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Spiritual Struggle within a Faith-Based Institution

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SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE WITHIN A FAITH-BASED INSTITUTION

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Hannah Kristine Schundler

May 2014

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

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entitled

Spiritual Struggle within a Faith-Based Institution

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

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Abstract

During four critical years in college, students ask big questions and form a stronger sense of identity, purpose, and personal conviction. Recent studies in the area of college student spirituality have indicated that, while college students have an increased interest in spirituality, many students experience spiritual struggle during these formative years. These questions and uncertainties about identity and spirituality arise even at faith-based institutions. In fact, some research (Bryant & Astin, 2008) has found that students at faith-based institutions are actually more likely to experience spiritual struggle during the college years than their peers at other institutional types, for reasons not previously researched. The current qualitative study examined factors that contribute to spiritual struggle within a faith-based institution, the experience of students experiencing struggle within a faith-based institution, and the institutional elements that support or challenge students during this developmental “crisis.” Six themes emerged from the individual interviews conducted at a small, Midwest, faith-based institution. Students experiencing spiritual struggle entered college with strong religious upbringing, which had shaped their spiritual paradigm and framework. Various factors during the college experience created dissonance and led the participants to reexamine a framework that seemed inadequate or incomplete to address new questions and ambiguities. During the time of spiritual struggle, the students experienced frustration towards the religious climate on campus. Students kept their struggle private from most individuals and forums on campus, despite

their belief in the campus community's openness and acceptance of spiritual struggle. Faculty and staff members played a vital role in supporting and challenging students during times of spiritual struggle. The study formulated implications for educators at faith-based institutions who desire to create an environment in which students can wrestle with questions and ideas and grow in spiritual and intellectual maturity.

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This thesis is dedicated to the students I have known who have experienced seasons of spiritual struggle, uncertainty, and doubt during college. Thank you for your courage and for your persistence to seek Truth and light, even in the midst of darkness. I will not forget you or your stories. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Purpose Statement.....	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	6
Increased Study of Spirituality and Religion in College Students.....	6
Religion and Spirituality among Emerging Adults.....	7
Relationship between Higher Education and Religious Beliefs	8
Changes in Religious Identity.....	10
Spiritual Struggle or Loss of Faith.....	10
Institutional Mission of Faith-Based Institutions.....	16
Chapter 3 Methods	18
Participants.....	18
Procedure	19
Data Analysis	20
Chapter 4 Results	21
Religious Upbringing.....	21
Reexamination of Religious Beliefs and Framework	22
Frustration towards Religious Culture on Campus.....	28
Selective Openness Regarding Spiritual Struggle	29

Perception and Reality of Community Acceptance	32
Support from Faculty and Staff.....	33
Conclusion	35
Chapter 5 Discussion	36
Implications for Practice	39
Limitations	45
Future Study.....	46
Conclusion	46
References.....	49
Appendix A.....	54

Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent years, the topic of college student spirituality has been receiving much attention in developmental literature and higher education research. This interest follows decades of neglect in the field of higher education and student development (Astin, 2004; Love & Talbot, 1999). Educators recognize not only the importance of spirituality and meaning in holistic development, but also the growing interest of spirituality among college students. A 2004 survey administered by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (Astin, Astin, Lindholm, Bryant, Calderone, & Szelényi, 2005) revealed that 80% of college students "have an interest in spirituality" (p. 5), and 74% are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. Astin (2004) articulated the need for higher education professionals to focus more on the "inner development" of students (p. 34), which has the potential to develop greater understanding of self and others, strengthen community, and integrate meaning and purpose into academic and intellectual development.

Faith-based institutions have a unique place in this conversation. First, these institutions explicitly seek to foster holistic development, which includes not only academic and intellectual development but also spiritual development (Beers, 2003). Generally, faith-based institutions attempt to integrate spirituality into all aspects of the university, including academic courses, residence life, leadership development, off-

campus opportunities, and faculty-student relationships. These institutions strive to develop the minds, hearts, and souls of individuals and prepare students for lives of service and leadership within their fields. Second, faith-based institutions also seek to develop individuals committed to religious beliefs, convictions, and accompanying behaviors. The integration of faith into all aspects of the university enables students to grow deeper in their commitment to personal beliefs and convictions. Third, significant peer influence exists at faith-based institutions; the community of like-minded believers creates an environment for students to teach and learn from each other, which often strengthens religious commitment (Lee, 2002).

One area of spirituality with significant relevance for student affairs professionals in institutions committed to the promotion of faith development is the topic of spiritual struggle or loss. Spiritual struggle or loss can represent a prolonged crisis period in which an individual cannot commit to a set of beliefs or convictions. Theories and research on college student spirituality identify spiritual struggle as a component of college student spiritual development. The theories of spiritual development articulated by Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000) both recognized the presence of crisis in the faith development process. However, some individuals experience prolonged spiritual loss or doubt. The individual, having once made commitments to a particular set of beliefs, can no longer maintain those convictions. This topic proves critical for student development professionals who understand faith as an important element of holistic development. With increasing focus and research on the topics of religion and spirituality, professionals must garner awareness of how to cultivate a community in which individuals can thrive and flourish not only academically but also spiritually. While growth and development necessitate

some types of crisis or struggles, colleges must find a balance between challenge and support (Sanford, 1966).

The presence of spiritual struggle and crisis also exists at the faith-based institution; this topic of spiritual loss arguably becomes more critical for the faith-based institutions. Despite the fact that a majority of students within a faith-based institution experience significant spiritual growth and increasing commitment to faith during college (Ma, 2003), a small percentage of students experience a loss of faith during college. Bryant and Astin (2008) studied correlates of spiritual struggle and found that students at faith-based institutions more likely experience spiritual struggle than students at public or private nonsectarian institutions.

Multiple factors potentially contribute to a student's loss of faith. These elements include circumstantial crises, as well as uncertainty stemming from changes in intellectual reasoning or understanding. At a faith-based institution, where most individuals engage in an ongoing process seeking to define the importance of spirituality and faith in their lives, great potential exists for spiritual growth; however, for students who struggle to reconcile questions of faith, meaning, and purpose, there remains potential for spiritual loss and alienation within the community.

While most students at faith-based institutions experience growth and deepening commitment to their faith, research reveals that a small percentage of students experience faith loss. One study conducted by Fankhauser (2012) revealed that about 5% of students at a faith-based institution experienced a lack of spiritual growth during college, despite the institutional commitment to fostering spiritual growth. While no one universal factor

contributed to loss of faith within these particular students, each student perceived that the university did not adequately support or challenge them during this time.

Students who experience spiritual struggle or loss at faith-based institutions easily stand as a hidden minority. While some students who lose their faith may withdraw from a faith-based institution, others choose to remain despite the dichotomy between their faith and the mission of the institution. Little research addresses how the faith-based institution impacts students who experience spiritual struggle or loss. Research indicates that the literal and metaphorical environment of a school impacts student success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005); faith-based institutions must assure that their campus environment promotes success for all students.

Purpose Statement

The current phenomenological study examined the relationship between the Christian college environment and students who have experienced spiritual struggle while in college. This research particularly addressed the contributing factors to spiritual struggle, the experience of students within a faith-based institution who spiritually struggle, and the impact of the community on students during spiritual struggle. The research provided insight student development professionals and university faculty who desire to support and challenge (Sanford, 1966) students who experience spiritual struggle and foster holistic development. This research attempted to answer the following three questions:

- 1) What factors contribute to spiritual struggle or spiritual loss for students at a faith-based institution?

- 2) What is the experience of students that spiritually struggle at a faith-based institution?
- 3) What aspects of the faith-based institution support or challenge students experiencing spiritual struggle?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Increased Study of Spirituality and Religion in College Students

College student spirituality has recently received attention in developmental literature and higher education research. Before this resurgence in the study and emphasis of college student spirituality, colleges and universities generally assumed that the goals of higher education to increase critical thinking and empirical knowledge cooperated with the development of spirituality and meaning-making (Kronman, 2007; Love & Talbot, 1999; Parks, 1986, 2000.) However, in recent years, the literature has indicated that the topic of spirituality has become of increasing interest and relevance to college students. The college years operate as a unique time to make meaning and connect belief with behavior in the world (Garber, 1996; Parks, 2000). Student affairs professionals recognize that students benefit from engaging questions of meaning and purpose. Studies have found a positive association between religious engagement and well-being (Bowman & Small, 2012) and also between religiosity and psychological adjustment (Hackeny & Sanders, 2003). Shafer (1997) found that having a sense of meaning and purpose inversely relates to personal distress among college students. Finally, educators also recognize benefits to holistic development; Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) demonstrated that spiritual growth in college students “enhances other college outcomes, such as academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership development, and

satisfaction with college” (p. 10). There exists not only increasing interest by college students in topics of spirituality and meaning-making but also psychological and educational gains for students who engage these topics.

Religion and Spirituality among Emerging Adults

Current literature examines such areas as religion, religiosity, religious affiliation, spirituality, and faith; in recent years, studies have addressed the relationship between these topics and emerging adulthood and higher education. Religion is typically defined as “shared system of beliefs, principles, or doctrines, related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power” (Love, 2011, p. 8). Religiosity represents the measurement of actions—such as attendance of religious services, discussion of religion or spirituality with friends, and prayer—that accompany religious beliefs (Astin et al., 2005.) Religious affiliation implies “stated membership, association, or identification with different major religious traditions and organizations” (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 103). Spirituality typically refers to search for meaning and purpose. Astin et al. (2011) classified spirituality as “the values that we hold... our sense of who we are and where we come from... beliefs about why we are here- the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life- and our sense of connectedness” (p. 4). Lastly, Fowler (1981) introduced an identification of faith into the developmental literature, and Parks (1986, 2000) further defined and developed the concept as a way to make sense and meaning in the world.

Even though the search for meaning and purpose remains a high priority, the literature indicates a gap between spirituality and religion among college students and emerging adults in the twenty-first century. According to data from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) (Astin et al., 2005), although 79% of college students believe

in God, only 28% pray daily. Arnett and Jensen (2002), whose work on emerging adulthood prompted extensive study of this generation, found that, while emerging adults remain skeptical of religious institutions, they value religious beliefs. These beliefs have become highly individualized, an unsurprising outcome given the generation's emphasis on individualism and identity exploration. Additionally, studies on emerging adults found that about 70% of emerging adults attend religious services less frequently than during their adolescence (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). However, only about 20% report religion as less important in their lives, and only about 17% disaffiliate from religion.

Smith and Snell (2009) found that only 15% of emerging adults self-identify as "committed traditionalists" who embrace and articulate a strong, internalized religious commitment. Chief characteristics of these emerging adults include "inner piety and personal moral integrity" (p. 166). The researchers found that 30% of emerging adults fall into the category of "selective adherents," about 15% into the "spiritually open" category, 25% as "religiously indifferent," 5% as "spiritually disconnected," and 10% as "irreligious."

Relationship between Higher Education and Religious Beliefs

Studies have continued to examine the relationship between higher education and religious beliefs; while conventional wisdom and earlier research would assume that college attendance has an aversive effect on religious beliefs, more recent studies suggest that the relationship does not operate as inversely as previously thought (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Studies have reported those with a bachelor's degree as actually the least likely to report a decrease in the importance of religion in their lives, compared to those with an associate's degree or those without a college education (Uecker et al., 2007).

Additionally, one study found that those without a college education had the highest rates of decreased religiosity. While college students are more likely to experience religious doubts than non-students, they are less likely to stop believing in a personal God than non-students (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011.)

In a particular study, religious service attendance negatively associated with the belief that multiple religions may be true, as well as the construction of an individualistic religion (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). The study also found that religious service participation, as opposed to college attendance, serves as a deterrent for the liberalization of religious beliefs. Strong parental relationships also negatively correlated with religious liberalization.

One study with nationally representative data found that, in comparison to other areas of personal growth, college students observed the lowest growth in the development of their own religious values, as well as an understanding of the religious values of others; additionally, they reported that college had among the lowest impact in this area of their growth (Graham & Cockriel, 1996). Clydesdale (2007) utilized the image of a “lockbox” to describe college students’ unexamined and relatively unchanged view of faith after their first year of college.

Research reveals that college students become less religiously active during the college years, indicated by decreased religious service attendance, discussion of religion, participation in religious organizations or clubs, and prayer. Even though religious engagement decreases during college, students’ interest and integration of spirituality in their lives increases during the college years (Astin et al., 2005; Astin et al., 2011; Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003). Studies also have indicated that, while these behavioral

indicators of religiosity decrease during the first three semesters of college, the importance of religious beliefs on average remains stable during college (Stoppa & Lefkowitz, 2010). Some studies even have suggested an increase in religious convictions during college (Lee, 2002). Small and Bowman (2011) found that students who attend a Protestant institution have higher gains in religious commitment than those who attend a secular institution. The literature provides a more nuanced examination of the relationship between higher education and religious beliefs.

Changes in Religious Identity

Research reveals the trend among emerging adults of switching religious affiliations. Smith and Snell (2009) found that only 64% of 13-17-year-old participants who identified as conservative Protestants and only 50% who identified as mainline Protestants maintained that religious affiliation five years later. About 15% of participants ages 13-17 who identified as conservative Protestants and 24% of those who identified as mainline Protestants identified as nonreligious five years later. Loveland (2003) found that education, geographic mobility, marriage outside the faith, age, race, lapse of religious practice, and conservative Protestantism correspond with switching religious affiliation during adulthood. Studies have shown that childhood religious socialization has little effect on religious switching (Loveland, 2003) or religious attendance and beliefs during emerging adulthood (Arnett & Jensen, 2002).

Spiritual Struggle or Loss of Faith

The study of spiritual or religious struggle among college students has received increased attention in developmental literature and higher education research following the interest and study of college student spirituality. Bryant and Astin (2008) defined

spiritual struggle as “intrapyschic concerns about matters of faith, purpose, and meaning in life” (p. 2). According to this scale, spiritual struggle involves a) questioning religious or spiritual beliefs; b) feeling unsettled about beliefs; c) wrestling with difficult topics, such as suffering and death; d) experiencing anger towards God; e) being disillusioned about one’s religious upbringing. Parks (2000) used the metaphor of a “shipwreck” to describe experiences that “rip into the fabric of life” and cause a “collapse of self, world, and ‘God’” (p. 28).

Most major world religions recognize struggle as an expected and essential part of the journey (Pergament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). Additionally, theories and research on college student spirituality both identify spiritual struggle as a component of college student spiritual development. Many developmental theories (Erikson, 1980; Marcia, 1966) have identified crises that, if overcome by the individual, lead to growth. Theories of spiritual development articulated by Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000) both recognized the presence of crisis in the faith development process.

Spiritual struggle among college students appears relatively common, especially during a developmental period when individuals explore their beliefs and identity (Erikson, 1980). A national survey (Astin, 2004) indicated that two-third of students question spiritual or religious beliefs at least occasionally, and 68% feel unsettled about spiritual or religious matters to some extent. One survey (Johnson & Hayes, 2003) revealed that 26% of college students experience considerable distress due to religious and spiritual problems.

Current literature examines various types and factors of spiritual struggle. Pergament et al. (2005) identified three broad types of spiritual struggle within the Judeo-

Christian tradition: interpersonal, intrapsychic, and Divine. These categories identify the source of spiritual struggles in an individual's relationship with others, with oneself, and with God. These three categories emerged in a phenomenological study of college students' spiritual struggles (Rockenbach, Walker, & Luzader, 2012). This study revealed the concept of encountering contrast as a major underlying theme of spiritual struggle. The study identified three forms of contrast: within self or "possible selves" (p. 62), in relationship with others, and with one's perception of the world. In each of the three realms, students experienced dissonance between their ideals and reality; the researchers noted that students experience spiritual struggle in "moments of transition, complexity, and paradox" (p. 69).

Bryant and Astin (2008) identified correlates of spiritual struggle and found that spiritual struggle associated with being a religious minority, being female, attending an Evangelical or Catholic university, converting to another religion, being on a spiritual quest, and majoring in psychology. In another study, significant spiritual or religious distress correlated with confusion about beliefs, loss of a relationship, sexual assault, homesickness, and suicidal thoughts and feelings (Johnson & Hayes, 2003). Parks (2000) not only highlighted many of the same life crises that can lead to "metaphorical shipwreck" (p. 28) in college students but also identified abstract crises, such as "defeat of a cause, betrayal by a community or government, or the discovery that an intellectual construct is inadequate" (p. 28) as contributing factors. Both circumstantial and existential factors contribute to "shipwreck" and a time of question and uncertainty about spiritual or religious beliefs, meaning, and purpose.

Pergament et al. (2005) noted that “a narrow, undifferentiated spiritual orientation” (p. 252) unable to engage topics of suffering and evil also makes an individual unprepared to face difficult circumstances and more vulnerable to spiritual struggle. Certain perceptions of God also correlated with spiritual struggle; the perception of God as “teacher,” “divine mystery,” and “a universal spirit” correlated with higher levels of spiritual struggle, whereas descriptions of God as “beloved,” “protector,” and “part of me” (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 15) connected to lower levels of spiritual struggle. The former represent God as a detached and uninvolved presence, while the latter identify God as a relational and loving being.

Academics can become a primary source for spiritual struggle among college students (Fisler et al., 2009). Formal and informal academics experiences, both on campus and abroad, enable students to ask questions, engage new perspectives, and challenge formerly held beliefs. The increase in exposure and exploration can lead to spiritual struggle or skepticism of beliefs, convictions, and assumptions. Astin et al. (2011) found that students studying the humanities, fine arts, or social sciences are more likely to question spiritual or religious beliefs, feel unsettled about spiritual or religious matters, or feel disillusioned about religious upbringing than students in other fields. They also found that students who engage academically or encounter ideological diversity in the classroom or abroad are more likely to experience spiritual struggle.

College attendance and completion does not associate with a reduced preference for institutionalized religion but rather an increase in skepticism of super-empirical Christian beliefs, such as the belief in God, angels, demons, and an afterlife, and a decrease in exclusivist beliefs (Hill, 2011). In addition to diminishing exclusivist beliefs,

a college education also associates with lower levels of Biblical literalism (Schwadel, 2011). Religious engagement and religious skepticism relate inversely (Small & Bowman, 2011).

Spiritual struggle associates with a range of emotional, physical, and psychological effects for students. Fisler et al. (2009) identified the “conflicting emotions including pain, fear, frustration, and liberation” (p. 266) experienced by those who have lost their faith. Spiritual struggle also correlates with psychological distress, including feelings of depression, anxiety, or stress, and poorer physical health (Bryant & Astin, 2008). The literature also reveals that, while spiritual struggle can have negative consequences for the individual experiencing the struggle, positive effects also can result if the individual experiences “personal transformations” (Rockenback et al., 2012, p. 68) and gains greater self-awareness and conviction of belief.

While former studies (Bryant & Astin, 2008) emphasized some of the physical and psychological consequences of spiritual struggle, other research (Pargament et al., 2005; Parks, 2000; Rockenbach et al., 2012) demonstrated positive outcomes of spiritual struggle that occur as a student explores, reflects, and makes meaning following the struggle. Parks (2000) identified the “gladness” (p. 29) that one experiences after surviving the metaphorical “shipwreck” (p. 28); this “gladness on the other side of shipwreck arises from an embracing, complex kind of knowing that is experienced as a more trustworthy understanding of reality in both its beauty and terror” (p. 30). The shattering of one’s faith can precipitate “transformation” (p. 29) and a fuller, more complete understanding of self, the world, and God if one perseveres through the struggle. Fisler et al. (2009) identified four outcomes of spiritual struggle:

“recommitment” to original spiritual beliefs; “readjustment,” which indicates a shift in authority; “blending” by synthesizing new ideas with former beliefs; and “loss of faith” (p. 266-267).

Despite the fact that a majority of students within a faith-based institution experience significant spiritual growth and increasing commitment to faith during college (Fankhauser, 2012; Ma, 2003), some students experience spiritual struggle that results in a loss of faith during college. Bryant and Astin (2008) found that students at faith-based institutions more likely experience spiritual struggle than students at other institutional types. While no definitive explanations apparently exist for this phenomenon, Bryant and Astin (2008) postulated that the emphasis on religion at these institutions encourages continual reflection, examination, and analysis of one’s own beliefs, which may increase spiritual questions or spiritual struggle. The authors also suggested the possibility that students who internally disagree with the normative campus culture may experience increased struggle. With regards to this phenomenon, Astin et al. (2011) pointed out the impact of peer culture on spiritual struggle at a more religious institution; students who share spiritual struggles or questions with each other may more likely question their own beliefs.

The literature on spirituality and college student development defines spiritual struggle quite broadly, since the struggle often accompanies cognitive and developmental processes already occurring as students seek their own identity and develop new patterns of thinking about their beliefs and convictions. The UCLA study (Astin et al., 2005; Bryant & Astin, 2008) identified different aspects of spiritual struggle—from disillusionment about religious upbringing, to anger at God, to questioning or a feeling of

unrest about beliefs or existential questions. Spiritual struggle commonly appears among college students, as 18% of students in the UCLA study reported that they frequently questioned spiritual beliefs, and 16% felt unsettled about beliefs “to a great extent” (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 12). However, research has indicated that students reach different conclusions or commitments following the crisis. One study at a public institution (Fisler et al., 2009) examined the continuum of outcomes of spiritual struggle, which includes recommitting to former religious beliefs, synthesizing old and new beliefs, and finally, losing one’s faith.

Institutional Mission of Faith-Based Institutions

The presence of spiritual struggle and crisis also appears on faith-based campuses; this topic of spiritual loss is arguably more critical for faith-based institutions, since a huge component of their mission focuses on encouraging and fostering spiritual growth and development. In Holmes’ classic work, *The Idea of a Christian College* (1987), he pointed out that a Christian college offers “an education that cultivates the creative and active integration of faith and learning, of faith and culture” (p. 6). Besides the intentional integration of faith and learning, a focus on a “Christ-centered education” and the belief that “All truth is God’s truth” (Litfin, 2004, pg. 127) prevails at Christian institutions. The idea of “formation” also operates inherently within these institutions; schools commit to forming and shaping students academically, spiritually, and vocationally. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) functions as an “international association of intentionally Christ-centered colleges and universities” with 115 members in the United States (“Profile,” n.d.). Among the unifying characteristics of its members

stands the focus on Christ-centered education, as well as a commitment to hire only Christian full time faculty and staff.

The mission statements of schools within the CCCU demonstrate the institutional commitment to shape students both intellectually and spiritually; within the spiritual realm lies a focus on spiritual formation, as well an emphasis on graduating students who will shape and influence the world as servants, leaders, and Christians. Institutions strive to develop “grateful servants,” “servant leaders,” “Christian character,” “effective Christians,” and the “mind and character” of students, who upon graduation will “minister Christ’s love and truth,” “impact the world for the Lord Jesus Christ,” serve “church and society,” and engage “the academy, church, and world.” These institutions strive to prepare students who not only have “intellectual maturity” or training within their field but who also demonstrate a commitment to serve God and society after their time in college.

The literature indicates that, while college students and emerging adults have an increased interest in topics of spirituality and meaning-making, they become less religiously active during the college years and also become prone to questions, doubts, and uncertainties about their religious beliefs and convictions. College students at faith-based institutions more likely experience spiritual struggle, despite the institution’s religious identity and commitment. The topic of spiritual struggle or loss has become more crucial for the consideration of faith-based institutions, as a central part of their work and mission emphasizes the fostering of spiritual development and increased commitment.

Chapter 3

Methods

The present qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to examine the topic of spiritual struggle within the context of a faith-based institution. A phenomenological approach “involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive description that provides the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The researcher determined that this approach would best allow participants to reflect on their individual experiences of spiritual struggle at a faith-based institution and share the specific factors of their experience with the researcher. Though spiritual struggle is not an unusual or atypical occurrence for college students (Astin et al., 2011), and while research highlights students at faith-based institutions as more inclined to experience spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008), the experiences of individual students vary greatly. A phenomenological approach enabled individual participants to articulate their unique experience of spiritual struggle at a faith-based institution. The researcher analyzed and interpreted these experiences of spiritual struggle to better understand this specific phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985).

Participants

Six upperclassmen students or recent graduates from a small, faith-based, liberal arts university in the Midwest served as the participants in the current study. This

university has a strong emphasis on the integration of faith and learning, as well as the cultivation of an intentional Christian community. The researcher recruited three female participants and three male participants for the present study with the assistance of university faculty and student affairs staff members who have regular interaction with upperclassmen students. The researcher asked faculty and staff to identify and contact students who had experienced spiritual struggle during their time in college.

In order to define the broad concept of spiritual struggle for the recruitment process, the researcher used the same identifiers of spiritual struggle as those determined by Bryant and Astin (2008). This scale defines spiritual struggle in the following ways: a) questioning religious or spiritual beliefs; b) feeling unsettled about beliefs; c) wrestling with difficult topics, such as suffering and death; d) experiencing anger towards God; and e) being disillusioned about one's religious upbringing. The researcher provided faculty and staff with this definition, as well as the research questions and information about the purpose and intended benefits of the study. The researcher encouraged faculty and staff to contact students at any stage of the struggle or crisis, ranging from those who had just recently begun to experience spiritual struggle to those who had resolved it. The faculty and staff communicated information about the purpose and procedure of the research study to potential participants and provided the researcher with the names and contact information of willing participants.

Procedure

The researcher received IRB approval and contacted the participants recruited by faculty and staff. The researcher then collected data through individual interviews with each participant; each interview lasted on average about one hour. Before conducting the

interview, the researcher explained again the purpose and procedure of the study, reviewed the informed consent form, and obtained signatures from participants. The open-ended interview questions as well as relevant follow-up questions guided each interview (see Appendix). The researcher designed the interview questions to collect data about each participant's experience of spiritual struggle, including contributing factors to the spiritual crisis, the experience of the participant at the faith-based institution, and the impact of the university community on the participant's experience of spiritual struggle. The researcher conducted two pilot interviews to test the protocol questions and interview structure. The pilot interviews demonstrated the effectiveness of the protocol questions and enabled the researcher to collect relevant and rich data. Due to the high quality of the pilot interviews, the researcher did not alter or change the structure or design of subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

The researcher audio recorded and transcribed the interviews. After reviewing all transcriptions and further analyzing the experiences described by the participants, the researcher coded the data (Creswell, 2008). The researcher then reduced the codes to a small number of emerging themes. To validate the findings, the researcher triangulated the data among other studies and among other investigators to ensure that the themes did align with the data. The researcher utilized member checking and asked one male participant and one female participant to review the themes and findings to confirm their validity.

Chapter 4

Results

The present qualitative, phenomenological study examined the topic of spiritual struggle or loss within a faith-based institution. The researcher conducted one-hour interviews with six participants, all either upperclassmen or recent graduates of a small, faith-based institution in the Midwest. The researcher transcribed, coded, and themed the interviews in order to examine the essence of the struggle and experience within the faith-based institution. This section examines themes, as well as narrative elements, that emerged from the interviews.

Religious Upbringing

While the theme of religious upbringing did not emerge as the strongest theme in the study, this finding strongly influenced the other themes and provided helpful background information about the participants and their experiences of spiritual struggle. This theme strongly informed the data analysis, as well as the implications of the study.

All six participants in the study grew up in conservative, Protestant families. During the interviews, the participants described the centrality of church and Christian teaching in their upbringing and described the way Christian beliefs and practices shaped and guided their parents' actions and decisions. As Sebastian pointed out, "I grew up in a Christian home, my parents are both Christian, went to church every Sunday, my dad was [a Church leader]... I like grew up going to church like three times a week."

Some of the participants commented on the lack of alternative viewpoints or perspectives in their lives with regards to religion and faith during their upbringing. They only realized the insularity of their upbringing after going to college. Natalie pointed out,

I guess I grew up with religion like everywhere... Yeah, it was, I don't think that I really realized it like at the time, but I was very like surrounded by it and I just like thought that was how everyone is. This is where everywhere is. But that's, I mean, not true.

While describing his deeply conservative upbringing, Matt commented that he only knew two individuals who “were not Christians, but those were the only people I knew and they were kinda off in a way.”

Christian beliefs and ideals also influenced the participants' educational and social lives during childhood and adolescence. Five of the six participants participated actively in their youth groups, with Christian friends as a primary peer group before college. Matt and Mariah attended private Christian schools from kindergarten through the end of high school. Ashley was homeschooled in a Christian home and then attended a Christian high school. Paul spent part of his childhood abroad while his parents served as missionaries. Religion and faith played a major role in participants' lives prior to college, shaping the social and, for some, the academic environments of the participants and their families.

Reexamination of Religious Beliefs and Framework

The identification of college as a place to reexamine religious beliefs and convictions emerged as the strongest theme in the study. Paul even entered college with the assumption that “college is where you do the grand questioning.” The participants

discussed the realization early in college that their strong religious upbringing had shaped their beliefs and convictions, which led them to question the reasons and extent to which they held those beliefs themselves. Mariah pointed out,

I think it just came to a point where I had looked back at my life was just like, wow, I've literally just been bombarded with Christianese my whole life, and bombarded with religion, and stuff like that, and so I think it came to a point where I was like, ok, so this is everything that I've been told about like, who I am as a Christian and like just everything I've been told about who God is and what Christianity is, but like, what do I actually believe based on my experiences or like lack of an experience?

The realization that Christianity had surrounded her throughout her entire life caused Mariah to ask questions about her identity and her personal beliefs. The beliefs and convictions she had taken for granted during her upbringing in a Christian family and Christian school suddenly caused her to feel critical of her religious identity and upbringing. The new environment in college functioned as a time for these students to ask hard questions and challenge the beliefs of their upbringings in a different setting.

Other participants also identified experiences in college that led them to reexamine their own personal beliefs and convictions. Natalie's semester abroad caused her to question the beliefs of her white, middle class, American upbringing. The time away from close friends and family, as well as her exposure to a significantly different religious expression, caused her to question the norms and beliefs of her own religious and cultural background. As she pointed out, "I got to talk to people like [abroad] a lot about how they see things. And it was just interesting to me that they see the world in a

very different way than I had seen the world.” In response to some conversations that revealed different cultural assumptions and truths, Natalie commented,

I wonder if I think that because I was born in America, and so I started thinking about all of these things and I like I wonder if all these other values I have are because of where I lived and grew up and if I grew up here would I have different values?

Natalie’s exposure to other values and beliefs caused her to analyze the social constructs that impacted her own religious framework.

Matt described the experience of being in a new environment in college and stated, “It was only in the absence of family, friends, and church constantly reinforcing ideas that I was even able to conceive of the possibility of God not being real in a serious way.” The college experience allowed Matt to explore questions of faith and identity away from his family and home church. He pointed out that in college he began to “read about like other views,” which caused him to question the beliefs of his upbringing. Paul pointed out that “being in an academic setting allows you to think in a more sort of academic way... that’s what was necessitated for me to actually bring up these larger thoughts.”

Ashley’s case appeared more unique, as she delayed early questions about faith and practice until later on in her college career. Upon entering college, Ashley realized some of her own faith practices differed from those of her peers. During the first few years of college, she adopted many of the faith practices of her peers; however, during her senior year, she began to question the extent to which she desired to maintain the faith practices she had adopted. She commented, “It didn’t really become apparent until

senior year that I wasn't really sure if I actually believed everything I guess my life had kind of become." The participants began to experience questions and spiritual struggle during the first two years of college, partially due to a new environment, as well as space away from their upbringing in which to ask challenging questions.

All six participants discussed the personal or intellectual factors that prompted them to question or challenge their formerly held beliefs and convictions. In Sebastian and Natalie's case, specific circumstances prompted new questions about faith and God. For Sebastian, the deaths of a few friends and family members in high school and college sparked questions and anger about God's goodness and justice. He began wrestling with these questions before college, but continued to feel unsettled about them as he experienced more personal tragedy in college. After experiencing the deaths of two close friends and family members, Sebastian felt quite angry and frustrated towards God and recollected, "I was like, well, forget this God, you are taking everyone I care about and cares about me away." In Natalie's case, a cross-cultural experience prompted questions about the degree to which her cultural lens had shaped her faith beliefs and personal identity. She described how her study abroad experience

gave me a chance to reevaluate like, who do I want to be? And take away my parents and my family and my friends all from back home and just like ignore that for a little while and say... am I who I am because I want to be? Or because people are telling me to?

Upon arrival back to the university campus, Natalie continued to wrestle with these questions about identity and faith.

Ashley, who had delayed some early questions about faith and practice, experienced spiritual struggle during her senior year in college in the midst of many simultaneous transitions. With regards to the spiritual questions she and her friends experienced, she commented,

I think a lot of questions started coming about because I was a senior, had a bad summer, friend groups were changing, my living situation was changing, on top of that, in a few months everything was going to change... with so many things changing, so many things seem really uncertain and [the struggle] just kind of came at that time because that was the stage of life we were in.

During a time of transition filled with questions and uncertainty, Ashley began to reflect more on her faith and ask “is this even what I want my life to be, is this even what I believe?”

In Matt and Paul’s cases, the reexamination of former beliefs did not become prompted by specific circumstances but rather by new questions or knowledge that did not fit their old paradigm. Matt, who grew up in a highly fundamental church and family, recalled reading statistics early in college about different faith practices, as well as low religiosity, in certain parts of the world and wrestling with questions of hell and eternal damnation. He described how the conception of hell he had while growing up – “fire and brimstone, burning torture, that sort of thing” – led him to ask questions about God and religion. As he began to research and read more by non-Christian writers, he began asking, “How there could be good people who weren’t Christians?” These new questions caused Matt to assess many of his preconceived ideas and convictions. He stated,

Like someone pulled a string, so many of my unique Christian beliefs, as well as beliefs gained as a Christian on the age of earth, on evolution, use of genesis, reliability in the history of the Bible, on views of the gospels, on the origin of the universe, on the origin of humanity, on sin, nature, morality, purpose, Jesus, God, on religion in general, on knowledge, on epistemology, on evidence, on eternal life, on hell, on heaven, on happiness, and joy and hope, on secular worldviews... on hedonists, on unselfishness, on empathy, on sex, on sexuality, on character, on identity, on hell... on so many more began to unravel.

As Matt's paradigm and understanding of the Christian faith began to falter, he realized he had to reexamine his belief and identity with regards to this vast range of topics. He did not compartmentalize his spiritual struggle from his worldview and personal beliefs but recognized a need to rethink his beliefs in light of a changing framework. After an extended period of searching, in which God felt very silent, Matt concluded he had lost his faith and no longer subscribed to Christianity. Because Matt chose to abandon his old paradigm, he realized,

I had to build a new world to live in. The afterlife, ideas of divine love, providence, and communications, [the university's] Christian community, none of these things provided comfort or support anymore. Slowly my habits, my patterns of thought, and my hopes and dreams all began to change.

Matt confronted realities and new truths that did not synthesize with his old paradigm, which led to an intense period of spiritual struggle and the eventual resolution in a completely new paradigm and spiritual identity.

Paul also wrestled with the question of hell and new questions that created dissonance with the framework of his upbringing. Growing up with an interest in science, Paul had learned to compartmentalize his faith convictions with questions of scientific evidence and evolution. Speaking about his understanding of faith and science upon entering college, Paul stated, “So at that point, up until then, I’d done a good job of compartmentalizing the two... and not really wanting to let the two collide because I was afraid of what might happen.” Once in college, Paul decided to “let those walls kind of collapse and see what happened” in an effort to maintain intellectual integrity with faith. Paul described how many peers did not engage large difficult questions about evolution, free will, or eternal damnation, and instead had the mindset that “I don’t understand and [those topics] seem really bad but just, give it to the Lord, I mean, Christianity has to be right.” Paul found himself playing Devil’s Advocate, both to his friends, but more importantly, to himself. College became a time to search for a model that accounted for intellectual truths and nuance.

All the participants discussed a reexamination of religious beliefs in college prompted by circumstances or a new environment. This reexamination caused participants to ask questions about their own beliefs, as well as their individual identity.

Frustration towards Religious Culture on Campus

The participants all expressed some degree of frustration or unease towards the religious culture on their campus. In the midst of spiritual struggle, participants felt frustrated towards their friends, classmates, and chapel speakers for accepting faith without engaging with uncertainty or doubt. Mariah described her frustration towards the spiritual atmosphere on campus that she identified as “fake” and “cheesy,” while Paul

identified the spiritual atmosphere as intellectually “disingenuous” at times. Mariah felt “annoyed” towards the Christian community and claimed,

People just aren't honest or true to like themselves or like really think about what they believe... the whole Christian community of like, I don't know, like Bible studies, reading your Bible, and everything is cheesy... it just seems really fake to me.

Mariah's frustration directed itself towards the religious culture on campus that seemed both “cheesy” and an “overload of like Christianity and restraints.”

Paul primarily expressed a frustration towards a lack of intellectual integrity in the belief systems of many peers and friends within the college community. He expressed surprise that, despite the fact that many of his peers were “really, really smart, some people that are doing great things... people who have been on [cross-cultural missions trips],” faith appeared very “simple” to them. Larger questions about evolution, hell, free will, and other difficult topics did not seem to phase or affect many of his peers. Many of these peers clung to the beliefs of their upbringing and did not challenge themselves or wrestle with the complexities of faith and the world.

Selective Openness Regarding Spiritual Struggle

None of the participants shared their spiritual struggle or questions with the majority of people in their social or academic spheres but instead chose to confide in a select few friends, faculty members, or counselors in the campus counseling center. The participants did not appear outspoken individuals on issues of doubt or struggle but rather wrestled with their questions and uncertainties with a very small group of trusted peers

and mentors. As Matt explained, he initially did not tell his professors about his loss of faith due to

A lot of uncertainty with coming out with something which is not generally approved by the community around you, especially when you hear bad stories from the Internet and elsewhere about going to hell, or being kicked out of their parents home, disowned, that sort of thing, so you have to evaluate. You end up evaluating these things in your head over and over again.

Matt's fear of rejection and other perceived consequences prevented him from communicating honestly with peers and contributed to his withdrawal from others in the community. Besides telling a counselor and a professor, Matt did not share his spiritual struggles with other peers.

The other participants talked more honestly with select friends about their spiritual frustrations and struggles. Some described seeking out like-minded friends who shared some of the same questions and frustrations. Ashley pointed out that, during the time of spiritual struggle, her "friend group changed a little bit and included some people who all, who appeared more cynical about life in general but also about Christianity." Mariah also pointed out that she "thought of myself longing to be around people who were more like, in the same state as I was... I don't know how to put it, but like, the like bad students." Paul comments that, while he never explicitly came out and shared his specific struggles until after graduation, he noticed that he "seemed to befriend the misfits... at least social misfits, deemed by probably the majority of [the institution's] campus, because in my mind, those were the people that really had questions that you know, didn't have this puritanical view." While Paul did not talk explicitly with peers

about his struggles, he did have more honest conversations with various professors regarding his spiritual questions and struggles. The participants all found a small network of trusted individuals to share and discuss their questions and spiritual frustrations.

Despite their security in sharing with this small group of individuals, the participants all discussed the need to hide their spiritual struggles from the greater campus or residential community. Most participants discussed the ways in which they hid their questions and struggles from others. Sebastian discussed how he invested in the social life on campus but disengaged from the spiritual atmosphere. While he had close friends with whom he shared his honest thoughts and frustrations, he described that “unless I got really close to someone I never really told them about stuff. And so...I have a lot of surface level friends, and so like, that was kind of how I, I still stayed in the [university] community.” Natalie also described “keeping relationships at a surface level” in order to keep the image that she still believed the things others assumed she believed.

Some participants described the sense that they pretended to believe things in order to appeal to the campus community. Natalie continued to stay involved with small groups and other spiritual aspects on campus but did not disclose any of her deeper questions and struggles. She participated in Bible studies but commented that she would “sometimes say things that I don’t even know if I believe but I’m like, if I still believed the things I say that I believed then I would say these things.” Later, she admitted that she worried about how others would respond to her questions or uncertainties about spiritual beliefs. After discussing this fear, she stated, “I avoid that problem by actually pretending to believe the things if I need to.” Matt echoed this idea and also used the verbs “pretend”

or “play along” to describe his participation with peers in a spiritual setting. He commented,

It’s kind of like I’m frozen where I was a Christian back in high school and early [college]... I can’t really say what I actually think and, lots and lots of pretend... I can’t let people know. Um, I have to play along.

This idea of maintaining a certain image or withholding deeper thoughts or uncertainties in the campus community appeared evident in all interviews.

Perception and Reality of Community Acceptance

The participants described the phenomenon that, despite the presence of a commonly held perception that the institution remained open to spiritual questions and struggle, this perception did not translate to reality. This nuance or gap between perception and reality often seemed subconscious or mysterious to the participants themselves. Even as they described it, it appeared difficult to pinpoint why this gap existed. Mariah found the gap to be evidence of hypocrisy and stated, “I mean, people say all the time, like, ‘Not everyone [at this university] is a Christian,’ but its like, we don’t act like that. We act like everyone is a Christian.” She expressed frustration that some clichés or mantras of Christians on campus did not line up with individual attitudes towards spiritual doubt and questioning.

Others identified this gap at a broader structural level. Both Natalie and Paul found the institution open to questioning and critical thinking, especially in comparison to the churches of their upbringing. Their experiences with professors and courses demonstrated the openness of the institution to questioning and critical thinking. However, despite this view that the institution welcomed questions and alternative ideas,

they still perceived the student body as more narrow minded or closed off to questions.

Natalie described,

Theoretically in my mind [the institution] is a very open place and open to questioning and open to people questioning. Like, I know people talk about there being atheists who come here, I don't know any, but a place where people won't judge you for asking questions but will like appreciate that you're asking the questions, um, but I guess I still sometimes, like, as an institution I think that might be accurate, but even around some students I feel like maybe its just like, I don't know, I feel like I am afraid of being judged, even though, I don't know, it doesn't seem like that would be the case at [this institution], it still is an issue somehow.

Paul identified that the “overlying theme of [the institution] seem to be more welcoming of questioning.” However, this concept contrasted with his observation of the “simple” faith of his peers remaining “unwavering” even in the midst of questions or topics that posed a threat to this paradigm. This gap between the perception of the institution as an open place and the actual experience of students with questions and doubts seemed greatly illuminating and could lead to further research.

Support from Faculty and Staff

All the participants identified faculty or staff members within the university who supported and/or challenged them during their spiritual struggle. Participants identified both personal and intellectual ways in which professors provided support. Ashley identified several staff members as “all really understanding people instead of being judgmental.” She commented, “It was helpful to be able to talk with someone who wasn't

like a best friend or something, that they kind of have an outside opinion.” Matt also identified a “very understanding” faculty member who “did probably 99% listening” to his various questions and struggles. Sebastian shared his story and spiritual struggles with his hall director, who reassured him that “doubting is a great part of your faith.” Regarding that conversation, Sebastian commented, “That was a big, that statement, just hit me and I was like, well, that’s good, at least I am in a decent place right now.” The simple affirmation of spiritual doubts as healthy and normal changed Sebastian’s perspective on his current state.

Participants also discussed intellectual ways in which professors challenged them in their thinking. Paul commented that the fact that some professors at the institution ably integrate their faith with scientific theories, such as evolution, became a support to him because this posture demonstrated that “integrity is being pursued, and we’re not going to shy away from the tough questions just because they force us to reconsider things.” Natalie remembered one day that a professor critiqued a chapel message given earlier that day. She recalled, “I was like, you can do that? I didn’t know that was a thing... what they say isn’t always true?” This professor demonstrated the importance of thinking critically about faith and the absorption of truth. Natalie also identified the ways in which this same professor challenged her to continue wrestling with spiritual questions, rather than resigning herself to apathy or a position of being “undecided.” Matt and Paul also identified professors who appeared open to intellectual conversations about faith and spiritual struggles. The participants found faculty and staff members helpful for both personal and intellectual support during times of spiritual struggle.

Conclusion

Participants in the current study all grew up in Christian environments and entered college with a strong sense of religious commitment and conviction. During the course of their four years in college, various factors led the participants to reexamine the faith of their adolescence, which became insufficient in the midst of new questions, complexities, life circumstances, or intellectual concepts. As the participants wrestled to reconcile their questions and uncertainties, they felt unease towards the religious culture on campus. They perceived the faith of many peers as foreclosed and unexamined, which contributed to the participants' frustration and sense of alienation within the community. The participants shared their struggles with a small number of trusted individuals, including close peers and at least one faculty or staff member. Though the participants believed the institution seemed open to questions and spiritual struggle, they felt uncertain about how individuals within the institution would receive their questions and uncertainties. Finally, faculty and staff members played a significant role in creating an environment that supported and challenged the participants during their spiritual struggle.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The reexamination of spiritual beliefs and identity parallels developmental changes that occur when individuals transition from adolescence to adulthood. For traditional college students, this transition between adolescence and adulthood occurs at the beginning of the college experience. For college students on a residential campus, this transition occurs not only at the beginning of college but also in an environment away from parents, family, and other support networks. Drawing from development theories (Marcia, 1966; Erikson, 1980), the participants in the present study faced a “crisis” that required them to ask questions about their religious beliefs, convictions, and upbringings. With the exception of one participant, none had committed to a new spiritual identity but continued to search and wrestle with beliefs and identity.

The work of Parks (2000) described the challenges of faith and meaning making during young adulthood. After identifying various personal or intellectual factors that create dissonance in one’s faith, she commented that “this kind of experience can suddenly rip into the fabric of life, or it may slowly yet just as surely unravel the meanings that have served as the home of the soul” (p. 28). The participants in the current study identified the factors that ripped into their “fabric of life” and rendered their initial faith paradigms and ways of making meaning insufficient and incomplete. This realization caused participants to explore and search for new frameworks that addressed

new questions and new truths. One participant articulated this concept when he stated, “I had to build a new world to live in.” Parks stated that, if individuals can “survive shipwreck” (p. 29) or the unraveling of faith paradigms, they will never return to former ways of knowing, but will instead experience “gladness in an enlarged knowing and being, and in a new capacity to act” (p. 29). Parks’ theory and research identified the changing landscape of faith in the lives of young adults and the challenges that precipitate a reexamination of belief.

Using developmental theories as a lens, the participants experienced frustration and resentment towards individuals whom they perceived as “foreclosed.” Despite similar upbringings to many of their peers in the faith-based institution, the participants experienced a type of “crisis” that did not seem to affect or impact the spiritual lives of their peers. While the participants stepped back to assess and analyze their own spiritual beliefs and framework, they perceived that many of their peers unquestioningly accepted the faith of their upbringing without challenge or doubt.

Even though the participants hid their spiritual struggles from the majority of peers and even friends, the participants did not assume that others might be in a comparable spiritual situation. This assumption may indicate the remnants of a personal fable psychology from adolescence, in which individuals view their own situations as unique and uncommon (Elkind, 1967).

The participants’ perception of the lack of spiritual struggle within their peer group raises questions of interpretation. First, the participants may misperceive that the majority of their peers do not struggle with questions of faith or conviction. Just as the participants did not reveal their spiritual questions to most peers, their peers may actually

struggle spiritually as well. This topic of spiritual struggle may occur more prevalently on this faith-based campus than the participants or others struggling with questions of faith expect. This conclusion would raise questions about the reasons for secrecy and the lack of dialogue about questions of faith.

However, participants' perception may possibly be more accurate—that the majority of their peers do not experience the same level of spiritual struggle or reexamination of faith during the college years. In this case, some peers may have adopted an adolescent faith that does not allow for nuance, ambiguity, or doubt, all necessary for a resilient and mature faith. If students in college do not ask big questions about their beliefs and convictions, their faith identity may remain inherited or borrowed, inhibiting a deeper internalization that fosters growth and commitment. While the current study does not seek to prove the accuracy of the participants' perceptions, the findings from the present study do inform implications for educators at faith-based institutions. As much as the presence of spiritual struggle within faith-based institutions necessitates consideration, the lack of struggle raises different questions about the resiliency and sustainability of young adult faith.

Although the participants believed the institution at an abstract level welcomed and encouraged questions about faith, they did not perceive that their peers would accept their spiritual struggles. The divide between perception and behavior likely connects to the cognitive, social, and spiritual maturity of college students. Cognitively, students recognize the diversity of thought in the Christian community, and even begin to experience greater nuance in their own cognitive conceptions during college. However, this cognitive maturity may not connect immediately with social interactions or spiritual

beliefs. Students may trust their own cognitive maturity more than they trust others to think critically and engage nuance.

Faculty and staff played a major role in supporting and challenging students during a time of spiritual struggle. Some participants described the ways in which staff or faculty members identified areas of illogical thinking in their doubts or uncertainties; this involvement helped the participants rethink some of their questions in a new way. In other cases, faculty members served to help participants realize the importance of spiritual doubts or uncertainties for authentic faith. Some faculty members indirectly supported or challenged students by demonstrating an ability to engage with difficult topics or questions in their own academic and intellectual lives. Each participant sought out the support and guidance of at least one staff or faculty member, which reveals a strong degree of trust and hope in the power of that relationship. The faculty and staff members provided a safe and productive space to wrestle with questions and seek resolution.

Implications for Practice

College offers a time of intellectual and spiritual change and growth. For some students, new intellectual ideas and development conflict with spiritual beliefs or convictions, leading to a period of spiritual struggle, uncertainty, and doubt. However, as the participants noted, other students may enter college with a foreclosed view of faith. These students less willingly engage in questions or ambiguities that may challenge or alter prior faith commitments. If one of the primary goals of a faith-based institution is to cultivate a mature and resilient faith for a lifetime of religious commitment, then educators must discern how to best prepare both students who spiritually struggle, and

those who cling to a foreclosed view of faith. Educators must seek to support students experiencing spiritual struggle and also cultivate an environment on campus that fosters questions and a maturing of young adult faith.

First, the curriculum within faith-based institutions should provide students with ways to integrate increased knowledge with previous faith beliefs. Faculty members should not fear asking hard questions or even wrestle with challenging questions and topics themselves. Students in the sciences may particularly experience some of these intellectual and spiritual challenges, as they attempt to synthesize scientific ideas into traditional beliefs about Creation and the Bible. Foundational general education courses may provide opportunities to engage some of these questions in an interdisciplinary way. The general education curriculum requirements should allow students at all developmental stages to engage with questions of faith in an intellectually challenging way that honors integrity and intellectual honesty.

Second, faculty and staff members must create learning environments and learning activities that appropriately challenge and even deconstruct faith convictions and concepts. Challenge and deconstruction should not aim to shatter or destroy a young adult's faith but rather to introduce nuance and the ability to reflect more critically on faith beliefs and convictions. Educators at faith-based institutions have a unique opportunity to refine and strengthen the faith convictions of young adults in a nurturing but also intellectually stimulating environment. For traditional-aged students, the college years bridge adolescence and emerging adulthood and provide opportunities for students to develop self-awareness, maturity, and internalized commitment to an identity. Faculty and staff members must remember that their role includes preparing students to face

ambiguities and complexities within a life of faith. Educators do not prepare students by preserving the brittle and unchallenged faith of their upbringing. Instead, educators best serve students by helping them develop a resilient, mature, and dynamic faith.

Challenge and deconstruction, when met with support, can help students grow in their own understanding and internalization of faith. Faculty and staff must design various learning experiences that create a healthy dissonance and critical reflection of faith. For example, cross-cultural learning experiences, especially in partnership with churches or Christian ministries in other cultural contexts, provide students with a lens of the worldwide church. This type of experience can remind students that faith practices and traditions differ by culture and that human beings express adoration and faithfulness to God in various ways.

Another learning experience that provides reflection and examination of faith convictions involves engagement with individuals who hold different perspectives on faith and action. Opportunities for this type of engagement exist in a large group setting, such as chapel, as well as individual interactions. The chapel setting provides a unique opportunity for students to examine the diversity of expressions and beliefs within the Christian faith. For instance, in a predominantly white, politically conservative, middle class, and Protestant campus community, students benefit from discussion and dialogue with Christians outside of these descriptors. Additionally, a student body that reflects the diversity of the Church in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and denominational affiliation creates an environment in which students learn from differences as they worship and follow the same God.

As much as students benefit from engaging different Christian perspectives, students may also develop greater intellectual and spiritual maturity through discussion and dialogue with individuals outside of the Christian faith. Service learning opportunities and cross-cultural experiences provide avenues to engage with individuals from different faith backgrounds and perspectives. The invitation of speakers or individuals from different religious traditions to campus can also provide forums to dialogue about meaningful and challenging topics. The opportunity to listen to other opinions and articulate one's own questions, beliefs, and perspectives proves an incredibly valuable experience. While these interactions may introduce uncertainty or new questions into students' lives, especially those who have not engaged such perspectives before, students can wrestle with these new ideas and ambiguities in a safe and nurturing environment. If a faith-based institution serves in part to prepare students for faithful action and engagement in an increasingly pluralistic world, educators must take some risks within the faith-based institution to expose students to incongruent and challenging perspectives.

Third, faculty and staff members can help students understand doubt and struggle as a normal part of the faith process. Spiritual struggle comes as an expected part of the Christian faith journey, as evidenced by the lives of the apostles and other Christian leaders throughout time. However, students may not have experienced doubts or uncertainties in their faith before college. The topic may not have received attention or encouragement within their families or churches. Faculty and staff members can support students by reassuring them of the normalcy and even expectation of spiritual doubts and uncertainties in a life of faith. As the saying goes, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but

certainty; students may not recognize the inherent nature of doubt in faith. In appropriate settings, faculty and staff members could also benefit students by sharing times of doubt or uncertainty in their own spiritual lives. Finally, faculty and staff members can demonstrate, both through word and action, that questions and struggles exist as part of a life of intellectual and spiritual integrity.

Parks (2000) reminded educators and students that a static and unchanging faith becomes not only unrealistic but also intellectually dangerous. She stated,

Commitment to truth requires a questioning curiosity and ongoing and rigorous examination of one's most elemental assumptions. In the face of new understanding, one may come to perceive an earlier experience of faith or religious belief- an earlier way of making meaning- as now outgrown or otherwise irrelevant... A richer perception of faith, however, enables us to recognize that fidelity to truth may indeed require changing a particular set of beliefs- and yet be important to the ongoing tasks of finding a more adequate faith. (p. 18)

If faith provides a way of making meaning of self, world, and God, it must be capable of engaging with new challenges and intellectual development. As finite humans, we will never fully comprehend or understand the mysteries of God. We will always have questions. Faculty and staff who “live the questions” (Rilke, 2013, p. 24) and model a life that explores and wrestles with ambiguity can support students with difficult and often unanswerable questions about God.

Fourth, faculty and staff can support students by simply demonstrating care for their spiritual and intellectual well-being. Whether this care manifests itself in conversation with students or in thoughtful and open feedback to student reflection

papers, students benefit when they see that faculty and staff members care for them. This unconditional care, even towards students with spiritual doubts and uncertainties, provides a respite and safe haven for students during challenging and difficult seasons. In the study, many participants perceived that faculty and staff members appeared more open and accepting of spiritual struggles than peers. Faculty and staff members can support students in very helpful and sustaining ways simply by demonstrating an unconditional care, regardless of the student's spiritual state.

Finally, educators must help students find ways to reconcile new beliefs with old perspectives. When students begin to reexamine their religious framework, they often recognize insufficient aspects of this framework. This realization understandably contributes to resentment or disillusionment toward the formative faith structures of their upbringing. Students experiencing spiritual struggle and a reexamination of prior beliefs may perceive the religious beliefs of their previous churches, pastors, and even parents as immature, naïve, or ignorant. While this tension comes expectedly as individuals reconcile their former beliefs with new ideas and concepts, educators must help students and perhaps parents navigate this change. Educators must find ways to communicate to parents, when appropriate and necessary, that the faith-based institution operates to help students develop a mature and lasting faith. The intention of providing challenging learning experiences is not to shatter or destroy faith but rather to help students internalize the Christian faith. While students may not recognize the benefit of their upbringing during times of spiritual struggle, educators can support students and parents through prayer, empathy, and a desire to cultivate a richness of faith and identity in students.

The presence or absence of spiritual struggle during the college years introduces different challenges for educators who hope to develop mature faith commitments in young adults. Educators should not fear the presence of spiritual struggle in the lives of their students, nor should they give easy answers to placate questions and uncertainties. The experience of spiritual struggle during the college years fosters an opportunity for students to test and refine adolescence faith convictions. Educators best support students by helping students grapple with new questions and seek new ways of knowing. The absence of spiritual struggle also presents opportunities for educators to challenge preconceived faith notions. Again, the purpose is not destruction of adolescent faith but rather a maturing of faith that prepares students for future challenges, tragedies, and questions inherent in a life of faith.

Limitations

One limitation of the current study came in the smaller number of participants than desired. The researcher planned to interview ten participants; however, due to the difficulty of finding willing participants, the study only had six participants. While these six interviews proved rich, four more interviews may have strengthened or deepened some themes or even introduced others. Also, the researcher's recruitment method, which involved purposeful sampling via recommendations of participants from faculty and staff, may have inhibited the participation of individuals who had not openly discussed their spiritual struggle with a faculty or staff member. Finally, the study became limited by the perspective and interpretation of the researcher, who may have introduced bias into the conduction and analysis of the study.

Further Study

One finding that came out during the data collection process involved gender differences with regards to spiritual struggle. Initially, it proved much more difficult to find female participants for the study than male participants. Further research could examine the extent to which men and women experience spiritual struggle and loss differently. Another future study could examine spiritual struggle among first-year or second-year students. Many of the participants in the study commented that, while their struggle began during the first few years, their perception of the struggle changed as they matured and developed. A study examining the perception of spiritual struggle and the response to the campus community among younger students may illuminate some developmental differences in the way higher education communities understand struggle and questions. Additionally, the study examined students who decided to stay at the university, despite their spiritual struggle. A future study could examine the impact of spiritual struggle on decisions to transfer or drop out of the faith-based institution. Finally, a study examining the spiritual lives of graduates five years out of college may reveal how the presence or absence of spiritual struggle during college impacts faith in the future.

Conclusion

The college years serve as a critical time to make meaning, ask questions about self, identity, and God, and develop a philosophy or paradigm to guide and shape ones beliefs and behavior in the world. Traditional-aged college students experience intellectual and cognitive development in this transition between adolescence and adulthood, as well as an increase in independence and autonomy from parents and other

former structures of support. New perspectives, ideas, experiences, and individuals within the college environment serve to challenge the preconceived ideas and convictions of students and cultivate more holistic and nuanced ways of understanding the world. The faith-based institution additionally provides students with a community of like-minded believers who can strengthen and support one another during this critical time of growth and development. While these factors can lead to incredible growth and maturity, educators must realize the potential vulnerability and fragility of faith and belief during these years. Students at any institution, including faith-based colleges and universities, may experience spiritual struggle and uncertainty during these years. Some research (Bryant & Astin, 2008) has indicated that students at faith-based institutions are more likely to experience spiritual struggle.

The current study examined spiritual struggle within the faith-based institution. Six themes emerged from the qualitative study. The participants all came from strong religious backgrounds that significantly shaped their childhood and adolescence. During college, various personal, cognitive, and intellectual factors caused the participants to reexamine the convictions, values, and beliefs that shaped their faith paradigms. The participants experienced frustration towards the religious culture on campus, perceiving that others held a “fake,” “disingenuous,” and foreclosed faith. Despite the fact that the participants perceived the institution as open and welcoming to questions, they felt inhibited from sharing their questions and struggles with most individuals within the university community. Instead, they chose to confide in a very select and trusted group of students and faculty members. All the participants identified certain faculty and staff members who effectively supported or challenged them during the spiritual struggle.

While limited to one campus and a small number of participants, the study does provide a picture of the experience of spiritual struggle within a faith-based institution.

Educators at faith-based institutions have an important role and responsibility to foster a learning environment that welcomes questions about faith, belief, and identity. If educators at faith-based institutions hope to develop students personally, intellectually, and vocationally to respond effectively to their callings in the world, the college must function as a place that values intellectual integrity, spiritual maturity, and a nuanced framework from which to engage complex realities. The curriculum and co-curriculum must offer students opportunities to examine their intellectual and spiritual framework in light of new questions and knowledge and wrestle with incongruities and inconsistencies. Within the context of a nurturing university community that supports and challenges students, individuals can ask big questions and develop a more nuanced and mature faith.

Faith-based institutions must effectively support and challenge students experiencing spiritual struggle. Educators must remember that struggle and “crisis” offer great opportunity for students’ personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth. The unraveling of former paradigms and frameworks precipitates a period of searching and eventual commitment to a new way of knowing and understanding. This new way of knowing and understanding accommodates for nuance and ambiguity, which appears present in all of life. While the outcome of spiritual struggle proves unpredictable, educators must foster a nurturing community that facilitates students’ ability to approach challenge, uncertainty, and “crisis,” so that they may grow towards greater understanding, meaning, and faith.

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Appendix A

Protocol Questions for Individual Interviews

- 1) First, can you tell me about your religious upbringing?
- 2) Tell me about your faith or religious beliefs upon entering college.
- 3) Describe the spiritual struggle that you experienced during your time at Taylor.
- 4) Can you talk about what prompted this spiritual struggle or loss?
- 5) During this time of spiritual struggle or loss, how did you experience the community at Taylor University?
- 6) To what extent did you communicate your questions, struggles, or doubts with others in the Taylor community?
- 7) Did you experience any new difficulties as a student in this community that you would attribute to your spiritual struggle?
- 8) How did others who knew about your spiritual struggle interact with you?
- 9) Did this spiritual struggle impact your experience...
 - a. In the classroom, and if so, how?
 - b. In the residence hall, and if so, how?
 - c. In your relationships with other students, and if so, how?
 - d. In your relationships with faculty members, and if so, how?
 - e. Any other ways that you would note?
- 10) Were there aspects of the university were helpful for you as you wrestled with spiritual beliefs and ideas?
 - a) Were there specific individuals who supported you in this spiritual struggle? How did they support you?
 - b) Were there specific academic experiences that supported you in this spiritual struggle? How did they support you?

c) Were there specific co-curricular experiences that supported you? How did they support you?

11) Were there aspects of the university that challenged you to continue to think and wrestle with this spiritual struggle?

12) Were there aspects of the university that were unhelpful, or unsupportive, to you during this time?

