

SUPPORTING UNDERGRADUATE SPIRITUALITY: COLLEGE-RELATED  
FACTORS EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN STUDENTS PERCEIVE AS AFFECTING  
THEIR WORKING THROUGH SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE WHILE ATTENDING A  
PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

By

Steven Christopher Argue

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education–Doctor of Philosophy

2015

## ABSTRACT

### SUPPORTING UNDERGRADUATE SPIRITUALITY: COLLEGE-RELATED FACTORS EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN STUDENTS PERCEIVE AS AFFECTING THEIR WORKING THROUGH SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE WHILE ATTENDING A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

By

Steven Christopher Argue

Undergraduate experiences of spiritual struggle on campus are common and indeed necessary for personal spiritual development and holistic maturity, but they are often unseen or misunderstood by universities, leading to a lack of their support and even detrimental effects on the students; experiencing that struggle. The purpose of this study is to understand Evangelical Christian undergraduates' descriptions of factors that contribute to their spiritual struggle and the resources they accessed to work through that struggle. Understanding what these students see as supportive resources, relationships, and experiences available to help them work through spiritual struggle can offer additional insights to public colleges and universities they can apply to support students' spiritual and holistic development. Thirty-nine interviews were conducted with twenty undergraduates in a qualitative study at a major Midwestern university. While students' descriptions of the factors that contributed to their spiritual struggles and the resources they accessed to work through those struggles remained consistent with previous literature descriptions, this study extends the research on undergraduate spiritual struggle by focusing on Evangelical Christian undergraduates; further classifying students' spiritual struggle descriptions by adopting Parks' (2000) spiritual development framework; and introducing a separating-integrating continuum to describe students' views of their campus and how these may influence the kinds of spiritual struggles they

encounter and the resources they will access to work through that struggle. By providing richer descriptions of Evangelical undergraduate spiritual struggles, public universities will be more aware and better prepared to support these students as they work through their spiritual struggle experiences.

Copyright by  
STEVEN CHRISTOPHER ARGUE  
2015

I dedicate this dissertation to Jen—your love perpetually gives me courage and hope; and to Kara, Elise, and Lauren—my three most incredible inspirations. I love you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr. Ann Austin, you have made me a better thinker, writer, and person. Your examples of academic scholarship and compassionate friendship have shaped me as a scholar, husband, and father. Dr. John Dirkx, I never heard any other professor speak of the “the dark night of the soul” in learning. When you shared this view with me, I knew what I needed to pursue. Dr. Matt Wawrzynski, your concern for students and your relentless questions forced me to narrow my interests and channel my idealism, and saved me. Dr. Cary Roseth, my experiences in your classes always reminded me that learning’s best motivator is love. Thank you all.

To countless family and friends who took the time to ask me about this project, your love and interest kept this extrovert inspired through the solitary hours of writing—thank you Mom and Dad, Pat and Ken, Dave and Linda, and Lisk. Also, thank you Chris, who celebrated my entrance into the doctoral program and would undoubtedly celebrate my completion if cancer had not taken you. To my colleagues in both religious and academic contexts, thank you for encouraging me to bridge and embody both remarkable worlds.

Finally, to the students who shared their lives with me for this study. My hope was to give voice to your stories. This was only possible because you risked sharing your spiritual journeys with me. I am deeply inspired by your honest and transparent sharing that invited me into the sacred spaces of your lives. Thank you for taking these risks. Always remember that your voices and your journeys do matter very much.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |      |
|--|------|
| LIST OF TABLES .....   | xiii |
| LIST OF FIGURES .....  | xiv  |
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....  | 1    |
| Statement of Problem and Its Rationale .....                             | 1    |
| Research Questions.....  | 6    |
| CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....                                       | 8    |
| Introduction .....   | 8    |
| Terminology and Definitions.....   | 8    |
| Undergraduate .....  | 9    |
| Emerging Adulthood.....  | 9    |
| The Terms “Religious” and “Spiritual” .....                              | 10   |
| Religious .....  | 11   |
| Spiritual.....   | 12   |
| The Relationship Between the Religious and the Spiritual.....            | 14   |
| Spiritual Development .....  | 15   |
| Spiritual Struggle .....   | 18   |
| Emerging Adult Spiritual Development .....                               | 20   |
| Undergraduates Bring their Spirituality to Campus .....                  | 22   |
| Undergraduate Spiritual Lives a “Blind Spot” and “Hidden” on Campus..... | 25   |
| The blind spot .....   | 25   |
| Hidden lives .....   | 26   |
| Varied Descriptions of Undergraduate Spirituality.....                   | 27   |
| Evangelical Undergraduates.....  | 27   |
| Undergraduate Spiritual Struggle .....                                   | 29   |
| General Observations Regarding Spiritual Struggle .....                  | 30   |
| Spiritual Struggle As Knowing, Dependence, and Community.....            | 30   |
| Spiritual struggle in the form of knowing.....                           | 31   |
| Spiritual struggle in the form of dependence.....                        | 31   |
| Spiritual struggle in the form of community.....                         | 32   |
| Spiritual Struggle and College-Related Support .....                     | 33   |
| Gaps in the Literature on Undergraduate Spiritual Struggle .....         | 33   |
| CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....   | 38   |
| Introduction .....   | 38   |
| Research Question .....  | 38   |
| The Research Paradigm.....   | 39   |
| Phenomenography.....   | 41   |
| Critical Realism.....  | 42   |
| Critical Realism and Phenomenography .....                               | 44   |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Research and the critical realist perspective .....                | 45 |
| The phenomenographic method.....                                   | 46 |
| A Conceptual Framework Drawn from the Literature .....             | 46 |
| The form of Knowing.....   | 49 |
| The form of Dependence.....  | 49 |
| The form of Community .....  | 50 |
| Spiritual Development and Spiritual Struggle .....                 | 50 |
| Study Participant Selection.....                                   | 52 |
| Upperclassmen .....  | 52 |
| Evangelical Christian Undergraduates .....                         | 53 |
| Study Site Selection.....  | 54 |
| Data Collection .....  | 55 |
| Reflective Memo and Lay Summary .....                              | 56 |
| Connecting With Campus Religious Group and Church Leaders.....     | 57 |
| Interview Protocol .....   | 59 |
| The Interviews.....  | 60 |
| Data Analysis.....   | 60 |
| Transcription and Coding.....                                      | 61 |
| Validity.....  | 62 |
| Full Consideration of Human Subjects .....                         | 63 |
| Participant Sample .....   | 64 |
| Student Backgrounds and Campus Involvement.....                    | 68 |
| Family Background and Its Influence .....                          | 68 |
| Parents and home-life elements .....                               | 68 |
| Church involvement.....  | 69 |
| Advice received for attending a public university .....            | 70 |
| Campus Involvement .....   | 71 |
| Campus Religious Group (CRG) involvement.....                      | 72 |
| Church involvement.....  | 72 |
| Involvement in non-religious groups.....                           | 72 |
| Summary of Student Backgrounds and Their Campus Involvement .....  | 73 |
| CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .....  | 75 |
| Introduction .....   | 75 |
| Examples of Struggle that are Uniquely Spiritual .....             | 75 |
| Spiritual Struggle Examples.....                                   | 76 |
| Non-Spiritual Struggle Examples .....                              | 78 |
| On-Campus and Off-Campus Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle..... | 81 |
| On-Campus Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle .....               | 81 |
| Educational and classroom experiences.....                         | 81 |
| Faith and science.....   | 82 |
| Accepting and engaging others.....                                 | 83 |
| Spirituality versus academic studies .....                         | 83 |
| Finding friends and connecting relationally .....                  | 84 |
| Dating, sex, and romantic relationships.....                       | 85 |
| Philosophical/theological topics .....                             | 85 |



|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Intellectual topics .....   | 86  |
| Other worldviews .....  | 86  |
| Substance abuse or destructive behaviors .....  | 87  |
| Assault .....   | 87  |
| Campus religious groups .....   | 88  |
| Women, faith, gender, and feminism .....  | 88  |
| Off-Campus Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle .....   | 89  |
| Family death/illness .....  | 89  |
| Going home .....  | 89  |
| Assault .....   | 90  |
| Summary of On-Campus and Off-Campus Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle .....                        | 90  |
| Resources Named Relevant to Undergraduate Spiritual Struggles .....                                   | 91  |
| On-Campus Resources Helping With Spiritual Struggle .....   | 91  |
| Friends on campus .....   | 91  |
| Classmate friends .....   | 91  |
| CRG friends .....   | 92  |
| Roommate friends .....  | 93  |
| Friendship summary .....  | 93  |
| CRGs and CRG leaders/mentors .....  | 93  |
| Faculty and class resources .....   | 94  |
| Summary of on-campus resources .....  | 95  |
| Off-Campus Resources Helping With Spiritual Struggle .....  | 96  |
| On their own .....  | 96  |
| Parents/family .....  | 96  |
| Counselors/therapists .....   | 97  |
| Church .....  | 97  |
| Summary of off-campus resources .....   | 98  |
| Summary of Resources for Spiritual Struggle Named by Undergraduates .....                             | 98  |
| Spiritual Struggle within Spiritual Development .....   | 98  |
| Spiritual Struggle within the Form of Community .....   | 99  |
| Separating struggle .....   | 99  |
| Seeking struggle .....  | 100 |
| Contributing struggle .....   | 101 |
| Spiritual Struggle within the Form of Dependence .....  | 102 |
| Negative feelings .....   | 103 |
| Positive feelings .....   | 103 |
| Spiritual Struggle within the Form of Knowing .....   | 104 |
| Doubting struggle .....   | 105 |
| Adjusting struggle .....  | 106 |
| Integrating struggle .....  | 107 |
| Summary of Students' Spiritual Struggle within Spiritual Development .....                            | 109 |
| Student Spiritual Struggle and Their Perceptions within the Separating-Integrating<br>Continuum ..... | 111 |
| The Separating Perspective .....  | 111 |
| College climate .....   | 112 |
| Interacting with "others" .....   | 112 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Spirituality and education .....   | 113 |
| Reflections on the interview experience .....  | 114 |
| The Integrating Perspective.....   | 115 |
| College climate .....  | 115 |
| Interacting with “others” .....  | 116 |
| Spirituality and education .....   | 116 |
| Reflections on the interview experience .....  | 118 |
| Summary of Students Perceptions along the Separating-Integrating Continuum....   | 119 |
| Undergraduates’ Perceived Purpose, Expectations, and Recommendations<br>in Light of the Separating-Integrating Continuum ..... | 120 |
| Undergraduate Descriptions of Purpose.....   | 120 |
| Purpose expressed as a separating perspective .....  | 120 |
| Purpose expressed as an integrating perspective. ....  | 121 |
| Purpose expressed between separating and integrating perspectives .....  | 122 |
| Undergraduates’ Expectations and Recommendations for Higher Education .....  | 122 |
| Freshmen expectations and advice for future freshmen .....   | 123 |
| Recommendations for faculty .....  | 125 |
| Be approachable and accessible.....  | 126 |
| Be enthusiastic, inspiring, creative, and organized.....   | 126 |
| Be able to connect material to real life and personal ideas.....   | 127 |
| Smaller, discussion- oriented, input- inviting classrooms matter .....   | 127 |
| Faculty do not need to talk about spirituality to attend to spirituality .....   | 128 |
| Undergraduates’ impressions of campus religious groups (CRGs) .....  | 129 |
| CRGs and the university have a legitimate connection .....   | 129 |
| Reasons that students join CRGs .....  | 130 |
| CRGs support of higher education.....  | 131 |
| CRG theology and outreach.....   | 132 |
| CRGs and gender .....  | 133 |
| Summary of undergraduate expectations and recommendations.....   | 133 |
| Summary of Spiritual Struggle within Spiritual Development .....   | 134 |
| CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....   | 135 |
| Overview of Study.....   | 135 |
| Problem and Rationale .....  | 135 |
| Research Questions .....   | 135 |
| Key Literature .....   | 136 |
| Spiritual development .....  | 136 |
| Spiritual development and emerging adults.....   | 137 |
| Spiritual development and undergraduates .....   | 137 |
| Undergraduate spiritual struggle.....  | 138 |
| Evangelical undergraduates and spiritual struggle .....  | 138 |
| Gaps in the literature on undergraduate spiritual struggle .....   | 139 |
| Design Summary .....   | 139 |
| Summary of Key Findings.....   | 141 |
| Student-Described Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle.....  | 141 |
| Student-Described Resources for Addressing Spiritual Struggle .....  | 142 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Spiritual Struggle within the Realm of Spiritual Development .....                 | 142 |
| The Separating-Integrating Continuum and Student Perspectives.....                 | 144 |
| Students espousing a separating perspective .....                                  | 144 |
| Students espousing an integrating perspective .....                                | 145 |
| Discussion of the Results.....   | 146 |
| Religious Tradition Affects Evangelical Undergraduates' Spiritual Struggle .....   | 146 |
| Student-described On-Campus and Off-Campus Factors of Spiritual Struggle .....     | 148 |
| Student-described factors affecting spiritual struggle.....                        | 149 |
| Student-described resources for addressing spiritual struggle.....                 | 151 |
| Student Descriptions of Spiritual Struggle will Vary per Spiritual Development     |     |
| Forms and Maturity.....  | 152 |
| Spiritual struggle is experienced relationally.....                                | 152 |
| Spiritual struggle is experienced emotionally.....                                 | 153 |
| Spiritual struggle is experienced intellectually .....                             | 154 |
| Student Perspectives Affect How They View Spiritual Struggle Factors.....          | 155 |
| Students' separating-integrating perspectives affect their views of college .....  | 156 |
| Students' separating-integrating perspectives affect their relationships           |     |
| with Campus Religious Groups (CRGs).....   | 157 |
| Additional Questions and Observations.....   | 158 |
| Can students change from a separating to an integrating perspective? .....         | 158 |
| What is the role of CRGs on campus? .....  | 159 |
| If the campus is "hostile," why do Evangelical students attend public              |     |
| universities? .....  | 160 |
| What is the relationship between spiritual struggle and a major of study? .....    | 160 |
| Further Considerations .....   | 161 |
| Public University Considerations.....  | 161 |
| Faculty and Classroom Considerations.....  | 162 |
| CRG Considerations.....  | 163 |
| Parent Considerations.....   | 163 |
| Student Considerations.....  | 165 |
| Struggle is normal .....   | 165 |
| Students are not alone .....   | 165 |
| Part of working through spiritual struggle is seeking new resources .....          | 166 |
| Leave church, but find community .....   | 166 |
| Find ways to reflect on your spirituality .....                                    | 167 |
| Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research .....                          | 167 |
| Concluding Remarks .....   | 171 |
| APPENDICES .....   | 173 |
| Appendix A: Researcher Identity Memo.....  | 174 |
| Appendix B: Reflective Memo.....   | 177 |
| Appendix C: Lay Summary .....  | 180 |
| Appendix D: Interview Protocol.....  | 182 |
| Appendix E: Student Descriptions of Their Personal Purposes within the Separating- |     |
| Integrating Continuum .....  | 184 |
| REFERENCES .....   | 185 |



## LIST OF TABLES

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Table 1. Participant Sample Characteristics .....                                 | 65  |
| Table 2. Participating Students' Structured,<br>Non-Academic Involvement .....    | 67  |
| Table 3. Kinds of Struggle Described within the Form of Community.....            | 102 |
| Table 4. Kinds of Struggle Described within the Form of Dependence .....          | 103 |
| Table 5. Kinds of Struggle Described within the Form of Knowing.....              | 108 |
| Table 6. Student Struggle Descriptions within Spiritual<br>Development Forms..... | 110 |
| Table 7. Student Places on the Separating-Integrating Continuum .....             | 119 |
| Table 8. Literature Comparisons for Student Descriptions of Struggle.....         | 151 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Figure 1. Spiritual development and spiritual struggle .....          | 48 |
| Figure 2. Spiritual development and kinds of spiritual struggle ..... | 51 |

## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Statement of Problem and Its Rationale**

Significant work in the mid-1990's by Barr & Tagg (1995), Marsden (1994), and Eck (1993) arguably signaled, in concert, a renewed interest and focused research effort for understanding the religious and spiritual lives of undergraduates. Subsequent research projects pertaining to the religious and spiritual lives of undergraduates then sought to extend learner-centered pedagogical implications, ensure more holistic (vs. fragmented) student development, and understand the plurality of religious and spiritual beliefs that students were bringing to campuses. Educators have since explored this topic further in an ongoing quest to better prepare students for their learning and meaning-making, holistic development, and global citizenship.

Some educators have argued that studying the spiritual perspectives of undergraduates offers yet another useful way to achieve better understanding and encourage the development of the whole student during this crucial time in a young person's life (Astin & Astin, 2003; Astin et al., 2003; Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Fowler, 1995; Lindholm & Astin, 2008; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010; Rue, 1985; Tisdell, 2003). This holistic development takes into account "exterior" behavior lives of students and their "interior" inner lives, both of which relate to their personal "values, spirituality, identity, purpose, and meaning" (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006, p. 2). Educators further nurture holistic development helpfully when they acknowledge undergraduates as complex humans who embody many different and complex layers of meaning and work further to

understand students' multiple and integrated perspectives to include race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, religion, and spirituality (Astin, 2004; Braskamp et al., 2006; Chickering et al., 2006; Dirkx, 1997; Haynes, 2006; Manning, 2001; Palmer, 1998).

While still considerably diverse, a majority of undergraduates do report that they value religious and spiritual perspectives and believe in God, a Higher Power, or a Life Force, thus raising important questions for those in higher education to consider what such beliefs mean for their students' educational experiences (Astin & Astin, 2003; Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Smith & Snell, 2009). Additionally, students for whom spirituality is important want their colleges to help them integrate their spirituality into their actual ongoing educational experiences (Astin, 2004; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010; Astin et al., 2003; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000; Lindholm, 2007; Tisdell, 2003).

Spiritual development, which is part of more general holistic development, attempts to capture this integration, but it has yet to be fully understood by educators. Supporting students' spiritual development appears to be especially crucial during times of spiritual struggle. Spiritual struggle is common and also often necessary. Fowler (1981) described spiritual struggle as the space between epistemological frames/frameworks that is associated with suffering, doubt, learning, and despair. Parks (2000) offered the view that struggle often takes one by surprise, launching a young person into a key time of searching. Hill & Pargament (2003) and Raper (2001) suggested that this struggle represents pivotal moments in life that may lead individuals to positively continue onward or negatively digress off their current path of development. Bryant & Astin (2008) equated struggle with undergraduates' feeling a sense of crisis or "shipwreck" as they suddenly encounter ideologies very different than their own. There



is thus a need for more research to understand this phenomenon that affects a “sizable proportion of college students” (p. 20).

Bryant and Astin (2008) observed that spiritual struggle manifests as forms of doubt, feelings of being unsettled and disillusioned about one’s religious background, or working through concepts of evil, suffering, and death. Fisler et al. (2009) reported that the spiritual struggle for the students they studied was common, painful, and confusing. While spiritual struggle experiences will vary based on students’ religious backgrounds, gender, and major in school, Bryant & Astin (2008) observed that spiritual struggle was a reality for many college students and thus called for higher education institutions to “ask difficult questions regarding their role in supporting students whose lives are complicated by existential dilemmas” (p. 23). They suggested that these “difficult questions” included asking whether campuses are supportive environments that provide the most effective support for students’ character development and resolution of their personal spiritual struggle.

Students do experience spiritual struggle when they try to integrate their learning and lives with the college environment. Often they will need to adjust their spiritual beliefs, as they gain new knowledge and more experience. This personal struggle to integrate and adjust spiritual beliefs can manifest itself in positive, but also negative ways. Positively, spiritual struggle helps students critically reflect on their beliefs, thereby promoting greater development and a more mature understanding of themselves, others, and their place in the world. This process can lead to further growth in personal responsibility, compassion, and more openness toward those who are different from them. Negatively, students who encounter spiritual struggle often report experiencing

stress, anxiety, and even fear. They feel pressure to conform to family or religious group expectations, which can lead to oppression by those in authority and isolation from those with diverse perspectives. Spiritual struggle has also been reported to have positive and negative effects on academic studies, relationships, and even personal health (Astin et al., 2010; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005; Rockenbach, Walker, & Luzader, 2012).

There is further evidence that suggests that students rarely navigate through spiritual struggle on their own (Clydesdale, 2007; Parks, 2000; Rockenbach et al., 2012; Smith & Snell, 2009). Students will experience spiritual struggle when they feel pressure to conform to religious expectations, fulfill academic demands toward getting a degree and then a job, while still managing a range of daily life experiences that often distract them from addressing the internal spiritual struggles they are feeling. Students then simply “remain faithful” or “lose their faith” altogether, not necessarily because they have matured, but often because they have not taken the time or do not know how best to critically reflect on their own spiritual and religious beliefs and the questions that have appeared about those beliefs (Clydesdale, 2007; Fisler et al., 2009; Magolda & Gross, 2009; Pargament et al., 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009). The value of spiritual development in higher education, therefore, is not to mandate spirituality. Rather, the value rests in the informed opportunities that colleges can provide their undergraduates who desire or even need to develop their spirituality in concert with their education, especially during times of personal spiritual struggle. More awareness and understanding of undergraduates’ spiritual development and struggle by faculty and staff in higher education venues can provide these students with effective support and help them to move toward complete

meaning-making, holistic development, and solid preparation for being global citizens (Astin, 2004; Astin et al., 2010; Chickering et al., 2006; Palmer et al., 2010).

Understanding the spiritual lives of students is challenging, as their inner lives often are “hidden” from most faculty and staff (Chickering et al., 2006; Collins & et al., 1987; Dalton & Crosby, 2007; Rue, 1985). Further, most of the studies on undergraduate religious and spiritual perspectives have “decontextualized” students, not taking into account their unique cultural backgrounds or religious contexts, thus resulting in more generalized descriptions that often lack specific understanding (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009, p. 271). Few studies have sought to understand students’ descriptions of the factors that support or impede their working through such spiritual struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Dalton & Crosby, 2007; Rockenbach et al., 2012). More researchers have thus called for these specific studies so as to better understand the spiritual experiences many undergraduates have in the context of their personal religious traditions and the context of their college experiences (Astin & Astin, 2010; Astin et al., 2010; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2012).

Students come to college from a broad range of religious and non-religious traditions. One of the religious traditions that undergraduates identify with is “Evangelicals,” and it is this group that is the focus of this current study. Evangelicals are theologically conservative, Protestant Christians who emphasize personal piety and often come from fundamentalist, neo-evangelical, “seeker-sensitive”, or Pentecostal congregations (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). While Evangelical students typically will have on campus the most available and most attended religious groups, they are also a population that tends to integrate less with other campus groups. Further, Evangelical

students report more spiritual struggle at college than, for example, Mainline Protestant Christians (Astin et al., 2010; Bryant, 2007; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Jacobsen & Jacobson, 2008; Magolda & Gross, 2009). For these reasons, Evangelical students and their perceptions of college-related factors that either support or impede their working through their spiritual struggle is the focus of this study

This project will contribute to the knowledge of undergraduate spiritual development by examining what college-related factors Evangelical students perceive as supporting or impeding them, as they work through their personal spiritual struggles. Understanding what these students perceive as supportive resources, relationships, experiences during their undergraduate experience can offer additional new insights for public colleges and universities to apply as they seek to support student meaning-making, educational development, and preparation for global citizenship.

### **Research Questions**

The following overarching guiding research question and sub-questions frame this study:

From the perspective of undergraduate students who have come from the Evangelical Christian tradition, what factors support or impede their experiences when working through spiritual struggle while at college? The sub-questions for this study then are:

- a) What does spiritual struggle mean for Evangelical undergraduates?
- b) For those Evangelical undergraduates who have experienced spiritual struggle, what do they view as the particular sources or issues that relate to that struggle? What personally brought the struggle on for them?

c) What factors do undergraduates perceive as affecting the process of how they handled their struggle? Specifically, what college-related factors (resources, relationships, experiences) do these undergraduates perceive as affecting how they handled their struggle? Which helped and which impeded them as these students managed their spiritual struggle and in what ways?

d) How have the experiences of undergraduates who have worked through spiritual struggle affected and influenced other areas in their lives (major/career decisions, relationships, interests, beliefs, religious practices, etc.)?

e) What recommendations can Evangelical undergraduates offer to their higher education institutions for ways to better support them as they experience and manage spiritual struggle?

## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

This section defines the terminology used in this study and reviews the literature relevant to undergraduate spiritual development, specifically student spiritual struggle at college. The “Terminology and Definitions” section establishes the terms used throughout this study and addresses the ongoing challenges of “religious” and “spiritual” usage, including how these terms actually relate to each other. The “Emerging Adult Spiritual Development” section highlights the literature that has focused on spirituality during this particular period of the human lifespan.

The “Undergraduates Do Bring Their Spirituality to Campus” section describes what is known of undergraduates and the spiritual perspectives they bring to college and acknowledges that there are “blind spots” and “hidden” aspects of student spirituality that can be better understood. Specifically, this section proposes focusing on public university students from a single religious tradition—Evangelical Christians. The “Undergraduate Spiritual Struggle” section focuses specifically on undergraduates’ spiritual struggle at college, leading to the final section that identifies the gaps in the research on undergraduate spiritual struggles and focuses specifically on the literature already in place on Evangelical college students.

#### **Terminology and Definitions**

One of the challenges associated with addressing any religious and spiritual concept in higher education is the varied definitions offered in the literature on this topic. This section thus establishes precise definitions for certain key terms referred to in this

study and also provides a rationale for the definitions and the relationships that exist between “religious,” “spiritual,” “spiritual development,” and “spiritual struggle.”

### **Undergraduate**

While undergraduate students vary in age and the duration of their program participation, the terms “undergraduate” or “student” in this study refer to the more traditional undergraduate student, ages 18-22. References to freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior students thus will assume the traditional progression through an undergraduate program.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

Emerging adulthood is a phrase coined by Arnett (2004) that describes a unique stage of development for those 18 to 26. Emerging adults—those who no longer consider themselves adolescents, but have yet to see themselves as adults—predominantly live in post-industrial societies where the cultural norms for marrying, having children, or entering a career are delayed. This identified developmental period has emerged in the research more recently, as young people have reported needing more training to enter the workforce and thus delaying marriage, a choice that affords them more options and autonomy during this period of their lives. Developmentally, emerging adults report not feeling like adults and being somewhat resistant to the constraints associated with adulthood (Arnett, 2004). Arnett (2004) has identified five main features of emerging adulthood: 1) the age of identity exploration, trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work; 2) the age of instability; 3) the most self-focused period of life; 4) the age of feeling in between, in transition, and neither adolescent nor adult; and 5) the age of possibilities, when hopes flourish and when these individuals have an unparalleled

opportunity to transform their lives and focus them more specifically. While undergraduates typically inhabit the earlier years of the emerging adult age-range, research on this developmental stage has useful implications for the current research and is often referenced by those researchers who study undergraduate spirituality.

### **The Terms “Religious” and “Spiritual”**

One of the challenges acknowledged in most of the research on religious, spiritual, and spiritual development concepts in higher education is the difficulty of defining these two terms. The first colleges in America were created and solidly rooted in Christian and denominational contexts (Geiger, 2005; Thelin, 2004). Later, Enlightenment influences, empiricism, and positivism deemed religion and spirituality as irrelevant, even detrimental, to higher education (Raper, 2001; Thelin, 2004).

Eventually, the growing awareness of a metaphysical void in higher education brought forth new questions for how colleges and universities should address affective elements in student learning and development, including those religious and spiritual issues long discarded, especially in the public context (Astin, 2004; Speck, 2005). The initial solutions sought to separate the spiritual self (the internal, affective, and mystical) from the religious self (influenced by dogma or control from which one should be liberated (Love & Talbot, 1999; Nash, 2001; Speck, 2005).

Polarization of one’s religion and one’s spirituality created a false dichotomy, culturally reinforced by a privatized spirituality that short-circuited critical self-reflection and diminished public dialogue on spiritual and religious topics (Johnson, Sheets, & Kristeller, 2008; Speck, 2005). More recent approaches by educators have now acknowledged the unique, yet interdependent, relationship of one’s religion and



spirituality (Chickering et al., 2006; P. C. Hill et al., 2000; Nash, 1999). For the purposes of this study, the definitions and the relationships between these terms are given here.

**Religious.** Marty & Moore (2000) suggested that religion provides a structure to use to organize one's daily spirituality. Common characteristics of all religions include: 1) a focus on matters of ultimate concern related to the meaning and purpose of life; 2) a sense of community, a place where one can gather, celebrate, mourn, and offer behavioral injunctions on how to live; 3) myths (narratives) and symbols that tell a single ultimate truth through allegory, story, metaphor, or art; and 4) ritual and ceremony that celebrate within the community all of life's most important transitions, such as birth, entry into adulthood, love or marriage, and death and final transition (pp. 8ff). One's religiosity also involves participation in the particular beliefs, rituals, and activities of traditional religion (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988).

Eck (1993) observed that whether one's religion is a major world religion, agnosticism or atheism, or something else, each "religion" has a cultural aspect that gives a specific context to one's background and life endeavors. Religion attempts to provide a framework for general human meaning, and offers meaning-making language to help individuals interpret their experiences and organize their day-to-day conduct. According to Geertz (1973), "the force of religion in supporting social values rests, then, on the ability of its symbols to formulate a world in which those values, as well as the forces opposing their realization, are fundamental ingredients" (p. 131). If, at its best, religion is a stabilizing influence that creates a framework for life's meaning for individuals, then it also has the potential to nurture one's spiritual development (Geertz, 1973; P. C. Hill et al., 2000; P. C. Hill & Pargament, 2003). Nash (1999) suggested that religion is a

fundamental part of human existence, and students cannot understand history or politics without reflecting on the role of religion in producing both good and evil in the world. Further, he concluded that excluding religion from learning results in an illiberal education “because students only get half the story” (Nash, 1999, p. 4). Nash (1999) also offered that religion is such a fundamental part of human existence that students cannot appreciate history or politics without understanding religion’s positive and negative influences on and within societies. Therefore, the religious perspectives that people hold are not merely cognitive assents or intellectual blinders. They are cultural lenses informed by and edited through one’s race, ethnicity, culture, family, ritual, and inherited worldview. Individuals are thus faced with the task of critically reflecting on their backgrounds, while graciously and tolerantly learning to understand others and their backgrounds, as they revisit their own frameworks of meaning.

For the purposes of this study, one’s “religion” (whether theistic, atheistic, or agnostic) describes the cultural background and worldview narrative of an individual that contributes to the way that person creates meaning and defines and describes his or her daily experiences and practices. Religion affects people’s spirituality by framing their spiritual behaviors and language, connecting them with others with similar traditions (via discussion, ritual, gathering, etc.), and help them express their views respectfully to others of different religious perspectives (in discussion, dialogue, or debate).

**Spiritual.** All persons can experience spirituality, and the concept is not the same as religiosity, if by “religious” one means actual participation in particular beliefs, rituals, activities or traditional religion (Elkins et al., 1988; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, Zuttermeister, & Benson, 1991; Parks, 1991). Some have attempted to broaden the

concept of spirituality by viewing it as more than an internal belief or a mode of knowing and instead seeing it as more of a quality of life that moves beyond the self into the outer world (Gottz, 1997). Others refer to this concept as “faith” (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Spirituality, a term that comes from the Latin word, *spiritus* meaning “breath of life,” has been expressed as a way of being and experiencing that comes about through the awareness of a transcendent dimension characterized by certain identifiable values with regard to the self, others, nature, life, and whatever other entity one considers to be the Ultimate (Elkins et al., 1988).

The characteristics of spirituality are understood to include an ongoing quest for meaning/purpose in life, which often does include the Sacred or a higher power, an ability to find peace in the midst of challenge or hardship, an ability to look beyond oneself toward the beauty and needs of the world, a sense of identity with and responsibility toward making the world a better place, and an openness to other people’s perspectives to create deeper relationships and commitment to community (Astin & Astin, 2003, 2010; Astin et al., 2010, 2011; Astin et al., 2003; Elkins et al., 1988; Love & Talbot, 1999). Spirituality also encourages having a personal commitment toward “something,” the *telos* (goal) that reaches beyond mere personal fulfillment (Nash, 1999; Speck, 2005).

One’s spirituality describes personal meaning-making and the internal work an individual undertakes to make sense of his or her beliefs, sometimes with or without an actual formal religious background. Although more personal in nature, spirituality is best worked out through an ongoing dialogue in a mutually supporting community (Love & Talbot, 1999). Thus, for the purposes of this study, “spirituality” is defined as one’s

meaning-making efforts that inform the way one lives in and relate to the world and others, transforming and encouraging that person to move toward the *telos* (goal) of having a more mature, congruent, and faithful way of living.

### **The Relationship Between the Religious and the Spiritual**

My attempt thus far has been to address some of the ambiguities associated with various religious and spiritual definitions used in the literature and to offer clarity on how this study will apply these same terms. However, seeking to bring a precise focus to these terms only addresses part of the challenge. Another element of the ambiguity found in the literature is revealed in the way “religious” and “spiritual” as terms are used in relation to one another. Thus, further clarity on the definitions of “religious” and “spiritual” and how these concepts relate can affect how educators perceive the religious and spiritual lives of all people, including undergraduates. Hill (2000), and further, Smith & Snell (2009) argued for the inseparability of one’s spirituality and religiousness. Aligning with Smith & Snell (2009), this study assumed that most students frame their spirituality with a religious framework of terms and meanings, thus reframing a commonly held assumption often assumed by educators, that undergraduates are “spiritual, but not religious” (Cherry et al., 2001; Colby, 2003; Johnson et al., 2008; Love, 2001).

It is more likely that any separating of one’s religiousness and spirituality is a form of spiritual struggle where, due to the varied transitions students are managing in their lives, their religious framework when considered in relation to their spiritual experiences becomes temporarily suspended or even contradictory (Clydesdale, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009). Emerging adults and their declining religious practices may reflect

their attempts at gaining autonomy and to draw clear differentiation from their parents and family, largely motivated more by developmental factors than epistemological ones (Arnett, 2004; Arnett & Jensen, 2002).

Smith & Snell (2009) concluded that the majority of emerging adults are more accurately described as conventional spiritual followers who are trying to fit in rather than as detached spiritual seekers, and indeed, hold that “spiritual but not religious” assumptions rarely do apply to emerging adults. Similarly, Bryant et al. (2003) observed that spirituality and religiousness are highly correlated concepts, while Clydesdale (2007) noted that most incoming freshman who describe themselves as spiritual, typically express their spirituality in conventional religious terms.

Thus, this study takes into account that the religious backgrounds of undergraduates do affect the way they understand, talk about, and express their spirituality. It also acknowledges that one’s religious background likely does affect the ways that many students experience spiritual struggle and also the ways they attempt to work through and understand and apply that struggle to their learning experiences.

### **Spiritual Development**

Spiritual development, which is part of holistic development, is one way of understanding the spiritual changes people experience as they mature in their meaning-making. Researchers have argued that spiritual development fosters students’ well-being (Temkin & Evans, 1998), contributes to an interdisciplinary foundation (Inayatullah & Gidley, 2000; Love & Talbot, 1999), acknowledges personal “conversion” or transformation (Fowler, 1995; Vella, 2000; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998), encourages greater authenticity and a more integrated self (Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000; Love &

Talbot, 1999; Murphy, 2005; Stewart, 2005; Tisdell, 2003), and is about meaning-making as a way that individuals can construct their knowledge and integrate their lives (Jablonski et al., 2001; Keeling & Dungy, 2004; Tisdell, 2003). Spiritual development affects people's understanding of themselves, their relationships with others, and their ongoing pursuit of meaning-making

Spiritual development assumes a personal commitment toward "something," the *telos* (goal) of spirituality beyond mere personal fulfillment (Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; Nash, 1999; Speck, 2005). This process of spiritual development occurs gradually or abruptly, as people's current understandings of their own worlds are challenged. Such challenges may be due to newly realized information or dramatic events (whether positive or negative) that cause disorienting experiences and compel a person to seek to recover a sense of epistemological equilibrium (Fowler, 1981, 1995; Loder, 1998; Mezirow, 2000). This search for equilibrium often brings about purging or purification, which can be stressful as that person realizes that he or she is unable to assimilate the new experience or add information into one's current way of being and must thus begin the process of accommodation and change.

Through this change, one reaches illumination as that person reorients to a new perspective that then brings personal change and a conversion of sorts. Finally, equilibrium returns, as one finds unification and a form of homecoming, a connection with the transcendent, or even the sacred (Clark, 2001; Loder, 1998; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). While this process has aspects of stage-like development, most consider the process to be more spiral in nature where as one moves forward in development, one also must circle back periodically to create new meaning out of old

events, symbols, and experiences that have already shaped his or her spiritual journey, life journey, and identity (Cranton & Roy, 2003; Fowler, 1995; Kegan, 1994; Tisdell, 2001; Wilber, 1996).

Parks (2000) has suggested that spiritual development happens as one matures in one's forms of knowing, dependence, and community. This development tends to be the most dramatic during an individual's attendance at college. One's form of knowing within spiritual development matures during that time, as meaning-making integrates new knowledge and experiences toward a reframed worldview. It involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness in both thinking and living (Love & Talbot, 1999; Rogers & Love, 2007). The process also involves the active pursuit of meaning-making through self-reflection, spiritual identification, and learning from having or witnessing both good and bad experiences (equanimity) (Astin et al., 2010, 2011; Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Gotz, 1997; Parks, 1991).

One's form of dependence within spiritual development matures as people derive what is true for them increasingly less often from external authorities (parents, teachers, religious leaders, etc.) and more often from their own internal convictions (Parks, 2000). It inspires a continual personal pursuit or quest to derive meaning, construct knowledge, and expand understanding (Astin et al., 2010, 2011). This process prepares persons to be open to new ideas, value the perspectives of others, and view themselves as less central and a part of something bigger (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; English, 2000; Gotz, 1997; Love & Talbot, 1999; Parks, 1991).

One's form of community within actual spiritual development matures as the sense of connection with that community broadens and becomes more inclusive and more

engaging (Parks, 2000). A person becomes aware of a unique interconnectedness with the world, values relationships, feels connected with a community (Love & Talbot, 1999), and develops a stronger sense of self further nurtured through interaction with others (English, 2000). This connection calls on the individual to look beyond ego toward others, know and reach out to them, and ultimately discover interdependence with them (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; English, 2000; Gotz, 1997). It recognizes that development comes through interpersonal, social, and cultural components that become broader, more inclusive, and more compassionate over time (Astin et al., 2010, 2011; Parks, 1991, 2000). Love and Talbot (1999) remarked that this element of spiritual development is also a paradox, as spiritual development is both personal and unique and yet finds its fullest manifestation in the context of and the contact with an ever-broadening and mutually supporting community.

Therefore, for this study, spiritual development names the maturing process that individuals go through to understand, integrate, and express their spirituality in light of their current forms of knowing, dependence, and community. Spiritual development also pertains to spiritual and religious perspectives that often inform and influence students' academic, social, and emotional well-being (Bryant et al., 2003). The intensity of spiritual development thus is often most evident in pivotal moments that can be described as spiritual struggle.

### **Spiritual Struggle**

One of the most challenging parts of spiritual development appears when a person leaves old paradigms behind to embrace new, truer ideas that support that personal meaning-making (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009; Fowler, 1981; Pargament et



al., 2005; Parks, 2000). These crucial periods have been described as suffering, betrayal, doubt, questioning, struggle, anger at God, despair, crisis, the “dark night of the soul,” a disorienting experience, pivotal moment, shipwreck, or conversion (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fowler, 1995; P. C. Hill & Pargament, 2003; Mezirow, 2000; Parks, 2000). Terms presented across most of the literature to explain this part of spiritual development describe these defining moments as spiritual or religious struggle. Based on the often overlapping or synonymous uses of “religious struggle” and “spiritual struggle,” in the literature and the assumption, as stated previously, that each person’s spirituality is often informed by religious background, this study uses the term “spiritual struggle” to describe those critical moments that people experience when they realize that their spirituality must change to accommodate new experiences or new information.

Suggesting that spirituality is not a separate or private characteristic but an integrated part of the whole person and therefore, an important aspect of students’ learning and development, raises challenges for distinguishing spiritual struggles from more common forms of human struggles (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006). It is important to understand how students make sense of their inner worlds in relationship to their externally expressed lives. Spirituality and spiritual struggle described in this study attempt to name what Dirkx, et al. (2006) called a “backdrop,” “matrix,” or “context” through which persons’ lives play out. Careful attention is needed, as it is possible for some people to over-spiritualize their human struggles and, for others, to grapple with language that expresses the challenges they encounter which may, in fact, have spiritual elements. Other researchers who have attempted to understand spiritual struggle have noted that spiritual struggle includes not only immanent aspects of everyday life, but also

transcendent elements associated with persons' experiences that make their struggles, spiritual struggles (Fisler et al., 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2012; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998).

### **Emerging Adult Spiritual Development**

Some of the life-span research pertaining to spiritual development has included, but not necessarily focused on, understanding emerging adults who are also traditional college undergraduates (Fowler, 1981, 1984, 1995; Fowler, Keen, & Berryman, 1978; Fowler & Loder, 1982; Loder, 1989, 1998). These studies have acknowledged that spiritual development, while having some aspects of religiousness, refers to a human quality where people, regardless of religious orientation, seek to create meaning in light of their epistemological assumptions. They report on those people having experienced spiritual change and frequent challenges over their life spans, as they revisit their spiritual viewpoints and then move on toward more reliable and congruent beliefs.

Other researchers who have focused primarily on the emerging adult life-stage have included, but not necessarily focused, on undergraduates (Arnett, 2004; Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, & Tanner, 2011; Parks, 1991, 2000; Smith & Snell, 2009). They have agreed with other life-stage theorists that emerging adults do experience a unique and challenging period in life and report that spirituality is one element that shapes and is shaped by emerging adult experiences (Arnett, 2004; Arnett et al., 2011). "Something changes" in these emerging adults' spirituality, as they search to make their spirituality "more true," interpret and reinterpret their experiences, and reframe their beliefs to integrate with their ever-growing exposure to a diversity of worldviews (Arnett, 2004). As these emerging adults reorient their spiritual viewpoints,

they are known to suspend religious practices, an act that may not be an indicator of their leaving their original spiritual convictions as much as simply re-imagining them (Clydesdale, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009). Still, these personal changes in religious behaviors have resulted in adults and educators' misunderstanding emerging adults' attitudes and behaviors regarding religion and spirituality (Arnett, 2004; Clydesdale, 2007; Fisler et al., 2009; Lee, 2002; Nash, 1999; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007).

While religious attendance of emerging adults declines during college, Smith & Snell (2009) argued that this change is not a new phenomenon. Emerging adult actions are as much about differentiating themselves from their parents and their past, as they are a part of each student's spiritual journey. Although their religious participation and outlooks may be changing, life-stage theorists and those studying the emerging adult life stage have argued that emerging adults in America remain predominantly theistic, generally have a positive view toward religion, are fairly conventional/traditional in the way they talk about religious and spiritual topics, and see spirituality as an important aspect. However, these espoused views remain more situated in the background of their daily lives (Arnett, 2004; Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Clydesdale, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009).

What has remained unclear, however, is what is actually happening to emerging adults that causes their spiritual viewpoints to change during this stage of life. Studies on emerging adult spirituality have called for a closer look at emerging adults in various contexts, including those who are undergraduates and attending colleges (Arnett, 2004; Barry & Nelson, 2005; Braskamp et al., 2006). In terms of the opportunities for emerging adults to develop their personal beliefs in a safe and supportive environment,

Arnett (2004) has suggested that the “American college is the emerging adult environment par excellence” (p. 140).

### **Undergraduates Bring Their Spirituality to Campus**

Thus far, I have defined the terms “religious” and “spiritual” and their inter-relatedness to both spiritual development and spiritual struggle. I have also noted that the period in the life-span called emerging adulthood has unique characteristics associated with spiritual development that still require more specific and clearer understanding. It is important to apply these concepts now to the study of undergraduates.

The religious and spiritual perspectives of students have gained attention, as several studies have reported that a majority of undergraduate students do bring their religious traditions and beliefs to campuses (Astin, 2004; Astin & Astin, 2003; Astin et al., 2003; Jablonski et al., 2001; Lindholm, 2007; Love, 2001; Tisdell, 2001). Recent studies have also reported that a majority of undergraduates who enter college have a high interest in spiritual ideas and involvement and have expectations that their college or university will support their further spiritual development (Astin et al., 2003; Lindholm, 2007). While still diverse, a majority of students who come to college do believe in God, a Higher Power, or a Life Force. These findings invite further consideration of what these students’ beliefs mean for their ongoing college experiences (Astin & Astin, 2003; Bryant et al., 2003; Smith & Snell, 2009). Further, those undergraduates who do value their spiritual or religious perspectives report wanting more ways to be available to develop or integrate their religious and/or spiritual selves with their academic selves. They believe that people are spiritual beings, have pondered the challenging questions of suffering, evil, and death in the world, and desire to integrate their spiritual lives into

their whole lives (Astin, 2004; Astin & Astin, 2010; Astin et al., 2010; Astin et al., 2003; Bryant et al., 2003; Lindholm, 2007).

Astin et al. (2003), Astin (2004), Astin, Astin, & Lindholm (2010), Lindholm (2007), Braskamp (2008), and Magolda & Gross (2009) all refer to the findings of the Higher Education Research Institute that drew from survey data collected in 2003 from 112,232 students attending a national sample of 236 colleges and universities. Of those undergraduates entering college, 83% believed in the sacredness of life; 80% were interested in spirituality; 76% were searching for the meaning/purpose of life; 74% discussed life philosophies with friends; 69% looked to their religious beliefs for guidance; 64% viewed spirituality as a source of joy; 79% said they believed in God; 81% attended religious services; 69% prayed on a regular basis; 69% wanted their school to help them develop their personal values; and 48% said explicitly that they wanted their college experience to encourage their personal expressions of spirituality. These same researchers referred to the college experience as a time when undergraduates try to make up their minds about their religious and spiritual perspectives. In the words of Braskamp (2008), “Entering college students not only bring their faith to campus with them; they expect to grow in their religious and spiritual lives while in college” (p. 125).

In their follow-up study done in 2007, Astin & Astin (2010) identified a number of college experiences that affected students’ spiritual development. These included faculty, type of major, curricular and co-curricular experiences, and peers. Faculty who encouraged questions about meaning and purpose or engaged students in discussions on religious and spiritual matters or who promoted introspective activities as part of their courses were identified as being supportive of their students’ spiritual development.

Students who majored in education, fine arts, the health professions, biological sciences, or social sciences showed positive growth in spirituality, while those in engineering, mathematics/statistics, physical sciences, or technical fields showed negative growth. Curricular experiences, such as service learning, interdisciplinary courses, study abroad and co-curricular experiences like leadership training, had positive effects on spirituality. Where students resided, such as living in a residence hall (versus living at home), also positively affected their spiritual perspectives. Braskamp (2008) concluded that “Faith and learning can go hand in hand” (p. 117).

Lee (2002) observed that half of undergraduates reported no change in their religious values between their freshman and senior years with only 14% reporting a decline and 38% reporting that their religious convictions strengthened. There is speculation that undergraduates’ religious beliefs do not dramatically increase or decrease as much in college as they are simply being reframed by their spiritual development. In other words, people may remain connected to their religious traditions and practices for various reasons, depending on where they are currently sitting in their spiritual development (Bryant et al., 2003; Lee, 2002; Smith & Snell, 2009).

Although general college domains have been identified as affecting students’ spiritual experiences, less is known about the specific ways these domains support or specifically impede students’ spiritual development and spiritual struggle in particular ways. Bryant, et al. (2003) offered that, “[b]ecause spirituality is something that clearly many students want in their lives, it makes sense that we develop practices to attend to this need” (p. 740).

## **Undergraduate Spiritual Lives a “Blind Spot” and “Hidden” on Campus**

Astin (2004) stated that, “[m]ore than anything else, giving spirituality a central place in our [higher education] institutions will serve to strengthen our sense of connectedness with each other, our students, and our institutions” (p. 41). Still, undergraduates’ inner and spiritual lives have been identified as a blind spot and hidden from most faculty and staff.

**The blind spot.** While many undergraduates value spirituality, some have called spirituality in higher education a “blind spot” that needs more understanding (Collins & et al., 1987; Palmer et al., 2010; Rue, 1985; Temkin & Evans, 1998). Calls for colleges and universities to better attend to undergraduates’ whole selves and inner lives have raised questions pertaining to those students who have religious and spiritual beliefs. Higher education has been committed to better understanding undergraduate perspectives in light of their varied and multiple identities, including their gender, race, ethnicity, Socioeconomic Status (SES), and sexual orientation. Similarly, efforts to understand the varying spiritual perspectives of students can produce additional support for student learning, development, and engagement with others (Braskamp et al., 2006; Chickering et al., 2006; Collins & et al., 1987; Parks, 2000).

Fowler (1981) has stated that faith, classically understood, cannot be separated from life or compartmentalized spirituality. It is an orientation of the total person, giving full purpose and goals to hope, strivings, thoughts, and actions. However, recognizing the relevance of spiritual development seems to be a blind spot for too many educators. In fact, even “seeing” this “blind spot” proves to be difficult, as some researchers have

reported that the interior lives of undergraduates have become today even more “hidden” from faculty and staff than they were earlier.

**Hidden lives.** Dalton & Crosby (2007) argue that the “hidden” inner lives of undergraduates may be caused by five factors. They explain that peer culture is difficult to track because it exists as a parallel world alongside an “official” college culture that is unseen and unknown by adults. Next, most faculty and staff who interact with students during the day, are absent during “night campus,” those non-class interactions and activities (both helpful and detrimental) where these students work out their most pressing personal queries. Also, the inner lives of college students are typically eclipsed by the emphasis higher education places on the cognitive aspects of learning, thus placing less priority on students’ inner development. Further, understanding the diverse backgrounds of students’ identities is limited due to generalizations and discrimination that fails to take into account the uniqueness of individual student identities. Finally, technology has redefined the way that students interact with each other and with faculty, often creating more distance between the two. Dalton & Crosby (2007) emphasized that knowledge of these factors can help staff and faculty be more aware of what they know and what they do not know about their students. After identifying these issues, some educators are calling for greater attention to be paid to students’ spiritual development and have advocated for making more opportunities available for students to explore their “inner lives” as well as their “outer lives” within the college environment (Astin & Astin, 2003; Astin et al., 2003; Cherry et al., 2001; Chickering et al., 2006; Lindholm & Astin, 2008; Palmer et al., 2010; Rue, 1985; Tisdell, 2003).



## **Varied Descriptions of Undergraduate Spirituality**

The challenge of studying the spirituality of undergraduates has produced studies that offer a wide range of descriptions of student spiritual development. Undergraduates are described in many ways: Less religious, spiritual but not religious, more spiritual seeking than religious dwelling, conventional, non-interested or overwhelmed, spiritually growing, or spiritually disinterested (Astin, 2004; Astin & Astin, 2003; Astin et al., 2011; Clydesdale, 2007; Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004; Lindholm, 2007; Lindholm & Astin, 2008; Love, 2001; Love & Talbot, 1999; Parks, 2000; Rogers & Love, 2007; Small, 2009; Smith & Snell, 2009; Welch & Mellberg, 2008; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). Thus, it still remains, it seems, a certain ambiguity among researchers as to what the spiritual lives of undergraduates actually are and what undergraduates who do want to develop spiritually actually need. Enhancing universities' understanding of students who consider their spiritual development as important, and in particular, universities' understanding how these students experience and work through spiritual struggle will help faculty, student affairs, college staff, and campus religious leaders all better support undergraduates while they are in college.

## **Evangelical Undergraduates**

This current study focuses on students from a single faith tradition—those who identify as Evangelical Christians. Evangelicals are theologically conservative Protestants who emphasize personal piety and often come from fundamentalist, neo-evangelical, “seeker-sensitive”, or Pentecostal congregations (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). They hold to supernatural truth, namely the Bible as being both inspired and authoritative, and prioritize the need for forgiveness of sins, personal spiritual conversion,

eternal life, and evangelism (Nash, 1999). Evangelicals come from a conservative, “fundamentalist” Christian Protestant tradition and generally hold to a “fundamentalist narrative” that is “a powerful counter-discourse that is appealing to those disenchanted with the false promises of modernism and secularism” (Nash, 1999, p. 57).

Students who share a common religious viewpoint often seek connection with other students who share their beliefs by joining campus religious groups (Astin et al., 2010; Lee, 2002; Magolda & Gross, 2009; Temkin & Evans, 1998). Some reports claim that of all the religious groups on campuses, the most numerous are Evangelical, and they have the most involvement (Astin & Astin, 2003; Cherry et al., 2001; Lugo et al., 2008). Still, Evangelical campus groups are reported as being the least open to dialogue with other groups, and Evangelical students are more susceptible to spiritual struggle (Bryant, 2006a; J. P. Hill, 2009; Magolda & Gross, 2009). Bryant (2006) studied an Evangelical campus group climate and posture and found that these members encouraged separatism, resisted dialogue, and promoted conservative gender roles among students. Magolda & Gross (2009), while studying a particular Evangelical group on a public campus over two years, observed that this group related to society as an oppositional subculture, choosing to identify and separate from the mainstream and a secular culture and engage it only through recruiting and proselytizing. Evangelical undergraduates also gravitated toward religious organizations in their quest for community and avoided perceived marginalization (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Smith, 1998). While this religious group promoted student involvement and co-curricular activity, it also perpetuated potentially harmful ways of relating to others on campus through isolationism, separatism, sexism,

minimal dialogue with those different than themselves, and anti-intellectualism (Magolda & Gross, 2009).

Magolda & Gross (2009) have stated that the “academy remains largely ignorant about the intricacies of Evangelical organizations and uncertain how to meet the unique needs of evangelical students while remaining true to core, secular institutional values” (p. 11). They suggested that higher education leaders must clarify the role of religion and faith on campus, forge alliances with para-churches (campus religious groups/organizations that are not churches) based on differences, challenge campus religious groups to expand their worldviews, move beyond simply conformity, and encourage evangelical students to see differences as positive opportunities for self-reflection and dialogue. While the students associated with these various groups could be studied, this study focuses specifically and only on Evangelical students.

### **Undergraduate Spiritual Struggle**

So far, those studies that have sought to understand spiritual struggle in college students include Parks (2000), Astin, et al., (2003), Bryant & Astin, (2008), Fisler et al. (2009), Astin, Astin & Lindholm, (2011a, 2011b), and Rockenbach et al. (2012). From their findings, certain general observations about spiritual struggle can be made. More in-depth descriptions of students’ spiritual struggles can be explored in depth by classifying their spiritual struggles according to Parks’ (2000) forms of spirituality: Knowing, dependence, and community. Following the recommendation of Rockenbach, et al. (2012), Parks’ (2000) forms of spirituality were adapted to frame the methodology of this current study.

## **General Observations Regarding Spiritual Struggle**

Generally, spiritual struggle appears to be a reality for many college students (Astin et al., 2010; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Chickering et al., 2006; Fisler et al., 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2012). If spiritual development is a process that moves individuals toward a more mature way of holding their spirituality, then spiritual struggle must be expected. Even though it is stressful and disorienting, spiritual struggle can also become an open portal toward obtaining a truer spirituality (Parks, 2000; Rockenbach et al., 2012). This struggle centers on the daily lives of students, potentially impacting their academic, social, and emotional well-being (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Rockenbach et al., 2012). Chickering, et al. (2006) indicated that without healthy space or dedicated time on campus for students to explore their identities through personal spiritual development, students are driven to be involved in a “night campus” where the same struggle is worked through in detrimental ways that produce unhealthy and risky behaviors too often associated with alcohol consumption, sexual activity, and video games (Astin et al., 2010, 2011; Chickering et al., 2006; Freitas, 2008). Spiritual struggle can be a necessary element in one’s total spiritual development and serve as a valuable catalyst to help students address the spiritual issues they may be facing while in college (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000; Rockenbach et al., 2012).

## **Spiritual Struggle As Knowing, Dependence, and Community**

Parks (2000) has suggested that spiritual development has three essential forms—knowing, dependence, and community. These forms offer a useful way to understand undergraduate spiritual struggle descriptions and provided a useful conceptual framework for this study.

**Spiritual struggle in the form of knowing.** Parks (2000) described the form of knowing as the cognitive part of faith (or spiritual) development and postulated that knowing brings fear, curiosity, doubt, and anxiety. Bryant & H. Astin (2008) observed that those who encountered spiritual struggle questioned their religious/spiritual beliefs, felt unsettled, wrestled with issues of evil, suffering, and death, felt angry with God, or struggled with their past upbringing. Students experienced crisis or what Parks (2000) referred to as a “shipwreck” when they encountered ideas or experiences that were different from their own. Fisler et al.’s (2009) descriptions of this struggle appear to relate to the way undergraduates think about their spirituality. Undergraduate critical thinking is stimulated by classroom assignments and discussions with faculty and peers that often leads to students’ experiencing spiritual conflict, confusion, and pain as they reexamine their beliefs and worldviews (Fisler et al., 2009).

**Spiritual struggle in the form of dependence.** Parks (2000) described the form of dependence as the affective part of spiritual development where undergraduates reconsider their locus of authority (in self, others, traditions, etc.) that evokes emotional responses. As undergraduates depart from their inherited beliefs, they do not always have the emotional support needed to help them navigate toward the new territory they are seeking (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Loder, 1998; Smith & Snell, 2009). Spiritual struggle was also reported to increase during the undergraduate junior year than during the freshman year, as students by then have more experiences and more maturity they can use to reflect on their beliefs (Astin et al., 2011; Clydesdale, 2007). Spiritual struggle over one’s dependence evoked in many undergraduates the feelings of unsettled

emotions, disillusionment, anger, distress, low self-esteem, pain, and confusion (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009).

**Spiritual struggle in the form of community.** Parks (2000) described the form of community as the relational part of faith (spiritual) development when undergraduates search for belonging. Students relationships and interactions with past and present communities and contexts may evoke such spiritual struggle (Astin et al., 2011). Some experienced struggle because of the tensions they felt between their loyalty toward family or their religious community at home and their new transforming spiritual viewpoints at school. Often, those from minority religious preferences, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Unitarian Universalism, experienced greater struggle (Bryant & Astin, 2008). Other factors found to affect spiritual struggle included being female, attending a religious college, and majoring in psychology, humanities, the fine arts, or social sciences. Fisler et al. (2009) reported that students believed that people (friends, roommates, peers), organizations, campus environments, and organized religion both helped and impeded their quest for resolution of their struggle. Fisler et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of the campus climate and suggested that more qualitative research be undertaken on how relationships and environments both help and impede student spiritual development.

Spiritual struggle varies by college type and peer group. Religious colleges often report more struggle among their students, likely because faith is more readily discussed in that environment (Bryant & Astin, 2008). Bryant & Astin (2008) noted that undergraduates from public colleges are more likely to experience struggle through their encounter with a variety of worldviews. Further, those undergraduates who experienced

struggle were often the same persons who highly engaged in religious activities with their peers. Some peers opened up about their own questions and doubts, and others felt more comfortable sharing their own struggles (Bryant & Astin, 2008). Astin et al. (2011b) suggested that in light of the communities in which students participate, spiritual struggle often becomes “contagious” (Astin et al., 2003, p. 105). Hence, if one struggles, one’s friends may struggle as well.

### **Spiritual Struggle and College-Related Support**

Astin et al. (2011b) argued that a public university is an ideal place for students to explore their spiritual commitments, as there is no official dogma there and more room to explore different beliefs and values. Of the studies that researched spiritual struggle, Parks (2000) emphasized the need to have a mentoring community as a safe harbor for those seeking to own their spirituality and not shipwreck their faith. Fisler et al.’s (2009) study is the only research that explored what that support looks like to undergraduates. They reported that undergraduates found support from roommates, family, friends, ministers, counselors, student organizations, and peers. Interestingly, these same people and groups were also responsible for producing spiritual struggle. Other undergraduates referred to the campus setting as both helping and hurting their journey through their spiritual struggle. Some referred to campus groups as places of support, while others lamented that campus religious groups were hard to access because they appeared to be exclusive and separatist (Bryant, 2007; Magolda & Gross, 2009).

### **Gaps in the Literature on Undergraduate Spiritual Struggle**

Bryant & Astin (2008) remarked that, based on their work on undergraduate spiritual struggle, “struggles of a spiritual nature are a reality for college students” (p.

23). Spiritual struggle is a known source of challenge for a “considerable portion of college students”, thus bringing spiritual conflict within the person (Rockenbach et al., 2012, p. 55). Undergraduate spiritual struggle is a necessary part of students’ spiritual development and does need understanding and support since it affects everyday learning and meaning-making (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Chickering et al., 2006; Dirkx, 1997; English, 2000; P. C. Hill & Pargament, 2003; Love, 2001; Palmer, 1998; Parks, 2000).

So far, spiritual struggle has been identified in both theory and observation by only a few studies, and more research is needed to understand the actual college-related factors that support and/or impede students who are working through their spiritual struggle. None of the studies on undergraduate spiritual struggle have considered the specific religious backgrounds of undergraduate participants, although struggle is often rooted in students’ critical reflections on the inherited beliefs and values acquired from their families and their religious traditions. Most studies, although purposeful, are still random or intentionally diversified in terms of identifying religious backgrounds.

While spiritual struggle is described in general terms, Parks’ (2000) work challenges educators to consider the more precise intellectual, affective, and relational types of spiritual struggle that undergraduates are experiencing. Richer descriptions of undergraduate spiritual struggle can help colleges learn how to support these students more effectively. Rockenbach et al. (2012) provided the first study that described a more specific “texture” of the spiritual struggles of students in the Southeast, and in so doing, the authors recommended further research on other college campuses (p. 62).



While higher education creates opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking, little has been learned about how faculty or classroom experiences have supported students throughout their spiritual struggle. Although students have reported an interest in spiritual dialogue, they have also voiced the difficulty of actually accessing such opportunities on campus. Also, faculty have acknowledged the difficulty of addressing the ambiguity and diversity of student spirituality (Lindholm, 2007). Lindholm (2007) offered that, “[e]ven when we are equipped with the information that is available, bridging the gap between student interests and college practice requires thoughtful consideration” (p. 16). Thus, there are still more areas of student life to explore for how faculty and classroom experiences can better support students as those same students work through their personal spiritual struggles within their education.

Also, universities may wonder what they can assume or expect of students regarding their spiritual development maturity. Fisler et al. (2009) seemed surprised that undergraduates did not have their spiritual commitments worked through by their senior year in college. However, spiritual development is likely to be an ongoing process that continues beyond the undergraduate experience, and further spiritual struggle within spiritual development is likely to keep recurring throughout life. Revisiting the expectations that educators have for undergraduates and more research to understand the exact qualities of spiritual development and struggle is necessary.

While attention has been given to students’ leaving the traditional beliefs of their family and religion, little study has been undertaken to consider whether participation in religious campus groups helps or impedes students’ spiritual struggle and development. Studies of campus groups have found that some groups can be oppressive, separatist, and

resistant to the values usually associated with a liberal arts education (Bryant, 2006a; Magolda & Gross, 2009). More research is thus needed to examine undergraduates' full and clear perceptions of the presence and effects that campus religious groups have on them.

Most observations of students' religious and spiritual perceptions have been conducted by researchers who admit to having no theological training and/or limited understanding of particular religious traditions. The absence of theological training and an unfamiliarity with certain religious traditions likely produced limitations regarding their knowledge and also their analysis of students' spiritual struggle descriptions. Perhaps, further research applied by those who have education in both spiritual development and theological training will provide an additional layer of analysis of the descriptions of these students' spiritual struggles. In addition, those projects that have studied spiritual struggle have all encouraged further qualitative research in unique campus environments with students from particular religious backgrounds (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fidler et al., 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2012).

Undergraduate inner lives have been largely hidden from educators for a variety of reasons. Knowledge of the spiritual development and struggles of these undergraduates, however, can help campus leaders and faculty better support student learning and their holistic development. Thus, the overarching research question to be addressed by the proposed study is: From the perspective of undergraduate students who have come from the Evangelical Christian tradition, what factors support or impede their experiences when working through spiritual struggle while at college? This study gathers these students' descriptions of their spiritual struggles and attempts to understand their

meaning in light of their college context, religious background, and spiritual development.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This project contributes to the knowledge of undergraduate spiritual development by examining what college-related factors Evangelical Christian students perceive as either supporting or impeding them as they work through their spiritual struggles at a Midwest public university. The organization of this chapter includes a restating of the research question, an overview of the methodology, the research paradigm, the participant sample, site selection, data collection, data analysis, data validity, and a precise consideration of the chosen human subjects.

#### **Research Question**

In this study addresses the following research question: *From the perspective of undergraduate students who have come from the Evangelical Christian tradition, what factors support or impede their experiences when working through spiritual struggle while at college?* The sub-questions are:

- a) What does spiritual struggle mean for Evangelical undergraduates?
- b) For those Evangelical undergraduates who have experienced spiritual struggle, what are the particular sources or issues do they view as being related to that struggle? What factor or factors brought that spiritual struggle to bear?
- c) What factors do undergraduates perceive as affecting the process of how they handled their struggle? Specifically, what college-related factors (resources, relationships, experiences) do these undergraduates perceive as affecting the process for how they handled the struggle? Which of these factors helped and which impeded the

process as these students experienced and managed their spiritual struggle and in what ways?

d) How have the experiences of undergraduates who have worked through spiritual struggle affected/influenced other areas in their lives (major/career decisions, relationships, interests, beliefs, religious practices, etc.)?

e) What recommendations do Evangelical undergraduates offer to their higher education institutions for better ways to support them and others as they experience and manage their spiritual struggles?

### **The Research Paradigm**

Keeling & Dungy (2004) have suggested that, “all institutions should establish routine ways to hear students’ voices, consult with them, explore their opinions, and document the nature and quality of their experience as learners” (p. 28). Concerns over previous research that has only “decontextualized” undergraduates and their spiritual perspectives have inspired further calls for more qualitative studies that focus on the spiritual development of unique populations of students in particular college contexts (Astin et al., 2010; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Lindholm, 2007; Mayrl & Oeur, 2009). Qualitative researchers typically seek to understand “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). These researchers focused on trying to understand the phenomena associated with participants’ perspectives, not their own (Merriam, 2009). Interactions with participants, therefore, simply assume that participant realities are constructed, complex, and also changing (Glesne, 2006). The goal of qualitative research is to rely on participants’ views instead and the way that participants construct meaning

for the topic being studied by collecting open-ended, emerging data with the intent of identifying themes gleaned from that data (Creswell, 2002). Ultimately, qualitative researchers will seek to ask the question, “What’s going on here?” Qualitative studies are useful for understanding how participants interact with their world (how they feel, what they believe, what they perceive) within a particular segment of their lives (Creswell, 2002, p. 96).

Merriam (2009) has noted that “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 15). Maxwell (2012) suggested that researchers should be viewed as valuable components of qualitative research. Aspects of a researcher’s life and the actual research also can offer a unique “source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks” (Merriam, 2009, p. 45). The researcher can be responsive and adaptive to the collection of data and very attentive to nonverbal information that may offer a fuller description of the participants’ responses. Merriam (2009) also suggested that even though researcher biases cannot be eliminated, it is still important to identify and monitor these biases for how they may shape the data collection or its interpretation or both scenarios. Maxwell (2012), like Merriam (2009) stated that the researcher “is the instrument of research” (p. 45). The challenge for each researcher then, is to not eliminate bias to attain a “God’s eye view,” but rather carefully identify the perspectives of the researcher and the researcher’s background (Merriam, 2009, p. 46). Maxwell (2013) also suggested that researchers can reflect better on their own biases by creating a Researcher Identity Memo to explore their own expectations, beliefs, and assumptions that are associated with the research study on which they have embarked (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). This process is an intentional way to identify certain values and beliefs

as one's own, rather than projecting them onto other people or circumstances during the data gathering (Maxwell, 2012). To carefully reflect upon and identify my own perspectives, I created a Researcher Identity Memo, which is articulated in detail in Appendix A.

### **Phenomenography**

Phenomenographic research is the qualitative method of inquiry used for this study as the method has the potential to collect appropriate data pertaining to research questions. Marton (1981) has stated that researchers can approach questions about learning by either orienting themselves toward the world to make statements about reality or by orienting themselves toward their research participants' ideas and their experiences of that world. The former is the study of the phenomenon. The latter is the study of how people experience that phenomenon and is the focus of phenomenography. In this study, a phenomenographic method helped me understand what factors supported or impeded the participants' experiences while working through their own spiritual struggle during college.

Phenomenography indicates that experience is the "subject" of a study and tries to understand the ways people seek to make sense the phenomena around them (Marton, 1981). Phenomenographic research is designed to interact with participants to better understand how they perceive, think about, and conceptualize their experiences that pertain to the specific phenomenon of study (Booth, 1997). Therefore, phenomenographic research studies the conceptions of a particular group regarding a particular phenomenon and does so primarily through interviews. The method identifies similarities and differences in people's conceptions and faithfully articulates those

descriptions (Entwistle, 1997; Svensson, 1997). The goal in phenomenographic research is to identify the categories of description drawn from the participants' conceptions and experiences of a phenomenon. As these descriptions are established, the research approach seeks to capture the underlying meanings and relationships between them (Entwistle, 1997; Marton, 1981). It is a method often used in studies pertaining to higher educational and in those related to religious and spiritual topics (Åkerlind, 2008). Marton (1986) explained that phenomenography is "an empirical research tradition that was designed to answer questions about thinking and learning" (p. 28).

One of the critiques directed toward phenomenography is that it is rooted in foundationalist assumptions where, from a constructivist perspective, it is impossible to categorize themes across interviews, as the researchers unconsciously assess their own constructed categories (Richardson, 1999). While phenomenography may have certain foundationalist characteristics, it also holds constructivist views, thereby aligning well with the basic theory of critical realism.

### **Critical Realism**

The caution that constructivists have raised regarding phenomenography is also an epistemological tension that I personally worked to navigate when considering an appropriate research method. I had certain reservations with the epistemological assumptions of both foundationalism and constructivism. Foundationalism holds that there is one external reality that becomes known through use of objective methods, but it fails to consider the layers of perspectives that people infuse into how they individually look at the world. Research on race, culture, gender, and orientation have exposed the biases of majority cultures and their "objectivity," and rightly cited the dangerous results



of those who use this claim on objectivity to oppress others. Constructivism holds that reality is not simply “out there” but rather is constructed through individual and shared constructions (Maxwell, 2013). Thus, an individual knowledge of reality is a social construction that is “constituted by human mental categories, discursive practices, definitions of situations, and symbolic exchanges [and] then sustained as ‘real’ through ongoing social interactions that are in turn shaped by particular interests, perspectives, and, usually, imbalances of power” (Smith, 2010, p. 122).

Criticism of constructivism (especially its strongest versions) comes from the argument that it is intellectually self-defeating, as there is no true way to judge what is absolutely real. This perspective undermines all the research, including the researcher’s results as mere constructions of the researcher who has no authority to observe, assess, or recommend reliable ways forward. Strong forms of constructivism are also critiqued as being morally self-defeating, as there can be no real moral standards. Judgments, therefore, on others’ perspectives are impossible, as all moral claims made are mere social constructions. In the end, the purest forms of constructivism are both self-defeating and isolating. Soft constructivism, on the other hand, has merit, but it is better expressed through critical realism (Maxwell, 2012; Smith, 2010).

Critical realism offers an alternative approach to foundationalism and constructivism. It is rooted in both ontological realism and epistemological constructivism. Ontological realism, like foundationalism, holds that there is a real world that exists independently from people’s perceptions, theories, or constructions of that world. Because we live in an independent individual reality, we experience certain aspects of it, but not its entirety. Epistemological constructivism holds that our

understanding of the world is constructed from our perspectives of the shared world we live in although our perspectives of that world, especially from our own different points of view, remain still limited and thus incomplete. Therefore, critical realists believe (contrary to constructivists) that there are not multiple realities of the world. There is only one reality; however, they also deny (contrary to foundationalism) that anyone can actually have an “objective” view of the world.

Instead, critical realists hold that there is one reality and multiple perspectives of this reality that indeed need to be continually tested. Critical realism allows for varying perspectives so as to emphasize common themes that may provide greater insights to a broader reality. At the same time (in concert with postmodernity), critical realism continues to emphasize that differences in perspectives exist, and that these differences allow for critiques of our individual understandings of reality (Maxwell, 2012; Smith, 2010). Smith (2010) stated that “[c]ritical realism explicitly advocates the *fallibility* of all human knowledge (but without sliding into relativism) and, therefore, [motivates] ongoing engagement, inquiry, and debate” (p. 143). He posited that critical realism encourages our search for “the best human account of truth about the real” that is drawn from our “scientific humility, open considerations of plausible alternative viewpoints, and reliance on persuasion as evidence to influence minds” (p. 143).

### **Critical Realism and Phenomenography**

Qualitative research done from a critical realist perspective using the phenomenographic method supports the goals of this study, which are to contribute to the knowledge of undergraduates’ spiritual development by examining what college-related factors that Evangelical Christian students perceive as supporting or impeding their

experiences of working through spiritual struggle at a public university. This goal assumes that students' perceptions are important and also relevant for understanding what they describe as the factors affecting spiritual struggle and the resources they access for working through that struggle. The potential for clarifying, affirming, or discovering themes that support and/or impede students' spiritual struggle experiences offers the potential for more discourse and increasingly better practices (Smith, 2010). Further, the assumptions described herein take into account the value and the limitations of the researcher as an individual who interacts, reflects upon, and attempts to capture both the common and the contradictory themes that can emerge within and across such qualitative interviews (Marton, 1981, 1986).

**Research and the critical realist perspective.** Research from a critical realist approach assumes that meaning (beliefs, reasons, motives, etc.), although not accessible to direct observation, is still real and offers a valid explanation for individual actions. Instead of a dualism that rests between the metaphysical and the physical, critical realism holds that people's meanings affect their actions, and their actions then affect the meaning (Maxwell, 2012). Maxwell (2012) has suggested that the strategies useful for causal explanation in qualitative research include long-term involvement, collecting "rich" data (a description of participant thinking and behaviors), and using the narrative approach (Maxwell, 2012). In solidarity with postmodern perspectives that reject universals and emphasize the complex and multiple tensions regarding individual perspectives, a critical realist perspective assumes that research not only identifies similarities, but also exposes differences within those similarities. An emphasis on

similarity alone fails to capture the unique diversity that is present in any phenomenon and may indeed allow for overstatement of its interpretation (Maxwell, 2012).

**The phenomenographic method.** Entwistle (1997) offered that when phenomenographic studies in higher education gather data from interviews, questions must be posed that allow participants, namely, students, to express their perceptions through their own frame of reference rather than having one imposed on them by the researcher. He suggested that it is better to conduct questioning that moves “from actions to experience and from concrete to abstract” (p. 132). Descriptive categories should also be presented with enough sufficient extracts to capture their full meaning and contextual relationships. Summaries of descriptive categories should reveal the salient features that distinguish these categories from other categories. Care must also be taken to establish categories that reflect each participant response fairly. Once these categories have been established, phenomenography can then seek to understand the relationship between those categories (Entwistle, 1997).

### **A Conceptual Framework Drawn from the Literature**

While spiritual struggle has been described generally in the literature, there are also calls for richer narratives to determine what struggle actually means to undergraduates (Rockenbach et al., 2012). The developmental model offered by Fowler (1980, 1994) and built further by Parks (2000) offers a helpful lens for interpreting undergraduates’ personal understanding of their spiritual growth. Parks (2000) recognized that individual spiritual development is comprised of three essential elements: The form of knowing (intellectual), the form of dependence (affective), and the form of community (relational). Using the work of Fowler (1981), Parks (2000) focused

specifically on what Arnett (2004) has called the emerging adult period (late teen to mid-twenties). Within that emerging adulthood period, Parks (2000) identified three stages of spiritual development—Adolescent/Conventional, Young Adult, and Tested Adult. Parks (2000) emphasized the need for educators to be particularly aware of undergraduates in these stages of spiritual development, who experience crises or “shipwreck,” and who need support to navigate those stressful periods.

Past studies have recognized Parks’ (2000) framework as helpful for understanding participants’ perceptions of their spiritual development and support. Fisler et al. (2009) suggested that a strength of Parks’ (2000) theory is “the recognition of cognitive, affective, and social influences on spiritual development” (p. 269). Spiritual struggle will occur when students experience their spirituality as being betrayed, challenged, threatened, or found wanting because of new information or different life experiences. They are compelled to step away from the familiar cognitive, affective, and social ways for how they have understood their spirituality and enter into unknown territory to seek a more congruent spirituality that can hold and support the new information and experiences they have recently encountered. Thus, understanding students’ perspectives regarding what supports or impedes their working through spiritual struggle requires offering and expressing a sensitivity to their unique stage of spiritual development and also the type of struggles they are experiencing during that stage. (Fowler, 1981, 1995; Parks, 2000).

Figure 1 describes the kinds of spiritual struggle students may experience, depending on the form of that struggle and the maturity of spiritual development.

Note in Figure 1, that spiritual struggle occurs in between stages of equilibrium, will likely happen more than once, and may be experienced intellectually, emotionally, and/or relationally. Placing more specific attention on where and what kinds of spiritual struggle undergraduates experience, creates opportunities for a more refined understanding of the struggle that the students describe. The kinds of struggle labeled in Figure 1 will be explained in light of Parks' (2000) spiritual elements, namely, knowing, dependence, and community.

| <b>Forms of Spiritual Development and Struggle</b> | <b>Adolescent</b>            |                        | <b>Young Adult</b>           | <b>Tested Adult</b>          |  |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| <b>Forms of Knowing (Cognitive)</b>                | Authority Bound Dualistic    | Unqualified Relativism | Probing Commitment           | Tested Commitment            |  |
| Struggle within Knowing                            | <i>Doubting struggle</i>     |                        | <i>Articulating struggle</i> | <i>Integrating struggle</i>  |  |
| <b>Forms of Dependence (Affective)</b>             | Dependent/ Counter-Dependent |                        | Fragile Inner-Dependence     | Confident Inner-Dependence   |  |
| Struggle within Dependence                         |                              |                        | <i>Negative feelings</i>     | <i>Positive feelings</i>     |  |
| <b>Forms of Community (Relational)</b>             | Conventional                 | Diffuse                | Mentoring Community          | Self-selected Class/Group    |  |
| Struggle within Community                          | <i>Separating struggle</i>   |                        | <i>Seeking struggle</i>      | <i>Contributing struggle</i> |  |

*Figure 1.* Spiritual development and the kinds of spiritual struggle. Adapted from Parks' (2000) depiction of spiritual development where spiritual struggle can be experienced at various phases and in various forms. Labels for the kinds of struggle possible are my own and designed for easier description and reference.

## **The form of Knowing**

Within the form of knowing, spiritual struggle occurs as undergraduates begin to critically reflect on their beliefs and worldviews, often questioning what those in authority have taught them. *Doubting struggle*, occurs when students reconsider their inherited (Authority Bound Dualistic) beliefs in light of new information and experiences. Students express doubt or feel challenged when they address existential questions of evil, death, war, disparity, etc. In doubting struggle, students articulate more emphatically what they do not believe, and their thinking can be easily influenced by contexts and relationships (Unqualified Relativism). Next, *articulating struggle*, occurs as students embark on a quest to test and try out new belief systems or worldviews, often experiencing a “divided self” by attempting to synthesize what they already know and accept along with what they are learning or experiencing (Probing Commitment). *Integrating struggle*, occurs as young people take responsibility for their own thinking and knowing and seek to live in a way that is both committed to and congruent with their emerging beliefs (Tested Commitment) (Parks, 2000).

## **The form of Dependence**

Within the form of dependence, undergraduates wrestle with the affective elements that are associated with spiritual struggle. *Negative feelings*, ensue as students seek to develop their spirituality less from external (religious leaders, adults, parents) influences (Dependent/Counter-Dependent) and more from an internal locus of authority wherein they are making their spirituality their own (Fragile Inner-dependence). People during this period of negativity may experience feelings of guilt, shame, insecurity, betrayal, rebellion, sadness, or anger. As they work through their negative feelings, some

continue to internalize and own their beliefs for themselves and experience *positive feelings*, where they find comfort, confidence, congruency, and peace with the person they are becoming spiritually (Confident Inner-Dependence) (Parks, 2000).

### **The form of Community**

Within the form of community, undergraduates reconsider their loyalties and relationships to the people or groups with whom they associate. *Separating struggle*, emerges as young people move from an uncritical loyalty to a group that is “just like us” (Conventional) and then question the assumptions that divide “us” from “them,” which can then lead them to separating themselves from a group, a family, or relationships (Diffuse). Next, *seeking struggle* occurs as students search for a community that welcomes, supports, or encourages their evolving perceptions of a more inclusive group (Mentoring Community). Beyond attending a community, students may experience *contributing struggle* to try and find their place or role within the same or a different community that they selected, which also respects and acknowledges their new, varying perspectives (Self-Selected Class/Group) (Parks, 2000).

### **Spiritual Development and Spiritual Struggle**

Spiritual struggle described within spiritual development and the form of spirituality provides a framework that helps one delve deeper into students’ descriptions of their struggles. Figure 2 summarizes the ways these kinds of struggle have been described to try and provide a more articulate lens for viewing and understanding students’ described spiritual struggles.



| Elements of Spiritual Development | Adolescent  |   | Young Adult  | Tested Adult  |  |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|--|---|--|
| Forms of Knowing (Cognitive)      | Authority Bound Dualistic   | Unqualified Relativism  | Probing Commitment   | Tested Commitment   |  |
| Struggle within Knowing           | <i>Doubting struggle</i><br>Doubting what has been taught them; asking questions on the problem of evil, pain, suffering, injustice; existential questions, etc.; articulating what they don't believe anymore. | <i>Articulating struggle</i><br>Attempting to articulate one's own beliefs; seeking to offer alternative rationales for what they assumed or were taught. | <i>Integrating struggle</i><br>Growing confidence in articulating their own beliefs/worldview; learning to accept both/and new categories rather than either/or.     |   |  |
| Forms of Dependence (Affective)   | Dependent/ Counter-Dependent  |   | Fragile Inner-Dependence   | Confident Inner-Dependence  |  |
| Struggle within Dependence        |   |   | <i>Negative feelings</i><br>Experiencing feelings of guilt, shame, anger, confusion, unfaithfulness, betrayal  | <i>Positive feelings</i><br>Discovering a sense of being at peace with oneself and others |  |
| Forms of Community (Relational)   | Conventional  | Diffuse   | Mentoring Community  | Self-selected Class/Group   |  |
| Struggle within Community         | <i>Separating struggle</i><br>Questioning community assumptions, norms, biases, etc.; experience conflict, misunderstanding, loss and home no longer being "home."  | <i>Seeking struggle</i><br>Seeking or searching for a place to belong to, be accepted, search, quest  | <i>Contributing struggle</i><br>Searching for one's role within the new community; discovering the value and challenges associated with an interdependent community. |   |  |

Figure 2. Spiritual development and descriptions of spiritual struggle. Adapted from Parks' (2000) depiction of spiritual development where spiritual struggle can be experienced at various periods and in various forms. Descriptions show generally how each form of struggle is typically explained.

### **Study Participant Selection**

Maxwell (2012) suggested that the guiding principle for selecting participants in a qualitative study is not to ensure representativeness or comparability, but rather to “identify groups, settings, or individuals that best exhibit the characteristics for [the] phenomena of interest” (p. 94) and also, to “select those that are most accessible and conducive to gaining the understandings you seek” (p. 94). He calls this method “purposive sampling” and adds that, in such a sampling, one must include participants who can speak relevantly to the theory being studied. This current study thus uses a purposive sampling approach to identify those participants that hold the particular characteristics closely related to this study’s research questions. Participants thus qualified for the sample when they met the following criteria: 1) they were junior or senior college students; 2) they identified as Evangelical Christian; 3) they reported experiencing some form of spiritual struggle (“shifts or changes” in their spiritual or religious beliefs or practices) while at college; and 4) they were students’ attending the public university chosen for this study.

#### **Upperclassmen**

Focusing on junior and senior undergraduates acknowledges what the previous research findings have indicated, namely, that younger undergraduates are not likely to be aware of or engaged in critical thinking about their own spiritual development (Clydesdale, 2007; Fisler et al., 2009). Younger undergraduates are more likely to remain conventional in their inherited beliefs, while older undergraduates have had more time to experience challenge, change, and take ownership of their own spirituality. Further, upper classmen have more of a historical perspective and can look back on their

college careers and thus speak precisely to the questions addressed in this study (Barry & Nelson, 2005; Fidler et al., 2009; Lindholm, 2007).

### **Evangelical Christian Undergraduates**

In an attempt to remain focused on one perspective of religion and spirituality, this research focused specifically on undergraduates who identified as “Evangelical Christian.” Evangelicals are theologically conservative Protestants who emphasize personal piety and often come from fundamentalist, neo-evangelical, “seeker-sensitive”, or Pentecostal congregations (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Arnett & Jensen (2002) categorized Evangelicals as “Conservative Christians” who express a belief in traditional Christian dogma, for example, that Jesus is the Son of God and the only path to salvation. They may mention being saved or refer to an afterlife of Heaven and Hell and say that Christianity is the only true faith. The PEW Research Foundation described “Evangelical Protestant Churches” by using similar characteristics to those used by Arnett & Jensen (2002), which includes the use of “born again” language to describe one’s spirituality (Lugo et al., 2008).

Smith & Snell (2009) noted that the majority of emerging adults who identify as “Christian” retain the religious tradition they had as teenagers and still have positive feelings toward their religion. Still, an emerging adult identification with a particular denomination can sometimes be less defined. Putnam & Campbell (2010) have identified many young people as “liminals” or those who may have a religious tradition, but do not have any exclusive commitment to one denomination (p. 136). In this study, I tried to be sensitive to “liminality” in terms of the ways that undergraduates defined their religious identity, taking into consideration that at times no self-identification was clear-cut. I thus

took into account students' religious upbringings and the language they used to describe their Christian perspective. Some studies have treated Historically Black Protestant Churches as a separate category, although still admitting there is some overlap with the Evangelical category (Lugo et al., 2008; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). For this study, however, Historically Black Protestant Churches that hold Evangelical perspectives were considered as being also Evangelical.

### **Study Site Selection**

This study was undertaken at a Midwest public university. Unlike religious colleges or smaller colleges where there is likely to be more homogeneity, a public university is tasked with the challenge of acknowledging and understanding the many diverse perspectives of its diverse student body. The literature points to public universities today becoming increasingly aware not only of the spirituality of their students, but also the diverse spiritual perspectives their students may encounter (Bryant, 2006b; Cherry et al., 2001; Eck, 1993; Miller & Ryan, 2001; Nash, 2001; Patel, 2007; Raper, 2001; Speck, 2005; Wuthnow, 2005). As Tisdell (2003) observed, each type of higher education institution has challenges and opportunities associated with serving their students, as these students encounter varying perspectives that will affect their personal religious and spiritual assumptions.

All the students interviewed for this study attended the same Midwest, public university. The school is a Research 1, land grant university with a student body of approximately 50,000. According to the university's *2013 Statistical Report*, 7,161 international, undergraduate and graduate students from 131 countries attended the university in the fall of 2013. According to their *2011-2012 Annual Progress Report on*

*Diversity and Inclusion*, approximately 79% of the student population was white, with 19% being students of color and international students. The percentage of undergraduate women and men equally distributed at 50%. Over 150 majors are offered to undergraduates. On their website, the university reports having more than 550 campus groups. Of these groups, approximately 50, or close to 10%, are listed as Christian campus religious groups with a third of these groups (15) having an Evangelical outlook. In addition, there are approximately 10 churches near the campus that have reported reaching out to students who are attending the university.

### **Data Collection**

Maxwell (2012) stressed that the “relationships that the researcher creates with participants in the research are real phenomena; they shape the context within which the research is conducted, and have a profound influence on the research and results” (p. 100). This study interviewed 20 participants, asking each to reflect on their spiritual struggle as undergraduates who are attending a public university. Participants were juniors or seniors, self-identifying as Evangelical Christians who have experienced a shift or change in their spiritual or religious beliefs or activities while attending college. Two rounds of interviews were scheduled with the participant group. The first round of interviews each lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The second interviews were 30 to 60 minutes in duration. After collecting and analyzing the first round of interviews, a second round was held with the same participants. The second round of interviews gave students more opportunities to reflect on their initial interviews and also to become more at ease in talking with me about their spirituality. Additionally, the second interviews allowed for

the opportunity to member check, clarify themes, and delve more deeply into the more predominant themes that these students revealed in their first interviews.

### **Reflective Memo and Lay Summary**

Maxwell (2012) further stressed the importance of establishing mutually productive and equitable relationships throughout the interview process. One way to address this dynamic is to create a “reflective memo” that asks questions about the kind of relationship the researcher wants to establish, while also anticipating how the researcher will be perceived by those with whom he or she is interacting, then deciding on what agreements will be made regarding collecting and reporting results, and anticipating any ethical problems that might arise (Maxwell, 2012, pp. 102-103). My reflective memo for this study is articulated in Appendix B.

While the reflective memo is a document addressing the reflexivity of the researcher, the “lay summary” is a document that can be presented to the participants. Glesne (2006) indicated that a lay summary explains to study participants who and what the researcher is doing, thus preparing the participants for the data collection (p. 40). Lay summaries establish who the researcher is, what the researcher is doing and why, what will be done with the results, how the study site and participants were selected, any possible benefits or risks to the participants, the promise of confidentiality and anonymity given to the participants, the site, the frequency of interviews, the length of each session, and a request for permission to record observations and the words of the participants by either recording or writing the words down or doing both (Glesne, 2006). My lay summary for this study is articulated in Appendix C.

## **Connecting With Campus Religious Group and Church Leaders**

In the Spring 2014 semester, I contacted 16 campus religious groups and local church leaders by email. Of these, 10 leaders responded to my invitation to talk in person or by phone. My intent was to introduce myself and explain my research project, so they would understand the purpose of the project and the spirit in which it was conducted. Generally, I received positive feedback. Many leaders were very interested in the research topic and eager to pass along my request to students who might fit my participant requirements. Some leaders raised certain concerns over confidentiality for their students and anonymity of their organizations, but they felt satisfied once I explained my process. From January 2014 through February 2014, I met with campus and church religious leaders and provided them information about the project via electronic and hard copy that they could then pass along to potential students. The leaders then promoted my request for participants through email, Facebook, and personal conversations. One group leader invited me to a group meeting, and I was able to announce my study there, but other groups did not permit me to address their groups. Resistance to my addressing groups ranged from scheduling conflicts to their in-place policies regarding announcements. From February 2014 through March 2014, students responded to my participant requests. Students contacted me via email or text messages to express interest in participating in my study. I confirmed with them that they met the study's participant characteristics, and then set up interviews.

Throughout my first round of interviews, I used snowball sampling, asking participants to consider passing along information to others who might fit the study's participant requirements. By the end of March, the majority of the 20 first scheduled

interviews were completed, and I even had to turn away some students who had offered to be participants.

Using Doodle, an online scheduling tool, I arranged follow-up interviews with 19 of the 20 participants and had a 100% return rate from all I invited back for the second interviews. I completed those interviews by the end of April 2014. One participant who completed the first interview proved to be unable to articulate the spiritual experiences he had, so I determined that I had received all the relevant information I needed from him in the first interview and, therefore, had no need to invite him to a second interview. Except for this one participant, I completed two interviews for each participant.

Throughout this process, I achieved the important goals I had set for the process. I sought to meet with, listen to, and honor the religious leaders I met. During the participant search, I sent these leaders updates on my progress and thanked them for getting the word out on my behalf. Many leaders thanked me for these updates, and some even emailed me to inquire how I was progressing. I worked to complete my research in the Spring 2014 semester, as I wanted to meet with the students before their summer break. Further, I was very surprised by the number of students willing to participate and did not expect to be in a position to turn away willing participants. Finally, I was impressed that I was able to experience a 100% response rate from the first-interview participants who I contacted about returning for their second interview. While students may have been motivated by the incentives of the Amazon gift cards I offered, their remarks during their interviews suggested that they indeed valued our conversations and saw their investment in the interviews as also beneficial for them personally.



## **Interview Protocol**

As these interested students responded, we communicated via email wherein I offered a brief lay summary of my study and invited them to participate. To encourage participation, I offered incentives of a \$15 Amazon gift card for the first interview and a \$25 Amazon gift card for the second interview. Interested students who said they met the study's criteria were scheduled for their first interview. I arranged by email to meet them at a public, yet quiet, spot on campus of their choosing. Typically I gave them options of a nearby coffee shop, the on-campus food court, or the student union. Before the interview, I reviewed the IRB consent form with them, asked them to sign it, and offered them a copy. Due to the nature of student spirituality often being a particularly personal topic, I was particularly committed to creating a safe and conversational environment, relying primarily on recording the conversations for later transcription and limiting the amount of writing I did in front of the participant. After the interview, I thanked them for their investment of time and explained that they could expect me to contact them for a follow-up, second interview.

The first round of interviews allowed me to do an initial analysis and find cross-cutting themes. The second interview was intended to create more familiarity and rapport with each participant and provide additional space and time for each student to speak more freely about his or her experiences. It also gave me the opportunity to follow up by asking clarifying questions that I had gleaned from the first round of interviews (Maxwell, 2013).

## **The Interviews**

I conducted a pilot study to practice my interview and observation techniques and ensure that the questions, approach, and process undertaken in the actual interviews were the most effective. I interviewed three participants for the pilot study and recorded my observations and any adjustments to that process to prepare well for the study (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2012). These students did not attend the public university where I conducted my actual study, but their ages and experiences matched the type of student I sought, and my interviews with them helped me fine-tune my preparation for the interview process for the actual study. For the first and second interviews, I used a semi-structured interview protocol to explore the research questions. Appendix D precisely frames that interview protocol.

All participants gave me permission to record both interviews, and all interviews were transcribed. After I transcribed the participant's first interviews, I reflected on our conversations and used the data to plan my follow-up questions for the second interview. As anticipated, each first interview lasted 45-90 minutes, and every second interview lasted 20-45 minutes. I compiled the transcriptions and notes from both interviews for each participant and uploaded the data to Dedoose, an online, qualitative research tool. Using Dedoose, I categorized the participants and coded the data, saving it in an online, password-protected format. In place of the participants' real names, I used pseudonyms in order to protect their identities.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using what Maxwell (2012) describes as categorizing and connecting strategies. The categorizing of strategies is based on the similarity of

relationships between observations that are independent in time and space. They are data connections based on comparison rather than actual connection and done through coding. The connecting of strategies analyzes data by “identifying key relationships that tie the data together into a narrative or sequences” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 115). Attention to both categorizing and connecting of strategies provides more sensitivity to undergraduates’ spiritual experiences and their spiritual development journey and its narrative. These strategies for analysis were implemented through transcription, data categorization, and data connection in this instance.

### **Transcription and Coding**

Following Creswell’s (2009) levels of data analysis, the data was prepared by organizing and preparing it via transcribing the audio-recorded interviews, typing field notes, and arranging the data. Next, the data was reread to gain a general sense of the information and its overall meaning. Then, a detailed analysis of the coding was completed. Following coding, general themes were developed for further analysis by considering both the categories and the chronology. Finally, interpretations of the data were offered (Creswell, 2002; Maxwell, 2012).

Coding as a categorization strategy was completed and organized using Dedoose, an online, qualitative data analysis application. I followed Maxwell’s (2012) types of categories for coding, namely, organizational, substantive, and theoretical categories. Organizational categories capture the broad issues established prior to data collection, often used as abstract “bins” for re-sorting data later (p. 112). Substantive categories are descriptive and include the participants’ concepts, beliefs, and personal words. They can be useful in developing a general theory for what is happening. Theoretical categories

place coded data into a general framework established by the researcher. In this instance, I used the data collected to identify key themes for the specific factors that affected undergraduates' spiritual development.

### **Validity**

From a critical realist perspective, theories offer the potential of letting us better understand reality. Validity is important, as it helps ensure the quality of the generated theories. Maxwell (2012) stated that, the “main challenge for a realist approach to validity is to explain how, if our understandings are inevitably our own fallible constructions rather than ‘objective’ perceptions or interpretations of actual phenomena, one can possibly have any basis for making validity judgments that go beyond procedures and attempt to engage with these real phenomena” (p.131). He argues that validity is not based merely on the methods used, but also on how those methods affect the conclusions that are drawn. Maxwell (2012) also suggested that establishing validity also involves utilizing descriptive validity, interpretative validity, theoretical validity, and generalizability.

Descriptive validity pertains to factual or descriptive accuracy for what the researcher saw or heard. It refers to specific events and situations and where, in theory, matters of inter-subjective agreement from the gathered data can be achieved. Interpretive validity is concerned with what the collected data mean to the participants. Researchers seek to comprehend what meanings participants are giving to the topic being studied. These include beliefs, intentions, or concepts that are either used by the participants or merely believed by them (e.g. theory-in-use vs. espoused theory) (Maxwell, 2012).

Theoretical validity is the theoretical construction that the researcher brings to analyze the data. Theoretical validity includes the validity of the concepts applied to the phenomena studied and the way that those concepts are brought together to interpret those phenomena (Maxwell, 2012). With these elements of validity fully in mind, this study incorporated some of the strategies suggested by Cresswell (2003), including member checking, rich/thick description, clarifying the biases of the research, and using a peer debriefer.

Generalizability refers to the extent that one can connect findings to other situations or populations. Maxwell (2012) suggests there are two types of generalizability—internal and external. Internal generalizability refers to generalizing within a setting, group, or institution. External generalizability refers to generalizing outside that group to other groups, settings, or institutions. Internal generalizability is more important for qualitative researchers, as they rarely make external generalizability claims (Maxwell, 2012). Still, the uniqueness of the interviewing process often does limit the way that one generalizes findings. Care must be taken not to make inferences that overstep the data that is collected from unique interviews (Maxwell, 2012).

### **Full Consideration of Human Subjects**

In compliance with Michigan State's University Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS), I completed an online application for the UCRIHS. Further, I ensured the quality of my interaction with all the participants in light of what has previously been described here, including, and especially related to the reflexive memo offered in Appendix B (Maxwell, 2012).

## **Participant Sample**

Maxwell (2012) suggested that “purposive sampling” involves inviting the participants to help the researcher accomplish what he or she wants to know. To accomplish this goal, I sought out those who could help direct me to potential participants, including campus religious organization leaders and local pastors. Through face-to-face conversations, phone calls, and emails, I communicated the project’s goals and sent leaders soft and hard copy materials for them to pass along to their students. For those students who responded, I scheduled and conducted first interviews. I used snowball sampling by asking students to share my project with other friends who might fit the designated participant characteristics of the study (Merriam, 2009). Nineteen of twenty participants completed their second interviews. Merriam (2009) noted that a sample size should be large enough to maximize the information sought by the research questions. Thus, the appropriate size of a sample is reached when there is redundancy in participant responses and no new information is being reported from them. Upon completion of the second round of interviews, totaling 39 interviews from 20 students, I felt comfortable that I had reached Merriam’s (2009) “redundancy” definition in terms of my participant responses.

Of the 20 students interviewed, 11 were males, and 9 were females. The racial make-up of the sample included 16 White, 2 Asian, 1 Black/African American, and 1 Hispanic/Latino. Of the sample, 11 were juniors and 9 were seniors. Regarding their majors of study, 14 were in professional/applied majors (Engineering, Animal Science, Social Work, International Relations, Education), 4 were in humanities majors (History, Religious Studies, Communications, English), and 2 were in formal science majors

(Mathematics, Human Biology). Of the sample, 12 students were involved in a Campus Religious Group (CRG) and 8 were not. Those who were not attending a CRG either never attended this kind of group or had stopped attending one. Regarding church attendance, 8 attended a church that was similar to the one they grew up in, 8 attended a church that was different than the type of church they grew up in, and 4 did not attend church at all. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the study participant sample.

Table 1

*Participant Sample Characteristics*

| Name      | Gender | Race/ Ethnicity | Year   | Academic Major                    | CRG Attendance | Church Attendance         |
|-----------|--------|-----------------|--------|-----------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Aaron     | Male   | Asian           | Junior | Human Biology                     | Yes            | Attended similar church   |
| Andy      | Male   | White           | Senior | Computer Science                  | Yes            | Attended similar church   |
| Brenda    | Female | White           | Junior | Elementary Education, Spanish     | No             | Attended different church |
| Cassandra | Female | Hispanic/Latino | Senior | Education and Chinese             | No             | Attended different church |
| Colleen   | Female | White           | Junior | Kinesiology                       | Yes            | Attended different church |
| James     | Male   | White           | Senior | Mathematics                       | No             | Did not attend church     |
| Jenny     | Female | White           | Senior | Elementary Education              | Yes            | Attended similar church   |
| Jodi      | Female | White           | Junior | Social Work                       | No             | Attended different church |
| John      | Male   | White           | Senior | Biomedical Engineering            | Yes            | Attended similar church   |
| Joseph    | Male   | White           | Senior | English                           | No             | Did not attend church     |
| Karen     | Female | White           | Senior | Education and Psychology          | Yes            | Attended different church |
| Mara      | Female | White           | Junior | Human Development, Family Studies | Yes            | Attended similar church   |

Table 1 (cont'd)

|         |        |                        |        |                                  |     |                           |
|---------|--------|------------------------|--------|----------------------------------|-----|---------------------------|
| Matt    | Male   | White                  | Junior | Religious Studies and Psychology | No  | Did not attend church     |
| Mike    | Male   | White                  | Senior | History Education                | Yes | Attended different church |
| Mitch   | Male   | White                  | Junior | Applied Engineering Sciences     | Yes | Attended different church |
| Simon   | Male   | Asian                  | Junior | Dietetics                        | Yes | Attended similar church   |
| Therese | Female | Black/African American | Junior | Animal Science                   | Yes | Attended similar church   |
| Tom     | Male   | White                  | Junior | International Relations          | No  | Did not attend church     |
| Trevor  | Male   | White                  | Senior | Communications                   | Yes | Attended different church |
| Trisha  | Female | White                  | Junior | Bio-systems Engineering          | No  | Attended similar church   |

Outside of student academic activities, 17 of the 20 participants reported investing time in spiritual activities, averaging 9 hours per week (ranging from 2 to 2 hours); 11 of 20 reported working at a job or internship, averaging 12 hours per week; 6 of 20 participants volunteered outside their religious group averaging 6 hours per week; 4 of 20 reported being involved with a non-religious campus group or athletics, averaging 10 hours per week. Not surprisingly, those who were more invested in their CRGs, had less time available for other groups and volunteering, and vice versa. Table 2 summarizes the students' non-academic involvement.



Table 2

*Summary of Participating Students' Structured Non-Academic Involvement*

| Name      | CRG | Church            | Spiritual/<br>Religious<br>Investment<br>(hr/week) | Volunteer<br>(hr/week) | Work/<br>Internship<br>(hr/week) | Campus<br>Org/Sports<br>(hr/week) | Total<br>Hours/<br>Week |
|-----------|-----|-------------------|--|------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Aaron     | Yes | Yes/<br>Similar   | 10   | 0                      | 0                                | 0                                 | 10                      |
| Andy      | Yes | Yes/<br>Similar   | 20   | 0                      | 10                               | 0                                 | 30                      |
| Brenda    | No  | Yes/<br>Different | 7  | 4                      | 10                               | 0                                 | 21                      |
| Cassandra | No  | Yes/<br>Different | 5  | 0                      | 15                               | 0                                 | 20                      |
| Colleen   | Yes | Yes/<br>Different | 10   | 10                     | 0                                | 0                                 | 20                      |
| James     | No  | No                | 0  | 0                      | 0                                | 0                                 | 0                       |
| Jenny     | Yes | Yes/<br>Similar   | 10   | 5                      | 20                               | 0                                 | 35                      |
| Jodi      | No  | Yes/<br>Different | 6  | 0                      | 0                                | 4                                 | 10                      |
| John      | Yes | Yes/<br>Similar   | 10   | 0                      | 0                                | 0                                 | 10                      |
| Joseph    | No  | No                | 0  | 0                      | 7                                | 12                                | 19                      |
| Karen     | Yes | Yes/<br>Different | 10   | 4                      | 13                               | 0                                 | 27                      |
| Mara      | Yes | Yes/<br>Similar   | 10   | 5                      | 15                               | 0                                 | 30                      |
| Matt      | No  | No                | 5  | 0                      | 0                                | 0                                 | 5                       |
| Mike      | Yes | Yes/<br>Different | 10   | 0                      | 15                               | 0                                 | 25                      |

Table 2 (cont'd)

|         |     |                   |    |   |    |    |    |
|---------|-----|-------------------|----|---|----|----|----|
| Mitch   | Yes | Yes/<br>Different | 9  | 0 | 15 | 0  | 24 |
| Simon   | Yes | Yes/<br>Similar   | 10 | 4 | 0  | 2  | 16 |
| Trisha  | No  | Yes/<br>Similar   | 2  | 0 | 0  | 20 | 22 |
| Therese | Yes | Yes/<br>Similar   | 8  | 0 | 5  | 0  | 13 |
| Tom     | No  | No                | 0  | 0 | 12 | 0  | 12 |
| Trevor  | Yes | Yes/<br>Different | 10 | 0 | 0  | 0  | 10 |

### **Student Backgrounds and Campus Involvement**

Beyond students' self-identifying as coming from an evangelical or a conservative religious background, I asked the participants to describe their lives leading up to college and also to describe their current campus involvement. This information let me better understand the students' backgrounds as to where they came from and how their home lives may have influenced their college activity choices beyond academics.

#### **Family Background and Its Influence**

To get a sense of the students' backgrounds and thus where their beliefs may have shifted or changed, I asked them to tell me about their families and religious lives prior to attending college. Three background factors surfaced: parents and home life; home church involvement and experiences; and advice that those from home gave students prior to their attending the university.

**Parents and home-life elements.** Most students described their parents as people who attempted to live their daily lives congruently with their religious convictions. They regularly attended church as a family and often incorporated Bible reading and/or prayer

into their family activities. Most students had parents who were still married to each other, though a few had divorced parents. One had a father who had died with the mother remarrying. Most described their parents as being supportive and desiring to pass along their religious beliefs to their children. Tom explained: “My dad went to a Christian high school. My mom did, too. My grandparents all went to Christian Schools. All my brothers went to Christian schools.” Therese described her religious heritage: “I grew up in a Pentecostal-Apostolic household. My dad’s a Deacon, my mom is a Sunday School teacher. My grandpa was a trustee in his church. I’m part of a long line of Pentecostal-Apostolic Christians.” Jodi identified her family as “conservative”: “My grandparents are Christians on both sides. It’s in my heritage. We were pretty conservative. When I saw your flyer, and it said ‘Conservative,’ I thought, ‘Well, that fits!’ John appreciated his parents’ spiritual influence:

I grew up with very faithful parents who were consistent in encouraging me to love the lord. They were good examples. They are the people in my life that have had the most lasting impact. It started with them praying with me when I was young.

**Church involvement.** Most students described positive experiences of attending church and/or youth group in high school. Jodi commented: “I had a regular youth group experience. It was good. I enjoyed it.” Mitch described his consistent involvement: “I was heavily involved in my youth group. More or less, I was a leader in youth group. It was kinda small. I went every week. I felt I was growing. I was being disciplined [i.e. mentored] by the church pastor.” Simon offered: “I grew up in a Chinese-American church. I’ve been around Christian disciples my whole life.” Mara credited her high

school religious involvement for shaping who she is now: “I know that if I hadn’t had my background in middle school and high school, going to church, being a Christian, I probably wouldn’t have turned to God.”

Not all of the students’ experiences were positive, as some described their family changing churches or witnessing changes within churches that felt disruptive. James indicated his parents were no longer going to church:

I’m not too sure why they stopped. I didn’t complain much. I never liked getting up going to church. I was older, though, and I was at the point where I, and my peers, could make those choices on their own. There was more freedom. I think my parents tried a few different churches during the transition. But they don’t go to church anymore.

**Advice received for attending a public university.** During the interviews, I realized that students had specific impressions about their university. It occurred to me that some of their impressions were not their own ideas, but rather views that they had chosen to adopt. Pursuing this point, I asked students about any advice those from home (parents, church leaders, family, adults) had offered them before they came to college. The most frequent piece of advice students indicated they received was to be prepared to defend their faith from an otherwise non-Christian or anti-Christian, public university environment. Karen said, “I remember during my [high school] senior year, my religion teacher teaching us about apologetics [a subject on how to argue for and defend one’s own faith], and I remember him telling us that we needed to be prepared to defend our faith.” James also recalled the advice he was given:

No one directly warned me, but I heard it generally that, “When you go out into the world, your views are going to get challenged.” And they would say that it was possible that, if you went to a secular institution, you would have professors who would call you out and call you stupid and try to convert you [by] turning you atheist, which is ironic, because now I’m atheist! But I don’t feel that that’s what happened at all.

Therese remembered one of her church scholarship essay questions: “One of the scholarships I applied for was through my church. One of the essays asked ‘How will you maintain your Christianity when you go to a secular campus.’” Aaron described how the advice about college impacted him: “My church had this idea, once you go to college, everyone becomes a non-Christian, or it becomes really hard to stay a Christian. That might have been me by the mindset I had coming into college.”

Summarizing the students’ family backgrounds and influences, I observed that the majority of participants in this study came from fairly stable homes with parents who intentionally tried to model and pass along their religious beliefs to their children. Most said that they were invested in their home churches and/or youth groups and found connections there. Also, the most frequent advice students described receiving before they attended the university was to be prepared for it to be a hostile environment that would challenge their faith.

### **Campus Involvement**

Campus factors refer to the ways that students, beyond their academics and dorm life, spend their time. In this study, I observed that many students invested their time in campus religious groups (CRGs), church, and non-religious activities, such as

volunteering, paid work, internships, and athletics. This section documents where students reported spending their non-academic time and is grouped as: CRG involvement, church involvement, and involvement in nonreligious groups.

**Campus Religious Group (CRG) involvement.** Of the 20 participants interviewed, 12 said that they were involved in a CRG. Each of those students reported spending at least 9-11 hours per week in spiritual investment (attending church, CRG meetings, and personal disciplines such as prayer or scripture reading). Of the 8 students who were not currently involved in a CRG, most indicated that they were not part of such a group because they didn't feel it fit them. Jodi chose to be involved in a church college group in lieu of a CRG. Trisha had athletic commitments that did not allow her to connect with a CRG, nor did she feel that kind of group fit her. James became an atheist, so he felt no desire to join. Tom struggled to connect with the CRG meeting format and style. Brenda found most students there to be younger than she was and couldn't relate to them.

**Church involvement.** The 12 students involved in a CRG all said they attended church with 5 attending churches different than their home churches and 7 attending churches similar to their home churches. Of the 8 students who were not involved in CRGs, 4 did not attend church, 3 attended churches that were different from their home church, and 1 attended a church similar to their home church.

**Involvement in non-religious groups.** Students also described being involved in groups or activities beyond churches and CRGs. Some were involved in athletics. Trisha competed athletically at the university level and dedicated 20 hours a week to her sport.

Joseph was an assistant coach for one of the university teams and played the sport at the club level, requiring a high time commitment and travel on the weekends.

Four students invested their time in volunteering. Beyond their involvement with a CRG or a church, Jenny volunteered at a clinic, Simon volunteered at a hospital, and Colleen volunteered at a rehab center. Brenda was not involved in a CRG group, but attended church, served as a substitute teacher and led a Boy Scout troop.

Some students worked jobs. Jenny, Mitch, and Brenda worked as Resident Assistants. Karen worked a student job campus. Jenny was a receptionist at a local business. Mara worked at a local coffee shop and was also a part-time youth worker at a local church. Therese worked at a local vet clinic. Andy had an internship associated with his major. Joseph was a Teaching Assistant in his department.

Summarizing their non-academic student involvement, students described being involved in CRGs, church, work, other school activities, or volunteering. The range of their participation was zero to 30 hours per week. On average, the students invested 18 hours a week in non-academic, structured activities. These junior and senior students generally described themselves as both busy and involved.

### **Summary of Student Backgrounds and Their Campus Involvement**

Evangelical students, who bring their spirituality to college reported coming from fairly stable homes where parents and other influential adults were committed to practicing and passing along their religious tradition to their children. The advice students received from home painted the university as threatening to their faith and students were encouraged to find support on campus, especially through CRGs. More than half of the participants attended CRGs. Others that did not attend CRGs cited a lack

of fit with such groups. Almost all students described themselves as invested and busy with academic and non-academic activities.



## **CHAPTER 4:**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

The main question of this study focuses on understanding how Evangelical Christian students described spiritual struggles they encountered while attending a public university. The first section of this chapter offers examples of spiritual struggle, as distinguished from more general human struggles. It will show how, at times, students' usage of spiritual language can both cloud and clarify their spiritual struggle descriptions. The second section of this chapter identifies the on-campus and off-campus factors that the students described as affecting their spiritual struggles. Further, I describe the on-campus and off-campus resources, relationships and practices the students accessed to work through their spiritual struggles. Adopting the conceptual framework from Parks' (2000) model on spiritual development, the third section identifies more specifically the spiritual struggles students described, and the meanings they placed on their experiences. These observations surfaced descriptive patterns reported in the final section that, informed by what I will introduce as students' separating and integrating perspectives, affected how they viewed themselves, their integration of education and spirituality, their views of spiritual faithfulness, and their purpose in life.

#### **Examples of Struggle that are Uniquely Spiritual**

This section addresses the sub-question: What does spiritual struggle mean for Evangelical undergraduates? The challenge is to try to distinguish spiritual struggle from what might be common human struggle that most students experience during their college careers such as feeling lonely, looking for friendships, trying to fit in, dealing

with failure, searching for a major, etc. Following the spiritual struggle definition provided in the literature review chapter and previous projects from researchers like Dirkx et al. (2006), Fidler et al. (2009); Rockenbach et al. (2012); and Zinnbauer et al. (1998), who referred to the transcendent elements students ascribed to their meaning-making, this study sought to identify the uniquely spiritual elements of students' described struggles. At the onset of the participant selection, students who participated in this study self-identified as having experienced a shift or change in their religious or spiritual beliefs or practices while at college. Thus, the factors associated with the struggles they described had, according to them, somehow affected their perceptions of the transcendent such as how they viewed God, held their identity as "Christian," and/or the way they related to others. Of course, not every struggle that students described constituted spiritual struggle. Referring to the literature reviewed and definitions given in this study, spiritual struggle evokes the need to change one's spiritual or religious perspectives to accommodate new information or experiences. Some students, however, spoke of their experiences using religious language that either reinforced previously held views or lacked references to any shifts or changes in the meaning they ascribed to the transcendent, such as God, themselves as spiritual beings, or their place in the broader world. This section offers some examples of student descriptions that were classified as spiritual struggles, and other examples of students' descriptions that were, likely, more common human struggles than spiritual struggles.

### **Spiritual Struggle Examples**

As noted in the next section pertaining to on-campus and off-campus factors that students perceived as affecting their spiritual struggles, the factors described are

relatively common experiences. Still, students who struggled spiritually shared how some of their college experiences uprooted their assumptions about their religious beliefs, their lives as Christians, or the ways they related to others within and outside the Christian faith. For example, Simon recognized a shift in his outlook, as he claimed to be more liberal in his theological perspectives. His reflection highlights his renegotiating his previously held views affecting his perceptions of and connection with his relationships back home:

I'm definitely more liberal now. Back at home everyone is more conservative.

Both my parents are conservative. I grew up in a conservative environment. I'm here now. I don't have that influence. I'm learning things on my own.

Conservatives, they're stuck in their mindset, what they believe in. I want to be open to other things. I don't think it's fair to not give other beliefs or theories a chance.

Jodi explained how she struggled to view those she called "non-Christians" differently. This struggle went deeper than just getting along with others or making friends. For her, it was a major shift in how she saw them as people and, how she perceived God saw them:

I know I struggled with having friends who weren't Christians or only having them to convince them to become Christians. And now it's like I'm your friend because I really like you as a person. They're not just a "non-Christian;" they have all these qualities, great personalities, we get along great. They are no longer my projects. I want them to know God, but when we hangout, I don't feel pressure to convert them. We just hang out. So that's changed a lot.

Matt explained that his change in beliefs alienated him from some his friends back home, which made him question his view of God and some of the foundational assumptions he had about church:

I had numerous conversations with people and I'd feel like I as being ganged up on, accused. It scarred me a bit. Pretty hostile. I felt hurt. I backed away. I had tons of questions. My mind raced, searching for ideas about God. Questioning everything. It was overwhelming.

What is notable about these descriptions was that these common struggles over changing beliefs, changing views toward people, or hometown expectations were viewed by students as having transcendent elements affecting their views of God, their Christian identity, or the way they related to other people. These experiences often challenged the way students assumed the world worked and how they thought God acted, evoking epistemological, relational, and identity challenges.

### **Non-Spiritual Struggle Examples**

As mentioned previously in the Literature Review chapter, this study proposed that there appeared to be a connection between one's religious background and the ways a person articulates one's spirituality. Because Evangelical students' religious backgrounds have a cultural component to them (rituals, language, etc.), students often used religious language to describe their experiences, but this did not necessarily mean that their struggle experiences were spiritual struggles. Later in the discussion of findings, a section is devoted to students who experienced significant crisis that they said got them back on track with life and God. The examples, though significant for those students, were not necessarily spiritual struggles as much as traumatic experiences that

brought them back to religious and spiritual ideas that were familiar to them. For example, Trevor had a dramatic story about being in a car crash, framing the experience through his already-held spiritual perspectives. The experience seemed to wake him up to his poor choices, but it did not necessarily challenge his views of God or the way he viewed himself as a Christian:

I got involved with drugs. Ended up getting in a car crash when I was drunk and high. Somehow I walked away with no scratches. I thought, there's no way I could be okay. I should be dead. God saved my life and there was no way I should be alive. I went home, got down on my knees, weeping, and said, 'I'm giving my life to you. My life is yours.' That was the turning point.

Trisha expressed the loneliness she felt at school as people different from her "pretty much just do what they want." Her feeling uncomfortable with those holding different lifestyles, however, had less to do with her spiritual outlook as much as her own limited experiences with making new friends:

Honestly I didn't meet anyone other than my roommate. I was so overwhelmed with classes and swimming, I basically slept in my dorm room. The next year, we lived with all girls from the swim team. I'm not that social. I stick with my close friends.

Andy shared how certain activities with his campus religious group inspired him. These kinds of experiences seemed important to him because they validated his spiritual outlook and gave meaning to his college experience but they did not seem to challenge his spiritual convictions. Instead, he seemed excited to have an experience that encouraged and reinforced his beliefs:

The experience from that was cool... the stories... some guy came up and was worshipping with my friends, and another guy walked by as we were reading his favorite Bible verse. Cool little stories like that. It got me a little more back on track. It re-energized me.

John said he had to work through his convictions regarding the role of women in the church with his fiancé. However, he described “working through” the topic as helping his fiancé coming to see his perspective. John was a thoughtful and sensitive person, but it was evident from this example that he was not experiencing spiritual struggle as much as he was seeking to fit his experiences into his existing spiritual and religious constructs.

Jenny told of her courageous story of working through some tough experiences at college. It did not appear that her spirituality changed as much as it served as a positive way forward through the challenges she faced:

So I decided I wanted to give my life to Christ again. And I wanted God to woo me because I wanted God to be my first love. And he did. He opened my eyes to a kind and gentle love that is extreme. God showed me how special I am and how radical he wants me to be, to tell others.

These examples and non-examples of spiritual struggle highlight the careful work that was needed to listen carefully to how students used religious language to describe their spirituality and struggles. The advantage, it seems, for students having religious language was that they had some terminology to explain the transcendent struggles they experienced. The caution with some Evangelicals, however, is that religious language is used so regularly in their common discourse that their descriptions of struggle can sound

like spiritual ones but are often common human struggle experiences expressed with religious terminology. The next section attempts to capture students' descriptions of spiritual struggle experiences affected by on and off campus factors.

### **On-Campus and Off-Campus Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle**

This section addresses the sub-question: For those Evangelical undergraduates who have experienced spiritual struggle, what do they identify as the particular sources or issues that relate to that struggle? What brought their struggle on? I attempt to answer this question by first reporting on students' responses from two main categories-- on-campus and off-campus factors affecting spiritual struggle. On-campus factors pertain to the students' lives as lived on campus (e.g. academic, fellow students, or groups on campus). Off-campus factors identify elements beyond campus life that brought struggle into these students' lives (e.g. family crisis, home life, getting arrested, or other crises).

#### **On-Campus Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle**

Evangelical students reported eight on-campus factors that brought on spiritual struggle for them: educational and classroom experiences; finding friends; dating, sex, and romantic relationships; and philosophical or theological topics. Additional, but less frequent factors described by the students were substance abuse or destructive behaviors, sexual assault, and campus religious groups (CRGs).

**Educational and classroom experiences.** Evangelical students described course assignments and classroom settings as factors affecting spiritual struggle. More specifically, students struggled with the contradictions they felt or found between their faith and science classes; between accepting and engaging others who held different perspectives from themselves; and between investing their time between spiritual and

educational commitments. Women, in particular, struggled with religious teachings and feminism. Thus, these struggles were more than academic. The subject matters seemed to challenge students' views on the Bible as the source of truth and Christianity as the religion that faithfully interprets that truth.

***Faith and science.*** Overwhelmingly, the students reported struggling with subjects pertaining to evolution and older earth theories. They felt conflicted between what they had been taught in their church at home or by their parents, and what they were learning in their classes. Jenny's attempt to integrate these two viewpoints serves as an example of what many students expressed:

I think evolution and Christianity could be connected, but I believe in a young earth, not what the evolutionists say. I don't know. I believe in microevolution. Not macro. I think Christians get nervous when it comes to evidence versus faith. Science uses evidence. Christians can't do that.

Therese expressed the struggle her friend had with holding belief and new learning, raising her own questions: "I have a friend who is a Zoology major, and [she] said, 'How do I integrate this major and be a witness for God? How am I supposed to integrate this?' And when she said this, it got me thinking about me. How does that work?" Mike expressed his need to reevaluate his own spiritual assumptions: "Recently I've been challenged that there may be some things that rely on certain interpretations. I'm reevaluating if I need to have an opinion on that." Tom admitted that changing one's opinion may mean changing many things in his life: "You start thinking, if I was wrong about this or I have a different perspective on this, what else am I wrong about? You change your opinion on one thing and it affects everything else."



*Accepting and engaging others.* Students felt spiritual struggle when they met people, especially in the classroom, who held very different views than their own. Mara described one of her experiences:

In my class, the teacher was Turkish, and there were gay people in the class.

There were international students from China and Saudi Arabia and there were just white people like me, normal ... no, not normal, obviously. It was the most diverse class I've ever been in.

Jodi explained how she was challenged to be more open to other perspectives: "I think my major has played a bit of a part of it. Just taking social work classes and learning about the different places people are." Matt described how he was exposed to a much broader range of perspectives than from home: "In terms of religion, studying in class and out of class, there's more out there than what I knew before—the beliefs that I held, the beliefs that I had been taught."

**Spirituality versus academic studies.** Evangelical students said they struggled with how to be both faithful Christians and good students at the same time. John told of a student that he tried to counsel: "I dealt with one student who was so focused on school he didn't focus on anything else. School is great. You need to focus on school. That doesn't mean you shouldn't focus on God." Aaron described the tension he felt:

Sometimes I feel judged for putting school ahead of my Campus Religious Group participation, and I'm told my priorities are a little skewed. That may be true, but I came to school, not to serve this fellowship, but to be a student and help people grow in God. I want to finish school first and then help people grow. Some people have different thoughts about that. I sometimes question myself too."

**Finding friends and connecting relationally.** Evangelical students described the challenges they experienced in finding friendships and being relationally connected at college. While both males and females described these struggles, females mentioned this factor twice as often as males. Notably, students reported struggling spiritually when they lacked good friendships, had little in common with their roommates, or longed to connect with a group. Students reported this struggle occurring especially during their freshman year as they sought to find friendships that would help them remain faithful, as well. “Not fitting in” and feeling “over my head” were common expressions. They felt anxiety, doubted God, and experienced loneliness. Colleen described her experience as follows:

I got here. I felt very thrust into this secular world. I’m like, “I’m in over my head.” I’d go home and visit my friends at a Christian college and they had all these friends, because everybody was like them. It was easy for them to make connections with people. It was so small. Everybody knew each other. I would visit, and then go back to my university and cry, realizing, “I have no friends.”

Mara explained the challenge she had with finding friends and how it affected her spirituality:

I started to get really bitter with God, asking God why He isn’t providing me with a community? Why can’t I find any Christians to hang out with who don’t party and drink on the weekends? All first semester, my freshman year, I was really angry and bitter, and going into second semester I was done. I was like, “Well, I don’t really know if I even believe in God anymore. If He existed He would at least provide me with good friends.”

**Dating, sex, and romantic relationships.** Evangelical students said that their encounters with dating, sex, relationships, and assault brought about spiritual struggles for them. Some questioned whether God would provide for them and fill the longings they had for a significant relationship. Simon reflected, “I ended up dating this girl. So it kinda sucks that she broke up with me. So I went to God and asked, ‘Why did you do this to me?’” Others like Trisha expressed hurt and questioned her convictions when her boyfriend broke up with her because she would not have sex with him:

I’ve questioned what I’ve been told about relational boundaries and sex. It wasn’t an issue in high school. In college, this year, I had a guy interest. So I started talking with this guy. He said he went to church, was religious. And then he completely stopped talking to me because I wouldn’t sleep with him. [...] And that made me think, “Am I the only person that thinks that it’s right to stay pure before marriage [tears]? So that made me question a lot of things about my Christian life.

**Philosophical/theological topics.** Evangelical students described philosophical and theological factors that brought them struggle. Often, theological/philosophical struggles resulted from the students’ encounters with individuals who held different worldviews.

***Intellectual topics.*** Some students explained the philosophical differences they felt between their personal beliefs and the churches and/or CRGs they attended. For example, Joseph felt disconnected with the churches and CRGs he had attended:

“Sometimes where I’m at spiritually and student organizations are, don’t align with me. I’m wanting a different thing from what I’m given from them. It’s not

an excuse. I feel like, I could go but I'd rather relax at home if I don't find CRGs valuable."

Other students identified philosophical/theological factors that emphasized theological or religious particularities. John wrestled with the doctrine of sin. Andy reconsidered the meaning of baptism. Mike expressed that it was important for him to work through the doctrines of predestination and human free will, especially after talking with one of his professors:

I meet this professor. At some point it comes out that he's a pastor, and I kind of poked and prodded him on this issue, which seemed to me, to be the most important issue at the time. As I talked with him more, I realized that he was of the Reformed Church tradition. He's studied a lot of Calvin, and that struck me as someone I respected and liked. And that challenged me because I liked and respected this person, and everything he said I liked, but he held this belief of the church that I was at odds with.

***Other worldviews.*** Students were challenged to consider their theological beliefs, as they encountered students at college with different religious backgrounds. Some, like Simon, thought more generally about other religions, making him wonder if his belief as a Christian could be the only right one. He reflected, "I sometimes don't feel that desire a lot. My freshman year I was in an exploration phase. I wondered how Christianity could be the only one." Jenny described how her religious beliefs encouraged her to "convert" [i.e. evangelize, proselytize] others, but wondered how she would react if those from other religions did the same thing to her. She reflected, "It's difficult for me to talk with others about religion who believe as deeply about their religion as much as I believe

about mine. They're not going to convert me, so how can I convert them? I'm struggling with that right now." Brenda's encounter was more specific, as she sought out and served the poor with a group of Muslim students. She talked about bridging differences and shared, "Yeah. It shakes me a little bit. I see these people on the other side of the table making sandwiches with me, don't know Jesus, yet [they] are friendly and devoted to their religion. So it makes me wonder about those kind of aspects."

**Substance abuse or destructive behaviors.** Of the 20 students interviewed, 5 said that drug, and alcohol- related experiences contributed to spiritual struggle. All five described traumatic experiences that made them reconsider how they were living their lives. Karen explained how, after a tough breakup with her boyfriend, she gave up on religion and self-medicated through drugs and alcohol that almost led to suicide. At that point she said she hated God: "So here I am [at this moment] with all this [crisis], and this guy tells me I'm not good enough." Mike spoke of his spirituality and drug habits "colliding:"

I began to smoke pot. [I thought] it never affected my faith. I just separated them as two different things. The curtain got taken away. I got caught and then things collided. That struck me that I was holding two things at once. I'd think one way and act one way, I'd think another way and act the other way.

**Assault.** Jenny struggled with her faith and her identity as a Christian as a result of her sexual encounters, one which led to an assault situation:

So I had buried this thing [rape]. I'd go to a CRG, and then drink with these guys and then hook-up. I was trying to figure out where I'd fit in, where I could make friends, and where I would be accepted. I was looking for love and acceptance,

and thought I found it in boys and in pleasing others. I became a people-pleaser.

Freshman year was trying to figure out where I fit and living this double life.

**Campus religious groups (CRGs).** While some Evangelical students described CRGs as a spiritual resource, others said CRGs contributed to their spiritual struggle. Sometimes students' values and beliefs collided with the CRG outlooks and practices. For example, Mara challenged her CRG to invest more in social issues. Aaron did not like that his CRG did not value his academic pursuits like he did. Mike felt that one CRG didn't treat his friend fairly. And, Karen felt disrespected by the CRG leadership, as they were digging up her past and using it against her.

**Women, faith, gender, and feminism.** Only women noted this eighth factor, which pertained to religion, gender roles, and feminism. This factor, specifically raised by women, expressed the tension they felt by wanting to be faithful to religious teachings while also valuing gender equality and feminism. Cassandra described the tension: "It sucks. It is a struggle every single day. [...] But the Bible says that women are supposed to submit to their husbands. I struggle with those [ideas] a lot. I did a lot of reading about feminism, and all kinds of sociology." Jenny explained that her spiritual convictions about being a woman didn't seem to align with her campus culture, causing her additional stress:

I believe we all should have the same rights. But for me, I want to be a mom. It's sort of how I'm made. I don't want to work. I want to be in the home, volunteer at the church, be available. I'm the same as the woman who is the CEO woman. But it's hard to articulate that. Even to say we complement each other is pretty radical on this campus.

## **Off-Campus Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle**

Off-campus factors affecting spiritual struggle refer to non-campus-related elements that, like on-campus factors, uprooted students' assumptions about transcendent meaning. In this study, students identified off-campus factors that included experiencing a family death or illness, navigating hometown expectations, defining their spirituality as different from others' spirituality, and being victims of sexual assault back home.

**Family death/illness.** Evangelical students described a family death or illness as a factor affecting spiritual struggle. Many students expressed concern for their parents, and especially their aging grandparents and the potential of them dying. Brenda reflected on her grandmother's passing and the difficulty she had with understanding and facing the death of a loved one: "My freshman year... I'm really close with my family... my grandma was diagnosed with cancer. It was a hard thing. It was hard for me to be here on campus and have that going on." Mara struggled with understanding God in light of her mom getting cancer:

My mom got diagnosed with breast cancer. I was just like, what is happening? I didn't expect it at all. I just remember that night. I was just like, "Well, I can't do this on my own!" I was just praying like, I know you know I can't live without my mom right now, but you're gonna have to take care of her.

**Going home.** Matt and Jenny, Mitch, and James described how they have become different people since going to college and their struggle with now navigating hometown friends and family expectations. Matt described his experiences:

In my hometown, people were set in [their] ways. I was experiencing this new, open world. I probably dove into that world too quickly. When I would go home

I felt like I was being ganged up on, accused. It scarred me a bit. Pretty hostile. I felt hurt. I backed away.

Mitch struggled with living out his spiritual convictions without disrespecting his father's beliefs:

I wanted to raise support and allow other people to partner with me in that. My dad didn't like that at all [and wanted to pay for the trip]. I told my dad, "thanks," but I want to grow in this area, and I don't want you to pay for it, though thank you. This was about me, not you. This was hard for him. My dad loves his children, and to tell my dad "no" was hard to take. It was hard for me because I love him so much.

**Assault.** Two women admitted that they were raped while visiting their hometowns. One shared that "I lost my virginity. I didn't call it [rape] right away. It was very shameful, and I buried it, which is unique for me because I'm a pretty open person. He didn't think he did anything wrong. I was confused. I went through a faith and identity crisis. It was a really dark time. A black hole."

### **Summary of On-Campus and Off-Campus Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle**

Students described eight on-campus factors affecting spiritual struggle that were connected to their university experiences and experienced by students for the first time on their own. More relationally-oriented factors affecting spiritual struggle were often described as occurring during their freshmen years, while intellectually-oriented causes of struggle were reported as occurring later. Off-campus factors affecting spiritual struggle were more event-oriented and yet still impacted the students' college experiences and spiritual outlooks.



### **Resources Named Relevant to Undergraduate Spiritual Struggles**

This section addresses the third sub-question: What college-related factors (resources, relationships, experiences) do these undergraduates perceive as affecting the process of how to handle their struggles; and specifically, which of these factors helped and impeded them, as these students experienced and managed spiritual struggle? Like the factors affecting spiritual struggle that were previously identified, the factors that students described using to resolve their spiritual struggle were found both on-campus and off-campus.

#### **On-Campus Resources Helping With Spiritual Struggle**

Evangelical students described three on-campus resources that helped them the most with their spiritual struggle: Friends on campus; CRGs or CRG mentors; and interactions with faculty, classroom settings, and/or course assignments.

**Friends on campus.** For students, the most prominent resource that was described twice as often as the other resources was friends. In particular, students looked to classmate friends, CRG friends, and roommate friends to help them through their spiritual struggles. The participants saw these friends as people with whom they felt accepted and comfortable sharing spiritual topics.

***Classmate friends.*** Students found the peers they met in their classes to be reliable friends. Jodi described how she relied on fellow classmates to talk through several topics related to her major and her spirituality:

My one friend has been in almost all my social work classes. She's a Christian, and we talk a lot, about the things discussed in our classes, like the LGBT community. That's a hard thing for me. I mean, being a Christian and in social

work at [my university] bring points of tension, and so I wrestle through things.

And so my friend and I go to the coffee shop and talk things through.

Jenny said she met a friend in one of her classes who helped her work through her past struggles and supported her spiritual journey:

So, Linda and I started being friends again. After one class, Linda and I had a really deep discussion. She was going through her own personal struggles. So we were accountability partners. She was the first person who I really felt was a support for me. It was really the first time in college where I felt like I practiced my faith in a conscious and deliberate time of living.

***CRG friends.*** Some students relied on their CRG friends to help them through their times of struggle. Karen described her CRG friends as being there for her when she worked through her personal challenges:

I have three best friends at [my university]. I was horrible to them when I went through all the stuff I went through. I was a loose cannon. Shut them out. I had no idea, but they got together to pray for me. I'm like, "you guys are wonderful people!" They've been there the whole way.

Simon struggled with finding connections at the university and credited his CRG friends for helping him feel connected:

Everyone just welcomed me. They were super friendly. They embraced me even though they didn't know who I was. I was like, 'This is really weird.' I've never felt that much love, especially from people I just met.

***Roommate friends.*** Some students relied on the support their roommates. Matt said his roommate helped him expand his spiritual outlook:

My roommate grew up Catholic. I grew up Protestant. It was really interesting. He and I definitely saw that when you sum up the basics, that there's a God of love out there, and I don't think he's given up on this world.

Brenda discovered her suitemates to be a great resource as she sought out friends at college for the first time: "I went in blind with my roommate and had two other suitemates. We were an eclectic group, but we learned to do life together so well."

Therese and Cassandra found friends in the dorms who shared her spiritual perspective and proved to be supportive of her. Therese shared:

God really blessed me in that people across the hall were people who went to a CRG. And down the hall, there was a girl who was Baptist. So I was able to become stronger by having a support system around me in the dorms.

***Friendship summary.*** Evangelical students looked to their classmate friendships, CRG friendships, and roommate friendships to be resources for them when they were working through their spiritual struggles. Many were surprised by the connections they made with a new classmate or roommate and often attributed this connection as God providing in their lives. The most memorable events the students described came from the friends who stuck with them, went deeper into relationships with them, and supported them.

**CRGs and CRG leaders/mentors.** Some Evangelical students, who were involved in CRGs, looked to their group leaders or mentors for support in times of spiritual struggle. Aaron relied on older students in his CRG to help him think through the creation and evolution debate. John shared how his CRG mentor helped him work through the spiritual struggle and doubt he was experiencing, and he appreciated how his

mentor was a consistent part of his life at college: “I’ve met with him for two years now. He’s been awesome.” Jenny and Colleen found encouragement and support from their CRG leaders as they worked through challenges in their lives. Colleen reflected on that support:

So, that following Monday, I went to Bible Study and I talked to one of my leaders and I think I just sat there and cried for an hour. And just seeing the way she loved on me, rather than saying you probably shouldn’t have been with that guy, or gotten drunk after serving Jesus dogs, really impacted me. I started taking stuff out of my life, little by little. I think my mentor, in my time of weakness, showed me Christ.

**Faculty and class resources.** Some students mentioned their professors, classes, and class assignments as resources that helped them work through their spiritual struggles. Matt shared how his courses and his religion professor helped him move from “undecided” to being a Religious Studies major:

My first semester, I took a class on Intro to Biblical Literature with Professor [Smith]. I talked with him about joining the Religious studies program and joined my sophomore year. It’s something I realized I always wanted to study.

Brenda explained how an assignment she had and her interaction with that professor helped her process the death of her grandmother:

For my assignment, I wrote about my grandma. I kind of had it in my head, and we had to go into peer review. And then my professor called me in after the papers had been turned in and sat down with me and said, “I’m so sorry for your loss. It seems like it happens to a lot of college students, and it doesn’t make it

easier.” The fact that this grandfatherly writing professor was taking time to invest in me brought me peace. So I think that it was a roller coaster of a struggle, and I think God provided the whole time.

Therese shared how an academic advisor and a professor in her department encouraged her to stick with her major and her career aspirations, even when her assignments were getting tough:

I remember going to my professor and feeling so distraught about Vet School. I kept hearing that nobody gets into the vet school and that I should come up with a back-up plan. But my whole entire life I wanted to be a vet, so what do I do? This is what I want. And so I went to her and started to say, “If grad school doesn’t work...” And she’s like, “You don’t need a back-up plan. You’re going to get into that school.”

In summary, those students who identified faculty and their classroom experiences as positive resources that helped them through spiritual struggles noted that their professors challenged, supported, and encouraged them. Professors helped them choose a major, stick with their major, and even helped them work through their life circumstances and intellectual challenges.

**Summary of on-campus Resources.** Students overwhelmingly identified their friends as their most frequent resources for helping them work through their spiritual struggles. These friends were classmates, CRG friends, and roommates. Students involved in CRGs referenced their leaders and mentors as people who helped them through specific periods of spiritual struggle and also walked all the way with them

throughout their college careers. Students also described faculty as a resource for support, challenge, and encouragement.

### **Off-Campus Resources Helping With Spiritual Struggle**

In order of frequency, students identified the off-campus resources they accessed as studying on their own, parents/family, counselors/therapists, and churches.

**On their own.** Many students reported working through their spiritual struggles on their own through personal study and reflection. Jodi journaled regularly. Karen, Mitch, Mike, Brenda, James, Matt, Colleen, and Jenny all said they read a lot and did further reading and study beyond their assigned coursework. These students referred to specific books that they said had helped them through their spiritual struggles over theology and worldviews, and in personal crises. John said he found support and resources on the Internet to help him understand and embrace his atheism more fully. Brenda saw her college experience as a way to learn to how to express her own spirituality:

I think this is one of the ways attending a public university has served me so well.

It forced me to adopt new spiritual practices for myself. No one is telling me to go to church. No one is telling me to journal. It's something I do for myself now.

**Parents/family.** Next to personal study, the students identified their parents and family members as resources to whom they turned. Mara talked to her mom about her longing for a boyfriend: "If I do break it down to my mom and tell her sometimes I'm insecure about this, then she will reassure me, but most of the time it's just her like, 'praying for your love life!' Oh my gosh!" Jodi looked to her parents when she struggled with finding a new church that was much different than the one she grew up with and

attended. She explained, “My parents have been understanding. They have encouraged me to make that leap to the new church. I’m really glad for that.” Joseph mentioned his parents as people he felt comfortable going to if he needed support: “I think if I were to doubt the faith, I’d talk with them about it.” Colleen said she went to her mom when her eating disorder was too much for her: “I ended up talking to my mom. I needed help. I really did. I didn’t know where to run to.”

**Counselors/therapists.** A few students sought out help from a counselor or a therapist to work through their personal challenges. Karen shared how her therapist helped her unpack her borderline eating disorder, giving her new perspectives for understanding herself. Jenny shared the significant healing she obtained through the time she spent with her counselor at the clinic: “I grew a lot my junior year. I knew I needed help emotionally, and spiritually. I called a pregnancy center. The clinic was Christian. My experience was really beautiful and significant. This counselor was an angel.”

**Church.** Just five Evangelical students described churches as being the resources for their spiritual struggles. Brenda gave credit to her church for helping her feed the poor and interact with Muslim students by serving alongside them. Jodi saw her church as a force for good by caring for the poor, which was important to her spiritual convictions. Simon said he found a pastor from another town who was always available to him. John felt very supported by his church throughout college. Mike said his pastor helped him work through theological topics and inspired him to consider ministry as a profession. A few other students said they enjoyed going to their church or watching video-casts on line, but they didn’t speak specifically to how that interaction was a resource for them.

**Summary of off-campus resources.** The primary off-campus resource that students accessed for working through their spiritual struggle was studying further on their own. Students studied topics that went beyond their academic courses, focusing specifically on the issues they were wrestling with, such as theology, crisis, and relationships. Some students reached out to their parents, especially their moms. Other students told of the specific ways that churches helped them although this particular resource was mentioned much less frequently than the other two. A few students like Mara were searching for an older, non-family member, to mentor them: “I think it’d be nice sometimes to talk to someone about relationships who’s actually married or to have an older mentor, which is something that I’m probably going to start looking for.”

#### **Summary of Resources for Spiritual Struggle Named by Undergraduates**

These students described resources, relationships, and/or experiences they accessed for working through struggle in two general domains: on-campus and off-campus. As on-campus resources, friendships were overwhelmingly accessed followed by CRG programs and leaders (for those who attended CRGs), and faculty/class resources. As off-campus resources, students most preferred working out their struggles on their own, although they also sought out parents or family members, saw a counselor/therapist, and/or accessed their home or campus church connections.

#### **Spiritual Struggle within Spiritual Development**

This section classifies the students’ descriptions of their spiritual struggles in light of the elements that Parks (2000) suggests are forms of change in college students’ spiritual development (community, dependence, and knowing) noted in Chapter 3. In light of these classifications, and to understand the students’ perspectives of their



university context, I will introduce the separating-integrating continuum in the last section, to describe students' views of their campus and how these views may influence the kinds of spiritual struggles they encounter and the types of resources they access to work through that struggle.

### **Spiritual Struggle within the Form of Community**

Forms of community highlight a particular dimension of spiritual struggle that pertains to the relationships that students move from and toward (Parks, 2000). College students typically experience spiritual struggle in the form of community through the three kinds of struggle I have described as *separating struggle*, *seeking struggle*, and *contributing struggle*. In *separating struggle* undergraduates reconsider their loyalties and relationships to the people or groups with whom they associate. The next developmental transition is *seeking struggle*, wherein people search for a community that welcomes, supports, or encourages their evolving perceptions and questions within a more inclusive environment. Beyond merely participating in a mentoring community, people then experience a transition in *contributing struggle*, where they seek to find their own place or role within a community that now respects and welcomes their contributions. What follows here are descriptions of these separating, integrating, and contributing struggles that were observed in the student participant interviews. Table 3 depicts Evangelical descriptions of spiritual struggle within the form of community.

**Separating struggle.** Within the form of community, the students described experiencing separating struggle the most; indeed, 16 of the 20 students described separating struggle as having to leave familiar support networks or questioning their own fit in groups where they once felt comfortable. Students described the need to separate

from the beliefs of their parents, former religious leaders and churches, and also the CRGs they joined when coming to college, as they felt “boxed in,” and unable to express their expanding spiritual perspectives as interfaith dialogue, justice, and leadership.

The struggle students felt separating from their families was expressed by Matt, who said he rejected the assumptions he used to share with his friends and family back home. Mitch described separating struggle by trying to tell his parents how he wanted to live his spirituality different than how they lived their faith. James explained how, in college, he came to grips with his atheism, distancing himself from the Christianity he had been taught at home and in his Christian school. Therese said she resisted the pressure she felt from her family to join a similar group at college.

Students also described the separating struggles they encountered as they distanced themselves from their home churches and religious leaders. Aaron and Simon doubted the reliability of what their leaders taught them about science and claimed to be more liberal now. Jenny struggled with a CRG she tried where her peers and the leaders couldn’t relate to her experiences. Joseph rejected the simple answers offered by the CRG and church leaders that he met and was now seeking a place where he could ask more questions. Mike wanted to avoid the church politics he had experienced growing up. Tom chose to not become involved in a religious group like he had done in high school.

**Seeking struggle.** Of the 16 students who described their separating struggle, only 8 described any seeking struggle. These students described their individual searches for new kinds of communities. Some students reported finding new religious or academic groups that they felt more precisely reflected their emerging spiritual ideas.

Matt, Mike, Tom, and James described finding community within their academic programs. Matt explained how he felt a sense of community within his Religious Studies program. Mike felt a connection through his pastor who was also a professor at his university and explored academic and theological topics with him. James, who considered himself an atheist, found community with his friends in his program who were also atheists and his professors with whom he worked closely. Mara, Therese, Brenda, and Jodi explained that they found churches that were more open to their changing spiritual outlooks. Therese described the new kind of church she had found at school that was much different than her home church:

[My church at school] was very different than any church I had gone to before. It had all kinds of people, all kinds of races. It was really small. And it was really cool. The people were cool. And I'm learning about the Bible. I'm expanding, spiritually. And I still go there. It's like my second home church and it's really nice.

**Contributing struggle.** Only Brenda and Jodi explained the personal contributions they made to their churches and how they felt compelled not only to benefit from their new faith communities but to contribute to them as well. Brenda explained her search to contribute in this way: "I liked the choir, I like to teach Sunday school once a month. I like that they need me." When responding to whether other students she knew went to the church, Brenda responded: "A few [laughs]. And that's okay, too. We have gotten to know each other and rely on each other." Jodi had a similar story where she described having found an inner-city church that cared for the poor and said that she planned to invest more in that church: "I love that it's small and diverse. It's an inner-

city church, so they have a breakfast. There's a pie shop, and they give us all their day-old pies. They feed the homeless. I love how inclusive it is. I could bring anyone, and they wouldn't feel unwelcome. I think in the summer I will volunteer more."

Table 3

*Kinds of Struggle Described within the Form of Community*

| Struggle and Forms of Community          | Separating Struggle  | Seeking Struggle   | Contributing Struggle                        |
|--|--|--|--|
| Students and Their Struggle Descriptions | <i>Separating from family's/parents' beliefs</i><br>Matt<br>Mitch<br>James<br>Therese          | <i>Connecting with a different church</i><br>Mara<br>Therese<br>Brenda<br>Jodi | <i>Investing in Church</i><br>Jodi<br>Brenda |
|  | <i>Separating from religious leaders</i><br>Aaron<br>Jenny<br>Joseph<br>Mike<br>Therese<br>Tom | <i>Connecting with an academic program</i><br>Matt<br>Mike<br>James<br>Tom     |  |
|  | <i>Separating from CRGs</i><br>Brenda<br>Jodi<br>Matt<br>Kate<br>Jenny<br>Therese<br>Karen     |  |  |

**Spiritual Struggle within the Form of Dependence**

Spiritual struggle within the form of dependence highlights the affective dimension

of individuals' spiritual struggles, describing both the *negative* and *positive* feelings individuals experienced with those struggles. In this study, the majority of emotions students' described were negative feelings with only four expressing positive feelings. Table 4 describes Evangelical students' spiritual struggles within the form of dependence.

**Negative feelings.** The majority of emotions students reported were negative ones. All the students who reported negative feelings also described their experiences with separating struggle; the most prevalent emotions they expressed were feeling overwhelmed and feeling anxious. Trisha felt overwhelmed by all the new possibilities and challenges at college. Matt said he felt like he was pulled in so many directions, as he explored new ideas and read diverse literature: "I had tons of questions. My mind raced. I was searching for ideas about God. Questioning things. It was overwhelming." Therese doubted if she could handle what she had felt called to study in school because of its rigorous nature and Karen described a similar experience, namely, feeling "over my head." Tom may have best captured what the others felt with his description about how any change in his spiritual outlook could affect every part of his life: "You start thinking, if I was wrong about this, or I have a different perspective on this, what else am I wrong about? You change your opinion on one thing and it affects everything else."

**Positive feelings.** The four students who expressed positive feelings from their struggles described working through an experience and then discovering liberation, satisfaction, clarification, and encouragement. Mitch explained that his journey was "freeing." Brenda seemed satisfied with the changes that she made in her spirituality, and she reflected: "I think it was a needed change in perspective for me. These things caused me to take a step back and reevaluate how I'm doing faith and how I'm doing life." Jodi

expressed her satisfaction with the current state of her spiritual journey and the decisions she has made:

I have felt encouraged on the journey I'm on. That it's okay to question things, to make decisions you wouldn't expect or that others would expect [you to make] because they see you as [someone who should be] a "Campus Religious Group Girl" and lead Bible studies. And then I ended up not [being that]. And people were surprised. And it's been okay to make that decision.

Table 4

*Kinds of Struggle Described within the Form of Dependence*

| Struggle and Form of Dependence | Negative Feelings   | Positive Feelings  |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Students and their Struggle     | <i>Overwhelmed</i><br>Trisha<br>Matt<br>Therese<br>Karen<br>Tom<br><br><i>Anxious</i><br>Matt<br>Mitch<br>Brenda<br><br><i>Fear</i> -Mara<br><i>Rejection</i> -Matt<br><i>Confusion</i> - John<br><i>Boxed-in</i> - Jodi<br><i>Unpleasant</i> - James | <i>Freeing</i> -Mitch<br><i>Satisfying</i> -Brenda<br><i>Clarifying</i> -Matt<br><i>Encouraging</i> - Jodi |

**Spiritual Struggle within the Form of Knowing**

The form of knowing highlights a dimension of spiritual struggle wherein undergraduates began to critically reflect on their beliefs and worldviews, often

questioning what those in authority had taught them (Parks, 2000). Within this form, students described their experiences of spiritual struggle as *doubting struggle*, *adjusting struggle*, and *integrating struggle*. Doubting struggle, especially adjusting struggle, was described the most. Only two students described experiencing integrating struggle. Table 5 shows where Evangelical students placed their struggles within the form of knowing.

**Doubting struggle.** Doubting struggle, as described by 8 of the 20 students surveyed for this project, focused on differentiating current beliefs from those at home or distinguishing their beliefs from Evangelical CRGs that they either encountered or were still part of. While these students were able to articulate what they questioned or no longer believed, they still struggled to explain what new beliefs they did hold. The CRGs that Matt tried because he thought he'd find common ground "didn't work" because he realized his worldview was different from theirs and that he would have to look elsewhere to explore his emerging thoughts. He reflected further that: "College opened me up to world of new religions. I tried Christian groups and that didn't work. I felt rejected from them, and so I'd go look somewhere else for means of fulfillment." Simon's experience is one example of doubting struggle, wherein he describes questioning his inherited views on creationism in light of the coursework in his science class:

So now, I don't know which one's true. I mean, I still want to say creationism, but [I want to] understand the other viewpoint before I take that stance. I'm learning things on my own. Conservatives, they're stuck in their mindset and what they believe in. I want to be open to other things.

**Adjusting struggle.** Eight students described adjusting struggle wherein they attempted to incorporate new kinds of people, concepts, and roles into their worldviews. Students who experienced adjusting struggle described a growing awareness of the varied, even conflicting beliefs that they held and also their attempts to integrate those beliefs. Therese described how her beliefs had changed since coming to college: “I started to see God who was more of a loving figure than what I was taught to believe. Looking back, it got lost in the rules and regulations and things I couldn’t do, but I didn’t know why.” Tom recalled his realizations when encountering others different from him and how that made him reconsider and go “back and forth” with his own worldview:

And I realized that people don't all believe the same thing. It was kind of a culture shock. Especially here, there seem to be a lot more liberal people. You grow up hearing one thing, and then you come here and hear other things. I keep going back and forth. In high school I was the liberal guy. I’ve come here and I’ve realized that I’m the conservative guy.

Jodi explained how she did not agree with the labels that her classmates associated with Christianity, while also recognizing that the kind of Christian she was becoming was different from her parents’ and grandparents’ Christianity. She was becoming more open to the needs and rights of others and also more aware that her own worldview was changing:

[My view of people who are not Christians has] changed a lot. They’re not just a “non-Christian.” They have all these qualities and great personalities. We get along great. They are no longer my projects. I want them to know God, but when we hangout I don’t feel pressure to convert them. We just hang out.



Mitch demonstrated his attempt to test out some his emerging beliefs: “If I have faith in what God says he’s going to do, I’m going to see if he’ll do it. So I started to put more trust in that. I started to see how true these promises were. It’s growing my faith.” Brenda shared her awareness of the multiple roles she holds as an RA and a Christian and the sensitivity that comes with projecting her values on others while remaining congruent to herself as a person:

[Students come to me] with struggles, anything from eating disorders to roommate trouble. It’s difficult to be a person of faith and not jump in with a faith-based aspect of it. It can be such a comfort to me and it’s difficult for it to not be my first reactions.

**Integrating struggle.** People who experience integrating struggle seek to take responsibility for their own thinking and live in a way that is committed to and congruent with their new emerging beliefs. Only two students demonstrated integrating struggle. They described their beliefs by avoiding religious clichés and using language that was more congruent and personal. These students knew who they were and what they believed, and this recognition was expressed by the way they lived. When I asked Matt if he still considered himself a Christian, he offered:

There’s one quote I heard from Gandhi, where someone came up to him and said, “Would you identify yourself as Hindu?” And Gandhi said, “If you have a little bit of time, yes, I am. If you have a lot of time, no, I’m not.” If we have a quick moment, face value, yes I’m a Christian, totally fine. If you have more time, there’s a lot more there than simply affiliating with one religious background. The way that I label myself, I don’t like the term “Christian.” I never have. I

prefer the term, “follower of Jesus Christ.” It highlights the relationship. I would say that.

Brenda’s spirituality flowed seamlessly into all the experiences she was involved in, such as being a Resident Assistant, tutoring Spanish children, leading a Boy Scout troop, serving the poor with her church and Muslims, and substitute teaching. She described her actions more as expressions of the person she was becoming than as the things she did only to make herself a Christian. She explained:

These activities are things I just like to do. I like to substitute teach. It’s a highlight of my week. My Boy Scouts changed my perspectives. These activities cause me to take a step back and reevaluate how I’m doing faith and how I’m doing life.

Table 5

*Kinds of Struggle Described within the Form of Knowing*

| Struggle within the Form of Knowing      | Doubting Struggle  | Adjusting Struggle  | Integrating Struggle   |
|--|--|---|--|
| Students and Their Struggle Descriptions | <i>Disagreeing with CRGs</i><br>Mara<br>Mike<br>Jodi<br>Matt                 | <i>Integrating new people</i><br>Matt<br>Brenda<br>Therese<br>Jodi<br>Tom | <i>Articulating and owning their worldview</i><br>Matt<br>Brenda |
|  | <i>Disagreeing with inherited beliefs</i><br>John<br>Aaron<br>Simon<br>James | <i>Integrating new concepts</i><br>Matt<br>Mike<br>Mitch<br>Brenda        |  |

Table 5 (cont'd)

---

*Integrating new  
roles*  
Brenda  
Jodi  
James  
Therese

### **Summary of Students' Spiritual Struggle within Spiritual Development**

By adapting Parks' (2000) framework for understanding Evangelical students' spiritual struggles, I was able to categorize students' descriptions beyond the on-campus and off-campus factors that students perceived as influencing and resourcing their spiritual struggle experiences. What became evident was that, relationally, most Evangelical students experienced a relational disconnection as they began to question or reject the religious and spiritual assumptions held by their parents, religious leaders, home churches, or the CRGs they had joined. Only some found connections with new religious or academic groups, and few described the ways they were trying to invest in these new groups. Emotionally, most described their negative feelings of being overwhelmed and anxious with only a few expressing positive feelings when referring to their spiritual struggles. Intellectually, most students doubted or acknowledged the tensions they felt between their inherited beliefs and their new ideas and experiences, and only a few were able to articulate their own, newly developed beliefs.

Apart from the kinds of spiritual struggles described above, I identified four students who described their struggle as more akin to what Parks (2000) might view as a pre-emerging adult struggle. I called this kind, *crisis struggle*. Crisis struggle refers to the students' described crisis experiences (excessive drinking, drugs, sex, pregnancy, assault,

getting arrested) and their search for help. For these students, a CRG or a local church served as a familiar, safe haven to where they returned when they lost their way. Table 6 summarizes how all the participants described their struggle in light of the forms and stages of spiritual development adapted here from Parks' (2000) framework.

Table 6

*Summary of Student Struggle Descriptions within the Spiritual Development Forms*

| Students  | Forms of Struggle |          |           |             |                   |                   |            |         |              |
|-----------|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------|---------|--------------|
|           |                   | Knowing  |           |             | Dependence        |                   | Community  |         |              |
|           | Crisis            | Doubting | Adjusting | Integrating | Negative Feelings | Positive Feelings | Separating | Seeking | Contributing |
| Aaron     |                   | x        |           |             |                   |                   | x          |         |              |
| Andy      | x                 |          |           |             |                   |                   |            |         |              |
| Brenda    |                   |          | x         | x           | x                 | x                 | x          | x       | x            |
| Cassandra | x                 |          |           |             |                   |                   |            |         |              |
| Colleen   | x                 |          |           |             |                   |                   |            |         |              |
| James     |                   | x        | x         |             | x                 |                   | x          | x       |              |
| Jenny     |                   |          |           |             |                   |                   | x          |         |              |
| Jodi      |                   | x        | x         |             | x                 | x                 |            | x       | x            |
| John      |                   | x        |           |             | x                 |                   | x          |         |              |
| Joseph    |                   |          |           |             |                   |                   | x          |         |              |
| Karen     |                   |          |           |             | x                 |                   | x          |         |              |
| Mara      |                   | x        |           |             | x                 |                   |            | x       |              |
| Matt      |                   | x        | x         | x           | x                 | x                 | x          | x       |              |
| Mike      |                   | x        | x         |             |                   |                   | x          | x       |              |
| Mitch     |                   |          | x         |             | x                 | x                 | x          |         |              |
| Simon     |                   | x        |           |             |                   |                   |            |         |              |
| Trisha    |                   |          |           |             | x                 |                   |            |         |              |
| Therese   |                   |          | x         |             | x                 |                   | x          | x       |              |
| Tom       |                   |          | x         |             | x                 |                   | x          | x       |              |
| Trevor    | x                 |          |           |             |                   |                   |            |         |              |

## **Student Spiritual Struggle and Their Perceptions within the Separating-Integrating Continuum**

The previous section showed that the majority of Evangelical students have yet to fully mature in their spiritual development either relationally, emotionally, or intellectually. I also noticed that their spiritual struggle descriptions were associated with the way that they perceived various elements within their university. I began to speculate that the students' perceptions of their university influenced the kinds of spiritual struggles they described and also the kinds of resources they accessed to work through those struggles. Now, with a clearer understanding of the kinds of spiritual struggle that these students' reported, I took a closer look at the student interviews to see whether students shared any other outlooks or behaviors. That process led me to discover that the students shared similar perspectives that closely aligned with their spiritual development, which I call the *separating-integrating continuum*. Thus, I characterized each student as having a separating or integrating perceptive. In this section, I explain how students with these different perspectives characterized their campus' climate, their interaction with others, their education, their spiritual growth, and also their interview experiences.

### **The Separating Perspective**

In describing their spiritual struggle experiences, some Evangelical students used language that attempted to maintain a distance or separating posture between their spiritual/religious beliefs and their campus environment. Specifically, they experienced their campus as hostile or adversarial toward their spiritual beliefs, and they described their interactions with others who were different from them in terms of proselytizing (e.g. witnessing, sharing their faith). They kept their spirituality and education separate, and in

their interviews, they often revealed their definition of spiritual faithfulness as maintaining the same religious faith they had been taught.

**College climate.** Some students used language and imagery that portrayed their perception of the university climate as being indifferent or hostile toward Christians and Christianity. What Cassandra described the university as “anti-Christian,” Trevor called it “secular,” and Jenny viewed it as “liberal,” all were using terms that described the opposite of who they saw themselves to be. Therese’s comments are a useful example of this view:

I think [the university] wants to put religion in a very specific box. And you are allowed to say this, but not that. You can believe homosexuality is wrong, but you can’t tell someone it’s wrong. You can have your beliefs, but you can’t share them. I think [those] people would be heavily persecuted. You can believe what you want to believe but not say a word about it. It’s heavily against witnessing, regardless of who you are. It’s okay to have your religion, but don’t spread it—like the flu.

**Interacting with “others.”** All the students agreed that there was a tremendous amount of diversity on their campus. However, some students saw those “others” who were different than them as people who did not hold the truth or have spiritual beliefs. They often referred to “other” students who did not share their religious outlook as “non-Christians” or “atheists,” but giving little explanation as to what those labels actually meant. When asked what it was like to interact with students who were different than themselves, most described experiences of proselytizing other students for the purpose of converting them. Students like Colleen believed that other students in her classes who

weren't Christian didn't have the right beliefs or had no beliefs at all: "I try my darndest to make friends in my class. I don't know what they believe, but I'm guessing nothing too strongly." Also, she talked of mentoring other Evangelical students by taking them out to proselytize on campus. When asked what he learned from conversations he had with Jews, Muslims, and atheists, Trevor responded that most of them are "scared" and they "shrink away from the conversation" when he tries to talk with them. John, Cassandra, and Karen expressed respect toward these others, but were very clear that there was a distinction between Christians and non-Christians and that non-Christians needed saving. Karen honestly admitted a similar view:

If people tell me, I don't say it out loud. But in my head [I'm thinking], 'You've got it wrong.' If they ask what I believe, I tell them. People have said to me, 'Are you one of those people who think that if I don't believe in God I'm going to Hell?' It's hard, but I tell them, 'yes.'

**Spirituality and education.** When asked how they sought to integrate or connect their spirituality into their actual learning, classrooms, and/or assignments, most of the students with a separating perspective either did not see a connection, felt that spirituality was repressed by faculty or other students, or tried to avoid any tension between their spirituality and their education altogether. Colleen lamented that in class there was "no room for discussion for what we might believe." Jenny admitted: "Learning about feminism and what I believe about it has been very challenging at the university because the faculty and professors and the people I work with, are very liberal." Simon also noted: "There is not as much talk about spirituality in my classes as I had hoped, actually. My best shot about getting people to know God is how I carry myself and then

they'll ask." When asked if she thought professors cared about her spiritual perspectives, Coleen responded: "I don't think so. I never felt any reason they would. So, I don't feel they do." Therese admitted trying to keep her spirituality and education separate:

That's one of the things I've tried to avoid. Because I'm part of such a science-based major, I'm also in the honors college. All the university requirements that would open up the possibility to talk about religion, I have avoided.

**Reflections on the interview experience.** When asked about their interview experience pertaining to this current study, those students who espoused a separating perspective admitted feeling comfortable with talking about spiritual things; felt proud about remaining faithful to the religious beliefs taught to them; appreciated the chance to reflect on their spiritual lives, admitted that they hadn't spent much time reflecting on their spirituality; and felt a need to process some of my interview questions with their peers and mentors between their first and second interviews. Therese said what many of these students expressed: "It's been very interesting. I've never before sat down and actually looked through my entire experience. And to be able to see how everything was leading up to me growing stronger in Christ and becoming a better person." Mike reflected: "It's been great to step back and reflect and see how things three years ago have connected with who I am today." Mitch offered: "I've been really excited. This is awesome for me to process what's been going on in my life. We talked about how much time I spend doing different things. I saw it as an opportunity for me to think about what different things have impacted my faith over the course of my college career." Aaron saw his interviews as a chance to reflect on his spiritual progress:



I think [the interviews helped] a lot. I'm an external processor and I don't get a chance to talk to people a lot about this. It gave me a deeper understanding of where I am and where I came from. You had me recall things before I came to college, and it helped me see my progress.

Similarly, Jenny said she was proud of her spiritual progress over her college career:

Yeah. I think [these interviews] have come at a really cool time for me because I am graduating. So it's been really cool to reflect [over my four years at college]. And I'm kinda proud of myself about seeking healing and seeking God. I'm thankful for the heart that God has given me.

### **The Integrating Perspective**

In describing their spiritual struggle experiences, some Evangelical students used language and concepts that attempted to integrate their spirituality with their college lives. Those students who held an integrating perspective saw the college climate as beneficial and supportive of their spirituality, viewed others as peers where mutual understanding was possible, held their education and spirituality as partners in their own personal growth, and struggled with their spiritual path when it diverged from the traditional Evangelical script.

**College climate.** Evangelical students who espoused an integrating perspective toward their university described a campus that was an open and positive environment that helped them grow, expanded their perspectives, and matured their convictions. Notably, the only negative experience that all of this group did mention referred to a street preacher who visited the campus regularly and told the students that they were

going to Hell. Mike was grateful for the university environment: “I think the university has been a stronger environment for me to grow spiritually. It’s the strongest environment I could ask for. [My faith and calling] has stuck, and it’s given me more certainty about what I’m doing.” Joseph and Jodi talked about the openness of the campus. Jodi explained: “I have never felt oppressed or feel like I couldn’t talk about God. I think there is a general openness.” Brenda’s comments provide a useful example of some of the students’ growing appreciation for their university: “You know, this might just be my bias, but the university gets a really bad rap for being hostile on all spectrums. And there probably have been instances of that. But I don’t see it.”

**Interacting with “others.”** Students who espoused an integrating perspective were more open to seeking out, meeting, understanding, and learning from other students and professors who were different from them. These relationships, however, brought forth a new level of struggle, as they tried to make sense of their spiritual differences within their newfound friendships. Mike explained, “I’ve had my perspective broadened to realize that people who disagree with me have legitimate points.” Therese reflected, saying, “I try, when I see someone, no matter what background, to learn from them to be a better person.” Matt’s language demonstrated his desire to recognize the uniqueness of others while also finding common ground. Reflecting on the friendships he has made at college, he commented: “Right now, I don’t have friends that affiliate with Christianity the same way I do. Many wouldn’t identify with Christians. They would identify themselves as spiritual, or atheist, or agnostic. A broad range of people.”

**Spirituality and education.** Some students had a more positive view of their classes and also their professors. They valued what they were learning and attempted to

make connections to their spirituality. They experienced the classroom as a place where ideas and opinions could be shared in order to understand others and grow, not simply proselytize. Matt gave credit to his college classes for teaching him how to dialogue better with others:

But in college, the small group settings [versus large group settings where the professor just lectures], is where it's easier to branch out and say what you want to say. So, there are times I agree with the group, and other times I say, "What if we were to think about this in another way."

Students also described times when their class experiences did not go so well. Brenda, for example, had a bad experience when another Christian did not handle the class environment well:

One girl spoke up and said she went to campus religious group. She said that she doesn't judge anyone but there's the truth, and what the Bible says is that homosexuality is a sin [...] and I think I probably would have scaled it back a bit. I remember thinking that the way [this student] handled that probably wasn't needed. Props to her for sharing her opinion, but I think if you don't think through all the possible viewpoints, it's hard to be articulate about it.

While they did remain positive toward the classroom environment, most of these students preferred to talk about spiritual religious topics *outside* of class in lower-risk settings where conversations could revolve around their friendships with trusted classmates. Joseph attempted to interpret the divide he sometimes saw between peers in the classroom:

[The classroom] is definitely open, but sometimes, I think people are more prone to hold their tongue about their faith in class. [It gets set up that] you're either atheist or religious and there's no talking between the two sides. People are more prone to hold their tongue to speak about these things because it's uncomfortable to talk about that subject. People want to be right. They don't want there to be any doubt in what they believe, any uncertainty. If you feel strongly about something, you'll defend it. But I have to be with these [peers] all semester.

**Reflections on the interview experience.** Similar to those with a separating perspective, students with an integrating perspective appreciated their interviews, but also had slightly different reactions. These students treated the interviews as rare and safe places to lament, even grieve, over some of their spiritual challenges. Some students like Joseph, Jodi, and Brenda appreciated having their spiritual journeys validated even when they admitted diverging from the traditional Evangelical script, which those with a separating perspective valued, such as being a leader in a CRG, attending church regularly, or evangelizing on campus. Tom admitted:

“Since we met last time, it's made me think a lot about where I am, about my spiritual life, what I want to do in the future. It's helped me put it into perspective and what kind of path I want to take. What kind of people I want to meet with. What I want to join. It's made me think about it more than I have before.”

Jodi explained: “I think I feel really validated in my journey. Not that I felt invalidated. I just wonder what people think about me, and I shouldn't but I guess I have felt encouraged on the journey I'm on.” Similarly, Brenda shared how her interviews helped normalize her experiences and give her comfort:

I think it has been nice for me to know that not everyone goes about it the same way. Even in our last interview when you said you've heard responses from all across the board. That is comforting to me. That it's kind of unique and that not all doing Christianity at the university do it the same black and white way. That's been good. It's nice to hear that I'm not completely off, that I'm doing faith right!

### **Summary of Student Perceptions along the Separating-Integrating Continuum**

Based on the Evangelical students' responses regarding campus climate, view of "others," education and spirituality, and their view of personal faithfulness, I characterized these students as resting along the separating-integrating continuum as depicted in Table 7. While some students fit consistently in the separating or integrating categories, other students fit in between, as they espoused some separating and some integrating perspectives. Notably, the perspectives these students held aligned closely with the kinds of spiritual struggles that they described under Parks' (2000) framework.

Table 7

#### *Student Places on the Separating-Integrating Continuum*

| Separating Perspective | In-Between Separating and Integrating Perspectives | Integrating Perspective |
|------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Aaron                  | James  | Brenda                  |
| Andy                   | Joseph   | Jodi                    |
| Cassandra              | Karen  | Matt                    |
| Colleen                | Mitch  | Mike                    |
| Jenny                  | Therese  | Tom                     |
| John                   |  |                         |
| Mara                   |  |                         |
| Simon                  |  |                         |
| Trevor                 |  |                         |
| Trisha                 |  |                         |

## **Undergraduates' Perceived Purpose, Expectations, and Recommendations in Light of the Separating-Integrating Continuum**

Characterizing Evangelical students on the separating-integrating continuum, while also paying attention to the kinds of struggle these students described, proved to be helpful for answering this study's research question and the remaining two sub-questions (restated below).

### **Undergraduate Descriptions of Purpose**

How have the experiences of undergraduates who have worked through spiritual struggle affected and influenced other areas in their lives (major/career decisions, relationships, interests, beliefs, religious practices, etc.)? I asked students to discuss their purpose for being at the university and what they hoped to pursue beyond college. I also asked them about any expectations that they had of the university or any recommendations to provide the university. Answers varied depending on whether a student tended toward having an integrating perspective rather than a separating perspective. Appendix E summarizes where students were located on a separating-integrating continuum in terms of their descriptions of their educational purposes and future goals.

**Purpose expressed from a separating perspective.** Students with a separating perspective believed that the campus and their future careers were mission fields where they could take their Christian message. Aaron admittedly had yet to find any integration between his study of science and his spirituality, but like John, he saw his education as preparing him for medical missions. Andy aspired to be a computer programmer, Colleen to be a teacher, Jenny to be a social worker, and Cassandra to be an orphanage worker. All envisioned their careers as means to their ultimate goal— to proselytize others. Simon

did not explain or demonstrate a clear integration of his spirituality and education, but nevertheless, he felt a deep conviction to serve others. Trisha and Trevor were unable to articulate their present and future roles as students with their future aspirations. In general, students with a separating perspective had very authentic and compassionate attitudes for how they wanted to serve God by investing their lives to help others. Yet most of their descriptions about purpose were general, vague, and lacked specifics.

**Purpose expressed from an integrating perspective.** Those students espousing an integrating perspective described the purposes of their roles at their university and for their futures using language that was original, less clichéd, and more natural. They expressed more specific and more thought-out aspirations and were able to articulate some of their next steps. Mike talked about the impact of his studies at college and his specific plan to get a teaching degree and then study theology to become a pastor. Tom gave credit to his learning community for helping him see the injustices present in the world. He planned to apply to graduate school and study international politics in order to study the political challenges associated with global warming. Matt discovered, through his studies at college, a growing interest in religious studies and psychology. He talked of going to a graduate school or a seminary that valued and taught theological and psychological integration. His description demonstrated his clear growing convictions about his spirituality and how he hoped to develop a psychological and theological integration to prepare him to either be a skilled pastor and/or a counselor with theological training. Brenda, likely the most integrated student of the sample, sought to use her degree in education to teach Spanish to underprivileged children.

### **Purpose expressed in between the separating and integrating perspectives.**

Some students when describing their purpose fell in-between the separating and integrating perspectives, as they showed signs of integration, while also admitting that they had yet taken any steps to pursue their aspirations. Mitch often referred to his role and future career as his opportunities to share Christ, and yet he also explained the ways he was trying to integrate his faith and his role as a Residence Assistant by seeking to honor his supervisor's expectations and Christian convictions. Karen described "getting an education" as not being spiritual, but then also talked about her college training giving her courage to step out to teach children overseas. Karen expressed being this "in-between" by using two different versions of her name. When I asked her about it, she referred to the names as the "old and new Karen." Joseph had trouble integrating his education and spirituality, but talked passionately and specifically about being a teacher or a professor because he wanted to make the world a better place through good teaching and caring for his students. Mara tended to separate her education and spirituality, yet still dreamed of using her major to work with a Christian adoption agency or with refugees.

### **Undergraduates' Expectations and Recommendations for Higher Education**

What recommendations do Evangelical undergraduates offer to their higher education institutions for better ways to support them as they experience and manage their spiritual struggle? Evangelical students seemed at a loss when asked to offer specific "recommendations" to the university, but they did talk freely about their own experiences and about the advice they would give others associated with the campus. These students offered insights on the following topics: descriptions of their own



freshmen expectations and their advice to future Evangelical freshmen; recommendations for their professors through describing their best professors and classes; and recommendations to campus religious groups. Considering how students responded in light of their separating and integrating perspectives also provided helpful insights.

**Freshmen expectations and advice for future freshmen.** I asked if the students had any expectations of their university regarding their spirituality when they entered college, and if they had any advice for future incoming freshman who also shared their Evangelical Christian backgrounds. Evangelical students across the separating-integrating continuum all described having little or no expectations of the university actually helping them with their spiritual development. What was evident, however, was that most of the participants had similar expectations entering college, but where they fell along the separating-integrating continuum was related to how they discussed their expectations and advice.

When they came to the university, almost all the respondents said that they had anticipated that the university would be hostile or indifferent toward their spirituality. They assumed that they were spiritually on their own or admitted that they gave little thought about their spirituality as they started college. Mara explained: “I knew that it wasn’t a Christian school; it was public. The classes are big, so I didn’t expect them to nurture my spirituality at all.” Similarly, Trisha felt that spiritually, she was on her own: “I kind of knew that it was a public school and that I would have to find [spiritual and religious] things on my own.” Therese explained her expectations: “I expected to encounter professors and students who were going to combat my beliefs either in their teachings or what they believed. I expected my roommate and my dorm not to believe

what I believe.” Mitch admitted: “This is really bad to say. I was interested in seeing if I would have a professor who was outlandish, an atheist, or agnostic.” Mike shared the same sentiment: “No expectations. I heard the ‘boogeyman stories.’ I got that professors are going to be there to get you. I never experienced that. I’m not sure I had any expectations.”

Most students admitted having little expectations of their university regarding their spirituality. Yet, when asked what advice they would give to incoming freshmen or their “freshmen selves,” their suggestions were more descriptive and did align with their separating or integrating perspectives.

The majority of advice offered by those students with a separating perspective was to become connected with a CRG. Simon, Coleen, Aaron, and Mara gave similar advice. For example, Mara explained that there were multiple ministries on campus, referring only to CRGs as options: “If you’re interested in growing your faith, there are lots of Christian organizations for you to seek out.” Aaron, suggested that Evangelical students should have two friend groups—a spiritual friend group and a secular friend group: “For spiritual, I like what I did. Keep going to a CRG. Understand that having two friend groups is okay.”

In contrast, those students’ holding an integrating perspective suggested that freshmen try new things, branch out, and explore what their university has to offer. Tom recommended: “Don’t be afraid to be yourself. Branch out!” Jodi offered: “I would say, feel free to explore different groups on campus.” Therese, who expected the university to be “hostile” before she attended, advised:

Being close-minded is one of the worst things you can do. It's important to explore other Christian faiths. It's important for each person to find what they think is the full truth and to search earnestly for it. I believe if you search for the full truth, you will find it.

**Recommendations for faculty.** Previously, in Chapter 4 I noted that most students reported spirituality rarely coming up in the classroom. Also, due to the personal nature of that topic, students preferred to talk about it within friendship contexts, outside of class. This view may explain why students had difficulty describing what recommendations they would offer to faculty to support them, as they worked through any spiritual struggle. However, when asked to describe a favorite professor or class experience, the students were much more specific and even animated about sharing their insights. Students said that they appreciated faculty who were approachable and accessible in their personalities; enthusiastic, inspiring, creative, and organized in their teaching; and relevant in connecting subject matter to real life. Students appreciated and were impacted by classes that were smaller, discussion-oriented, and input-inviting. Regarding spirituality, an encouraging message from these students was that faculty did not necessarily need to talk about spirituality to attend to students' spiritual needs effectively. Regarding faculty, students' place along the separating-integrating continuum showed less contrast, although, those with a separating perspective tended to be more harsh and dismissive of professors whom they perceived as unspiritual. There also appeared to be little distinction between students' descriptions of faculty and their classroom experiences based on their major of study.

***Be approachable and accessible.*** Students said they appreciated professors who were approachable and accessible both in and out of class. Simon, Aaron, Jodi, Jenny, and Trisha admitted that they felt intimidated by professors and had experienced some distant, even aloof ones. Aaron's comment summarized many of the students' sentiments: "I didn't really go to any of my professors. I don't like approaching my professors or teaching assistants. I think they're really intimidating." Conversely, many students relayed stories of being pleasantly surprised by their encounters with certain faculty who were approachable, engaging, helpful, and who did value interaction. Mara loved how her instructor treated students as her peers, as she felt that professor's posture empowered the class to learn and ask valuable questions. John appreciated how his professor was understanding of his religious commitments outside the classroom and was accommodating toward some of John's scheduling conflicts. James liked how closely he worked with professors on some of his projects, while Brenda appreciated the sympathy her professor showed her when her grandmother died.

***Be enthusiastic, inspiring, creative, and organized.*** A prominent theme expressed by most of the students was how much students appreciated their professors' enthusiasm about the subjects they taught. They offered examples of their professors being "passionate" about their subjects and gave multiple examples of how they were creative in their teaching approaches. Students noticed when more effort and investment in learning were put into a class. Simon remembered a teacher who was creative and invested in her teaching, and it inspired his future career choice:

My teacher, she talked about kale and brought samples for our class of 200 people! It was interesting, and I enjoyed it. She was nice and passionate about what she was teaching. It was really great, and I knew that's what I wanted to do. Mitch's experience captured qualities that students experienced and appreciated from the professors who loved their subjects:

I had this professor my freshman year who I think is one of the best professors on campus. He was my chemistry professor, and he loved talking about chemistry. Because he loved talking about chemistry so much, it didn't matter if he loved teaching. I remember one time that he always had really great notes for us in class, and I had a question. And I went up to him and I said, "Professor, I have a question." And his eyes lit up and he said, "Yeah, what's the question? Let's talk chemistry!"

***Be able to connect material to real life and personal ideas.*** Students appreciated when professors tied class subject matter to their real lives. Students felt supported when instructors were sensitive to their students' spiritual and religious convictions and acknowledged students' attempts to integrate these views with their academic studies. Jodi offered this example:

I appreciated my professor a lot. Just that she realized that religion can be an issue in the social work profession. That it can be hard for Evangelical Christians. That was actually the term. It was in our textbook. It was like a bold vocab word.

***Smaller, discussion- oriented, input- inviting classrooms matter.*** Students described some of their best classes as the ones where class sizes were smaller and safer for discussion. They appreciated instructors who valued students' input and questions

and worked to make the classroom space safe and inviting for exchanges of dialogue. Students like Tom and Jodi said that these kinds of classes helped them grow in articulating their opinions, interacting with others, and speaking up in class. Tom described his love-hate experience in one class that he learned to value:

There was a smaller intro course where my professor made us think deeply about the causes and consequences of the topic we were discussing. She would also call us out in class if we weren't debating. That's probably where I started getting my skills for dialoging with others. She was very demanding. There were times I hated it. I hated this professor! But when I came out of it, I realized it was one of my best experiences. It helped my reading and writing a lot.

***Faculty do not need to talk about spirituality to attend to spirituality.*** Most students noted there was little discussion of spiritual or religious topics in the classroom. Some assumed that their professors avoided spirituality because they did not like it or simply chose not to approach the subject. More students admitted that their peers avoided the topic in class because they were intimidated, did not want to be controversial, and worried about the subject moving from discussion to debate (which some students did actually witness). Students who wanted to talk about spiritual topics found that most of these conversations happened outside of class in casual conversations, with friends. Many said students were open to talking about spirituality, but that the stakes were too high in class. Still, many talked about how the classroom was the place where they were challenged and inspired to integrate their thinking, consider new perspectives, or entertain new ideas pertaining to their majors and their career choices. Trisha explained her experience:

Actually, one of the professors I have right now, I had him my freshman year for my intro to bio-systems engineering class, and he was probably the reason I stuck with the major I'm in now. He was really engaging. And I've had him for one of my higher-level classes, and it seems like he cares that we're learning.

Regarding students and their perspectives along the separating-integrating continuum, there appeared to be little distinction between different students' advice to faculty, although those espousing a separating perspective tended to be more harsh and dismissive of professors, assuming them to be unspiritual or resistant to Christianity.

**Undergraduate impressions of campus religious groups (CRGs).** This section captures how students described their university's connection to CRGs along with my personal observations; why students thought students should join CRGs; how they saw CRGs' supporting them as students; what they described as their CRG's theology in practice; and how they described CRGs' views of gender and gender roles.

***CRGs and the university have a legitimate connection.*** In terms of context, Evangelical CRGs are recognized groups on the university campus in the current study. They hold the privileges that come with this recognition, such as access to campus building spaces and acknowledgment as a legitimate campus group on the university's website. Students saw these CRGs as part of their university community. Students remembered filling out a "Religious Preference Form" during Freshman Orientation. It gave students the opportunity to share their religious backgrounds, so those groups that matched their religious leanings could contact them. These forms were delivered to campus religious groups who then had the option to follow up with students through emails, social media, and visitations.

Many students in this study reported filling out the form, being visited by CRG leaders, or as a student leader, some of these students following up with freshmen themselves. In addition, some students mentioned and appreciated the fact that the university's Vice President of Student Development has, for the last two years, attended their large group meeting to speak to students and parents. Generally, the university appeared to welcome Evangelical CRGs, formally recognize them, promote the groups on the university website, and provide or allow ways for students to become connected to CRGs.

***Reasons that students join CRGs.*** Beyond receiving advice from their parents, I asked students why they thought students joined CRGs. Their responses were largely consistent across the separating-integrating continuum. Students offered that CRGs were familiar to students and similar to what students experienced in their home church youth groups. For example, Jenny explained: "Generally, students join CRGs their freshman and sophomore years because they did it in high school. They come to college and do the religious thing because they've been told that they should, or they did it in high school." Mitch added: "They come to CRG events because they've done these kinds of religious gatherings their entire lives."

Also, students reported that CRGs provided students with opportunities for friendships with similar and like-minded individuals. For example, Karen explained: "Why they join is to find community, because that's especially hard here at school. They seek people [with whom] they share things in common, people they can be friends with." Aaron admitted: "Coming to college, I didn't know anyone because I was out of state. So the group helped me get friends."



In addition, students explained that CRGs provided protection, support, and alternatives to college partying. Simon admitted: “For me, [my CRG] kept me from a lot of temptations, like going to parties and drinking. Jenny framed her “Thursday night” decisions as a spiritual choice where CRGs offered an alternative: “Thursday nights are when people go out, so students have to decide between faith and going out.”

Finally, students said that CRGs helped some of them to connect with something meaningful. Mara explained: “I know that a lot of people at our college are lost and searching for something. So I think people like to get involved in things that are bigger than themselves.”

***CRGs support of higher education.*** I asked students who did have experiences with CRGs if they thought their CRGs and CRG leaders also supported their academic aspirations. Their responses were mixed. Some held the view that their CRGs encouraged them to glorify God in their studies, while still providing them with encouragement and support. Colleen, Therese, John, and Mara felt supported enough by their CRGs to invest in their schoolwork. They explained how people in their groups did ask them how school was going, offered to study together, and reminded them that they were college students for a reason. Mara said: “We’ve been taught in [my CRG] about glorying God in everything you’re doing, and that includes schoolwork.”

Other students felt a tension with some of their CRGs’ expectations. Simon, Mitch, Jodi, and Aaron all expressed the pressure they felt to choose between CRG involvement and their studies. Aaron described what he felt: “Sometimes I feel judged and that my priorities are a little skewed. That may be true, but I came to school, not to

serve this fellowship, but to be a student and help people grow in God.” Jodi, however, felt pressured by her CRG to attend certain programs even when she had to study:

In my CRG, I felt like I couldn’t pour myself into my classes. Say you had an exam study session, and it conflicts with Bible study. I would feel like I had to go to Bible study. Even though I was here at school to get a degree. I didn’t feel 100% freedom to do that, I guess.

Mitch and John explained that CRGs emphasized the importance of doing ministry on campus, going into ministry beyond college, or at least “ministering” through the choice of a person’s career. Mitch explained: “Ministry here means being a witness to Christ and evangelizing. I think our group would like anyone involved [in our CRG] to do full-time ministry.” He explained that CRGs see getting every student into ministry as a profession or to evangelize through their “secular” jobs:

And that’s why you’re here so that we can build you up and send you out into the workforce. So, I think our CRG ideally would like everyone to do full-time ministry because it would complete the Great Commission [Referring to *Acts* 28 and Jesus’ command to “Make disciples of all nations”]. Some Christians argue that when the Great Commission is completed, Christ will return and reign].

***CRG theology and outreach.*** The tensions felt by some students about CRGs may have related to the pressure from CRGs to proselytize. The most significant activities that those students who attended CRGs mentioned were activities that involved engaging other students by sharing their faith either directly or indirectly. Colleen explained: “I think that [my CRG] focuses on evangelizing and sharing the Word of the Lord like my church back home, which I think is good. There is more emphasis on

witnessing at [my CRG].” A number of students mentioned a “hot dog ministry” where Christian groups would hand out hot dogs to drunken students on weekends trying to tell or show them God’s Love.

***CRGs and gender.*** Another theological belief that occurred in the interviews pertained to students’ descriptions of their CRG views on gender roles. Most of the comments on this topic came from the female participants. Positively, females appreciated the respect they received from men in their CRGs. Mara felt “respected and honored” much more than in the other interactions she had with men on campus. Colleen admitted that she liked it when men “took the lead” in a relationship, appealing to what she had been taught about the uniqueness of men and women’s roles in a relationship. Some students said their CRGs had women leaders and teachers. Still, females also expressed the tension they felt between their university experience and their CRG culture. Jenny explained her CRG’s view in relation to women: “No [women do not teach]. Women lead prayer meetings. But, the president and large group leaders are males. We have female Bible study leaders. Whenever we have speakers come in, they’ve always been male.”

**Summary of undergraduate expectations and recommendations.** Regarding Evangelical students’ expectations and recommendations, what appeared most common for all students was that they came to college with the advice that the campus would be hostile to their faith and with little expectations of the university supporting their spirituality. Students’ impressions and their advice seemed to differ, however, on whether the students held separating or integrating perspectives. For those students with an integrating perspective, the university introduced them to new kinds of struggle, while

simultaneously, this group also discovered that the university offered multiple resources for spiritual support. Those students with a separating perspective appeared to remain unchanged, still holding to the advice and perspectives that had been communicated to them before they came to the university as freshmen.

### **Summary of Spiritual Struggle within Spiritual Development**

In Chapter 3, I noted that the goal of phenomenographic research is to identify categories of description as drawn from participants' perceptions of a particular phenomenon. As these descriptions are established, this approach seeks out underlying meanings and then examines the relationships between them (Entwistle, 1997; Marton, 1981). This section adapted Parks' (2000) spiritual development framework to probe more deeply into the students' experiences in this study. Specifically, this section took into account the different forms of spirituality (community, dependence, and knowing) and the spiritual maturity of the students who were participants in order to understand their responses. This analysis led to the creation of a continuum that defined the separating and integrating perspectives that shape students' views of their campus, their interactions with others who are different from them, their integration of their education and spirituality, and their view of spiritual faithfulness. Further, students' positions on the separating-integrating continuum helped to clarify their expectations and the recommendations for incoming freshmen, faculty, the classroom, and CRGs; and shed light on the resources certain Evangelical students preferred accessing to help them with their spiritual struggle.

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **DISCUSSION**

In this final chapter, I present: (1) an overview of the study; (2) a summary of the key findings; (3) a discussion of results; (4) the considerations for future practice; and (5) the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

#### **Overview of Study**

This section offers a brief overview of the study's research problem and its rationale, the research questions, key literature, and design summary.

#### **Problem and Rationale**

Undergraduate experiences of spiritual struggle on campus are common and indeed necessary for personal spiritual development and holistic maturity, but they are often unseen or misunderstood by universities, leading to a lack of support and even detrimental effects on the students' experiencing that struggle. The purpose of this study was to understand Evangelical undergraduates' perceptions of the factors affecting spiritual struggle and learn the resources they accessed to work through that struggle. Understanding these factors offers additional insights for public colleges and universities to apply, as they seek to support their students in their spiritual development. This project sought to contribute to the knowledge of undergraduate spiritual development by examining the college-related factors that Evangelical students perceive as either supporting or impeding them as they work through that same spiritual struggle.

#### **Research Questions**

In light of the aforementioned problem, this study presented the following research question:

From the perspective of undergraduate students who have come from the Evangelical Christian tradition, what factors support or impede their experiences when working through spiritual struggle while at college?

The research sub-questions were the following: a) What does spiritual struggle mean for Evangelical undergraduates? b) For those Evangelical undergraduates who have experienced spiritual struggle, what do they view as the particular sources or issues that relate to that struggle? What brought the struggle on for them? c) What factors do undergraduates perceive as affecting the process for how they handled their struggle? Specifically, what college-related factors (resources, relationships, experiences) do these undergraduates perceive as affecting how they handled their struggle? Which of these factors helped and which impeded them, as these students experienced and managed spiritual struggle and in what ways? d) How have the experiences of undergraduates who have worked through spiritual struggle influenced other areas in their lives (major/career decisions, relationships, interests, beliefs, religious practices, etc.)? and e) What recommendations can Evangelical undergraduates offer to their higher education institutions for ways to better support this group of students as they experience and manage personal spiritual struggle?

### **Key Literature**

The key literature that framed this study includes the available works on spiritual development, particularly the research on emerging adulthood, undergraduate spirituality, spiritual struggle, and Evangelical Christian students.

**Spiritual development.** Researchers have argued that spiritual development fosters students' well-being (Temkin & Evans, 1998), contributes to an interdisciplinary

foundation (Inayatullah & Gidley, 2000; Love & Talbot, 1999), acknowledges personal “conversion” or transformation (Fowler, 1995; Vella, 2000; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998), encourages greater authenticity and a more integrated self (Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000; Love & Talbot, 1999; Murphy, 2005; Stewart, 2005; Tisdell, 2003), and it supports meaning-making as one of the ways that individuals construct their knowledge and integrate their lives (Jablonski et al., 2001; Keeling & Dungy, 2004; Tisdell, 2003). Spiritual development affects these individuals’ understanding of themselves, their relationship with others, and their ongoing pursuit for more meaning-making.

**Spiritual development and emerging adults.** Certain researchers have focused primarily on the emerging adult life-stage (Arnett, 2004; Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Arnett et al., 2011; Parks, 1991, 2000; Smith & Snell, 2009). They have agreed with other life-stage theorists that emerging adults (ages 18-26) experience a unique period in life where, among other things, their spirituality shapes and is shaped by their new knowledge and experiences (Arnett, 2004; Arnett et al., 2011). “Something changes” in the spirituality of many emerging adults, as they search to make their spirituality “more true,” reinterpret their worldview, and reframe their beliefs in light of their ever-growing exposure to a diversity of worldviews and experiences (Arnett, 2004; Parks, 2000).

**Spiritual development and undergraduates.** A select group of researchers have studied emerging adult spiritual development, as that development pertains specifically to undergraduate students. It has been observed that a majority of undergraduates bring their religious traditions and beliefs to campus (Astin, 2004; Astin & Astin, 2003; Astin et al., 2003; Jablonski et al., 2001; Lindholm, 2007; Love, 2001; Tisdell, 2001). Studies have also reported that a majority of undergraduates who enter college have a high

interest in spiritual ideas and involvement, and the expectations that their college or university will support their spiritual development (Astin et al., 2003; Lindholm, 2007). Simultaneously, some educators have called spirituality in higher education a “blind spot” that needs more and better understanding by educators (Collins & et al., 1987; Palmer et al., 2010; Rue, 1985; Temkin & Evans, 1998).

**Undergraduate spiritual struggle.** In order to understand undergraduate spirituality more specifically, this study focused on studying undergraduate perceptions of their own spiritual struggle. Bryant & Astin (2008) offered that “struggles of a spiritual nature are a reality for college students” (p. 23). Spiritual struggle is a known source of challenge for a “considerable portion of college students” thus bringing about spiritual conflict within the person (Rockenbach et al., 2012, p. 55). Undergraduate spiritual struggle is also a necessary part of their spiritual development and needs understanding and support, as it can impact the academic, social, and emotional well-being of college students (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Rockenbach et al., 2012).

**Evangelical undergraduates and spiritual struggle.** This study looked at a specific Christian tradition—Evangelical Christians. Evangelicals are the one category of religious groups on campus that typically have a larger organized presence on a campus, but are often less open to dialogue, remain more separate from campus activities, and are more susceptible to spiritual struggle (Bryant, 2006a; J. P. Hill, 2009; Magolda & Gross, 2009). Although many Evangelical students join campus religious groups (CRGs), Magolda and Gross (2009) have stated that the “academy remains largely ignorant about the intricacies of Evangelical organizations and uncertain how to meet the unique needs of evangelical students while remaining true to core, secular institutional values” (p. 11).



**Gaps in the literature on undergraduate spiritual struggle.** So far, the prior studies that have sought to understand spiritual struggle in college students include Parks (2000), Astin, et al., (2003), Bryant & Astin, (2008), Fisler et al. (2009), Astin, Astin & Lindholm, (2011a, 2011b), and Rockenbach et al. (2012). In terms of the perceived spiritual struggle of Evangelical Christian undergraduates, I identified specific gaps in the literature. In particular, I noticed that none of the studies on undergraduate spiritual struggle have considered the religious backgrounds of the undergraduate participants; that spiritual struggle was described in more general terms and called for new and more specific descriptions; that little has yet been learned on how faculty or classroom experiences can support students through their spiritual struggle; and that students' spiritual struggle and development are rarely resolved by graduation, thus raising key questions on how their development does affect their spiritual struggle. It is unclear whether campus religious groups, often accessed by Evangelical students, are helpful or harmful. Finally, researchers who also have theological training, may offer a level of insight that most studies pertaining to students' religious and spiritual perceptions have not addressed or achieved.

### **Design Summary**

The studies that have researched spiritual struggle have all encouraged more qualitative research on unique campus environments with students from particular religious (including non-religious) backgrounds (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2012). This study thus conducted 39 interviews with 20 participants who were juniors or seniors, identified their family religious traditions as conservative and/or Evangelical Christian and self-identified as having experienced a

shift or change in their spiritual or religious beliefs or practices while in college. A phenomenographic method of qualitative research was used to better understand how the participant undergraduates all attending the same public university perceive, think about, and conceptualize their experiences. The emphasis was on the specific phenomenon of spiritual struggle. Special attention was given to distinguish students' descriptions of spiritual struggle from other common forms of human struggles they experience while attending college. Thus, students who volunteered for this study self-identified as having experienced shifts or changes in their spiritual or religious beliefs or practices. The interviewees sought to understand their spiritual struggle experiences where everyday events were often catalysts for struggle, but their struggles had transcendent elements that caused students to question their views of God, their Christian identity, and their relationships with others (Fisler et al., 2009; Rockenbach et al., 2012; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998).

Parks' (2000) model of spiritual development was adopted to examine more closely how spiritual struggle is described in light of the different forms of spirituality she explained (community, dependence, knowing) and the students' level of spiritual development. These crucial elements of spiritual development and struggle—relational spiritual struggle, emotional spiritual struggle, and intellectual spiritual struggle—provided a way to categorize students' described experiences. This rubric allowed me to note more precisely the way that students described their spiritual struggle, what influenced that struggle, what resources they sought to work through it, and how that experience affected their religious involvements, campus experiences, educational pursuits, and future aspirations.

## **Summary of Key Findings**

The previous chapters presented the findings of the research in detail. Chapter 3 described much of the background information the students revealed about their families, homes, majors of study, and investment in non-academic activities. Chapter 4 categorized students' descriptions of their spiritual struggle experiences in terms of on-campus and off-campus factors affecting and resourcing their spiritual struggles. Next, it adopted the conceptual framework adapted from Parks' (2000) model on spiritual development to examine more closely the spiritual struggles that the student participants described, and the meanings they placed on their experiences. These observations surfaced descriptive patterns, informed by their separating and integrating perspectives, evident in the students' perceptions of themselves, their integration of education and spirituality, their views of spiritual faithfulness, and their purpose in life. These perspectives also clarified the different kinds of struggle that the students described and the ways they chose to access university resources to work through each struggle.

### **Student-Described Factors affecting Spiritual Struggle**

The students' perceived factors affecting spiritual struggle were summarized in two broad categories, namely, on-campus and off-campus causes. On-campus factors influencing spiritual struggle described spiritual challenges that the students experienced as the result of a particular experience at college. There were eight major areas of concern: educational/classroom experiences; finding friends and connecting relationally; dating, sex, relationships; philosophical/theological intellectual and relational encounters; substance abuse and destructive behavior; campus religious groups; sexual assault and specifically for females, integrating gender, faith, and feminism. Off-campus factors

influencing spiritual struggle related to the spiritual challenges students experienced beyond their campus locations. These included family deaths/illness, hometown expectations, and sexual assault.

In light of the students' religious and family backgrounds and how they invested their time during college, it is not surprising that the factors affecting their struggles primarily involved their new experiences at college. The off-campus factors that students reported were more event-oriented, such as the death or sickness of a family member, coming home to bad influences, or experiencing sexual assault from someone away from college.

### **Student-Described Resources for Addressing Spiritual Struggle**

The students' perceived resources, relationships, and/or experiences used for working through struggle were again summarized in the same two categories that were used for the factors affecting struggle-- on-campus and off-campus. The on-campus resources, relationships, and/or experiences that these students described overwhelmingly placed friends as their most common resource followed by CRG programs and leaders (for those who attended CRGs), and faculty/class resources. The off-campus resources, relationships, and/or experiences that students identified included working through struggle on their own, seeking out parents or family members, seeing a counselor/therapist, and accessing their home or campus church.

### **Spiritual Struggle within the Realm of Spiritual Development**

This study thus took a closer look at students' descriptions by understanding their perceptions of these descriptions in light of their spiritual development. By adapting Parks' (2000) framework, the study sought to understand more specifically how the

factors affecting spiritual struggle and the resources available for addressing that struggle, as described by students, varied in their meaning based on the different forms of spiritual struggle and the students' developmental maturity. What was discovered was that Evangelical students generally had yet to attain more spiritually mature perspectives within their spiritual development. Therefore, their experiences with spiritual struggle reflected less mature stages of challenge and resolution within their spiritual development, with few students having yet attained a more mature, resolved, and focused spiritual maturity.

Within spiritual maturity, this study adapted Parks' (2000) essential elements of spirituality (i.e. community, dependence, and knowing) and created descriptive terms for the kinds of spiritual struggle that the students described. Within the form of community, students' described kinds spiritual struggle by what I call *separating struggle*, *seeking struggle*, and *contributing struggle*. Most students described the separating struggle they felt as being separated from home, parents, or religious leaders, or distancing themselves from campus churches or the CRGs they joined as freshmen. Some sought new connections (seeking struggle) with a different faith community or connections with their academic programs. Only a few students mentioned their desire to invest in local churches or groups, feeling compelled to not only benefit from these communities but to contribute to them as well (contributing struggle).

Within the form of dependence, students' described the emotions they felt during spiritual struggle by what I call *negative feelings* and *positive feelings*. The overwhelming majority of students described experiencing negative emotions, primarily

feeling overwhelmed or anxious. Only four students described positive feelings related to their spiritual struggle experiences as freeing, satisfying, clarifying, and encouraging.

Within the form of knowing, students described the kinds of epistemological spiritual struggle they experienced by what I call *doubting struggle*, *adjusting struggle*, and *integrating struggle*. Almost half of the students experienced doubting struggle, disagreeing with the CRGs they attended or questioning their inherited beliefs acquired from family or their home religious community. An equal number of students experienced adjusting struggle, describing their attempts to integrate new people, new concepts, and new roles into their worldviews. These students expressed a growing awareness of the diverse perspectives available at school and a new appreciation of the complexity of the world in which they lived, even if they still remained unsure of how to integrate these new people, concepts, and roles into their lives. Only two students demonstrated integrating struggle, where they were able to use language and concepts to help them explain and question how their spirituality could be expressed through their worldview, studies, aspirations, and challenges. Indeed, they appeared to know who they were, what they believed, and how they desired to live.

### **The Separating-Integrating Continuum and Student Perspectives**

Capturing Evangelical students' descriptions of their spiritual struggle and classifying their struggles by adopting Parks' (2000) conceptual framework, allowed me to place students along a separating-integrating continuum of perspectives in this study.

**Students espousing a separating perspective.** Those students with a separating perspective viewed their campus as hostile. They saw those who were different from them as needing to hear and believe the truth they had without their ever considering

other students' backgrounds or beliefs. They perceived their classes as either ignoring or attacking Christianity and had trouble synthesizing their education with their spirituality. In addition, when asked what advice they would give to freshmen like themselves, they encouraged freshmen to join a CRG. When asked about their purpose for being a student now and their aspirations for the future, these students saw their role as a student and their role as a Christian separately, and typically talked about their future aspirations in very general terms (e.g. desiring to love God, help people, or go into mission work). Those students with a separating perspective were proud that they had "kept the faith" of their families, and even though they did struggle, they didn't stray. Their perspectives and advice did not diverge from what their adults and church leaders had told them when they entered their freshmen year. Most all of the students who held a separating perspective still attended a CRG.

**Students espousing an integrating perspective.** Those students holding an integrating perspective viewed the campus as a resource filled with possibilities. They saw others as people they needed to know, learn from, and befriend. They viewed the classroom as a place where learning and dialogue were possible and also helpful in their spiritual growth. In addition, when asked what advice they would give to freshmen like themselves, they encouraged these freshmen to branch out and try the new and many different things their campus offered. When asked about their purpose for being a student now and their aspirations for their futures, these students talked of learning from and contributing to their school and spoke of their future with more particularity and specificity (e.g. exploring ways to use their teaching degree to help inner-city kids or aspiring to pursue graduate degrees and psychology and theology to be well rounded as a

psychologist or minister). Further, students who exhibited an integrating perspective were proud that they had found their own path, although they admitted having struggled with feelings of unfaithfulness because their paths had diverged from the typical Evangelical script (e.g. religious attendance, joining Bible studies, being a leader in a CRG, or upholding foundational beliefs). In their interviews, many felt encouraged that their journeys were validated. Their perspectives of college and their advice to freshmen changed from what their parents and church leaders had told them when they entered college. They saw the college as a resource, not a hindrance, and emphasized trying new things other than just CRGs. None of the students who held an integrating perspective were attending a CRG at the time of their interviews.

### **Discussion of the Results**

This section discusses how this study compares to other studies, namely, how it has extended the research on undergraduate spiritual struggle by raising particular highlights and tensions discovered during the effort. I also discuss the particular questions that this research raised for me.

#### **Religious Tradition Affects Evangelical Undergraduates' Spiritual Struggle**

There have been studies on the spiritual struggle of undergraduate students by Zinnbauer & Pargament (1998), Bryant & Astin (2008), Fisler et al. (2009) and Rockenbach et al. (2012). There also have been studies on Evangelical undergraduates by Bryant (2006a) and Magolda & Gross (2009), but this study was the first to specifically focus on Evangelical undergraduate spiritual struggle at a public university. As detailed in Chapter 2, this study assumed that the presumed separation of one's religiousness and spirituality during higher education creates an unhelpful dichotomy,



contributing to both the “blindness” and the “hiddenness” that educators experience with students when they seek to understand their spiritual experiences as students on campus (Chickering et al., 2006; Collins & et al., 1987; Dalton & Crosby, 2007; Rue, 1985).

Thus, this current study supports the suggestions made by Hill (2000) and Smith & Snell (2009) who argue for the inseparability of one’s spirituality and religiousness, and challenge the assumptions of undergraduates being “spiritual, but not religious” as suggested by Cherry et al. (2001), Colby (2003), Johnson et al. (2008), and Love (2001).

The Evangelical students I interviewed confirmed and highlighted the fact that parents and other influential adults from home (e.g. grandparents, extended family, other adults, religious leaders) created a positive network of support for them as they headed off to college (Clydesdale, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009). Undergraduates who came from a religiously Evangelical Christian tradition brought with them something beyond theology; they also brought a distinct and rich religious culture. Because the religious tradition of Evangelical students espouses a rich religious culture that permeates family relationships and everyday practices, these students may have more in common with minority religions on campus, such as Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, than do most Mainline Christians. If this aspect is true, then Bryant & Astin’s (2008) observations that undergraduates holding minority religions experience more struggle may apply to Evangelicals as well. Further, this finding may shed further light on Magolda & Gross’s (2009) observations that Evangelicals see themselves as “cultural outsiders” and Smith’s (1998) commentary that Evangelical undergraduates gravitate toward religious organizations to avoid any perceived marginalization. It may also explain why Evangelical students report higher rates of spiritual struggle than do Mainline Christians

(Astin et al., 2010; Bryant, 2007; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Jacobsen & Jacobson, 2008; Magolda & Gross, 2009). Therefore, any spiritual struggle that influences these students to consider breaking away from their inherited beliefs is quite dramatic for them, as it has not only epistemological, but also relational consequences. The findings here helped to make sense of two contradictory concepts wherein Evangelical students are typically from the majority culture (White, Middle Class, Christian, etc.) and yet perceive themselves as being in the minority and operating out of an oppositional subculture mentality (Magolda & Gross, 2009).

### **Student Described On-Campus and Off-Campus Factors of Spiritual Struggle**

Rockenbach et al. (2012) described “classic understandings” of spiritual struggle (p. 71) as those struggles typically described from previous literature on spiritual struggle: gaining independence, critically reflecting on religious beliefs, and establishing one’s own personal commitments. My initial on-campus and off-campus domains were used to classify students’ descriptions in clearer descriptive categories and to attempt to compare my findings with past studies. This current study confirmed the previous research by indicating that Evangelical undergraduates share, on the surface, similar kinds spiritual struggles described in the literature. The limitations of these classic descriptions, noted by both by Rockenbach et al. (2012) and Fisler et al. (2009) are that they fail to take into account the uniqueness of students’ backgrounds, maturity, or kinds of the struggles experienced. Still, my first attempt to generally classify students’ descriptions of factors affecting their spiritual struggles and the resources they accessed to work through those struggles within on-campus and off-campus domains were intended to provide helpful categories for a university to consider in the future.

Universities can more directly address on-campus categories, while off-campus categories are those that the university would be wise to be aware of and understand.

**Student-described factors affecting spiritual struggle.** Bryant and Astin's (2008) observations of student descriptions of spiritual struggles and Fisler et al.'s (2009) attempts to categorize student descriptions of their spiritual struggles are noted in Table 8. Table 8 indicates that these Evangelical student descriptions of their spiritual struggles were similar to those in the previous literature. Still, these understandings of spiritual struggle across the different studies revealed slightly different ways that each study categorized factors influencing spiritual struggle, making it difficult to know how similar or different these descriptions truly were. Bryant & Astin (2008) identified the experiences of students, while Fisler et al. (2012) used the categories of academic experiences, external relationships, and internal thinking or feeling.

Notably, a unique factor affecting spiritual struggle described by female participants in the current study pertained to how they navigated what their religion taught them about their gender and what the university taught them. This issue was especially expressed by females who attended CRGs. Although females felt respected in their CRGs, some indicated that, either from the teaching or modeling, a complementation perspective of male and female roles (e.g. a religious view stating that there are prescribed gender roles), rather than an egalitarian one, was perpetuated. Gilligan (1982) highlighted that the development for women often takes place in the contexts of relationships, while Magolda & Gross (2009) asserted in their study that females joined Evangelical CRGs for personal relationships and to grow closer to God. Butchko (2004), in referring to Pastorino, Dunham, and Kidwell (1997), and Parks (2000)

also affirmed that the college years are a time when females often reexamine their faith. Bryant's (2006) study identified how some CRGs not only separated themselves from other campus groups, but also perpetuated separation within the groups in terms of gender and gender roles. The current study's findings confirm these past references to female Evangelical students who seek relationships through CRGs to develop spiritually, only to often find those same relationships contribute to their own spiritual struggle.

On-campus and off-campus categories were used as ways of classifying the factors described by students while also attempting to connect the findings to the previous research. While these categories offer some clarity within this study, comparisons remained difficult with previous studies on student spiritual struggle because categories and even definitions varied. Rockenbach et al. (2012) are correct to point out the limitations of the classic understandings of students' spiritual struggles described in previous studies and to call for more in-depth descriptions for understanding. Agreeing with Rockenbach et al. (2012), I made an attempt in this study to adapt Parks' (2000) framework and introduce the separating-integrating continuum.

Table 8

*Literature Comparisons of Student Descriptions of Spiritual Struggle*

| Research     | Bryant & Astin (2008)                               | Fisler et al. (2009)  | Argue (2014)  |
|--------------|---|---|---|
| Descriptions | Understanding evil, suffering, death                | <i>Academics</i><br>Classroom<br>Coursework   | <i>On-Campus Factors</i><br>Educational/ classroom experiences    |
|              | Questioning religious/spiritual beliefs             | Study abroad  | Finding friends and connecting relationally                       |
|              | Feeling unsettled about religious/spiritual matters | <i>External Influences</i><br>On-campus relationships (friends, roommates, other peers) | Dating, sex, relationships, and assault                           |
|              | Disillusioned with one's family upbringing          | On-campus groups (religious and non-religious)  | Philosophical/Theological, intellectual and relational encounters |
|              | Feeling angry at God                                | Campus climate  |   |
|              |   | <i>Internal Influences</i><br>Internal processing                                       | Substance abuse and destructive behaviors                         |
|              |   | Positive and negative emotions  | Campus religious groups (CRGs)                                    |
|              |   | On their own (reading religious and non-religious books)                                | Integrating gender, faith, and feminism (females)                 |
|              |   |   | <i>Off-Campus Factors</i><br>Death/illness                        |
|              |   |   | Hometown expectations   |
|              |   |   | Sexual assault  |

**Student-described resources for addressing spiritual struggle.** While Astin et al. (2011b) and Parks (2000) have called for non-peer support, such as mentors, religious leaders, and faculty, and because students rarely navigate spiritual struggle on their own (Clydesdale, 2007; Parks, 2000; Smith & Snell, 2009), the primary on-campus and off-campus resources that students accessed in this current study derived from peers and their own. This finding confirms what Fisler et al. (2009) noted, namely, that students

predominantly tried to work out their struggles with other peers and/or on their own.

Rockenbach et al. (2012) observed that those students who share their struggles even with close peers are rare. It is possible that the go-to resources that the students described in this study were not because those resources were the best, but only that they were perceived as being more accessible and offering lower risk.

### **Students Descriptions of Spiritual Struggle will Vary per Spiritual Development Forms and Maturity**

Rockenbach et al. (2012) attempted and then suggested that more research be done to describe spiritual struggle that is “multilayered and manifests in myriad ways as students navigate complex relationships, experience fear and doubt, lose and find meaning, and negotiate social and personal identities” (p. 71). Bryant & Astin (2008) offered that, in the end, students define spiritual struggle for themselves and must also construct the answers they seek themselves. Further, Rockenbach et al. (2012) noted that spiritual struggles were embedded in the “conflicting, contradictory, and paradoxical aspects of life” (p. 62). They suggested that spiritual struggle emerges from the contrasting experiences students feel regarding their conflicting identities, their relationships, and how to synthesize those beliefs with their new experiences. This study also attempted to place more specific language on Evangelical students’ spiritual struggle descriptions by looking beyond the general descriptions described above to include the relational, emotional, and intellectual elements associated with their spiritual maturity.

**Spiritual struggle is experienced relationally.** In terms of the relational form of spiritual struggle, this current study aligns with what previous studies by Clydesdale (2007) and Braskamp (2008) highlighted, namely, that relational struggle is often more

prevalent in students' freshman years, while intellectual struggle emerges later in their junior or senior years. These findings highlighted the varied types of struggle that students experienced pertaining to community and offered a clearer interpretation of Magolda & Gross's (2009) statement that "belonging is on the minds of most first-year students" (p. 89). Like Rockenbach et al. (2012), this study identified the conflict students felt between their own self and others. Further, many students described their ongoing effort to navigate their relationships with others, often joining, then leaving, certain groups. Thus, students' attendance at structured religious gatherings varied, calling into question the value of religious attendance as an often-used measure of religious or spiritual commitment in the previous studies (cf. Arnett, 2004; Fisler et al., 2009; Lee, 2002; Nash, 1999; Uecker et al., 2007).

Statements used in the prior religious and academic literature about college students "leaving church" or being "less religious" failed to capture the actual relational spiritual struggles that Evangelical students are working through. It casts a different light on Astin et al.'s (2010) definition of "religious engagement" where only religious attendance is measured or Lee's (2002) summary that attending college causes a decline in religious activity. More likely, the findings from this study align with the studies by Smith & Snell (2009) and Clydesdale (2007) where religious attendance means something, but not everything. What the findings here also highlight is that spiritual struggle may require students to both join *and then leave* faith communities in order to develop spiritually.

**Spiritual struggle is experienced emotionally.** The current study's findings confirm the previous studies' observations, but also reveal that the majority of emotions

described by students were darker and more negative, rather than being positive. This study, along with those of Fisler et al. (2007) and Rockenbach et al. (2012), shows that students feel more of the negative emotions associated with struggle with few students' experiencing the positive emotions associated with resolution. Unresolved struggles with negative feelings seemed akin to what Putnam & Campbell (2010) describe as "liminality," and what Bryant & Astin (2008) raised about students being "chronically stuck" in a prolonged struggle (p. 23). This awareness of those Evangelical students who are likely living with unresolved struggle and holding primarily negative feelings can offer helpful insights for faculty and student development staff who then can have greater opportunities to support these students.

**Spiritual struggle is experienced intellectually.** In terms of the forms of knowing, most students began to realize the competing experiences and information they were holding, but few attempted to or knew how to resolve that intellectual tension. Thus, in concert with Clydesdale's (2007) and Braskamp's (2008) observations that intellectual spiritual struggle is often experienced later in the undergraduate career, this study witnessed few students who had worked through that struggle by that time to achieve more intellectual maturity. This finding confirms what surprised Fisler et al. (2009), namely, that undergraduates did not have their spiritual commitments worked through by their senior year in college. Awareness of where Evangelical students typically reside on intellectual spiritual struggle maturity may offer helpful insights into what pedagogical and student development approaches can best serve students as they experience this form of struggle.



## **Students' Perspectives Affect How They View Spiritual Struggle Factors**

The way Evangelical students perceived the factors affecting spiritual struggle and the resources available to work through that struggle depended on the perspective they held. By adopting Parks' (2000) spiritual development framework to identify students' perceptions of their spiritual struggles, a continuum with two polar perspectives emerged in this study, namely, a separating and an integrating perspective. Fisler et al. (2009) observed that spiritual struggle resolution among the students they studied took four forms: recommitting to an existing faith, slightly adjusting one's spiritual or religious values, blending spiritual traditions, or losing faith. The separating-integrating continuum has certain similarities to Fisler et al.'s (2009) continuum of resolution in that it recognizes that students are in-process as they renegotiate their core values and will not necessarily find full resolution before they graduate.

Fisler et al.'s (2009) described categories, however, remain vague and lack specificity for what "slightly adjusting," "blending traditions" or "losing faith" really mean. Further, while Fisler et al. (2012) offered descriptions of spiritual struggle and then described the current state of their study's participants, the study is unclear as to where their diverse sample began spiritually or religiously or how their participants arrived at their end positions. This current study attempted to describe students' starting points (pre-college) and understand their spiritual struggles as journeys that brought them eventually to their current separating or integrating perspectives. This study highlights that those students who come from the same religious tradition, even when they may still ascribe to that religious viewpoint, may experience and work through their spiritual struggles quite differently.

### **Students' separating-integrating perspectives affect their views of college.**

Evangelical undergraduates who demonstrated a separating perspective in this study did not match the descriptions articulated by many researchers who suggest that undergraduates want their colleges to help them integrate their spirituality with their educational experience (Astin, 2004; Astin et al., 2010; Astin et al., 2003; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000; Lindholm, 2007; Tisdell, 2003). The students in this study did not expect any support from their university other than their considering joining CRGs, which they saw as part of the university. Those with a separating perspective matched the findings of other studies, however, where students were less open to dialogue and tended to separate from the rest of the college community (Bryant, 2006a; J. P. Hill, 2009; Magolda & Gross, 2009).

Similar to those Evangelical students who held a separating perspective, students with an integrating perspective did not come to college with any specific expectations on how their college would support them spiritually. However, they seemed to discover the value of their university's opportunities and resources unintentionally or accidentally. Eventually, these students became aware that their campus had resources that could help them integrate their spirituality with their educational experience. Thus, it does not appear here that students with integrating perspectives unilaterally set out to find support from faculty and staff as much as they discovered both as supportive through their personal experiences at college.

The good news for higher education is that these students recognized the challenge and support the university brought to them. What still remain as "blind spots" and "hidden," however, may be the proactive efforts of educators to anticipate or support

Evangelical undergraduates (Chickering et al., 2006; Collins & et al., 1987; Dalton & Crosby, 2007; Rue, 1985). This point is important because the findings of this study seem to suggest that students rarely know where or how to ask for support for their spiritual development or how to work through their spiritual struggle.

**Students' separating-integrating perspectives affect their relationships with Campus Religious Groups (CRGs).** Bryant (2007) and Chickering & Reisser (1993) highlighted the important role that (CRGs) and campus communities play in offering social integration for students on campus. Chickering & Reisser (1993) offered that groups that contribute to the development of students encourage interactions between students, provide opportunities for collaboration, are small enough to make members feel significant, include people from diverse backgrounds, and serve as a positive reference point for students by maintaining boundaries and behaviors. For the students in this study, CRGs served these functions, often providing safe, familiar places for them as they sought relationships, especially during their freshmen year. Bryant (2007) noted that those groups that are more homogeneous and insulated may distract students from learning how to associate with others who are different from them. The findings from this study confirm this point. Those students who held a separating perspective toward campus, others, and their education were more likely to be involved with a CRG, while those with an integrating perspective either never joined or left their CRGs.

What this study's findings cannot answer is whether CRGs cause a separating perspective in students or if students with a separating perspective simply seek out CRGs. From the findings, however, it seems likely that because Evangelical students come to college with a less mature spirituality; more often rely on advice from home to beware of

the hostile university and join a religious group and have immediate needs to connect with peers similar to them, they seek out CRGs. Spiritually maturing students who begin to hold a more integrating perspective no longer appear to need or even may reject CRGs. Less spiritually maturing students appeared to stay with their CRGs who then reinforce and reward those views associated with the separating perspective. This latter group seems to describe students in the CRG studied by Magolda & Gross (2009) and raises more general questions regarding CRGs as discussed below.

### **Additional Questions and Observations**

As a result of this study, certain questions surrounding undergraduate spirituality and spiritual struggle remain unanswered and are raised in detail in this section.

**Can students change from a separating to an integrating perspective?** The findings here on students' separating-integrating perspectives raises questions of whether students can and do change from separating to integrating perspectives while at college. While this study does not contain enough information to make a clear determination, I speculate that the answer is "yes." I believe this to be the case because the students from this study had similar religious upbringings, were given similar advice, and had few expectations that their university would support their spirituality. Over time, however, those students who were able to acquire an integrating perspective did so by accessing certain resources *beyond* their family and like-minded peers. For them, this new perspective moved them from seeing the campus as hostile to seeing it as helpful. Realization of these new resources gave students new options for solving the spiritual struggles they encountered. Also, some students were able to explain the differences they saw in themselves for how their perspectives regarding faith, "others," and education had

changed through attending college. Thus, it appears that students can change their perspectives, although the findings of this study also show that only 25% of the participant sample did espouse an integrating perspective. This result raises questions as to what can be done further on campus to help students grow toward this spiritually maturing perspective.

**What is the role of CRGs on campus?** In this study sample, a large percentage of students were aware of, tried, or attended CRGs, allowing me to gather a great deal of information on the students' experiences and perceptions of CRGs. It was striking that when students' separating-integrating perspectives were compared to their CRG involvement, almost all the students who held a separating perspective attended CRGs, while none of those espousing an integrating perspective attended them. This finding raises a question as to the role of CRGs on campuses and how they are contributing to the spiritual and holistic development of students. Magolda & Gross (2009) suggested that higher education leaders must clarify the role of religion and faith on campus, forge alliances with CRGs based on differences, challenge campus religious groups to expand their worldviews, move beyond conformity, and encourage evangelical students to see differences as positive opportunities for self-reflection and dialogue. While I agree with Magolda & Gross (2009), this study also made me concerned that encouraging Evangelical CRGs to forge alliances with groups different from them may be a challenging task in that it seems to contradict the core mission of these CRGs. Further, the hope that most Evangelical families hold that Evangelical CRGs will encourage and support their children and also the hope that universities place in CRGs to help social integration and retention, may hinder parents and universities from seeing how CRGs

hold students back in their spiritual development, especially with women. More work is needed to explore how CRGs are both helpful and harmful to the spiritual and holistic development of each student.

**If the campus is “hostile,” why do Evangelical students attend public universities?** It is not surprising to hear that those from more conservative perspectives (religious or political) describe colleges as being more liberal (Astin et al., 2010; Bryant et al., 2003). I was surprised, however, by “the university is dangerous to your spirituality” narrative that students’ consistently described being told before entering their public university. I am curious about what informs this narrative and, if the public university campus is perceived by Evangelical families as hostile toward their religious beliefs, why these families send their children there. What value do Evangelicals see in sending their children to public universities, and how does this value overcome the shared concerns they have that the university culture is detrimental to their children’s spiritual lives? Perhaps a positive bridge can be built that will help Evangelicals overcome their strong perceptions of the public university as being hostile to their religion.

**What is the relationship between spiritual struggle and a major of study?** Contrary to the previous research on students’ spiritual struggle and their choice of major, no consistent theme emerged from this study’s findings on Evangelical students’ struggles and their majors (Astin & Astin, 2010; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009). I am unclear why I found no difference in students by major, as other studies have highlighted that aspect. While 14 students were in professional/applied majors, their academic concentrations varied. Only 2 students were in formal science majors, so I speculate that Evangelicals in these particular majors may experience more struggle due

to the tensions that can be raised between religion and science. Further research that focuses specifically on Evangelical students and their majors may prove helpful to educators in this regard.

### **Further Considerations**

In light of this study's findings and the ongoing discussion, this section offers specific considerations for public universities, faculty, CRGs, parents, and Evangelical undergraduates to consider when understanding and supporting students as they express and work through spiritual struggles at college.

#### **Public University Considerations**

When public universities consider what it means to support students through their spiritual struggles, they must be aware that spiritual struggle has religious, developmental, and unfinished elements. For Evangelical students, their religious tradition often affects the way they view themselves on campus, the expectations they have of a university, and the campus resources they choose to access. For universities only to address students as “spiritual, but not religious” individuals fails to appreciate the religious heritages that their students bring to campus and where some of their spiritual struggle is actually rooted. Universities can support Evangelical students better by being more aware of their religious tradition and the effects their tradition has on their spiritual struggles. Developmentally, this study revealed the salience of students' separating and integrating perspectives and the impact these perspectives can have on how students experience the factors affecting spiritual struggle and then access the available resources. Universities can support Evangelical students by being more aware of the incomplete and often negative feelings these students experience with spiritual struggle. This support can

include providing low-risk opportunities that help normalize the experiences this group has, acknowledging the challenges they feel, and encouraging them to seek resources that will help them work through their struggle successfully.

### **Faculty and Classroom Considerations**

Providing on-campus support for students working through spiritual struggle may not necessarily mean universities developing specific programs as much as it means delivering better leveraging of the learning spaces already available on campus.

Research on learner-centered pedagogy has already identified the findings further reported on in this study (Astin, 2004; English, Gillen, & Imel, 2000; Keeling & Dungy, 2004; Lindholm & Astin, 2008; Weimer, 2002). The encouraging aspect of this study is that faculty need not be well-versed in religious or spiritual topics to support students who are experiencing spiritual struggle. The efforts of faculty who are open to creating space, both formally and informally, for their students to integrate their religious and spiritual convictions with their education will likely suffice (Gappa, Austin, & Trice, 2007; Lindholm, 2007; Lindholm & Astin, 2008; Nash, 2001).

Evangelical students value those classroom environments that invite dialogue and the sharing of their opinions. Faculty who were creative, inspirational and relevant, and who encourage smaller group discussions, were most appreciated by the students who participated in this study. They appreciated professors who noticed their religious backgrounds and spiritual perspectives because they felt that these teachers wanted to know a little bit more about them, especially through assignments, personal interactions, and sensitivity to their religious involvement outside of class. Positive faculty support for their spiritual struggle was seen in their professors' abilities to teach well and be excited



about their courses, in their sensitivity to the religious backgrounds of all their students, and in their ability to create a safe and open environment where their students could wrestle with course topics and their spiritual perspectives freely and openly. Professors who were dismissive, distant, and sarcastic about spirituality were treated with suspicion. Offering class assignments to students to express their struggle and encouraging out-of-class conversations (where students feel more comfortable and less risk) can be helpful first steps.

### **CRG Considerations**

Past events that have involved tensions between Evangelical CRGs and their universities, such as occurred at Vanderbilt, the University of North Carolina, Harvard, and the California University system are examples of the conflict felt between CRG values and the values of the university campuses that host them (Paulson, 2014). This study highlighted more subtle, but still consistent, tensions in this regard. Perhaps CRGs should consider themselves as transitional groups that can help incoming freshmen socially integrate and then provide off-ramps for better integration into university resources and opportunities. Then these students can develop a more congruent existence with their university. The challenge may be of course that this approach confronts certain deeply held identities and purposes of some CRGs for actually being on campus.

### **Parent Considerations**

This study's findings highlighted the high degree of influence students perceive their parents and religious figures have on their spiritual faithfulness. This study has also noted that students' approaches to spiritual faithfulness varied depending on the separating or integrating perspectives they held. It is the opinion of this researcher that

students holding an integrating perspective were more able to integrate their spirituality with their education and experiences. Fowler (1980) and Parks (2000) have suggested that one's maturity within spiritual development is not about being more faithful but more true or helpful with navigating the complexities one encounters in life. Still, there can be faithfulness in students' spirituality no matter where students fall on the separating-integrating continuum. This is important as, for some religious communities, faithfulness means not diverging from religious beliefs, practices, and expectations. Some participants indeed equated "faithfulness" with remaining true to their religious teachings, practices, and behaviors. For parents and religious leaders who desire for their children to uphold a separating perspective, it may behoove them to ensure that the CRGs their children join are theologically consistent in supporting their religious beliefs and practices. Alternately, other students, who held an integrating perspective, often described "faithfulness" as diverging from the religious beliefs, practices, and actions of their elders in order to integrate new ideas and experiences they had encountered at college. Parents and religious leaders should not assume that these students are leaving their religious tradition as much as reinterpreting it to remain faithful to their expanding worldviews.

Regardless of the separating or integrating perspectives, students expressed their concerns over sharing their spiritual struggles with their parents for fear of straining their relationships with them. While the extent to which students diverge from their parents' beliefs varies depending on their perspectives, most parents can help their children by encouraging, trusting, and respecting them, as they work through spiritual struggle, and by recognizing that their children's spiritual paths, convictions, and expressions will

likely look different than their own. Parents who can appreciate this change as spiritual growth, not unfaithfulness, will help their college children move through their spiritual struggles and help them achieve a more integrated, self-authored faith that takes into account the traditions from which they have come. This goal may mean that parents will need to reconsider the advice they give their children before they head to college regarding the campus climate and their children's involvement in that climate.

### **Student Considerations**

One of the goals of this study was to give voice to those Evangelical students who have experienced spiritual struggle while attending a public university. I have been humbled by the trust and transparency offered to me by these students, as they shared their very personal and complex experiences. I thus offer the following considerations to Evangelical students and their friends who share the same religious tradition, live in a similar university setting, and have experienced similar spiritual struggles.

**Struggle is normal.** Many students were troubled that they struggled for fear of being unfaithful, or they were worried that their struggles would cause tension with their friends, family, and parents back home. Students must remember that spiritual struggle is a necessary part of any spiritual growth and development. One cannot grow without struggle, and these experiences that students have are likely true acts of faithfulness, not unfaithfulness. When struggle is hard, students should be reminded that there is a positive side of struggle where, once through it, they will not only find relief, but new possibilities.

**Students are not alone.** Students admitted feeling alone as they navigated through their struggles. At one level, spiritual struggle is a very personal experience to

address. At another level, however, students can be reminded that there are others who struggle like they do, trying to make sense of their faith and purpose in life. While it can often feel more natural for students to turn to peers or try to work out their struggle alone, they need to be reminded that there are adults in their lives to whom they can turn for support and that there are more resources on their campus than they may realize.

**Part of working through spiritual struggle is seeking new resources.** Some students expressed feeling stuck in their spiritual struggles and not knowing how to integrate new ideas or experiences with their religious teachings. Some students suspended this tension by not addressing it or postponing the effort needed to work through their struggle. In these moments, students can be encouraged to seek out and ask people outside their regular relationships to help them work through the spiritual struggle they are experiencing. A counselor, advisor, professor, religious leader from a different church or organization, or a new classmate may give new, helpful insights. For Evangelical students, branching out can sometimes be scary because many have been told that the university is hostile toward their faith. However, this study revealed inspirational stories of individuals on campus offering significant support and guidance to these students.

**Leave church, but find community.** Evangelical students have been told that if they are not involved in a CRG or a church, that they may become unfaithful. Students from this study admitted feeling guilt over the choices they made to remain faithful by *not* attending campus groups or churches that conflicted with their maturing faith. Students need to understand that sometimes leaving a community is an act of faithfulness.

The challenge for students is to seek out other communities that encourage and support the spirituality they want to nurture.

**Find ways to reflect on your spirituality.** During this project, students shared very personal details about their lives, spirituality, and spiritual struggles. These students said they appreciated our interview conversations, but also admitted that I was one of the few, or even the only person, they had talked to about these things. Students should be better supported by encouraging them to find adults with whom they can share their spiritual journeys and who can make regularly scheduled time for them to reflect on their spirituality while at college.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study sought to better understand the Evangelical undergraduate experience of spiritual struggle among students attending a public university. Previous literature has called for more specific research on unique types of students with religious traditions. This current study responded to this call. I offer the following limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

This study looked at a particular group of students to bring a more focused and detailed approach toward studying undergraduate spiritual struggle. It was completed with 20 students, and while there was salience in the responses of this participant group, a larger sample may offer more insights and clarify the identified themes in greater detail. With more time and resources, a longitudinal study that tracks undergraduates from their freshman to their senior years may capture more of their unique struggles rather than only having students reflecting back on their college experiences as this research effort did.

Students experience a unique context when they attend Research I public universities. This study has chosen to focus on only one school, while recognizing the uniqueness factors at each institution that affect and resource students' development. While context is affected by university type, the university at the center of this study likely espoused a number of other factors. Since this university is a Midwest university populated by many Midwest students, religious language and traditions might be more familiar to the student population than schools on the east or west coasts. Further, the fact that this study has been conducted in 2014 brings certain cultural factors that distinguish this time period from previous decades. For instance, such factors include higher education's growing sensitivity to factors associated with student learning and development beyond the cognitive; the increasingly diverse student population that brings varied cultural and religious views to campus; and the commitment universities have had to developing students as global citizens which requires students to acquire new and evolving competencies. Those students who come from particularly strong religious backgrounds are faced with diverse ideas and new questions that often require creative resources for support. Awareness of these factors can encourage researchers not only to compare and contrast varied college types and locations for common and diverging factors, but to also keep in mind the uniquely dynamic social and cultural elements in which higher education institutions are situated. The goal, then, is not to find "the answer" to students' spirituality on campuses as much as it is to develop skilled attention to the changing challenges students face, including those associated with their spirituality.

One of the most significant findings of the study pertained to students' separating and integrating perspectives and the impact of these perspectives on students' descriptions of the factors that influenced their struggle and the resources they accessed. This finding raised an important question on which the researcher of this study could only speculate. Given the distinct difference between students' espousing separating and integrating perspectives, did students change their perspectives at college, and if so, what campus factors affected that change? Speculation on if and how that change occurred was offered earlier, but more focused attention should be directed at understanding the experiences and thinking that those students with integrating perspectives encountered during their college experiences.

Given the positive and negative effects that CRGs had on Evangelical students and their spiritual struggle, more research should be undertaken on the role and relationship that CRGs have with universities. In this study, CRGs were grouped together, although not all operated in the same way, had the same perspectives, or cultivated the same environments. Other than my initial introductions to CRG leaders who helped disseminate the study's information to recruit students, I did not interview them. All impressions of CRGs mentioned in this study came from the students. Additional studies that explore one specific and nationally represented CRG across multiple campuses and that include input from both students and leaders can provide more specific findings and also more precise recommendations to these CRGs.

This study sought to explore one religious tradition, and therefore, it is limited in its generalizability to other groups. Still, the study was able to capture some of the distinct influences of religious tradition, parents, and home life on student perceptions of

college and spirituality. A closer exploration of the relationship between other religious traditions and student spirituality on campus may also prove helpful in understanding all students, their struggles, and how they perceive the university they attend. Future studies on other Christian denominations or religious traditions that apply a similar methodology may reveal shared similarities and also valuable differences in undergraduate spiritual struggle and the influence that each religious tradition has on those perceptions.

The prevalence of a separating-integrating continuum that these students held and how it affected their perceptions of their campus, spirituality, and education may be a useful framework for understanding more about spiritual struggle, factors that affect that struggle and resources sought out across other Christian denominations and even other religious traditions. More studies using this framework to examine other religious traditions can offer new ways for universities for understanding students from other diverse religious backgrounds.

This study focused on students who drew from a religious tradition and language that likely helped them articulate the spiritual struggles they experienced. Further research might explore whether students who experience struggle must have language to identify something as spiritual or to acknowledge that they are struggling spiritually. For example, might some students, with no religious tradition upbringing, lack language to express spiritual struggle? Or, might students who do not have religious backgrounds or language actually not experience spiritual struggle, naming it as something more like existential struggle?

This current study brought to the surface some unique aspects of spiritual struggle descriptions pertaining to females and also some disturbing reports of sexual assault on



females. While some gender differences were noted, this study did not focus particularly on gender similarities and differences as they pertain to student spiritual struggle. Given some of the unique challenges that these Evangelical Christian undergraduate women reported regarding their spiritual struggles, a closer exploration based on gender may further reveal their unique spiritual struggle stories and as a result, new and valuable insights.

While other studies have identified students' majors of study as impacting spiritual struggle, it is curious that this factor did not surface in this particular study. More specific studies on undergraduate perceptions of spiritual struggle when studying a specific major or a specific discipline may be worthy of exploration, since faculty posture and pedagogy made a major impression on the students interviewed in this study.

Finally, a White, Christian, heterosexual, male planned and executed this study. Previous discussion on methodology in Chapter 3 referenced and addressed my potential biases and limitations. I am aware that my demographics may have affected the leaders I chose, the leaders who were willing to meet with me, the students who chose to participate, and even the information they revealed. Possibly a more diverse team of researchers can produce a more diverse sample and potentially new or more nuanced findings.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Undergraduate student spiritual struggles on campus are common and indeed necessary for personal spiritual development and holistic development that leads to maturity, but these struggles are often unseen or misunderstood by many universities, leading to a lack of support and even detrimental effects on the students who are

experiencing such struggle. The purpose of this study was to compile and understand Evangelical undergraduates' descriptions of their spiritual struggle experiences. The findings of this current study revealed that Evangelical students' religious tradition affects their perceptions of their campus, spirituality, education, and spiritual struggle. Most students described the factors affecting their struggle as on-campus factors, even though they sought resources to work through that struggle using off-campus factors. A closer look to consider the forms of that struggle and the spiritual development of these students brought to light how their perceptions of spiritual struggle – the factors affecting their struggle and the resources they accessed – differed based on either a separating or integrating perspective. Students who held a separating perspective struggled with preserving the faith they inherited and found support through Campus Religious Groups (CRGs). Those who held an integrating perspective struggled with guilt from having branched out from the traditional Evangelical expectations to find support through their academics, different churches, and more diverse groups on campus. Most of the students commented on how they appreciated their interviews, and that taking the time to reflect upon and talk about their spiritual experiences during the course of the study was rare for them. There is an ongoing need for more research to better inform universities of their students' spiritual lives. Then the university can be one of the supportive contexts where students can spiritually mature and holistically prepare for both their education and adulthood.

## APPENDICES

## **APPENDIX A:**

### **Researcher Identity Memo**

I am a White male who comes from a family tradition that was economically privileged, politically conservative, and religiously Evangelical Christian. While I graduated from a public high school, I consciously remember my world expanding when I attended a large, Midwest, public university. Here, my beliefs were abruptly challenged as I encountered new friends, worldviews, and experiences that forced me to question many of my prior assumptions. In my attempt to remain “faithful” to some of my inherited beliefs, I joined and then quit para-church organizations on campus when I found them unhelpful in my quest for a deeper, more inclusive spirituality. My own experiences at college made me sympathetic to the spiritual journeys that undergraduates intentionally and unintentionally take as they work to make greater sense of their lives.

My graduate studies were undertaken at a Midwest divinity school where I learned Biblical languages, theology, and counseling, earning a Masters of Divinity (MDiv). I found this experience intellectually satisfying, but also constraining, as I did not believe that the professors were addressing the questions or challenges that younger people were asking about life, faith, religion, or spirituality. Eventually I served as a pastor at a large church, working with high school students. This work kept me immersed in adolescent culture and eventually gave me numerous opportunities to train others who were working in youth ministry. Later, my work at a non-profit training organization and a Christian university gave me unique opportunities to teach and mentor emerging adults. Currently, I oversee the spiritual formation of children and adolescents, direct a residency program, and minister at a large church in the Midwest.

For over twenty years, I have worked with adolescents and emerging adults in academic and religious settings as a pastor, instructor, mentor, and communicator. I believe my background has served me well in this qualitative research study due to my sense of comfort and long-time familiarity with both adolescents and emerging adults. At the same time, I am aware that my experiences do not qualify me to know or understand everything about a rapidly changing and increasingly diverse population. I believe my religious training and experience allows me to talk comfortably about religious and spiritual topics, a subject that many adults find difficult to discuss with young people (Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009). I recognize also that while I am the most familiar with certain forms of Christianity, I am not well versed in all forms of this or any other religion. My interactions with varying denominations have taught me to seek similarities while also appreciating the truth that differences that do exist in different religious traditions.

I also recognize that my background contains spiritual and religious experiences that have been in more privileged contexts. I have tried hard to bridge age, gender, religious, and orientation gaps, seeking out partnerships and relationships to broaden my own understanding. However, I find that my most critical biases are toward the tradition and perspectives from which I have come. As I considered this study, I found I wrestled with how I might present myself to the participants. I did not want to come across as a presumed “pastor” as I thought that image might create an uncomfortable environment for undergraduates, who might feel they were talking with a spiritual authority. Thus I chose to address them as someone who also values faith and spirituality (I did not want

them to think I was someone who is anti-religious and only trying to trick them) and is also extremely interested in hearing their different perspectives and experiences.

It was imperative for me to monitor how the participants were shaping my data collection and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). More specifically, I used careful data collection and interpretation and kept in mind what Merriam (2009) identified as desirable competencies in qualitative research. These include the researcher having a questioning stance that sought to understand why certain descriptions were offered by participants, a high tolerance for ambiguity, a commitment to being a careful observer, an interviewing approach that asked relevant questions, an inductive approach to data analysis, and a comfort and skill with writing clearly to capture the data and its findings effectively.

## **APPENDIX B:**

### **Reflective Memo**

A Reflective Memo was proposed by Maxwell (2012) to establish mutually productive and equitable relationships throughout the entire interview process. What follows are my responses to Maxwell's (2012) Reflexive Memo Questions (pp. 102-103).

**What kind of relationships have you established or do you plan to establish, with the people whom you are studying? What consequences do you think these will have for your study? What alternative kinds of relationships could you create, and what advantages and disadvantages would these have?** I established a more formal and structured relationship with my participants. I invited them to participate in my study as interviewees with me as the interviewer. Other than an initial correspondence, there was little previous relationship established between the participants and me. By conducting a second interview with the same participants, I established more familiarity, rapport, and trust with them. The consequences of this relationship ran the risk that interactions would feel more formal and potentially somewhat guarded at first. Because there was little relational history, there was also a unique possibility for participants to share their thoughts openly, as there was little relational risk for them. Advantages of a study of longer duration likely would bring a greater context to understanding participant responses and greater openness, as they may learn to trust me even more. Disadvantages might be that they would get to know me too well and that relationship could influence the way they responded to my questions. For this study, I therefore took a more short-term, "observer-participant" approach that sought close interaction with the individuals to

establish an insider's identity without participating in any of the undergraduates' other activities (Merriam, 2009).

**How do you think the people you interact with in your research will perceive you? How will this affect your relationships with these people? What could you do to better understand this perception and to correct possible misperceptions? I**

planned to present myself as a researcher who was very interested in this topic and who shared an appreciation for the faith perspectives of all the participants. I felt that some self-disclosure about my own faith might help students know that I am sympathetic to their religious and spiritual backgrounds, perspectives, and struggles. I hoped this disclosure would establish further rapport and help them speak freely with me. I did not share with them the fact that I was a pastor, as I was concerned that this revelation might create an unnecessary power differential and potentially skew their responses because I would be viewed as a religious authority figure expecting specific responses.

**What explicit agreements do you plan to negotiate about how the research will be conducted and how you will report the results, both to the people you are working with and to others? What *implicit* understandings about these issues do you think these people (and you) will have? How will both the implicit and explicit terms of the study affect your research? Do any of these need to be discussed or changed?**

Explicitly, I offered each participant a version of my "Lay Summary" that explained who I was, what I was doing, and what role I desired the participant to play in the research project (Glesne, 2006). Explicitly, I expected to communicate to the participants my desire to understand and accurately capture their personal and philosophical perceptions. As I personally reflected on this process, I had certain implicit expectations



for creating the needed conversational space that produces exactly what I was asking of these students, namely, that I provided a supportive environment for the students to talk about their spirituality and their spiritual struggles as undergraduates. From the perspectives of the participants, some of the previous research made me suspect that opening up on the topic of spirituality to undergraduates was rare and yet, desired and wanted by them. I wondered if these students might not only share their experiences, but also seek my advice as I postured myself as a sensitive and sympathetic ear. It was important for me, therefore, to respect the boundaries of these research relationships and not default to the role of pastor or mentor instead.

**What ethical issues or problems do these considerations raise? How do you plan to deal with these?** What was crucial for me was to remain in the role of researcher and not gravitate to one of pastor/mentor. I believe my knowledge of Christian spirituality helped me ask viable and precise questions and cultivate a good working dialogue. My challenge was to seek to understand the participants' perspectives and not default to encouraging, correcting, or dismissing their thoughts, feelings, and impressions. I dealt with this issue by establishing a clear Lay Summary and journaling my own self-reflections after each interview to assist me in undertaking the next interview.

## **APPENDIX C:**

### **Lay Summary**

A Lay Summary explains who the researcher is, what the researcher is doing, and what role the participant plays in a study. What follows is the Lay Summary that I used to frame what I explained to each participant, while also going through the IRB Consent Form.

**Lay Summary.** You are being invited to participate in a research study to learn about undergraduate spirituality, particularly the perspectives of undergraduate students, namely, how their higher education institutions support or impede their experiences with that spiritual struggle. This research is being done as part of my program as a doctoral student at Michigan State University.

I am asking you to participate because a friend, mentor, pastor, or leader who considers you as someone who values spirituality during your college career has recommended you to me. Further, you have indicated through our voice or email interactions that you have indeed experienced spiritual change while at college. I believe your descriptions and perceptions will clearly help me better understand what supports or impedes the experiences of other undergraduates who may also be addressing their spiritual struggle or change. The benefits to you of doing this study are several. This interview might give you a further positive opportunity to reflect on your own experiences, and further, you may enjoy sharing your ideas, as doing so may help others' entering college in the future. Your participation in this study will help others better understand the spiritual struggles of undergraduates and help provide the support that undergraduates truly value. There is, however, a risk. In talking about your spirituality

or spiritual journey, you may find that sometimes deeply held feelings will appear that can be either upsetting or challenging for you.

While you have been recommended to me for this study, I will be the only person who knows that you are participating. Anytime I use information you give me, I will always identify you with a fake name that is a pseudonym. When I interview you, I would like your permission to audio-record our interviews and take occasional notes. Beyond professional transcribers and my dissertation advisors, I will be the only one who possesses, listens to, or accesses these recordings. When I am not using them, I will keep them stored in a locked cabinet and also password protected on my computer. After I am finished with this study, I am required to store the data for three years, and then I will destroy all the data. Your participation in this study will involve two interview sessions of 60-90 minutes in length. For the first interview, I will give you a \$15 Amazon gift card and for the second interview, a \$25 Amazon gift card as my appreciation for the time you have invested in this important research.

The most important detail to remember while you are participating in this study with me is that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask you. I am extremely interested in your experiences and perceptions. If I ask you to tell me more or to explain further what you mean, it is because I really want to understand what you are saying and fully capture your perceptions as accurately as possible. Also know that you can decide not to participate in this study or stop doing your participation at any time even after you have started the study.

## APPENDIX D:

### Interview Protocol

I used the following interview protocol to frame my semi-structured interviews.

#### First Interview

##### *x. “Getting to know you,” Questions*

I will use the beginning of each interview to get to know the participant, asking her/him about their semester, major, interests, aspirations, etc. I will also ask them about their hometown, family, and general religious background. These questions will be asked in a conversational posture with the goal of getting a general sense of who the participant is and where he or she is coming from.

I will then transition to the purpose of our interview, reminding the participant that the reason I’m eager to speak with them is that they may have a story of spiritual shift/change that will be helpful toward understanding other students like themselves that come to college.

1. *Can you tell me about a time when your religious/spiritual beliefs shifted or changed since you have been in college?*
  - a. What happened?
  - b. Prompts (if needed): Can you offer a few examples?  
Did you shift your thinking about God, science, other religions, or evil in the world, etc.?
2. *What brought on this/these experience(s) for you?*
  - a. Prompt for college-related events/instances (e.g. classroom topic, peer interaction, challenging event, etc.).
  - b. Student may offer non-college-related events/instances (family-related, personal crisis, world event, etc.). Listen, but also explore further for college-related events.
3. *What was it like working through it? What was the outcome of that experience (resolved/not resolved? Positive/negative experiences?)*

Prompts:

- a. If college-related I will ask questions about the type of support they perceived they were receiving (Who/what helped? Professors, advisors, friends, mentors, campus group, etc.?).
  - b. If college-related factors do not come up, I will ask “Did you find help/support from people, resources, or groups at college?”
  - c. If non-college-related, I will note this detail, but I will not pursue it.
4. *How did this experience affect other areas/parts of your life? (How has this experience affected your overall college experience?)*

Prompts:

- a. Friendships/relationships (past and present)?
- b. Academic Major/Career goals?
- c. Interests/involvement in groups, causes, and events?
- d. Beliefs (e.g. spiritual, political, social)?
- e. Religious practices/involvement (personal practices, religious participation)?

xx. *Wrapping up the interview*

- a. I will ask the participant if they have anything else they would like to share or tell me.
- b. If the participant offers information during the interview that contributes to the research questions, I will thank them for their input and invite them for a follow-up interview with me. I will try to schedule the follow-up interview immediately, confirming through email.
- c. If the participant's responses do not fit the scope of the research questions, I will thank them for their input and wrap up the conversation, but with no invitation for a follow-up interview.

Follow-up/Second Interview

Follow up interviews will occur, likely within one month of the initial interviews. The purpose of these interviews will be to clarify statements or ideas offered in the first interview and pursue clarifying questions that may emerge from the first round of interviews. The final question asked will be: "What was this interview experience like for you?"

## APPENDIX E:

### Student Descriptions of Their Personal Purposes within the Separating-Integrating Continuum

| Separating Perspective<br>(10 students)   | In-Between<br>(5 students)  | Integrating Perspective<br>(5 students)   |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Aaron-</i> God is helping him get his medical degree so that he can use his gifts and skills in missions.  | <i>James-</i> Grad school, mathematics and academics are an expression of his atheism.  | <i>Brenda-</i> Teaching underprivileged kids, so university is preparing her for that, and she's already doing it. Her future doesn't feel so "far off" because she's actually living her future now. |
| <i>Andy-</i> School is about reaching others. Desires to get a job in computer science and evangelize   | <i>Joseph-</i> Desires to be a high school teacher to make the world a better place.  |   |
| <i>Cassandra-</i> Learning Chinese to work in an orphanage in China. Wants a degree to care for people and care for her family.   | <i>Karen-</i> Unsure, but may want to teach overseas. Doesn't see "getting an education" as very spiritual, but necessary.  | <i>Jodi-</i> At school, she seeks the integration of spirituality, relationships, and education. Hopes to express this view in her social work career.  |
| <i>Colleen-</i> Evangelize at school; Become a teacher to evangelize.   | <i>Mitch-</i> Pursuing engineering. At school to evangelize, and also to be faithful as both an RA and a Christian.   | <i>Matt-</i> Seeks integration of religious studies and psychology and is searching for a grad program that values both.  |
| <i>Jenny-</i> Wants to get married, work with others who have been through abortions like her.  | <i>Therese-</i> Desires to be a veterinarian, and it comes out of her love for animals and desire/calling to care for them. Wants to be a positive influence in her world, now and in the future. | <i>Mike-</i> Pursuing teaching to eventually become a pastor who integrates education and theology.   |
| <i>John-</i> Wants to be an evangelist in school and go into medical missions.  |   | <i>Tom-</i> Inspired by his courses, wants to go on to grad school, international politics, fight to stop global warming- a political and spiritual conviction for him.                               |
| <i>Mara-</i> Goal is to work in a Christian adoption agency or with refugees; college helped her discover God's will.   |   |   |
| <i>Simon-</i> Pursuing nutrition to help others like him who needed help getting more healthy.  |   |   |
| <i>Trevor-</i> Has not connected his education with his spirituality and sees them as oppositional; future is about going on to grad school though he is vague as to why. |   |   |
| <i>Trisha-</i> Was clear about her major, but unclear about her future career.  |   |   |

## REFERENCES

## REFERENCES

- Åkerlind, G. S. (2008). A phenomenographic approach to developing academics' understanding of the nature of teaching and learning. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(6), 633-644.
- Arnett, J. J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Arnett, J. J., & Jensen, L. A. (2002). A Congregation of one: Individualized religious beliefs among emerging adults. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 17(5), 451-467.
- Arnett, J. J., Kloep, M., Hendry, L. B., & Tanner, J. L. (2011). *Debating Emerging Adulthood*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Astin, A. (2004). Why spirituality deserves a central place in liberal education. *Liberal Education*, 90 n2 p34-41(2), 34-41.
- Astin, A., & Astin, H. (2003). Spirituality in College Students: Preliminary Findings from a National Study. Los Angeles, CA Higher Education Research Inst., Inc.
- Astin, A., & Astin, H. (2010). Exploring and nurturing the spiritual life of college students. *Journal of College & Character*, 11(3).
- Astin, A., Astin, H., & Lindholm, J. (2010). *Cultivating the spirit: How college can enhance students' inner lives* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A., Astin, H., & Lindholm, J. (2011). Assessing Students' Spiritual and Religious Qualities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(1), 39-61.
- Astin, A., Astin, H., Lindholm, J., Bryant, A., Calderone, S., & Szelenyi, K. (2003). The spiritual life of college students: A national study of college students' search for meaning and purpose. Los Angeles: UCLA Higher Education Research Institute.
- Barry, C. M., & Nelson, L. J. (2005). The role of religion in the transition to adulthood for young emerging adults. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34(3), 245-255.
- Baxter Magolda, M. (2000). Teaching to promote holistic learning and development. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*(82), 88-98.
- Baxter Magolda, M., & King, P. M. (2004). *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (1st ed.). Sterling, Va.: Stylus Pub.



- Booth, S. (1997). On Phenomenography, learning and teaching. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 16(2), 135-158.
- Braskamp, L., Trautvetter, L. C., & Ward, K. (2006). *Putting students first: How colleges develop students purposefully*. Bolton, Mass: Anker Pub. Co.
- Bryant, A. (2006a). Assessing the gender climate of an evangelical student subculture in the United States. *Gender and Education*, 18(6), 613 - 634.
- Bryant, A. (2006b). Exploring religious pluralism in higher education: Non-majority religious perspectives among entering first-year college students. *Religion & Education*, 33(1).
- Bryant, A. (2007). The effects of involvement in campus religious communities on college student adjustment and development. *Journal of College & Character*, VIII(3), 1-25.
- Bryant, A., & Astin, H. (2008). The correlates of spiritual struggle during the college years. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(1), 1-27.
- Bryant, A., Choi, J. Y., & Yasuno, M. (2003). Understanding the religious and spiritual dimensions of students' lives in the first year of college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44(6), 723-745.
- Capeheart-Meningall, J. (2005). Role of spirituality and spiritual development in student life outside the classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*(104), 31-36.
- Cherry, C., DeBerg, B. A., & Porterfield, A. (2001). *Religion on campus*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Chickering, A. W., Dalton, J. C., & Stamm, L. (2006). *Encouraging authenticity and spirituality in higher education* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Clark, R. T. (2001). The law and spirituality: How the law supports and limits expression of spirituality on the college campus. In M. A. Jablonski (Ed.), *The implications of student spirituality for student affairs practice* (pp. 37-46). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clydesdale, T. T. (2007). *The first year out: Understanding American teens after high school*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Colby, A. (2003). *Educating citizens: Preparing America's undergraduates for lives of moral and civic responsibility* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Collins, J. R., & et al. (1987). The blind spot extended: Spirituality. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 28(3), 274-276.
- Cranton, P., & Roy, M. (2003). When the bottom falls out of the bucket. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(2), 86-98.
- Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dalton, J. C., & Crosby, P. C. (2007). The hidden world of college students: Five reasons we know less about students than we should. *Journal of College & Character*, 8(2), 1-5.
- Dirkx, J. M. (1997). Nurturing soul in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 1997(74), 79-88.
- Dirkx, J. M., Mezirow, J., & Cranton, P. (2006). Musings and reflections on the meaning, context, and process of Transformative Learning: A dialogue between John M. Dirkx and Jack Mezirow. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 4(2), 123-139. doi: 10.1177/1541344606287503
- Eck, D. L. (1993). *Encountering God: A spiritual journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.
- Elkins, D. N., Hedstrom, L. J., Hughes, L. L., Leaf, J. A., & Saunders, C. (1988). Toward a humanistic-phenomenological spirituality. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 28(4), 5-18.
- English, L. M. (2000). Spiritual dimensions of informal learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 85, 29-38.
- English, L. M., Gillen, M. A., & Imel, S. (2000). *Addressing the spiritual dimensions of adult learning: What educators can do*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Entwistle, N. (1997). Introduction: Phenomenography in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 16(2), 127-134.
- Fisler, J., Agati, H. A., Chance, S. M., Donahue, A. E., Donahue, G. A., Eickhoff, E. J., . . . Foubert, J. D. (2009). Keeping (or losing) the faith: Reflections on spiritual struggles and their resolution by college seniors. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 27(2), 257-274.
- Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

- Fowler, J. W. (1984). *Becoming adult, becoming Christian: Adult development and Christian faith* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Fowler, J. W. (1995). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. [San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Fowler, J. W., Keen, S., & Berryman, J. (1978). *Life maps: Conversations on the journey of faith*. Waco, Tex.: Word Books.
- Fowler, J. W., & Loder, J. E. (1982). Conversations on "Stages of Faith" and "The Transforming Moment". *Religious Education*, 77(2), 133-149.
- Freitas, D. (2008). *Sex and the soul: Juggling sexuality, spirituality, romance, and religion on America's college campuses*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gappa, J., Austin, A., & Trice, A. (2007). *Rethinking faculty work: Higher education's strategic imperative*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York,: Basic Books.
- Geiger, R. L. (2005). The ten generations of American higher education In P. G. Altbach, R. O. Berdahl & P. J. Gumport (Eds.), *American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, political, and economic challenges* (2nd ed., pp. 38-70). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Gotz, I. L. (1997). On spirituality and teaching. In S. Laird (Ed.), *Philosophy of Education Society Yearbook*. Champaign-Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society.
- Hamilton, D. M., & Jackson, M. H. (1998). Spiritual development: Paths and processes. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 25 (4), 262-270.
- Haynes, C. (2006). The integrated student: Fostering holistic development to advance learning. *About Campus*, 10 n6 (6), 17-23.
- Hill, J. P. (2009). Higher Education as moral community: Institutional influences on religious participation during college. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48(3), 515-534.
- Hill, P. C., Pargament, K., II, Hood, R. W., McCullough, J. M. E., Swyers, J. P., Larson, D. B., & Zinnbauer, B. J. (2000). Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points

- of commonality, points of departure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30(1), 51-77.
- Hill, P. C., & Pargament, K. I. (2003). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health research. *American Psychologist*, 58(1), 64-74.
- Holcomb, G. L., & Nonneman, A. J. (2004). Faithful change: Exploring and assessing faith development in Christian liberal arts undergraduates. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2004(122), 93-103. doi: 10.1002/ir.112
- Inayatullah, S., & Gidley, J. (2000). *The university in transformation: Global perspectives on the futures of the university*. Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey.
- Jablonski, M. A., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J., Love, P. G., Dalton, J. C., Manning, K., . . . Williams, S. (2001). *The implications of student spirituality for student affairs practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jacobsen, D. G., & Jacobson, R. H. (2008). Postsecular America: A new context for higher education. In D. G. Jacobsen & R. H. Jacobson (Eds.), *The American university in a postsecular age* (pp. 167-185). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, T., Sheets, V., & Kristeller, J. (2008). Empirical identification of dimensions of religiousness and spirituality. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 11(8), 745-767.
- Kass, J. D., Friedman, R., Leserman, J., Zuttermeister, P. C., & Benson, H. (1991). Health outcomes and a new index of spiritual experience. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 30(2), 203-211.
- Kazanjian, V. H., & Laurence, P. L. (2000). *Education as transformation: Religious pluralism, spirituality, and a new vision for higher education in America*. New York: P. Lang.
- Keeling, R. P., & Dungey, G. J. (2004). *Learning reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience*. Washington, D.C: ACPA : NASPA.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lee, J. J. (2002). Religion and college attendance: Change among students. *The Review of Higher Education*, 25(4), 369-384.
- Lindholm, J. (2007). Spirituality in the academy: Reintegrating our lives and the lives of our students. *About Campus*, 12(4), 10-17.

- Lindholm, J., & Astin, H. (2008). Spirituality and pedagogy: Faculty's spirituality and use of student-centered approaches to undergraduate teaching. *Review of Higher Education, 31*(2), 185-207.
- Loder, J. E. (1989). *The transforming moment*. Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard.
- Loder, J. E. (1998). *The logic of the spirit: Human development in theological perspective*: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Love, P. G. (2001). Spirituality and student development: Theoretical connections. In M. A. Jablonski (Ed.), *The implications of student spirituality for student affairs practice* (pp. 7-16). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Love, P. G., & Talbot, D. M. (1999). Defining spiritual development: A missing consideration for student affairs. *NASPA Journal, 375*(1), 361-375.
- Lugo, L., Stencel, S., Green, J., Smith, G., Cox, D., Pond, A., . . . Ralston, M. (2008). Religious affiliation: Diverse and dynamic *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*: The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.
- Magolda, P. M., & Gross, K. E. (2009). *It's all about Jesus!: Faith as an oppositional collegiate subculture* (1st ed.). Sterling, Va.: Stylus.
- Manning, K. (2001). Infusing soul into student affairs: Organizational theory and models. In M. A. Jablonski (Ed.), *The implications of student spirituality for student affairs practice* (pp. 27-35). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Marton, F. (1981). Phenomenography — Describing conceptions of the world around us. *Instructional Science, 10*(2), 177-200.
- Marton, F. (1986). Phenomenography: A research approach to investigating different understandings of reality. *Journal of Thought, 21*(3), 28-48.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *A realist approach for qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Mayrl, D., & Oeur, F. (2009). Religion and higher education: Current knowledge and directions for future research. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 48*(2), 260-275.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, V. W., & Ryan, M. M. (2001). *Transforming campus life: Reflections on spirituality and religious pluralism*. New York: P. Lang.
- Murphy, C. (2005). The academy, spirituality, and the search for truth. In S. L. Hoppe & B. W. Speck (Eds.), *Spirituality in higher education* (pp. 23-29). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nash, R. J. (1999). *Faith, hype, and clarity: Teaching about religion in American schools and colleges*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Nash, R. J. (2001). *Religious pluralism in the academy: Opening the dialogue*. New York: P. Lang.
- Palmer, P. J. (1998). Evoking the spirit in public education. *Educational Leadership*, 56(4), 6.
- Palmer, P. J., Zajonc, A., & Scribner, M. (2010). *The heart of higher education: A call to renewal*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pargament, K. I., Murray-Swank, N., Magyar, G. M., & Ano, G. (2005). Spiritual struggle: A Phenomenon of interest to psychology and religion. In W. R. Miller & H. D. Delaney (Eds.), *Judeo-Christian perspectives on psychology: Human nature, motivation, and change* (pp. 245-268): American Psychological Association.
- Parks, S. D. (1991). *The critical years: Young adults and the search for meaning, faith, and commitment*. [San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Parks, S. D. (2000). *Big questions, worthy dreams: Mentoring young adults in their search for meaning, purpose, and faith* (1st ed.). San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.
- Patel, E. (2007). *Acts of faith: The story of an American Muslim, the struggle for the soul of a generation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Paulson, M. (2014). Colleges and Evangelicals collide on bias policy. *New York Times*.
- Putnam, R., & Campbell, D. (2010). *American Grace: How religion divides and unites us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

- Raper, J. (2001). "Losing our religion": Are students struggling in silence? In V. W. Miller & M. M. Ryan (Eds.), *Transforming campus life: Reflections on spirituality and religious pluralism* (pp. 13-32). New York: P. Lang.
- Richardson, J. T. E. (1999). The concepts and methods of phenomenographic research. *Review of Educational Research*, 69(1), 53-82.
- Rockenbach, A. B., Walker, C. R., & Luzader, J. (2012). A Phenomenological Analysis of College Students' Spiritual Struggles. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(1), 55-75.
- Rogers, J. L., & Love, P. G. (2007). Exploring the role of spirituality in the preparation of student affairs professionals: Faculty constructions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(1), 90-104.
- Rue, L. D. (1985). Our most outrageous blind spot: The academic study of religion. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 40.
- Small, J. L. (2009). Faith dialogues foster identity development. *About Campus*, 13(6), 12-18.
- Smith, C. (1998). *American evangelicalism: Embattled and thriving*: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, C. (2010). *What is a person?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, C., & Denton, M. L. (2005). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, C., & Snell, P. (2009). *Souls in transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Speck, B. W. (2005). What Is Spirituality? *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*(104), 3-13.
- Stewart, D. L. (2005). The role of faith in the development of an integrated identity: A qualitative study of black students at a white college. In M. E. Wilson & L. E. Wolf-Wendel (Eds.), *ASHE Reader on college student development theory* (pp. 163-176). Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing (Reprinted from *Journal of College Student Development* 43, (1993), American College Personnel Association).
- Svensson, L. (1997). Theoretical foundations of phenomenography. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 16(2), 159-171.

- Temkin, L., & Evans, N. J. (1998). Religion on campus: Suggestions for cooperation between student affairs and campus-based religious organizations. *NASPA Journal*, 36(1), 61-69.
- Thelin, J. R. (2004). *A history of American higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tisdell, E. J. (2001). Spirituality in adult and higher education. *ERIC Digest*, *ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education*.
- Tisdell, E. J. (2003). *Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Uecker, J. E., Regnerus, M., & Vaaler, M. L. (2007). Losing my religion: The social sources of religious decline in early adulthood. *Social Forces*, 85(4), 1667-1692.
- Vella, J. (2000). A spirited epistemology: Honoring the adult learner as subject. In L. M. English, M. A. Gillen & S. Imel (Eds.), *Addressing the spiritual dimensions of adult learning: What educators can do* (pp. 1-6). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Welch, R. D., & Mellberg, K. (2008). Spiritual Maturation and Religious Behaviors in Christian University Students. *Christian Higher Education*, 7(12), 142-161.
- Wilber, K. (1996). *A brief history of everything* (1st ed.). Boston: Shambhala.
- Wuthnow, R. (2005). *America and the challenges of religious diversity*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Zinnbauer, B. J., & Pargament, K. I. (1998). Spiritual conversion: A study of religious change among college students. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37(1), 161-180.