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SPIRITUAL EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS 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  
Masters of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by  
Jessica A. Fankhauser  
May 2012  
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<p><b>Higher Education and Student Development</b>  <b>Taylor University</b>  <b>Upland, Indiana</b></p>
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTERS THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Jessica A. Fankhauser

entitled

Spiritual Expectations and Experiences of Students 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  
May 2012

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## ABSTRACT

Part of a larger, multi-faceted research project, this study looked at the expectations of spiritual growth among college freshmen and the experiences of spiritual growth among college seniors through a qualitative modified grounded theory approach in an effort to answer the question, “What elements of the college experience are most influential in facilitating students’ expectations and realizations of spiritual growth?” Eighty-four freshmen and 171 senior essays were collected at a small faith-based liberal arts institution in the Mid-west. Results from the study suggest that students’ expectations play a significant role in their experiences of spiritual development. Freshmen students’ indicated a desire to grow deeper in their relationship with God, make their faith their own, grow in their knowledge of faith, and live out their faith in community with others with similar beliefs. The study found that these expectations closely paralleled seniors’ expressed experiences of growth. Perceived contributors of the college environment influencing this growth included the example of how others lived their lives, the challenge and diversity of opinions encountered in the classroom as well as through study abroad opportunities, and the physical and programmed spaces on campus designated for spiritual growth. Seemingly lacking in the results of this study was the influence of individual mentors, leadership experiences, and the diversity of other faith traditions.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“Liberal education is an open invitation to join the human race and become more fully human.”*

(Holmes, 1999, p. 35)

Decades of time and resources have been dedicated to the undertaking of education. It is not that people were made for education but rather education allows people to understand themselves and the world better. The existence of formal education acknowledges that people have an innate desire to make meaning. One’s role as an educator in this process of making meaning – and as Garber (1996) argues the purpose of higher education – is to help students understand the world and their place in it. And while intellectual and cognitive development are generally the focus of formal education (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1968), they often fail to address and cultivate the meaning that students desire – that which gives them a deeper purpose and the skills necessary for living among others.

This presents a two-fold challenge. Educators must continue to help students understand the world, whether that be through courses of study such as science, finance, music, history or psychology, while also helping them create meaning and purpose for their lives. Cultivating in students a desire to care for others, be civically engaged, and make life-long ethical decisions requires a whole-person educational approach. Although it is true that students learn about the world through academic study, the process by which students develop meaning and purpose deserves additional attention. As students

learn about the world, they cannot understand their place in it until they first understand themselves (Chickering, 2004). Identifying this as spirituality, Astin (2004) argues that recent history has placed too much focus on the exteriors of academic study while failing to acknowledge the interior aspects of development.

This has not always been the case though. In fact, the foundation of higher education was largely centered on religion (Ringenberg, 2006; Rudolph, 1990; Thelin, 2004). It has only been over time that institutions have increasingly shifted towards secularization (Marsden, 1994), switching the focus towards objective truth as the primary way of knowing while slowly diminishing subjective ways of knowing from the curriculum. The exception to this continues to be a small segment of denominational and faith-based institutions whose missions and purposes still focus on integrating spirituality into their curriculum. Understanding this continual shift towards secularization makes the renewed interest and dialogue surrounding spirituality a unique discussion.

As culture shifts, a new classification labeled emerging adults now describes the stage of crisis and development among 18 to 29-year-olds in America. Smith and Snell (2009) mention four cultural changes that have created this distinction. The first is the overall growth of higher education as an ideal in following the American dream which has caused the numbers of those beginning stable careers at 18 to decline rapidly. The second factor is the delay in marriage among youth in America today. Third, because of the global economy many young adults take longer to settle into one career; instead they continually change jobs gaining the skill and flexibility needed to settle into a long term career. Finally, the fourth factor aiding in this new distinctive phase of life is that parents seem more apt to support their children financially and with other resources probably out

of an understanding of the growing need for resources in order to succeed. Smith and Snell (2009) urge educators not only to acknowledge and study this new distinct phase of life, but more specifically they believe that understanding the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults will provide insight into life changes and the character of contemporary American culture and institutions.

Not only has higher education seen an increase in conversations on spirituality, but students now seem more apt to practice their religious beliefs openly and engage in faith dialogue. Results from studies conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) indicate that nearly half of all students consider it “essential” or “very important” for colleges to encourage their individual expressions of spirituality, and more than two-thirds want their college to play a large role in helping them develop personal values (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). This interest has continued to spark conversations and research in an attempt to better understand how spirituality affects student development. Palmer and Zajonc (2010) enter the discussion with their thoughts on getting back to the heart of higher education by arguing that:

A truly integrative education engages students in the systematic exploration of the relationship between their studies of the “objective” world and the purpose, meaning, limits, and aspirations of their lives. The greatest divide of all is often between the inner and outer, which no curricular innovation alone can bridge. The healing of this divide is at the heart of education during the college years, rightly understood. (p. 10)

Within the realm of student learning literature, the concept of holistic student development has continued to rise in its importance and focus across colleges and

universities. As part of this integrative approach, spirituality is now being included within the context of the holistic development that liberal arts education values so highly. Not only do all aspects of the college experience aid in a student's development, but there is a need for educators to focus on all aspects of development as well (Astin, et al., 2011; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Pascarella, 1997).

From a theoretical perspective the idea of sense-making, or creating a meaningful philosophy of life, has often been described as identity development. Moving through a variety of vectors, Chickering (1969) understands the central focus of identity development during the college years to be that of developing purpose and integrity. The role of higher education amidst these transitions and the progression of identity development is one of facilitating student learning. And while it may seem obvious to mention the need for challenge and support in the developmental process of college students, the idea of a true integrative holistic education demands that educators fully engage in this process. Pascarella and Terezini (1991) have shown that as students receive both challenge and support they are able to grow and develop in positive ways. In order for students to develop spiritually and, therefore, holistically, educators must challenge students in their quest for meaning. To ask students the hard questions and to present them with diversity of thought in a safe and supportive environment is a necessary part of this challenge. And yet it can be often ignored because it requires a willingness from educators to be challenged themselves in the area of spirituality.

With a focus on community, Palmer and Zajonc (2010) argue that education can no longer separate the heart and mind of students and still maximize their development. Merely emphasizing intellectual and cognitive growth during college would mean settling

for mediocre education. All aspects of education are necessary in developing students and should not be viewed as separate purposes (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2005).

Therefore, in an effort to resist mediocrity and instead ensure quality – holistic education – this qualitative study asks questions of both freshmen and senior undergraduate students through an essay format regarding their spiritual development in an effort to answer the question: “What elements of the college experience are most influential in facilitating students’ expectations and realizations of spiritual growth?”

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Holistic Development in Faith-based Institutions**

Within faith-based institutions holistic development has long been the goal of education. Institutional missions state purposes not merely of academic excellence but also moral and spiritual development outcomes in the lives of students (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). For students entering faith-based institutions, growing spiritually is often not only a desire but an expectation. Yet in trying to understand a subjective area of growth such as spiritual development expectations can actually be quite different than the realizations of that experience. One reason is that the subjective nature of spirituality can make it difficult to measure growth. This reality juxtaposed with the growing trend of assessment and the potential shifts in the accreditation process causes institutions – especially faith-based ones – to feel an increase in pressure to be able to measure spiritual growth (Alexander, 2000; Cheng, 2001). As the government pours money into the higher education system, it wants to know whether institutions are offering what they say they will. In addition to meeting governmental demands, there is also the question of whether the institution is meeting the students' expectations.

These questions have the potential to present major problems for institutions whose missions include helping students develop spiritually. In fact, the growing need for institutions to be able to assess student spiritual development actually points to a gap in the literature. Assessing student learning outcomes requires an understanding of the factors that influence what is being measured. In order for faith-based institutions (or any

institution) to maximize the holistic development of their students, they must understand how students grow spiritually and what aspects of the college experience contribute to that growth.

### **Moral and Character Development**

Much more important than expertise in a given discipline is the desire to develop students of character. To understand and implement a more holistic approach to education, there is first a need to understand the theory and practice of moral development as it shapes the character of students. Although moral development has been an expected component of education throughout history, as the research agenda began to increase, the focus on moral development has greatly diminished from the curriculum (Rudolph, 1990). Narvaez (2006) attributes this decline to increasing societal diversity which has caused contention and blurred the role of educators in the moral development of students. In response to the lack of focus regarding moral development, Willimon (1997) urges higher education to “recover its historical aim: produce people of character” (p. 74). Character and the growth of values and convictions, Garber (1996) writes, can only occur in the context of community.

As a leader in this field, Lawrence Kohlberg (1971), sought to understand the process by which moral reasoning occurs more than the content of moral decisions. In his studies, Kohlberg identified different levels of moral reasoning through which individuals seek to create and operate by way of a conscience-based set of principles that guide action. Successful movement through Kohlberg’s stages parallel the development of a personal philosophy and understanding of the meaning of life.

Research has shown that movement through these stages occurs largely in college-aged students and cites college attendance as a large predictor of growth in principled moral reasoning (Pascarella, 1997). Pascarella also found that increased moral reasoning was positively influenced specifically by off-campus learning experiences, interaction with faculty outside of the classroom, and the teaching of logic or concepts of justice. In defining and assessing the outcomes of character in college, Strange (2004) suggests that the institutions willing to examine and improve their focus on character development could very well be the institutions that prove most successful since a growing segment of the public demands character of college graduates.

### **Faith Development**

Along with character and moral development, there is the self-identified task of faith development in faith-based institutions. Closely tied, character often develops out of a foundation of personal faith (Willimon, 1997). Faith in the most basic sense has been described as a trust or firm persuasion in believing something is true (Beers, 2003). James Fowler (1981) gives a more detailed definition describing faith as a person's way of finding coherence and meaning within the context of all aspects of human existence. Fowler explains his understanding of faith through 6 stages: primal, mythical-literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective, conjunctive, and universalizing. While agreeing with Fowler's stages, Sharon Parks (2000) goes a step further and adds a stage known as "probing commitment," more clearly describing the faith development stage of young adults. In a quest to find meaning and purpose in life, young adults continually ask the questions "Who am I?" and "Where do I fit in the world?" These probing questions are a large part of faith development as well as guiding principles in the purpose of faith-



based higher education. Barry and Nelson (2005) agree, stating that emerging adulthood has been characterized in large part as a time of risk-taking and self-exploration especially within the realm of spirituality

Palmer and Zajonc's (2010) definition of spirituality as "the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than one's own ego" (p. 48) corresponds with this understanding of faith development as a search for meaning and a bigger purpose in life. Nuanced slightly, Love and Talbot (1999) understand spirituality as a process of seeking self-knowledge, a sense of centeredness, openness to embracing one's community, and the ability to recognize a power beyond human existence. While still acknowledging a sense of something larger than oneself in spiritual development, Love and Talbot emphasize the personal aspect of spiritual development as well in this definition. This then fits with Astin's (2004) term "subjective life," suggesting that spirituality encompasses the affective experiences of life along with intuition, inspiration, sense-making, and connectedness (p. 1), bringing the understanding of spiritual development back to a holistic approach.

While there are clearly different interpretations of the terms faith development and spiritual development, as a foundation for this study and an understanding of spiritual development within Christian faith-based institutions, the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) provides great overview and insight. According to the CCCU, spiritual development involves not only understanding the sacredness of life and seeking meaning and purpose but also acknowledging that this purpose is connected to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (CCCU, 1998).

## **Campus Environment**

The mission, values, and emphasis placed on spirituality inform all programs, events, and elements that make up the campus environment of faith-based institutions. Since it is known that the more students are involved the more they learn (Astin, 1999), institutions are able to impact student learning outcomes significantly based on the types of academic courses, programs, and campus events they provide and in which they encourage students to become involved. For faith-based institutions this includes programs and events that allow students to grow spiritually and holistically.

Providing a framework for *how* students learn, Kolb (1984) underscores the importance the college experience has on student learning. Research continues to show that student learning does not occur merely in the classroom. Often, aspects of the campus environment impact student learning as well (Kuh, 1991; Sandeen, 2004). Studies have found that participating in extracurricular activities, living in a residence hall, faculty interaction, and the influence of a student's peer group all increase student learning and personal development (Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Along with personal development, Baxter Magolda (1992) has found that peer relationships, organizational involvement, living arrangements, employment, and exchange experiences increase student intellectual development. Each of these studies align with the various student engagement and involvement theories and the understanding that involvement in activities outside the classroom can aid in further development of students (Astin, 1999; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969).

Kuh and Gonyea (2006) find that students who engage in spiritually enhancing activities tend to view the non-academic environment more positively and are more likely

to participate in campus activities and service projects. This involvement in spiritual activities not only increases student engagement but, in regards to worship, meditation, and prayer, it also appears to contribute to personal and social development as well.

Specifically within a Christian college environment, Ma (2003) found that both academic and non-academic settings influenced student spirituality. Love and Talbot (1999) underscore the need to understand how spiritual development interacts with cognitive, moral, and psychosocial development. And while student affairs professionals agree with the value of holistic student development in theory, research shows that they still fall short in practice (Kiessling, 2010).

### **Gender**

While not directly an aspect of the campus environment, research has shown that gender is also an important factor to consider in spiritual development. Corresponding with literature on other aspects of development, females seem to engage in and benefit more from a focus on spiritual development than do males (Ma, 2003). A study by Welch and Mellberg (2008) indicates that women showed a greater internalization and therefore greater spiritual maturity than men, suggesting that gender differences play a role in spiritual development. Another study by Buchko (2004) provides further support of this idea, finding that women more than men experience a strong spiritual relational component to their religious faith.

### **Mentoring, Spiritual Struggle, and Maturation**

An understanding of gender points to the value of mentoring during the college experience. A leader in understanding faith development and mentoring, Parks (2000) highlights the value of mentoring relationships in helping students create meaningful

philosophies in life. Looking at the spiritual struggles of college students, Bryant and Astin (2008) have discovered that an overall lack of support during the college years, which are characterized by crisis and identity struggles (Marcia, 1966), presents a problem for student affairs professionals. Attempting to understand this further, Fisler et al. (2009) looked at how students perceived and experienced spiritual struggles during their college experience. Based on their results they reported 3 primary areas in which students were confronted and wrestled through spiritual questions: academics, external influences, and internal influences.

In regard to academics, opportunities both inside the classroom and abroad have been shown to aid in spiritual formation (Fisler et al., 2009). Fisler et al. also found that while interaction with faculty inside the classroom is beneficial, the influence on spiritual development and student learning occurs even more when students are able to interact with faculty outside the classroom. Ma (2003) agreed that spiritual development occurs both inside and outside the classroom but reports that students perceived the nonacademic aspects of college to be more influential in the process of spiritual development. Specifically, students reported peer relationships to be the most significant factor in their spiritual development.

Supporting students through their struggles specifically in these 3 areas makes them more likely to develop further. Welch and Mellberg (2008) report that within the process of questioning and wrestling through faith issues, students who are better able to internalize their faith grow more spiritually. Aiding in this process of spiritual maturation is year in school, class standing, and participation in religious behaviors.

## **Assessment**

The tasks of faith-based institutions to provide quality assessment and prove outcomes of student learning in areas of development such as spirituality seem difficult at best. Yet in an ever-growing economically accountable society, the government continues to push educational institutions to provide proof that students are meeting certain learning outcomes (Alexander, 2000). Coupled with the natural process of maturation over time, holistic student development becomes much harder to measure, which leads to questions that the literature has not been able to fully address: How can institutions assess student learning apart from the natural process of maturation that occurs during the developmental stage of emerging adults and, more specifically, how do faith-based institutions assess students' spiritual development?

## **Summary**

As the literature has shown, it is nearly impossible to separate spirituality from the process of identity development that characterizes college students. Neither can the effects of academic and student affairs practices be kept separate if holistic development is to occur in the lives of students. Yet Kiessling (2010) points out that while student affairs values holistic student development, practitioners fail to include spirituality in the process of student development in a consistent way. Much of this could be due to the fact that spiritual development is so hard to measure. But with the growing trend of assessment, faith-based institutions that adhere to spiritually focused missions should be leaders in the development of student spirituality assessment tools because when assessment is done well, it allows for continual improvement in order to create a better environment for student learning and development (Cheng, 2001).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore students' expectations on how the college experience will shape their spiritual growth as well as to gain a better understanding of the realizations of their expectations and the impact of various campus elements on their personal spiritual growth. As part of a larger, multi-phase study of spiritual development, this qualitative project will add to existing literature and help to develop future quantitative measures of spiritual development through a systematic analysis of freshmen and senior student essays.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### **Methodology**

As a way to understand qualitatively how students perceive the impact their college experience has on their spiritual development, this study used aspects of a modified grounded theory along with content analysis. Part of a more comprehensive, multi-phase research project, this part of the study collected short essays from both college freshmen and seniors which were then coded and analyzed for emerging themes. The volume and short length of the essays did not allow for a true grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, in an attempt to let the content of what students were saying drive the results (Glaser, 1992), aspects of open coding and a level of theoretical sampling were still helpful. This process allowed for the voices of students to be heard more clearly rather than forcing them to fit into pre-constructed categories.

#### **Participants**

Participants in this study were both freshmen and seniors enrolled in mandatory general education courses. Eighty-four of 458 freshmen participated during the fall of 2010 while enrolled in a freshman worldview course. One hundred eighty-four seniors were enrolled in a 1-credit senior capstone course during the spring of 2011. All students were enrolled at a small, private faith-based liberal arts institution in the Midwest.

## Procedures

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the IRB and permission was given for data to be collected in both general education courses. Convenience sampling was used as essay assignments were given in mandatory freshmen and senior courses.

All freshmen attending the institution were enrolled in a mandatory 3-credit worldview course during their first semester. Participation in the study was voluntary but 1% extra credit was added to the final grade of those who chose to participate. Eighty-four of the 458 freshmen who were enrolled in the course during the fall of 2010 completed the extra credit by writing a 250-300 word essay (approx. 1 page) responding to the questions (a) “What are your goals for spiritual growth?” and (b) “How do you expect the college experience to help you grow spiritually?” Appendix A provides a copy of the assignment that was posted online through a course management system. After submission a student worker went through each essay and matched the participants with their corresponding ID numbers to determine gender.

All seniors attending the institution are required to take a 1-credit senior seminar. There were 184 students enrolled in the course during the spring of 2011. As a course assignment which accounted for 100 points of their overall course grade, each student was required to write a 1 ½-2 page essay (approximately 500-750 words) in response to the questions (a) “What elements of your college experience have contributed the most to your spiritual growth?” and (b) “How have you grown or changed spiritually since entering college?” While each student had to complete the essay for course credit they were given the options not to have their essay used for research. Appendix B provides a copy of the assignment as it was posted online in the course management system.



The inclusion of the student name was for the purpose of receiving a course grade only and was removed by a student worker and replaced with a random number before the essays were analyzed. As part of the senior study, participants were asked to indicate on their essay demographic questions of gender and anticipated graduation date. The graduation date was used to discard any essays of students who would not be graduating within the remaining calendar year.

Upon submission, all essays were downloaded from the course management system into a zip file and given to a student worker to remove any identifiers. The student worker erased each name from the essay and assigned a number randomly in its place. Each file was then also resaved using the number it was given rather than the student's name. All of the names and numbers were password protected and saved in a database that was not accessible by those analyzing the data.

Once all identifiers were removed from the essays and the files renamed with numbers, they were given to the primary researcher. The essays of any students enrolled in the senior seminar course who did not anticipate graduating in the next year or who indicated that they did not want their essays used in research were thrown out at this time. As a result 13 essays were removed and the remaining 171 were analyzed along with 83 freshmen essays.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

To begin data analysis 10 essays were randomly selected from the freshmen responses. As each essay was read, phrases answering either of the 2 questions were marked accordingly. After the initial 10 essays had been read and marked, all of the answers were compiled in 2 lists, 1 for each question. Next, answers and phrases that were similar or connected were grouped together to create broader themes and to better encompass the data. After this another 10 essays were selected and the same process followed to see if any other themes emerged. These lists were then reviewed by other members of the research team and further clarifications and titles of themes were established. At this point a final list of themes was compiled.

The same process was used to generate a list of themes answering each of the senior essay questions as well. The only difference is that a third set of 10 essays were reviewed before the final list of themes was generated due to longer and more complex senior responses.

Next, every essay was read and coded according to the lists of themes by indicating key phrases from the list of themes at the top of every essay. After all the essays had been read, they were then reread at a later time to ensure that the themes were accurate. At this point a tally was also kept to determine how many times each theme emerged in the essays. It is from this final analysis that the themes seen in the discussion section have come.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Table 1 displays results from this study based on themes emerging from student responses and are divided by essay question. Under each essay question themes are listed according to the strength with which they emerged from the data.

Table 1

*Summary of Themes*

---

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>FRESHMEN EXPECTATIONS</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>What are your goals for spiritual growth during college?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deeper relationship with God</li> <li>Pursue personal disciplines</li> <li>Desired ownership of faith</li> <li>Increased intellectual of faith</li> <li>Deeper sense of community</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>SENIOR GROWTH AND CHANGE</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>How have you grown or changed spiritually since entering college?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deeper complexity of faith</li> <li>Broader perspective</li> <li>Ownership of faith</li> <li>Interdependence</li> <li>Continued quest</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>FRESHMEN EXPECTATIONS OF CONTRIBUTORS</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>How do you expect the college experience to help you grow spiritually?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Living in a Christian environment</li> <li>Academic courses</li> <li>Campus programming and opportunities</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>SENIORS' PERCEIVED CONTRIBUTORS</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>What elements of your college experience have contributed the most to your spiritual growth?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The example of others</li> <li>Academics</li> <li>Physical and programmed spaces</li> <li>Diversity of thought</li> <li>Study abroad</li> </ul>

---

**Freshmen Expectations**

Freshmen expectations indicate both the personal and communal nature of faith as well as an overall desire to grow spiritually. As one student wrote, “Whether through classes, residence life or new friendships, I expect to find myself being challenged by those in community with me to seek out Christ first.” The expectations highlighted by this student and others generated the following 5 main themes: (a) A deeper relationship

with God, (b) a desire to pursue personal disciplines, (c) a desired ownership of faith, (d) an increased intellection of faith, and (e) a deeper sense of community.

### **Deeper relationship with God.**

Nearly half of the freshmen respondents mentioned a desire to grow in their relationship with God, to know him more, or to grow closer to Jesus Christ. Freshmen entered college wanting to develop a deeper understanding of who God is and to conform more to the image of Jesus Christ. One student responses characteristic of the group said, “The idea is not however to obtain head knowledge of God but to connect the words of the Bible with a deep understanding of God’s presence and love,” and also that “my goals for spiritual growth during college are to be able to know and understand God better and also make what I have, not a religion, but a relationship.”

In striving for a deeper relationship with God, one that was more than just a religion, students determined that they would need to surrender other things in their lives that were currently more important to them than a relationship with God. Freshmen anticipated through their various goals for growth that this would often include them giving up control of their own lives in order to follow God’s will and to make him the top priority in their lives. As they grew closer to God and gained a deeper understanding of who he was, they then felt they would better be able to follow his will for their lives.

Giving up control of their lives in turn meant striving to trust God more and grow in their dependence on him. Students never seemed to view this negatively; rather they expressed a desire to trust in God rather than in their own abilities using phrases such as “I hope to become even more dependent on God.” In their desire to know God more and

to trust him with the plan for their lives, students also expressed wanting to bring God glory and to honor him in everything.

**Pursue personal disciplines.**

Along with desiring to grow in their relationship with God, a second way freshmen expected to grow spiritually was in personal faith disciplines. Articulating a very personal component of their faith, students mentioned repeatedly disciplines such as spending time with God daily through quiet time, devotions, and reading scripture. This also included personal study of scripture and time in prayer. Different than involvement in small groups or time spent in corporate prayer or bible studies with others, students specifically would mention wanting to grow individually in these areas as a way of growing spiritually, and they viewed these various disciplines as practices to be done alone.

**Desired ownership of faith.**

This third theme that emerged refers to students' clearly expressed desire to make their faith their own. When students expressed a desire to make their faith their own it was often tied to their desire to have a deeper relationship with God as well. Taking ownership of their faith could also be seen in their reasoning for pursuing personal disciplines as well as in various goals to gain knowledge of Scripture or their faith. One student wrote, "I am so excited to take personal ownership of my faith and beliefs, to know not just what I believe, but *why* I believe it."

This student's response captures a larger essence underlying many of the essays in that students recognized they had a basic knowledge of faith but only what they had been taught by their parents growing up. Student's desire to make their faith their own and no

longer blindly accept the beliefs of their parents or family demonstrated a deeper motivation in students' goals for spiritual growth. Students wanted to be able to think for themselves and determine personally what they believed and why they believed it.

**Increased intellection of faith.**

Another theme was found in students' desire to grow in a cognitive understanding of their faith. While an increase in knowledge is also a part of knowing God more, this theme refers to specific responses in which students articulated a desire to grow in their knowledge of scripture, their knowledge of Christianity, and, in a few instances, their knowledge of other religions. Students anticipated that an increased knowledge of Scripture would shape their theology, in turn helping them make their faith their own as already discussed as well as leading them into a deeper understanding of God.

Often a significant motivator in their goal to grow in the knowledge of their faith was students' desire to be able to defend or justify their faith to others. Students entered college with a desire to understand the intellectual arguments for the faith they claimed in hope that these would allow them to communicate their faith more boldly and clearly to others. One student articulated this goal, "I would also like to have the courage to step out in my faith and not be afraid to share God's word with anyone as well as to share my faith with others through my actions."

Other goals of students' desires to grow spiritually included knowledge of the world and other cultures. Students recognized that to grow spiritually they would need to gain a broader perspective of the world in which they lived. For a few this knowledge was not enough, rather they hoped that the knowledge they gained would move them into action. One student expressed this idea writing:

My personal spiritual journey has been a road of questions and struggles, and as I enter [institution], I anticipate that significant spiritual growth will occur over the next four years. I will attempt to consolidate what I believe and then pursue whatever ministry God has for me.

Another student powerfully wrote:

My hope is that I will learn about things in the world that will give me such a burden that I won't be able to do anything else but help. I want to be engraved with such a passion that the silly feeling of "being awkward" will be replaced with an immense confidence from what Christ has done on the cross. I want to grow enough to be able to go out into the world and truly make an impact for Christ's Kingdom.

**Deeper sense of community.**

Finally, many students also indicated a desire to understand their faith in relation to others. Community was the word used the most in students' goals for deeper relationships with others, although the wording of essays often indicated that freshmen did not have a good understanding of what that meant. Rather they merely understood community as something they had been told they should look for and strive towards.

Toward that end though, and in an attempt to live their faith out daily, many students wrote of their desire to be part of a community of people who shared their faith. This included both their personal efforts within a community as well as the actions of others. "College will help me grow by allowing me to learn from other people," wrote one student; "there are so many people who have different viewpoints, backgrounds, experiences, gifts, and passions. I can't wait to learn from them." Along with this, a few

students mentioned their goal of finding a mentor – someone already in the community that could support and encourage them in their pursuit of spiritual growth. For others, community was a place where they could learn to better serve and love others. This included seeking out opportunities for service, ministry, and leadership.

While mentioned as a goal far fewer times than the other themes already mentioned, religious practices also fall within this category of community and deeper relationships with others. Interestingly, very few students indicated finding a church, attending chapel, or joining a small group – what many would consider more formal indications of spirituality or religion among their goals for growing spiritually while at college.

And while nearly half of the students clearly articulated a desire to grow in their relationship with God, there were a handful of other students worth mentioning that entered college hoping that the Christian community would help them desire to have a deeper relationship with God. While clearly a very small minority, not all students entered college ready to grow spiritually. Highlighting this fact one student wrote:

Before entering [institution], I came to the conclusion that I honestly did not know if I truly believed in Jesus Christ....I expect that this college experience will hopefully help me realize the path I want to take in what to believe and what to have faith in....I know I cannot base my whole faith on my experiences at [institution], but I think it is a good way to start.

Despite the ambiguity of faith for this student and others, each articulated in some way that they were choosing a faith-based institution because they wanted to want to grow



spiritually or gain a knowledge of the Christian faith, and they thought that being in a Christian environment would help them in these pursuits.

### **Freshmen Expectations of Contributors**

Responding to the second essay prompt, “How do you expect the college experience to help you grow spiritually?” freshmen perceptions of their college experience delineated into 3 main categories. They were the expectations of: (a) living in a Christian environment, (b) academic courses, and (c) campus programming and opportunities.

#### **Living in a Christian environment.**

Nearly half of the freshmen essay respondents perceived that the Christian atmosphere of the institution would help them grow spiritually. Living in community with others who shared their faith emerged as the top expected contributor. One student stated, “I expect the college experience to help me grow spiritually because I’ll be surrounded by other believers who will encourage me to grow, can sympathize with me during trials, and will be there for me.” Still another wrote, “[I have] the privilege of being surrounded by many Christians who can challenge and motivate me to achieve this goal.”

Some students’ understanding of a Christian environment also included the expectation that there would be fewer temptations than at a non-religious institution. Many students gave the impression that they believed simply being around others who had faith would be enough to help them to grow without much personal effort on their part. This was evidenced as one student responded, “I am also growing simply by being encouraged through the way others live their lives out and their encouragement.”

In many other essays though, this idea contrasted with a deeper understanding of the contribution of a Christian environment and students' expectations that they would grow from personal relationships with others. Students wrote specifically that they expected to grow as a result of relationships they formed on their wings, floors, or with peers. One student said, "There are so many guys living around who are brothers in Christ that could keep me accountable for my sins, just as I could keep them accountable." Students expected both the challenge and support of these relationships to impact their spiritual growth.

#### **Academic courses.**

Apart from the relational experience of college, a significant number of students also expected their courses and interactions with professors to help them grow spiritually. Major courses were mentioned infrequently and other times classes were simply mentioned generally as an expected contributor to growth. What was mentioned specifically were those courses in the mandatory religion core of the institution, at times excitedly. One representative excerpt read

I'm also ecstatic about taking bible-based classes such as Biblical Literature and Foundations of Christian Thought which will increase my understanding of the Bible, and shape my theological knowledge, which will in turn highly benefit my understanding of Christ as I grow closer to Him.

Mentioned just as frequently as core religion courses was the expectation that professors would contribute to students' spiritual growth. The concept of challenge as a contributor of student's spiritual growth was strongly linked to academic courses and the teaching of professors. Students would write things such as, "I know that my [institution]

experience will be full of professors and other students helping me to further my faith and walk with God by challenging me and helping me to really learn who God is.” Students mentioned both the teaching of professors as well as their interactions with professors outside the classroom. One student grasped an understanding of the integrative nature of the institution writing, “The faculty here is also something special. Every teacher had a love for God that I feel will help me learn, not just their class material, but what experience with God can do for one’s life.”

### **Campus programming and opportunities.**

Both formal and informal programming also appeared in students’ expectations of how the institution would specifically contribute to their spiritual growth. Formal opportunities included chapel, missions and study abroad trips, service opportunities, and small groups. Informal opportunities included space to worship, pray, study scripture, and interact with people who hold different perspectives.

Of these opportunities, chapel and small groups were mentioned most frequently, each almost equal to academic courses in their frequency. In terms of chapel, some students looked forward to opportunities to be challenged by speakers as a way in which their faith would grow while others anticipated growing as a result of the opportunity chapel offered for corporate singing. Almost entirely, when small groups were mentioned they were referred to in the context of accountability. “By having these friendships, I am greatly encouraged and the accountability is a huge factor,” writes a student, continuing that “I know that by having the small groups in my hall, I will have that accountability and have godly relationships.” This student and others expected small groups to provide them with the challenge and support they deemed necessary to their spiritual growth.

Missions and study abroad trips were mentioned in the context of contributing to students desire to grow in service or be challenged by new perspectives with one student writing, “Through the strong emphasis on missions I hope to truly become a servant.” Just as frequent was students’ mention that getting involved in service opportunities would help them grow spiritually.

The final category of student expectations was opportunities that the college experience offered that were outside of the university setting. The first of these is involvement in a local church. Students mentioned getting involved in a church during their time at the university. Along with spending time in the local church, they also talked about spending intentional time with God in study. Finally, students mentioned how the independence they gained in leaving for college would also help them grow spiritually.

### **Seniors’ Growth and Change**

Shifting now to essays collected from seniors, their responses elicited more detail as students described how they had grown or changed spiritually during their college experience. Corresponding with freshmen’s goals for spiritual growth during college, seniors responded to the question: “How have you grown or changed spiritually since entering college?” Their responses fit into 5 main categories: (a) A deeper complexity of faith, (b) a broader perspective, (c) ownership of faith, (d) interdependence, and (e) continued quest.

#### **Deeper complexity of faith.**

The overarching change in regards to student’s faith during college given by seniors was a deeper and more complex understanding of their faith. As mentioned

above, simply the wording of students' answers showed a deeper level of their faith and their ability to wrestle with the tensions of their faith as seen in the following response:

I have learned that it is ok to struggle, to question, even to doubt aspects of my spiritual life, but none of that need lead to a loss of faith. Thus, I see that I can believe with the fullest of convictions in the love and goodness of God, and still question evil in the world.

As indicated by this response, students understanding of faith and its complexity often blurred what used to seem black and white. Students repeatedly wrote that they were closer to God now than when they came to college. A deeper relationship with God also meant a deeper understanding of his character and attributes as one student writes:

This year I have grown in my understanding of God, in the intimacy of my relationship with him, in my ability to discern his will, and in my love of his Word. I have failed at everything I desired my college experience to be, but I do not consider my college experience a failure. God has worked through my mistakes.

As this student (and others) wrote, being confronted with challenges in life while at the same time learning more about God and his attributes led them into a deeper understanding of faith and their relationship with God. "All of these difficulties have allowed me to really learn to lean on God" another student wrote, which introduces another major change in students' relationship with God during college. By students' own admission their dependence and reliance on God had grown during college so that they now believed they were leaving college with a greater ability to rely on him amidst the challenges and uncertainties of the future.

**Broader perspective.**

The second overarching theme that emerged was that students grew in their knowledge of faith, specifically their understanding of Christianity and their knowledge of scripture. This knowledge often played a role in deepening students' faith as well. In concluding an essay one student wrote:

All of these experiences and individuals have helped me expand my view of the world and of God's unmatched greatness in the world. They have pointed me towards passionate pursuit of truth and a life wholly devoted to Jesus Christ on every level from academics to family life to ministry.

Students also wrote repeatedly that college was a time when they grew intellectually in their faith. Describing the experience of spiritual growth as an intellectual experience one student wrote, "I was challenged to read the scriptures and understand them from an intellectual position, which in turn, has contributed to my personal spiritual growth."

Another way students grew was in their understanding of the world, specifically, the global church, with comments such as, "I learned a lot about God's church and how amazing it is that so many different kinds of people speaking different languages and living different lifestyles all over the world are worshipping and praising the same God I am."

**Ownership of faith.**

The third major theme in terms of students' spiritual growth, ownership of faith, was the most clearly articulated theme. Often entering college with the faith of their parents, students found college to be a time when they could learn to think for themselves regarding issues of faith in ways they had not needed to while they still lived at home.

Presented with new ideas, students learned to think critically about not only what they believed but also why they did (or did not) believe it.

Students generally used direct language such as “I made my faith my own” or “I now know what I believe and why I believe it” to indicate growth in this area. Having made their faith their own, students talked frequently about how confident they felt in their ability to defend their faith and justify it through logical arguments to others as they prepared to leave college. To illustrate, one student sums this all up well writing:

I really appreciated how our professors gave us both sides of all the issues. This way we were able to develop our own unbiased beliefs. I finally felt like I had made my own educated decision about my faith. Because of this, I feel like I can effectively share my faith with others. I feel like I’ve learned a lot while here at [institution] that broadens my knowledge of why I believe what I believe.

### **Interdependence.**

The final noteworthy theme that emerged was how students understood their spiritual growth as affecting how they lived with others. Seniors mentioned frequently that they often learned more about themselves “through living with new and different people.” Leaving college seniors also often mentioned how they had grown to appreciate community and had a better understanding of its importance. Peers and friends, often those on a student’s wing or floor, were part of this process with one student writing that his wing mates taught him “how to reach out and provide my neighbor with a little encouragement, as well as showing me that I don’t have to handle all the trials in life by myself.”

Through interactions like these, students grew in their service towards others as they reached out to those around them sometimes realizing how blessed they were themselves. Students' greatest understanding of community was that through it they learned to be more loving and to have respect for others. Through community, students wrote that they learned to be more patient, to have compassion and a positive attitude. Living among friends and peers allowed students the ability to gain confidence and practice humility. Many described having learned of the importance of community through its ability to shape their character to be more like Jesus Christ.

**Continued quest.**

Finally, while only a small minority, it is also important to mention that not all students acknowledged growth. Approximately 5% of those surveyed articulated negative responses to spiritual growth. For some this simply meant that they had not yet made their faith their own and were still questioning what they believed as they prepared to leave college. Others did not feel like they grew spiritually at college at all beyond gaining an intellectual knowledge of the Christian faith traditions. Still others wrote about experiences that had given them a negative view of faith or that led to a loss of faith all together.

These experiences included both those on campus as well as family or other situations outside of their college experience that just happened to have occurred during their time in college. More than any other category each of these cases were unique and different – often extremely personal containing a variety of factors that led to their negative view of faith. Yet in each case they mentioned some way in which the



community at the institution failed either to challenge or support them like they expected it to have done.

### **Perceived Contributors**

While there were significantly more contributors mentioned by the seniors than those which freshmen expected to contribute to their spiritual growth, they still fit into basically the same categories simply with more detailed descriptions or variations in how students experienced different aspects of the college experience. The example of others, academic courses, students' understanding of the physical and programmed spaces of the community, and interactions with different perspectives as well as opportunities abroad all emerged as significant contributors in students' spiritual growth.

Emerging as a meta-theme, interwoven within each of these perceived contributors was the necessity of challenge and support. Without prompting, nearly half of all student responses contained the word challenge and almost 40% of the essays contained words such as support or encouragement. Students often articulated that the reason their academic courses caused them to grow was a result of being challenged to think differently. The examples of others caused them to grow because they were challenged by how others lived their lives and the standard of integrity to which they held. Students were challenged continually when they studied abroad as they interacted with different faith traditions and saw a broader view of God or the global church, and those differences caused them to reevaluate what they believed.

Those who articulated large changes in their spiritual growth were challenged in an environment that also afforded them support and encouragement. Articulating the combined impact of both challenge and support on their spiritual growth in reference to

relationships created on a residence hall wing, one student writes, “In addition to supporting and encouraging me beyond belief, [they] challenge me to be a better person and challenge me to grow in my faith.” Depending on the specific student, support looked different for different students. The following are just some of the things mentioned as providing support to students: other students on their wing or floor, close friends, teammates, small group members, and faculty or staff.

### **The example of others.**

The strongest theme that emerged from senior responses was this idea that more than anything else, students grew as a result of how they saw others living their lives. The most cited example for this was living in the residence halls where they were surrounded by other Christian men and women living out their faith. One student writes:

Student life at [institution] was not such that I could coast through untouched by the spirit in some way. It wasn't that the chapel speakers made any kind of impact, it wasn't spiritual renewal, or any kind of spiritual growth event the campus provides for that matter. What made me grow was the company I kept. My floormates and other friends surrounded me in my times of need to pray and even cry with me when I needed it. They were there to encourage and support me. They were there to let me know I was out of line. They radiated God's love like I had never felt. I wanted so much to be like them, and I think I'm on my way.

Beyond the context of the residence hall, the example of peers was also mentioned in context of the campus environment as a whole as seen in the following response:

Being surrounded by people who were solid in their beliefs, really encouraged me to grow as well. They were such an example to me and still are an example today.

Because they told me what they believed or showed me through their actions, I then questioned what I believed or what I did.

Another strong influence was the example of how professors lived their faith in a way that was evident to students. One student wrote, “Of no small influence has been the teachers at [institution]. If anything, I would cite their example and devotion as the strongest influence.” Another even more powerful indication of the influence professors and staff have on students’ spiritual growth was when a student responded to the essay prompt by writing:

Although I loved many of the opportunities that were presented over the past 4 years, it was not a certain program or speaker or event that helped me grow. The main contributor to my growth was seeing the example of those around me, and how they lived out their faith every day. Many of my professors have taught me so much about living a Christian lifestyle, without even preaching to me on the subject.

#### **Academic courses and professors.**

A second contributor that emerged from the essay responses was that of academic courses. Students articulated frequently that their spiritual growth was impacted by course content and how professors taught their respective disciplines:

For me, so many of my spiritual lessons have come surprisingly *through* the academics that I set my mind towards, and the relationships that flourished out of them. Truly, my worth, my concrete faith, and my confidence in work are all spiritual aspects that arose from my experiences in class and with professors and faculty as well as students and peers around me.

Both major and general education courses were mentioned but not enough to elicit their own theme. Rather, the predominant courses mentioned were those in the religion core required by the institution. Students identified these courses as contributing to an increase in their knowledge of God and the Christian faith as well as providing the space and content for them to determine what they believe and why they believe it.

Many also articulated the benefit of an integrative approach and the impact of integrating faith into the classroom. Toward this end one student powerfully wrote:

My spiritual growth was accompanied by a mental growth – a desire to analyze and think critically about academics and my own daily philosophies. This has been one of the greatest marks that college has left on me: that my mental and spiritual development are often indistinguishable.

#### **Physical and programmed spaces.**

Perhaps a multifaceted theme, responses indicated that the idea of the community's impact on spiritual growth referred more to the environment and was thus a different theme than the example of others. Students indicated that they were able to grow because of an environment where they felt safe and also one that encouraged mutual respect both inside and outside the classroom.

Chapel and small groups were mentioned most frequently as programmatic elements of the institution that contributed to spiritual growth. Chapel was the one theme that elicited mixed responses. Some students said they grew because of positive experiences in chapel, but others wrote that they grew because they did not agree with their experience in chapel. This challenged them to study scripture on their own, such as the following student:

I feel obliged to add that chapel has been very influential in my growth...Chapel's influence has not come from providing answers, but providing questions that demand I search for answers. It has prompted me not with its goodness, but with its flaws and empty sections.

For those who viewed chapel as contributing positively to their spiritual growth there were mixed responses in terms of what aspects of chapel were influential – some mentioning times of corporate worship and others mentioning speakers brought in for different chapel series such as spiritual renewal.

Apart from chapel, small groups were the other largest single program on campus that contributed to students' spiritual growth within their idea of community mentioned outside of the classroom. Small groups were uniquely discussed in terms of the accountability or support and encouragement they provided. Small groups were identified as places where students felt safe to share their struggles and to wrestle with hard questions with a close group of friends generally made up of men or women on their wing or floor, something that was “extremely helpful for accountability purposes as well as encouragement.”

#### **Diversity of perspective.**

Highlighting this theme one student wrote, “Through coming into contact with many different people, I have been able to see how Christ works in many different people and cultures.” Students continually referenced the idea that whether exemplified by others, presented in chapel, or through ideas discussed in courses or small groups, they grew as a result of being confronted with perspectives and opinions that were different than their own.

Further, the non-denominational nature of the institution, if cited, was always cited as a positive contributor to spiritual growth because it created an environment where these different perspectives were represented. One student writes:

I think one of the best things [institution name] has done is to simply be a place where I can express my Christian beliefs and grow in my walk with Christ. By not being a repressive or religiously condemning institute, [institution name] is already doing its students a lot of good.

Students felt like this non-denominational space gave them freedom in choosing what they wanted to believe and was a positive source of challenge in their development.

### **Opportunities abroad.**

Opportunities abroad included semester study abroad programs, month-long service trips, as well as spring break service trips. These experiences contributed to students' spiritual growth through the newness of environment, sometimes increased independence in a new place that stretched them beyond their own resources, interactions with new people and cultures, and a time for students to step away from their daily routine. For students who mentioned study abroad experiences specifically, it was generally one of the top experiences that had contributed the most to their spiritual growth.

This was the one theme in which diversity was acknowledged as contributing to spiritual growth in a broader context of other cultures and other faith traditions. As students interacted with people and cultures that held to different faith or religious traditions they were challenged to evaluate their own beliefs.

### **Other experiences.**

While no other contributors appeared in the data enough times to be considered as significant themes, there were some experiences that were very influential for individual students. For a few, their participation in college athletics shaped their experience, as one student wrote that athletics “played a role in developing my character, which is significantly impacted by my faith.” Another student described their athletic experience as the only positive influence on their faith while at college writing,

Much of my spiritual growth has come from playing the sport I love....The only intentional community I’ve experienced here is that of my teammates. They’ve taught me that faith in Christ is what I need, and love for others is something I gain from God.

For others it was theatre, as one student wrote, “Getting sucked into the theatre was one of the best things that could’ve happened to me spiritually. I found a new family there, and a renewed sense of community.” The counseling center also impacted students’ spiritual growth in ways other aspects of the community could not, as one student describes the experience:

During especially difficult times in my life, I was able to talk through my situation with someone when I often did not feel comfortable sharing that personal information with my friends. My counselors helped me to realize what I was struggling with and how to deal with those spiritual and emotional issues.

Finally, for a few, spiritual growth came through their leadership roles. One writes:

I have learned the importance of confrontation, vulnerability and honesty in relationships as a [RA] and friend. This has allowed many friendships to be taken

to another level, but most importantly it has deepened my relationship with Christ and my faith.

And another describes the challenge of having peers watch how you live your life:

As a [resident] assistant, I was quickly thrown into a position where I was under the microscope. I had to live by example because the women around me saw how I truly lived. This challenged me to be a better person and to strive after Christ even more.

### **Conclusion**

Although no direct conclusions can be drawn between freshmen and senior essays due to the collection method and the lack of longitudinal data, the following discussion will address many parallels in an attempt to understand better the impact that students' expectations seem to have on their experiences of spiritual growth (or lack of growth) during college.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### **Challenge and Support**

The range of responses elicited by both freshmen and seniors in regards to their spiritual development seem to align closely with the majority of existing student development theories. Students' overwhelming desire to make their faith their own both as an expectation and a reality during their college experience aligns with the autonomy and identity theories of Chickering and Reisser (1993). Corresponding with Marcia's (1966) theory of identity development, students appeared to move from foreclosure toward commitment in their spiritual development. This finding seems to contrast previous research conducted by VanWicklin, Burwell, and Butman (1994) on identity foreclosed students and the liberal arts. Perhaps most interesting in the analysis was the sheer number of seniors who wrote the word "challenge" as they described what contributed to their spiritual development. Students' indication of challenge as a factor in their growth made it seem necessary to their growth and was often paralleled by support and encouragement.

Students mentioned both study abroad and academic courses as examples of experiences that provided the challenge they desired in their spiritual growth. The need for challenge in order to grow was seen in students' desire for accountability and in their emphasis on the example of others as challenging them to live differently.

The challenge of others seemed to be tied to students' interactions with those who were different than them in some way, whether it was those further along in their spiritual

growth such as faculty and upperclassmen or simply peers who had different interpretations of Scripture or came from a different denominational background. These interactions that provided some level of challenge to students' personal understanding impacted their growth and ability to gain a larger perspective of spirituality. When students mentioned the impact of diversity as challenging them to grow in their faith, it is important to note that this sense of diversity only referred to diversity of perspectives within interpretations of Scripture and / or Christian faith and did not include diversity in terms of other religions, other cultures, race, or gender. Language in the essays indicated that students understood their faith in a personal way and desired to be challenged and encouraged in an environment that held to their same basic faith orientation. Students seemed to embrace the non-denominational environment of the institution but never indicated an expectation or desire for a broader diversity at least in its impact on their spiritual development.

This aligns with discussion surrounding students' understanding of spiritual growth when asked to articulate their expectations and experiences of spiritual growth or change. While a specific definition of spiritual growth was never given in the essay prompts, it became clear in the process of analysis that the students who responded understood spiritual growth in much the same way. Both in their expectations and realizations of spiritual growth, it was clear that students specifically understood spirituality as a personal relationship with God and knowledge of the Christian faith. Students never articulated a broader definition of spiritual growth that one would see in Astin, Astin, and Lindholm's (2011) research or in Parks' (2000) understanding of students' search for meaning and purpose. This could be because the nature of the

assignment was already explicitly faith-based or perhaps the length of the assignment or the wording of the questions did not necessitate a definitional response.

### **Expectations and Experience**

Upon entering college, the Christian community of the institution was the most cited expected contributor, and yet students seemed to have little understanding of what that meant. In fact, at times it was clear that they were simply mentioning the community nature as something they had been told they would find at the institution. Students entering college showed a significantly higher focus on personal and external aspects of faith compared to seniors who mention having internalized more of their faith and extending out towards community. In understanding Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development, students generally transitioned from merely accepting the faith traditions they grew up with to reflecting and critically analyzing them in an effort to make their faith their own. Many also moved beyond this, articulating their ability to see their own faith as well as the faith of others from a broader perspective.

This corresponded with seniors' response that the single most important contributor to their growth was the example of others. Mentioned in the context of faculty, friends, and peers, it seems that modeling as mentioned by Oman (2008) proved most important. Interestingly, the example of others was almost always mentioned as in watching how others lived their lives rather than in the context of a mentoring relationship. In fact, specific mentors were only mentioned a handful of times in all of the seniors' responses. This was surprising when looking at research by Parks (2000) highlighting the importance of mentors as well as young adults expressing desire for mentoring relationships. The results of this study do not indicate that mentoring is not

beneficial to spiritual growth, rather the study merely raises the potential need for more research in this area.

Another discussion point presents itself in the lack of students' understanding of leadership positions as contributing to their spiritual growth. This raises some questions because the institution emphasizes student leadership and opportunities. From the essays obviously it is impossible to know the reasons why students did not make connections between being in leadership and their spiritual growth. More research would be needed to see whether this is actually true or whether students simply did not intuitively make the connection between leadership and the example of others in the short length of the essays.

Other aspects that failed to emerge in seniors' responses as significant themes were the more formal religious practices and personal disciplines. It is hard to tell if this was simply because students already viewed these as integrated into how they lived their lives rather than areas of growth or if they simply were not central components in students' understanding of their faith. The two formal aspects of religion that were mentioned by seniors were chapel and small groups. Chapel, though, carried very mixed responses as to its actual impact. Many were disappointed and mentioned chapel as one aspect that did not contribute to their growth. Others who did find value in chapel programming specified either the corporate worship or speakers, but there was no clear consensus on one versus the other. If anything, some of the programmed series were more beneficial than individual chapels.

The discussion around small groups seemed to be an interesting one. Students seemed to have high expectations for the accountability and support they would find in

small groups on their wing or floor during their residential experience. A non-mandatory form of programming where students were generally placed randomly in small groups was something often mentioned by seniors as having contributed significantly to their spiritual growth as well.

In regards to personal disciplines, while they were mentioned frequently by freshmen as expected contributors to growth or actual goals of growth, they were rarely the focus or even mentioned in seniors' responses of growth or contributors. While this could be seen as a critical finding, one should be slow in jumping to such a conclusion. It was not clear from the essays whether personal disciplines were ignored because they were simply an expected or natural part of students' spiritual lives and, thus, they failed to mention them or whether they saw little value in them. Like external religious practices such as church attendance, personal disciplines could have been an already expected aspect of students' personal faith and not something they expected the institution to provide for them. In this sense there may have been discrepancies in how freshmen and seniors read the essay prompts with seniors only discussing what the question asked for: what aspects of the institution were most influential in their spiritual growth.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of the study was the use of convenience sampling. Freshman essays were not mandatory but rather offered as extra credit which could have created a selection bias. The difference in students' writing abilities could also be seen as a limitation of the study. Students may not have had the ability to articulate fully through writing a subjective topic such as spirituality in a clear manner, and through essays

students may not have had the ability to respond with as much depth as in an interview. The lack of longitudinal data available also limited the study in its ability truly to see how students changed from their freshmen to senior year since freshmen and senior essays were collected in the same year.

### **Implications for Practice**

Despite these limitations, it was impossible to read students' responses and not see the impact of personal relationships within a community of faith on students' spiritual growth. Perhaps one of the greatest implications of this study is the reminder of how much the example of faculty and staff as well as peers influences students' growth. Students entered this particular institution seeking a community of challenge and support and seemed to grow according to the level at which they perceived these two elements to be present in their interactions with others. While students often mentioned a lack of challenge or support at different times, they never mentioned having too much of either. Even in an environment where growth seems to be occurring, it might well be worth an evaluation of how to challenge students even more.

Due to the inherently personal nature of faith, especially of incoming students, attention should also be given to the use of space on campus for students to engage in personal faith practices as well as ways for them to begin to interact with others in faith discussions. Even though personal faith practices were not emphasized in senior responses, they were an important element of what freshmen seem to be focused on when they come to college. Also, because challenge and diversity of thought, along with the example of others, were sighted as the most important contributors to spiritual growth, a good amount of thought should at the same time be given to creating guided dialogues

and opportunities for students to interact with both those who think differently and those who model strong faith commitments.

And finally, while more research is needed to see just how and how much students' expectations shape their experience, there is no doubt that students' expectations do shape their experience. Seen in students' seeming lack of understanding of community coming into college and their emphasis on having learned the importance or meaning of community by the time they were a senior, students showed that at least at times what they expected (or were told to expect) when entering college influenced the ways in which they grew. Aligning with ideas in Smith's (2009) book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, there is then a large responsibility on the institution to continue to make sure that what students are told and experience is consistent with the intended outcomes of the university. In the case of students who indicated a lack of spiritual growth, the reason was almost always because they felt that the institution did not provide the challenge or support that it claimed it would.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Having only collected essays at one institution during one academic year and employing convenience sampling to obtain freshmen essays, there is much more research that needs to be done. The results from the study seem to indicate that students' expectations have great influence on what they experience and shape how they view their institutions' impact on their overall development. Replicating this study longitudinally and at other institutions would begin to give weight and increased depth to some of the themes that emerged. The impact of gender, although not analyzed in-depth, indicated

some differences that could help better target incoming students and impact their spiritual growth sooner and should be studied further.

### **Conclusion**

The impact of spirituality within the lives of college students has already been highlighted in the broader context of higher education research. The purpose of this study was to add a level of depth and a more practical understanding of how the process of spiritual growth occurs within a faith-based institution. Desiring a holistic approach to student development, the results of this study repeatedly reinforced how important all aspects of the college experience are in the spiritual development of students. Ranging from the residential community, to academic courses, and faculty interaction as well as departmental programming across the institution, students seemed to graduate with a greater complexity and understanding of their faith. Students showed through their responses that in their pursuit of spiritual growth and a deeper relationship with God, they sought to be challenged and encouraged in a community of education that emphasized learning in every department and interaction. The challenge then for institutions is to continue to be safe places where students are challenged in their thinking and lifestyles and given the freedom to determine for themselves what they believe and why they believe in a way that urges them toward action in the world.



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## APPENDIX A:

## Freshmen Essay Assignment

Please write a 250-300 word (about one double-spaced page) response to the following questions. You will receive 1% extra credit in Foundations of Christian Thought for completing this assignment.

What are your goals for spiritual growth during college? How do you expect the college experience to help you grow spiritually?

You may write your 250-300 word response in a Word document, attach it on this page, and then hit the "Submit" button below. If you have any questions please email [brmaher@taylor.edu](mailto:brmaher@taylor.edu). Thanks!

Brent Maher  
Director of Assessment and Quality Improvement  
Office: 765-998-4626

**INFORMED CONSENT:** Your responses will be used for a research project investigating the spiritual expectations of first-time freshmen. Your responses will be kept confidential and your name will never be reported with the research results. There is no risk to individuals participating in this research project. By submitting the assignment on this page, you acknowledge reading this informed consent notice and agree to participate in the research project. If you have any questions, please contact Brent Maher, Director of Assessment and Quality Improvement, at [brmaher@taylor.edu](mailto:brmaher@taylor.edu) or 765-998-4626.

## APPENDIX B

## Senior Essay Assignment

## Spiritual Growth Reflection

Your assignment is to write a 1 ½ - 2 page (double-spaced) response to the following questions in a Word document, attach it on this page, and then hit the "Submit" button below prior to class on Wednesday May 4th. Please be sure to include your name, gender, and anticipated graduation date on the top of the page as well. This assignment is worth 100 points of your overall grade. Please bring a copy of your responses to class as well for further discussion.

Name:

Gender:

Anticipated Graduation Date:

Questions: What elements of your college experience have contributed the most to your spiritual growth? How have you grown or changed spiritually since entering college?

**INFORMED CONSENT:** Your responses will be part of institutional assessment and research efforts regarding the spiritual formation of undergraduates and as a result will be included in the annual assessment report and review by the University Assessment Council. Results of the study may also be published and presented. However, your responses will be kept confidential and your name will never be reported with the research results. There is no risk to individuals in this assessment and study.

While still a course requirement, if you feel strongly opposed to your essay being used for research you may write: "Do not include" at the top of your essay. By submitting the assignment without a "Do not include" phrase at the top, you acknowledge reading this informed consent notice and agree to participate in the assessment and research. If you have any questions, please contact Brent Maher, Director of Assessment and Quality Improvement, at [brmaher@taylor.edu](mailto:brmaher@taylor.edu) or 765-998-4626.