NURTURING SPIRITUAL QUEST:

STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH AT A FAITH-BASED INSTITUTION

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STUDY OF FAITH INTEGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT (SFID)

- **Focus**
  - Spiritual Development and Experiences of Students
  - Integration of Faith and Learning in Academic and Co-curricular educational settings

- **Questions**
  - How are students growing during college and how are our programs impacting their development?
  - How do educators practice the integration of faith and learning?
SFID PHASES

- **Phase I**
  - Student: Collect written essays at home institution
  - Faith-Learning: Interview Academic and Student Development educators at home institution

- **Phase II**
  - Expand to include multiple campuses

- **Phase III**
  - Develop quantitative instrument to measure students’ spiritual development and effectiveness of faith-learning integration
**SFID TEAM**

- **Tim Herrmann, Ph.D.**
  - Director of Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

- **Scott Moeschberger, Ph.D.**
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  - Resident Hall Director, Calvin College

- **Jess Fankhauser**
  - Graduate Student

- **Andrew Lehr**
  - Graduate Student
Faith-based liberal arts institution

Defining Christian Spirituality

- The quest for a fulfilled and authentic life, that involves embracing the historic claims of the Christian faith
Christian education should “shape people in the love of God” (Hauerwas, 2007).

National Survey of Youth and Religion (C. Smith, 2009)
- From teenage to emerging adult years “conservative protestants” are less likely to:
  - Attend church
  - Pray
  - Read Scripture alone

James K.A. Smith
- Christian higher education should create “liturgical” environments that focus on kingdom formation
- Disciplines are not auxiliary, but central practices of Christian education and community
SPIRITUALITY

- *Cultivating the Spirit* (Astin, Astin & Lindholm, 2010)
  - 4/5 students express an “interest in spirituality”
  - 4/5 students have “high expectations for their own spiritual development”
  - Most students report some level of “spiritual quest” or “seeking a better understanding of who we are, why we are here, and how we can live a meaningful life”

- How Spiritual Impacts the Academic Experience
  - Positive correlation between spirituality and...
    - GPA
    - Intellectual self-esteem
    - Psychological well-being
    - General satisfaction with college experience (Astin et al., 2010; Kuh & Gonyea, 2006)
  - Professors that are spiritual are more likely to adopt a student-centered approach. (Lindholm & Astin, 2008)
    - Positive correlation with increased student learning
What happens during college?

- Knowledge becomes more contextual
- Greater confidence in own knowledge, understanding, beliefs
  - Authority lies more within but still need affirmation
- Take responsibility for own faith but still dependent on external authority
  - Multiple mentors
  - Mentors become “peers”
- Know what they believe and have a basis for beliefs
SPIRITUALITY: PARKS

Faith Defined
- “The activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience.” (Parks 7)

Stage Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Way of Knowing</th>
<th>Knowledge becomes relative as a result of “others” Previous perceptions come into contact with people Opportunity to develop critical thinking Begin to take responsibility for faith</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Way of Dependence</td>
<td>Vulnerable stage Self is now becoming a valuable and trustworthy authority Still dependent on external authority but choose for self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way of Community</td>
<td>Concentric circles around them and are learning how to be in each of them Combination of mentors rather than one person Begin to see different from society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unqualified Relativism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fragile</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inner-Dependence</td>
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## SPIRITUALITY: PARKS

### Stage Three

| **Way of Knowing**  | Able to commit to a belief because many have been examined  
| **Tested Commitment** | Begin to feel a sense of “home” with their beliefs  
|                      | Know what they believe and have a basis for it  

| **Way of Dependence** | Authority now lies more within, but still need affirmation  
| **Confident** | Still a need for mentors  
| **Inner-Dependence** | Mentor-mentor relationships turn into peer relationships  

| **Way of Community**  | Become more comfortable with relativism  
| **Self-Selected Group** | Feel less threatened by those with different beliefs  
|                      | Choose communities to be involved in  

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore students’ expectations on how the college experience will shape their spiritual growth as well as gain a better understanding of the realizations of their expectations and the impact of various campus elements on their personal spiritual growth.

Research Question:

What elements of the college experience are most influential in facilitating students’ expectations and realizations of spiritual growth?
METHODOLOGY

- Essay format pilot-study
  - Freshmen essays were gathered within the first month of college through a mandatory freshmen worldview course
    - 250-300 words
    - 1% extra credit
    - 85 (17%) responses, names removed and confidential identifiers assigned
  - Senior essays were collected in the last month of college through a mandatory senior seminar course
    - 250-500 words
    - 100pt assignment
    - Focus group follow-up
    - 171 (56%) responses, names removed and confidential identifiers assigned
METHODOLOGY

Analysis
- Modified grounded theory
- Random samples to generate thematic base
- Analysis of all essays based on initial themes
LIMITATIONS

- Gender variables not analyzed
- Writing abilities can bias analysis
  - Ex. Many of the exemplary essays were written by honors students
- Results represent one campus
- Orientation programs may have developed students’ expectations, especially for institutional contribution
- Some variance in methods between freshmen and seniors
ESSAY QUESTIONS

Freshman Essay Questions

- What are your goals for spiritual growth during college?
- How do you expect the college experience to help you grow spiritually?

Senior Essay Questions

- How have you grown or changed spiritually since entering college?
- What elements of your college experience have contributed the most to your spiritual growth?
FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- **Individual Faith Goals**
  - “My goals for spiritual growth during college are to be able to know and understand God better and also make what I have, not a religion, but a relationship.”
  - “I hope to become even more dependent on God.”
  - “I am so excited to take personal ownership of my faith and beliefs, to know not just what I believe, but why I believe it.”

- **Increased Knowledge**
  - “I want to grow enough to be able to go out into the world and truly make an impact for Christ’s Kingdom.”

- **Deeper Relationships with Others**
  - “There are so many people who have different viewpoints, backgrounds, experiences, gifts, and passions. I can’t wait to learn from them.”
FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTION IN SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- Surrounding Christian Atmosphere
  - “I expect the college experience to help me grow spiritually because I’ll be surrounded by other believers who will encourage me to grow, can sympathize with me during trials, and will be there for me.”
  - “[I have] the privilege of being surrounded by many Christians who can challenge and motivate me to achieve this goal.”

- Relationships
  - “There are so many guys living around who are brothers in Christ that could keep me accountable for my sins, just as I could keep them accountable.”

- Academic Courses
  - Every teacher had a love for God that I feel will help me learn, not just their class material, but what experience with God can do for one’s life.”

- Campus Offered Opportunities
  - “Through the strong emphasis on missions I hope to truly become a servant.”
## Senior’s Experience of Spiritual Growth and Change

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Deeper Complexity of Faith</th>
<th>Broader Perspective</th>
<th>Ownership of Faith</th>
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| • “I have learned that it is ok to struggle, to question, even to doubt aspects of my spiritual life, but none of that need lead to a loss of faith.” | • “All of these experiences and individuals have helped me expand my view of the world and of God’s unmatched greatness in the world.” | • “I made my faith my own.”  
• “I now know what I believe and why I believe it.” |
SENIOR’S EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND CHANGE CONT.

- Wing mates taught “how to reach out and provide my neighbor with a little encouragement, as well as showing me that I don’t have to handle all the trials in life by myself.”

- Small number of students who each mentioned that the community had in some way failed them.

“My spiritual growth was accompanied by a mental growth—a desire to analyze and think critically about academics and my own daily philosophies. This has been one of the greatest marks that college has left on me: that my mental and spiritual development are often undistinguishable.”
Perceived Contributors

- Academics
- Community
- The Example of Others
- Study Abroad
- Diversity of Thought
ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS: FIRST-YEAR EXPECTATIONS AND SENIOR EXPERIENCES

**Freshman Essay Question**

How do you expect the college experience to help you grow spiritually?

- Campus Environment
- Relationships
- Classroom
- Chapel and Small Groups
- Service/Opportunities Abroad
- Church
- Personal Faith Practices

**Senior Essay Question**

What elements of your college experience have contributed the most to your spiritual growth?

- Example of Others
- Classroom
- Community Environment
- Diversity of Perspective
- Opportunities Abroad
META-THEMES

- **Challenge**
  - To think differently
  - To live differently

- **Support and Encouragement**

  “In addition to supporting and encouraging me beyond belief, they challenge me to be a better person and challenge me to grow in my faith.”
**IMPLICATIONS: CONNECTING THEMES**

**Freshman Expectations for Spiritual Growth**
- Developing a genuine faith
- Discipline in personal faith practices
- Increased Knowledge
- Desiring to grow in community

**Contributors to Spiritual Growth**
- Example of Others
- Classroom
- Diversity of Perspective
- Community Environment

**Senior Realities of Spiritual Growth**
- Deeper Complexity of Faith
- Broader perspective
- Made their faith their own
- Interdependence
MEETING STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS

- Engaging Diversity
  - Students expect to grow from interacting with diverse perspectives
  - Faith-based institutions must continue to recruit and welcome a more diverse student body and staff
  - Professionals must seek opportunities for students to engage others outside of evangelical Christianity
- Ensure depth of integration between faith and learning
  - Continue to help faculty connect scholarship to spirituality
  - Curriculum connects content to opportunities for service

My goal while I am here is to be educated in a way that will prepare me for my future endeavors. My hope is that I will learn about things in the world that will give me such a burden that I won’t be able to do anything else but help.
Discussion and Questions