Authoring an Undivided Self: Predictors of Self-Authorship Among First-Year Students Attending Christian Universities

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Authoring an Undivided Self:
Predictors of Self-Authorship Among First-Year Students Attending Christian Universities

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Abstract

Ample research suggests that self-authorship may serve an important role in helping students develop as whole people. Therefore, the time is ripe for Christian student affairs professionals to further investigate the construct of self-authorship, specifically how it may be shaped in the college context. To that end, the purpose of this study was to identify key factors that influence self-authorship among a sample of first-year students attending a Christian university (N=428). Drawing on the work of Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001), this study utilized hierarchical multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between self-authorship and a set of predictor variables, namely, civic engagement behavior, problem-solving ability, strengths self-efficacy, spirituality, religiosity, and social support. Findings indicate that strengths self-efficacy, civic engagement behavior, and problem-solving ability were significant predictors of self-authorship. Implications for research and practice are outlined and discussed.

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Introduction

"In the undivided self, every major thread of one's life experience is honored, creating a weave of [total] coherence and strength…Such a self, inwardly integrated, is able to make the outward connections on which good [work] depends."

–Parker Palmer, *Courage to Teach*

"Teach me your way, Lord, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name."

–Psalm 86:11 (New International Version)

At the heart of student affairs work lies a deep commitment to helping students develop as whole people. It is not surprising, then, that the phrase "holistic student development" is so widely used among student affairs practitioners—it speaks to the profession's fundamental aim of fostering student growth and maturity among all areas of well-being (social, intellectual, moral, etc.). While promoting students' holistic development is certainly important and valuable work in itself, such work carries even greater meaning in light of our Christian faith. For Christian student affairs professionals, the notion of holistic student development has implications that go beyond nurturing students' overall growth and well-being. This is because, through a Christian lens, helping students develop as whole people means leading them on the path of restoration and reunification with our Creator.

As Scripture reminds us, we bear a divine imperative to pursue wholeness. When God made humanity, He made it in His Image (Genesis 1:27), therefore bestowing upon it the state of being complete and whole. After the Fall, however, humanity was separated from God (Genesis 3:23) and therefore rendered broken and incomplete as a result. Yet, our souls—the "life-giving core of the human self" (Palmer, 2004, p. 2)—never lost the desire to be made complete again. Our souls, therefore, long for wholeness—they long to be reunited with God.

Our Christian faith, thus, compels us to view holistic student development as the process of guiding students toward true, biblical wholeness—toward "reconnect[ing] with the divine likeness afforded to them as a result of being created in God's image" (Ream & Glanzer, 2013, p. 111). By aiding students in their pursuit of wholeness, Christian student affairs professionals help students fulfill their souls' deepest yearning—that is,

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to grow closer to God and ultimately become who He created them to be. One of the goals for Christian student affairs work, then, is to help students align their actions with their innermost values and commitments—to cultivate what Parker Palmer (1997) refers to as the "undivided self." Palmer speaks poignantly to this concept in *Courage to Teach*, stating that in the undivided self, one's external life is wholly congruent with one's internal soul. Such congruity, he asserts, is the foundation for a larger and deeper life (Palmer, 1999).

According to Palmer, by becoming more attuned to our inner condition and dynamics—our inner self, so to speak—we can then go on to make choices that are life-giving for ourselves and others (Palmer, 1997). This notion of attending to one's inner self in order to develop as a whole, undivided person is precisely why the concept of *self-authorship* should be a relevant consideration for both college students and Christian student affairs professionals alike. Defined as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (Baxter Magolda, 2008), self-authorship refers to one's development of a coherent, internal identity (Pizzolato, 2005). As students develop and strengthen this internal identity, they build an internal foundation that provides stability amidst the complex forces they may face—a base camp of convictions that will sustain them through the tempests of contemporary life. In short, by nurturing self-authorship, students learn to develop and exercise their inner voice—thus gaining the capacity to see themselves as authorial beings who may join God in writing the magnificent story of redemption and restoration.

While there is fairly abundant literature highlighting the various benefits associated with self-authorship, far less work has been done to examine what may predict self-authorship itself—much less within a Christian college context. Therefore, the overriding purpose of this study was to understand which factors may predict self-authorship in students attending Christian universities. To that end, this study used hierarchical multiple regression analysis to examine how a set of variables influenced self-authorship among a sample of first-year students attending a Christian university (N=428). Specifically, the author's work was guided by the following research question: *Drawing on the work of Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001), to what extent do spirituality, religiosity, strengths self-efficacy, social support, problem-solving ability, and civic engagement behavior influence self-authorship in first-year students attending Christian universities?*

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Review of Relevant Literature
Self-Authorship

Self-authorship is a topic that has been heavily investigated throughout the scholarly literature on college student development. The concept of self-authorship was first introduced by Robert Kegan (1994), who used it to describe the "developmental shift from reliance on external to internal sources of meaning-making" (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Baxter Magolda (2001; 2004) later built upon this concept, applying it specifically to the context of college student development. In brief, self-authorship is defined as "the internal capacity to define one's belief system, identity, and relationships" (Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 69) and highlights the interconnectivity between cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development. These three areas of development—cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal—thus constitute the different dimensions, or domains, among which self-authorship is cultivated (Baxter Magolda, 2007).

In recent years, the relationship between self-authorship and college student well-being has become a focus of empirical inquiry. For instance, in her dissertation research, Tetley (2010) discovered that self-authorship correlated with both hope and life meaning among a sample of sophomore college students. Additionally, in a recent study by Bowman, Linley, and Weaver (2020), self-authorship was found to significantly predict various psychological well-being and leadership outcomes. Their findings corroborate the work of other scholars; for instance, recent studies have shown that self-authorship may predict college students' leadership capacity (Eriksen, 2009; Collay & Cooper, 2008) as well their ability to cope (Pizzolato, 2004) and seek help (Surmitis, 2014).

Another subset in the literature on self-authorship and college student well-being focuses on the cognitive gains that students may derive from developing self-authorship. For instance, several researchers contend that a strong relationship exists between self-authorship and intellectual growth (Meszaros, 2007). Additionally, self-authorship has been found to correlate with higher levels of student metacognition (King & Siddiqui, 2011) as well as academic performance (Strayhorn, 2014). Finally, self-authorship may also be linked with greater decision-making abilities among college students (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005).

Taken together, these findings suggest that developing self-authorship may enable college students to lead more developed, well-adjusted lives. However, while recent studies have provided greater insight into

the relationship between self-authorship and personal well-being, a gap exists in terms of our knowledge on which factors may predict self-authorship itself. Fortunately, a small cadre of researchers has begun to take steps toward filling this critical gap in the literature. For example, some researchers have examined how certain demographics may impact students' self-authorship development (Torres & Hernandez, 2007; DeLay, 2019). Other scholars have focused on how certain environmental aspects (Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006; Baxter Magolda, 1999) and experiences (Dugas, Geosling, & Shelton, 2019; Barber & King, 2014; Pizzolato et al., 2012) may influence college students' self-authorship development within the college context.

While studies such as these represent a collective attempt to better understand the nature of self-authorship, more work needs to be done. Broadly speaking, self-authorship remains a "complex, multidimensional construct that is not well understood by researchers or practitioners" (Tetley, 2010, p. 303). Therefore, in order to better understand self-authorship—particularly how it may be shaped during the college years—additional research is needed.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was informed by the work of Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001). Kegan (1994) first articulated three dimensions of self-authorship: 1) Interpersonal, 2) Intrapersonal, and 3) Cognitive. A visual diagram of these three domains is presented in Figure 1. Baxter Magolda (2001; 2004) later expanded on these three dimensions, specifically foregrounding them in the context of college student development.

According to Baxter Magolda (2004), the interpersonal domain of self-authorship refers to maturity in one's relationships and interpersonal interactions—it addresses the question of *how do I relate to others*? In this study, interpersonal variables included perceived social support and civic engagement behaviors. Together, these two variables provide a closer look at how students relate to two important groups within their social network: their immediate social circle and members of their local community. Perceived social support indicates to what extent students believe they can rely upon their immediate social group (peers, family, etc.)—an element that may be particularly relevant toward cultivating self-authorship. As Palmer (2004) notes, a strong community "helps people develop a sense of true self, for only in community can the self

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exercise and fulfill its nature: giving and taking, listening and speaking, being and doing" (p. 39). In a similar vein, civic engagement behavior was included to measure the extent to which students are actively involved in their local communities. Self-authorship has been linked with civic identity in the scholarly literature, suggesting that service to one's community may lead to a greater sense of self (Iverson & James, 2013).

The intrapersonal domain, on the other hand, refers to one's level of self-knowledge—it addresses the question of *who am I*? For this study, intrapersonal variables included strengths self-efficacy, religiosity, and spirituality. Strengths self-efficacy was used to assess to what extent students believe they can effectively apply their personal strengths in various contexts. Developing efficacy in one's strengths requires understanding one's personal strengths to begin with—therefore, it is a construct closely tied with self-knowledge. Additionally, the links between spirituality, faith development, and self-authorship are firmly established in the literature (Bryant, 2011; Nolan-Areñez & Ludvik, 2018; Frieden, Baker, & Mart, 2014). Therefore, religiosity and spirituality were included to examine whether the strength of one's religious and or spiritual identification had any impact on one's level of self-authorship.

Finally, the cognitive domain refers to one's ability to synthesize, apply, and create new knowledge—it addresses the question of *how do I know*? As Baxter Magolda and King (2004) note, one's cognitive development can be assessed using a variety of constructs (creativity, decision-making ability, etc.). However, these authors especially stress the importance of a self-authored person's ability to problem solve. Therefore, this study included problem-solving ability as a cognitive variable.

Figure 1
A visual diagram representing the three domains of self-authorship
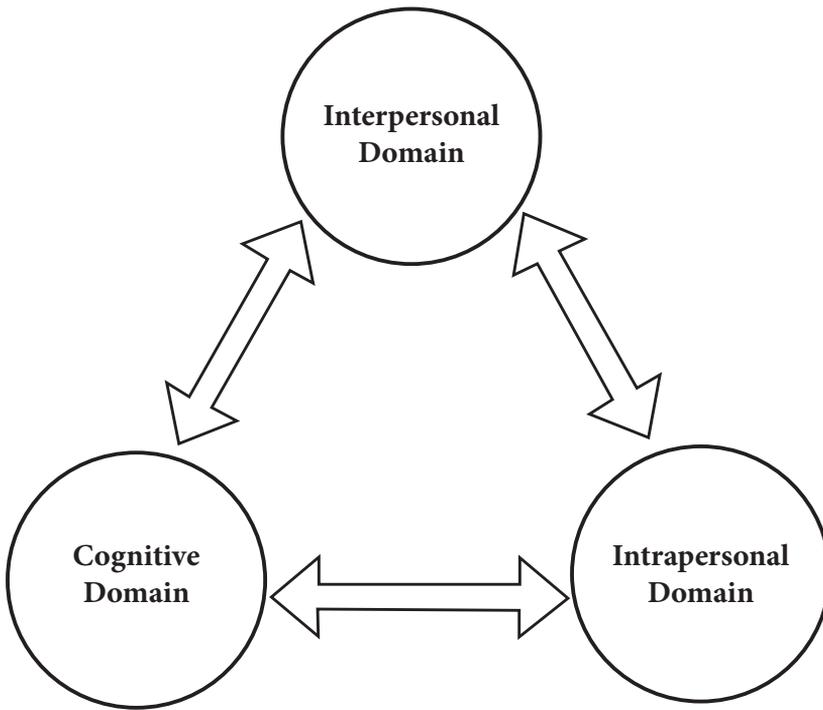
Materials and Methods

Instruments

For each of the following instruments, when a measure used a Likert-type response format of other than six alternatives, the scales were adapted to use a common 6-point format.

Self-Authorship

An adapted version of Pizzolato's (2007) Self-Authorship Scale (SAS, four items) was administered to assess participants' self-authorship. Possible Likert-type responses to each item range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), with a higher score representing a higher level of self-authorship. Sample items include "I am able to break down real-life problems into smaller parts" and "When I set a goal for myself, I come up with a specific plan of how I am going to achieve it." The SAS has previously demonstrated excellent psychometric properties and is widely-used in self-authorship research (Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006). In this

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study, this scale had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .81 and therefore demonstrated sufficient reliability.

Social Support

Participants' perceived social support was measured using the twelve-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). Sample items include "My friends really try to help me" and "I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me." In this study, this scale demonstrated sufficient reliability with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .90.

Civic Engagement Behavior

Participants' level of civic engagement behavior was assessed using the six-item behavior subscale from Doolittle & Faul's (2013) Civic Engagement Scale (CES). Sample items include "I am committed to serve in my community" and "I believe it is important to volunteer." In this study, the scale had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .90 and therefore demonstrated sufficient reliability.

Strengths Self-Efficacy

Strengths self-efficacy was measured using an adapted version of the eleven-item Strengths Self-Efficacy Scale (SSES; Tsai et al., 2014). The scale's items included language that was adapted to fit the population of interest: first-year college students. Sample items include "How confident are you in your ability to use your strengths to help you achieve your goals in life?" and "How confident are you in your ability to apply your strengths at school?" This scale demonstrated sufficient reliability with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .95.

Spirituality

Participants' spirituality was measured using an adapted version of the Spiritual Identification sub-scale from the College Students Beliefs and Values (CSBV; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011) survey. This scale contained four Likert-type response items that each measure participants' spiritual beliefs and attitudes. Sample items include "I feel a sense of connection with a Higher Power that transcends my personal self" and "I consider myself a spiritual person." In this study, this scale had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .90 and therefore demonstrated sufficient reliability.

Religiosity

Similar to spirituality, participants' religiosity was assessed using an adapted version of the Religious Identification sub-scale from the College Students Beliefs and Values (CSBV; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011) survey. This scale contained five Likert-type response items that measure

participants' religious beliefs and attitudes. Sample items include "My religious beliefs have helped me develop my identity" and "I consider myself a religious person." In this study, this scale had a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .93 and therefore demonstrated sufficient reliability.

Problem-Solving Ability

Problem-solving ability was assessed using the ten-item Internality subscale in the Problem Solving Inventory (PSI; Heppner & Petersen, 1982). In previous research, the PSI has been shown to adequate psychometric properties (Kourmousi et al., 2016; Sahin, Sahin, & Heppner, 1993). Sample items include "I trust my ability to solve new and difficult problems" and "Given enough time and effort, I believe I can solve most problems that confront me." In the present study, this scale demonstrated sufficient reliability with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .76.

Participants

Participants included 428 first-year, undergraduate students at a midsized, Christian university in the Southwestern United States. Of the participants, 68.5% identified as female ($n = 293$) and 31.5% identified as male ($n = 135$). Participants reported a mean age of 18.5, and 52.3% self-identified as White ($n = 224$), 17.6% as Hispanic ($n = 75$), 16.5% as African American ($n = 66$), 10.8% as Two or More Races ($n = 46$), and 2.1% as Asian ($n = 9$). The majority of participants indicated a declared major (93%; $n = 398$). These demographics generally mirror those of the institution at which data were collected.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through a First-Year Seminar pool and were sent an anonymous survey link. Participants were not compensated nor offered any incentive to complete the survey. Four hundred seventy students initially completed the survey, resulting in an overall response rate of 52%. Of the 470 participants who completed the online survey, 428 provided usable data that were included in the study's analysis.

Once the data were determined to meet the four assumptions of normality (Field, 2009), they were evaluated using hierarchical multiple regression analysis in accordance with Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda's (2001) tripartite framework of self-authorship. In the hierarchical multiple regression procedure, self-authorship served as the dependent, or outcome, variable, and predictor variables were entered within four successive steps or "blocks." Demographic or input characteristics were entered first, for which race was dummy coded (0 = White, 1 = Person of

Color) along with gender (0 = Female, 1 = Male) and religious affiliation (0 = Christian, 1 = Non-Christian).

Demographic variables were entered first so that they would be controlled for each successive block. The blocks were then entered in order of their hypothesized magnitude of influence on self-authorship; in other words, because the author hypothesized that interpersonal variables would have the greatest influence on self-authorship, this block was entered before the blocks containing intrapersonal and cognitive variables, respectively. The sequence of regression analysis for the current study thus included:

- **(Block 1) Student demographic characteristics:** age, gender, and religious affiliation;
- **(Block 2) Interpersonal domain:** social support and civic engagement behavior;
- **(Block 3) Intrapersonal domain:** strengths self-efficacy, spirituality, and religiosity;
- **(Block 4) Cognitive domain:** problem-solving ability

The increase in R^2 (ΔR^2) was computed to determine the relative contributions of each set of variables. Additionally, standardized coefficients (β) and unstandardized coefficients (B) were computed to compare the relative influence of each variable in the model. Analysis was performed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 27.0 program.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

As shown in Table 1, each of the study's predictor variables significantly correlated with self-authorship. The variables that had the largest correlations with self-authorship were problem-solving ability ($r = .62$, $p < .01$) strengths self-efficacy ($r = .55$, $p < .01$), and civic engagement ($r = .43$, $p < .01$).

Table 1

Intercorrelations and descriptive statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean	SD
1. Self Authorship	1.00							4.85	0.76
2. Social Support	0.30	1.00						5.32	0.76
3. Civic Engagement	0.43	0.36	1.00					4.87	0.87
4. Strengths SE	0.55	0.4	0.34	1.00				5.05	0.9
5. Spirituality	0.19	0.3	0.41	0.18	1.00			4.75	1.11
6. Religiosity	0.18	0.27	0.4	0.19	0.89	1.00		4.49	1.13
7. Problem-Solving	0.62	0.33	0.44	0.66	0.24	0.22	1.00	4.97	0.83

Note. Strengths SE = Strengths Self-Efficacy. Civic Engagement = Civic Engagement Behavior, and Problem-Solving = Problem-Solving Ability.
[a] $N = 428$
*All correlations significant at the $p < .01$ level

Multiple Regression Results

As shown in Table 2, regression results indicate that the overall model significantly predicted self-authorship, $R^2 = .45$ (adj. $R^2 = .43$), $F(9, 394) = 11.61$, $p < .001$. In other words, this model accounts for 45% of the variance in self-authorship and is thus considered to have a large effect size (Sriram, 2013). Regression results also indicate that three of

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the predictor variables significantly contributed to the overall model: strengths self-efficacy, civic engagement behavior, and problem-solving ability. In terms of magnitude, problem-solving ability had the largest influence ($\beta=.38$), followed by strengths self-efficacy ($\beta=.23$) and civic engagement ($\beta=.19$).

After controlling for demographic variables, variables related to the interpersonal development (Block Two) proved to yield the largest change in the model's overall effect size, followed by variables related to intrapersonal development (Block Three). Somewhat surprisingly, in the overall model, gender (dummy coded as 0 = Female, 1 = Male) and spirituality each had a *negative* individual effect size. These findings suggest that identifying as male and or reporting a higher level of spirituality may negatively influence a participant's level of self-authorship when controlling for the influence of the model's other variables.

Table 2

Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting participants' self-authorship

Variable	Block One: Demographics			Block Two: Interpersonal Domain			Block Three: Intrapersonal Domain			Block Four: Cognitive Domain		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Gender	-0.23	0.08	-0.14**	-0.1	0.08	-0.06	-0.11	0.07	-0.07	-0.08	0.06	-0.05
Race/Ethnicity	.00	0.08	.00	0.12	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.06	0.06	0.08	0.06	0.05
Religious Affiliation	-0.06	0.11	-0.03	0.02	0.10	0.01	0.12	0.10	0.05	0.11	0.09	0.05
Social Support				0.17	0.05	0.16***	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.02
Civic Engagement				0.33	0.04	0.38***	0.28	0.04	0.27***	0.16	0.04	0.19***
Strengths SE							0.38	0.04	0.45***	0.19	0.04	0.23***
Spirituality							-0.01	0.05	-0.02	-0.03	0.04	-0.04
Religiosity							0.02	0.05	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.04
Problem Solving										0.35	0.05	0.38***
R²	0.02			0.22			0.38			0.45		
ΔR²	0.02			0.20			0.16			0.08		

Note. Strengths SE = Strengths Self-Efficacy. Civic Engagement = Civic Engagement Behavior, and Problem-Solving = Problem-Solving Ability.
[a] $N = 428$
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

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Discussion

Implications for Future Research

Results from this study offer several research directions to be explored. Firstly, continuing to empirically understand the three domains of self-authorship, as outlined by the work of Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001), is a fruitful venue for future research. In future studies, investigators should continue to explore these three domains, focusing on variables that may be directly impacted during the college experience. For instance, when considering the interpersonal domain, it might be beneficial for future researchers to measure how self-authorship may be influenced by interpersonal relationships that students develop during college (e.g., relationships with college faculty and student affairs staff).

Secondly, because the data collected for this study were cross-sectional, causal relationships could not be determined. Therefore, future research should examine the relation of the study's variables longitudinally so that causal relations can be established. For instance, conducting a longitudinal cohort study on a sample of college students during which data are collected at multiple timepoints would allow student affairs researchers to trace the development of students' self-authorship during their college years.

Implications for Practitioners

Findings from this study can also be brought into the fold of Christian student affairs practice. Firstly, one of the most striking findings from this study is the significant influence that intrapersonal development—specifically, strengths self-efficacy—has on first-year college students' self-authorship. This finding indicates that student affairs administrators who aim to promote self-authorship among students should be intentional about creating on-campus opportunities and spaces that allow for students to learn more about their personal gifts and strengths, as well as gain confidence in applying those strengths in various contexts. Measures such as the Clifton Strengths for Students (formerly StrengthsQuest; Gallup, 2017) and the Enneagram personality typing tool can be useful in assisting student affairs professionals in applying this strengths-based approach to self-authorship development. Assessments such as these serve the dual purpose of assisting students in identifying their strengths and providing a common campus framework to understand and apply these strengths.

Secondly, this study brings to light the predictive relationship between students' civic engagement and self-authorship. Therefore, Christian student affairs professionals who aim to help students develop greater self-authorship may find it beneficial to create opportunities for students to become more engaged in civic service. Examples of these types of opportunities include implementing on-campus community service projects, integrating volunteer work into student leadership roles and requirements, and encouraging participation in local governance.

Finally, problem-solving ability was also found to be a significant predictor of self-authorship among the study's sample. Therefore, faculty and student affairs professionals who wish to help students foster greater self-authorship should consider utilizing techniques and practices that enable students to exercise problem-solving skills such as identifying specific problems and brainstorming solutions. Examples of such techniques may include case study analysis (Yoo & Park, 2014), cooperation learning (Dees, 1991), and project-based learning (Chiang & Lee, 2016).

Limitations

The results of this study need to be taken with a number of limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted solely of students from a single university and was mostly white and female. It is therefore critical that future research on self-authorship draws from a more diverse pool of individuals to both establish the generalizability of these findings and to better understand the interplay between sociodemographic characteristics and self-authorship. Secondly, the cross-sectional data collected in this study make it impossible to establish causal relationships between the study's constructs.

Conclusion

Although recent scholarship has shed new light on the link between self-authorship and college student well-being, few studies have investigated which factors influence or predict self-authorship itself—much less in a Christian college context. This study, therefore, contributes to the scholarly literature on Christian student affairs by highlighting the relevance of certain factors in predicting self-authorship in a sample of 428 first-year undergraduate students. Guided by the work of Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001), findings from this study highlight the significant influence that students' strengths self-efficacy, civic engagement behavior, and problem-solving ability have on self-authorship. This study thus provides a launching pad for future research on

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self-authorship and its potential role within the domain of Christian student affairs practice.

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