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REMEMBER WHEN: ALUMNI INVOLVEMENT AND MEANING MAKING  
IMPACTED BY PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONS CULTURE IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Christina R. Brandsma

May 2019

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

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Christina Brandsma

entitled

Remember When: Alumni Involvement and Meaning Making Impacted by Perceptions of  
Traditions Culture in Higher Education

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

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2019

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Skip Trudeau, Ed.D      Date  
Thesis Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Scott Gaier, Ph.D      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Todd Ream, Ph.D      Date  
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tim Herrmann, Ph.D.      Date  
Director, M.A. in Higher Education and Student Development

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of traditions culture on alumni involvement and meaning making. Through a transcendental phenomenological design, this study investigated traditions at a small, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest from the perspective of alumni. This exploratory research was guided by the following questions: How have traditions impacted the meaning alumni made of their college experience and their personal identity? How do traditions influence the current involvement of alumni with their institution? Key findings from this study include an understanding of traditions defined from an alumni perspective, the benefits alumni perceive from engaging traditions, relationships between continued alumni involvement and traditions, and a rich description of meaning alumni derived from involvement with traditions. Alumni described the essence of traditions as aspects of culture, which are “transmitted,” “engaged,” “continuous,” and “unifying.” The research produced an increased understanding of campus traditions and informed practitioners to encourage involvement in traditions, cautiously intervene with traditions, remain mindful of alumni as part of the campus communities, and view traditions as a developmental opportunity for the alumni community. Campus traditions shape individuals throughout their lives.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

“No way! What year did you graduate? What hall did you live in?” As alumni meet each other outside of Taylor University, instant connections are made. Shared experiences and common language unite graduates. Alumni, even graduating years apart, connect through common points of involvement and traditions such as student leader positions, residence halls, traditional events, or other quirky aspects of the university’s culture. Such associations elicit feelings of nostalgia for the individuals. Campus traditions influence the community of a university, impact student development, facilitate an oral history, and bind alumni inextricably to one another. This research pursued a greater understanding of alumni perceptions of traditions and the impact of traditions on the meaning they derive from their college experience and on their continued involvement, if any, with their alma mater.

### **Traditions Culture**

Traditions culture refers to a recognized pattern of passing down objects, beliefs, values, events, or practices within a campus community (Bronner, 2011; Gross, 1992; Shils, 1981). Informed by these existing definitions, this research specifically measured traditions culture by alumni descriptions of traditions that note objects, beliefs, values, events, or practices as things that have been passed to them or things they plan to pass to others.

As a societal phenomenon, traditions and their impacts on culture have been broadly studied by many researchers. Bronner (1998/2011) broadly discussed traditions: the ways traditions evolve, the ways traditions are defined, and the ways traditions are passed along. Shils (1981) also defined traditions and addressed the impact of traditions on a culture or society. His insights increased the understanding of traditions' influence on a campus community.

As American colleges evolved, they developed unique cultures permeated with traditions. Bronner (2012), Moffatt (1985), Rudolph (1990), and Torbenson (2009) outlined this transformation in higher education. These researchers highlighted traditions related to extracurricular involvement paving the way for Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) to begin to link these types of involvements and traditions to a sense of belonging among college students. Kuh and colleagues (2005) asserted traditions bond students to one another and their school.

Kuh et al. (2005) established connections between a sense of tradition or school pride and a feeling of belonging; this current research sought to understand the role alumni play in perpetuating traditions in college communities. Green (1997) discussed tradition-bearers and studied the people involved in sustaining traditions. This research evaluated whether alumni fill the role of tradition-bearer.

### **Making Meaning out of College Traditions**

This research also studied the process of meaning making and the ways traditions influence meaning making among alumni. Meaning making refers to the process of forming connections and significance from experiences (Parks, 2000). This thesis explored how alumni derive meaning, value, or significance through their experiences

with campus traditions, both during their time as students and presently. This derived meaning may serve as a foundational aspect of university or personal identity. Meaning making, in this research, was measured by alumni self-reports of deriving meaning, value, or significance through their experiences with campus traditions.

Parks (2000) discussed meaning making and noted traditions influence the way an individual connects to the surrounding culture. Manning (1994), Gross (1992), and Perry (1997) established traditions as foundational to the meaning making process. Furthermore, Perry (1997) and Parks (2000) contributed to an understanding of how college students derive meaning from their experiences, including traditions linked to their educational experiences.

### **Traditions and Alumni Involvement**

Alumni involvement is defined as alumni giving and/or participating with their alma mater within the last three years. When considering alumni involvement, the research aimed to know if and how alumni connected with their alma mater in recent years. Traditions foster a feeling of belonging in institutions of higher education, and, in turn, a sense of belonging increases university affinity. Gaier (2005) and Gallo (2013) examined links between university affinity and alumni involvement. With the knowledge that traditions can lead to university affinity, this research sought to understand if the impact of traditions extends to alumni involvement. Alumni are known to serve universities through participation, funding, and governance. This research investigated potential links between traditions and alumni involvement.

## **Purpose of the Study**

In the literature, a gap exists between research on college traditions and the impact of those traditions on alumni involvement and the meaning such traditions hold for members of a university's alumni community. Higher education institutions value a bonded campus community that maintains connections with individuals beyond their time as students of the university. With this value, institutions will benefit from learning the factors influencing a culture rich in traditions within a university community. This research sought to explore how alumni currently make meaning of traditions when reflecting back on them, how alumni made meaning of traditions during their time as students, and how traditions impact alumni involvement. This research evaluated if a connection exists between traditions and alumni involvement. These gains in understanding offer insights into the characteristics of traditions and traditions' long-term impacts on student and university identity development. The exploratory research was guided by the following questions: How have traditions impacted the meaning alumni made of their college experience and their personal identity? How do traditions influence alumni's current involvement with their institution?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

A discussion of college traditions' impact on students and alumni demands a definition of tradition and an understanding of the impact tradition has on culture. It is valuable to comprehend the ways traditions operate within communities and impact the individuals involved. Often traditions function as living entities, interacting with the culture at large and resulting in a multifaceted impact on a community. The literature establishes descriptions of tradition, values of traditions in communities, the ways traditions can evolve, and a brief history of traditions in college communities (Boyer, 1990; Bronner, 1998/2011/2012; Gross, 1992; Morris, 2016; Shils, 1981; Spoutz, 2018).

To discern how current and former students have derived meaning from college traditions, a brief discussion of meaning making is necessary. In the literature, a gap exists between research on college traditions, the impact of those traditions on alumni involvement, and the meaning such traditions hold for members of a university's alumni community. University affinity is a product of a campus culture rich in traditions and a satisfactory undergraduate experience; such affinity and satisfaction predict increased alumni involvement (Gaier, 2005; Gallo, 2013). The meaning alumni derive from campus traditions yields increased alumni involvement.

## Tradition

The term *tradition*, and derivative forms of the word such as *traditions* and *traditional*, commonly describe behaviors, beliefs, and events. It describes a breadth of experiences thus possessing significant ambiguity. Researchers have made efforts to distill the term *tradition* through succinct definitions. Shils (1981) defined tradition as anything “transmitted or handed down from the past to the present” (p. 12). He further explained the things handed down include “material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions” (Shils, 1981, p. 12). Bronner (2011) also emphasized the transference of an item or piece of knowledge as part of traditions. Bronner referred to the word’s Latin root, *trader*. *Tradere* is the Latin verb meaning to transmit, “to hand over or deliver” to clarify the ambiguity (Bronner 2011, p. 27; Gross, 1992). The term also implies that what was delivered must also be kept safe (Gross, 1992). Thus, the notion of transmission is essential in explaining the concept of tradition.

The process of defining tradition is itself an example of tradition, as definitions are handed down from the past to the present. Gross (1992) evaluated the Latin words *traditio* and *traditum*, in addition to *tradere*. *Traditio* refers to the transmission process, and *traditum* refers to the object, belief, or event being transmitted (Gross, 1992). These terms provide a framework for understanding how material inheritance, patterns of religious beliefs, recurring campus events, and patterns in behavior can all fall under the overarching term: *tradition*.

In defining tradition, it is helpful to distinguish tradition from other patterns. Customs, cultures, rituals, and habits are not always traditions, though the differentiations



between such terms are rarely clear (Gross, 1992). Bronner (2011) posited tradition emphasizes “intergenerational connection and symbolic connotation” more than habits and customs. Additionally, Green (1997) suggested traditions, more than other similar patterns or customs, are revered as almost sacred.

**Types of traditions.** Tradition can be used as both a noun and an adjective. The adjectival usage highlights qualities that have been passed down through multiple generations (Green, 1997). Bronner (2011) believed traditional perspectives create consistency by filtering out trends incompatible with handed-down values. Examples such as “traditional college student,” “traditional marriage,” or “traditional literature” demonstrate a greater importance of inherited values over individual opinion (Green, 1997).

Nuanced distinctions bring clarity to the concept of traditions. Green (1997) made one such distinction, differentiating between little traditions and great traditions. Little traditions grow from common people in lower levels of society and serve as the foundation from which great traditions emerge. Conversely, great traditions occur within the most refined, intellectual, and advanced levels of society and represent formalized pieces of culture. Notably, both little traditions and great traditions are present within societies. A society typically begins with basic structures of “beliefs, norms, and standards” constituting little traditions (Green, 1997, p. 427). Over time, little traditions can evolve into great traditions, defined as “norms, beliefs, and aesthetic and intellectual achievements” with leaders who affirm and interpret patterns (Green, 1997, p. 427). This process of little traditions evolving to great traditions within higher education begins when college students develop belief in friendship and sharing life together. These, in

turn, evolve to great traditions when administration formalizes community as a core value. As such, both little and great traditions have the potential to influence a community's behaviors.

In addition to the tradition's size, the state of society also shapes the effects of traditions. Swidler (1986) categorized societies as settled or unsettled and explained the unique roles of traditions in each societal context. In settled cultures, traditions reinforce patterns, actions, and values without explicit direction. In contrast, traditions in unsettled cultures overtly direct new patterns, actions, and values (Swidler, 1986). Such categories provide a helpful means for understanding the relationship between the stability of a society and its traditions.

**Transmission of traditions.** A major component of traditions is the manner in which they are passed down through generations. The concept of transmission, or handing over, traditions implies they can be possessed by humans, involve a social connection, bond people to previous generations, are experiential, and maintain social continuity (Bronner 2011). The connection between human hands and what is transmitted as a tradition is valuable for understanding traditions. Bronner (2011) offered several benefits to describing traditions in relation to hands in that they are handled through grasping and passing objects, beliefs, and events.

As the term suggests, transmission is an essential component to the livelihood of a tradition. Traditions can be transmitted through oral, literary, and institutional means with varying degrees of intentionality (Gross, 1992). Transmission has the power to shape the community experiencing the rituals and patterns (Manning, 1994). While oral and literary methods of transmission are organic, institutionalized transmissions are more

formal. Cannons and creeds are a few examples of intentional, institutionalized ways of passing on traditions (Gross, 1992). In the higher education context, mission statements and codes of conduct are some of the more common examples of institutionalized transmissions of tradition. Though institutional support has the potential to reinforce traditions, more often than not, excessive formalized structure causes traditions to be “distorted through too much institutional interference” (Gross, 1992, p. 18).

**Traditions are alive.** Transmission is but one of the means by which traditions sustain their life-like quality (Green, 1997; Gross, 1992). Additionally, social and cultural changes can also shift perceptions of experiences, the traditions themselves, and their meanings (Gross, 1992). Transmission, however, does not consistently produce identical replications. In addition to social and cultural factors that lead to evolution, the process of transmission can also have the capability to alter the tradition. Despite evolutions, embellishments, and deteriorations, traditions can be recognized by the consistent aspects that remain vibrant over multiple generations (Gross, 1992).

Like the wise member of a society who passes a traditional practice to the next generation, traditions themselves hold wisdom and life. Associated with precedent, continuity, and convention, tradition is commonly put forward to direct future action (Bronner, 1998, p. 11). In this way, “tradition informs people where to begin and guides them on how to proceed” (Bronner, 2011, p. 8). Traditions serve as a living reminder to help individuals evaluate the past and provide direction for the future.

In a community with significant transience and diversity, such as a college campus, a confluence of multiple traditions is common. Traditions can be held by many stakeholders, including but not limited to individuals, residence halls, athletics,

departments, and universities at large. As various traditions collide, common patterns of change occur (Shils, 1981). Differing traditions respond to the infusion of other patterns in various ways and impact the broader community traditions. This life-like nature allows traditions the potential to grow, fade, merge, and evolve. In discussing American traditions, Bronner (1998) offered three responses to tradition: upholding, forming or evolving, or breaking down. When multiple traditions converge, one or both traditions change, absorb the other, or repulse the opposing tradition (Gross, 1992).

Bronner (1998) sought to “rationalize diverse American traditions into a coherent identity” (p. 1). This challenge exists on college campuses when students join the campus community from varied backgrounds but identify with a unified campus culture. Bronner (1998) posed three perspectives for viewing American culture—nationalist, pluralist, and behaviorist—all of which can be used to evaluate collegiate cultures. The nationalist perspective suggests social progress and democracy encourage members to identify with the culture. Combining many community members’ voices to improve and govern a campus community provides members with a sense of ownership. The second perspective, the pluralist perspective, honors different local traditions within the broader community and affirms value in such diversity. Whether localized traditions stem from students’ cultural backgrounds or smaller sectors of campus, those traditions shape the broader campus culture. Lastly, the behavioralist perspective suggests experiences of culture follow individual responses to society. The behavioralist perspective understands individuals to be less communally oriented than the other two perspectives and believes traditions to be upheld for structural reasons over historical reasons (Bronner, 1998). These three views are all valuable to consider when studying traditions.

Researchers typically study traditions in the peak of their existence, once established; however, it is also important to understand how traditions are formed as the formation impacts the meaning and transmission. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) analyzed the creation of traditions in reference to the process of formalization and ritualization. In contrast to more established traditions, recently invented traditions often contain vague, ill-defined, symbolic rituals without representing clear structures of the society for which the invented tradition is ascribed (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Manning (1989) acknowledged the paradox of establishing new traditions and advises colleges to revitalize dormant traditions or build new traditions on the foundation of the university's established ideals, goals, and values.

In addition to the inception of traditions, the death of traditions is also important to address. Traditions, for a variety of reasons, die. Often, traditions cease in practice or behavior before the associated belief wanes (Gross, 1992). For example, a church may discontinue the practice of shaking hands during the worship service but may uphold the value of community and greeting one another within the church community. Gross (1992) also acknowledged the possibility for traditions to appear to die off but remain "underground and out of sight," especially when repressed by society (p. 10). These traditions that remain alive, though out of sight, reappear later (Gross, 1992).

**Traditions on college campuses.** Bronner (2012) asserted traditions permeated old-time colleges and remain central to modern colleges. Colonial colleges followed many patterns of England's higher education system, including memorization, religious emphasis, and studies in Greek and Latin (Rudolph, 1990; Torbenson, 2009). Collegiate ideals slowly shifted to emphasize holistic development in addition to increased

knowledge, allowing university staff and students to share a sense of familial community (Torbenson, 2009). By the late 1850s, a new pattern of thought developed: “a concept of college as a world in itself, with its own customs, ceremonies and iconography” (Moffatt, 1985, p. 2). Accompanying this perception was “a notion of the college experience centering on extracurricular activities rather than on academics or intellectual education” (Moffatt, 1985, p. 2). Rudolph (1990) and Bronner (2012) described the rise of extracurricular involvement in colleges during the 1800s; students engaged in literary societies, Greek fraternities, and athletics. The culture shift favoring extracurricular activities followed the development of fraternal organizations (Moffatt, 1985; Torbenson, 2009). An emphasis on secrecy within fraternities laid the groundwork for unregulated, student-led activities in college. Occurring concurrently with increased extracurricular activities was the rise in class identity, solidified with new rituals embodying students’ values. Following the Civil War, the values of “class spirit” and “college spirit” emerged. Interclass athletics, hazing, rushing, and rituals became common practices and provided the foundation for college traditions (Moffatt, 1985). When criticized for disorderly and immature behavior, students responded by labeling such acts with the concept of “tradition” (Moffatt, 1985).

School spirit and campus traditions have continued to shape college students’ experiences. Acknowledging the significant number of traditions surrounding collegiate athletics, Beck and Wilkinson (2013) gathered a list of college sports traditions. As they compiled hundreds of college sports traditions in a list, they defined tradition as “an action, complete with a start and a finish, and then continued over a period of years” (Beck & Wilkinson, 2013, p. 1). In addition to athletic traditions, colleges and students

established rituals, pranks, celebrations, and events to solidify and communicate university norms and values, social hierarchies, and school spirit (Bronner 2012).

Kuh and colleagues (2005) reported students from Wabash College—an all-male institution—as saying, “I was not interested in an all-male college, but the visit sold me. The sense of tradition and the feeling of pride—it just felt right” (p. 53). Despite the recruitment hurdles posed to Wabash College as a result of being a single-sex institution, this distinctive feature was viewed as an asset (Kuh et al., 2005). Additionally, Kuh et al. (2005) promoted the importance of a student’s strong sense of belonging within a university and discussed Wofford College to support his claim. Wofford encourages students to view their participation as “joining” the Wofford community, as opposed to “attending” Wofford (Kuh et al., 2005). Students expressed feeling Wofford was a place they could fit in and matter; an “89% first-to-second-year persistence rate” supports these expressed feelings (Kuh et al, 2005, p. 111). Traditions foster communal bonds between members of a campus community across generations, provide students with events to anticipate, ritualize holistic development into adulthood, and allow students to belong to something greater than themselves (Bronner, 2012; Kuh et al., 2005).

Additionally, colleges communicate the values and behaviors defining the community through traditions and ceremonies, thus transmitting the institutional culture to new students (Bronner, 2012; Manning, 1989). Bronner (2012) poetically described the continuity created by traditions and the emotional connection students feel to the university’s tradition and legacy as “taking part in an unbroken chain from the past to the future” (p. 163). Traditions are invaluable to college communities, impacting students as they attend and transforming them beyond their time at the university.

## **Alumni Involvement**

Alumni involvement is defined as “alumni giving and/or alumni participating with their alma mater within the last three years” (Gaier, 2005, p. 279). During the rise in extracurricular activities, an increase in alumni involvement began to occur. In the early nineteenth century, “college loyalty” was nonexistent (Moffatt, 1985). Rudolph (1990) discussed increased alumni involvement in the governance and funding of colleges following the Civil War. Alumni sustained universities by communicating a school’s values and culture and contributing financial provisions (Rudolph, 1990). Rudolph (1990) compared the relationship between alumni and their colleges to congregants and their church; emphasizing the loyalty of alumni by calling them “faithful communicants” (p. 429). Bronner (2012) emphasized the significant identity an individual shares as an alumnus of a college and notes, “when grad[uate]s get together, they perpetuate lore based on their reminiscences if they were socially engaged on campus” (p. 405). Despite the passing of time, graduates feel a sense of ownership and belonging within their institutions.

A web of connections exists between college loyalty, alumni involvement, traditions culture, and university affinity. Gallo (2013) found alumni progress through four stages of involvement with their alma mater: affiliation, affinity, engagement, and support. Individuals can plateau at any stage and can cycle through the various points multiple times. In his research, Gallo (2013) studied an Irish university that encouraged a strong initial affiliation through a “vibrant student experience” (p. 1158). A greater degree of an individual’s satisfaction with their undergraduate institution is linked to increased alumni giving and participation (Gaier, 2005).



Additionally, “alumni who participated in at least one formal student activity during the undergraduate experience were 87 percent more likely to give and 154 percent as likely to participate” with the university as alumni as compared to those who did not participate in any student activities as undergraduates (Gaier, 2005, p. 285). Mael and Ashforth (1992) found organizational identification, defined as “perceived oneness with the organization,” increases one’s likelihood to support the organization (p. 103). Organizational identity and intraorganizational unity are encouraged through multiple avenues, including institutional “rituals that celebrate the organization’s identity such as orientation festivities, initiation rites, pep rallies, homecoming parades, graduation ceremonies, local traditions, and anniversary celebrations” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 118). College traditions create bonds between individuals and institutions that extend beyond a person’s time as a student.

Well-connected alumni transmit traditions to new and prospective students. Shils (1981) clarified the transmissible parts are “the patterns or images of actions which they imply or present and the beliefs requiring, recommending, regulating, permitting, or prohibiting the reenactment of those patterns” (p. 12). A belief in university loyalty upholding patterns of tradition was exemplified in a celebration at the New York Yale Club in 1922, which honored the [rowing] crew who defeated Harvard (Rudolph, 1990). An alumnus spoke of the event saying:

I would rather see the color of the blue-tipped oars first across the finish line than gaze at the matchless splendor of a masterpiece of Titian. I would rather watch the hats go over the cross bar after a Yale victory than the finest dramatic performance the world has ever known. I would rather in the midst of a titanic

gridiron struggle hear 'March, march on down the field' than listen to the music of a great opera. (Rudolph, 1990, p. 430)

The sense of belonging and affinity the speaker felt toward Yale University was deeply ingrained in his identity. Consistency is established when older members, like alumni, induct younger members, such as current and future students, into beliefs and patterns (Shils, 1981). The intensity to which the Yale speaker proclaimed loyalty to his institution affirms Shils' (1981) statement: "adherence is the social structure which possesses the tradition" (p. 262).

What Rudolph (1990) referred to as "faithful communicants," Green (1997) labeled as "tradition-bearers." A tradition-bearer is "a person who preserves traditional materials in memory and transmits them to other people" (Green, 1997, p. 802). Green (1997) asserted tradition "does not lie in the depths of the soul of all the people of a given community but rather it has its custodians, who generally form a minority of the total population" (p. 802). In a college community, involved alumni are likely the tradition-bearers.

### **Meaning Making**

Students and alumni derive meaning from their undergraduate experiences, including campus traditions. Parks (2000) defined meaning making as "the activity of composing a sense of the connections among things: a sense of pattern, order, form, and significance" (p. 19). People inherently organize meaning through their experiences. Customs, liturgies, and traditions serve as patterns for individuals to orient themselves and make meaning of the world around them (Parks, 2000). Manning (1994) recognized the power of traditions not only to communicate longstanding meaning and values but

also to serve as vessels for communicating new meaning. Manning (1994) explained how the familiarity of traditions can facilitate openness to new ways of thinking through “[using] old forms to create new meaning” (p. 280). Tradition creates “a framework for meaning and purpose: it tells people what they should do in order to be in harmony with the world” (Gross, 1992, p. 10). Perry (1997) explained how college students develop increasingly complex meaning from their educational experiences.

Parks (2000) also noted college students gravitate toward others who have shared experiences or beliefs, explaining, “location, social context, and general surroundings play a central role in the formation of meaning and faith” (p. 88). Emphasizing the role of community to help individuals formulate an understanding of their world, Parks (2000) asserted “the power of tribe” as a valuable way individuals make meaning (p. 89). College students often find this tribe in student groups, residence halls, and in the university community at large.

### **Challenges to Studying Tradition**

A challenge to studying traditions in America is the future-oriented nature of American society. This societal attitude is analogous in college communities and poses the same challenge to researching traditions on college campuses (Bronner, 1998). Bronner (1998) noted the unique blend of tradition and modernity; this blend is visible in college settings. The greatest problem, Bronner (1998) believed, in tradition is “explaining the ways that people rely on one another, with reference to precedent, for their wisdom, their expression, their identity” (p. 9). Bronner (1998) asserted tradition is a formative way individuals learn and create personal meaning; “tradition suggests being a link in a social chain” and thus offers a sense of belonging within a community (p. 10).

## **Conclusion**

Traditions are complex, living entities that share a mutually impactful relationship with the communities and individuals involved. Literature describes terminology related to traditions, effects of traditions, evolutions of traditions, and the presence of traditions within college communities (Boyer, 1990; Bronner, 1998/2011; Gross, 1992; Shils, 1981). College traditions impact the student experiences of alumni, university affinity, and continued university involvement (Gaier, 2005; Gallo, 2013). One of the many implications of college traditions is the way they contribute to students' processes of meaning making. People extract meaning from their experiences; alumni and college students are no exception as they gather meaning through involvement with campus traditions (Parks, 2000). Relationships exist between traditions, alumni involvement, and meaning making; however, existing literature fails to connect these constructs. This research endeavored to examine the relationships between these concepts and provide meaningful links through individuals' shared experiences with traditions at a small, faith-based, liberal arts institution in a rural area of the Midwest.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The research was conducted in connection with the Traditions Research Project (TRP), a project that aims to understand the value of traditions in higher education. Goals of the project include understanding traditions' impact on students' college experience and identity development and gathering evidence valuing traditions in college communities. The researcher utilized a qualitative exploratory approach as minimal research exists on traditions in higher education. To guide the exploration process, the researcher collected and analyzed data using a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007).

Two previous theses were completed in conjunction with the TRP, and both emphasized specific traditions (Morris, 2016; Spoutz, 2018). These prior theses and other phases of the research project fostered an understanding of traditions from those currently part of the campus community. This study's emphasis on the alumni perspective will bolster the overall comprehension of traditions on a college campus through a unique vantage point.

### **Design**

The research sought to understand the impact of traditions on alumni's college experience and continued involvement. Research was conducted using a phenomenological design to amalgamate individual alumni's experiences with the phenomenon of traditions to describe the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007).

With a perspective aided by retrospection from their college experiences, participants described traditions at their alma mater. Participants were asked about the value of traditions at their university, personal perceptions of the traditions, and long-term personal effects of traditions.

Empirical, transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to submit existing beliefs to the data collected and understand the recorded, conscious experiences are descriptive, not explanatory or analytical (Creswell, 2007). Such philosophical perspectives are essential to phenomenological research. Creswell (2007) reiterated the philosophical relationship between subjects and objects: “the reality of an object [traditions] is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual” (p. 59). The researcher aimed to avoid personal biases when studying the data collected.

The researcher used an empirical, transcendental phenomenological design to study the phenomenon of traditions at a small, faith-based liberal arts institution in the rural Midwest. This design best suited the research project as it fosters reflection on essential themes of traditions throughout the description without interpretation or analysis of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The researcher interpreted findings and determined patterns of graduates’ perceptions of traditions.

### **Context and Participants**

The research took place and was influenced by Taylor University’s context as a small, faith-based liberal arts institution in the rural Midwest. The university has been in existence for over 150 years and prides itself in its rich history of traditions. Research was conducted with 17 alumni. Creswell (2007) suggested extensively interviewing between five and 25 individuals to best gather an understanding of a shared experience.

The goal of the sampling was to move toward saturation so that additional interviews reiterated identified themes and did not generate new themes (Creswell, 2007). For this reason, the interviewer sought to interview ten alumni who share the experience of traditions as young alumni and ten alumni who share the experience from a more seasoned perspective. Among both groups, the participants were split relatively equally between male and female participants. The variety of genders offered not only multiple perspectives but also a broader array of traditions experienced.

Additionally, diversified graduation years account for a campus community that has evolved over time and the ways time and perspectives shape the views of the participants. For this reason, this study contained an even distribution between recent graduates, having graduated within the last four years, and seasoned graduates, having graduated ten or more years ago. In addition to a balance between young alumni and seasoned alumni, the research sought an even distribution between male respondents and female respondents. However, the number of participants in each gender category were not equal; there were seven male participants and ten female participants. Each participant was assigned a unique code name to preserve anonymity while differentiating the comments made by different alumni.

### **Procedures**

The researcher collected data using individual, in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews. In-depth interviews foster a rich description of traditions and allow researchers to encourage participants to expound on answers and descriptions when beneficial (Creswell, 2007). The open-ended, in-depth qualities of the questions allowed

participants to respond with their own language and examples, and the semi-structured quality provides cohesion across participants throughout the study.

The researcher emailed alumni with the opportunity to voluntarily participate in interviews for the purpose of this research; email addresses were provided by the office of alumni relations. Through email interactions, the researcher scheduled and conducted in-person, FaceTime, and phone interviews. The interviewer took care to avoid influencing the content of participants' descriptions and attempted to suspend personal beliefs that could impact interview responses (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, the interview protocol limited bias through the structured, specified questions.

Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed through a digital transcription service. Each interview began with a scripted introduction and explanation. The protocol (Appendix A) consists of 21 questions that serve both this area of research as well as the broader context of the traditions research team. Of the 21 questions, 13 questions maintained consistency throughout the TRP, as they were used among other populations within the TRP. These 13 consistent questions explore individuals' involvements and perceptions of traditions, understandings of the origins of traditions, and reflections on the impacts of traditions. The remaining eight questions pertained specifically to alumni experiences of traditions. Interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended to allow the researcher to clarify responses and encourage respondents to expound on their answers.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher began the process of data analysis with a personal description of the experience of traditions in an attempt to separate the researcher's own experiences



from the participants' reported experiences (Creswell, 2007). Though the researcher heard stories of and witnessed many of the traditions of the university being researched, the researcher has not participated in them or interacted with them in the context of the undergraduate student experience. The researcher cannot entirely remove herself from the culture of traditions being studied and acknowledges the significance many students derive from their experiences. However, for the purpose of the study, the researcher did her best to set aside these anecdotal beliefs and describe traditions using only the information received through participant interviews.

The researcher then read the transcriptions of the interviews and noted distinct themes that emerged. To maintain validity and reliability of the research, triangulation was utilized. The interview protocol was validated through the use of a pilot study and has maintained reliability through its use in previous phases of the TRP. The primary researcher consulted with other members of the research team to clarify responses that were unclear.

Using the interview transcriptions, the researcher identified and categorized themes and subthemes. These themes and subthemes were labeled, defined, and organized in a hierarchy. Each theme or subtheme also labeled with a code that was applied to every comment mentioning, implicitly or explicitly, the theme or subtheme. Transcripts of interviews were coded using Dedoose software to label and count the frequency of code applications. Dedoose software was then utilized for further data analysis and organization. All alumni response themes created a description of the shared core of the traditions experience. Themes and responses were also compared between groups stratified by gender and recentness of graduation to discover similarities, if any,

between the different alumni groups' experiences. Compiled statements portraying traditions disclosed a rich description of the phenomenon of traditions in higher education, as perceived by alumni of the university studied. Furthermore, this research broadened the understanding of the lasting impacts of traditions for those who experienced them.

## Chapter 4

### Results

The purpose of this study was to understand the essence of campus traditions from the perspective of alumni, the impact of traditions on continued alumni involvement, and the ways, if any, alumni derived meaning, value, or significance from their experiences with campus traditions. Participants' comments primarily described either what a tradition was or what resulted from a tradition. These two options emerged as the overarching themes, along with nine subthemes. Figure 1 represents these themes and subthemes; following each, the number indicates the quantity of excerpts mentioning a subtheme out of the 440 total excerpts from all of the alumni interviews.

Alumni Themes
Theme #1: Characteristics (354)
Subtheme #1a: Transmission (165)
Subtheme #1b: Engaged (149)
Subtheme #1c: Continuous (134)
Subtheme #1d: Unifying (104)
Subtheme #1e: Type (85)
Subtheme #1f: Significant (63)
Subtheme #1g: Unique (34)
Theme #2: Results (232)
Subtheme #2a: Benefits (215)
Subtheme #2b: Harms (42)

*Figure 1.* Theme outlines for alumni

The following discussion expounds on the themes and subthemes found in the data by providing examples of the applied codes as well as the frequency with which each theme emerged.

### **Theme 1: Characteristics (354)**

Over three quarters of participant comments described traditions, and these interview excerpts comprise the theme *characteristics*. The theme *characteristics* refers to how participants described traditions. Examples of this theme include participants explaining their own definitions of traditions, aspects which differentiate traditions from other patterns, and moments when specific traditions are described using language that bolster the depiction of traditions.

When asked to define a campus tradition, participants listed many characteristics explicitly that were later brought up implicitly during the interview. The following quotes represent how participants describe traditions:

- I would define a campus tradition as something that many people have gotten to experience and may have morphed into different things over the years, but something that kind of brings people together in that common experience. (FY1)
- I would define it as a community event that happens continuously over a span of years. (FY2)
- I think my initial instinct would just be some that is carried on over time.  
Whether that's an event or maybe just like a culture for lack of a better word.  
(FY4)
- I guess I would define it as something as . . . repeated and endeared by a group of students, or a group of Taylor affiliated people. (MY3)

These excerpts list many of the subthemes that permeated the alumni interview discussions. With slight variations, participants' definitions of traditions clustered tightly around similar aspects, including *transmission*, *engaged*, *continuous*, and *unifying*.

**Subtheme 1a: *Transmission* (165).** *Transmission* refers to the passing down or perpetuation of traditions. Participants acknowledged the various ways in which traditions are transmitted for various reasons and through multiple methods. Traditions were perpetuated through a commitment to a pattern, a well-known or common understanding of the tradition, and through word of mouth. Additionally, this transmission can occur in an intergenerational way and can include both students and/or university leadership and staff:

Let's see. I would say . . . I supposed that would really depend on their commitment to it. To use Silent Night [an annual basketball game in December where students dress in costumes, remain silent until the tenth point, and conclude the night by singing silent night] again as an example, that's not something that really needs to be passed down because everybody knows it and accepts it as is. And everybody looks forward to it. Whereas say, when The Friday Guy [a student who announces Fridays weekly during chapel] graduates, he has to define who's gonna be the next Friday Guy. So I don't know, I guess it really depends on the scale of the tradition and who's in charge of it and whatever who holds the name or those in charge are looking for the continuation of the tradition. (MY1)

This participant noted the ways traditions are carried on due to a known history or pattern as well as the intentionality of student buy-in.

Similarly, the following participant expressed the common understanding of Silent Night that directs future action. However, this participant also depicted the transmission of traditions as a result of a commitment to the pattern of how things have been done:

I mean they get passed down. I couldn't even tell you much about the origins of Toga Football [playing football wearing togas] or the Silent Night one. You've seen the ESPN deal, you kind of hear the here's what we did and why we did it. So you kind of hear them but the origins never really played a whole lot. It was more like this is what we do so you will continue. You know, yeah, this is what we do, we'll continue to do it. (MS1)

Traditions are carried on through a variety of means, and, regardless of the method, the transmission keeps traditions alive.

**Subtheme 1b: *Engaged* (149).** The subtheme *engaged* indicates high participation, involvement, and/or student buy-in. Included within the subtheme of *engaged* is an element of fun—and specifically wholesome fun. Participants highlighted the theme *engaged* when they characterized traditions as fun, presented traditions as including large numbers of participants, or described themselves or other students as heavily involved. One participant discussed students' engagement with traditions, saying “they come up with ways of just truly having wonderful, clean fun on campus, where you feel safe, and it's just truly fun without unfortunately some of the stuff that goes, as I said, with other schools” (FS3). Another individual noted the importance of buy-in and involvement for a tradition's survival:

Obviously, you have to have buy-in to do that, so if people think it's stupid, then it's probably not gonna catch on and pass on, but if you can develop that buy-in I think that's kind of how you get there. (FY5)

Both high involvement and wholesome fun comprise the theme *engaged*. This level of participation also encompasses individuals' alignment with the university or the specific tradition.

**Subtheme 1c: *Continuous* (134).** When participants referred to long-standing traditions that happen again and again, the subtheme *continuous* was ascribed to their statement. “We had Nostalgia Night [talent showcase], like you guys have now. But it was the only big event of the year, so kind of like Air Band [choreographed lip sync contest] is now, Nostalgia Night was a little bit of a bigger deal back then” (MS4). The subtheme *continuous* refers to the ongoing nature of traditions and encompasses both the consistency and evolving aspects of traditions maintained over time. Like the above participant noted, there is continuity in Nostalgia Night; however, there is also evidence of the evolving nature of the event as well as the inception of newer traditions.

**Subtheme 1d: *Unifying* (104).** *Unifying* referred to descriptions of traditions as things that bring people together, facilitate individuals getting to know one another, and bond a group of people. This subtheme included several dimensions of relational connections such as familial feelings, teamwork, close-knit relationships, identifying as part of a group, or feeling welcomed and included within a group. Participants expressed feeling connected to the campus as a whole and/or to their specific living community as an integral part of traditions. One participant epitomized this theme with the following remark:

You're getting to be with other people for whatever reason. You're all there together. A lot of times those activities, yeah, unify and kind of bring people together. I think in hopes of building camaraderie and bringing people together, which is, I think, especially yeah, unique here when it comes to traditions at Taylor. (FY1)

When reflecting on traditions, alumni recognized the ways traditions bonded them to other students through shared experiences. Alumni even mentioned this common ground fostered relationships with people who would have otherwise remained unknown to them.

**Subtheme 1e: *Type* (85).** The term *type* refers to the various kinds of traditions that are passed down; this code was applied to instances in which participants described a broad range of aspects that are considered traditions. The three elements that specify the various types are artifact, event, and ideology. Artifacts include tangible items passed on that are described as traditions. Participants in this study mentioned freshmen beanies and journals with floor histories as artifacts that constitute traditions. Many events were mentioned by participants as being traditions; these events included campus wide events like Silent Night as well as specific subsets' events like the floor event of Melon and Gourd [week-long game of tag involving a melon and a gourd]. The code ideology was applied to beliefs, values, or stereotypes labeled as traditions. An example noted by participants was the tradition of the Christian faith. The following alumni interview comments aid in delineating the different types of traditions.

- Artifact and Event - The dominant one, I think, was for everybody who came in as a freshman, and it was freshman initiation. They called it orientation, but it was really initiation. By the time I graduated this one, I



think, was already gone. We had freshman beanies. All the freshman had to wear little beanies. We had to have them, literally, on our heads wherever we went for a period of two or three weeks. We also wore name tags. The upper class men could see us and call us by name, and if they called on us we had to be able to sing the school song. All verses and choruses included. If they called upon us at any meal, we all had to stand with our beanies on and sing the school song. So, it was in a sense, a little bit of harassment, but it was also a real unity building time sequence for us and our identity as a freshman class, and as a group of people who were involved in a community on our own. (MS2)

- Event and Ideology - Speaking mainly of chapel, Taylor is showing the student body, and showing the alumni, that Christ is still important at the university. (MS3)
- Event and Ideology - I think my initial instinct would just be some that is carried on over time. Whether that's an event or maybe just like a culture for lack of a better word. Yeah, it might not be an event like Silent Night but a culture of people saying English [residence hall] is quiet of Olson [residence hall] is loud or even some of that feels like a tradition. (FY4)

Often, as in these examples, multiple types of traditions were described within the same comment. Allowing participants to define tradition themselves allowed these various types of traditions to be revealed. This finding is consistent with literature that describes traditions as objects, beliefs, or patterns being passed down (Bronner, 2011; Shils, 1981).

**Subtheme 1f: *Significant* (63).** *Significant* refers to participants describing traditions as important, purposeful, or sacred. Some participants even went so far as to describe traditions as so meaningful that the meaning was more valuable than the tradition itself:

In terms of traditions that are going forward, that have become exceedingly significant, more so than the beanies and that kind of thing, it's the graduation towel [a towel representing servant leadership], the service towel. . . . That's one that is going to endure, because the symbolic significance translates into the reality of living out faith in Christ. It's just such a tangible, wonderful symbol that becomes so meaningful to so many. I think something like that takes on almost a generative power of its own, because of the symbolic significance as the kids go from here into the world. I've seen it in my kids, and I've seen it in so many others who've come out of here. (MS2)

Sacred symbolism surrounding traditions resulted in a lifelong impact on alumni.

Alumni derived faith as a dominant meaning encompassed in many traditions. These meaningful aspects of traditions are valued by alumni.

**Subtheme 1g: *Unique* (34).** The subtheme *unique* characterized traditions as being rare or uncommon to outsiders and also included elements of creativity. Inherent to traditions is the notion that the aspect of culture labeled as tradition is set apart from other aspects of daily life:

I think traditions are above all those things and it allows every type of individual to say, I'm going to go dress like Waldo and go to Silent Night and you're going to

have to find me in the crowd. It's like, that's funny stuff. The creativity that comes out of that, that is exactly what it should be for a tradition. (MS1)

When participants used words like *odd*, *uncommon*, and *creative*, they were distinguishing one aspect as set apart and less routine and meaningfully describing traditions as unique. One participant even noted, "I don't know if this would be true . . . but it's maybe uncommon to the outsiders, but to the insiders it's a common known thing" (FY2). This highlights the perception of uniqueness sometimes comes from external sources and not from those who feel engaged in the traditions. These themes and subthemes describing traditions emerged alongside themes and subthemes referring to the outcomes of traditions.

### **Theme 2: *Results* (232)**

*Results* emerged as the second theme of the interviews and labeled comments describing outcomes or consequences of traditions. Participants acknowledged both the positive and the negative results of traditions with varying degrees of specificity. Whether the described instance was theoretical or personal to the participant's own experiences, mentions of the effects of traditions were categorized using the theme *results*. In addition to being applied to specific and general outcomes, this theme was applied to both immediate and long-lasting outcomes of traditions. In commenting on the results of traditions, this participant noted both positive and negative results, though emphasized the positive aspects:

I think overall it can add to campus. Again, it's thoughtful and well done. I'm sure that there could be an Air Band act that could be insensitive, or a costume or something at Silent Night that is in poor taste that could affect the mission of

Taylor and implicitly tell about the character of the students. But I think that as a blanket statement I would say it's generally positive. (FY2)

Alumni understand the potential for traditions to result in negative outcomes but overwhelmingly perceive traditions to benefit those who engage them. Of the 232 mentions of results of traditions, there were 215 mentions of benefits as the type of result produced by traditions.

**Subtheme 2a: *Benefits* (215).** The subtheme of *benefits* surfaced within the theme of *results*. *Benefits* refer to positive outcomes of traditions and include community or relational benefits, personal developments, and memories. Community benefits include a general feeling of connectedness to the university community as well as specific, significant relationships:

I think that just great memories, great to tell the stories. I think when I talk to other Taylor grads, it's fun to just talk about some of those things we used to do. So yeah, again it's another connecting point to other alumni and to students.

(MS4)

Alumni overwhelmingly found traditions beneficial to those who engage them as students. They reported that, when aligned with the mission of the university, traditions are able to impact the faith development of students.

Many participants listed benefits related to their spiritual formation or faith community when referring to benefits of traditions involved with community. When asked about any benefits related to spiritual formation that result from traditions, one participant said,

I would definitely say yes. Some of them you might be hard pressed to think how something like Melon and Gourd would help you grow spiritually but again it's a part of that Christian community that's so important and whether we think something on the surface has a lot of value it's really the resultant effect of a group of men, in this case, a group of men who are committed to the Lord, who love each other, who really, really just live out that tradition in the best possible way. (FS2)

Even through traditions that are not explicitly designed to foster spiritual development, this participant and others connected the tradition to the Christian faith.

**Subtheme 2b: *Harms* (42).** Another subtheme that emerged in the theme of *results* can be described as *harms*. This category refers to negative outcomes of traditions. Often, participants acknowledged the potential for traditions to result in a negative impact for students, but their comments were rather nondescript. Other times, they were able to describe specific types of harms that were, or could be, experienced by individuals involved in traditions. Specific harms mentioned include general feelings of discomfort when participating with a tradition and people feeling excluded amidst communities involved with traditions. The following quote exemplifies the way participants perceive harms from traditions:

I was often a participant where I was like, I totally go with the flow and I love doing this, but there are plenty of people who wouldn't feel that way and who would almost feel coerced into something or the certain dynamics of it would be really weird. I have a good friend from Taylor who's mentioned a couple of times, she's like, "dude [participant name] the zoo open house [students act out a

fictional zoo], is so weird!", like freakishly kind of sexual and just kind of weird to anyone from outside of Taylor and we're kind of just get used to it because we're here, but it's so disconcerting. And, even things like that I could totally see how someone would feel completely uncomfortable with that and in some way could, depending on how it's done and what it entails, either break down a sense of community, where someone doesn't feel like they can participate because they do feel uncomfortable and so then they do feel kind of disengaged or whatever. (FY5)

This participant both validated specific harms and extrapolated experiences to discuss potential harms resulting from traditions.

When considering harms alongside benefits, it is important to note that, despite the produced discomfort, this participant expressed personal enjoyment of the tradition. Another individual explained the harms of traditional ways of interacting with newly engaged individuals in the community:

One of the traditions that went along as a consequence of the proposals, with the ring down [celebration for newly engaged women] for the girls, was what turned out to be some pretty intense hazing of a lot of the guys. I know that, as much as they've been able to do it, that's been stopped. I think that, even while we were here, that got to be way over the top. Not any kind of beneficial initiation, but almost to the point of abuse of some of the guys. I think some of them look back on it fondly, but it was a reason that I chose not to propose to my girlfriend until after I was out of Taylor, because I saw such harsh treatment of the guys. I think something like that needed to be changed and go a very different direction and

become something very different that would be a celebratory kind of a thing, rather than something that we would write off as boys being boys. Because it wasn't that. It became much different. (MS2)

The harms associated with the community's traditional practices deterred this individual from proposing during his time at Taylor University. He acknowledged the need for these traditional practices to change to better align the intent of the tradition with the impact of the tradition.

### **Comparisons Between Seasoned Alumni and Young Alumni**

Nine seasoned alumni and eight young alumni were interviewed and shared a common experience with traditions culture at the studied institution. While seasoned and young alumni had similar responses in the interviews, some differences emerged.

Seasoned alumni described traditions with the labels *continuous* and *evolving* far more than young alumni. This could be explained by the longer amount of time seasoned alumni have witnessed and experienced the traditions. Additionally, and likely for similar reasons, seasoned alumni described traditions using words like *significant* or *meaningful* much more than young alumni. Perhaps time allows for alumni to gain a greater perspective of the significant and meaningful impact traditions have.

Young alumni also slightly varied from seasoned alumni in the method of transmission of traditions as well as the types of traditions they identified. Young alumni mentioned hearing of traditions through PAs (residence life student leaders) far more than seasoned alumni. Perhaps the student leader role or perceived influence has changed over the years. When considering the types of traditions as artifacts, events, and ideologies, only one young alumnus mentioned artifacts as a type of tradition. When

describing the characteristics of traditions, seasoned alumni often mentioned the institution's unique location as a contributing factor to the campus traditions, but no young alumni mentioned this. Location did not seem to be a relevant piece of information when young alumni described traditions.

Regarding the results of traditions, young alumni noted the ways traditions foster personal development, including self-discovery and leadership abilities, significantly more than seasoned alumni. This may be due to the recency of such personal developments or a potential revised emphasis on holistic development within the college experience. Finally, young alumni more frequently identified harms such as exclusivity or homogenization compared to seasoned alumni. This may stem from an increasingly diverse student body or current cultural contexts highlighting the importance of diversity over the positive aspects of assimilation and shared experiences. Not only did young alumni mention these downsides of traditions more often than seasoned alumni, but seasoned alumni never mentioned assimilation or homogenization as a downside.

### **Comparisons Between Female Alumni and Male Alumni**

Ten female and seven male alumni were interviewed. Female and male respondents characterized traditions similarly with only a few minor exceptions. Female participants described traditions as both fun and unique more often than male participants. The research does not suggest a reason for this difference.

Though few differences were found when characterizing traditions, some distinctive differences emerged between female and male responses regarding the results of traditions. While every participant mentioned relationships as a benefit of traditions, female participants reiterated this benefit more than male respondents. Additionally,



more female than male respondents mentioned personal development and leadership as benefits of traditions. Differences also existed in the mention of harms resulting from traditions. All participants mentioned harms, but women were far more specific in describing these types of detriments. For example, about twice as many females as males listed specific ways that traditions cause harm, including assimilation of differences, exclusivity, and feeling uncomfortable. No male participants listed assimilation as a specific harm. Further research would be required to better understand the difference in specificity regarding the harms resulting from traditions.

### **Summary**

The first theme, *characteristics*, included the subthemes *transmission*, *engaged*, *continuous*, *unifying*, *type*, *significant*, and *unique*. The second theme, *results*, consisted of *benefits* and *harms*. Together, the themes foster an understanding of the essence of campus traditions from the alumni perspective. The essence of campus traditions is that a tradition must be commonly described as events, ideologies, or artifacts transmitted, engaged, continuous, and unifying that produce primarily beneficial results. Regardless of gender or length of time since graduation, participants described traditions and their results in similar ways. Key findings include an understanding of traditions defined from an alumni perspective, the benefits alumni perceive from engaging traditions, relationships between continued alumni involvement and traditions, and a rich description of meaning alumni derived from involvement with traditions. Alumni described the essence of traditions as aspects of culture that are *transmitted*, *engaged*, *continuous*, and *unifying*. Alumni discussed benefits as inextricably linked to traditions. The research produced an increased understanding of campus traditions.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The TRP seeks to examine the impact of traditions on the college student experience. The current study specifically approached this question from the perspective of alumni with three aims. The first was to understand traditions from the perspective of alumni. Second, the research aimed to discern if a relationship existed between continued alumni involvement and their involvement with traditions as students. Finally, the study pursued an understanding of alumni involvement with traditions as students and any meaning they derived from those experiences. The study resulted in an increased understanding of the unique vantage point of traditions through the perceptions of alumni.

Alumni described both characteristics of traditions and results of traditions. One major finding is the way alumni perceive traditions. The three characteristics of traditions mentioned with the greatest frequency across all participants are *transmitted*, *engaged*, and *continuous*. The current research also found significant benefits result from traditions. The overwhelming amount of benefits to students and alumni should cause institutions to value traditions. Additionally, alumni remain connected to their alma maters through traditions; community and connection were frequently mentioned as benefits resulting from traditions. Finally, traditions impacted, and sometimes continue

to impact, alumni's meaning-making process. These findings should implicate practices in higher education. The results yield implications for practice and future research.

### **Implications for Practice**

**Finding #1: Alumni define traditions as artifacts, events, and ideologies that are transmitted, engaged, and continuous.** This conclusion is consistent with the existing literature. This affirms the emphasis Shils (1981) put on passing down traditions and reiterates traditions encompass many aspects of culture including artifacts, events, and ideologies. Bronner (2011), Gross (1992), and Manning (1994) asserted similar conclusions, defining traditions with themes such as *transmitted* and *continuous*. These three defining subthemes are interconnected, as traditions cannot continue or be carried on without being engaged in. Alumni consistently described community values, tangible items, and events engaged with high participation or fun. They also discussed the need for these traditions to be transmitted across generations. Interestingly, many participants noted this happened naturally as a result of general involvement in the community. Lastly, the continuous aspect was described as both consistency and evolving parts of the ongoing life of a tradition.

These findings prompt caution in higher education practitioners who hold the power to influence traditions. Gross (1992), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), and Manning (1989) acknowledged the creation and death of traditions, while noting the challenges presented by both circumstances. Traditions fail to exist with substantial meaning and alumni connections when they lack transmission, engagement, and continuity. When possible, leaders and members of a community should work to maintain the continuity and longevity of traditions. Maintaining continuity is especially

important to the seasoned alumni who particularly emphasized the significance of traditions. Furthermore, the next finding reveals valuing and perpetuating traditions leads to many positive outcomes.

**Finding #2: Traditions yield significant benefits for those who engage them.**

The majority of traditions' results were described as benefits, and this finding compels practitioners to value traditions. While participants agreed traditions have the potential to result in harm to those who participate, they consistently stressed the benefits of traditions. Equipped with the knowledge that campus traditions benefit those who engage them, higher education practitioners should consider the ramifications of discontinuing a tradition. Certainly, traditions that cause harm must be adjusted or terminated. However, such actions should be taken only after consideration of potential harms resulting from such actions. Practitioners should carefully weigh the benefits and harms before interfering with campus traditions.

Without transmitted, engaged, and continuous traditions, current students may lose shared experiences in their community, significant relationships, refining spiritual formation, personal development, memories, and a sense of connection to the university. Similarly, alumni could lose the ability to share in experiences with current students and their connection to the institution. These potential losses encourage university communities to maintain traditions in order to reap the resulting benefits. One significant benefit to the university resulting from traditions is the connection alumni continue to feel with their alma mater.

**Finding #3: Traditions connect alumni to their alma mater.** Not only do traditions bind current students to the institution, they also tether alumni to the institution.

Again, this finding should inform practitioners in higher education to value traditions. Alumni mentioned engaging with the institution in various ways, including connecting with students, attending events, and donating financially. According to Gaier (2005), these actions of giving and participation constitute alumni involvement.

Similarly, the affinity and belonging alumni continued to feel toward their institution reiterate Mael and Ashforth's (1992) research. This deep sense of unity with an institution increases alumni's likelihood of supporting the school. Higher education practitioners should recognize the long-term impacts traditions have on the ways graduates support their institution. Alumni continue to fondly remember traditions, discuss traditions, and support the institutions that perpetuate these traditions and the campus cultures these traditions create. When institutions lose continuity over time, they threaten the continued and sustaining involvement of alumni. A prioritization of traditions translates into continued alumni buy-in and support.

**Finding #4: Alumni derive meaning, value, or significance through their experiences with campus traditions.** Alumni described ordering personal priorities and values around the traditions they experienced in college. One participant described a culture of traditions by saying, "it provides you a little more stability and how-to," noting the form and direction traditions provide (MS4). Participants learned to value community, prayer, and challenging and sharpening spiritual friendships through their formational experiences with traditions. Consistent with findings by Gross (1992), these values create a framework for how individuals learn to orient themselves to their world. In both the beliefs and practices alumni carry with them through life after their college experience, traditions have ordered and directed them.

This composed sense of order, form, and significance illustrates the meaning-making process Parks (2000) described and affirms her observation of the significant influence of a community on an individual's meaning-making process; in the present study, alumni often described the meaning, value, or significance they derived through campus traditions in conjunction with community. When asked directly if experiences with campus traditions have yielded meaning, value, or significance for the individual, one participant included a light-hearted campus tradition as a formative, and even spiritual, experience:

I think it also teaches something about what people value and what they find significant. Dressing up in the cow suit, it's not that people value cows. It's that people value being a part of something different than them. I think it does point when you really look at what drives that tradition, it teaches what people value and desire to be a part of. (FS5)

In even the silly traditions, values are formed that shape alumni for years to come.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study affirmed existing research on traditions and college traditions while adding the unique perspective of alumni. Still, there is a need for continued, expanded research on college traditions. Research focused on different institutions, alumni populations, and specific traditions would be beneficial.

Involvement in traditions was a prerequisite for benefiting from involvement with traditions, so it would be helpful to better understand what factors influence student and alumni engagement with traditions. Do specific major areas of study impact a student's ability to be involved with traditions? Does the distance alumni live from campus impact

their continued involvement with campus traditions? Does the degree to which an individual was involved in campus traditions as a student predict the continued engagement of the same individual as an alumnus? Further research regarding involvement could confirm observed patterns of involvement in this research and help to establish causation between student involvement with traditions and continued alumni involvement with the university. When this involvement can be quantified through alumni giving or the recruitment of prospective students, the research could be especially advantageous to admissions and advancement offices on college campuses.

Additionally, future research on changing traditions would be valuable. In an effort to modernize, curb harm, and remain relevant, colleges change their traditions. In this study, participants mentioned long-standing traditions ending or asked whether the researcher knew if certain traditions have continued over time. It is important to know the impact of changing, eliminating, or adding new traditions in college communities. Since this study found traditions bind alumni to their alma mater, it is important to understand the impact of changing traditions on the relationship between alumni and the university. Perhaps alumni are not even considered when colleges evaluate the perpetuity of traditions and the impact of specific traditions on a campus community. It is vital to remember alumni are an important part of a campus community.

Another way future research could benefit universities is to study specific traditions to discern which are most impactful and in what ways each tradition impacts those involved. Participants in this study mentioned many traditions and many benefits, but in an effort to focus institutional support toward a smaller number of traditions, it would be helpful to know which traditions result in the greatest impact. This research

opportunity may even reveal traditions that are minimally impactful or negatively impactful in ways that direct future university action.

### **Limitations**

Though many significant findings emerged, this study is not without limitations. One limitation is that only one institution was studied. The institution's type as a small, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest is a narrow subset of all college alumni. Consequently, the results must be cautiously used to inform practice at institutions that differ significantly from the studied institution.

A second limitation is the sample composition; the sample was comprised of engaged alumni with whom the alumni relations office both had connections and felt comfortable sharing contact information with the researcher. Though alumni could choose to participate in the study, not all alumni were given this choice, and those who were contacted were known to have a continued relationship with the university. It is likely that the participants studied had favorable opinions of the institution, which may have caused the sample not to reflect the general population of alumni, though it would likely accurately represent the population of alumni still engaged with the institution.

A third limitation was that, in a traditions-rich culture, the distinction between a tradition and any other aspect of life during college became quite blurry. It seems as if the retrospective perception of alumni prohibits participants from clearly differentiating Taylor University traditions from other practices within the institutional culture. Despite the limitations of studying only engaged alumni at a single, traditions-rich institution, the findings remain relevant for practice within higher education.



## **Conclusion**

Traditions are multifaceted, living structures within a community. Both the literature and this research suggest one of the many implications of college traditions is the way they contribute to students' processes of meaning making. Relationships exist between traditions, alumni involvement, and meaning making; however, existing literature fails to connect these constructs. This research examined the connections between traditions culture, alumni involvement, and meaning making processes through each individual's common experience with campus traditions.

Campus traditions foster many continuing benefits for students who engage them. As alumni recount their experiences with campus traditions, they identify their experiences with traditional aspects of the campus culture as positive and formational. Alumni also credit traditions as playing a significant role in their meaning making processes and their continued involvement with their alma mater. This research synthesized the characteristics needed for an aspect of a college's culture to be labeled a tradition from the perspective of the institution's alumni. It also yielded an understanding of the results of traditions; traditions predominantly resulted in many benefits for the alumni and the campus community but did retain the potential to produce harms.

Based on the key findings, four recommendations surfaced. First, campus leadership—including senior-level administrators, higher education practitioners, and key student influencers—should strive to perpetuate and encourage engagement with traditions. Furthermore, caution should be taken when considering the termination or squelching of traditions. Transmission, engagement, and continuity comprise the necessary components describing traditions, and failing to maintain a culture of traditions

erodes the benefits for those who engaged traditions as students. Another recommendation for practitioners in higher education is to prioritize traditions for both the community presently at the institution and the campus community across time, comprised of alumni. Traditions bond alumni to their institutions, and maintaining a sense of familiarity promotes continued alumni involvement and support for the university. Finally, higher education practitioners should be mindful that traditions are developmental and formative for the alumni community.

Campus traditions significantly form students in ways that impact their lives long after they leave their institutions. Traditions can be a vessel for communicating values that institutions hope to instill in their students or a way for students to internalize significant or meaningful beliefs. Higher education professionals should not discount even those traditions that, on the surface, seem meaninglessly fun. These traditions can solidify core values such as Christian community and inclusion that alumni hold dear throughout their lives.

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## Appendix A

### Traditions Research Interview Protocol

**Please use the following intro at the beginning of each Interview**

Thank you for taking part in this research. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact campus traditions have on the college student experience. Your participation is voluntary and you may opt to stop at any point in this process. Your participation will be completely anonymous and at no time will your name or any identifying information about you be reported to anyone outside of the research group.

All interviews are being recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions will be analyzed by the research team and only the team will have access to any of this information. The results of the analysis will be reported in aggregate form and again no individual identifying information will be reported.

If at any time during the interview discussion you have any questions, please ask.

Are you ready to begin?

1. How many years ago did you graduate from your alma mater?
2. Do you continue to feel connected to your alma mater?
3. Can you describe involvement you have had with your alma mater in the last 3 years? (giving, participation with the university, attending events, connecting with students)
4. How would you define a campus tradition?
  - Can you provide some examples?
5. What are some of the traditions that existed at your campus?
  - University Sanctioned?
  - Unofficial or student generated?
6. What are the characteristics of these events that make them traditions?
7. How have these traditions been passed down to new and incoming groups? How are they kept alive?
8. Will you describe your participation in these traditions?
  - As a student?
  - Since graduating?
9. In what ways, if any, have you contributed to passing down these traditions?
  - In what ways, if any, do you continue to communicate campus traditions from your alma mater?
  - How did you hear of these traditions?
10. In what ways, if any, did these traditions benefit students who engage in them?

11. In what ways, if any, do these traditions continue to have benefits for alumni who engaged them as students?
12. What do you know about the origins of these traditions?
  - Is it important to know the origins of these traditions? Or just that they are traditions?
13. If a tradition has a negative impact is it important for the institution to work to change it and if so how should the school work towards this change?
14. How many people/groups participate in these traditions?
  - In what ways are they gender specific? Gender inclusive?
  - Do they have a unifying effect across different groups?
15. Have these traditions grown over time?
  - How have they evolved? Changed?
16. What do these traditions teach, implicitly or explicitly about your campus?
17. In what ways do these traditions add or detract from the mission of your campus?
  - Do they reinforce the mission? How?
  - Do they undermine the mission? How?
18. Since this institution has a commitment to faith learning integration do campus traditions impact the faith development of students at your school? How?
19. If you have worked at or attended any other colleges how would you say that the traditions at your current institution compare to those at your former institutions?
20. Did your engagement in these traditions enhance your experience at your university?
21. In what ways, if any, have you derived meaning, value, or significance through your experiences with campus traditions?

**At the end the Interview**

Thank you again for your participation in this research. If you have any questions regarding this project, please address them to Dr. Skip Trudeau.

## **Appendix B**

### **TAYLOR UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT**

The College Experience: Explorations of the Link between Tradition and Student Identity

You are invited to participate in a research study of the role of campus traditions and student identity development. You were selected as a possible subject because you are either a student or alumni at a participating university or a faculty/staff member with at least 5 years of service. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Dr. Drew Moser, Dr. Mike Hammond, Danielle Spoutz, Paige McCourt, Austin Smith, David Gebby, Britney Wallbaum, Christina Brandsma, and Griffin Gardner – Taylor University employees or graduate students. It is funded by the Taylor University Women's Giving Circle.

#### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to examine the potential connection between campus traditions, the practices they foster, and college student identity development

#### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 6-10 students in a focus group or one of 10 faculty/staff member subjects at your institution who will be participating in this research.

#### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:  
Participate in either a focus group or a one-on-one interview.

#### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

While on the study, the risks and/or discomforts are:  
The risks of completing the interview or focus group are being uncomfortable answering the questions and possible loss of confidentiality.

To minimize these risks you may tell the researcher you feel uncomfortable or do not care to answer a particular question. To minimize the risk of loss of confidentiality, your name will be changed in any results.



**BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

The benefit to participation is the opportunity to reflect on how campus traditions have impacted the identity development of you, a friend, or the students you work with.

**ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

There is no alternative to taking part in this study.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published. Only the researchers will have access to the recordings of the interviews or focus groups and the recordings will be deleted following the completions of the research study.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

**COSTS**

There is no cost to participate in this study.

**PAYMENT**

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

**COMPENSATION FOR INJURY**

In the event of physical injury resulting from your participation in this research, necessary medical treatment will be provided to you and billed as part of your medical expenses. Costs not covered by your health care insurer will be your responsibility. Also, it is your responsibility to determine the extent of your health care coverage. There is no program in place for other monetary compensation for such injuries. If you are participating in research which is not conducted at a medical facility, you will be responsible for seeking medical care and for the expenses associated with any care received.

**CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher Dr. Skip Trudeau at (765) 998-5368 or [sktrudeau@taylor.edu](mailto:sktrudeau@taylor.edu). Inquiries regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at [IRB@taylor.edu](mailto:IRB@taylor.edu) or the Chair of the IRB, Susan Gavin at 756-998-5188 or [ssgavin@taylor.edu](mailto:ssgavin@taylor.edu)

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University or any of the researchers involved in this study

**SUBJECT'S CONSENT**

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

