowered
the likelihood of interracial friendship. Being a student of color and having a more diverse friendship group prior to college were associated with higher levels of interracial friendship. Model 2 controlled for religious salience, which was negatively related to interracial friendship. When religious salience was controlled for, being Protestant still lowered the likelihood of having friends of other races, and being Jewish was also associated with lower interracial friendship. The positive associations between being a student of color, precollege friendship diversity, and interracial friendship persisted in Model 2.

Model 3 added elements of the college environment and experience to the logistic regression equation. Attending a more racially diverse institution increased the likelihood of interracial friendship. Out of the seven types of student organizations, two had a negative relationship with the dependent variable. Students involved in ethnic student organizations and religious student organizations had significantly lower levels of interracial friendship, and the effect associated with religious student organizations was more pronounced than the effect associated with ethnic student organizations. Out of the variables related to religion in the final model, being Protestant, Jewish, having higher religious salience, and being involved in a religious student organization all lowered the likelihood of interracial friendship.

Discussion

Previous research has ascribed numerous benefits with interracial friendship, and close interracial friendship is particularly effective in fostering positive intergroup attitudes (Davies et al., 2011). Because interracial friendship is rare in both pre- and postcollege settings (McPherson et al., 2006), college is a unique opportunity for students to cross racial divides and establish friendships. However, despite the prominent role of religion in U.S. society, previous studies of collegiate interracial friendship have overlooked the possible role of religion in shaping interracial friendship, necessitating the current study. Findings confirmed all three hypotheses: Protestant affiliation and religious salience were negatively related to interracial friendship, as was being involved in a campus religious organization. Additionally, being Jewish was negatively related to having a close friend of another race. This is the first study to examine if any relationship exists between religious affiliation and interracial friendship for

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Noncategorical Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s education (1 = less than college degree; 2 = college degree or more)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school racial composition: Heterogeneous*</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school friendship diversity: Heterogeneous*</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Salience scale (3-item scale of self-rated religiosity 0 to 10, frequency of religious service attendance 0 to 5, and self-rated religious observance 0 to 10)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>13.85</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial diversity of institution*</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a,c High school and college racial diversity of the institution were calculated using the Diversity Index formula developed by Meyer and McIntosh (cited in Chang & Yamamura, 2006). The Diversity Index indicates the probability that two randomly chosen students from an institution will be of different racial groups: \( \% \text{(SAME RACIAL GROUP)} = \% \text{(White)}^2 + \% \text{(Asian)}^2 + \% \text{(Latino/a)}^2 + \% \text{(Black)}^2 + \% \text{(American Indian)}^2 \% \text{(DIFFERENT)} = 1 - \% \text{(SAME RACIAL GROUP)} \). b High school and college friendship group diversity were composed using the formula developed by Moody (2001) to capture heterogeneity:

\[
\text{heterogeneity} = 1 - \sum \left( \frac{n_k}{N} \right)^2
\]

where \( N \) is the total number of friends and \( n_k \) is the number of people in group \( k \). Students were asked to list their closest friends during high school or college and to list the race/ethnicity of each friend. Using the above formula, the number of friends of a certain race was divided by the total number of listed friends (i.e., 10 for high school, 4 for college) and then squared. The sum of each squared proportion was added and then subtracted from 1. Consequently, a higher score reflects greater friendship heterogeneity, while a score of 0 indicates having all friends of the same race.
college students. Considering the hypersegregation of U.S. Protestant churches (Emerson & Woo, 2006), the finding that identifying as Protestant lowered the odds of interracial friendship is unsurprising. Being Jewish was also associated with a lower likelihood of interracial friendship, perhaps because of how Judaism can function as an ethno-religious or ethno-cultural identity. Notably, the negative effect between being Protestant or Jewish and interracial friendship persisted even when religious salience and being involved in a religious student organization were controlled for, suggesting that there is something related to identifying as Protestant or Jewish that lowers the likelihood of interracial friendship regardless of how religiously involved an individual may be.

Being Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist did not lower the probability of close interracial friendship. Regarding Muslim students, the finding is somewhat surprising in light of previous work on the “religification” of Muslim students that suggests that anti-Muslim bias spurs homophily along ethno-religious lines (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2011). Perhaps the number of students from these groups, Muslim and otherwise, is relatively small at many campuses (Bryant, 2006), meaning that these students are more likely to form additional friendships outside of their ethno-religious community. Muslims are a racially diverse population (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010); thus, even if homophily occurs for Muslim students along religious lines, it may not be as prominent in regard to race. In addition, there may be nothing particularly distinct about being Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu that discourages interracial friendship once religiosity, observance, and involvement are controlled for. In contrast, many White evangelical Christians use distinctly religious frameworks to justify color blindness (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Additional research on whether and how Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu students’ religious identities mediate their attitudes toward race and friendship patterns during college is needed.

Regarding the second hypothesis, religious salience was negatively associated with having a close friend of another race. Thus, even when religious affiliation and being involved in a religious student organization were controlled for, a student’s self-rated religiosity, observance, and involvement were negatively associated with the dependent variable. The more important students see their religious faith as and the more frequently they actually attend religious services—a combination of both internal and external markers of religiosity—the less likely they are to have close friends of other races during college. It could be that the more religious students are, the more likely they are to be invested in religious communities, and most religious campus communities are racially homogeneous (Park, 2010). Additionally, it could also be the case that some students who see themselves as religious (such as White evangelical Protestants) are more likely to embrace a color-blind philosophy (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Future inquiries should examine if religious salience has a different type of relationship with the outcome of interracial friendship for students of different races, given that Black and White Protestants have markedly different views on race relations (Emerson & Smith, 2000).

The final model tested the third hypothesis of whether being involved in a religious student organization was negatively related to interracial friendship. Also of interest was whether the two religious affiliations and religious salience maintained their significant relationships with the dependent variable once being involved in a religious student organization entered the regression equation. Out of the seven types of student organizations controlled for in Model 3, being involved in a religious student organization had the strongest relationship with the dependent variable (log odds $-470$, $p < .01$, odds ratio .625). Even when the Model 3 variables were controlled for, the religious affiliation and religious salience variables maintained negative and significant relationships with the dependent variable.

The confirmation of Hypothesis 3 speaks to the power of student subcultures, and this study makes a key contribution to the research on peer culture. While most religious communities on campus are racially homogeneous (Park, 2010), it also appears that participation in such groups actually lowers the likelihood of close interracial friendship, regardless of religious affiliation or religious salience. Religious subcultures tend to foster deep friendships (Magolda & Ebben Gross, 2009), but it appears that such groups deter interracial friendship in at least two ways. First, because of their racially homogeneous composition, there are generally few students of
other races within religious student organizations to befriend, thus discouraging interracial friendship. Second, the tight-knit nature of such subcultures likely deters the formation of deep friendships outside of the subculture (antonioc, 1998).

Altogether, it appears that there are multiple dimensions of being religious that lower the likelihood of interracial friendship, including a student’s affiliation (formal identification), pre-college participation in religious services, self-rated religiosity and observance, and participation in a religious student organization during college. While all of these dimensions certainly overlap and are difficult to disentangle, there are likely distinct facets of each one that may contribute to a student being less likely to form close interracial friendships during college. (The three sets of variables—religious affiliations, religious salience, and being in a religious student organization—were not highly correlated; see Table 2 for correlations.) It appears that there is no single reason why religion appears to lower the probability of interracial friendship during college, but a combination of affiliation, involvement, and specific involvement in religious peer environments lowers the likelihood of close interracial friendship.

While all variables related to religion were negatively associated with interracial friendship, several other variables were positively related. Being a student of color remained significant in all three models, meaning that even after all religious variables were controlled, Asian American, Latino/a, and Black students were all significantly more likely to have close friends of another race than White students. While being involved in an ethnic student organization was negatively related to interracial friendship, the odds ratio (.675, p < .05) is negligible in comparison to the much more pronounced positive relationship between being a student of color and interracial friendship (3.731 to 32.686, p < .001). Thus, while ethnic student organizations are generally racially homogeneous subcultures that play a unique role in supporting students of color (Museus, 2008), students of color still form close friendships
with students of other races during the college years and are much more likely to do so than White students. Interestingly, an additional analysis of NLSF data that controlled for the frequency of interaction that students had with peers from ethnic student organizations (unlike the current study, which only controlled for membership) found there was no significant relationship between more frequent interactions with peers from ethnic student organizations and interracial friendship (Park & Kim, 2011).

Additionally, the racial heterogeneity of both the student’s high school friendship group and the student’s college significantly increased the probability of close interracial friendship, consistent with previous research (Fischer, 2008). These factors suggest that while aspects of religion may discourage interracial friendship during college, students simultaneously participate in environments that encourage interracial friendship, specifically, attending racially diverse institutions. Overall, findings underscore the importance of having a racially diverse institution in order to provide students with ample opportunities for cross-racial interaction and interracial friendship.

**Limitations**

The reader should take into account that this study captures a specific dimension of interracial friendship—whether, out of his or her four closest friends, a student had at least one close friend of another race. In addition, due to the nature of secondary data analysis, this study was limited to the variables offered by the NLSF survey. For instance, it would be ideal to be able to see whether students’ self-reports of spirituality might be related to the outcome, but the NLSF did not include such measures. It is important to note that findings do not indicate causality. Lastly, the sample consists of students attending 28 selective and highly selective institutions and may not be generalizable to other collegiate contexts, such as community college students. Future studies should attempt to examine whether similar dynamics exist regarding the relationship between
Conclusions

Altogether, this study showcases how multiple dimensions of the college experience—a student’s personal affiliations and observance, a student’s participation in peer environments, and a student’s institutional environment—all contribute to the complex phenomenon of interracial friendship during college. Religious affiliation and involvement do not just affect students’ religious and spiritual experiences during college; religion affects other dimensions of college student life such as students’ experiences with racial diversity. This study also adds to work on religion and college students by showing how formal religiosity is both related to students’ attitudes and openness toward diverse others (Bryant, 2004, 2011) and linked to their actual patterns of friendship during college.

With this study’s findings on the negative relationship between interracial friendship and religious affiliation, religious salience, and participation in a religious student group, it might be easy to jump to the conclusion that religious faith and practice are at odds with some of higher education’s goals related to diversity and inclusion. Thus, a potential response might be to discourage religious practice during college or withdraw university sponsorship from religious student organizations. However, it is not only impractical for universities to take such action but also virtually impossible, nor desirable, given the role of religious communities in supporting students of color as well as the prominent role of religion and spirituality in many college students’ lives (Astin et al., 2010; Kim, 2006; Strayhorn, 2011). Instead, universities should consider how they might encourage religious practitioners to harness the potential of religion to challenge social and racial divisions. Although multiracial campus religious organizations are rare, studies on existing groups show that they effectively foster deep interracial friendships (Park, in press).

As Allport (1966) observed, “There is something about religion that makes for prejudice

| Table 3 | Logistic Regression Results for Variables Associated With Interracial Friendship |
|---------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|         | Model 1                         | Model 2                         | Model 3                         |
|         | Log odds SE Odds ratio          | Log odds SE Odds ratio          | Log odds SE Odds ratio          |
| Sex: Female | -.155 .103 .857                | -.124 .105 .884                | -.124 .106 .883                |
| Mother’s education: College degree | .192 .112 1.212                | .188 .113 1.207                | .183 .115 1.200                |
| Race: Asian/Asian American | 1.481*** .158 4.399            | 1.571*** .160 4.813            | 1.679*** .166 5.362            |
| Race: Black        | 1.149*** .130 3.154            | 1.287*** .134 3.623            | 1.317*** .139 3.731            |
| High school racial diversity | .229 .258 1.257                | .291 .261 1.337                | .217 .264 1.242                |
| High school friendship diversity | 1.372*** .231 3.942           | 1.297*** .234 3.657           | 1.225*** .236 3.403           |
| Affiliation: Protestant | -.359** .119 .698             | -.281*.120 .755               | -.253* .122 .776               |
| Affiliation: Jewish | -.333 .197 .717               | -.413*.200 .662               | -.411* .202 .663               |
| Affiliation: Muslim | -.012 .393 .988               | .046 .393 1.047               | .103 .398 1.108               |
| Affiliation: Hindu  | .193 .325 1.213               | .177 .326 1.194               | .183 .329 1.201               |
| Affiliation: Buddhist | -.161 .343 .852              | -.334 .346 .716              | -.397 .348 .672              |
| Religious Salience scale | -.054*** .009 .948           |                              | -.043*** .009 .958           |
| Racial diversity of institution |                              | .943* .382 2.569             |                              |
| Club: Fraternity or sorority |                              | -.311 .159 .733              |                              |
| Club: Service     | .005 .135 1.005               |                              |                              |
| Club: Career      | .059 .163 1.061               |                              |                              |
| Club: Religious   | -.470** .177 .625            |                              |                              |
| Club: Music, arts, theater | .001 .151 1.001          |                              |                              |
| Club: Ethnic organization | -.393* .161 .675         |                              |                              |
| Club: Intermural sports | -.077 .168 .926            |                              |                              |

*p < .05.  ** p < .01.  *** p < .001.
and something about it that unmakes prejudice” (p. 447). University educators are in a prime position to challenge students to harness the elements of religion that “unmake” prejudice or students’ hesitation to cross racial/ethnic boundaries. They can partner with those who often have closer contact with students’ religious lives during college—campus ministry staff and local houses of worship—to discuss possible linkages between race and faith during the college years. When they see racially homogeneous religious student organizations, they can inquire into whether a specific purpose exists in the demographic composition of the group (such as supporting students’ ethnic identity development) or whether the demography is more a by-product of a group’s hesitation to address race. Finally, given that many students of different races may share a particular religious faith, they can consider how faith can be used to unite students across racial/ethnic lines instead of divide them. Religion may be the most racially divided arena of life in the United States, but the university setting provides a rare opportunity in which to break the cycle of segregation in America.

References


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