

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

JESSICA FANKHAUSER, TIM HERRMANN,
ANDREW LEHR, BRENT MAHER

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.**
 - Professor of Psychology and Higher Education and Director of Harold J. Ockinga Honors Program
- **Skip Trudeau, Ed.D.**
 - Dean of Student Development and Associate Professor of Higher Education.
- **Brent Maher, MA.**
 - Director of Assessment and Quality Improvement
- **Sara Hightower, MA.**
 - Residence Hall Director
- **Brandon Jacob, MA.**
 - Resident Hall Director, Calvin College
- **Jess Fankhauser**
 - Graduate Student
- **Andrew Lehr**
 - Graduate Student

CONTEXT

- 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

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

- 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

STUDENT SPIRITUALITY: PARKS

- **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

Way of Knowing Unqualified Relativism	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
Way of Dependence Fragile Inner-Dependence	Vulnerable stage Self is now becoming a valuable and trustworthy authority Still dependent on external authority but choose for self
Way of Community Mentoring Community	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

SPIRITUALITY: PARKS

Stage Three

Way of Knowing Tested Commitment	Able to commit to a belief because many have been examined Begin to feel a sense of “home” with their beliefs Know what they believe and have a basis for it
Way of Dependence Confident Inner-Dependence	Authority now lies more within, but still need affirmation Still a need for mentors Mentor-mentee relationships turn into peer relationships
Way of Community Self-Selected Group	Become more comfortable with relativism 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

Deeper Complexity of Faith

- “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.”

Broader Perspective

- “All of these experiences and individuals have helped me expand my view of the world and of God's unmatched greatness in the world.”

Ownership of Faith

- “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.

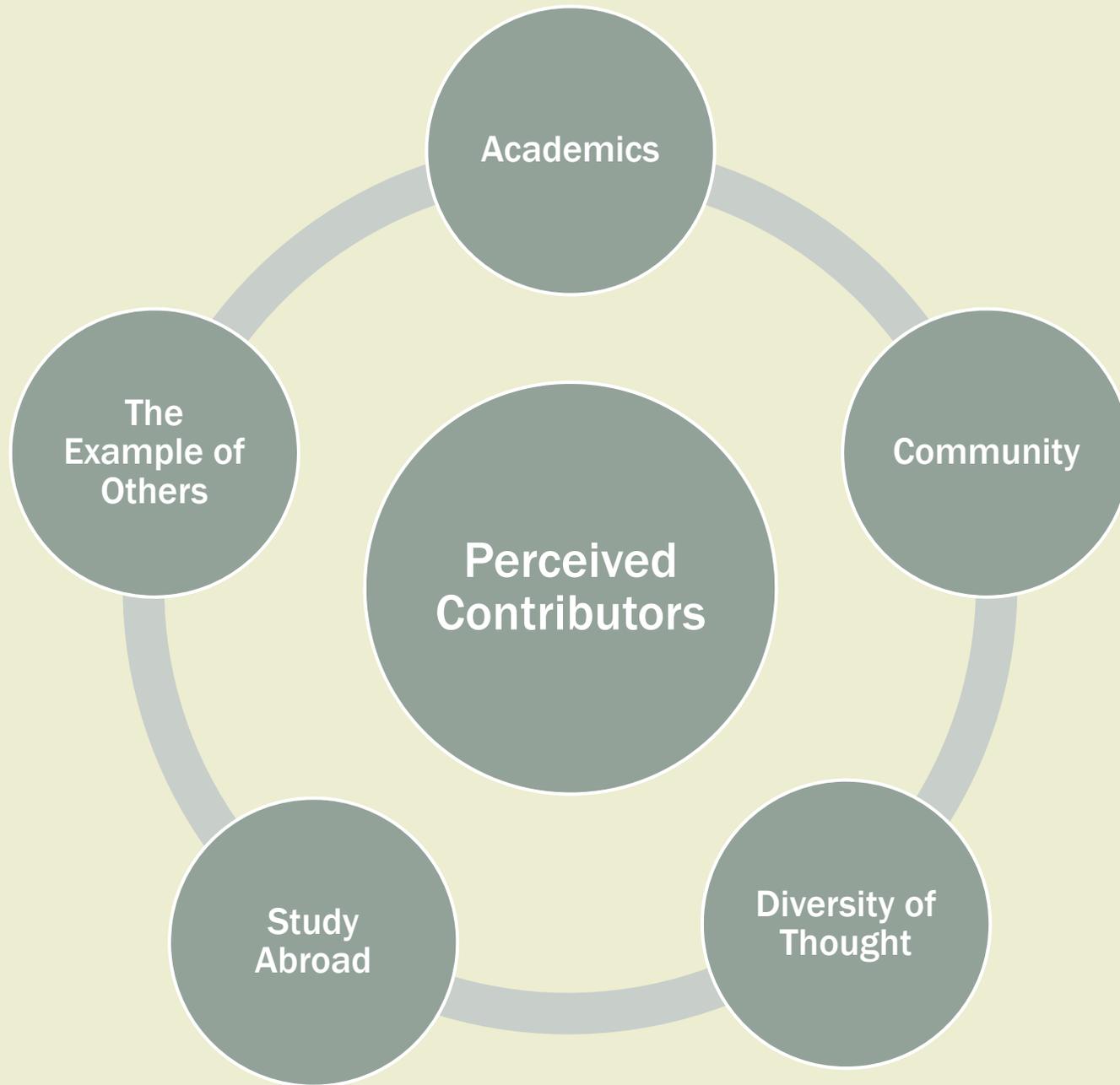
Interdependence

- 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.”

Continued Quest

- 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.”



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

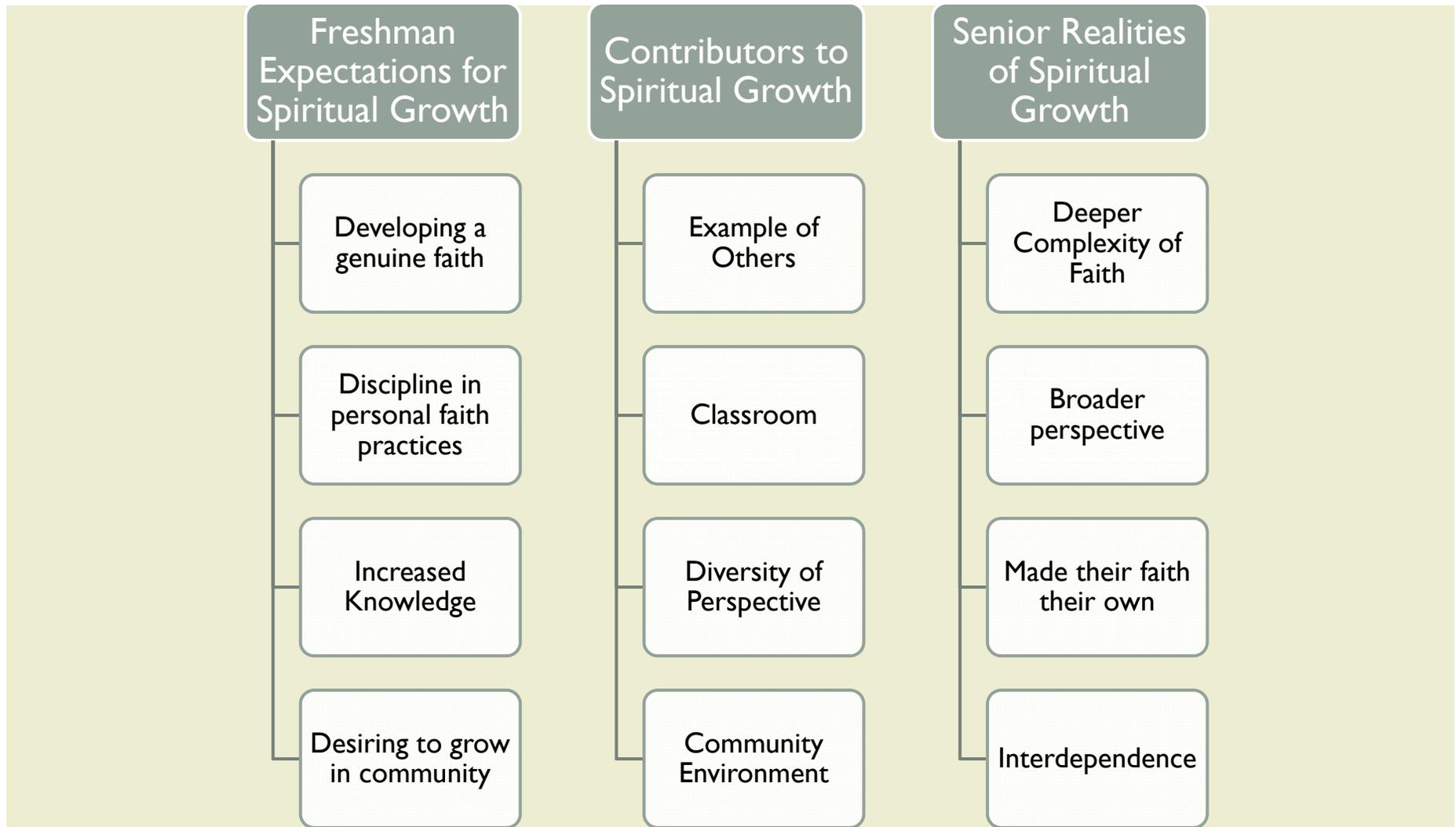
Opportunities Abroad

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



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