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Trends in Catholic School Minority Enrollment and Higher Education Entrance Over the Recession

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Research has shown that enrollment in Catholic secondary schools has positive outcomes for minority students, including increased enrollment in higher education institutions and higher academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to examine if minority enrollment in secondary schools altered over the recession (2007–2009). Results of this study suggest that minority enrollment of Black and Hispanic students in secondary schools increased over the recession, as did Black and Hispanic enrollment in higher education institutions. Data limitations make it impossible to confirm the exact enrollment of minority students in higher education institutions and to establish a direct causal relationship.

Keywords

Minority students, secondary schools, recession, enrollment

In the early 1960s, Catholic schools in American urban city-centers started educating a large number of minority children, many of whom were non-Catholics (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Buetow, 1970). During this same time period, the White Catholic population began vacating urban city-centers. The evacuating White Catholic population would go on to establish new churches and schools in the suburbs, and cease supporting their former parishes (Hunt, 2005). As a result, urban city-center parishes received less funding to support local Catholic schools, and the shrinking group of parishioners had less direct support to provide to these same schools. Beginning in the late 1960s, some of the urban city-center schools, now educating large numbers of minority students, began to close—a trend that continues to the present day (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Greeley, 1982). The continued closing of these Catholic schools is considered of particular concern for the minority students enrolled, as parents and community leaders often believe that Catholic schools provide students with better educational opportunities than local public schools (Aldana, 2014; Mulaney, 2014).

The benefits of attending Catholic schools for minority children have been demonstrated repeatedly. Minority children in Catholic schools often have better educational outcomes and fewer behavioral issues (Greeley, 1982). Black students are considered to benefit most from attending Catholic schools (Brinig & Garnett, 2014), as they have been shown to have higher grades than their White Catholic school counterparts and their Black public school counterparts (Aldana, 2014; Hoffer, 2000; Polite, 2000). Furthermore, the closing of Catholic schools has impacted the educational outcomes of minority students and the overall social quality of the neighborhoods in which these schools were located (Brinig & Garnett, 2014).

The impact that attending Catholic schools has had on minority attainment of higher education and success in higher education institutions is of particular importance. Minority students with Catholic school backgrounds are considered to be better prepared for the rigorous work of college than their traditional public school counterparts (Hoffer, 2000; Polite, 2000). In addition, minority students with Catholic school backgrounds are more likely than their non-Catholic school counterparts to attend higher education institutions, have the belief they are going to graduate, and actually graduate (Aldana, 2014; Greeley, 1982; Riordan, 2000). These outcomes are considerable, as minority students—particularly Black students, have struggled with graduating and succeeding in higher education (Aldana, 2014).

The economic recession from 2007–2009 placed an increased strain on many educational institutions (Chakrabarti & Sutherland, 2013; Mulaney, 2014). As the economy slowed, public and private funding sources reduced their support for education. This decrease in funding forced schools of all types to make difficult decisions about how to spend their limited income. Catholic schools that rely upon parishioner support for school resources faced additional challenges, as parishioner donations to the church were down during this period (Brinig & Garnett, 2014). Catholic schools enrolling minority students likely faced additional challenges, as a large proportion of these students are from low-income backgrounds and pay reduced-tuition rates or have scholarships provided by the schools (O’Keefe & Murphy, 2000). Whether the economic recession had an impact on the decision by Catholic schools to accept minority students is not known. Given the historical role of Catholic schools in educating minority students, as well as the success of these students in higher education, the impact of the recession on minority student enrollment warrants examination.

The purpose of this study is to examine trends in Catholic school minority enrollment and Catholic school student enrollment in higher education institutions over the 2000s decade, with a specific focus on the impact of the 2007–2009 recession. This study is guided by three research questions: (a) How did the 2007–2009 recession impact Catholic high school minority enrollment?, (b) How did the 2007–2009 recession alter Catholic high school enrollment specifically for Black and Hispanic students?, and (c) How did the 2007–2009 recession impact the four-year college enrollment of students from Catholic high schools? Given the reduced funding from public and private sources, it is expected that as a result of the recession, minority enrollment (often supported by reduced-tuition or scholarships) decreased. In addition, it is expected that the four-year college enrollment of Catholic school students decreased, as enrollment in Catholic high schools is expected to have decreased.

Background

The relationship between Catholic schools and higher education is rooted in concerns over undergraduate retention and degree completion. After higher education's "golden age" ended in 1970, college student attrition grew alarmingly and upset the resource allocation of most institutions (Thelin, 2011). Universities traced their expensive problem to secondary schools. Growing numbers of high school students were graduating with low standardized test scores and limited skills in math, science, and writing. Minority students were of the greatest concern. Affirmative action left colleges anxious to increase diversity. However, secondary schools were afflicted with a growing achievement gap through the last half of the twentieth century (Aldana, 2014). Fewer and fewer Black, Hispanic, and low-income students were graduating public schools ready for higher education. This trend was not true of students from Catholic secondary schools, which became known for advancing minority students to college (O'Keefe & Murphy, 2000). Catholic education has shown unexpected success with graduation rates and college readiness throughout its history.

According to Buetow's (1970) foundational *Of Singular Benefit*, Catholic schools have always stood apart from mainstream education. The first American Catholic schools were started to educate Catholic youth away from Protestant influences (Buetow, 1970; Hunt, 2005). Separate education continued into the modern age because public education was secular in principle but not in practice (Hunt, 2005; Moreau, 1997). Into the early twentieth century,

public schools used anti-Catholic texts, and Catholic values were publicly accused of being harmful to education (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Hunt, 2005; Moreau, 1997). In turn, poorer dioceses saw public education as hazardous, and many decreed separate education as necessary to protecting the faith of vulnerable immigrant children (Buetow, 1970; Schmandt, 1978). Pursuing this mission, separate Catholic education expanded during the twentieth century (Carper & Hunt, 2007; McLellan, 2000).

Initially, the operation of Catholic high schools conflicted with the values and methods of most other American schools (Buetow, 1970). Catholic schools educated those who had the fewest educational options, rather than the elite or general population. The faculty were almost entirely unpaid nuns and clergy who focused on preparing students for Catholic universities or vocations (Buetow, 1970; Hunt, 2005; McLellan, 2000). Catholic education was considered so drastically different from the mainstream that many people felt it was a national threat, with nativists even attempting to outlaw Catholic schools in 1925 (Carper & Hunt, 2007; Hunt, 2005; Moreau, 1997). In response to mounting hostilities, Catholic secondary schools began an ideological shift during the modernization efforts of Vatican II (1962-1965). Nonclergy teachers replaced nuns, and the schools began to be supervised by boards of laity (Hunt 2005; McLellan, 2000). The modernizations, post-World War II prosperity, and the baby boom allowed Catholic schools to undergo what Buetow (1970) described as a time of “remarkable growth” (p. 225). By the time a Roman Catholic president was elected in 1960, Catholic education had become a normalized American schooling choice, and enrollment in secondary schools peaked (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Hunt, 2005).

The enrollment peak of the 1960s was short-lived, however (Buetow, 1970; Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Greeley, 1982). Rising high school tuitions and deteriorating cities led many White Catholics to seek better school districts in suburbs, thus leaving their urban parishes behind (Hunt, 2005). City congregations began to shrink, putting a substantial strain on the secondary schools that had historically gathered students from affiliated churches (Brinig & Garnett, 2014). Catholic high schools began to draw students from the greater community in an effort to gain more funds from tuition (Riordan, 2000). By accepting students from outside the ethnically homogenous parishes, the demographics of urban Catholic schools changed drastically. Through the 1970s and 1980s, parochial schools’ student populations became increasingly African American, Asian, Hispanic, and diverse in faith. In 20 years’ time, minority enrollment in Catholic schools went from 6% to 25%, which was comparable to the demographics of 1990s public schools (Riordan, 2000).

While minority enrollment in Catholic high schools grew, American education became stymied by a widening performance gap. Throughout the past three decades, minority students— particularly those in urban public schools—became much less likely to graduate high school, enter college, and display college readiness (Aldana, 2014; Brinig & Garrett, 2014; Noguera, 2009). However, minorities that attended Catholic schools did not experience the same challenges. Greeley (1982) found that minority students were more likely to anticipate graduating from college if they were educated in a Catholic high school. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) reported that Black and Hispanic parochial students were significantly less likely to drop out of high school, thus having a greater chance of advancing to college. Catholic schools maintained minority achievement and continuation rates during the 1990s and early 2000s (Brinig & Garnett, 2014). Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) found that Catholic high school students continued to outperform their public school counterparts on standardized tests. Numerous studies have found that minorities are more likely to graduate from college if they attended Catholic schools, regardless of income (Brinig & Garnett, 2014). Because of the differences in test scores and college graduation rates, Catholic education became almost synonymous with minority achievement and college success.

Many researchers have doubted whether Catholic high schools would be able to sustain their reliable stream of minority students to colleges. While Buetow (1970) acclaimed the expansion of Catholic education and influx of non-White students, he lamented that the schools' positive outlook ended in 1964. The enrollment high of the 1960s dropped within one decade (Hunt, 2005). The growth in minority students could not mitigate the rising operating costs, mainly associated with the salaries of lay teachers (Harris, 2000; Hunt, 2005). Secondary school tuition became unaffordable for those who did not qualify for financial aid, and many urban families opted to send their children to public schools or move to the suburbs (Buetow, 1970; Harris, 2000). Unable to gather the tuition needed to stay afloat, Catholic high schools were considered unsustainable in the 1970s, and were predicted to reach near extinction within the coming decades (Greeley, 1982). Since the publication of Buetow's (1970) *Of Singular Benefit*, Catholic secondary schools have been closing at an ever-increasing rate due to continued financial hardships.

The problem of Catholic school closings has only increased since the recession in the 2000s. Catholic secondary schools were always dependent on alumni donations and tuition, rather than church support (Buetow, 1970). The

recession's widespread economic impact greatly limited parents' ability to pay tuition. Many urban students were forced to transfer to public high schools because of the cost (Brinig & Garnett, 2014). Alumni donations also began to slow to urban schools, as affluent families had moved to suburban parishes and were donating there instead (Harris, 2000). During the 1990s, 18 states began to offer public assistance to students attending private schools, which helped to stall Catholic school closures (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Mulaney, 2014). However, the recession led to federal cuts that reduced this public funding (Chakrabarti & Sutherland, 2013). With fewer parents able to afford the tuition and decreased funding, the number of Catholic schools dropped to 7,000 by 2010 (Brinig & Garnett, 2014).

Despite the link between Catholic schooling and minority college success, few studies have investigated the impact of fiscal hardship and school closures on minority college enrollment. Scholars have been split about the possible effects. *In Are Parochial Schools the Answer?*, Ryan (1964) wrote that closing Catholic schools would benefit disadvantaged students. Ryan argued that without Catholic schools, all students would receive the same comprehensive college-prep education. She also argued that public school teachers were better trained, and thus would better prepare students for college (Ryan, 1964). Famed Catholic sociologist Rev. Andrew Greeley, disagreed with Ryan's predictions. In *Catholic High Schools and Minority Students*, Greeley (1982) found that minority Catholic school students were much more likely to enter college than their public school counterparts. In his research, characteristics particular to Catholic schools appeared to promote student achievement beyond high school. Thus, he predicted that the loss of Catholic schools could lead to greater attrition of minority students in higher education.

Methods

Data

Data for this study are from the Private School Universe Survey (PSS). The PSS is conducted every two years by the U.S. Department of Education in an attempt to survey all private schools throughout the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Schools selected for use in this study had to self-identify as being of Roman Catholic denomination and enrolling students at

the 9th-, 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade levels. Schools also had to have participated in each of the surveys for academic years 2001–2002, 2007–2008, and 2009–2010. This data selection process led to the identification of 981 sample schools.

The variables selected for usage in the study analysis are *minority student percentage*, *Black student percentage*, *Hispanic student percentage*, and *four-year college enrollment percentage*. The minority student percentage variable was determined by subtracting the percent of students identified as White non-Hispanic from the overall student body percentage. *Black student percentage* was determined by identifying what percent of the student body was reported as Black non-Hispanic. Similarly, *Hispanic student percentage* was determined by identifying the percent of the student body reported as Hispanic, regardless of race. *Four-year college enrollment percentage* is the percent of 12th-graders who graduated in the prior academic year and who enrolled in a four-year college, and is taken from percentages reported in each PSS dataset used for this study. The *four-year college enrollment percentage* variable was selected because data limitations make it impossible to identify the four-year college enrollment rate for the students in the academic years included in the survey; however, the percentages are associated with the rate of these schools during the academic years included in the survey.

Analysis

Each of the study's statistical analyses was conducted in SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics were initially run on each variable before conducting the analysis. The statistical analysis procedure selected for this study was a series of paired-sampled t-tests that determined variable mean differences between specified academic years. Each analysis was first conducted on minority student percentage, second on Black student percentage, third on Hispanic student percentage, and finally on four-year college enrollment percentage. The first analysis compared differences between the 2001–2002 academic year and the 2009–2010 academic year. The intent of the first initial analysis was to gain an understanding of mean fluctuations over the entire decade. The second analysis compared the 2007–2008 academic year to the 2009–2010 academic year. The purpose of the second analysis was to make a direct comparison to the mean change from the marked beginning and end of the recession.

Results

Table 1 shows that the descriptive statistics of the schools varied by each year, although the majority of each descriptive grouping did not change. The majority of schools in the sample were secondary (only), coeducational, traditional schools, and affiliated with the local diocese.

Table 1

Sample School Descriptives by Academic Year (N = 981)

	2001–2002		2007–2008		2009–2010	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Grade levels						
Elementary and secondary	124	12.6	131	13.4	141	85.6
Secondary (only)	857	87.4	850	86.6	840	14.4
Student makeup						
Coeducational	657	67.0	662	67.5	659	67.2
All-female	179	18.2	174	17.7	181	18.5
All-male	145	14.8	145	14.8	141	14.4
School type						
Traditional	952	97.0	966	98.5	964	98.3
Montessori	0	0.0	1	0.1	1	0.1
Special program focus	24	2.4	9	0.9	10	1.0
Special education	3	0.3	3	0.3	3	0.3
Career/technical/vocation	2	0.2	2	0.2	1	0.1
Alternative	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.2
Catholic school type						
Parochial	164	16.7	147	15.0	149	15.2
Diocesan	428	43.6	443	45.2	422	43.0
Private	389	39.7	391	39.9	410	41.8

Table 2 shows the actual enrollment numbers of the schools included in this sample, with the numbers for minority students represented in Figure 1, the numbers for Black students represented in Figure 2, and the numbers for Hispanic students represented in Figure 3.

Table 2

Sample School Student Enrollments by Academic Year

	2001–2002	2007–2008	2009–2010*
	n	n	n
Student Enrollment	576,042	568,600	548,600
Minority	136,313	147,677	155,400
Black	40,626	46,201	44,244
Hispanic	64,492	70,258	66,762

Note. Some of the schools included in the sample enrolled students below the high school level. Due to how the data was reported, these students below the high school level are included in these total and the subsequent figures. *The 2009–2010 Private School Universe Survey included a *two or more races, not of Hispanic or Latino origin* student demographic category that had not been included in the prior years. A total of 13,686 students were considered to be of two or more races for the 2009–2010 academic year.

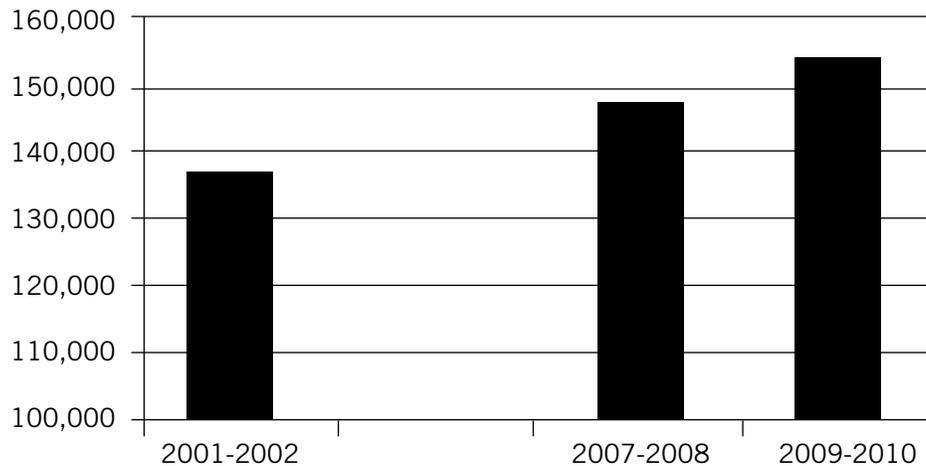


Figure 1. Minority student enrollments by academic year.

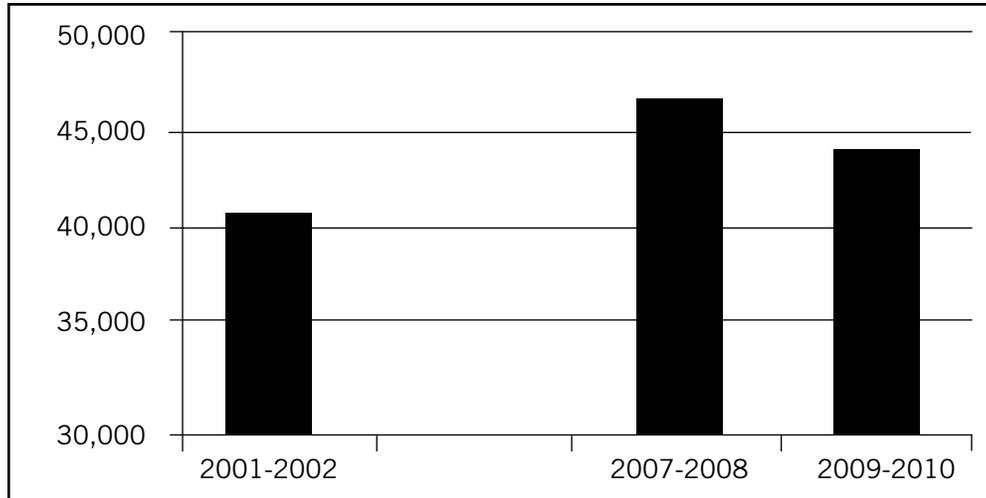


Figure 2. Black student enrollments by academic year.

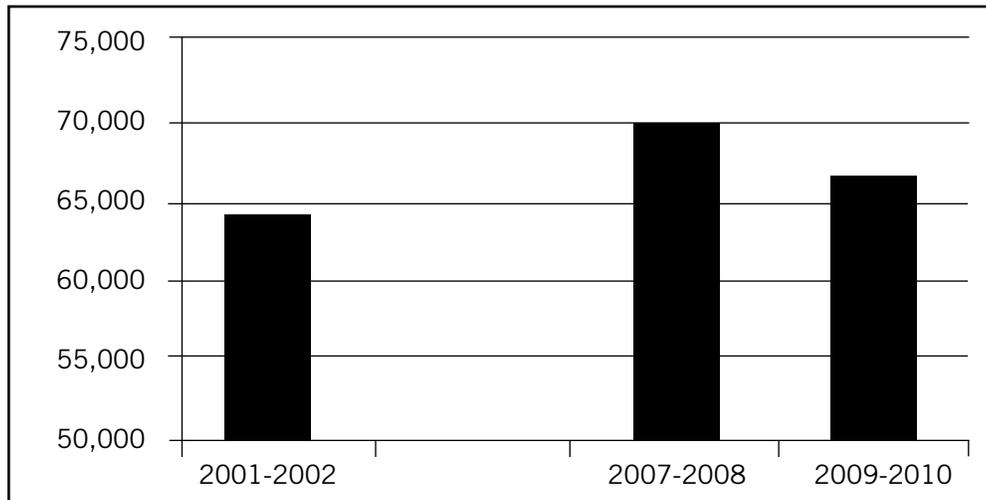


Figure 3. Hispanic student enrollments by academic year.

As student enrollment numbers show, minority enrollment within these schools grew throughout the decade. Black and Hispanic student enrollment also grew for these schools, however, these numbers dipped from the 2007–2008 and 2009–2010 school years. However, this slight drop in enrollment of Black students may be explained by the inclusion of a *two or more races* demographic category for students in the 2009–2010 PSS.

A series of paired-sample t-tests were completed to examine the mean change in minority enrollment in Catholic schools and the mean change in four-year college enrollment of 12th-grade Catholic school graduates. Table 3 reports the mean and standard deviations of these variables for the academic years 2001–2002, 2007–2008, and 2009–2010.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of School Enrollments by Academic Year

	2001–2002		2007–2008		2009–2010	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Minority enrollment	23.02	26.64	25.88	27.01	28.51	27.36
Black	7.44	14.33	8.60	15.05	8.66	14.71
Hispanic	10.48	17.79	11.83	18.89	11.80	18.38
Four-year college enrollment	78.87	21.08	85.70	17.17	86.06	16.70

The mean of minority enrollment was found to increase from the 2001–2002 academic year ($M = 23.02$, $SD = 26.64$) to the 2009–2010 academic year ($M = 28.51$, $SD = 27.36$), $t(980) = 14.15$, $p < .001$. For the specific years of the recession, the mean of minority enrollment increased from the 2007–2008 academic year ($M = 25.88$, $SD = 28.51$) to the 2009–2010 academic year, $t(980) = 9.51$, $p < .001$. There was no statistically significant difference in the enrollment of Black and Hispanic students over the specific recession years. However, Black student enrollment increased from the 2001–2002 academic year ($M = 7.44$, $SD = 14.33$) to the 2009–2010 academic year ($M = 8.66$, $SD = 14.71$), $t(980) = 7.08$, $p < .001$, and Hispanic student enrollment increased from the 2001–2002 academic year ($M = 10.48$, $SD = 17.79$) to the 2009–2010 academic year ($M = 11.80$, $SD = 18.38$), $t(980) = 4.62$, $p < .001$. Enrollment in four-year colleges also increased from the 2001–2002 academic year ($M = 78.87$, $SD = 21.08$) to the 2009–2010 academic year ($M = 86.06$, $SD = 16.70$), $t(980) = 4.62$, $p < .001$, although there was no statistical difference between four-year college enrollment in the 2007–2008 academic year and the 2009–2010 academic year.

Discussion

Since the 1960s, Catholic schools have been considered dependable sources of college-ready minority students. The recession (2007–2009) was anticipated to impact this historical trend with less affordable tuition, funding cuts, and the steady closing of urban Catholic schools. To determine if the economic downturn did impact the Catholic schooling of minorities and their eventual college attendance, this study examined responses to the PSS from the years before, during, and immediately after the recession. This study was guided by three research questions: (a) How did the 2007–2009 recession impact Catholic high school minority enrollment?, (b) How did the 2007–2009 recession alter Catholic high school enrollment specifically for Black and Hispanic students?, and (c) How did the 2007–2009 recession impact the four-year college enrollment of students from Catholic high schools? We predicted that our analysis would find that minority enrollment in Catholic secondary school and student enrollment in college decreased during the years specific to the recession. The results of our analysis indicate that both hypotheses were inaccurate.

The findings of the initial analysis component demonstrate that minority enrollment in Catholic high schools had a statistically significant increase during the 2000s, despite the 2007–2009 recession. The mean minority student enrollment of schools increased from 23.02% in the 2001–2002 academic year to 25.88% in the 2007–2008 academic year (the beginning of the recession) and 28.51% in the 2009–2010 academic year (the end of the recession). These results suggest that although Catholic school funding was decreasing during this time, either scholarships were still available for minority students or families were choosing to pay the rising tuition. Increased enrollment in an era of economic difficulty suggests a continued trend of students seeking out Catholic schooling when their paths to college become more constrained. Further, the growth implies that more students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds will be capable of social mobility, as the majority of Catholic schools' students later obtain college degrees (Aldana, 2014; Spaeth & Greeley, 1970).

Another important finding from this study is that both Black and Hispanic student enrollment in secondary schools had a statistically significant increase. The mean Black enrollment in the 2001–2002 academic year increased from 7.44% to 8.60% in the 2007–2008 academic year and 8.66% in

the 2009–2010. In addition, the mean Hispanic enrollment in the 2001–2002 academic year increased from 10.48% to 11.83% in the 2007–2008 academic year and 11.80% in the 2009–2010 academic year. Notably, there was no statistically significant difference in either Black or Hispanic enrollment in Catholic schools from the start of the recession to the end. As the standard deviations of mean Black and Hispanic enrollment in Table 3 show, the percent of Black and Hispanic students within an individual school likely widely fluctuates between schools. Although the overall mean increased, the results do not specify where these increases were occurring or if decreases were occurring in certain types of Catholic schools.

The results of the analyses on Black students suggest that this often non-Catholic population continued to choose this education path, even when scholarships and school survival became less certain. The growth in enrollment is important because Black students in Catholic schools have historically outperformed their peers (Aldana, 2014; Greeley, 1982). Many feared that the financial turmoil of the recession would place more Black students into underachieving urban public schools (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Harris, 2000; Greeley, 1982). Instead, more entered schools with proven records of college-readiness and college acceptance.

The results of the analyses of Hispanic students possibly suggest that the historically Catholic population is increasingly having its students attend Catholic schools. This may be changing due to immigration and the growing Hispanic American population (Lawrence, 2000; Louie & Holdaway, 2009). Such a change in Catholic school demographics could mean that Hispanics—traditionally underrepresented in four-year colleges (O'Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010)—are experiencing more pathways to higher education. If educators and institutions are interested in increasing diversity in higher education, then the outcomes of minority Catholic schooling warrant further investigation.

Another important finding from this study is that enrollment in four-year colleges of 12th-grade graduating students from Catholic schools had a statistically significant increase over the 2000s. From the 2001–2002 academic year, the four-year college enrollment of the graduating class increased from 78.87% to 85.70% in 2007–2008 and 86.06% in 2009–2010. These findings suggest that the recession did not negatively impact graduation rates of Catholic high schools. These results might not be surprising as the lack of employment opportunities may have encouraged students to seek higher education. However, the results are unexpected in that many scholars, such as Greeley (1982),

predicted that extended financial troubles would take their toll on Catholic high schools' retention and high graduation rates (Brinig & Garnett, 2014; Harris, 2000; Greeley, 1982). The findings also imply that school closures and budget cuts did not cause college entrance rates for minorities to experience the slump predicted by the literature.

Although this study cannot statistically claim that minority enrollment into four-year colleges increased, the results coupled with the literature suggest this may be true. The analyses showed that more Black and Hispanic students entered Catholic high schools during the 2000s, as well as an increase in students' overall college entrance rates. History has indicated that Catholic high schools experience little attrition and graduation rates of near 100% (Hoffer, 2000; Litton, Martin, Higareda, & Mendoza, 2013). Therefore, we can infer that minority college matriculation increased along with overall college matriculation. This conclusion means that Catholic schools did not succumb to many of the problems predicted by Buetow (1970), Greeley (1982), and others. Rather, Catholic schools were able to transition more minority students into higher education, fulfilling the demands for more qualified college students and diversity. While these implications are far from proving causation, they give cause for the further investigation of the impact of the recession on Catholic schooling and college enrollment.

Our results would be of particular interest to education policymakers, who might find that this study gives merit to voucher programs providing support for students to attend Catholic schools. Policymakers may want to consider increasing public support for Catholic schools as a means of educating minority students, or encourage expansion of the school choice programs (Mulaney, 2014). Our results also reaffirm Catholic schools' mission of rigorously educating all types of students, both Catholic and non-Catholic. Therefore, the findings might interest those who are unsure if religious schooling provides the same opportunities as secular education. In addition, educational policymakers concerned with diversity in higher education might find that these results support partnerships between Catholic schools and universities as a means to increase minority college enrollment. It is important to note that while minority student enrollment did increase during this time span—which was the focus of this study—the descriptives show that overall student enrollment in the sample schools decreased by nearly 30,000 students. This reduction in overall student enrollment may threaten the sustainability of Catholic schools, and thus reduce their ability to have positive outcomes on minority student populations in the future.

The primary limitation of this study is that data constraints prevent direct analysis of graduating Catholic high school minorities enrolling in four-year higher education institutions. Additional studies on this topic should seek to understand why Catholic school minority enrollment increased over the time period and examine variations in this enrollment by Catholic schools' location.

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