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# The Spiritual Formation of Recent College Graduates and Residence Life Influences Attributed to that Spiritual Formation

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## Abstract

This study investigated the spiritual formation experience of alumni from a Midwest Christian college six months to five years after graduation and the spiritual formation factors they attribute to their Residence Life experience. The data revealed that alumni persist in their Christian faith, and seek growth in Christian beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. Findings regarding Residence Life were consistent with the literature, revealing that the most significant source of spiritual formation for alumni are peer relationships, interactions, and conversations. Programming was not a significant factor in a student's spiritual formation. This study led to several recommendations for application including a re-orienting of Residence Life's mindset regarding spiritual formation. This mindset would conclude that the most spiritually significant role is that of community facilitation and development, the context for most spiritual formation. Recommendations for further study include studying specific aspects of peer relationships, interactions, and conversations that may be spiritually influential.

## Introduction

Emerging adults are experiencing the world in dramatically different ways than previous generations, and many of these changes usher in new challenges for these adults to face and navigate. The steady drift of emerging adults away from their Christian faith after graduating high schools is only one example (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2016, p. 9–19). This reality has been attributed to many things, and although one may anticipate college to be the trigger for faith abandonment, it is often not the reason for these emerging adults. This pseudo-trigger provides higher education professionals the context and opportunity to use the college experience to impact an emerging adult's spiritual formation and development.

The experiential impact on emerging adult spiritual formation could happen through multiple avenues on campus, but one common experience for college students is that of Residence Life (Blimling & Schuh, 2015, p. 59). Most Christian colleges not only offer residential housing, but often require students to live on campus for some duration of their time at the school. This requirement could be a natural vehicle for spiritual formation. Intentionally including elements of spiritual formation in the Residence Life experience could ensure that students grow into thriving Christians and Kingdom contributors. In order to do this effectively and efficiently, it is important for Residence Life staff to know how to maximize spiritual formation within the department and through the programs offered.

In order to understand more about the influence Residence Life has on a student's spiritual formation, it is important that a student's current context, understanding of spiritual formation, and college experience are taken into consideration. Christian Smith conducted substantial research on the emerging adult experience in multiple aspects of life, as well as the various challenges they face that are unique to their demographic (Smith & Snell, 2009). There is also significant literature on spiritual formation, which can be defined in multiple ways and with many metaphors (Nouwen, Christiansen, & Laird, 2010, p. vii) (Fowler, 1995, p. 3) (Greenman & Kalantzis, 2010, p. 24) (Hagberg & Guelich, 2011). Spiritual formation is fluid and complex, which means understanding the nuances and diverse perspectives on spiritual formation is vital if Residence Life professionals are to understand how to facilitate it. Finally, a student's college experience is the context in which his or her

spiritual formation will occur. It is important for Residence Life professionals to understand their own context in order to know what resources are available and what practices could facilitate the most significant spiritual formation. It is vital that Residence Life professionals are intentional and strategic in the four short years they influence these emerging adults' spiritual formation (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 91).

#### Purpose Statement

This study intended to begin to understand the influence of Residence Life on a student's spiritual formation and the factors students attribute to that formation at a specific Christian liberal arts college in the Midwest. The study analyzed students' attitudes, practices, and beliefs regarding their Christian faith as well as their Residence Life experience and was guided by the following research questions:

- How would [small Christian liberal arts college] graduates describe their current spiritual formation six months to five years after graduation as defined by reported attitudes, practices, and commitments?
- What specific aspects of Residence Life played a role in [small Christian liberal arts college] graduates' spiritual formation as perceived six months to five years after graduation? Why?

#### Literature Review

##### Emerging Adults

Most church leaders as well as trusted researchers readily agree that adolescents often become less religious after leaving home (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 91). These adolescents move into a time of life recently labeled as "emerging adulthood," a new life phase in the American script coined by Jeffery Arnett in 2000 (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, p. 3). This life phase is defined by identity exploration, instability, feeling in-between, self-focused development, and an optimism about life's possibilities (Arnett, 2006, 3-19). In 2009, Christian Smith, well-known researcher of emerging adults, published findings from a longitudinal study called the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). In this study, he and a team of researchers conducted hundreds of interviews and surveyed thousands of adolescents and young adults over several years, tracking their spirituality and the factors influencing their religious lives (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 3-4).

Emerging adults are not hostile to religion or spirituality; however, they have increasing apathy toward it as well as increasing self-awareness and

open-mindedness to societal ideas (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, p. 15–16). This apathy leads to religion and spirituality often being forced out of their daily lives and replaced with other, more important, opportunities and responsibilities. Many who grow up in Christian environments find themselves wandering away from the religion of their youth, often in effort to “limit the felt discontinuities between faith and lifestyle” (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, p. 18). David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, categorized Christian emerging adults into three categories: nomads, prodigals, and exiles. Over a four-year study, the Barna Group found that these adults would walk away from the organized church but still consider themselves Christians (nomads), lose their faith and deny being Christians (prodigals), or continue investing in their faith but feel stuck between the church and their culture (exiles) (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2016, p. 9–19).

The reasons for faith wandering are endless and represented only by each emerging adult’s unique story, yet the Barna Group research revealed several common themes among those who wander from their faith. Emerging adults often see the Christian church as overprotective (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2016, p. 95–98). The church’s creation of a Christian sub-culture communicates to these adults that the church is afraid of the world and must protect them from things that are harmful or evil such as media, other religions, culture, or societal norms. They also find Christianity and the church shallow. Some of these adults have shallow faith that cannot stand the test of trial or challenge, and some of these adults have only been given Christian information rather than Christian discipleship (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2016, p. 113–15). Another theme the Barna Group found was the feeling that the church is repressive or exclusive. Emerging adults “feel torn between the false purity of traditionalism and the empty permissiveness of their peers” (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2016, p. 150). They do not embrace a rule-oriented faith in the same way as older generations. Only 33% think that spiritual maturity means trying to follow the rules in the Bible as opposed to 66% of their elders (66+ years old) (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2016, p. 165).

In light of the research showing many emerging adults leaving the traditional Christian church and faith, it is important to note that college is not as detrimental to their spirituality as one may assume. The large majority of college students report that their faith was strengthened during their college years (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, p 21). In fact, those who attend college are less likely to stop church attendance or renounce

their faith (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, p 21) than those who do not attend. The most popular forms of spiritual searching among emerging adults are social in nature, meaning most spiritual activities revolve around groups designed to facilitate spiritual discovery within a social context (Morris, Barnard, Morris, & Williamson, 2010, p. 34).

#### Spiritual Formation on a College Campus

Spiritual formation is often fostered in the Christian college classroom, but spiritual formation must go beyond college programming such as chapel and ministry options (Bender & Self, 2014, p. 42-45). According to Balzer and Reed (2012), a holistic approach to creating an institutional context for spiritual formation must be tied to the hiring and development of faculty as well as the development of specific resources to aid faculty in guiding students in spiritual development. Spiritual development can happen after an institution has “developed relational approaches to education and have hired faculty and staff who are committed to influencing the whole person of the student for the sake of the world” (Bender & Self, 2014, p. 42-45). This philosophy has morphed over the years and now is expressed in Christian colleges through the college community.

Communities are carefully calculated to teach students to relate everything to their Christian faith (Holmes, 1991, p. 93). According to a study done by Dr. Todd Hall surveying students from seventeen colleges belonging to the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), conversations and relationships with faculty, staff, and peers make the biggest impact on students and their spiritual formation (Hall, 2006). These relationships can transform campus culture into one that fosters spiritual formation.

Another study done by Stella Ma from Biola University looked at factors that impact spiritual formation in college students (Ma, 2003, p. 321-339). The study found that residential students experienced greater spiritual formation than commuter students. Working through crises and practicing spiritual disciplines were two of the most significant factors in a student’s spiritual formation. Ma (2003) suggested that college staff invest in campus resources that help students in crisis as well as work toward ways spiritual disciplines can be encouraged whether directly or indirectly. Overall, nonacademic factors were overwhelmingly more significant to a student’s spiritual formation than academic factors.

Residence Life has slowly become a focus to researchers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The need to provide evidence for learning in residence halls propels this research and comes from increased fiscal tension and academic standards within institutions. Overall, students who live in residence halls are more likely to remain in college and graduate than those who do not live in residence halls, but according to Blimling and Schuh (2015) the research that proves this kind of success is indirect, meaning that the residence hall is often the link to relationships, resources, and activities that make a student successful (Blimling & Schuh, 2015, p. 59).

Residence halls create environments where student learning happens. Since most influence happens indirectly, some researchers would say that the “nature of residence hall programming is less important than the fact that it occurs at all and that it initiates and sustains students’ intellectual and interpersonal involvement” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 653). The frequency and nature of interactions and common attitudes, beliefs, and interests may be more influential in development than the content of subject matter.

30 Social groups formed within residence halls also deeply impact student learning. In particular, a roommate can greatly affect a student’s learning. Research has found that one’s happiness is not influenced by his or her roommate and together they have small influence on the other’s mental health, but a roommate can increase a student’s feeling of acceptance and impact his or her academic performance (Blimling & Schuh, 2015, p. 78–79). Value-based decisions (drugs, gambling, smoking, sexual activity, etc.) are also not significantly influenced by roommates. Instead, the social force of a group is the most powerful influencer in student behavior and learning.

Another influencer is a Residence Life professional’s feedback. Since these staff members see students at their best and worst, they have opportunities to encourage growth and development in areas that would otherwise go unnoticed (Blimling & Schuh, 2015, p. 82–84). Research widely agrees that feedback is a necessary learning strategy and can sometimes double the rate of learning in the classroom (Blimling & Schuh, 2015, p. 82–84). The feedback Residence Life staff gives students is both formal and informal, and an integral part to the learning process.

One particular Residence Life model, the Learning Model, embodies the philosophy of most Christian colleges by creating an environment where students can not only contemplate what they are learning in the

classroom but also explore diverse beliefs and ideas of peers, faculty, and staff in order to establish meaning and a mature self. A residence hall director and faculty-in-residence have the opportunity to mentor students in their domain, making these relationships feel natural and comfortable (Sriram & McLevain, 2016, p. 75). This means that in these relationships, especially with faculty and staff, learning happens from and with one another, which is an essential part of a student's personal and professional development. It makes space for students to have constructive conversations about their meaning-making identity, which establishes a platform for their beliefs, attitudes, and practices (Small, 2014, p. 12).

### Methodology

This study took place at a small Christian liberal arts college in the Midwest. This institution was chosen for its highly developed and nationally respected Residence Life program. The sample was focused upon May 2013–2017 graduates who lived in campus housing for at least two semesters. Respondents who met the criteria may be located all over the United States or the world and were contacted over the Internet. This quantitative research study utilized a survey questionnaire to collect data about spirituality, faith, and perceived influences on the respondent's spiritual formation and concluded with basic demographic questions. The survey was sent out in partnership with the campus Alumni Office via email with the intent to receive responses from recent graduates with varying demographics.

The survey consisted of three sections: Christian Spiritual Formation, Residence Life Impact, and basic demographics. The Christian Spiritual Formation section was a grouping of questions that correlated to the first research question. These questions inquired about a respondent's spiritual attitudes, practices, and commitments. The Residence Life Impact section was a grouping of questions correlated to the second research question. The questions in this section asked about a respondent's Residence Life experience and the spiritual formation he or she did or did not perceive to experience.

### Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed that the majority of respondents strongly believe in God, that they are a Christian, and that their Christian faith is important to them. They also are strongly committed to their Christian faith and relationship with God, which influences their daily



life, relationships, and decisions. The responses seem to suggest that their Christian faith and spiritual formation are foundational to the entirety of their lives. Overall, respondents feel strongly about their basic spiritual beliefs and commitments. They are generally not in seasons of questioning their basic spiritual beliefs, and their commitments translate to high participation in spiritual disciplines, specifically prayer, worship, Bible reading, service, and financial giving as seen in Table 1.1. These high percentages of participation are evidences of their strong beliefs and commitments and are consistent with Stella Ma's research that spiritual practices and disciplines are major factors of spiritual formation (Ma, 2003, p. 321-339).

*Table 1.1 Religious or Spiritual Disciplines and Practices Participation*

Religious or Spiritual Disciplines	Percentage of Participation
<i>Prayer</i>	93.5%
<i>Worship</i>	91.1%
<i>Bible Reading</i>	89.9%
<i>Service</i>	82.6%
<i>Financial Giving</i>	82.6%
<i>Bible Study</i>	76.5%
<i>Journaling</i>	61.5%
<i>Silence/Solitude</i>	60.7%

\*N=247

When it comes to respondents' experiences, although their perceptions are still positive, they are not as consistent as they are about their beliefs and commitments. Their responses vary more regarding their experience with God, prayer, joy, contentment, and peace, which suggests that they do not experience their spirituality to the same degree they are committed to their spirituality. This could be for a variety of reasons such as a respondent's theology about how God speaks and manifests himself in his or her life, or that respondents struggle to live and experience God as much as he or she believes in him, although the data do not inform the specific reasons for these patterns.

Analysis of the data regarding Residence Life showed that 76.9% of respondents agreed to varying degrees that Residence Life positively impacted their spiritual formation, which could potentially confirm

Stella Ma’s research that says that resident students experience significant spiritual formation during their college experience. The data clearly showed that the impact of Residence Life is complex and that relationships—not programs, structures, or campus resources—were the most impactful. This finding aligns with the literature that influence happens indirectly, and the “nature of residence hall programming is less important than the fact that it occurs at all and that it initiates and sustains students’ intellectual and interpersonal involvement” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 653).

The data indicated that the closer and more personal a relationship was to a student, the more influential it was on his or her spiritual formation as shown in Table 1.1.

*Table 1.1 Spiritually Influential Relationships within the Resident’s Experience\**

Statement	M/SD	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Slightly Agree (4)	Agree (5)	Strongly Agree (6)	Does Not Apply
Relationships (roommates, suite-mates, friends) on my floor or in my building positively influenced my spiritual formation.	M=5.31 SD=1.01	1.3%	2.2%	1.3%	10.9%	28.4%	55.9%	---
My Resident Assistant(s) (RA) positively influenced my spiritual formation.	M=4.03 SD=1.56	8.5%	10.5%	8.9%	22.7%	22.3%	17.8%	9.3%
My Resident Director(s) (RD) positively influenced my spiritual formation.	M=3.21 SD=1.60	13.4%	18.2%	10.9%	18.2%	8.5%	8.1%	22.7%

\*N=247

For example, 84.3% of respondents agreed that relationships with people they directly lived with influenced their spiritual formation, while only 40.1% of respondents agreed that the RA relationship was influential. Those numbers dropped dramatically when asked about relationships with professional staff such as a Resident Director. Roommates/suite-mates, floor/building friendships, and conversations with peers were the top three important factors to a student's spiritual formation, a finding that is congruent with Dr. Todd Hall's research (2006), which states that conversations and relationships with faculty, staff, and peers make the biggest impact on students and their spiritual formation. These relationships, conversations, and interactions are the key to a student's spiritual formation. It could be concluded that the environment that the RA creates on his or her floor can help or hinder the relationships that residents make, although the data do not directly show this conclusion.

Although Residence Life programs or resources were not as influential or important to respondents as relationships, there were still interesting and significant findings about these aspects of the student experience. The most influential Residence Life factor is the support and resources provided to students who are struggling. Almost 70% of respondents indicated that they had a difficult time during their time in college that necessitated care or support from Residence Life, and of those students, 77% of them agreed that the experience resulted in a positive and spiritually significant experience. Similarly, almost 80% of respondents indicated that campus resources (Counseling Center, Academic Support, Student Health Services, and Chaplain's Office) affected their college experience, and of those respondents 60% of them agreed that their experience with these resources positively impacted their spiritual formation.

These findings support Stella Ma's research and recommendations about student crisis (Ma, 2003, p. 321-339). Ma found that crisis was one of the top factors for spiritual formation in a college student and, as a result, recommended that colleges invest in resources and support for these students in order to support their spiritual formation. The findings of this study suggest that many of these alumni experienced a crisis during college in which they received care and were spiritually impacted as a result.

Those who ranked "Being a Residence Life student leader" as most important (among several Residence Life factors on the survey) agreed more than other respondents that they had a spiritually significant relationship with a Residence Life staff member and that their Graduate

Resident Advisor and Resident Director positively influenced their spiritual formation. Although it is not surprising that staff relationships were positive influences since student leaders work closely with Residence Life staff, the influence is significantly different from those who were not Residence Life student leaders and provides proof that those relationships do contribute to facilitating spiritual formation in a student leader.

#### Recommendations

Residence Life staff needs to consider creating a healthy environment and facilitating community formation as key foundations for encouraging spiritual formation. In light of this study, there are several recommendations for Student Development professionals.

First, build a campus culture of spiritual formation. Many of the following recommendations could be attempted through programming, but in light of the data, it seems like these recommendations need to be integrated into a campus culture instead of being addressed strictly through programming. Programming should be seen as supplemental and reinforcing of an existing campus culture of spiritual formation. Second, focus on strategies and methods that intentionally facilitate healthy relationships among residents in campus housing. Since friendships among roommates, suite-mates, and hall-mates are the most spiritually influential factor of the Residence Life experience, Residence Life staff should focus their energy on creating environments for these relationships to form and flourish in healthy ways. Third, invest in the flow of discipleship from professional staff to student leaders so the student leader is equipped to form a community that is conducive to deep, meaningful friendships and may result in spiritual formation. Residence Life roles support and facilitate healthy community, which breeds friendships that facilitate spiritual formation. Finally, consider strategic ways to increasingly integrate positive role models among students and staff/faculty into the living environment. This could be done through a variety of facilitated relationships such as faculty partners or integrated housing (freshman through seniors living in the same hall or living area).

The findings of this study also prompt recommendations for further study. Studying specific aspects of peer relationships, interactions, and conversations that are found to be spiritually influential would bring further insight to this important factor of Residence Life. A longitudinal study focusing on the specific links between a student's current spiritual formation and his or her spiritual formation while in college would also

provide key links between Residence Life spiritual formation and the lasting impacts of a student's college experience.

#### Limitations

This study contained a few limitations that are noteworthy. Respondents were intentionally tasked with defining spiritual formation for themselves since the survey did not define it for them. Although this was done intentionally in order to give respondents the freedom to assess their experience for what they understood it to be, it also creates potential confusion about what the results of the study mean. "Positive spiritual formation" could mean different things to each respondent, and respondents could strongly agree with one meaning and strongly disagree with another meaning. The varying perceptions of what this term means could have created discrepancies that are not easily articulated or discovered in the data. Additionally, a respondent's spiritual formation would have been impacted by a variety of factors during their time at college. Asking respondents to attribute their spiritual formation to certain factors could be difficult for some, or those attributions could be influenced by factors outside of Residence Life. For example, a student could have had a positive experience on his or her floor and experienced significant spiritual growth, but also had a negative experience in a class or with a professor that impacted his or her experience. Since experience is complex and comprehensive, it could be difficult for respondents to make distinctions, and those distinctions would be impossible for the researcher to notice through this particular study.

Another significant limitation is in the number of respondents. The survey was distributed to 2,735 alumni, but only 9% completed the survey. Although this response rate matched the expectation of the Alumni Office, a higher number of respondents would increase the accuracy of the data reflecting the experiences of a group this large. Those who completed the survey could have had motivation to click on the link and complete it that stemmed from overwhelmingly positive or negative experiences in Residence Life. Gathering a larger number of respondents could better reflect the overall experience of alumni.

#### Conclusion

An emerging adult's spiritual formation is deeply impacted during the college years. The impact on a his or her spiritual formation can come from many avenues, but is deeply impacted by the daily interactions and conversations with peers and friends. On residential college campuses,

these interactions and conversations take place largely in the residence halls, which means that Residence Life has an opportunity to impact student spiritual formation. Student crises and their subsequent need for care is often an opportunity for spiritual formation that results in positive growth. Residence Life student leaders experience the most spiritual formation from mentoring relationships with professional Residence Life staff and also continue to pursue mentoring relationships after graduation. Overall, alumni from this Midwest college continue in their Christian spiritual formation after they graduate. They persist in spiritual beliefs, attitudes, and practices learned during their college experience even after they graduate. They sometimes struggle in those beliefs, but overall press through the challenges even when their experience does not match their beliefs.

The literature revealed that friendships, conversation, and social pressure often impact a student significantly more than structured programming, faculty or staff relationships, or academics (Blimling & Schuh, 2015, p. 78–79). The findings of this study support the literature, confirming past research studies in this area, as well as confirming Stella Ma's (2003) recommendations regarding the importance of student crisis situations. Many of the resources and responses at this Midwest college align with her recommendations and the findings of this study are evidence that the recommendations can be fruitful and effective.

Not only do students find their peer relationships to be spiritually influential, but they also look on them with fondness. Student development professionals need to re-define spiritual formation success as community development and facilitation of healthy relationships. Creating healthy and safe communities in which strong friendships can form among students is doing a substantial portion of the work toward encouraging emerging adult spiritual formation.

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