THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY, STRESS, AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

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The current thesis seeks to extend the body of research on spirituality by directly examining its relationship to stress and college academic performance using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Research shows the stress is prevalent among college students for hosts of reasons and that stress has an impact on their academic performance and college retention. Poor performance and low retention not only stunt students’ intellectual and economic potential, but reflects poorly on universities. Spirituality is a resilient and controversial variable that has evidenced an ability to help people better cope with stress. It is also related to several other positive psycho-social variables; however, the literature concerning its relationship with academic performance is narrow and inconsistent. 100 students were surveyed, and ten of which were also interviewed, who attend three distinct universities in the Midwest. Students were given a Demographic Questionnaire and the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale, as well as asked question about their relationship with God and their academic achievement. Result showed that though there were no significant correlations between stress and academic performance or stress and spirituality, that there were multiple factors that predicted academic success including demographic variables, religious denomination, and satisfaction with current grades. Findings are discussed in terms of better understanding the salutary effects of spirituality and the impact spiritually-based coping could have on student achievement and universities success.
This research effort is dedicated to my grandmother, Shirley C. Marshall, who is no longer with us. If it had not been for her prayers, guidance, and faith in my abilities this research would not exist. It is impossible to separate her influence from this thesis project. I thank her for shaping my spirituality, which has been an invaluable asset in my personal and academic life.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

College can be an especially stressful time because of the high academic demands and social transitions inherent in the college experience. Stress has been defined as a significant life change that can be positive or negative (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). More specifically, stress can be explained as an interruption of “psychological homeostasis” (Burchfield, 1979). Research shows that college students are not just affected by an academic load, but that the current economic climate has led to increased financial stress for this population (Northern, O'Brien, & Goetz, 2010).

Considerable research has linked negative health outcomes to stress. It is common knowledge that there is a relationship between stress, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, chronic illness, and death (Bryg, 2009). Additionally, research has given attention to everyday hassles such as being caught in traffic or facing too many deadlines (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). Both stressors and hassles have been related to negative outcomes, but some research suggests that hassles can lead to the same distress as negative life events (Fabricatore, Handal, & Fenzel, 2000). Stressors have a negative impact on subjective wellbeing or satisfaction with life. For the college population, stress can be detrimental to academic performance (Dwyer & Cummings, 2000). Moreover, stress has been linked to depression (Aneshensel, Frerichs, and Huba, 1984). In fact, stress is one of the most cited reasons for depression among both men and women (FDA, 2005).

Depression is a common but serious disorder that interferes with a person's ability to eat, sleep, study, and even enjoy pleasurable experiences (NIMH, 2008). It has been related to anxiety disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and panic disorder (NIMH, 2008). Depression is linked with alcohol abuse and other substance
dependence. Of particular concern is depression’s strong relationship with suicide.

There is a critical relationship between stress, depression, and academic performance. It is imperative that researchers further investigate these relationships as well potential protective factors and coping mechanisms that can alleviate some of the pressures associated with the college life, help facilitate a less painful transition, and promote positive psychological well-being in this population. Spirituality is a protective factor that has demonstrated surprising reliability as a coping mechanism and protective factor in the literature (Clark, 2004; Gartner, 1991; Karren, Hafen, Smith, & Frandsen, 2002; Pargament, Maton, & Hess, 1992).

Spirituality is man’s relationship with the creator (Wong-McDonald, 2000). In the Judeo-Christian perspective, spirituality has been defined as “an active choice to surrender oneself to God's will” (Wong-McDonald, 2000, p. 149). Essentially, spirituality includes the experience of connection with God and the application of his principles into everyday life (Fabricatore, et al., 2000). There is a large body of literature that supports the idea that religious/spiritual coping helps to buffer the stress related to negative life events. Spiritual coping has been effective in protecting individuals from the negative effects of death of a loved one, natural disasters, chronic illness, and acts of terrorism (Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, Hipp, Scott, & Kadar, 1997). According to one study, young adults who experience more connection with God in their daily lives, and who use that relationship to deal with life’s difficulties have a more positive outlook on their lives than less spiritually involved people (Fabricatore, et al., 2000). That same study reported that spirituality moderates the relationship between stressors and satisfaction with life.

Bowen-Reid and Smalls (2004) reported that spiritually centered black youth are more likely to engage in health promoting behaviors such as healthy eating, regular physical activity,
responsible health practices, and social support. It has been hypothesized that spiritually oriented people see the body as God’s holy temple and thus reject activities that may defile the body (Bowen-Reid & Smalls, 2004). This hypothesis helps to elucidate the link between spirituality and health. In a separate study, Bowen-Reid (2002) and colleagues discovered that spirituality can serve as a buffer between racial stress and negative health outcomes.

It is also important to consider established factors that have been related to academic performance, although it is not my intention to present an exhaustive review of the literature. One important factor in college achievement is the ability to delay gratification, meaning to put off things that might cause immediate satisfaction in order to accomplish future goals (e.g. skipping a social event in order to study) (Mansfield, Pinto, Parente, & Wortman, 2009). In addition to self-control, the level of academic and social integration into the institution, parent's educational attainment and social economic status, students distance from home, high school achievement, standardized test scores, problem solving ability, and health have all been linked to college achievement (Mansfield, et al., 2009; Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, 2010). Another study highlights that ability, motivation, study time, and employment patterns all heavily affect academic performance (Nonis & Hudson, 2006). All these factors operate in tandem to produce adequate academic performance. For example, having a strong work ethic will not produce a high GPA if the student does not have the ability and, vice versa, if a student demonstrates exceptional ability but does not have a good work ethic, then, that will negatively affect their outcome as well (Nonis & Hudson, 2006).

Nevertheless, college success means different things to different people but commonly held definitions include high grade point average, retention, and the accumulation of important life skills (Kim et al., 2010). College success is crucial for the student because it improves
his/her chances of attaining long-term personal and career goals, and it is important to the institution because “it demonstrates the accomplishment of its mission to” prepare students beyond college. Poor retention can indicate that an institution is not responsive to meeting student’s needs, fails to support students’ progress, and has financial ramifications because the school in essence is losing a “paying customer” (Kim et al., 2010, p113).

Given that poor retention reflects badly on higher education establishments, most institutions provide various resources such as preparation courses, seminars, academic success centers, interventions, tutoring, and counseling to ensure student's success (Kim, Newton, Downey et al, 2010). Notwithstanding these efforts, 30 percent of freshmen do not return for their sophomore year and only 40 percent of all students actually finish their degree (Mansfield, Pinto, Parente, & Wartman, 2004). Student retention and success is the most critical component of a thriving university therefore, buttressing the need for more viable research to be conducted on how to ensure that each student achieves his/her potential in college.

**Purpose of the Study**

College can be a time of mounting uncertainties and overwhelming stress. Because past research has suggested an association between stress and academic performance and stress and poor mental health, I want to explore a construct that could potentially serve as a buffer. I chose spirituality because it has been well-documented in the literature to have therapeutic and protective properties (Clark, 2004; Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCoullough, Swyer, Larson, Zinnbaur, 2003; Kennedy, Davis, Taylor, 1998; Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament, Keonig, Perez, 2000; Rowling, 2008; Wong-McDonald, 2000; Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, Hipp, Scott, & Kadar, 1997). Yet despite the vast body of research on spirituality, there exists only limited, controversial, and contradictory research concerning its relationship
with academic performance (Clark, 2004; Park and Bonner, 2008). This thesis seeks to extend the body of research on spirituality by directly examining its relationship to stress and college academic performance.

**Research Questions**

Given the previous research, I have generated three significant research questions that will serve as the focus of this study. 1) What is the relationship between spirituality, stress, and academic performance? 2) How do spiritual students use their spirituality to cope with stress and how does this impact their academic performance? 3) Do spiritual people feel more positively about their academic performance than less spiritual people? Why or Why not? To answer these questions, took a mix methods approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research strategies.

**Chapters Defined**

This thesis has been organized in four additional chapters. Chapter Two focuses on the literature by highlighting past research that relates to stress, spirituality and academic performance. Chapter Three discusses the methodology used in selecting participants for this study, the qualitative and quantitative research approaches, how data were collected, and some limitations of the research study. This chapter also discusses the questionnaires I used, the interview questions, and how they were administered. Chapter Four of this thesis contains the results and includes a detailed analysis of the findings of this study. Finally, Chapter Five provides conclusions and recommendations for further research that should be conducted to further elucidate the relationship among spirituality, stress, and academic performance.
Definition of Terms

Academic performance: Grade Point Average (GPA) combined with how a person perceives (s)he is doing in school.

Religion: an institutionalized system of attitudes and repetitive practices that define and enhance one’s faith.

Spirituality: refers to a person’s individual relationship with God.

Stress: as a process in which environmental demands tax or exceed a person’s ability to adapt resulting in psychological and biological changes that place a person at risk for disease.

Christianity: is a religion that believes there is one God who exists in three distinct persons. Common tenants include the belief in the teachings of Jesus, the divinity of Jesus, that the Bible is the inspired word of God, that God has a plan for each individual.
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Vast amounts of research have been dedicated to understanding stress, its causes and its consequences (Aneshensel, Frerichs, and Huba, 1984; Burchfield, 1979; Fabricatore, Handal, & Fenzel, 2000; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Johnson & Bornstein, 1993; Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981; Neighbors, Jackson, Bowman, and Gurin, 1983). College students face intense pressure in their struggle to maintain economic stability, perform well in their academic studies, preserve their social lives, and cope with all of the ups and downs inherent in this developmental stage in their lives. These stressors have an impact on how college students perform in school. Research has proposed a link between stress and the controversial variable spirituality, with some studies suggesting that spirituality helps people better cope with stress. This chapter examines the research on stress, spirituality, and academic performance. It concludes by highlighting the gaps and inconsistencies in the literature, and explains how the present study can add to our current scientific understanding of college achievement.

College and Stress

The college age is a unique developmental period in the life span and can also be a time of increased stress (Northern, O’Brien, Goetz, 2010). At least part of the reason for this stress is because the traditional college age (18-25) also known as emerging adulthood is a pivotal point in the life course characterized by growth, change, and instability (Arnett, 2000; Brougham, Zail, Medonza, & Miller, 2009). This developmental stage is particularly stressful because young people are making decisions concerning their career and relationships, and worldview that will impact them for the rest of their adult lives (Arnett, 2000). In fact, when older adults look back on their lives they are most likely to identify this critical developmental period as containing the events that have most impacted their present lives. Describing this period, Arnett (2000) states,
“emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life’s possibilities is greatest for most people then it will be at any other period in the life course” (p. 169). Arnett’s research underscores the significance of this developmental stage.

Researchers have attributed at least some of the stress that college students experience to vulnerabilities associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Brougham et al., 2009). Such a transition is marked by having to live independently for the first time, handle finances, maintain academic standards, and adjust to a new social life (Brougham et al., 2009). While these changes can be a positive experience, they are not without their share of stressors. Unfortunately, college has also been found to be very stressful for many young adults. 27% of college students report being frequently overwhelmed 80% report being moderately stressed, 12% are severely stressed, and 52% report experiencing high levels of stress at least some time during a semester (Abouserie 1994; Pierceall and Keim, 2007; Hudd et al., 2000).

The literature defines stress as a process in which environmental demands tax or exceeds a person’s ability to adapt resulting in psychological and biological changes that place a person at risk for disease (Cohen, Kessler, & Gordan, 1997). Perceptions of stress vary from one individual to the next because stressors have the potential to elicit different responses based on people’s subjective experiences (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001). Past research has evaluated major life events (death of a loved one, severe illness etc.) and their relationships to stress but recently researchers have been examining daily hassles (e.g. conflict with friends or difficulties in school) (Kohn, 1994; Dwyer & Cummings, 2001). Such research has found that daily hassles can be more detrimental to psychological and physical wellbeing than major life events (Dwyer &
Given this relationship this thesis identified stress both in terms of daily hassles and major life events.

Because stress among college students has serious mental and physical health implications research has investigated potential coping mechanisms. Generally speaking, coping mechanisms have been divided into two large categories: problem focused and emotional focused (Brougham et al., 2009). Problem focuses strategies tend to favor behavioral problem solving strategies that require planning and action. On the other hand, emotion focused strategies involve avoidance behaviors, expressing emotions, and changing ones expectations. Of the two strategies, problem-focused coping is the most effective and leads to the best psychological outcomes (Brougham et al., 2009). Further research has considered self-efficacy and social support as particularly helpful for stress-coping. Self-efficacy involves the belief that one has the skills and resources necessary to carry out a certain behavior or arrive at a particular goal. People who have high levels of self-efficacy tend to report lower levels of stress suggesting that self-efficacy acts as a stress moderator (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001). Social support which is divided into familial and friend support has been demonstrated in the literature to promote psychological well-being and buffer the negative effects of stress (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001).

Past research has demonstrated that collegiate stress includes academic worries, social relationships, finances, daily events such as finding parking and being late, and familial relationships (Abourserie, 1994; Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009). College stress levels are correlated with cognitive deficits such as difficulty concentrating and paying attention in class, illness, increased anxiety and depression, and decreased satisfaction with life (Brougham et al., 2009). College students who experience the most stress are more likely to consume junk food, less likely to exercise, and less likely to get enough hours of sleep
Furthermore, college stress is related to impaired academic performance because students become overwhelmed with managing all of their responsibilities and have fewer cognitive resources to dedicate to their studies (Aneshensel, Frerichs, and Huba, 1984; Dwyer & Cummings, 2001; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Struthers et al., 2000).

**Finances as a source of college stress**

Given the current economic climate, college students are particularly susceptible to financial stress. The average credit card debt of an undergraduate was $2,327 and by the time a college student graduates he/she has accrued $20,402 in debt including credit cards and student loans (O’Malley, 2003). 37% of college students report that they worry about their ability to pay for their college education (Northern et al., 2010). The current financial recession has also lead more students to take out students loans, however many students are turned away because fewer banks are lending (Cho & Glod, 2008). Moreover financial concerns are a major deterrent to those who would seek graduate education (O’Malley, 2003). In addition, financial stress plays an important role in identity development, a crucial area among the college demographic (Choi, 2005; Arnett, 2000).

Financial stress also has important implications for academic performance because a greater number of students are employed while in school which may interfere with their studies (Northern et al., 2010). In fact, researchers have found 65.3% of entering freshman report having at least some concern that they will not have enough money to finish their degree (Nonis & Hudson, 2006). Even more interesting is that students are working to pay part of their tuition because of the rising cost of college and the decline of available grants as opposed to working for recreational expenses (Nonis & Hudson, 2006). Obviously, the extra time working can easily take away from time needed to study which presents a problem for universities, considering that
researchers recommend that for every hour spent in the classroom a college students spends two hours studying (Mansfield et al., 2004).

Financial stress has been correlated with higher cortisol levels, greater heart disease mortality, and other negative health outcomes (Northern et al., 2010). There is also a relationship between financial stress and increased smoking and alcohol consumption (Northern et al., 2010). Additionally, in college students financial stress is associated with poor self-reported mental health, lower self-esteem, lower self-image, and negative affect (Skinner et al., 2004; Northern et al., 2010). As is true with other kinds of stress, financial stress may require individuals to devote increased levels of their cognitive resources to try to cope with financial strains, resulting in fewer cognitive resources to allocated to other concerns (Aneshensel, Frerichs, and Huba, 1984). Ironically, this results in poorer coping and ultimately more stress.

**Spirituality’s benefits**

Although self-efficacy and social support are clearly related to psychological well-being, one of the most controversial and consistent stress moderators in the literature is spirituality. Moreover, spirituality has effects that are above and beyond the effects of nonreligious styles of coping (Pargament et al., 1998). Spirituality is defined as man’s relationship with his creator (Wong-McDonald, 2000). Moreover, spirituality has been viewed in previous research studies as “the developmental engine that propels the search for meaning, purpose, and contribution” (Rowling, 2008). Wong-McDonald (2000) discovered that when a person faces a potential stressor he first exercises all of his resources to find a solution to it. Upon realizing that the situation is beyond his ability he then leaves it in God’s hands. Contrary to research on locus of control (which implies that attributing life events to sources outside of self is unhealthy), Wong-McDonald’s research demonstrates that surrendering to God is strongly correlated with spiritual
well-being (2000). In this way the individual trusts his life and circumstances to God and no longer has to carry such burdens (Wong-McDonald, 2000). This is consistent with New Testament theology which says that the will of God should be foremost in the Christian experience and that God wants his people to experience an abundant life (Matt 10:32; John 10:10, New King James Bible).

Many people report that their spirituality provides them with a source of strength (Hill, et al., 2003). In fact, religion is cited more than any other coping mechanism in these studies (Pargament, Keonig & Perez, 2000). Spiritual coping has been associated with lower rates of depression, better physical and mental health, and lower mortality rates. Pargament, Keonig and Perez (2000) have identified 5 key dimensions of spirituality that lead to such positive health outcomes. 1) Meaning: when a person faces an uncertain situation spirituality provides a means for understanding and interpreting that circumstance. 2) Control: this is similar to spiritual surrendering. 3) Comfort: religion helps to soothe the individual’s fears when faced with the perplexities and disasters that happen in life. 4) Intimacy: common spiritual opinions help to draw people closer together reinforcing the research on social support. 5) Life transformation: spirituality often involves a conversion process in which one puts aside old values and ways of thinking and embraces new ones (Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, Belavich, Hipp, Scott, & Kadar, 1997).

Research has compared God to an attachment figure similar to a parent (Hill et al., 2003). Believers look to God as a protector and as someone who will take care of them. Thus, just like someone who experiences a secure attachment to a parent, a person who has a secure relationship with God experiences greater comfort when trying situations occur, and greater strength and confidence in everyday life (Hill et al., 2003). Such a relationship lowers depression, increases
self-esteem, reduces loneliness, and promotes better social and familial relationships (Hill et al., 2003). When a person faces a major life event (e.g. surgery, illness, and natural disaster) their secure relationship with God facilitates better psychological adjustment (Hill et al., 2003).

Furthermore, because some spiritual people view life through a spiritual lens they tend to avoid vices such as gluttony, envy, lust, and pride and embrace virtues like compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, and hope (Zinnbaur et al., 1997). This may explain why some deeply spiritual individuals report having more meaning in life, a better sense of well-being, lower levels of alcohol and substance abuse, and less sexual promiscuity (Hill & Pargament, 2003). Additionally, the relationships that such people have with their congregation members, clergy, and church officials had a number of health benefits; sometimes these health benefits can last throughout the person’s life as they turn to these people consistently when facing major life events (Pargament, Koeing, & Perez, 2000).

In the same vein, college students report being less anxious than their peers, spiritual persons suffering from chronic disease have more positive emotions, among heart surgery patients those who are more spiritual have a lower rate or mortality up to 6 months post-surgery, and family members who have lost a loved one because of homicide are less likely to feel hostility (Pargament, 2002). According to Pargament (2002) religion provides individuals with an “unambiguous sense of right and wrong, clear rules for living, a distinctive identity…and the faith that their lives are sanctioned and supported by God” (p. 173). Research suggests that spiritual people have less juvenile delinquency, lower divorce rates, higher marital satisfaction, report being more satisfied with life in general, have better recovery from mental illness, are less likely to smoke, and less likely to get cancer (Clark, 2004; Gartner, 1991; Karren, Hafen, Smith, & Frandsen, 2002; Pargament, Maton, & Hess, 1992).
Interestingly, negative events can lead to increased or decreased spirituality. In a study of sexual assault victims, 60% evidenced increased spirituality 9 to 24 months after the incident while the remainder reported decreased spirituality. Those victims with increased spirituality, however, appeared to have restored wellbeing, while those with decreased spirituality continued to be depressed (Kennedy, Davis, Taylor, 1998). The compensating reciprocal causation model may further help explain this relationship. According to the model, something happens that disturbs an individual’s well-being, this leads to an increased spirituality, which helps to restore the individual’s wellbeing to pre-event levels. Thus, during hardships, people actively seek meaning and question their sufferings. This desire for meaning leads to a spiritual awakening in some people that, in turn, restores psychological health (Baumeister, 1991).

Another key to understanding spirituality is prayer. In general, African Americans experience more stressors because of racism and discrimination, yet they are able to keep the stress external and prevent it from destroying their sense of self (Steward & Hanik, 1998; Veroff et al., 1981). Perhaps because when challenging situations arise many African Americans are more likely to pray about them (Neighbors et al., 1983). Prayer gives these African Americans a sense of strength to change personal crises that are outside of their control (Veroff et al., 1981). In this way blacks use their relationship with God as a coping mechanism. Moreover, if spirituality has been demonstrated as effective in this extremely stressed group, then it could have a profound effect on college populations as well.

**Spirituality vs. Religion**

It is noteworthy that spirituality has been criticized because the definition has been thought to be too broad. In an attempt to include various faiths and religions, many of the definitions have become so cumbersome that they are no longer useful scientifically (Zinnbauer,
Therefore instead of being all-inclusive, the present research seeks to examine spirituality strictly from the Christian perspective. The present research study does not separate spirituality from religion as some studies have attempted (Pargament et al., 1998). My justification for this decision is based on current research trends. For example, Hill et al., (2003) states:

there are several dangers to this bifurcation of spirituality and religion. First, the polarization of religion and spirituality into institutional and individual domains ignores the fact that all forms of spiritual expression unfold in social contexts…Second, implicit in the evolving definitions is the sense that spirituality is good and religion is ‘bad’ which overlooks the positive and negative elements that each construct can have depending on if they are used appropriately or inappropriately. Third, religion is often considered a very important aspect of a person’s spirituality so most laypeople do not make a distinction between the concepts. Finally, dichotomizing religion and spirituality may ultimately lead to needless duplications in concepts and measures (p. 64).

This explanation leads, to the conclusion that, ultimately spiritually and religion are interdependent rather than independent ideas.

**Spirituality and academic performance**

A critical review of the literature would indicate abundant evidence to support that spirituality as a coping mechanism in times of extreme stress and day to day hassles, yet there is only limited research examining the potential link between spirituality and academic performance and even the research that exist seems to ask more questions than what it answers and is extremely inconsistent (Clark, 2004; Park & Bonner 2008). Past research tends to indicate that those who are very religious tend to have less education, but these findings may exist at least
in part because of poor operational definitions of religion and spirituality (Clark, 2004). Also historically religion and spirituality have been viewed with contempt by social scientists (Clark, 2004). The same study demonstrated that there is a negative relationship between religion and IQ, but in this study, religion and spirituality were viewed as separate constructs (Clark, 2004).

There are other research studies which suggest religiosity is related to academic decline, these studies however conflict with Weber's (1905) theory of the Protestant ethic, a philosophy that postulates that the disciplined nature associated with Protestantism, leads to a stronger work principle and thus generates more material gain (and potentially academic gain). Another theory however insists that Protestants may not perform as well at secular institutions because such schools tend to present worldviews that conflict with their theology. Some conservative Protestants believe humanism and scientific philosophies “endanger the souls” of believers, thus, conservative Protestants are less likely to pursue higher education (Beyerlein, 2004). It should be noted that these observation apply only to conservative Protestants and that mainline Protestants are more likely to go to college. There is some research that implies that such Protestants may be correct. Uecker, Regenerus, & Vaaler (2007) explain,

> for many persons, such exposure [to college] has worked to erode …structures that up hold organized religion. Other studies have linked college prep courses and educational attainment to declines in religious participation and beliefs in the Bible, and young adults with college degrees give the most secular answers to questions about God and faith while those who have not entered college offer the least secular. So pervasive is the explanation for religious decline that some consider it a well-established fact that education, even Christian education secularizes. (p. 1669).
In essence, some conservative Protestants may be correct in their assessment that higher education thwarts moral teachings of the church.

Regardless of the benefits of spirituality (and how it could serve to positively influence the decisions and coping strategies of young people), research has shown that there is a sharp decline in religious commitment during young adulthood (Uecker et al., 2007). Ironically, American universities offer a plethora of resources to meet the religious/spiritual needs of students and these Universities often emphasis religious tolerance and respect in the classroom (Uecker et al., 2007). It seems universities do not just accommodate student's religious preferences but that they encourage religious development. However, some young people still tend to avoid religious affiliation because their lifestyles (which could be the direct result of the college party culture) are no longer compatible with the Church's teachings (Uecker et al., 2007).

Other studies demonstrate that many mainline Protestants actively seek higher education as there seems to be an emphasis on maintaining their Christianity without giving into secular influences. In this way such mainline Protestants feel they can transform society (Beyerlein, 2004). Unfortunately even mainline Protestants who attend college show a decline in religious participation (Uecker et al., 2007).

Such research may be based on stereotypes. Consider that one consistent stereotype that Americans have about religious people is that they are not as academically proficient as nonreligious people (Jeynes, 1999). Nevertheless, the number of studies examining the relationship between individual religious commitment and academic achievement is still quite small, and this is exponentially smaller when we consider the amount of studies conducted with minorities (Jeynes, 1999).
There may also be important cultural issues that serve to further complicate the relationship between spirituality and education. Generally, African Americans consistently report stronger religious involvement, higher levels of spirituality, and state that religion is more important to them overall than other American’s report (Steward & Hanik, 1998). Because of a variety of social issues African American's face conditions that can be extremely challenging. Despite these challenges, African Americans who are more spiritual are also the most well-adjusted and have the highest academic performance. Such African Americans were also more likely to use positive coping strategies such as social support networks when confronted with stressful circumstances (Steward & Hanik, 1998). Similarly a study that uses data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey demonstrated that very religious Blacks and Hispanic youth perform better academically than less religious students (Jeynes, 1999). The same study indicated that religion should be encouraged among minority youth because these groups historically perform worse academically than their white counterparts (Jeynes, 1999).

In another study, spirituality had a modest relationship with positive academic performance (high GPA, and academic honors) among African Americans for one semester. For European Americans, religious participation had a greater influence on their GPA across semesters (Walker & Dixon, 2002). However, this study also separated religion and spirituality buttressing a need for more in-depth quantitative and qualitative assessments of spirituality. Additional studies have found positive relationships between religion and academic achievement (one study suggests that religious urban children performed significantly better academically than their less religious peers), yet these studies fail to sift out the exact mechanisms involved in the relationship between spirituality and academic achievement (Jeynes, 2003; Withing and Liu 2009). Family religious involvement has a positive impact on academic achievement in that high
school students from such families have higher reading achievement than their peers (Park & Bonner, 2008).

Jeynes’ (2009) research shows that students with the highest levels of biblical literacy also had higher GPA’s while also demonstrating that the reverse is true. These results held true regardless of whether the students went to public or Christian schools (2009). For example, biblically literate students had a .40 higher GPA than their peers and for those who attended the Christian schools, there was a .56 difference in GPA demonstrating that biblical literacy is an intellectual expression of religious commitment (Jeynes, 2009). In other words, there may be some evidence that studying the bible helps students to perform better in school. Studies like the aforementioned help to support the movement to place the Bible back in school believing that individuals who study the Bible achieve both academically and in their school behavior (Jeynes, 2009). Such proponents argue that reading, studying, and applying the Bible help to encourage intellectual sophistication in the same way that reading other great works of literature improves the intellect. Engaging in critical thinking and analysis could enhance a student’s ability to more critically examine academic materials (Jeynes, 2009).

Conclusion

In the present study I evaluated spirituality from the perspective of Christianity and consider the influence it can have on stress and academic performance in college populations. With this goal in mind, the present study seeks to answers the following research questions. 1) What is the relationship between spirituality, stress, and academic performance? 2) How do spiritual students use their spirituality to cope with stress and how does this impact their academic performance? 3) Do spiritual people feel more positively about their academic performance than less spiritual people? Why or Why not?
CHAPTER III. RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter provides an outline of the research design, the participants, the data collection methods, how the data was analyzed, and some of the foreseeable limitations of the study. This thesis benefits from the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods, particularly the case study approach. In the following pages, I have described the participants in detail, as well as explained the data collection procedures used to reduce social desirability effects, and to promote confidentiality. Data were collected over a two-week period. The research questions this study attempted to understand were: 1) What is the relationship between spirituality, stress, and academic performance? 2) How do spiritual students use their spirituality to cope with stress and how does this impact their academic performance? 3) Do spiritual people feel more positively about their academic performance than less spiritual people? Why or Why not? To answer these questions, took a mix methods approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research strategies.

Research Approaches

The purpose of this study is to understand whether and how Christian-centered spirituality influences college students’ academic performance, and given the abundance of research that seeks to understand this relationship quantitatively, it is my desire to add to the literature by exploring this topic both quantitatively and qualitatively. In this way, I have the opportunity to ask questions concerning how and why these relationships do or do not exist. What differentiates qualitative research from quantitative research is the emphasis on understanding each person’s individual experiences and the degree of involvement the researcher has with the participant (Glesne, 1999).
Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest,

qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fields notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memo’s to self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to makes sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 3).

On the other hand, quantitative research refers to the systematic, empirical investigation of numerically-driven phenomena and their relationships (Sprinthall, 2003). The purpose of quantitative research is to use or develop statistical models to understand what is being studied. Quantitative research is best used for answering research questions concerned with the what, where, and when (Sprinthall, 2003).

Just as quantitative research employs a variety of statistically-based procedures to understand phenomena, there are also numerous qualitative “ways of knowing” including ethnography, case study, phenomenology, etc. (Glesne, 1999). However, for this thesis I will be using the case study approach. The case study is a research methodology based on an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group, or event (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case studies may be descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory (Yin, 2003). Generally, case studies are used when the questions “how” and “why” are asked, when the researcher has little control over circumstances, and when the focus is on “a contemporary phenomenon within real life context” (Yin, 2003).
Because it is multifaceted and can cover a wide array of different subject matters, the case study is one of the most common research techniques in the social sciences, in business, and almost every other academic field. According to Yin (2003),

the case study as a research strategy, comprises and all-encompassing method—covering the logic of design, data collection techniques and specific approaches to data analysis. In this sense the case study is not either a data collection tactic or merely a design feature alone, but a comprehensive research strategy (p.15).

Given the case studies multifaceted usefulness, I have employed this technique in the current research study.

**Participants**

Data were collected from 111 college students (39 males, 71 females, and 1 unspecified) who attend three different midsized to large universities in the Midwest. For the quantitative research questions I surveyed students from two intro sociology classes from a midsized university in Northern Ohio. All participants were at least 18 years old with a mean age of 19.5. Of the participants 54.1% were freshman (n=60), 27.9% were sophomores (n=31), 8.1 were juniors (n=9), 9% were seniors (n=10) and 0.9 % were graduate students (n=1). The participants were ethnically homogenous with 74.8% self-identifying as white (n=83), 13.5% as black (n=15), and the remaining 11% (n=13) identifying as Asian, Native American, Hispanic or belonging to two or more races. 97.8 % of the student identified as Christian (24.3% as Catholic, 18.9% as Protestant, 27% did not specify Protestant or Catholic, 10.8% were nondenominational) while 7% were Atheists, Agnostic, or other. However, only 29.7% attended church regularly (at least once a week) while 31% does not attend church at all. 62.1% of the students grew up going to church regularly. A little over half of the students (53.1%) consider their spirituality pretty
important to very important and 36.9% stated that spirituality was at least a little important to them. Of those who attend church 45% receive at least some social support from their places of worship. (See Appendix E for a table of the description of the participants).

The mean GPA was 3.08 on a 4.0 scale. The majority of the students (82.9%) feel positively towards their academic performance with 72.1% admitting that they are satisfied with the grades they make in school. 56.8% of the participants reported high to very high stress levels yet 82% felt that they had what they need to cope with their stress. Only 45% of the students were employed either fulltime or part-time.

Qualitative data were collected from 9 students who attend an off-campus coed Bible study in Northwest Ohio, and from student missionaries who attend a missionary training program in Eastern Michigan. I have selected these particular locations because they tend to attract an ethnically and socially diverse group of conservative to mainline Protestant Christians and because I have already established a rapport with the instructors of these courses and leaders of these organizations. To protect the students’ confidentiality I intend to use pseudonyms.

**Instruments**

This section discusses the instruments used in order to collect the data. I administered two surveys, a Background Information Survey, and the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) in order to examine my variables quantitatively. In order to examine my research questions qualitatively I conducted semi-structured interviews. Each instrument is further discussed in the next paragraphs.

**Background Information Survey**

This demographic inventory consists of 16 questions that I created to ask basic questions such as age, gender, race, classification and self-reported grade point average. It also asks
participants multiple choice questions about their religious background, true or false questions about their perceived academic performance and multiple choice questions concerning their perceived level of stress and how they handle stress (See Appendix B).

**Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale**

Daily Spiritual Experience Scale “addresses reported ordinary experiences of spirituality such as awe [and] joy that lifts one out of the mundane, and [give one a] sense of deep inner peace” (Underwood & Teresi, 2002, p.26) (See Appendix C). The scale consists of 16-items (i.e. “I desire to be closer to God or in union with him”). Respondents indicate on a 6-point Likert scale the frequency that they engage in spiritually related behaviors ranging from “Many times a day to Almost never.” The DSES evidenced good reliability across several studies with internal consistency estimates in the .90s (Underwood & Teresi, 2002). Preliminary evidence showed that daily spiritual experience is related to decreased total alcohol intake, improved quality of life, and positive psychosocial status.

**Semi-Structured Interview**

To fully understand the relationship between stress, GPA, and spirituality and to examine why spirituality potentially serves as protective factor, I interviewed 9 volunteers for the study (See Appendix D for a copy of the interview questions). Participants were asked to describe their faith and situations where it was beneficial. Additionally, participants were asked to talk about a recent stressful situation and how their spirituality helped them to cope with it. Participants were also asked how they feel their faith impacts their academic performance.

**Procedures**

The data were collected in two parts. For the quantitative portion, I surveyed 111 students. I was able to access the students by making contact with two University instructors who
allowed me to use a segment of their class time to administer the demographic survey and the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES). I explained the nature of the study to the participants, “I am conducting a research study for my master’s thesis. I am investigating the relationship between stress, spirituality, and academic achievement.” I then asked the students if they had any questions about the study. Student indicated whether they want to take part in the study by filling out the informed consent, demographic questionnaire, and DSES. The survey process took between 10 to 15 minutes. For the qualitative section of this research, I interviewed ten students (See Appendix C for a copy of the interview questions). Those interviewed students filled out the consent forms and the two surveys prior to being interviewed. The interviews were audio recorded and took between 15 to 35 minutes. No personal identifiers were placed on the questionnaires or transcribed copies of the interviews. I informed each student that they would be given a pseudonym and that their answers would remain confidential. Each interview question is based on the aforementioned research questions. To debrief the students, I informed them that they could have transcribed copies of their interviews and that they could also read the final thesis if they were interested. None of the students were provided with any incentives for participating in this study—they participated strictly on a volunteer basis. Each student had my personal contact information in case they have any questions concerning the study, its results, or any other information concerning their participation.

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were obtained for demographic variables. According to Sprinthall (2003) descriptive statistics are short hand numerical ways to describe large amount of data.
Preliminary correlation analysis were used to determine the direction and magnitude of the relationships among GPA, stress, and spirituality. Essentially correlation analysis is a statistical method of understanding whether and how variables are related to one another.

Based on the results of the correlation analysis, linear regression were used in order to see how dependent variables affect the independent variables (GPA, spirituality). Regression analyses are useful when examining how a change in an independent variable affects a dependent variable.

In order to analyze my qualitative data a coding analysis strategy was applied. After I conducted my interviews and transcribed my tapes, I coded the data. Coding is defined as “a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data” (Glesne, 1999). I printed out each transcribed interview and highlighted quotations that represented recurring themes. In essence, sometimes participants had similar experiences or opinions and together these experiences helped to answer my research questions. Assertions are essential statements that can be supported with data. Having come up with assertions, I created a Microsoft Word document and cut and pasted the relevant quotes under the correct assertions. These quotations serve as warrants. Warrants are evidence that have been observed or stated by participants and support of an assertion. After this process, I constructed a narrative based on the assertions and warrants and my experience with the participants.

**Triangulation**

Achieving validity and reliability in a qualitative study is different than in a quantitative one. Often qualitative researchers will use triangulation, using multiple methods to ensure the trustworthiness of their research. For this study, I utilized member checking, disconfirming evidence, and conducting research at multiple sites to make sure that the qualitative portion of my study is both valid and reliable. Member checking involves allowing my participants to read
over transcripts of their interviews to make sure I have represented their ideas accurately. Disconfirming evidence involve a conscious search for examples that go against my original hypothesis. This is evident in my interview questions when I ask participants if their spirituality ever causes them stress or if there might be negative aspects to being a spiritual person. Lastly, I have chosen to survey different classes, as well as interview students who attended various universities, and conducted interviews off campus as well as on campus.

**Limitations**

Findings from this study should be interpreted with caution primarily because of the limitations of convenience sampling and social desirability. The study was conducted using a diverse group of student who primarily attended three Midwestern universities. There were no selection criteria for the students I surveyed. In fact, I chose them primarily because they were college students and I had a rapport with their instructors. For the interview portion the only criteria students had to meet was being an undergraduate, and a Protestant Christian. Social desirability is a factor with virtually all survey-based research because people’s perceptions of self are very subjective and people tend to want to present themselves in the best light (e.g. student might want to present themselves as more spiritual than they really are). These issues may also influence the study’s external validity.
CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to ascertain how spirituality, stress, and academic performance relate to one another. This chapter presents evidence that helps to clarify the three research questions I am investigating in this study. The research questions were 1) What is the relationship between spirituality, stress, and academic performance? 2) How do spiritual students use their spirituality to cope with stress and how does this impact their academic performance? 3) Do spiritual people feel more positively about their academic performance than less spiritual people? Why or Why not?

To answer these questions first statistical data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 18 (SPSS 18) in order to numerically understand the relationship between spirituality, stress, and academic performance. Next, interview data were analyzed in order to assess students’ actual experiences with religion and how it helps them or does not help them in their personal lives and in their academic studies.

This chapter examines the quantitative data first and subsequently the qualitative data. The chapter is divided into two sections: section 1 will address the quantitative analyses and section 2 will explore the qualitative analyses. Additionally, section two will introduce the participants by highlighting their spiritual attitudes, summarizing their religious conversion, and evaluating their academic accomplishments.

Section 1: Quantitative Analysis

This section will discuss the statistical procedures used in this study as well as their results.

Relationship Between Spirituality, Stress and Academic Performance

A series of correlations were run from the survey data in order to ascertain the direction and magnitude of the relationships between the independent variables (age, ethnicity, work...
status, etc.) and the dependent variables GPA, and the spirituality measures. Several significant relationships emerge. Age was positively correlated with spirituality, as was how important the participants ranked religion and spirituality, religious involvement in youth and spirituality, how often a participant’s currently participants in religious activities and spirituality, how much social support an individual receives from their place of worship and spirituality, how positively a person feels towards their grades and GPA and the satisfaction a student has with his/her grades and GPA. Correlation analysis did not reveal any significant relationships between GPA and spirituality, or between measures of academic success (e.g. satisfaction with grades etc) and any of the religiosity variables. Interestingly, the relationship between frequency of church attendance growing up with marginally correlated with GPA. To summarize these results, spirituality and stress are not directly related in this study, nor is spirituality directly related to academic performance. (Appendix F contains a table highlighting these correlations).

In order to further explore the effect the dependent variables had on the independent variables, multiple regression analyses were run. I ran several models, however, some variables were strongly correlated with each other (e.g. importance of religion and frequency of religious attendance) thus I needed to avoid multicollinearity. Multicollinearity is an issue that arises in statistical research when two or more variables are very closely related to each other making it likely that they are measuring the same constructs. If not controlled for, multicollinearity can skew research results. I removed highly correlated variables from the models (i.e. instead of including importance of religion and frequency of religious attendance I included only importance of religion). The final model consisted of the variables religious denomination, frequency of church attendance as a youth, frequency of religions attendance currently, spirituality, age, gender, ethnicity, social support, satisfaction with grades, frequency of being
stressed out, and stress coping, into the model. The results of the analyses showed that demographics, social support, grade satisfaction, stress coping, and spirituality together predict GPA. Essentially, these results show that stress, spirituality, and academic performance are not related directly, however demographics, social support, grade satisfaction, stress coping, and spirituality all work together to raise GPA. Therefore, spirituality combined with other variables may play a part in increasing academic performance. (See Appendix G for the regression table.)

Section 2: Qualitative

In order to fully elucidate the relationship between spirituality stress and academic performance, in addition to surveys, I interviewed 9 college students. Five were female and four were male. In order to protect their confidentiality each participant was given a pseudonym. All the students stated that they received a lot of support from their places of worship. They scored between 50 and 79 on their daily spiritual experience scale indicated that this group is somewhat serious about their spirituality and has a high commitment to their relationship with God. Another interesting trend is that all the students, except one, defined spirituality as their relationship with God. In the next few paragraphs I will introduce each of the participants.

Eric

Eric is a 25 year old recent university graduate from East Africa. His GPA is a 2.9. He has a contagious smile and a pensive attitude. His gentle manner and outgoing personality tend to put people at ease and his baritone voice and confidence make him well suited to be a leader. Eric moved to the US, with his family in 2002, but prior to that he discovered the club scene and began drinking and neglecting church. After his move to the US, he started attending church but only as a formality and mostly because his parents “forced” him. One day while studying biology at the university out of sheer boredom (his cell phone did not work in his dorm and he did not
Eric, who have a laptop, began reading the Bible. This sparked a significant lifestyle change as his faith in God grew stronger. Now, Eric is in the Missionary Training Program. He describes his stress as low and feels he has everything he needs to cope with it.

**Gavin**

A 22 year old Protestant, African American sophomore, Gavin is as quiet as he is serious. His personality is a sharp contrast to the gregarious Eric. Gavin seems to be always analyzing something, but when he smiles the intense façade melts away and his demeanor becomes more inviting. He pauses frequently between words making sure that he is representing his thoughts as adequately as possible. Gavin was not raised a Christian but lived what he described as a “worldly” life until one day through circumstances he hardly understands, he found himself reading the Bible. He began to feel like God was speaking to him directly and thus turned away from the party life and converted to Christianity. A conscientious young man by nature, Gavin’s hope is to help other people experience the same change in perspective that he has. Gavin has earned a 2.7 GPA. He describes his stress as high but believes he has what he needs to cope with it. Gavin is in the Missionary Training Program.

**Mary**

Having been born into a Jewish family, 23 year old Mary converted to Protestant Christianity at 8 years old when her parents started going to a Protestant church. The first year graduate student is a bit shy, soft spoken and uncertain. She did not internalize her faith until she began college and started studying Christianity for herself. Now she prioritized God, believing that everything in her life is connected to her relationship with God. Mary’s GPA is a 3.9. She works part time and admits that her stress level as high, however she believes that she has everything she needs to deal with it. Mary is in the Missionary Training Program.
Nancy

Nineteen year old Nancy is a petite African American woman who is exceptionally soft-spoken. She grew up in the church but never really took her faith seriously until a year ago when she attended a Christian Youth Conference. During the conference, she was encouraged to see young people “on fire for God”, a stark contrast to the young people she knew back home in North Carolina. She mentioned that she never really believed God loved her and that she thought of him as angry and that his feelings for her were conditional, “if I did the right thing.” But after studying God’s character her opinion of him changed and now she sees herself as “God’s daughter.” Nancy’s GPA is 2.4. She describes her stress level as low and believes she has the resources she needs to deal with her stress. Nancy is in the Missionary Training Program.

Christopher

Christopher is very honest and logical. His direct way of conversing is thought provoking and engaging. The 22 year old college junior doesn’t mince words about his past. He admits to being a partying, drinking, drugging, student constantly in search of the next great high. In his subtle Hispanic, accent he relayed to me how his mom taught him of God but that he did not grow up going to church or having a serious faith relationship. One day he randomly picked up the Bible but did not understand it. Curiosity compelled him to ask God to give him an experience with him. He believed God answered his prayers by sending an evangelist to his door. With the help of the evangelist and personal study, he came to the conclusion that the Bible was accurate, historical, and logical. Soon after, he was baptized and now he gives Bible studies to other people. Christopher has a 2.8 GPA. Like Nancy, he has low stress and feels he has what he needs to cope. He is also part of the Missionary Training Program.
Jasmine

A junior from Northern California, 22 year old Jasmine is delicate and petite, with quiet girl-next-door charm. The half white, half Asian missionary grew up in a Christian home (both of her parents are Protestant Christians). However, she did not begin to explore her faith and feel certain about it until she went to summer camp as a teenager. It was at the camp that Jasmine learned how to study the Bible, how to have deep personal time with God and that God could actually be exciting. With this newfound understanding God became real in her life, and her relationship with him continues to grow closer. Academically Jasmine has a 3.5 GPA. She describes her stress level as low. Jasmine is in the Missionary Training Program.

Dustin

Outgoing, fast-talking, personable and charismatic are words the easily describe 21 year old college junior Dustin. Dustin’s conversation is not as straight forward as Jasmine or Christopher, instead his thoughts sort of meander in various directions until they finally arrive at a meaningful point. Like most of the participants (except Jasmine), Dustin grew up in the church but never really had a personal Christian experience. Then one day during his spiritual drifting he got the urge to go back to church. At that point, things “clicked” for him. He believes that God called him into a spiritual relationship. He began to process the evidence. If Christianity is true than he needed to make a decision because Christianity’s claims are, in his words, “radical”. As he began to grapple with the intellectual ramification of Christianity he realized that he needed this spiritual truth to permeate his heart as well. When he slowly made that decision he began to change. Dustin has a 3.9 GPA. He describes his stress level as low and believes he has what he needs to cope. Dustin did not specify his denomination. Dustin is part of an off campus Christian ministry.
Kay

Energetic, fun, and expressive, 19 year old Kay giggles nervously and gestures wildly as she speaks. The biracial fireball grew up going to church with her Grandmother, but because of conflicts with the church her family stopped going. When she entered junior high a friend invited her to church and Christian camp. From these experiences she later discovered that the Bible lined up with her understanding of historical and scientific facts. These experiences reignited her relationship with God. Kay is a nondenominational Christian with a 3.8 GPA. She too describes her stress level as low and feels she has everything she needs to cope with it. Kay is part of an off campus Christian ministry.

Mallory

Mallory is a 19 year old Caucasian college sophomore who credits her relationship with an off campus Christian group for the revival of her faith. Mallory grew up in a Catholic home, and went to Catholic school. However, the hectic schedule associated with college life caused her to temporarily decline in her spirituality growth. Mallory is very articulate and extraverted. Talking to her gave me the feeling that I was in conversation with someone wise beyond her years. She believes her faith has given her confidence, and currently works with the off campus Christian group to share her spiritual wisdom with others. Mallory has a 3.6 GPA. She describes her stress level as high but she believes that she has everything she needs to cope with it.

How do spiritual people use their spirituality to cope with stress?

A key impetus for this research involves understanding the role that spirituality plays in the Christian’s life when they are faced with stressful circumstances. The present research shows that spiritual people have three important ways of handling their stress which include reading the
bible, praying, and surrendering their problems to God. The following paragraphs highlight the significance of each of these coping strategies in more detail.

**Spiritual people cope with stress by reading the Bible.**

A common way that the participants cope with stress is through reading the Bible. Eric explains, “When I’m stressed out I read my Bible…somehow I manage to find some counsel in the Bible that gives me strength to keep on going.” For the participants, the Bible is a rich book full of stories of how people handled adversity in past times. Other students shared how the Bible contains several messages of encouragement as well as guidelines for how to live a rewarding life.

For the participants, the Bible is the inspired Word of God. It is God’s way of communicating with each individual. Dustin reinforces this point stating “occasionally God will speak audibly to people…but if you wanna hear his word you gotta read the Bible.” He adds reading the Bible is different from reading other literature because, “It’s just about this desire to walk through every single day basically with him by your side. To spend time investing in the relationship. You could almost call it like a date”. There is a level of intimacy in studying the Bible that is similar to the social support a person can receive by confiding in a trusted friend. For these participants reading the Bible is not just a passive, one-sided experience, it is a way that the active Christian can be refreshed and rejuvenated in God’s presence. It is a way their attitudes and opinions can be challenged and that their relationship can be enriched.

Dustin explains, “[By reading the Bible] I put myself in a position to receive grace from him. To be changed…” It appears that reading the Bible helps to alleviate stress because it places the reader in a position to be vulnerable with God. This receptivity to God’s instruction enables the reader to see how he/she needs to change. Changing behaviors that are not productive
reduces stress as does heeding to God’s instruction. In these ways the participants use the Bible as a coping resource when confronted with stress.

**Spiritual people cope with stress by praying to God**

In addition to reading the Bible, the participants view prayer as the other half of a conversation with God. Prayer is a rich resource that enables the Christian to reach out to God opening them up to receive His divine blessings and guidance. Nancy’s story is illustrative of the significance of prayer. Nancy’s biggest stressor is anxiety. In her words, “I guess just worry… I would worry a lot. Like, I would just think about [problems] over and over again… Yeah, and hold it in, yeah, keep it in.” By internalizing her problem, Nancy soon found herself overwhelmed. She realized that she needed to find a more efficient way of coping with her stress. In her own words Nancy shares, “I notice when I…believe that God has taken care of the situation, like, after I’ve prayed…I…don’t feel stressed any more. There’s like a… peace that things will work out”. Again, there is evidence that having a relationship with God can produce some of the same benefits of social supports as other important relationships. Just as sitting down and expressing feelings to a trusted friend can be cathartic so is confiding to God one’s fears and trials.

Other students stated that prayer was a means of preventing stress before it happens. Eric points out, “What I found now is that recently I anticipate [stress] and so I start planning ahead of time… I always know [when] I’m going to be in a stressful situation and stuff [so]… I’m constantly praying [so] when that time comes I’ll be prepared.” This is an interesting outlook for several reasons. First, anticipating that a stressful event might occur places a person in a situation to confront it and potentially ameliorate its effects. Next, is the idea that by talking to God before the problem actually occurs that God can change one’s perception of the problem and place it
into perspective. Additionally, the idea that God can handle a problem before it even occurs is reassuring and comforting. Finally, spiritual people believe that through prayer God can prepare them mentally and physically to face a stressful circumstance.

But why talk to God? Why not talk to a family member or a friend? Eric elaborates,

I can talk to my fellow human beings, but what can they do? …See we are limited as human beings. ….I believe God…knows why everything is happening. So I’d rather take my problems to him first and then seek wisdom and advice from other people second. …their things that are beyond our control. And so turning to a human being is just like adding problems to them sometimes.

Prayer is not just a conversation but an expression of a deep-seated faith. While we may burden a person with our problems, God cannot be overwhelmed by them. This knowledge increases confidence in God’s ability to handle the participants’ stressors thus producing the salutary effect of reducing stress.

**Spiritual people cope with stress by surrendering it to God.**

To the casual observer surrendering may sound like giving up. But to the Christian surrendering is a complex process that involves three steps. 1) The individual realizes that he does not have the resources he needs to deal with his condition. 2) The individual understands that God is all powerful and cares about their circumstances. 3) The individual makes a conscious choice when he has exhausted all human effort to give the matter to God. To give up would be to run from the problems or employ avoidance coping strategies. In contrast, the surrenderer is facing the problem head on and offering the problem to someone who he believes has better resources to manage it.
However, this surrendering process is not as easy as it sounds. Nancy summarizes this by saying, “...my problem is...I used to think that, [I could] rely on myself, ...sometimes I struggle relying on God. Nancy continues, “but...when I do get stressed out...I guess just pray, like just cry out to God, like, ‘I can’t handle this...I need you to help me’.” What makes the process difficult is that in order to benefit from God’s help the participant has to admit that they are limited. Because we all want to believe that we have control over our lives, this in itself can be a stressful process.

Mallory sheds light on this surrendering process expounding, “I would say, I am easily stressed out when it comes...exams [and] papers...when I am in those stressful situations, I can always just kind of throw up my hands [or] calm down and...pray.” She further reflects on this choice and decides to, “just kind of tell myself...’Mallory, you’ve done what you need to do, like you’ve done everything you can...kind of get rid of all the stress and give it to God’ cause that’s, kind of our relationship.” In her statements Mallory reveals an interesting distinction between giving up and surrendering to God. Like the other participants, Mallory is not giving up, instead she is tapping into her spirituality and using it as a protective resource to help her handle stress.

While research is not clear on exactly how this coping strategy works it may be explained using the theory of social support (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001). Knowing that someone loves you so much that they would take on your problems and fight your battles for you can be so comforting that it can actually minimize the stress of the problem. As Mallory and Nancy imply, the spiritual person believes that God has what it takes to solve their problems and the knowledge that no problem is beyond God’s resolution creates a confidence that actually reduces the negative effects of the stressor.
Yet there appears to be a tension in the participants minds between wanting to do things their way and needing to do things God’s way. This creates stress as well, but Christopher, like many other participants views this conflict optimistically. “Yes, [Christianity’s] not just all fun and games… [but] even though there’s a level of stress there is always an answer.” Christopher, like the other participants believes that God provides a way out of stressful circumstances or resources to deal with them. Like many other participants, He believes that his faith provides him with an inner peace that he has not been able to find using other methods of coping.

Regardless of circumstance, the spiritual person is never alone. He or she never has to face obstacles without help and encouragement. In summary, because the spiritual person demonstrates the faith to surrender his/her hope and optimism in God may actually serve to abate his/her stress.

**How does being spiritual impact academic performance?**

Another purpose of the present study is to shed light on the relationship between spirituality and academic performance. Three relevant implications emerge from the present study. First, spiritual people believe that their grades belong to God. Second, spiritual people surrender their academic trials to God. Third, spiritual people believe that God gives them the power to perform better in school. Each of these statements are examined in the following paragraphs.

**Spiritual people believe that their grades are for God.**

Many of the participants share stories of how God helped them to perform better in school despite stressful situations. In his distinct matter of fact way of talking Christopher describes his academic ups and downs. “I was partying all the time like everyday 7 days a week and I would get like 3 hours of sleep...so my grades declined…. I was on the border of not going
Christopher account for the surge in his GPA? He continues, “I start realizing that when you come to Christ…that God is the one that’s accountable for everything you do. It was no longer the teacher who I was trying to get good grades for….I was doing it for God. …” But Christopher is clear that it was not just his party lifestyle that resulted in his poor grades. He describes how his attitude impacted his high school experience and how this changed when he started studying the Bible.

Mary reinforces this idea declaring, “I don’t know what part of my academics I could possibly use in the future for his works, so I don’t want to slack in anything.” It appears spiritual people have a better motivation to succeed because every aspect of their life reflects God.

Similarly, Gavin had been expelled from school because of low grades, but his drive to be a witness for God compelled him to work harder and “discipline myself.” From his perspectives, “If I drop a class I’m wasting money, and I still have to take the class anyway later. That’s thousands upon thousands of dollars. That’s money that could be used to buy [Christian] literature or to reach people.” Having come to this realization, he resigned to buckle down, and work harder. He explains, “Before, I didn’t care if I showed up for class or not. But now I see that that’s a way I could reach my instructor for Christ.” Gavin’s desire to help lead other people into a relationship with God had made him a very conscientious student. Despite the fact that he is taking four classes, works until midnight every day, and is involved in church and campus ministry, Gavin still manages to get all A’s each semester.

Nancy reasons, “[spirituality] gives me the like the bigger picture…on why I’m in school…It’s like… ‘oh, I’m just doing this assignment because I have to do it, like I’m doing this assignment because… I’m gonna use this…for something better….” Even more interesting
Nancy adds, “I believe….God created education…We’ll always be learning [in heaven]. [Also] being academically excellent is an opportunity to help other people….school isn’t like just a temporary thing. It will help you in the future.” Nancy alludes to the present importance and the potential eternal implications that one’s education has.

In summary, there are several reasons that working to do well in school for God helps to increase grades. First, believing that there is a greater power out there who shares an interests in every aspect of your life serves as a motivator. For the participants, God’s love of them and belief in them awakens their desire to please him in their academic studies and in other areas of their lives. Second, the participants believe that they can use their academic skills in the future to further God’s work. Third, the participants believe that they can use their academic skills to help other students. Spiritual people believe that they are examples of God’s character. If others see how God is blessing them than it enables them to be positive witnesses.

**Spiritual people surrender their academic trials to God and this promotes better academic achievement.**

Once more, this research underscores the importance of surrendering in the Christian life. For the student, academic stress is inevitable, but just as surrendering to God helps to reduce stress in other areas, surrendering is also an effective coping mechanism in the academic realm.

Jasmines’ story supports the idea of surrendering. She highlights one particularly stressful time in her academic career stating “like when I took my anatomy exam I thought for sure, you know, I’d get a D, but even though the test was hard I somehow got a B and I thought that was a miracle cuz I didn’t study. Like I crammed.” Even though she did not study for the test as well as she should, she knew that God would be merciful to her and that he could help her through the situation regardless of the grade she received. But trusting her unknown future to God was not
easy. In her soft whisper of a voice she adds, “Like when I was taking the test I was just praying. Like I don’t know what I would have done, you know, [if] I didn’t have that relationship with God because who knows…I don’t know if I’d commit suicide…”Jasmine’s story illustrates the incredible pressure that is endemic to college life and the potentially devastating consequences of failure. Yet her story also illustrates that surrendering prevented her from failing and making an irreversible decision. Lastly, it shows that even when the Christian does not do his/her personal best (in the case of Jasmine she crammed before an exam), that their spirituality can still help them. In the Christian’s mind, God is exceedingly merciful and so even when the Christian makes mistakes, he/she can confidently still give the situation to God and trust the he has their best interests. Having an unconditional support system not only promotes positive well-being, but it enhances academic performance as well.

Mallory had a similar experience. She explains that without surrendering, “I feel like I would kinda take on all these burdens and harvest them inside myself and then they would fester and then become like super destructive. to me.” But there is a point in her life where God’s grace takes over and his help sustains her. Like the others, Mallory believes that God has a plan for her. She reflects,” I’m not saying that God is going to magically help me get an A in a class, but I always find that after I pray I feel more confident in the things that I DO know.” It seems that spiritual people tend to look at the big picture. They believe that God has a plan for their lives and, thus, they should submit their will to him so that he can bring those plans to fruition. When spiritual people submit their problems to God, they open themselves up to receive His blessings. Having God’s reassurance enables them to feel more confidently about their circumstances.
Spiritual people believe that God gives them the power to do better in school.

There is a comfort that comes from knowing that someone supports you and wants only the best for you. Spiritual people believe that God provides them with the wisdom and resources they need to be successful academically. Jasmines’ story buttresses this point. She adds,

I do my best but ultimately God is the one who blesses the efforts I can do all the studying… but unless I…acknowledge that it’s God who helps me and gives me the power to study and do well,,,it’s just for nothing. I mean I could study and do horrible on the test and I think that’s happened to people before… it just tells me that …God is really the one that gives people the good grades.

Jasmine’s assertion underscores the point that human beings are quite limited. Sure, a good student may study hard for an exam, but that does not guarantee they will pass it. It seems that people need a support that is bigger than their problems; a source outside of them that propels them to perform optimally.

Nancy tells a story about her difficulties with concentrating. She admits that she struggles to stay focused which leads her to procrastinate. Having tried to manage this problem on her own without success, Nancy decided to turn to God. “I remember there’s something I had to get done” , she says, “an assignment or something…and I couldn’t focus, and I was like, God, like, I just need You to help me focus…cuz I just need to get this done.” Nancy attributes her new found ability to stay on task to God’s miraculous intervention. It seems that spiritual people pray and then have faith that God hears and will intervene positively in the situation.

Eric had a similar situation. He was doing poorly in a class and needed to perform well on the final exam in order to pass. He expounds,
It came down to the last day and man I pray, but I think that day I PRAYED. I took it another level and by God’s grace the exam was the easiest I thought—one of the easiest. I did extremely well…I don’t think I’ve ever prayed for a class like that…And I think it gave me strength through every day as I was going through the class.

When spiritual students feel weak they draw from God’s strength in order to cope. In their mind God has the power to control outcomes and provide a positive solution to academic hassles.

**Do spiritual people feel more positively about their academic performance?**

The final purpose of the present study was to understand whether spiritual students had a more positive view of their academic performance. There are two pieces of evidence that suggested that, at least for the present study, spiritual people did feel more positively about their academic experience. First, spirituality gave students a more balanced view of their academic lives. Second, spirituality provided students with a deep sense of purpose. These two factors were explored in more detail in the following paragraphs.

**Spirituality gives students a more balanced perspective of their academic life.**

All of the participants felt positively about their academic performance. However, for the participants academic performance is not just about getting good grades, it’s about pleasing God and following his divine leading. As a result, many of the participants did have a more optimistic view of academic performance or at least the eternal significance of it. Mallory elucidated this point stating, “my spirituality has definitely made me a more confident and a more secure person…because before I had a lot of insecurities, a lot of doubts, a lot of gray areas in my life, now that, you know I’ve completely accepted God and everything, it kinda takes away those
gray areas because I know I am not the one supposing to be making plans, He is… and so, definitely has been a kind of a comfort to me.”

Kay grew up in a family that was not particularly concerned about her grades. Her parents were never straight A students. They only cared the she did her best. But she has always done well in school and places overwhelming emphasis on her academic success. At one point she even cried when she got a B because she felt that she let herself down, but her spirituality has helped her to focus more on God and less on school. She explains, “Like in high school I would stay up, drink coffee like it was water…I would never take time to just relax. I never realized the importance of relaxing… but now I put less weight on what I do well and more on what God does well.” As a direct result of her relationship with God, she no longer holds “myself to ridiculously high standards that were impossible to meet.” This has made her feel more at ease about her academic potential and thus has improved her attitude towards school.

Like Kay, Marry faced a challenging situation. She reflects,

…there was a time during final period and I had a ton of stuff to do, and I probably didn’t spend my time wisely. And I had all these papers and one of them I put off till the day before, and I’m like its fine I’ve done research its only ten pages. And somehow I realize it was thirty pages. And I almost had a heart attack, but …I was just praying and I had peace. It was weird , I just didn’t understand, …why I wasn’t stressed out….Yeah I have a more calm attitude now, I like to see it as perspective.

Once more the research reiterates themes of peace and solace brought on by a changing perspective. The students’ faith in God helps to allay their anxieties and provide comfort. Their
faith changed their negative perspectives and helps them to refocus on God’s larger plan and His ability to provide for them.

**Spirituality provides students with a sense of purpose.**

One of the reasons that people seek spirituality is because it provides them with a sense of purpose in an otherwise uncertain life. Mary tells a story that many students can relate to.

I guess last semester because I was adjusting and like trying to figure out what I am doing in grad school….. it took all semester to reconcile and to figure out what I was doing here and what my purpose was.

But in the midst of this personal crises Mary decided to pray. Utilizing her spirituality, Mary began to understand her purpose. She realized that she wanted to reach others and that she would be able to do so through her career. Her spirituality alleviated her uncertainty and gave her a sense of purpose in the midst of her academic confusion. It seems that having a sense of purpose helps to promote a more positive attitude towards life and towards academic endeavors.

Similarly Nancy explains,

I guess the biggest thing about my spirituality…that I’m beginning [to realize] the extent…that God is in my life, [and that he] wants to be in my life…Yeah, like my meaning, my purpose in life. Life without God is….in vain (laughter)…. Life outside of Christ is not worth living for.

Christopher found himself asking the same questions. What’s the point of it all? What’s the point of grades and academic merits? By introspecting and communicated with God, He realized that His academic performance was part of a larger purpose that God had for his life. Having a sense of purpose melts away uncertainties and provides an optimistic outlook on life and, for the student, academic performance.
Conclusion

Spiritual people have a host of resources available to them that enable them to cope in tough circumstances. In addition to providing social support and inspiration, spirituality enhances academic outlooks by decreases stress, changing perspective and providing a sense of meaning and purpose to life. This result also shows that there are multiple variables that affect academic outcomes, namely spirituality, demographic variables, access to social supports, and how a person copes in challenging circumstances.
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION

The intent of this study is to better understand the roles of stress, spirituality (as defined from a Christian perspective) and academic performance (operationalized as GPA and attitudes towards school). Previous studies reveal that college students face various pressures ranging from financial responsibilities, to transitions into adulthood, to social and academic tensions (Arnett, 2000; Brougham, Zail, Medonza, Miller, 2009). These stressors can decrease optimal mental health and thus impact academic success. The literature has suggested that spirituality is a variable that helps people to cope in a host of situations (Clark, 2004; Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCoullough, Swyer, Larson, Zinnbaur, 2003). Specifically, there is some conflicting scientific evidence that spirituality may benefit students in that spiritual students cope better and perform better in school (Clark, 2004; Park & Bonner 2008). However, there is also evidence that suggests that spiritual students do not perform better in school than other students and that very spiritually students may not seek higher education as it conflicts with their moral sensibilities (Beyerlein, 2004). Given this contrary evidence, I developed three research questions that I wanted to address in this study. 1) What is the relationship between spirituality, stress, and academic performance? 2) How do spiritual students use their spirituality to cope with stress and how does this impact their academic performance? 3) Do spiritual people feel more positively about their academic performance than less spiritual people? Why or Why not?

To investigate these research questions, I utilized qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The first research question was answered by using quantitative analyses. To assess spirituality I used the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale, a 15 question Likert scale that ascertains an individual’s commitment to God and His creation. To assess stress and academic performance I developed a basic demographic survey that includes questions on cumulative GPA, satisfaction with grades, frequency of stress, and current levels of stress. Using SPSS 18 I conducted
correlation analysis to better understand the relationship between my variables. These analyses revealed that there were several positive relationships between the spirituality measures and between demographic variables and spirituality. However, correlation analysis did not show any significant relationship among spirituality, academic performance, and stress. I postulate that I did not find a relationship between spirituality and stress because it is common knowledge that stress is inevitable and that each day we experience various degrees of stress. To this end, I suggest that just because an individual has a higher spiritual orientation does not mean that he or she will not be presented with stressful life events. Certainly more research is needed elucidating the stress, health, and spirituality connection. As for why spirituality was not related to the academic variables, I suspect that this is because the spirituality measure used in the current study seems to look at spirituality as a personality construct. The scale does not consider how spiritual people use their spirituality in everyday life, just how they experience it. Another reason is that intelligence is an individual difference variable that is both biologically and environmentally accounted for, thus a person’s relationship with God or lack thereof might not necessarily have a bearing on their intellectual aptitude.

The regression analysis enabled me to explore the relationship among these variables more in depth. Using SPSS, I developed several models in order to predict academic success. However many of the variables were so closely related (e.g. church attendance, and religious importance) that they had to be removed from the final model in order to avoid multicollinearity. The model revealed that religious denomination, frequency of church attendance as a youth, frequency of religous attendance currently, spirituality, age, gender, ethnicity, social support, satisfaction with grades, frequency of being stressed out, and stress coping, were the strongest predictors of academic performance. These results are consistent with past research which shows
that there are several variables related to academic outcomes (Mansfield et al., 2009; Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, 2010), and that there is no single component that predicts academic aptitude including a student’s drive and ability (Nonis & Hudson, 2006). However for the participants I interviewed, spirituality is their most cited coping resources and seems to have the most influence over their academic success.

To better summarize the results, academic performance is multifaceted, with a hosts of variables ranging from how a student copes with stress, to how much social support they receive, to even what age, gender, and ethnic group they are from, contributing to academic success or decline. These factors work together (as shown by the regression analysis), meaning that no single variable is responsible for academic outcomes (at least in this study). This is why the correlation analysis did not show a direct relationship between stress and academic performance or spirituality and academic performance. Alone, neither stress nor spirituality completely influences academic success, however when grouped with other important factors (how a person deal with stress, etc.) the present study shows that spiritual and stress do have a statistically significant influence on a student’s academic potential.

The second aim of the study was to discern how spiritual students use their spirituality to cope with stress and how this impacts their academic performance. This question was answered using qualitative data analysis. I interviewed nine Christian, college students, asking them about their relationship with God, how they cope with stress, and about their attitudes towards their grades. The qualitative analysis reveal just how multilayered these relationships are. How do spiritual students cope with stress? The students shared that reading the Bible, praying to God, and surrendering to God helped to assuage their anxieties and create a peace in tumultuous circumstances. Once more this is consistent with research which suggests that surrendering is a
powerful coping mechanism for the spiritually attuned (Wong-McDonald, 2000; Pargament, Keonig, Perez, 2000). Research on social supports further elucidates this relationship. Students view God as a parental figure, someone who they can talk to about difficult problems and trust in trying situations. To the participants, God is deeply involve in their lives, and has a plan to guide them where he wants them to be. This knowledge of having an all-powerful, ever-caring, unchanging parent, that will help navigate them through life’s trials helps to bolster their confidence and place stress into proper prospective, thus alleviating or eliminating it.

Additionally, these spiritual resources help to support students through academic struggles. Students view their grades (as well as every other aspect of their lives) as for God, they believe that they can surrender their academic stresses to God, and that he has the power to help them to do better in school. These are powerful beliefs that can shatter feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that some students may encounter throughout their matriculation. Instead these positive beliefs propel the student to perform to the very highest standards in school. But these beliefs are more than just positive self-talk. For these students, these are coping strategies that enable them to be rejuvenated and revitalized in the face of pressure. In this way students use their spiritual resources to help them succeed in academic settings. Furthermore, this finding challenges the research that suggests that academia can cause spiritual decline (Beyerlein, 2004). For these participants, academic pressures help to bolster their relationship with God because they rely on him for support through these circumstances and when they see his divine interventions it solidifies their faith.

Moreover, do spiritual students feel more positively about their academic performance? For these participants the answer is a resounding yes. The participants’ faith provides them with two important strengths which boosts satisfaction: perspective and purpose. While the students’
spirituality enables them to realize that their grades are important, it also helps them to see that there is more to life than just academic pursuits. In this way spirituality keeps the students balanced so that they do not put undue pressure on themselves or neglect their academic responsibilities altogether. Faith also gives students a sense of purpose. While grades are important, the student’s believe that God can fulfill his plan for their lives in spite of their GPA not just because of it.

Despite these positive results there is a small caveat: spirituality can, at times, be a source of stress and frustration. All of the students admitted that trying to live up to the standards of Christianity (i.e. be a good example, follow the commandments) can cause tension and a sense of unworthiness. However, these feelings are mitigated by God’s unconditional positive regard for them and unchanging mercy. Faith in his care, and seeing his work in their lives, helps alleviate this frustration.

**Limitations**

There are some limitations inherent in all research. This study is no exception. There are some questions this study cannot examine because the study was not able to compare spiritual people with nonspiritual people (as the majority of the participants had some religious affiliation). Could it be that because the students all had some level of spiritual interests that they reported higher levels of academic satisfaction? Or, could it be that because the students tended to perform well in school that they were happy with their achievement? There is a need for more research to fully sift out these relationships and their causes. Also as discussed previously this study suffers from social desirability and convenience sampling.
Recommendations

There are many stereotypes surrounding Christian-centered spirituality, with many of the doctrines considered antiquated and irrelevant. Additionally, Christianity’s claims to exclusivity conflicts with the ethos of postmodern academic institutions. Yet, despite the mounting tensions between academic structures and religious traditions, this study shows that spirituality does have an important impact on academic performance.

Academia can benefit from these findings by providing a safe and open-minded community where spiritual students can unapologetically practice their faith, by providing resources that enable the students to develop their spirituality even if the institution itself does not endorse a particular religion (e.g. providing access to Bible studies, building relationships with local clergyman and churches, providing more resources for faith-based organizations), by employing counselors that are trained to help students utilize their spirituality to promote positive mental health, by seeking out administrators, staff, and instructors that are cultural and religiously sensitive, and by incorporating diversity training that emphasizes religious sensitivity and the positive influences religion/spirituality plays in the academic realm.

Future research

Results show that there is at least some qualitative evidence to support the link between spirituality and academic performance; however, more research is needed to further elucidate these relationships. The sample size was relatively smalls and so it would be scientifically beneficial if a larger more diverse sample were used. Also, the DSES is adequate in explaining how people experience God, it is limited in explaining how people use this experience to cope with life’s hardships. Thus, other research might consider using other instruments to evaluate spirituality as a coping mechanism. Next, future research should consider the other motivators that may be applicable for the spiritually oriented. According to the current study, one of the
main academic motivators for Christian students is the desire to please God, and the desire to be an example. Might there be other motivators that work as well to encourage Christian students? In what other ways do Christian students experience and cope with stress? Lastly, submitting to God is a recurring construct throughout this research, but specifically how do people submit to God? Do students understand the difference between submitting to God and resignation? In conclusion, the Christian experience is a complex one that deserves careful study in that it can potentially reduce stress, promote academic achievement, and encourage optimal mental health.
REFERENCES


US Food and Drug Administration (2005) Take time to care.


Appendix A

Informed Consent

Dear Student,

My name is Crystal Cox, I am a graduate student in the Curriculum and Teaching Master's program. Currently, I am working on my Thesis which is about the relationship between stress, spirituality and academic performance. I would like to survey you in order to collect information on this topic and compare it to the data that already exists.

Please read this form and feel free to ask questions you may have before agreeing to participate in this research. Participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect your grades or your relationship with Bowling Green State University. If you feel you are unable to participate in this study for any reason do not sign the consent form. If you choose to participate you are free to withdraw at any time for any reason or to skip questions you are uncomfortable with.

If you agree to participate, after you have asked any questions concerning the study and signed this consent form, I will ask you to complete 2 questionnaires describing your religious background, perceived spirituality, and your current stress levels. I will also ask you some simple demographic questions such as your age, ethnicity, and year in school etc. Completion of these questionnaires will take approximately 15 minutes.

The study will benefit you by offering you the opportunity to reflect on your spiritual relationship and providing you with an outlet to examine school-related stress in a non-threatening environment. This study benefits you indirectly because it adds to the literature on academic achievement thus providing universities keys to understanding how to attract and retain students and how to help students reduce their stress. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study, however, even though this research will not be harmful to the average college student, there are some who from past negative experiences with religion that may feel stress from this survey. Should you experience such stress from participation in this study please contact the Bowling Green State University Counseling Center at 419-372-2081. The results will be kept confidential using a coding system; no personally-identifiable information will be reported. Only researchers will have access to the data. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

If you have questions regarding this study or would like additional information about participation please contact me at 410-522-8195 or coxc@bgsu.edu or contact my advisor Dr. Tracy Huziak-Clark by telephone at 419-372-7363 or thuziak@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716, hrsb@bgsu.edu should you have questions about participant rights.

Thanks you,

Crystal Cox

To indicate you voluntarily consent to participate in this study, print, and sign your name below.

Name (Please print)________________________________________________________

Signature________________________________________________________Date_______
Informed Consent

My name is Crystal Cox, I am a graduate student in the Curriculum and Teaching Master’s program. Currently I am working on my Thesis which is about the relationship between stress, spirituality and academic performance. I would like to interview you in order to collect information on this topic and compare it to the data that already exists.

Please read this form and feel free to ask questions you may have before agreeing to participate in this research. Participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect your grades or your relationship with Bowling Green State University. If you feel you are unable to participate in this study for any reason do not sign the consent form. If you choose to participate you are free to withdraw at any time for any reason or to skip questions you are uncomfortable with.

If you agree to participate, after you have asked any questions concerning the study and signed this consent form you will be asked to take part in a short interview. The interview will ask questions about your performance in school, how you cope with stress, and your relationship with God. This process will take about 40 minutes.

The study will benefit you by offering you the opportunity to reflect on your spiritual relationship and providing you with an outlet to discuss school related stress in a nonthreatening environment. This study benefits you indirectly because it adds to the literature on academic achievement thus providing universities keys to understanding how to attract and retain students and how to help students reduce their stress. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study; however, even though this research will not be harmful to the average college student, there are some who from past negative experiences with religion that may feel stress from this survey. Should you experience such stress from participation in this study please contact the Bowling Green State University Counseling Center at 419-372-2081. The results will be kept confidential using a coding system; no personally-identifiable information will be reported. Only researchers will have access to the data. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

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Thank you,

Crystal Cox

To indicate you voluntarily consent to participate in this study, print, and sign your name below.

Name (Please print) ____________________________________________________________

Signature __________________________________________________________ Date ________
Appendix B

Background Information Survey

1. Age_______

2. Classification:  Freshman_______  Sophomore_______  Junior______  Senior_______

3. Cumulative GPA________

4. Gender :  Male_____  Female_______

5. Ethnicity (circle as many as apply)
   White
   Black
   Asian
   Hispanic
   Native American

6. Students work status.
   A. Unemployed
   B. Working full-time
   C. Working part-time off campus
   D. Working part-time on campus

7. What is your religious denomination?

8. How important is religion in your life?
   A. Not important
   B. A little important
   C. Pretty important
   D. Very important

9. When growing up how often did you participate in religious activities?
   A. More than once a week
   B. About once a week
   C. A few times a month
10. Currently, how often do you participate in religious activities?
   A. More than once a week
   B. About once a week
   C. A few times a month
   D. A few times a year
   E. Rarely or never

11. How much social support do you receive from the place of worship/religious activities that you attend?
   A. I don’t attend
   B. No support
   C. A little support
   D. Some support
   E. A lot of support

12) In general I feel mostly positive towards my academic performance? True or False

13) In general I am satisfied with the grades that I make in school? True or False

14) How would you describe your current stress levels?
   A. Very High
   B. High
   C. Low
   D. Very Low

15) Do you feel you have what you need to cope with your stress? Yes/No

16) How often do you get stress out?
   Never
   Almost never
   Sometimes
   Frequently
### Appendix C

**The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale**

You may experience the following in your daily life. If so, circle the number that indicates how often you feel that way?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Many times a day</th>
<th>Everyday</th>
<th>Most days</th>
<th>Some days</th>
<th>Once in a while</th>
<th>Never or almost never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I feel God’s presence.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I experience a connection to all of life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. During worship, or at other times when connecting with God, I feel joy which lifts me out of my daily concerns.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I find strength in my religion or spirituality.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I find comfort in my religion or spirituality.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I feel deep inner peace or harmony.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I ask for God’s help in the midst of daily activities.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel God’s love for me, directly.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I feel God’s love for me, through others.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.

12. I feel thankful for my blessings.

13. I feel a selfless caring for others.

14. I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong.

15. I desire to be closer to God or in union with Him.

16. In general, how close do you feel to God?
Appendix D

Interview Questions

1) How do you define spirituality? What does it mean to you?

2) How would you describe your level of spirituality?

3) Please describe your Christian experience. When did you become a Christian? Why?

4) How would you describe your academic performance?

5) What kind of impact has your spirituality had on your life? On your academic performance?

6) Describe some of your daily spiritual activities. Why do you engage in them? How do they help you?

7) How do you tend to deal with stressful situations in life?

8) Tell me about a stressful time in your academic life.

9) How did your relationship with God help you through this situation? Are there any others you can share?

10) Do you feel that being spiritual helps you perform better in school? Why or why not?

11) Do you tend to turn to your relationship with God first when stressful things happen? Why or why not?

12) Does your spirituality ever cause you stress? What negative aspects might there be to being deeply spiritual, e.g. guilt, restrictions?

13) Is there anything else about your relationship with God that you feel is valuable, but that we might not have covered?
## Appendix E

Table #1 Description of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Freshman</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>54.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
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<td>0.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>74.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Race</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>35.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>64</td>
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### Appendix F

**Table #2 Results of the Correlation Analysis**

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<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>16</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1. age the age of the participant</td>
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<td>-2.26</td>
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<td>-0.96</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.357</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.159</td>
<td>0.131</td>
<td>0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. gender gender or participant</td>
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<td>-0.56</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-0.060</td>
<td>-0.073</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>-0.249</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.295</td>
<td><strong>0.068</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. ethnicity ethnicity of participant</td>
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<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.159</td>
<td>0.131</td>
<td>0.102</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>0.106</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. GPA cumulative GPA</td>
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<td>0.325</td>
<td>0.731</td>
<td><strong>0.617</strong></td>
<td>0.116</td>
<td>0.041</td>
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<td>-0.130</td>
<td>0.180</td>
<td>0.776**</td>
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<td>5. work student work status</td>
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<td>-1.01</td>
<td>0.111</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>-0.096</td>
<td>-0.231</td>
<td>-0.074</td>
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<td>6. Religion religious denomination</td>
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<td>7. Relig Important how important is religion in your life</td>
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<td>0.212</td>
<td>0.269</td>
<td>0.137</td>
<td>0.188</td>
<td>-0.125</td>
<td>0.114</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.277**</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Religious Youth when growing up how often did you go to church</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.693**</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>-0.116</td>
<td>0.094</td>
<td>-0.103</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>0.616**</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Religious Current currently how often do you participate in religious activities,</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.144</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>-0.149</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.598**</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Social Support how much social support do you receive from the place of worship/religious activity you attend</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.571**</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>0.148</td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>0.136</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Academic Performance in general i feel mostly positively towards my academic performance</td>
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<td>-0.043</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.085</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Grades Satisfy in general I am satisfied with the grades I make in school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-0.204</td>
<td>-0.497**</td>
<td>0.019</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Stress how would you describe your current stress level</td>
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<td>0.256</td>
<td>-0.180</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Cope do you feel you have what you need to cope with your stress</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.093</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Stressed Out how often do you get stressed out</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Spirituality</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Appendix G

Table #3: Regression Results Showing the Variables that Predict Higher GPA

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td>(.820)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Denomination</td>
<td>.532</td>
<td>(.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Youth (How often attend church growing up)</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td>(.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Current (How often currently attend church)</td>
<td>.726</td>
<td>(.055)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality (DSES)</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>(.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.271</td>
<td>(.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.940</td>
<td>(.120)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>.424</td>
<td>(.039)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support (How much social support receive from church)</td>
<td>.377</td>
<td>(.047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Satisfaction</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td>(.124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressed Out (How often get stressed out)</td>
<td>.555</td>
<td>(.082)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cope (do you have what you need to cope with stress)</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>(.156)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R Squared</td>
<td>.344</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Observations</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors are reported in parentheses. **, *** indicates significance at the 95% and 99% level, respectively.