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SPIRITUAL FIT: SPIRITUALITY'S IMPACT ON RETENTION  
AT A FAITH-BASED INSTITUTION

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Crystal Keetch

May 2012

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# Higher Education and Student Development

## Taylor University Upland, Indiana

### CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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#### MASTERS THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Crystal Keetch

entitled

Spiritual Fit: Spirituality's Impact on Retention at a Faith based Institution

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for  
the Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development  
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## ABSTRACT

With the growing pressures on higher education institutions, schools are increasingly focusing their attention on issues surrounding retention and persistence. Since many religious institutions are tuition-driven, when students leave the institution, these institutions are losing revenue. Religiously-based institutions are often centered on a mission that impacts students' spiritual growth along with their academic growth. At these types of institutions, students' feelings of spiritual fit within the institution impacted their attrition. Based on Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, this study looked at fit within the institution. This study utilized a mixed method design to examine the relationship between persistence and students' spiritual growth through participation in various expressions of their spirituality (Smith, 2009). Findings indicated that those students who reported more spiritually positive experiences with the institution and more spiritual growth were more apt to stay at the institution. Whether they were academically dismissed or they voluntarily withdrew, students who did not return did not mention relationship, community, personal devotions, or church attendance as often as returning students. This means that it is imperative that the institution assist students who are not developing relationships within the institution. These students may be assisted through mentoring relationships that teach methods for personally developing spirituality.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank God for His many blessings and my mother and father for all they have done for me.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In examining the landscape of higher education, there is an alarming trend that more first-time students leave an institution than those who graduate from that institution (Morris, Smith, & Cejda, 2003; Tinto, 1993). Between 1983 and 2006, private 4-year institutions' retention rates ranged from 60.9% to 74.8%; this shows that they lost at least 25% of their students before those students began their second year (Friedman, 2010). Obviously, this concerns educators as increasing attention is paid to factors that impact retention and attrition (Morris et al.; Tinto). This is not just an issue that affects the students who are leaving; the institutions are also impacted. With changes in enrollment, institutions are facing financial issues, with some even having to close their doors due to lack of funding (Tinto). Institutions looking for methods to reverse this problem would benefit from considering Tinto's model of college student departure, which speaks to why students choose to leave an institution. This model states that students make their decision to stay or leave an institution based on their perceived level of integration at the institution (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

#### **Connecting on Campus (Institutional Integration)**

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure incorporates students' sense of integration and feeling of fit as a vital part of student success at the institution they attend (Morris et al., 2003). The first year experience plays a large role in student persistence throughout the total college experience since most students who leave an institution do so

before their sophomore year (Tinto). Tinto's model focuses on the different areas of integration that a student needs to persist at an institution (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

A student's perception of fitting in on campus impacts the student's ability to integrate socially and academically into the campus environment in a successful manner. Responsibility for student success and persistence falls on the shoulders of both the individual and the institution. To meet these needs, institutions have put interventions into place to assist the student, and students must do their part to integrate academically and socially (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Spirituality is a vital aspect of students' perception of fit at an institution (Morris et al., 2003; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Since students' integration to college is essential to their persistence, spirituality, along with academic and social integration, must be taken into account (Morris et al.; Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al.). Since spirituality plays a significant role at institutions that are religiously based, they often attract students who tend to be more highly religious.

### **Spirituality's Role in Higher Education**

Since many institutions boast of a holistic learning experience for their students, it is imperative that spirituality not be left out of the higher education experience (Chapman, 2007; Schaffer, 2004; Woodrow, 2006). The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities seeks to "advance the cause for Christ-centered higher education and help institutions transform the lives of students" (Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, 2012). These institutions include in their mission their desire for students to develop holistically (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006). According to Morris, Smith, and Cejda (2003), retention is higher among students who are more satisfied with the religious

experience at their institution than with students who are not happy with the spiritual climate. Students need to feel a “spiritual fit” (Morris et al., p. 349), which means that they need to feel that what they believe aligns with the institution’s beliefs, making them feel comfortable and supported in the institutional environment (Morris et al.).

Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) explain that institutions of Higher Education need to learn to embrace spirituality without attempting to indoctrinate the students in a specific belief system. The impetus they give for spirituality focuses on authenticity, which they define as when a person’s actions are in line with what they say they believe (Chickering et al.). Students are able to apply what is learned in the classroom setting to their spiritual lives, even if the material covered was not about spirituality or religion (Eecker, Regnerus, & Valeer, 2007).

To ignore the role of spirituality in students’ lives “is to overlook a potentially very powerful avenue through which many of us construct meaning and knowledge” (Lindholm, 2007, p. 1). Since so much can affect students’ spirituality, there have been many movements to assist students in their growth. Secular institutions of higher education are searching for ways to assist students in their spirituality while staying away from a specified religion. Both religious and secular institutions are implementing methods to serve their students’ spiritual needs through the realm of vocation, meaning “a calling” (VanZanten Gallagher, 2007, p. 34). A Lilly grant was given to different Christian institutions to implement programs or offices that meet this need. Other initiatives have begun at secular institutions, such as granting full-time faculty members “100 contemplative practice fellowships” (Zajonc, 2003, p. 53). The importance of

spirituality in higher education is apparent, because foundations and organizations are taking action to help foster spirituality at both religious and secular institutions (Zajonc).

At a religious institution, the mission often centers on developing students spiritually (Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, 2012; Kuh & Gonyea, 2006). It is imperative that Christian colleges and universities focus on students' spiritual development, since the mission of these institutions is often based on serving Jesus Christ through the academic disciplines. Each institution that boasts a religious faith needs to pay extra attention to the spiritual development of their students (Ma, 2003).

Zajonc (2003) found that "students attending a church-related college are less likely to experience changes in their religious affiliation and degree of religiosity" (p. 42). Research shows they are, however, more prone to spiritual struggles than students attending public or private nonsectarian institutions. This might be due to students being exposed to new information that challenges them to grow deeper and stronger in their faith, or it might be due to their inability to reconcile their beliefs with what they are being taught (Bryant & Astin, 2008).

In addition to Tinto's model of student departure (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009), there are other theories that focus on student spirituality, such as Parks' theory, which is built on the work of James Fowler. Parks' theory focuses on "three forms of development – cognition, dependence, and community – that contribute to the process of faith development throughout adulthood" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 203). Parks' theory and Tinto's model both put emphasis on students' feeling integrated into the community at the institution (Evans et al.; Morris et al., 2003; Tinto, 1993).

Additionally, Parks' theory focuses on the importance of faith development in the lives of students (Evans et al.).

### **Research Question**

Integration is imperative for students (Morris et al., 2003; Tinto, 1993), and since many religious institutions center themselves on being religiously-based and having that be a defining part of who they are as an institution, retention could be greatly affected by student spirituality. Students who attend a faith-based institution often have different expectations of how their spirituality will play a role in their education, because those institutions often boast a holistic education that encompasses their faith and their learning (Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, 2012; Kuh & Gonyea, 2006). A student's spiritual growth is often demonstrated through participating in religious practices and other measures (Smith, 2009). This allows students to integrate their practices and the impact these practices have with their spirituality and growth in relationship to God (Chickering et al., 2006). If a student does not have a sense of "spiritual fit" (Morris et al., p. 349) at a religiously-based institution, they may be more apt to leave.

Understanding spirituality and the internal expression of this leads to the question: does spirituality reflected in religious practices affect retention at a private Christian, liberal arts institution?

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

To truly educate students holistically higher education cannot leave spirituality out of the picture as is often the case through the current separation of academics and spiritual aspects (Astin, 2004). It is important that students feel that they are able to integrate into their institution (Yorke, 1999). A guiding model that explains the impact of integration on retention is Tinto's (1993) model of student departure.

Tinto's (1993) model of student departure focuses on retention and how integration (both social and academic) impacts a student's success at an institution. This model was expanded by Morris, Smith, and Cejda (2003) to incorporate spirituality and how it impacts students' integration at an institution. These authors looked at students' spiritual integration and its impact on their persistence at the institution. Research shows that students are interested in spirituality (Astin, 2004) and that students who feel they are able to integrate spiritually at their institution are more apt to stay (Morris et al.). This study examines how student spirituality impacts retention of students in Christian higher education.

#### **Retention in Higher Education**

The federal government and education policy makers are concerned about the low graduation rates of college students and retention of students in the college setting (Belcheir, 2000; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Institutions also have an increasingly diverse demographic of students to serve, which leads to different needs of the individuals. It is

essential that institutions discern how they can best serve these students (Tinto, 1982). It is important to understand that students come into college with a variety of previous experiences and that their commitments to the institution vary, both of which greatly impact their success in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980).

### **Theories of retention.**

Astin's involvement theory explains that the more energy a student puts into being involved, the more that student will learn (Astin, 1999; Stodt & Klepper, 1987). It is imperative that an institution gauges the student's level of commitment and provides means for productive involvement to satisfactorily channel that commitment (Yorke, 1999). The involvement theory is based on "Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O)" which means "the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to his/her academic experience" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, pp. 410-411) affects that student's experience. The involvement theory lends itself to the fact that the more academically and socially involved students are, the more apt they are to stay at the institution (Wolf-Wendel et al.).

Tinto's model of retention incorporates integration as an essential part of student success and feeling that they fit at the institution they attend (Yorke, 1999). The core of this model is that students' traits affect how well they meld socially and academically (Morris et al., 2003). The model focuses on what makes students choose to leave an institution. Tinto's model shows that students' decisions to stay or leave an institution are based on their perception of integration (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Tinto explains that student departure has to do with both the student and the institution. For a student to successfully integrate into the campus, which is based on the



student's perception of fit into the campus, the student needs to feel integrated socially and academically. The institution can take measures and put interventions into place to encourage students to succeed. Student retention, in Tinto's model, puts responsibility on both the student and the institution (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Based on Tinto's model, Pascarella and Terenzini created a scale for measuring student involvement. Pascarella and Terenzini's "five scales are: Peer Group Interactions, Interaction with Faculty, Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching, Academic and Intellectual Development, and Goal and Institutional Commitment" (Wolf-Wendel et al., p. 415). In addition to social and academic integration, Morris, Smith, and Cejda (2003) added a spiritual integration component to Tinto's model to see the impact it had on students at a religiously based institution.

### **Retention factors.**

Tinto's model places importance on social integration. For part-time students, social integration is not as imperative due to their lack of involvement in the residential part of campus. Another model, created by Metzner and Bean (Yorke, 1999), focuses on factors that impact part-time student retention. It was found that academic success, being younger, fewer hours of enrollment, less satisfaction with their role, and restricted chances to transfer affect retention. Part-time students are most apt to leave an institution because of poor academic integration, such as poor performance or poor study habits (Yorke).

It is important to understand the reasons why students are leaving college so that interventions can be put into place to assist in keeping students on college campuses. There are many different factors that influence whether a student stays or leaves an

institution. Retention is impacted by students' college involvement, engagement, and integration (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Many different aspects of higher education can affect student retention. Living on campus and getting involved in the campus community, friendships with other students, and developing caring faculty-student relationships have been shown to be very important to students, especially minority students. Financial aid and on-campus jobs assist with student retention (Stodt & Klepper, 1987). Part-time student employment on campus has a positive effect on retention, whereas working off-campus or full time employment negatively affects students, since they are unable to fully integrate into the campus culture (Yorke, 1999).

Research also shows that along with "spiritual fit" (Morris et al., 2003, p. 343), there are other factors that affect retention. Students are more apt to stay at institutions that are selective in the admissions process and when scholarships and grants are offered. The type of institution, such as commuter or residential college, has an effect, since students are unable to integrate socially as well at commuter colleges as compared to a residential college. Students who do not know what they want to study or do with their future are more apt to leave an institution. If students do not have ties to the institution or personal goals, they may stay if they are socially integrated; the opposite is true that students who are academically integrated, but not socially integrated, may stay at the institution as well (Yorke, 1999).

Retention can also be impacted by factors that occurred before the student arrived on campus, such as how a student was parented while growing up. Parenting styles can

impact the anxiety of students in college, along with motivation and academic success (Silva, Dorso, Azhar, & Renk, 2007).

There are also other retention factors, some being age, gender, race, and ethnicity. Research has found that males are more apt than females to leave an institution (Jorgensen, Ferraro, Fichten, & Havel, 2009). Research also found that, for students of different races and ethnicities to succeed in college, they need to find a community in which they feel welcomed and supported; otherwise, they will most likely not persist at the institution (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

### **Types of Attrition**

Two types of different students leave higher education, withdrawn students and academically dismissed students. Most people assume that students do not persist because they cannot handle getting the needed grades; however, academically dismissed students make up only 15% of all students who depart from the institution (Kalsner, 1991). Most often students withdraw because of “personal, social, and financial problems” (Kalsner, 1991, p. 3). These two groups are different, because academically dismissed students need to leave the institution because of poor academic performance, while students who withdraw choose to leave. Often students who withdraw do so even though “their level of academic performance is adequate and some have grade point averages that exceed those of persisters” (Kalsner, 1991, p. 3). These two groups cannot be treated the same because the reasons for their attrition is very different.

### **Retention and Spirituality in Christian Higher Education**

Higher education institutions are finding that more students leave the first institution they attend than remain there and graduate (Morris et al., 2003; Tinto, 1993).

Research reveals some indicators of why students are leaving institutions. Some of these are related to the spiritual integration of students, especially at Christian institutions.

Research was conducted on first-year students at a Christian institution using Tinto's model of student departure with an added spiritual integration component. The authors sought to discover whether spiritual integration was a predictor of students staying from their first to second year of college. They discovered that students who are more satisfied with their religious experience at their institution are more apt to stay at the institution than students who are not satisfied with their religious experience (Morris et al., 2003). Christian institutions often attract students who want to have an education that integrates their faith and their learning. This study showed that students who feel that this has been done satisfactorily are more apt to stay at the institution. Even though students may attend a Christian institution for reasons other than the spiritual atmosphere, when students do not feel that they can integrate into the culture, they end up leaving the institution (Morris et al.).

Research has shown that there are many different ways that spirituality can be developed through the use of training student leaders, such as resident assistants and spiritual life advisors (Hanson, Drumheller, Mallard, McKee, & Schlegel, 2011). These students can come alongside peers and guide them. Also, it is important to have mission and service opportunities for students through which students can put their faith into action by serving others. Retention can also be impacted by ensuring that Christian institutions are being clear about the spiritual culture of their institution during the recruitment and admission phase for students (Morris et al., 2003).

### **Definition of Spirituality**

Spirituality has many different meanings. Even though being religious relates to spirituality, spirituality does not always equate to religiousness (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Shahjahan, 2005). Spirituality is focused on a personal and private experience, whereas religion is more traditional in customs and practices. Spirituality influences every part of life, every day, in all that a person does (Chickering et al., 2006). Spirituality points to the interior of a person and a person's values, beliefs, and the driving force behind their actions (Astin, 2004). It is thought of as a life calling (Lindholm, 2007; Mueller & Dennis, 2007) or purpose in life (Young, Cashwell, & Woolington, 1998). Spirituality looks for an authenticity within oneself, which means that a person is consistent in what they do and say (Chickering et al., 2006). It is related to seeking out a sense of purpose in one's life and being connected to others in community, looking past oneself to others (Bryant et al., 2003).

Unlike spirituality, religiousness focuses more on traditions and established values (Chickering et al., 2006). It centers on the belief in a higher power, such as a creator or governor. There is "a shared system of beliefs, principles, or doctrines" (Bryant et al., 2003, p. 723). Religiousness is often equated with religious practices such as religious services, praying, and meditation (Bryant et al.). The definition of religiousness given by Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno is "behavioral participation in religious activities such as church attendance and prayer" (Welch & Mellberg, 2008, p. 147). Often religiousness is demonstrated more through behaviors and actions (Bryant et al.).

For this study, the spirituality of students will be viewed based on their statements on their spiritual growth and on how their internal life is being shown through "public

expression of and participation in religion” (Smith, 2009, p. 254) through several different measures. This integrates their practices and the private experiences that impact their spirituality and how they state they feel they are growing in relationships with God (Chickering et al., 2006). Students are at a point where they are now choosing to participate in religious activities and seek out ways to feel a stronger sense of spirituality on their own because they no longer live with parents or guardians. This study looks at students’ reported spirituality and what actions they take to try to support personal growth and how they develop:

The values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here – the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life – and our sense of connectedness to each other and to the world around us. (Astin, 2004, p. 1)

Spirituality is the internal view of life and beliefs and thoughts of the meaning of life. However, research shows “when subjective, private, internal religious life is strong, so also is their external, public expression of and participation in religion” (Smith, p. 254).

### **Spirituality in Higher Education**

Research conducted on students’ interest in spirituality found students showing a strong interest in spirituality. Students in the college setting also reported they are experiencing some spiritual struggle and conflict with their spirituality (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Astin, 2004). However, avenues for students to express their spirituality are beginning to be implemented on campuses. In the classroom setting, there is a movement toward focus on student learning instead of focus on faculty teaching (Astin). Learning communities are becoming more prevalent on campuses, which increases

student learning through integrating connectedness and reflection. Students are also able to express themselves through creativity, which is closely linked to their spiritual experiences, because they are able to bring into existence something new that came from a deeper place inside themselves. Because of this, creativity needs to be addressed in the liberal core of an institution, because creativity is an essential part of what it is to be human (Astin).

### **Fowler.**

There are theories that describe the development of spirituality and faith. James Fowler's theory of faith development places importance on faith's relational nature (Evans et al., 2010). Fowler distinguishes between faith and religion, where his definition of faith is very similar to the definition given for spirituality. His theory is based on stages each increasing in complexity. This process is self-initiated when one cannot reconcile the conflict between one's experiences and one's core ideals (Evans et al.).

### **Parks.**

Sharon Daloz Parks has a theory of faith development that identifies faith similarly to how spirituality is described, because searching for meaning in life is the most inclusive aspect of our human experience (Evans et al., 2010). Her theory builds on the work of James Fowler (Love, 2001). Her theory is based on young adults and the impact that higher education plays in a student's life. The theory is based on "three forms of development – cognitive, dependence, and community – that contribute to the process of faith development throughout adulthood" (Evans et al., p. 203).

## **Spirituality in Christian Higher Education**

Spirituality is an important aspect of holistic education; Christian institutions place a high importance on the growth of their students' spirituality and even include it in the mission of their institution (Ma, 2003). There is emphasis placed on a "seamless learning environment" (Ma, p. 323), which is a college environment that integrates students' experiences both in and out of the classroom into one collaborative experience. This is a goal at many Christian institutions. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, which is a coalition of Christian affiliated colleges and universities, states that its mission is "to advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth" (Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, 2011, p. 1). However, there was a lack of assessment of whether Christian institutions are meeting the goals of their mission; this prompted Ma to research student perceptions of their college experience and its relationship to their spirituality. The research sought to find whether there were any student demographics that impacted student growth and what parts of the college experience impacted students' spiritual growth. It was found that students who live on-campus had higher scores of spiritual development compared to those who lived off-campus. The research found that the Christian college experience is perceived to positively affect students' spiritual growth.

There are many different factors that impact students' development and growth while at an institution of higher education (Ma, 2003). An important aspect of students' spirituality in the college setting is "spiritual fit or spiritual integration" (Morris et al., 2003, p. 343), in which students feel that they spiritually match the institution they are



attending and that their spiritual needs are being met through the institution's efforts to challenge and support them spiritually. Again, if students feel they are a spiritual fit at an institution, they are more apt to stay at that institution (Morris et al.).

### **Purpose of Study**

Retention has many different factors that affect students staying at an institution, but it is essential that each institution has interventions put into place to ensure students' success (Tinto, 1982). Spirituality has become an important topic that higher education must address, and ways need to be sought to ensure students are able to develop in this capacity (Yorke, 1999). However, there is not much to link these two pertinent topics together. This topic seems especially important to Christian institutions since they believe that to develop students holistically, students must be developed spiritually (Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, 2012; Kuh & Gonyea, 2006; Morris et al., 2003). This leads to the question of the impact of spirituality on retention at a Christian institution. To research the impact that spirituality has on retention, two methods will be used: qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative data will give insight into the impact of self-reported spirituality on retention. This will allow insight into whether self-reported spirituality can be a predictor of whether or not a student will stay at a Christian institution. Quantitatively, student data will be assessed to look into the link between self-reported religious behaviors and retention. The hypothesis of this study is that students who report not growing spiritually or are not reporting involvement in religious practices will be more likely to leave the institution. Using both quantitative and qualitative data will give a better insight into spirituality's impact on retention.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

To study the impact of spirituality on retention at a private, Christian liberal arts institution, a mixed methods design was used. This allowed for qualitative information to be gathered in addition to the quantitative data that will be analyzed to allow for a triangulation of the findings (Creswell, 2008).

#### **Participants**

The participants for this study were first-year students at a private, Christian liberal arts institution. All first-year students were sent the survey. There was a total response of 769 students, of which 689 students returned to the institution. Of those students who did not return to the institution, 25 were academically dismissed and 55 withdrew from the institution. The responses of all first-year students who took the survey during the 2010-2011 school year were included in the results. Students were told that the tool would be used mainly for assessment purposes but that it may be used for research purposes. Consent was given by the students through participation in the survey. Students under the age of 18 years were not included in the research.

#### **Quantitative**

##### **Measures.**

A spirituality scale was developed by the host university's Office of Retention, and it consisted of 4 questions. These 4 questions are either "yes or no" questions or are on an ordinal scale in a Likert format. The questions are available in Appendix A and were asked on the first survey given during their first year. The scale is designed so that

the student will receive a lower score for answers that equate to more time spent on spiritual aspects. Students will receive a higher score if they report investing less time in spiritual matters. The higher the number a student receives the less time and energy they report spending on spiritual development. The scale represents that the higher a student scores, the more likely the student is to leave the institution.

Quantitative data was collected to investigate the impact that students' self-reported spirituality has on retention. Four quantitative questions were asked of first-year students in September. Students' responses on each question were each given a score on a Likert scale. These numbers were added together to get a total score of each students' responses for an overall spirituality score to evaluate potential retention status. A higher number represented a higher chance of leaving the institution, and a lower number represented more contentment with the institution.

### **Procedures.**

The 4-question Spirituality scale was gathered through the MAP-Works Survey that was sent out to each first-year student. Students were given incentives to complete the survey such as gift cards, prizes from the campus bookstore, and I-Pads.

### **Qualitative Procedures**

The survey was conducted twice during the students' first college semester, once during the first 2 weeks of school and once in October. The questions were sent out through the MAP-Works survey, with the first question being asked on the first survey and the final three questions being asked on the follow-up survey (Appendix B). All responses from students ages 18 and older were used. Questions were asked through a

structured, written format, with no ability to ask follow up questions. This provided standardization of the questions, since all students were asked the exact same questions.

The data was analyzed by searching for themes to see if any specific responses seem to correspond with students leaving the institution or being academically dismissed (Creswell, 2008). Each answer was coded, positive answers were themed green, non-answers were themed yellow, and negative responses were themed red (Firmin & Gilson, 2010; Wininger & Norman, 2010). The themes were analyzed to see if students who responded negatively or who chose not to answer are more apt to withdraw or be dismissed from an institution.

This method was designed for the purpose of assessing first-year students to find predictors of their retention and success at the institution. Additionally, this information gave insight into the first-year class' spirituality and whether they returned to the institution. The questions were designed to reveal if students' spirituality impacts retention. The survey results allow for some observation of changes in students' spirituality and provide the ability to see if those changes seem to be impacting their retention.

### **Data Analysis**

This study is a mixed methods design, using qualitative data to complement the quantitative data. A content analysis was used to extract themes from the data collected. The data was analyzed into themes of similar responses. The purpose of the content analysis is to find the main factors students are citing as contributors to their spiritual development. The impact on retention was analyzed using several independent t-tests.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

Data was collected in search of answering the question, “Does spirituality reflected in chosen religious practices affect retention at a private Christian, liberal arts institution?” This data was collected quantitatively and qualitatively to give a more collective insight into spirituality’s impact on retention. Inferential statistics were used along with themes found in the qualitative research. First, the quantitative data will be discussed. Significance and explanation of analysis will be given, followed by the responses to the 4 quantitative questions. Second, the themes found in the qualitative research will be listed and explained.

#### **Spirituality – Quantitative Results**

An independent samples t-test was used to test the difference in the impact of individual reported spiritual practice when comparing students who persisted at the institution and those who were academically dismissed. There was a significant difference in scores for those who persisted ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ );  $t(712) = 5.193$ ,  $p < .003$  and those who were academically dismissed ( $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 3.53$ );  $t(712) = 5.193$ ,  $p < .003$ ,  $d = -.53$ .

An independent samples t-test was used to test the difference in the impact of individual reported spiritual practice when comparing students who persisted at the institution and those who withdrew. There was a significant difference in scores for those who persisted ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ );  $t(742) = 1.841$ ,  $p < .001$  and those who withdrew ( $M = 5.418$ ,  $SD = 3.19$ );  $t(742) = 1.841$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .66$ .

An independent samples t-test was also used to test the difference in the impact of individual reported spiritual practice when comparing students who withdrew to those who were academically dismissed. There was no significant difference in the scores for those who withdrew ( $M = 5.418$ ,  $SD = 3.19$ );  $t(78) = .854$ ,  $p < .894$  and those who were academically dismissed ( $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 3.53$ );  $t(78) = .854$ ,  $p < .709$ ,  $d = .09$ .

There was a strong statistical significance between returning students and those who were academically dismissed and withdrew from the institution. However, there was no significant difference between students who were academically dismissed and those who withdrew. This shows that on average students who receive a higher score due to reporting fewer spiritual practices and feeling they are not growing spiritually are more apt to leave the institution.

### **Qualitative**

The qualitative information was blind coded based on a positive, neutral, or negative scale. The data was then stratified based on students who returned, withdrew, or were academically dismissed between the Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 semesters of their first year of college. Then themes were found within each of the 3 student groups. The first qualitative question was asked in September with the previously mentioned quantitative questions. The last 2 qualitative questions were asked in October. There were 769 first time students who were involved in this study. This was all of the first-year students who were 18 or older at the beginning of the school year. There were 10.5% of the students who were either academically dismissed or who withdrew from the institution. The students were asked to answer 3 open-ended questions about their spirituality.

## Quantitative Student Responses

Table 1

### *Quantitative Student Responses*

|   | Returned<br>(n = 689) | Academically<br>Dismissed<br>(n = 25) | Withdrawn<br>(n = 55) |
|---|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Q1: Are you growing in your relationship with God?  |                       |                                       |                       |
| Yes   | 92.2% (635)           | 80% (20)                              | 76.4% (42)            |
| No  | 7.8% (54)             | 20% (5)                               | 23.6% (13)            |
| Q2: How often do you have personal devotions?   |                       |                                       |                       |
| At least once daily/More than once daily  | 24.8% (171)           | 16% (4)                               | 18.2% (10)            |
| More than once per week   | 25.3% (174)           | 12% (3)                               | 18.2% (10)            |
| At least once per week  | 15.4% (106)           | 20% (5)                               | 7.3% (4)              |
| A couples of times per week   | 10.7% (74)            | 16% (4)                               | 21.8% (12)            |
| Not Very Often  | 19.3% (133)           | 20% (5)                               | 25.5% (14)            |
| Never   | 4.5% (31)             | 16% (4)                               | 9.1% (5)              |
| Q3: How often do you attend church while at [institutions name]?                                    |                       |                                       |                       |
| Every Sunday  | 77.1% (531)           | 56% (14)                              | 45.5% (25)            |
| More than once a month  | 8.3% (57)             | 20% (5)                               | 14.5% (8)             |
| Once a month  | 0.9% (6)              | 0% (0)                                | 3.6% (2)              |
| Sporadically  | 8.3% (57)             | 4% (1)                                | 16.4% (9)             |
| Never   | 5.5% (38)             | 20% (5)                               | 20% (11)              |
| Q4: Are you involved in serving at the church that you are attending while at [institution's name]? |                       |                                       |                       |
| Yes   | 21.6% (149)           | 20% (5)                               | 25.5% (14)            |
| No/Not Applicable   | 78.4% (540)           | 80% (20)                              | 74.5% (41)            |

### **Growth in relationship with Christ.**

More returning students (92.2%) report growth in their relationship with Christ.

One student stated:

I feel like I'm definitely growing. My church plays a huge role in this as well as my parents. I'm thankful to [institution name] for it's [sic] Christian atmosphere as well, I believe all these things are helping me continue to grow closer to Christ. Similarly, a young woman stated, "I am growing into the woman of prayer, devotion, and action that God has called me to be."

However, about 9% of the first-year students reported not growing in their relationship with Christ. Of students who reported not growing, there was more than a 10% difference between returning students (7.8%) and students who withdrew (23.6%) or were academically dismissed (20%). Students who withdrew were the least apt to report feeling they were growing in their relationship with Christ. Negative responses included feeling they were struggling, slipping, and working through challenges in their faith. They described their relationship with Christ as "strained but developing back into being stronger like it used to be by being here" and "I kind of feel as though I'm slowly slipping away and forgetting to put God first." Students reported working through many different challenges such as "having the power to make my own decisions." Another student stated,

I feel stuck. I don't know where to go. I want to have a closer relationship with God, and I want to give myself to Him, but I don't exactly know how to go about doing this. I'm afraid if I try, I'll be faking it, or I'll not be serious enough. I feel lost.

However, some students did report a decrease in their faith with phrases like "a religious fall out [sic]" and "I don't have one and don't care that i [sic] don't."

Some students who withdrew reported positive growth, that their spiritual life was improving, and that "It is better than it has ever been." Said one notable student:



I am learning a lot about God and about myself right now. There are so many changes going on in my life, so I have been especially thankful that I serve a God who never changes. I want to grow closer to Him, and I think that [institution name] provides a great environment to do that.

The largest theme of spiritual growth is that academically dismissed students did not answer the question (40%). Academically dismissed students (36%) also reported desiring growth, even if it was slow growth. This was clear, because students stated things like “I've been growning [sic] a lot; even just the over-all atmosphere at this campus has been kind of pushing me to be a better, more dedicated christian [sic]” and “MY CURRENT SPIRITUAL LIFE IS DEVOTED TO THE LORD AND MAKING HIM MY SAVIOR.” Students also reported feeling they were struggling in their faith and that their relationship with Christ was decreasing or rocky. Students responses varied from “It's a struggle, but I press on” to “I am struggling to find the correct religion of the world. I'm not sure if Christianity is correct so I am always questioning it and not growing closer to God.”

### **Personal devotions.**

Just under 25% of all of the first-year students reported doing devotions at least once a day. Over 50% of students who returned reported doing their personal devotions more than once a week, while only 36.36% of withdrawn students and 28% of academically dismissed students reported this. Only 4.5% of returning students reported never doing personal devotions. The number of students who withdrew and reported not doing personal devotions (9.1%) doubled that figure, while the percentage of academically dismissed students reporting this was nearly quadrupled (16%).

A higher percentage of students who returned stated that they did their devotions daily over those that withdrew or were academically dismissed. A main theme of returning students responses was using personal devotions as a way to assist in their spiritual growth. One student said, “I try to spend time alone with God daily, and read my Bible and pray. I've utilized the chapel in my hall a few times, and really enjoy the atmosphere it provides.” Another stated “I have becomew [sic] disciplined enough to spend time every day with God because I cannot do without it I need God to help me through each day. I'd be a stress mess without God.”

Another main theme that was found is that along with personal devotions, returning students felt that involvement in a small group assisted in their spiritual growth. These included unit devotions, which are led by that area's resident assistant, team devotions with one of the institution's sports teams, and being encouraged and having accountability. Students said, “I have joined a Bible study with the women on my wing. It keeps me accountable.”

One of the main themes of withdrawn students was they took time to be alone with God and do personal devotions. They mentioned using the hall chapel or campus chapel as a way to get alone with God. However, several students who withdrew stated that they did not do enough to help themselves grow, stating that they did “nothing” or “not enough” when it came to helping themselves grow this semester.

Only 2 academically dismissed students mentioned doing personal devotions or getting alone with God as a way they were trying to grow spiritually. A large majority (76%) of the students did not respond to the question. There was also a theme of them not doing anything to promote growth. Of the 24% of the students who responded to the

question, there was a theme of students not making any attempt to grow in their spiritual life (33%). This is not a large number of students, but it was a large percentage of those who actually responded to the question. Examples of student responses include “I have done nothing to attempt to grow closer to God. I talk daily with other individuals around me concerning spirituality” and “N/A.”

### **Church attendance and other religious services.**

Students who did not return to the institution (20%) did not report attending church as often as those who returned to the institution (5.5%). Returning students (77.1%) reported attending church every Sunday, which was a much greater frequency than those who withdrew (45.5%) or were academically dismissed (56%). About 10% of returners mentioned church and worship services at the institution and local churches as ways of growing spiritually.

In addition to church attendance, a main theme of returning students was the positive impact of the institutions’ chapel. One stated, “Attending chapel three times a week helps a lot. It provides the structure to God time.” Along with chapel, the optional weeklong chapel series at the beginning of each semester was given as having an impact on their growth. Mostly returning students mentioned these optional chapels as a method used to grow closer to God in comparison to those who are no longer at the institution.

No academically dismissed students and only 1 withdrawn student reported church in the qualitative questions. One of the themes of withdrawn students was chapel and worship services, but only 2 academically dismissed students mentioned chapel as assisting their spiritual growth.

**Church involvement.**

For all 3 groups, over 74% said they were not involved in a church. The highest group of involvement in church was withdrawn students, followed by returning students, followed by academically dismissed students. A few returning students mentioned volunteering and joining outreach initiatives. Only 1 student who withdrew mentioned being involved in service or a volunteer opportunity in the responses to the qualitative questions. No academically dismissed students mentioned being involved in any volunteer or service opportunities.

**Relationships and the community.**

Returners mentioned different facets of the institutional community as ways that the institution assisted in their spiritual growth. One student mentioned “being around people who represent Christ and are positive and uplifting.” Students mentioned classes, campus organizations and teams, and the environment and community as influencing their growth. Students also stated many types of relationships that impacted their growth at the institution. Those included campus leadership, professors, and relationships with others at the institution. Returning students reported that classes at the institution and interacting with professors were assisting in their spiritual growth. Seventy-five returning students mentioned classes and professors, whereas only 1 academically dismissed student and 2 withdrawn students did. This theme shows that returning students are seeing more benefit in their classes and class work as something they can use to help their spiritual walk and not as just something provided by the institution. Returners mentioned classes and professors as a way they are assisting themselves to grow spiritually and as

ways the institution is assisting in their spiritual growth, unlike the other 2 groups who only listed it as a way the institution was providing growth.

A minor theme of withdrawn students was relationships and the campus community. This was not as prominent as those who returned and were academically dismissed. These students stated that “meeting solid Christians” helped them grow closer to God as well. The institutional environment and people they had interacted with assisted in their growth. One student stated that “mainly, being able to discuss my religion freely and in depth with others has started to develop my growth even further.” Academically dismissed students mentioned several areas that involved other people in their spiritual growth. They mentioned the community and environment, relationships with other students and campus leadership, and being a part of group devotionals. Academically dismissed students reported growth through relationships that they had established with campus leaders and other students. Giving an example of this sentiment, one student wrote, “The community and the leaders RD, RA, Professors and so forth” assisted in their spiritual growth. Students also mentioned that other students helped them and that being able to be involved in “the frequent chapels and the team devos [sic]” assisted in their growth.

### **Additional Themes**

#### **Withdrawn students.**

Some of the withdrawn students reported feeling that the institution had not assisted in their spiritual growth as hoped. One student stated,

Maintaining that [sic] habit of worship and learning through chapel services has been encouraging. However, since I have attended a Christian school since I was

in sixth grade, I have found it very easy being in this Christian environment that I have been able to maintain my faith, but I am not growing/challenged in the ways I have hoped.

#### **Overall academic dismissal themes.**

Another main theme found with academically dismissed students was that there were not many repetitive themes in responses and needing to work on their relationship with God. Only 1 person mentioned each of the following: personal devotions, the hall chapel, and team devotions. These each refer to spending time with God. Having devotions, using the hall chapel as a place to be alone with God, and team devotions are all ways that students devote time to God. In culmination, these bring about the last theme of devoting time to God.

#### **Withdrawal and academic dismissal overall themes.**

There were 2 themes that were found for those that were academically dismissed and those who withdrew from the institution. The first theme found was that students who responded negatively to the first qualitative question either did not answer the other 2 qualitative questions or responded negatively. The exception to this was one student who withdrew and one student who was academically dismissed that did not follow this pattern. The second theme is that students chose to skip the questions about spirituality. This was the case for all 3 of the open-ended questions asked. Forty percent of the academically dismissed students did not respond to the first qualitative question, and 76% did not answer the second and third qualitative question. Twenty-four percent of the withdrawn students skipped the first qualitative question, 61.8% skipped the second, and 56.3% skipped the third.

### **Returning student insight.**

Returning students also gave insight into ways that they were struggling at the institution. They said that they were finding that they often had to choose between homework, work, and social time when wanting to have devotions or spend time with God. One student explained the struggle with time by stating, “Unfortunately while transitioning into college I feel as if I have been putting God on the side in order to focus on my studies. I am trying to change that.” Another reported, “I am still adjusting to when i [sic] can do devotions, but chapels helps [sic] me grow daily.”

Students also stated that they were struggling to reconcile confusion about different views on God. One student answered,

Still trying to figure things out. All of these different views on God and the Bible being thrown at me. Sometimes, I just don't know what to do. I don't know whether to let the real God and the true message find me, or something else. I'm just so frustrated.

They also state that they are struggling to manage their spiritual life during a dry season. One said, “i [sic] don't feel close to God.i [sic] feel everything is in my head and i [sic] can't really feel anything. i'm [sic] at a standstill.”

### **Conclusion**

Students who returned responded differently about their spirituality than those who left the institution. Withdrawn and academically dismissed students had positive statements along with their negative quotes, but there were prevalent negative themes. The returning students also responded with feedback that gave answers to reasons that some students are struggling.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that there is some initial evidence for a link between spirituality and retention. In addition, there seems to be some general evidence that shows the importance for students who persist to feel that their relationship with God is growing, doing personal devotions, and church attendance. This ties to Tinto's (1993) model of student departure, showing how students who may not fit the mold of the typical types of students at the institution are leaving because they feel they do not fit at the institution. Together the quantitative and qualitative data indicated a trend that students who reported more positively about their spirituality tend to persist.

Students who reported not growing spiritually were less apt to stay at the institution. It seems that students at a religiously-based institution, who are not growing spiritually, may respond well to some sort of intervention that is focused on their spiritual development and sense of "fit." Returning students also reported doing their personal devotions more often; this could be an indicator of student retention. Since there was a much higher response of students who were academically dismissed never doing personal devotions compared to those who returned to the institution, this could indicate that those who are struggling to do well in classes are also struggling to do well with spending time alone with God. This could be because the skills needed to study independently for class are similar to the skills needed to delve deeper into God's Word. They may be struggling in both areas because of a lack of personal discipline. Academically dismissed students seemed to seek out people to assist in their spiritual growth. Overall these results seem to



support Tinto's model; when students do not feel they are fitting with the social norm, they may be leaving the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

It is stated that students withdraw because of "personal, social, and financial problems" (Kalsner, 1991, p. 3). However, these could also lead to the struggle that later leads to academic dismissal. Students who are dismissed from the institution may have struggled in their academics because of these other reasons. This may mean that students are making decisions because of struggle in these other areas that lead them to struggle academically.

Returning students had a much higher percentage who reported attending church every Sunday. This may be one way students are able to feel they are growing spiritually and connecting to their new location while at their institution. This may be because students had only been at the institution for 3 weeks and may not have been able to report the true level of their involvement by the end of the semester. This question did not provide great insight into student spirituality and retention. This might mean that students who withdrew were more involved, but that involvement could have been with their home church, which could have led to them not being as involved at the institution and, thus, withdrawing.

Students who did not return to the institution also did not report meaningful relationships as often as those who returned. They did report campus leaders and Bible studies, however very few of them did in comparison to those who returned. Fewer students who withdrew reported relationships than those who were academically dismissed. Dismissed students did not desire to leave the institution and had formed more

relationships than those who chose to withdraw. This aligns with Tinto's model of college student departure, because if students are not socially integrating into the campus, they will not have a level of perceived fit at the institution (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Returning students placed a greater emphasis on relationships and their spiritual growth; they reported more interaction with others that assist in their spiritual growth. Since relationships have a large impact on students (Stodt & Klepper, 1987), institutions may need to work to ensure that students are connecting to faculty, staff, and students. Jones-White, Radcliffe, Huesman, and Kellogg (2010) state that "community aspects of living in a residence hall, especially during the first year, may promote social interaction, which is a necessary step towards social integration and student success" (p. 156). Even though almost all students on this campus are residential students, the students who withdrew and were academically dismissed did not report as much about relationships. This gives insight that students who are not socially integrating may be more apt to leave and need extra attention. Also, the few students who mentioned others may not truly represent this sample well, since most did not respond.

Returners stated other specific relationships as well, including relationships with faculty. Returning students reported that classes and professors assisted their spiritual growth much more frequently than students who withdrew and were academically dismissed. Since research shows that relationships with faculty are important, this could be why these other students are not returning to the institution (Astin, 1993; James, Alford, Alpha-Kpetewama, Clagett, & Engleberg, 1996). This shows some intrinsic motivation on the returning students' part. Since dismissed students are struggling with

classes, they may not be interacting with their professors enough to develop these relationships.

Returners also mentioned benefiting from being a part of small groups. Those who returned were much more involved in small groups than those who withdrew or were dismissed. Those that withdrew were more involved in small groups than those that were academically dismissed. This may show that students who are struggling to succeed academically are also struggling to find ways to connect to grow spiritually. This also aligns with Tinto's (1993) model stating that students need to feel a spiritual fit with the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study reveal the need to understand the co-curricular value of assisting student success. The institution may need to focus more intently on co-curricular areas, since students are showing a need to connect with others. Students who are not connecting as well are not staying at the institution. It is important to develop a way for students to be involved in small groups. Residence Life professional staff or their student leaders could create small groups in the residence hall. It would also be helpful to have the chaplain's office create curriculum for students to go through. Students need encouragement and accountability which could be helped by forming small groups in the halls or even throughout campus. The small groups could be based on where students live on campus, interest areas, year in school, or major. Since students are using classes and relationships with professors as a way to develop spiritually, it may assist retention purposes to teach students how to use their classwork to be a part of their holistic development.

Since academically dismissed students reported that people impact their spiritual growth, and not individual time, it is important to develop mentors and people to walk alongside these students. Research shows that mentoring has many different positive impacts on students (Coles, 2011; Knippelmeyer & Torrraco, 2007). Mentors could assist these students in learning how to do personal devotions. This may show that students, who are struggling to succeed in their studies, may need to learn how to study God's Word as well, since they reported not doing personal devotions. The dismissed students are different than withdrawn students because they did not choose to leave the institution because of being unhappy but were required to leave because of not succeeding academically.

Students who returned to the institution reported a higher percentage of church attendance; this shows that it may be important for the institution to assist students in connecting to a church while in the college setting, including explaining the importance of finding a church home. Institutions may also want to provide names of places to attend. Chapel may be a good avenue to convey the need to find a church home and the importance of not substituting chapel attendance for going to church.

Students are struggling with the time crunch of college, so students need to be taught how to deal with time management. Students need to know how to center their lives around God in order to have a holistic spiritual life. Equipping student leaders through training can assist them in being better prepared to assist the students that they serve in many different capacities (Hanson et al, 2011). This could be incorporated into the first-year class or first-year experience since there is currently no place where this is formally done in the curriculum or co-curriculum at this institution. The residence halls

would also be a place that first-year students could learn how to build a schedule centered on God. Students need to learn time management and how to center their lives around God and live a lifestyle of worship, not just on having devotions as their sole time with God during the day.

First-year classes or experiences would be another good avenue for addressing students' struggles of reconciling confusion about different views of God and dealing with a dry time. Students may be struggling with different views of God because at this institution their first-year class challenges them to think about their faith and what they truly believe, but chapel tends to align with the institution's specific denomination. Students may be feeling lost because they are being challenged to start processing through their faith but do not have enough support to know how to do this on their own. Students need to hear that it is okay to feel this way and have others, such as student leaders, who can provide support and perspective. It would be beneficial for students in residence halls to have programming alongside what they are learning in chapel and their first-year class. Both reconciling views and struggling with a dry time could lead students to feel like they do not fit in with the institutional social norm. Tinto (1993) explains the need for students to feel that they fit within the institution. Students will integrate when they share attitudes and values of their peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). If these students are not finding those to come alongside them and assist them in these struggles, they may feel out of place in the spiritual setting of a religious institution. Since Tinto's model was expanded to incorporate spirituality, students may be feeling that they are not spiritually integrating into the institution (Morris et al, 2003).

Together these themes make evident that students struggle to find a holistic view of God. They are currently living a life of bifurcation and see their relationship with God as something separate from the rest of their lives. They see time with God as something that only occurs during specific spiritual activities. Finding ways to worship God outside of chapel is important. Students need to learn how to worship God all the time, bringing glory to God through all that they do, including homework, work, and social time. Chapel or residence hall Bible studies could address these issues. Students could be assisted through a first-year experience type of class, chapel, hall programming, or small groups. This is needed because first-year students need to understand the concept of holistically living a spiritual life and understanding that a relationship with God goes beyond devotions to living a life that seeks to honor Christ.

Since academically dismissed students and students who withdrew were the most apt to report negative answers or not respond to questions, the institution must decide how to respond to these students. It may mean that student development professionals are alerted to students with negative answers so that they, along with their student staff, can give extra attention to assisting these students and helping them connect. Also, knowing if these students are struggling academically would assist the institution in knowing how to assist the student, since those who are struggling academically have different needs than those who are just not happy with the institution overall.

Since there was positive mention of student leaders and community, it brings up the necessity to equip student leaders to be able to handle these issues and assist students as they struggle their first year of college. Student leaders need to learn how to lead a small group and how to assist students in their residence area with time management

(Murray, Snider, & Midkiff, 1999; Roussel & Elleven, 2009). It is essential that they learn to model a lifestyle of time management and worshipping God throughout the day, not just when doing devotions. It is also important to teach students how to have a healthy level of being open about spiritual matters, both questions and struggles, since students are sorting through spiritual issues. All of these issues can be addressed through implementing different aspects of a first-year experience, since research has shown that the first year has such a vital impact on students' experience at the institution (Morosanu, Handley, & Donovan, 2010; Schrader, 2008).

### **Limitations of the Study**

The different groups in this study (those who returned, those who withdrew, and those who were academically dismissed from the institution) were very different in sample size. The size of the group who returned was much larger than both groups who did not return to the institution.

In addition, the scale used only assessed 4 questions that were somewhat limited in scope. Along with this, because this scale was developed for this assessment, there has not been testing done to ensure the validity or reliability of the questions asked.

This study looks at attrition from the fall semester to the spring semester of the student's first year of college. However, it does not allow for the study to give insight into whether these students returned for their second year of college and does not utilize the 2 other surveys that students completed during the spring semester.

### **Implications for Research**

This information gives attrition from the Fall to Spring semester of 1 year. To continue to gather more information, it would be beneficial to research the Fall to Fall

attrition of these students. The data would need to be re-stratified and then analyzed for the upcoming year to see if there is any significance that extends to full-year attrition. The questions would need to be asked again. Also, it would be beneficial to develop additional stronger and predictive spiritual life questions to pose to students in this research. It would also be beneficial to work with next year's sophomores to further research those that had negative answers to inform current practices.

Also, research could investigate why students chose to stay. It would also be helpful to see why students with negative responses stayed at the institution. This information would provide insight into methods to implement with students who gave negative answers possibly to keep them at the institution and help them be successful. This could also be done by asking students who left the institution what they were unhappy with and how they could have been assisted while at the institution. This data could also be used to assess the spiritual life program at the institution. It would allow the institution to know if student programming could be better formed to assist students in their spiritual lives.

Others could use the base of this research to begin research at their own institutions, since this information may not be applicable to all institutions. Since each institution has its own culture and type of student, this would give insight into what assists their students' spiritual growth and how to assist them.

Since spirituality and retention is also an issue at non-religiously based institutions, this type of research could be continued at public institutions. It would give insight into how public institutions assist their students' spiritual growth and how this affects retention.



This information shows significant differences between students who stay and those who do not return to the institution. However, we are unable to assess the spiritual life program of the institution fully. Helpful future research would be to find out what the spiritual life program is doing that is significantly assisting students and where more time and energy should be invested. This could also lead to new initiatives being created and less time and energy being invested in programs that are not that influential in student growth.

This brought insight into answering if students who stated they are spiritually growing and spending time trying to grow spiritually persist at a religiously-based institution. However, more in-depth interviews from students who are in the 3 separate categories would give more depth into why students stayed at the institution.

There are certain questions that this research raises. It is important for institutions to know how to respond to students who are at a greater risk for attrition because of their spiritual life. Since there was statistical significance showing that there is a difference in responses between those that leave the institution and those that remain, should institutions be proactive and reach out to students who are showing the themes of leaving the institution? Would this help these students or push them away? The last question this raises is whether students are predisposed to not fitting into campus and if there are measures that can be put into place to assist these students. Finding out ways to assist students in this capacity would also be beneficial research.

## **Conclusion**

This research gives insight into the methods that students are reporting that the institution is implementing to assist their growth, along with how they are personally

attempting to grow spiritually. It is statistically significant that there is a difference between students who remain at a religiously-based institution and those who do not return for the spring semester. The themes found as to why students found the institution helpful in their spiritual growth, along with areas that they were struggling, provide information on how to assist students during their first year of college. This research aligned with what Ma (2003) found, that Christian colleges can assist students in their spiritual growth and with Morris, Smith, and Cejda (2003), that students who are more satisfied with their religious experience tend to remain at an institution.

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## APPENDIX A: QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONS

- Question 1: Are you growing in your relationship with God? (yes or no)
  - Yes – score 0
  - No – score 3
- Question 2: How often do you have personal devotions? (Likert scale)
  - “more than once a day” – score 0
  - “at least once per day” – score 0
  - “more than once a week” – score 1
  - “at least once per week” – score 2
  - “a couple times per month” – score 3
  - “not very often” – score 4
  - “never” – score 5
- Question 3: “How often do you attend church while at [institution’s name]?” (Likert scale)
  - “Every Sunday” – score 1
  - “Once a month” – score 2
  - “More than once a month” – score 3
  - “Sporadically” – score 4
  - “Never” – score 5
- Question 4: “Are you involved in serving at the church that you are attending while at [institution’s name]?” (Likert scale)
  - Not applicable – score 1
  - No – score 1
  - Yes – score 0

## APPENDIX B: QUALITATIVE PROTOCOL

- Question asked on first survey, beginning of September:
  - How would you describe your current spiritual life?
- Questions asked on the second (middle of first semester), third (beginning of second semester), and fourth survey (middle of second semester):
  - What have you done this semester to grow closer to God or what has helped you in your spiritual walk?
  - What at [institution name] has helped your spiritual growth?



