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A NOT-SO-SILENT NIGHT: HOW A SMALL-TOWN INSTITUTION HAS  
DEVELOPED AND SUSTAINED A NATIONALLY  
RENOWNED TRADITION

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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

Ryan W. Kristofek

May 2020

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

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Ryan W. Kristofek

entitled

Not-So-Silent Night: How a Small-Town Institution Has Developed  
and Sustained a Nationally Renowned Tradition

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

Master of Arts degree  
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May 2020

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the origin and impact of a popular tradition at Taylor University known as Silent Night. Through a phenomenological design, this study investigated traditions, specifically Silent Night, at a small, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest called Taylor University. The following questions guided this exploratory research: What is the student perception of the value of Silent Night? What is the personnel perception of the value of Silent Night? What are the institutional elements surrounding a successful campus tradition? Key findings from this study include an understanding of traditions defined from student and personnel perspectives, the benefits from engaging in campus traditions, the characteristics of a successful tradition, and institutional elements that set up a tradition for sustainability and success. Data collected from student and personnel interviews were divided into two main themes: descriptors and outcomes. Five subthemes emerged from the descriptors: continual, origin/history, location, timing, and transmission. Three subthemes emerged from the outcomes: community, fun, and university promotion. Based on these findings, several implications for practice and research also surfaced for higher education professionals. This research confirmed the value of campus traditions and identified institutional elements aiding their success.

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*My Triune God*, thank you for your overwhelming grace and provision in my life. Thank you for striking a passion within my heart to care for college students while you care for me through them. Thank you for giving me the courage to take on graduate school at Taylor University and empowering me to excel. You are with me forever.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	1
Purpose Statement.....	2
Chapter 2 Literature Review .....	3
Tradition.....	3
Campus Culture .....	6
Student Involvement & Belonging .....	7
Faith-based Higher Education.....	7
Taylor University .....	8
Silent Night .....	9
Chapter 3 Methodology .....	11
Context & Participants .....	11
Instruments.....	13
Procedures .....	13
Analysis.....	13
Benefits .....	14
Chapter 4 Results .....	16
Theme 1: Descriptors .....	18

Theme 2: Outcomes .....	27
Summary .....	36
Chapter 5 Discussion .....	37
Implications for Practice .....	38
Implications for Research .....	40
Limitations .....	41
Conclusion .....	42
References .....	43
Appendix A: Survey Questions .....	48
Appendix B: Informed Consent .....	50

List of Tables

Table 1. Identification Codes .....16

List of Figures

Figure 1. Theme Outlines .....16

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The echoes of shoes squeaking and a ball dribbling across the hardwood floor pierce the deafening silence of a crowded gymnasium. Rows upon rows of students wearing colorful costumes, masks, and painted faces watch with anticipation as the score of the game slowly increases. Wiggling fingers held in the air replace what would be cheers as each point is scored by the home-team. Anticipation grows stronger with each basket made. With the inevitable 10<sup>th</sup> point getting closer, students can be seen eyeing their classmates in preparation for what feels like the biggest celebration of the year. Suddenly, just as the basketball breaks the barrier between rim and net, the crowd erupts in passionate festivity and storms the court. Music blares and students jump as Taylor University celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> point as if they had won the national championship. Long after the celebration, as the game draws toward a close, the fans link arm-in-arm and sing harmoniously all three verses of “Silent Night.” No matter the final score, this beloved tradition known appropriately as “Silent Night” grows larger every year (Beck & Wilkinson, 2013).

Every institution across the country has its own unique traditions that contribute to the overall college experience. For many of these institutions, traditions provide an opportunity for the community to come together and celebrate its unity. “The idea of tradition on campus refers inevitably to connection—to the past, to people, to place. . .”

(Bronner, 2012, p. xiii). Traditions create a practice that embodies the values of the community and “connect individuals to those who have gone before them and to those who will come after them” (Spoutz, 2018, p. 3). Although most collegiate experiences are built on traditions, there is still a lack of literature and study on traditions in higher education.

“Whether they become directly involved or place student leaders in positions to do so, higher education professionals must ensure their institutional traditions provide positive and meaningful experiences for students” (Morris, 2016, p. 2). To ensure this, it is imperative to thoroughly examine campus traditions and not continue them simply for continuity’s sake. With this in mind, this study of Taylor University’s “Silent Night” tradition will help bring forth a further understanding of the motivations behind the creation and sustainability of this tradition. By studying a successful tradition, one can obtain a greater understanding of the recipe behind a positive and meaningful tradition.

### **Purpose Statement**

The present study sought to further understand the value of campus traditions in higher education. In particular, the study explored the campus tradition known as Silent Night at Taylor University. The study analyzed student and personnel perceptions of the value of campus traditions, guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the student perception of the value of Silent Night?
2. What is the personnel perception of the value of Silent Night?
3. What are the institutional elements surrounding a successful campus tradition?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Research concerning traditions in higher education is lacking; however, the presence of traditions in institutions across the country is abundant. Traditions “have the potential to teach students about the history of their institution, provide a means of building community, instill common values that span generations of students, and generate pride and enthusiasm” (Van Jura, 2010, p. 107). With this in mind, it is easy to see how traditions can provide a scope into the values represented by an institution. Taylor University in Upland, Indiana capitalizes on Van Jura’s words by embracing traditions like Silent Night and cultivating community around them. It is important to have a firm understanding of the values of an institution, campus culture, and emphasis on student involvement in order to create and/or sustain successful traditions.

#### **Tradition**

“Rituals and traditions . . . play a powerful role in shaping students’ sense of campus community” (Cheng, 2004, p. 229). Shils (1981) defined tradition as anything “transmitted or handed down from the past to the present” (p. 12). Some examples of things handed down, according to Shils (1981), include “material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions” (p. 12). Although the term has a historical presence, it “[is] the name given to those cultural features which, in situations of changes, were to be continued to be handed on, thought

about, preserved and not lost” (Graburn, 2000, p. 6). The existence and importance of traditions “is a strength to draw upon, a source of historically defined identity, and a source of a sense of safety, specialness, or difference” (p. 9).

Communities within an institution are important to the foundation on which traditions stand. 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). However, traditions are not merely a stand-alone concept that are created and unmoved—they grow and develop alongside the institution they represent. 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, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). “Traditions are complex, living entities which share a mutually impactful relationship with the communities and individuals involved” (Brandsma, 2019, p. 18).

**Tradition examples.** Across the country, traditions are carried out in a variety of ways and in many different places. To get a better understanding of tradition in higher education, it is helpful to investigate some of the more well-known traditions. For many years, athletic teams have been a primary source of belonging and community for higher education institutions. For many, when the team won, the entire community won. At Texas A&M, this is exemplified in the Aggies’ “Midnight Yell.” The night before every home football game, an average of 25,000 people gathers at Kyle Field. Started in 1931, the Midnight Yell begins when the yell leaders lead the Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band and current and former students into the stadium. Once there, the yell leaders lead the crowd

in yells and the singing of “The Aggie War Hymn” (Texas A&M University, 2019). This dramatic tradition going back almost 90 years is a unique display of comradery among those who represent the university community.

Yet not all traditions have foundations in athletics. Every March, an enormous dragon can be found parading the campus of Cornell University. During Dragon Day, Cornell architecture and engineering students’ skills in their specific fields of expertise are challenged. In a tradition dating back over 100 years, first-year architecture students come together to build a giant dragon and march it across campus to the Arts Quad where it “does battle with a phoenix” created by rival engineering students (Cornell, 2019). This parade is accompanied by many other students dressed in costumes. Dragon Day uniquely shows how tradition brings together students academically, thus forming community and displaying comradery in and out of the classroom.

Involvement in college traditions is also not limited to those currently studying at an institution—often, traditions keep alumni connected to their alma-mater. Two examples of alumni-involved traditions appear at Murray State University and Ball State University. Anyone who has spent time on campus at an institution can probably still name those “college sweethearts” that met during their undergraduate years. To this day, it is common to enter a university with an almost *expectation* to meet the love of your life during those years, hence the coining of such phrases as “ring by spring” and “senior scramble.” At Murray State University, these senior sweethearts are celebrated by returning to the campus “shoe tree.” A tradition since the late 1960s, these “sole” mates each hang a shoe on the tree as a way to illustrate the devotion of love between the two who met on campus (Murray State University, 2019). Some have even returned to nail a

baby shoe to the tree once a family has expanded. Though celebrating love is fun, not all alumni traditions in the country require the blessing of meeting a spouse on campus. On Ball State's Muncie, Indiana campus, the annual Bed Races are held. Since 1980, groups have gathered every Friday of homecoming weekend, welded wheels to bed frames, and raced down Riverside Avenue. Shortly after its inception, the event became officially sanctioned by the university, giving students, faculty, and alumni the chance to dress up in costumes, compete, and win (Ball State University, 2019). College traditions build and celebrate community among both current students and alumni.

### **Campus Culture**

Knowing the culture of a campus setting is essential to understanding the college experience (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Higher education scholars have found that culture assists campuses through the following purposes:

- (1) it conveys a sense of identity;
- (2) it facilitates commitment to an entity, such as the college or peer group, other than self;
- (3) it enhances the stability of a group's social system; and
- (4) it is a sense-making device that guides and shapes behavior. (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 26)

Traditions represent an observable byproduct of culture, as reflected in Dill's (1982) observation: "The management of academic culture therefore involves both the management of meaning and the management of social integration" (p. 317). However, culture is also affected by the traditions an institution puts into place. "Traditions may be shaped by the institutional culture while also contributing to it, providing a sense of belonging, social connection, and context to university values" (Trudeau et al., 2019, p. 27). "Both the scholarly and commonsense understandings of tradition have presumed

that a society is identified by its traditions. . . . The very identity of a society rests on this continuity of the past with the present” (Handler & Linnekin, 1984, p. 285). By continuing value in tradition, campuses shape and solidify their identity.

### **Student Involvement & Belonging**

According to Astin (1984), student involvement refers to “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 297). Therefore, a highly involved student puts his or her energy into spending much time on campus, participating in student organizations, and interacting with traditions that represent the institution. Involvement benefits the student in many ways. “It is reasonable to assume that the knowledge of campus history and traditions gained from high levels of involvement in student activities may contribute to a greater sense of campus community” (Elkins, Forrester, & Noel-Elkins, 2011, p. 116–117). The resulting community formed through involvement helps to combat loneliness and capitalizes on the student’s needs outside of the classroom. In a new environment with new people, belonging is crucial. “The most negative influence on the sense of community [comes] from feelings of loneliness” (Elkins et al., 2011, p. 107). When dealing with loneliness or overall wellbeing, traditions and other extracurricular activities are among the factors most crucial to their satisfaction with their college or university (Kaur & Bhalla, 2010).

### **Faith-based Higher Education**

The early colonial colleges in the U.S. aimed to train men in Christian character to bring about flourishing in society (Ringenberg, 2006). Despite the overall secularization of the academy, Christian colleges and universities continue to pursue the incorporation of faith and learning to prepare students. Although higher education today is a massive

economical and sociological discussion piece, the work of Christian education proves deeper than a business or educational responsibility; it provides a “calling—a ministry in the Body of Christ” (Mannoia, 2000, p. 4). The distinct nature of the Christian college, according to Holmes (1987), is “an education that cultivates the creative and active integration of faith and learning, of faith and culture” (p. 6). Christian higher education institutions are not career stepping stones, but instead commit to serving Christ in every aspect of life, particularly through learning, and also seek to prepare students to integrate faith in future roles and occupations (Beers, 2003; Dockery, 2000; Glanzer, Alleman, & Ream, 2017; Hughes, 2005; Smith, 2009).

### **Taylor University**

To know and understand Silent Night, one must first seek to understand Taylor University. Taylor was originally established as Fort Wayne Female College by the North Indiana Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1846 (Ringenberg, 1996). The institution now stands on 950 acres in rural Upland, Indiana, and is home to over 2,000 undergraduate students. To fully understand the unique setting, it is important to know that the town of Upland is currently home to under 4,000 citizens (Suburban Stats, 2020). Given its small-town setting, Taylor University has a unique family-style community within the campus, therefore providing ample opportunity for “whole person development.” William Ringenberg (1996), faculty emeritus at Taylor University, wrote: “The university has always sought to nurture both the spiritual and intellectual development of the students, but since the late 1960s there also has been a focused design for facilitating their social and psychological development as well” (p. 125).

As a faith-based, Christian liberal arts institution, Taylor's academics and programs are biblically anchored and centered on Christ, with a focus on the "integration of faith and learning." Although a Christian institution founded on Christian values, almost no religious activities have ever been required throughout its history, yet attendance remained steady. With this in mind, according to Ringenberg (1996), "Many students attended the daily chapel services, the Sunday-afternoon campus meeting, the worship services in local churches on Sunday morning and evening. . . . Professors frequently (although not by rule) began their classes with prayer or singing or both" (p. 127).

Although there are no longer daily chapel services, Taylor University continues to be an institution committed to its Christian foundation and the whole-person development of its students.

### **Silent Night**

Just before final exams every December, Taylor University students gather for the annual Silent Night basketball game. The game begins with the entire crowd silent, watching and waving hands instead of cheering. Students gather in costumes and pajamas, holding signs and packing the bleachers. However, everything changes once the 10<sup>th</sup> point is scored. Immediately after, the crowd erupts, rushing the court and beginning a massive celebration (Beck & Wilkinson, 2013). The Trojans are charged a timeout for the brief celebration, and the rest of the game is filled with celebratory energy. With two minutes left in the game, the Taylor crowd links arms and sways back and forth, singing a heartfelt and peaceful rendition of "Silent Night." A one-time assistant coach conceived the idea for Silent Night in the late 80s to bring attention to the school's basketball team; however, it is hard to imagine over 30 years later it would be a

packed-house celebration. Silent Night has evolved since its inception in the late 1980s. What was once a pajama-party-themed basketball game now is a national spectacle filled with costumes of all kinds and a large celebration among Taylor students. In recent years, this wonderful tradition has gained much popularity through its appearance in *Sports Illustrated* and multiple features on ESPN (ESPN, 2019).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted in correlation with the Traditions Research project. The Traditions Research project continues to gather research on the importance of tradition in higher education by starting with traditions' impact on student identity development, then continuing on to traditions' importance in college as a whole. This particular part of the project sought to understand the origin and impact a particular tradition has had at an institution. The researcher is a member of the Traditions Research team. A qualitative research approach was necessary due to the lack of existing research on the topic of traditions within the field of higher education. The qualitative approach was chosen because it identifies variables that cannot easily be measured and provides a richer description of the findings (Creswell, 2013). The level of detail for the description only comes from conversations with participants. Therefore, a phenomenological design was used to explore participants' experiences with the campus tradition. Qualitative phenomenological studies seek to describe the collective essence of a phenomenon based on the insights of individuals who experience it (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). The study sought to discover the comprehensive value of campus traditions—Silent Night in particular—as well as how a campus tradition takes root and thrives over time, all based on the perceptions of students and personnel. Through archival research and interviews, the researcher gathered a holistic perspective.

## **Context & Participants**

The research was conducted at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana. The institution is a small, faith-based liberal arts institution located on 950 acres of land in rural Indiana, providing a “small-town” feel. Taylor has been in existence for over 150 years and prides itself in its intentional community and rich history of traditions. As this study’s focus, Silent Night stands not only as one of the most significant traditions on Taylor’s campus but also one of the most significant sports traditions found in higher education (Beck & Wilkinson, 2013).

Throughout the Traditions Research (TR) project, the TR team has worked to obtain perspectives on campus traditions from students, faculty, staff, and administration. For this particular study on Silent Night at Taylor University, it was important to include participants with a variety of connections to Taylor University. First, the researcher invited 15 students, including nine attendees of Silent Night and six student-athletes who participated in the game itself. The invitees were all upperclassmen (juniors and seniors) who have had experience attending or taking part in this event. Additionally, nine faculty, staff, and administrators who support, coordinate, and invest in this campus tradition were invited to participate. In total, the researcher interviewed 24 students and personnel in order to gain a full understanding Silent Night’s value. Students and personnel have quite different involvement and experiences at Taylor University, but campus traditions often provide a shared aspect of campus life among these groups. The research included a relatively close number of student and personnel perspectives (nine student attendees, six basketball players, and nine faculty, staff, and administration) to

gain a more holistic, comprehensive understanding of the value of Silent Night for the campus and surrounding community.

### **Instruments**

A set of interview questions (Appendix A) were used to assess the value of the campus tradition from the perspective of both students and personnel. These questions were developed after a review of the literature identified current trends and areas of interest.

### **Procedures**

After attaining Institutional Review Board approval, this qualitative phenomenological study began with the analysis of archival materials on Taylor's campus. Material examination included reviewing documents, yearbooks, newspapers, programs, and other artifacts related to Silent Night. Interview participants were identified based on their connection to and/or involvement with Silent Night. Participants were contacted and asked to participate, while providing the option to decline. Students and personnel who agreed to participate were contacted once more to schedule individual interviews. Each of the 24 interviews was recorded and lasted approximately 30 minutes during the fall semester of 2019. Before beginning each interview, the participant read and signed a consent form.

### **Analysis**

Interview recordings were transcribed, then coded for themes. The data were analyzed by "identifying significant statements, creating meaning units, [and] clustering themes . . ." (Creswell, 2013, p. 226). The purpose of the themes was to illustrate "what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (p. 76). The

commonalities provided by the themes were essential in capturing the experiences of the participants and the essence of the institution. The sum of the weights for each theme were calculated to provide a level of significance in the findings.

### **Benefits**

The purpose and benefits of this study were to explore the relationship between traditions and culture in higher education. In particular, this study explored the culture surrounding Taylor University's Silent Night and obtained a better understanding of the significance this tradition has on Taylor's campus. Higher education institutions pride themselves on their campus traditions. However, little to no research has been conducted to better understand how traditions affect the culture of these schools. This study is beneficial to universities because it helps with:

- *Understanding the main characteristics of a tradition.* Why are some traditions successful and others not? This study helps professionals recognize qualities their students seek in traditions.
- *Unveiling how traditions' impressions or reflections impact a campus culture.* What is the relationship between traditions and campus culture? Once the relationship is more defined, professionals can gain a better understanding of why traditions are vital to their institutions.
- *Providing knowledge and interpretation of college traditions.* How do students interpret traditions? Do different perspectives affect interpretation? Pieces of the protocol aim at understanding what values traditions represent of the university culture.

- *Offering universities a starting point in evaluating their traditions and culture.*

Many institutions have beneficial traditions while others do not. This study's goal of clarifying the relationship between the two will allow universities to begin evaluation of their traditions and how to best use or promote them.

Higher education institutions foster and cultivate the next leaders, caretakers, and providers for the world. This study offers a deeper meaning to what students learn from their college experience, specifically from traditions.

## Chapter 4

### Results

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the value of campus traditions in higher education. In particular, the study explored the campus tradition known as Silent Night at Taylor University from the perspectives of students, staff, and faculty, as well as the athletes and coaches who participate in the event from a different perspective. Participants primarily described their personal experience with Silent Night and their perspective on their peers' experiences. After coding the transcriptions from 24 interviews, two themes emerged from the results. These two themes included many subthemes. Figure 1 represents these themes and subthemes; the number indicates the quantity of excerpts mentioning a subtheme out of the 662 total excerpts from all of the interviews.

Themes
<p>Theme #1: Descriptors (320)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Subtheme #1a: Continual (146)               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Evolving (44) &amp; Expectation (80)</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Subtheme #1b: Origin/History (25)               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Benefit (18) &amp; Significance (11)</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Subtheme #1c: Location (35)               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Population/Size (21)</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Subtheme #1d: Timing (46)</li> <li>5. Subtheme #1e: Transmission (28)</li> </ol>

<p style="text-align: center;">Theme #2: Outcomes (386)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Subtheme #2a: Community (243)             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Inclusive/Binding (143), Alumni Connection (40), &amp; Faith (18)</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Subtheme #2b: Fun (114)             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Memories (26)</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Subtheme #2c: University Promotion (81)</li> </ol>
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*Figure 1.* Theme Outlines

Participants were given their own specific identification code. Each code consists of descriptive initials, as well as an identification number. Below is a table indicating how to identify each participant.

Table 1

*Identification Codes*

<u>Identification Code</u>	<u>Description</u>
BB(1-6)	Basketball Player
FF(1-2)	Female Faculty
FSL(1-4)	Female Student Leader
MF(2-3)	Male Faculty
MS(1-2)	Male Staff
MSL(1-5)	Male Student Leader
SDL(1-3)	Student Development Leader

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 appeared.

**Theme 1: *Descriptors* (320)**

The term *descriptors* is used for this theme because 48% of participant comments described traditions. Examples of this theme include participants explaining their own definition of traditions and moments when specific traditions are described using language that bolster the depiction of traditions. Throughout the conversations, participants referenced characteristics of their own definitions of traditions. The following quote is an example of a participant's description of traditions:

Tradition is just something that continues to go on year after year, but yet there has to be some engagement, excitement, enthusiasm about that tradition.

Everybody buys in, everybody's excited about it, and it's just something they don't want to let go because of the great . . . what's the word I want to use? The great comradery that happens as a result of the tradition. (FF2)

These excerpts list many of the subthemes that emerged from the interviews. The following quotes represent how participants described Silent Night at Taylor University.

- For Taylor, it is the coming together of the entire community to celebrate the end of fall semester. To have a rally for the excitement of finishing up the semester but also a chance to be creative and connected and to be a part of something as an entire community that's a lot of fun. I think it comes at the right time. I also think my favorite part is as the game is ending when the student body sings Silent Night just to put a . . . maybe it puts the capstone on the event and just the purpose

behind it where it's still . . . there's a higher purpose in what we do around here, and so it's got a real unified spirit. Every year, I always pause during that time just because I think it's really neat. I think it's an event that showcases who we are as people here is how I would . . . in one statement. (MS2)

- It's a tradition. It's a marker of a certain time of the year that means we're getting close to the end of the fall semester. It's the commencement of finals to us, and so I think it's a really fun celebration of a good semester, hopefully. (MF2)

With slight variations, participants' definitions of traditions and Silent Night clustered around similar aspects, including *continual*, *origin/history*, *location*, *timing*, and *transmission*.

**Subtheme 1a: *Continual* (156).** *Continual* refers to the repetition and longevity of the event(s). Participants acknowledged the importance of the continuity of Silent Night and traditions as a whole. “Well, I think in the sense that it happens every year around the same time in the same place, and the same things basically happen every year. Those are all very strong earmarks of a good college tradition” (MF2). These aspects were included in the subtheme: *evolving* and *expectation*.

*Continual Aspect 1: Evolving (44).* When participants described traditions changing and adapting over time, the category *evolving* was ascribed to their statement, such as the following excerpt:

I think it's important for people to know, ‘Hey, this event always didn't look like this.’ I think when traditions are lasting, there's a story connected to that larger story that it's connected to. In its origination, there was a need to bring people

together, and clearly now, in December, thousands of people are coming together for this shared event. (SDL2)

As the institutional culture changes, traditions often adapt to those changes. As this participant mentioned, knowledge of the *evolving* nature of Silent Night had significant value.

*Continual Aspect 2: Expectation (80)*. Though the *continual* nature of traditions is evident, participants described a sense of *expectation* of the upcoming Silent Night.

It's not just people show up to this event just because it happens every year, but people are excited about it ahead of time, and are willing to participate in it and organize these things. And so part of the tradition is the planning, the expectation that goes into it. (MSL5)

Participants described the unwavering assumption of Silent Night's upcoming occurrence:

You always know it's going to happen every year. You can sense it approaching because people start talking about it. There's always thought put towards how we're going to celebrate it, and if it's going to be different this year or whatever. It can't be ignored either, I think. Like a tradition can die out, Silent Night is not going to die out. Someone would have to cancel the game and then people would revolt. (SDL1)

**Subtheme 1b: Origin/History (25)**. The subtheme *origin/history* indicates knowledge of the creation and life of the traditions, as well as the effects of having this knowledge. "I guess I don't think every tradition has like an important history, but I have a feeling that this one might" (FSL3). The purpose of wanting to understand participants'

knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of Silent Night's history is to evaluate if that knowledge is important and/or affects the participants. This subtheme includes two aspects: *benefit* and *significance*.

*Origin/History Aspect 1: Significance (11)*. The category *significance* indicates the importance or need for knowledge of Silent Night's history. Participants were asked to specify whether knowledge of the history of Silent Night was a critical part of their experience. According to one participant:

I do think it's important because it's really cool to see what it was aimed at, at the beginning and kind of where it's at now, and knowing that you can start something that can leave an impact like that even if it's a silly tradition. (FSL1).

Though some participants mentioned a high level of importance, a majority of them knew very little or no history of Silent Night. For example, one participant stated,

I think in this one, not really. I think everyone gets the gist of it and what happened 30 years ago is not relevant. Particular to this age group of students, I think that just doesn't really matter that much. (MS1)

Though participants indicated little importance of the knowledge of Silent Night's history, a vast majority of them specified its history could benefit participants' experiences. For this reason, this subtheme was given a second category: *benefit*.

*Origin/History Category 2: Benefit (18)*. The category *benefit* indicates if the participants' experience with Silent Night would be positively or negatively affected with knowledge of its history. One participant noted,

I think it'd be helpful for people to know the origins of it. I even think, well, it would be helpful for us as an institution to name that it's morphed. And maybe

we're just so comfortable with what it is now that we don't even feel like we need to. (SDL3).

Some participants, like previously mentioned, used language like knowledge of the history would be “helpful” and could *benefit* their experience. The following excerpts represent participants’ responses to the *benefits* of knowing Silent Night’s history/origin:

- For the people and students that's participating in, it would be good for them. I know it'll be important for them. They'd like to know the background of it. So they have a greater meaning of it. They can enjoy the experience that much more. (BB6)
- I would say the context of where does Silent Night come from definitely enriches the experience, but it's not necessary for enjoyment. (MSL1)

To summarize, participants see value in knowing the *origin/history* of Silent Night; however, it is not essential in order to enjoy the event.

**Subtheme 1c: *Location* (35).** The subtheme *location* speaks to how the physical location of the institution/tradition affects participants’ experiences. One participant observed,

I think in part it's (the campus) small, so that helps. Also, there's not a lot to do around here, so people look within to have fun rather than looking outside of the campus. . . . Therefore, people are confined into the campus, and so in order to make it more fun, the traditions drive people in. (FSL1).

Higher education institutions in the United States are found in many very different environments. Taylor University is located in a highly rural area of central Indiana, and

many participants alluded to its location as a factor to the institution's thriving traditions.

One participant in particular summarized this well:

I think probably the most common thing you hear and I would probably agree with it, is just the setting of the institution being where it is in relation to the nearest city or the nearest urban area where there's a lot of activity, a lot of things to do. It kind of forces our students in some ways to create their own fun, create their own interests, so I think a lot of the traditions have probably come from . . . Part of that is, I think there's a couple of things but both the rural context, but then also the fact that 90% of our students live on campus. When you have that many students who stay on campus, who stay within proximity to one another in a town where there isn't anything to do, I think all of those things create the conditions for more traditions than maybe you would see at other institutions that are maybe in a more urban setting or don't have as many students who live on campus.

(MF2)

Participants indicated a lack of events and/or community created by the surrounding environments and how it shapes the culture and need for traditions:

I would say the other thing which should be pretty clear . . . would be our location. And being placed in a rural Indiana or East Central rural Indiana, and the lack of significant cultural opportunities within an hour radius for example. So from the edges of Indy to Fort Wayne back to Upland, all that's not going on then creates an opportunity for an office like ours, and for wings and floors to say, "How do we generate our own fun?" Which I think in its healthiest forms, those are good ingredients to create tradition out of. Right, is that, oh we don't just have

stuff ready made for us. So how do we create culture for ourselves? And so I think that's a significant ingredient to us. (SDL3)

Though physical location clearly affects traditions and culture on this campus, a smaller aspect within this subtheme emerged as well.

*Location Aspect 1: Population/Size (21).* The category *population/size* indicates how the physical number of people located at the institution and surrounding community affect the event and participants' experiences. This institution is located in a very small rural town with a student population of around 2,000 students. When asked the question, "Is there anything unique about Taylor that allows for traditions to be successful?" one participant responded, "I think it's the amount of people that are interested in doing traditions. I'd say most of campus wants to do it. Because we're so small, but when we all do it, it shows up" (FSL3). Another participant described how the *population/size* complements the *location* by saying,

Just because it's so small, there is more opportunity for more traditions because more people I think are willing to participate. Because it feels like more people are participating, and there's not that many people to begin with. And the location, there's not much going on outside of Taylor. So, when things happen here that are considered a big deal, I feel like more people go to that because it doesn't happen very often. (FSL2)

Silent Night takes place inside the main gymnasium on campus and because of the size of the student population and surrounding community, many are able to attend.

**Subtheme 1d: *Timing* (46).** Many participants spoke about the importance of when Silent Night takes place every year. Historically, Silent Night takes place every

year during the final men's basketball game before Christmas Break. This also happens to fall on the last weekend before the students' final exam week.

It's a marker of a certain time of the year that means we're getting close to the end of the fall semester. It's the commencement of finals to us, and so I think it's a really fun celebration of a good semester, hopefully. Hopefully it's a way for students to say, "Okay, I've made it to Silent Night. That means we're really close." I think you sense that. When you're at Silent Night, it's almost like there's this release of like, "Ah. Okay, we're not done, but we're really close to being done now, so let's have some fun." (MF2)

Many participants indicated the level of stress students are often facing this time of year. The timing of Silent Night assists with this by being "something to blow off steam basically. Something for people to look forward to in the midst of all of the challenge of the end of the semester" (SDL1). The following quotes further explain the significance of the *timing* of Silent Night:

- I think the time of year in which finals are held is, it's starting to get cold and people are running thin on energy and they're not really feeling super motivated to study and things like that. They're ready to get home or they're just really stretched thin from the semester, and I think this is a way that the legacy brought itself in and that kind of makes it why it's a tradition that continues, because people enjoy it and it gives them a little spark before the end of the semester. (FSL1)
- For Taylor, it is the coming together of the entire community to celebrate the end of fall semester. To have a rally for the excitement of finishing up the semester

but also a chance to be creative and connected and to be a part of something as an entire community that's a lot of fun. I think it comes at the right time. (MS2)

It is clear that Silent Night provides a service that speaks to the needs of the community during a difficult season. *Timing* plays a critical role in the effectiveness of traditions and is evident in its use for Silent Night.

**Subtheme 1e: *Transmission* (28).** *Transmission* refers to the passing down or perpetuation of traditions. Participants indicated the various ways in which traditions are transmitted for various reasons and through multiple methods. *Transmission* is an integral part of the survival of traditions. One participant chose to include *transmission* when asked to define tradition:

[What] I think of is anything that is passed down, tradition being things that have happened in the past that people have liked or appreciated and so they want it to be passed down to the next group, and then that group also appreciates it and so they pass it down and it just becomes some collective appreciation of the experience is worth being passed down regardless of if the people who are actually doing it have the same values as the people who started it. (SDL1)

Nearly all participants who mentioned *transmission* also mentioned word of mouth being the most common form of *transmission*. “Well, it's deeply entrenched and deeply connected to what seems like most things that are happening. It seems very oral in its connection to Taylor. There's an oral tradition that is taking place” (SDL2). Participants indicated the occurrence of the event is transferred as well as the “rules” for the event.

We know exactly what day it's happening, certain events, sometimes get moved around, but the tradition is that it's always the Saturday before finals. It's always

the last home game for the men's, and it's always in the gym, and we always dress up. You always are silent for the first 10 points. So, there's these "rules" that we all know about and that all get passed along to all the new upcoming freshmen, and all the new transfers that come in, that that's why it's a tradition, I would say.

(FSL4)

*Transmission* acts as a foundation for the continuation of Silent Night, and that act of *transmission* is seemingly a tradition within the tradition. Students also take an assumed responsibility in continuing the *transmission* through word of mouth. The following quotes represent this assumed responsibility:

- It's just like a known fact that the PA's are ones who plan for it and the PA's are the ones who tell you what to do. But then, part of it too is just me and my co-PA are just like, "All right, we're going to take this on and we're going to do this."

(FSL4)

- But I'd say as a student, when I feel like a tradition has begun, it's when the upperclassmen are telling the freshmen about it. (MSL5)

Though some traditions across the country are created and funded institutionally, one of Silent Night's enduring values is the responsibility participants take on to ensure its continuation.

## **Theme 2: Outcomes (386)**

*Outcomes* emerged as the second and most prominent theme of the interviews and labeled comments describing results or consequences of Silent Night. Both the positive and negative results of Silent Night were acknowledged, whether theoretical or personal to the participant's own experiences. *Outcomes* refer to Silent Night, as well as traditions

on a larger scale. With slight variations, participants' references to Silent Night's *outcomes* clustered tightly around similar aspects, forming the subthemes *community*, *fun*, and *university promotion*.

**Subtheme 2a: Community (243).** *Community* referred to the groups of people affected by Silent Night, as well as forming of these groups. This subtheme included several dimensions of community relationships including the local community, institutional bonding, residence hall identity, as well as specific wings/floors and peer-to-peer relationships. Participants indicated the community formed through Silent Night speaks to the mission and values of the institution as a whole. According to one participant,

When it's at its best, it reminds us of everything that we love about this place.

That it's a small community that we share, that it brings us all into the same room physically. . . . I think the purpose that it would have more than anything is just to point us back towards being together. (MF2).

When asked what the “enduring value” of Silent Night was, participants consistently pointed toward this sense of community it formed. The following quotes display the enduring value of community:

- I think the enduring value would be what Taylor values the most, which is community. (FSL1)
- That's been my experience is that I'm just one cog in the larger machine. But of course then you have all these little groups of more intimate campus community, right, that come together to make a huge roaring crowd. (MSL1)

*Community* is clearly a value at this institution, and Silent Night fills that need. However, the term *community* can be used in a wide spectrum—because of this, the subtheme *community* is made up of three smaller categories: *inclusive/binding*, *alumni connection*, and *faith*.

*Community Aspect 1: Inclusive/Binding (143)*. This category is the most prominent category within the *community* subtheme. *Inclusive/binding* refers to deepened bonds between the people that are brought together. Whereas *community* at large speaks to the physical gathering, *inclusive/binding* signifies the relational connections between those people and the institution as a whole. Participants indicated Silent Night brings people together to support a common goal. As noted by one participant,

Probably 1,500 students, or 1,200 to 1,500 students who commit to coming.

Some sleepover in the gymnasium that night before, and they camp out. I think that enduring legacy of gathering around something and then the support of something together. (SDL2).

Although this event is a basketball game, even the players recognize Silent Night is bigger than a game.

Yeah, my experience has been really awesome. I've been able to, this year, hopefully, been able to start all four years and play in all those games and be a part of something that I thought was really cool coming into. My experience, like I said, has been nothing but positive and very enjoyable just to see, not even, not anything to do with basketball, but just to see the rest of the community come out and have fun doing something that is a little bit based around the basketball team

is a good feeling for us to feel like we can provide people with a night where they have a lot of fun. (BB2)

Participants were asked, “If Silent Night were to cease to take place, what void, if any, would it leave in the Taylor community or in Taylor’s fabric of traditions?” Virtually every participant stated some sort of void would be present if Silent Night were to cease existing. When asked what the student response would be, one participant said “there would be an outrage. . . . Oh I think it would be all over social media. I think it would be . . . I think students would protest and probably try to do another kind of a . . . another way to do it” (FF1).

The *inclusive/bonding* element is a major part of that void Silent Night fills and identifies the tradition as more than just a basketball game. One participant described this well:

I think the value of it is to just kind of be able to bring people together. It's kind of a piece in the community that we look to build here. Just kind of an avenue that you can take to encourage that community and bring people together. You know, a lot of people would never even go to a basketball game, they don't even care about basketball and then they hear about this and it kind of gets them involved, gets everyone from all different diverse cultures in kind of the same tradition. (BB3)

These participants identified Silent Night as an event that brings the community together and binds their relationships. It allows participants to “be a part of community and be intentional with the people” (BB2).

*Community Category 2: Alumni Connection (40)*. Participants identified that Silent Night bound together the current institutional community and connected them to those who went before them. The category *alumni connection* indicates the continued bond participants formed with their institution even after graduation. Many participants spoke about a sense of nostalgia Silent Night provided for alumni.

I think it's a place of building memories. Nostalgia. So I think for students it's, when you look back at your defining Taylor moments, or not defining moments but maybe some moments that you'll remember really well. You'll remember what you wore that year for Silent Night or what happened at that year on Silent Night, so I think it's just a nice reminder of what makes this place special. For alumni too, I think it's nostalgia. I think they look and they see students doing pretty much the same thing that they did 10 years ago, 15 years ago, 20 years ago and it's like, "Oh, it's good to know that that still happens at Taylor." You know? Like, "That makes me happy to see that that still goes on there." (MF2)

Participants also mentioned opportunities that Silent Night provided them to have a relationship with alumni:

I think that's kind of the beauty of traditions, is that even though different individuals can pass through a campus and be there at different times and experience different outside cultural events, if I were to meet an alumni who's been out of Taylor for 10 years, we could still bond over those moments of like, "Hey, are they still doing Silent Night? What'd you dress up for Silent Night?" So, it creates common ground for alumni and current students, which I think is kind of special. (MSL2)

When reflecting on traditions, participants recognized the ways traditions, and particularly Silent Night, bonded them to other students and alumni through shared experiences. It provided this common ground that fostered relationships with people who would have otherwise remained unknown to them.

*Community Aspect 3: Faith (18).* Being a private, faith-based institution, participants also indicated a faith component found within Silent Night. The category *faith* indicates personal and communal spirituality that binds the community. One participant recollected the experience of singing “Silent Night” towards the end of the event:

I think as people celebrate together and sing Silent Night, it feels like a very appropriate ending and in a way that Christian communities and Taylor, and lots of other places can only do. It's sort of like, hey, whatever craziness has happened now we're all going to get together and pray. It feels like a little bit like that ending, but way more meaningful. I don't mean to make that sound ridiculous as much as I think that that's our attempt to actually have, regardless of what you brought you there, have people be in unison in some way, shape, or form before they leave the event. (SDL3)

Participants mentioned the *faith* element as being a precursor to the success of Silent Night. “But honestly love of Christ, love for each other, I think is where it all stems from. A common love for each other is probably where it all stems from” (MSL4). The following quotes indicated the relationship between spirituality and fun found in the event:

- When the student body sings Silent Night just to put a . . . maybe it puts the capstone on the event and just the purpose behind it where it's still . . . there's a higher purpose in what we do around here, and so it's got a real unified spirit. Every year, I always pause during that time just because I think it's really neat. I think it's an event that showcases who we are as people here. (MS2)
- When you are standing in a room full of people who look nothing like you, who have not had a lot of the same experiences you've had, right. They might think completely differently politically or even in branches of theology, but you can stand in a room, be exhilarated over the same thing together. That's a really beautiful microcosm of heaven. And I think that's something that's lasting about it for me. (MSL1)

Participants detailed how *inclusive/bonding*, *alumni connection*, and *faith* all categorize the most prominent elements of *community* found through Silent Night. This tradition brings groups of people together, binds their relationships deeply, and continues to provide opportunity for a common sense of belonging long after they leave.

**Subtheme 2b: *Fun* (114).** The subtheme *fun* describes personal and/or communal joy. Participants indicated Silent Night provided a sense of relief and fun for them at times they needed them. As mentioned previously, Silent Night strategically occurs during a stressful time of year for the community and fills a need of participants. Participants described how Silent Night provided *fun* and relief for them. The following quotes are from participants elaborating on this:

- I mean, we play 30 plus games a year, so it's a game for us, but having the students there to support us and to have fun, that's really what it's all about. (BB3)
- It's also, I think this might sound silly, but I think a lot of times the purpose of things can just be to have fun or to create memories that last, and it feels like that is one of the most frontal parts of Silent Night. (MSL1)

That final quote indicated a necessary aspect under this subtheme: *memories*.

*Fun Aspect 1: Memories (26)*. The category *memories* describes the opportunity for participants to continue reliving experiences shared at Silent Night after the event ends. One participant made the following observation:

I think whenever we go back to a place, we usually tell a story to whoever we're with of what that experience was like for us. I think it's a really great time to tell a story, to make a story and then to think about a future story that we want to keep telling with Silent Night. (SDL2)

As participants take part in Silent Night and encounter other participants, these stories are made. Participants indicated that, for many, the memories made create opportunities for them to maintain their relationship with those they engaged with. One participant mentioned this in further detail:

I feel like Silent Night's legacy, it's basically this time where everybody can talk about when they came together or what they dressed up as, or what happened that night or what they did after that. And so it's this point we can all look back to and have fond memories over. (MSL5)

*Memories* contribute to participants' experiences with Silent Night long after they were physically present. Those nostalgic stories give past participants a sense of belonging that goes further than their undergraduate experience at the institution.

**Subtheme 2c: *University Promotion* (81).** The final subtheme is *university promotion*. This subtheme describes how Silent Night affects the popularity and/or outside perception of the institution. "Then when you have Silent Night, thousands of students come to it. People see it on ESPN, and people come to Upland, Indiana for this event because it's so widespread and so far reaching" (SDL2). Across the country, many higher education institutions brand themselves with their popular traditions. Participants indicated how their institution has been affected by the popularity of Silent Night, as well as how the institution uses it to its advantage. "It's just been such a good way to put Taylor on the map where otherwise it would have never gotten the coverage that it's gotten" (MF2). Participants also indicated a sense of school pride the publicity assists with. The following quote from a participant elaborates on this:

I feel like it puts Taylor on the map for both communities. Right? The fact that it's on TV or everyone knows like, "Oh that's the Silent Night school." I think there's some school pride that comes from it. Yeah, that's us, we do that weird thing. Or like when students go home to their parents after the first one, they're like, "What's Silent Night like?" They're like, "Yeah, I did that." (SDL1)

Silent Night's popularity affects both the participants as well as the institution it represents. "It brings people in. Attracts people. Yeah. It really puts Taylor's name more out there. So that's one of the biggest things. I think is the legacy, is ESPN all that

hype” (BB5). One participant went into detail on how the institution uses the tradition with admissions pursuits:

People bring prospective students. When they're on tours, they'll show them, explain what Silent Night is, and bring them to that. So, I think that's a really, part of, that helps go into recruiting people to come here. Students come here.

So, [if] they were to take Silent Night out, I think that would damage that a little bit and their experience. (BB6)

The element of *university promotion* affects students long before they ever participate in Silent Night and continues to affect them after they leave.

### **Summary**

The first theme, *descriptors*, included the subthemes *continual*, *origin/history*, *location*, *timing*, and *transmission*. The second theme, *outcomes*, consisted of *community*, *fun*, and *university promotion*. Together, the themes foster an understanding of the essence of Silent Night from the perspective of students, faculty, staff, and alumni participants. The legacy of Silent Night is described as a unique, continuous tradition created and upheld with the institution's distinctive location and community identity in mind to provide fun and relief to participants. Regardless of gender or role within Silent Night, participants described Silent Night and their results in similar ways. Key findings include an understanding of traditions defined from many differing perspectives, varying levels of responsibility surrounding the event, the benefits participants perceive from engaging Silent Night, relationships between the present community and previous members of the immediate community, and a rich description of the sense of belonging participants derived from involvement in Silent Night.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

This study specifically sought to understand how Silent Night, a large tradition at a small institution, earned the popularity it has by focusing on its impact and origin at Taylor University. The study focused on the perspectives of students, staff, faculty, and alumni currently involved in leadership at the institution with three aims. The first was to understand traditions from the perspective of those involved at Taylor University. Second, the research aimed to discern the role Silent Night has with the current Taylor community and previous members of the immediate community. Finally, the study pursued an understanding of the necessary characteristics of the institution and Silent Night that led to its current status. The study resulted in an increased understanding of Silent Night and traditions at large through many different perspectives.

Participants described both descriptors and outcomes of Silent Night. One major finding is the perceptions of Silent Night and traditions at Taylor University. The five descriptors of Silent Night mentioned with the greatest frequency by all participants are *continual, origin/history, location, timing, and transmission*. The results also found significant outcomes result from Silent Night. The number of influential outcomes has proven to affect participants of Silent Night as well as others affiliated with the institution. Additionally, the research proves the institution's commitment to Silent Night and traditions at large affects participants' sense of belonging and university

promotion. Finally, the results found the setting and institutional characteristics affect the success of Silent Night. The results yield implications for practice and future research.

### **Implications for Practice**

Several implications for practice among higher education professionals emerged when considering these research findings regarding the impact and origin of Silent Night. First, practitioners should consider the institutional setting and identity when evaluating campus traditions. Campus traditions like Silent Night involve a great deal of the community, making the community the focal point when creating these events. Practitioners should not mimic campus traditions on other campuses but instead should seek to better understand the institution's identity and strengths. Also, practitioners should properly evaluate campus traditions and be open to changing them according to the evolving campus. The research shows much of Silent Night's success involves careful consideration of the institution's location, the timing of the event, and the needs of the current student body. Traditions, if treated solely as rituals that their respective institutions "have always done," do not serve participants. Rather, rituals serve the institution's namesake and leave greater room for disastrous results that do more harm than good. Identifying specific value encourages practitioners in the importance and significance of the work they do with campus traditions. Traditions must serve and educate participants while displaying the institution's mission and values.

Additionally, practitioners should consider educating participants on the tradition's origin and history. Though the research showed knowledge of the tradition's origin and history is not necessary, participants believed there are benefits to having this knowledge when engaging with the tradition. That knowledge establishes greater sense

of belonging when engaging the tradition and helps paint a narrative for the participant. Practitioners should consider using programming, social media, and possibly forms of institutional media like a school radio show or newspaper to educate participants prior to the event. With knowledge about Silent Night's past, the event's enduring value will become more understood and valued, leading to an enduring future. Other institutions would be wise to learn and approach their own traditions with the same need for understanding. It is imperative that institutions dissect their traditions to better understand the foundation on which they stand to effectively shape them for successful futures.

Moreover, communicating the value of traditions should become a priority of higher education professionals. Rather than just stating traditions have value, practitioners should understand and communicate *why* they have value to the community. When a tradition is booming with success, it is easy to continue it for the sake of popularity and crowd-pleasing. Traditions should hold purpose and mirror the values of their institution. By studying and understanding the value, purpose, and significance of a tradition, participants appear more likely to take part in it and encourage it.

Finally, practitioners should regularly use effective assessment tools to evaluate campus traditions. Traditions evolve along with the community that participates in them; however, it is important to evaluate the traditions' direct effects on their institution. If institutions do not provide space for their campus traditions to evolve, they can become toxic and detrimental. If this happens, higher education professionals must be quick to respond. Many of the benefits discussed in this research are a result of healthy campus traditions. When traditions are not properly evaluated, they can harm students, divide

community, encourage negative habits, and tear down an institution's reputation. As practitioners approach building campus traditions with eagerness and charisma, they must be open to eliminating or restructuring these traditions when necessary.

### **Implications for Research**

Several implications for future research surfaced as a result of these findings. Utilizing the identified themes of value in Silent Night, practitioners at institutions across the country could explore how to create those valuable traits in new, more valuable traditions. This further research might focus on a greater understanding of the institution itself rather than only the traditions for which higher education professionals long for. By carefully studying the values identified in this research, practitioners can establish traditions that fit the already existing identity at their institutions.

Further research could also explore how to create new traditions that fill potential voids on college campuses. Higher education institutions are often seeking new opportunities to increase student participation and this research could provide practitioners more effective ways of understanding institutional needs. Research exploring campus culture and its connection to traditions would benefit those seeking to develop new traditions. Also, this research might focus on gaining an understanding of the development of such campus traditions in order to generate and enhance their value.

Finally, additional research should explore beneficial and harmful qualities in campus traditions. College campuses hold very diverse student bodies and although the predominant voices may speak positively about traditions, some students may find harm from them. Research helping practitioners identify how to distinguish between beneficial and harmful campus traditions would be important. Campus traditions tend to carry

popularity, and that popularity can often carry assumed value. Further research could investigate how to empower the voices of those participants who have experienced harm from such traditions and lead to the reinventing or elimination of those harmful elements.

### **Limitations**

This study also had limitations. First, the study focused on only one tradition at one particular institution. Though valuable themes were identified, one must consider the study's narrow scope. Consequently, the data must be cautiously used to inform practice at differing institutions.

Second, this research focused primarily on the benefits of Silent Night as opposed to potential harms. All participants are current institutional leaders; thus, it is likely they had favorable opinions of the institution and Silent Night. Also, no research was conducted on participants no longer affiliated with the institution or Silent Night. This may have caused the data not to reflect the general population of the institutional body. Furthermore, participants may have assumed the term *impact* was synonymous with *benefit*. The vocabulary used in the interview questions alluded more toward benefits rather than potential harms.

Third, participants' responses revealed an unusually large amount of solidarity. Virtually all participants spoke positively about their experiences with Silent Night. Silent Night's commanding presence and popularity possibly generated bias in the interviews. With such immense involvement, the researcher recommends more direct exploration on potential harms and/or negatives of Silent Night.

## Conclusion

This study sought to gain better understanding of the motivations behind the creation and sustainability of Silent Night. Both the literature and this research suggest college traditions have a significant impact on their institutions. Traditions also greatly affect student involvement and sense of belonging. The research found that institutions should focus on their identity and values they want to communicate when trying to establish traditions. It is also important to understand traditions play a role in small pockets of the college's immediate community as well as the alumni community. Research at Taylor University regarding Silent Night revealed the value of this campus tradition. Students, staff, faculty, administrators, and alumni alike understand this tradition's valuable impact on campus, as well as across the country. The research proves Silent Night's value lies in binding community, relieving fun, and everlasting memories. With these in mind, institutions hoping to start new traditions and/or build upon existing ones can piece together a recipe for success.

George Kuh and Elizabeth Whitt, in their 1988 report titled *The Invisible Tapestry: Culture in American Colleges and Universities*, profoundly stated, "The core of culture is comprised of assumptions and beliefs shared—to some degree—by members of the institution that guide decision making and shape major events and activities" (p. 42). Silent Night embodies the shared beliefs and values of Taylor University and exemplifies a tradition beloved by its participants. Higher education practitioners must continue to attend to and care for their institution's traditions to ensure a future of beneficial outcomes. Taylor University's Silent Night campus tradition continues to evolve with the campus culture and paints a unique picture of how to effectively cultivate tradition.

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## Appendix A

### Silent Night Interview Protocol

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. What is your role with/connection to Taylor University?
2. How do you define tradition in relation to a college community?
3. In what way(s), if at all, does tradition play a role within the Taylor community?
4. Is there anything unique about Taylor University that allows for traditions to be successful?
5. What traditions, if any, play the most critical role(s)?
6. What is Silent Night?
7. What is your role with/connection to Silent Night as a member of the Taylor Community? What has your experience been within that role?
8. What are Silent Night's core functions and/or what is its purpose?
9. In what way(s), if at all, does Silent Night qualify as a tradition at Taylor University?
10. What is Silent Night's enduring value? What is the legacy of Silent Night?
11. Do you know anything about the history of Silent Night? Is it important for those involved with Silent Night to have an understanding about its history?

12. What role does Silent Night play within the present Taylor community and previous members of the immediate community such as alumni?
13. If Silent Night were to cease to take place, what void, if any, would it leave in the Taylor community or in Taylor's fabric of traditions?
14. Is there anything else about the Silent Night tradition that I need to know?

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

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent**

#### **TAYLOR UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT**

##### **A Study of Silent Night at Taylor University**

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, faculty, or staff member who has attended and/or participated in Silent Night in some capacity. 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 Ryan Kristofek – MAHE Student at Taylor University.

##### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the origin and impact of the Silent Night tradition at Taylor University.

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

If you agree to participate, you will be in a focus group or in an interview.

##### **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 Ryan Kristofek at 810.247.1454 or [ryan\\_kristofek@taylor.edu](mailto:ryan_kristofek@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:** \_\_\_\_\_

