



## Religion and Higher Education in the American South: Introduction to the Special Issue

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 10.46303/jcsr.2022.1

### How to cite

Platt, R. E., & Burlbaw, L. M. (2022).  
Religion and Higher Education in the  
American South: Introduction to the  
Special Issue. *Journal of Curriculum  
Studies Research*, 4(1), i-iii.  
<https://doi.org/10.46303/jcsr.2022.1>

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### ABSTRACT

This is an introduction to the special issue on religion and higher education in the American South. This special issue features five research articles and a book review that provide telling details about the role religion has played and continues to play in Southern higher education.

### KEYWORDS

Special issue; religion; higher education; history of education;  
American South; United States.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

In a 1959 interview, William Faulkner explained how his upbringing—raised in the American South and reared in a religious community—influenced his literary career. Per Faulkner, "The Christian legend is a part of any Christian's background, especially the background of a [...] Southern country boy. My life was passed, my childhood, in a very small Mississippi town, and that was a part of my background. I grew up with that. I assimilated that, took that in without even knowing it. It's just there. It has nothing to do with how much of it I believe or disbelieve. It's just there" (Gwynn and Blotner 1959, 86). Faulkner's reference to the embedded nature of religion in Southern culture is evident, as are related artifacts and phenomena. Rural storefront marquees display Bible verses, yard signs advertise evangelical revivals, and debates over religion and education reverberate in state capital buildings. Churches dot the Southern landscape. Indeed, when compared to the rest of the United States, the South remains a significantly religious geographic region (Norman 2018).

This intersection of religion and regionality is vital when reflecting on the development of Southern society, its institutions, and organizations. While the South has experienced significant issues related to race, class, gender, ethnicity, and educational attainment, religion has, to some extent, influenced each. Similarly, religion has played a role in forming, developing, and maintaining Southern higher education. Though predominantly Protestant, the South possesses strong pockets of Catholicism, Judaism, and, in the past, alternative faith traditions such as Spiritualism. This presence has influenced Southern colleges and universities through organizational affiliation or external social influence. While there is scholarship on Southern higher education, very little focuses on religion. As a result, this special issue builds on existing scholarship and furthers the exploration of religion, regionality, and Southern higher education—both currently and historically. With this in mind, each contributing author has focused their research on these intertwined concepts.

Mollie Carter's quantitative study of spirituality and Southern college student self-efficacy supports notions that religious belief may reinforce personal assurance during the collegiate experience—an important consideration given scholarly acknowledgments of self-efficacy and academic matriculation.

Berlisha Morton's narrative of Saint Kathrine Drexel and the founding of the Xavier University of Louisiana not only examines the relationship between religion and New Orleans Black intellectualism it also critiques Southern historiography. Couched in the tenants of Southern Womanism, Morton provides a nuanced account of Drexel's faith journey while also showcasing the nature of Black female intellectualism set amidst the Afro-Catholic Diaspora.

Cynthia Gage and Joseph Odenwald both explore case histories of particular Southern Baptist colleges. Gage's research on now-defunct Mary Sharp College in Tennessee sheds light on Baptist pedagogical ideals and nineteenth-century Southern gender norms while featuring institutional plans to defy convention and create a female-serving academy equal to any college for men. Employing analogous historiographic methods,

Odenwald explores the early development of Baptist-affiliated Louisiana College and points out the importance of "town and gown" relationships, overcoming institutional hardships, and navigating academic competition with secular college.

Similarly, R. Eric Platt and Hannah Parris showcase the closure of Reconstruction-era Brinkley Female College during an intense episode of Spiritualism and adverse media reporting in West Tennessee. Platt and Paris demonstrate how uncouth journalists exploited local Spiritualist interest to turn a profit, which harmed the college's reputation and caused the academy to close.

Finally, this issue features a review of Maria Medina's *Loyola University of New Orleans College of Law: A History* by Katilyn Hall. Hall's review explains how this Catholic law school, like other, similar religiously-affiliated institutions, grappled with aspects of institutional adaptation, organizational persistence, and spiritual identity maintenance.

Altogether, these articles and book review provide telling details about the role religion has played and continues to play in Southern higher education. Whether featuring contemporary issues of college self-efficacy and spirituality, gendered instructional norms undergirded by denominational ideals, or instances of college adaption and closure, all papers herein punctuate the need for enhanced research on the relationship between church and college. With this in mind, the *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research* presents this window into an otherwise under-explored aspect of Southern history.

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