THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL QUESTIONING AMONG SELECT UNDERGRADUATES AT A MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY: CONSTRUCTIONS, CONDITIONS, AND CONSEQUENCES

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2012

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ABSTRACT

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This study explored the constructions of spiritual questions in the lives of undergraduates at a Midwestern University, with regard to the nature of the spiritual questions they construct during the college experience; the sources, motivating forces, and factors that trigger their materialization; circumstances and contexts that influence the spiritual questioning process; how such questions relate to and impact the various aspects of their lives; any associated effects and outcomes of these queries being asked; and how such questions align with a range of potential identifiers.

Employing the emergent methods of constructivist inquiry, this qualitative study included a sequence of two semi-structured interviews with each of sixteen undergraduate students who represented a wide variety of ethnicities, nationalities, college levels and majors, and religious, spiritual, and secular traditions. A subsequent iterative analysis of interview transcriptions and observation notes allowed for the categorizing and organization of themes, first within individual participant cases and then across all cases. Reports were generated for each participant and then aggregated to form a general construction of the problem in response to the research probes.

More than 900 spiritual queries emerged during the study and were arranged within a grounded framework of eighteen different topical groups across six broad categories and twenty-three distinct question types within four larger classifications. Moreover, eleven major conditions for these students’ spiritual concerns were identified, including thirty sub-categories
of circumstances and contexts that influenced their spiritual questioning process. Furthermore, participants reported numerous consequences of their spiritual questions which were grouped into five major categories and nineteen sub-categories.

This study extended previous inventories of such questions, provided additional depth and detail, and added clarity to the religious, spiritual, and secular storylines of a select group of contemporary college students. In doing so, the data yielded implications for scholars and practitioners alike, especially in regards to the nature of the spiritual questions themselves, the associated conditions and consequences of such queries, and the intersectionality of personal descriptors. The study concluded with recommendations for campus-based practice and for future research, incorporating suggestions for more effective strategies and additional methodologies.
To my parents, Dennis and Sandy Brown,

who made the possibility of a college education a reality;

    to Dr. Carney Strange,

my advisor, colleague, and friend,

who encouraged me to combine my practice with scholarship

    by personally challenging me to pursue a Ph.D.;

    to Lauren, Justin, Logan, Ethan, and Jameson Brown,

who sacrificed time with their dad as he pursued this dream;

    and to Teresa Brown,

who has been the wind beneath my wings these past twenty years.

    Thank you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a mentor and life coach on campus, I often tell students, “You are a product of those closest to you.” This has definitely been the case for me. When I think of these past four years and this tumultuous and painstaking journey in pursuit of a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration, I am certain that I would not have achieved this grand goal without the support and encouragement of so many special people.

I will never forget the formative conversation with Dr. Carney Strange in the student union that got this ball rolling. Carney, the seed you planted in the soil of my life on that significant afternoon has now sprouted and borne fruit. Thank you for seeing the potential in me and inviting me to enroll in the doctoral program. Serving as my advisor throughout coursework, preliminary examinations, and this dissertation, you have inspired me to accomplish more than I would have ever imagined. You have always been available and accessible to me both professionally and personally. I am grateful to you for demonstrating the perfect balance of challenge and support. It is my privilege to call you a mentor and friend.

Furthermore, I want to thank my committee members: Dr. Dafina Lazarus Stewart, Dr. Michael Coomes, and Dr. Bruce Edwards. I do not take for granted the many hours that were required to examine and evaluate these hundreds of pages of text. I appreciate your investment in me and this important research. Each of you, in your own unique ways, has pushed me to be a better scholar and practitioner. It is an honor to have your signatures ascribed to this manuscript.

There were several others associated with the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at BGSU who contributed to this final product. While the faculty and students in
the program were a constant source of encouragement to me, there are five individuals who are worthy of special commendation. Keith O’Neill and Dr. Julie Snyder, I appreciated your willingness to field my endless questions about the program as I was initially deciding whether or not to take the big leap into doctoral work. Dr. Jeff Kegolis, thank you for volunteering to be my HIED Guide during my first year in the doctoral program and for your persistent reminder to “Be good.” I was wet behind the ears, so the availability, wise advice, and persistent kindness of these three colleagues infused me with courage when I was prone to insecurity and fear. Dr. Maureen Wilson, exemplifying the heart of a true servant leader, spent an afternoon with me and tutored me in the tricks of great formatting. Maureen, it has been a pleasure working for and with you. Moreover, special thanks to Jacob Clemens, who served as my peer debriefer throughout this entire process. I am grateful not only for your keen eye and honest feedback about my transcripts and case reports, but for your friendship as well.

To the sixteen undergraduate students who agreed to participate in this study, I am truly honored that you chose to entrust me with pieces and parts of your personal stories. My own spiritual journey has been enriched by each of your spiritual questioning processes and the fascinating spiritual questions that you voiced and thus, contributed to this important research. More importantly, I cannot wait to introduce your narratives to a much larger audience in the years to come, so that others might come to appreciate you as well.

For my friends and relatives from around the country, thank you for checking in with me every so often to make sure that I was taking care of myself and not forgetting my most important priorities in the face of urgent deadlines. Most particularly, I want to thank my campus ministry colleagues who enthusiastically supported my transition into the academy. To
Peggy, Keith, Todd, Grant, Nancy, and Ann: Thank you for trusting me and giving me the freedom to embark on this unconventional path. To Steve and Amy: I am well aware of the toll that my absence has made on the staff team. You have never complained, but have been two of my greatest cheerleaders throughout the twists and turns in my personal and professional journey. There are no words to express my gratitude for such selflessness.

Lauren, Justin, Logan, Ethan, and Jameson: Thank you for sharing your father with the rest of the world! You have made many sacrifices throughout this process, particularly when I slipped away yet again to the campus library for late-night and weekend writing sessions. While I have many aspirations for my life, please know that none of these dreams and goals is more important than each of you. My most fervent prayer is that it might be said of me at the end of my life, “He was a great Dad!” I love each of you so very much!

Finally and most importantly, to my cherished wife, partner, and companion, of more than 20 years, Teresa Devroe Brown. Sweetheart, stated quite simply: I could have never accomplished this great feat without you at my side! You are the glue that holds this family together and I cannot even imagine doing life without you. Your constant and caring presence has been my strength for the past two decades. I love you with all of my heart!
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

College Student Growth and Development

The college experience is situated in a highly formative environment, replete with opportunities for learning, maturation, and development. The notion that traditionally-aged college students (between 18 and 24 years of age) undergo considerable change during these years has been well established in the research literature over the past several decades. For many students, this period of time is often associated with the pursuit of independence, the testing of boundaries, a reorientation in regards to authority figures, the challenges of time management and academic requirements, and an anticipation of a new beginning and a brighter future. Moreover, college students often find themselves approaching a series of developmental processes during these particular years that are often described through the lens of student development theory. Such theories address dimensions of personal identity, interpersonal relationships, intellectual development, the framing and interpretation of experiences, intrinsic personality characteristics, learning style and information processing, and decision making, and can be categorized into three groupings: psychosocial, typological, and cognitive-structural (Strange, 2004), “each stream of thought contributing significantly to an understanding of the processes of human development and maturation during the college years” (p. 49). The psychosocial theories tend to highlight the personal and interpersonal facets of life. The typological theory family includes such matters as personality distinctions and learning preferences. The cognitive-structural realm focuses on the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge and its synthesis into life experiences. Notably, colleges and
universities are well positioned to assist students in these complex and interconnected realms during what are important transitional years for many.

If higher education institutions, educators, and practitioners are to succeed in encouraging these various processes of development in the lives of their respective students, they need to be well-versed in the possible, probable, and even preferable changes in students’ lives (Parker, Widick, & Knefelkamp, 1978). Indeed, a comprehensive understanding of college student developmental processes in each of the three primary theory families can inform effective practice, policies, and pedagogy. For example, a working knowledge of how Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) psychosocial vectors address areas such as students’ movement through autonomy toward interdependence and interconnectedness to others might inform the design of campus space to encourage healthy peer interactions and the kinds of programming initiatives that promote dialogues of difference within residence halls. Similarly, other psychosocial models focusing on specific aspects of personal identity, such as race and ethnicity (e.g., Cross, 1991; Hardiman & Jackson, 1992; Helms, 1993; Phinney, 1990; Torres, 2003) and gender and sexual orientation (e.g., Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Davis, 2002; Fassinger, 1998; Josselson, 1987), might also be helpful in guiding purpose and design of various student experiences. Collectively, these and other psychosocial theories study the personal dimensions of individuals’ lives, with a deliberate focus on emerging identity development in relationship to others (Evans, 2003). Thus, as students change and grow, the manner in which they perceive themselves and comprehend their surroundings, evolves along somewhat predictable paths of understanding.
Typological theories also make a noteworthy contribution to both understanding and praxis. This second family of theories facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the “innate differences in mental functioning . . . that appear in many aspects of life, such as how people take in and process information, how they learn, and the types of activities that interest them” (Evans, 2003, p. 194). These highly individualized systems of internal psychological processing then seem to affect the other more observable arenas of personality characteristics (Myers, 1980), learning styles (Kolb, 1984), and vocational inclinations and career aspirations (Holland, 1985; 1992). Students differ on these dimensions, and as such they “are important to consider since they influence how students react to their environments and develop cognitively, interpersonally, and intrapersonally” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 33). Even though these typological theories map differences that are presumed to be more static than progressive, student development occurs perhaps when an individual evolves from a point of ambiguity to a position of clarity or expands to include alternative approaches. Furthermore, arriving at a point of self-awareness both enlightens and empowers the student to proceed more confidently through life in a variety of circumstances, and be more equipped to understand and adapt to other people’s preferences with skill, sensitivity, and savvy.

Rounding out these frameworks of college student growth are the cognitive-structural models that focus broadly on how individuals make sense of the world, and specifically on their intellectual development and consequent interpretation of experiences. Rooted in Piaget’s (1932; 1977) earlier research, this group of theories explains “how people think, reason, and make meaning of their experiences” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 124). As applied to the college experience, these theories chart a progression of increasingly complex
intellectual and interpretative capacities as students encounter and reflect upon the world around them. Accordingly, the college experience has been shown to stimulate intellectual and ethical maturation (Perry, 1968), ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), reflective judgment (King & Kitchener, 1994), epistemological reflection (Baxter Magolda, 1992) and moral reasoning pertaining to justice (Kohlberg, 1969) and care (Gilligan, 1982). Distinct from psychosocial and typological models, though, these stage theories purport that cognitive development takes place in a predictable and progressive hierarchical fashion as critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, and application of ideas become more complex. Moreover, subsequent levels of cognitive sophistication are achieved as students begin to both acknowledge and appreciate a multiplicity of perspectives from diverse sources of truth.

In regards to the developmental dynamics that include but are not limited to the aforementioned psychosocial, typological, and cognitive dimensions of life, it must be noted, however, that young adults who find themselves in a dynamic post-secondary educational context have not yet fully matured in all of these realms. Furthermore, they must do so within a context of the ordinary age-driven (Levinson, 1978) and event-centered (Schlossberg, 1981) life transition that usually includes distance from home, decreased exposure from longstanding authority figures, the creation of new relationships and support structures, an increase in academic expectations, and exposure to a diversity of people and perspectives. The intersection of all of these factors often prompts students to reexamine their beliefs, life structures, and value systems. Throughout such challenging experiences, and in conjunction with an immersion into a variety of campus environments, students find themselves wrestling with questions of meaning making that lie at the base of many changes. Some of these typical
questions are quite ordinary, such as: Will I succeed in college? Which student organizations
will I join? or What kinds of friendships will I pursue? However, other questions appear to be
much more extraordinary and fundamental in nature, such as: What do I believe to be true
about a higher being? What do I think about an afterlife? Or, why is there so much suffering in
the world? While the former are tended to by any number of the aforementioned theories,
these latter questions seem to transcend students’ immediate experience, are best labeled
“spiritual,” and are explained more effectively by models of spiritual development. Particularly
as students experience the challenges inherent in each of the three arenas of development, it is
these ineffable questions of an ultimate kind that bring attention to a seemingly mysterious
facet of the meaning making process that is increasingly highlighted in the evolving literature
on the spirituality of college students. Such literature not only highlights the extensity of this
phenomenon on college campuses, but it also seeks to provide conceptual models for
explaining emerging research on what is known as the spiritual dimensions of college student
development.

Spiritual Dimensions of College Student Development

Over the past five decades, higher education scholars and practitioners have mapped
out various forms, stages, and sequences through which students traverse as they reflect upon
and address spiritual questions in their own lives. Understanding how young adults in an
undergraduate college context approach such questions is the focus of researchers like Fowler
(1981), Parks (1986; 2000), Nash (2001), and most recently Small (2007), as they have sought to
explicate both the process of students composing meaning in this realm and the compositions
they construct.
The work of James Fowler (1981) is seminal to understanding the progression by which human beings develop in their construction and adherence to matters of faith and spirituality. Building upon the earlier work of Piaget (1932; 1977) and Kohlberg (1969), in addition to the psychosocial suppositions of Erikson (1963) and Levinson (1978), Fowler articulated a Stages of Faith Theory (SFT), purported to examine the human phenomenon of the composing of faith as a function of age, but independent of specific religious narratives or interpretations. In doing so, he described seven “characteristic patterns of knowing, reasoning, and adapting” (Fowler, 1981, p. 90), which progress from an “undifferentiated faith” (p. 121) situated in the first 24 months of life, through “mythical-literal” (p. 135), “synthetic-conventional” (p. 161), “individuative-reflective” (p. 174), and “conjunctive” (p. 184) faiths in subsequent periods, as development ensues toward the most advanced stage of “universalizing faith” (p. 202).

According to Fowler’s model, this is an unceasing recursive meaning-making and value-driven process that occurs over time as an individual is shaped by an expanding and escalating faith life, offering at each stage a particular and characteristic composition of meaning in response to matters of faith and spirituality.

A protégé of Fowler, Parks (2000) focused not only on the composing or “faithing” process, but also on the contexts within which faith is developed, strengthened, and tested. Anchored in Perry’s (1968) theory of intellectual development, Parks (1986) articulated this faithing process in terms of “three discrete strands of development: form of cognition, form of dependence, and form of community” (p. 43). The ongoing exercise of cognitive reflection, through varying degrees of dependence, moves the individual forward in the composing process of a maturing faith. Moreover, Parks (2000) posited that it is the larger community of
cojourners in the spiritual questioning process that is most responsible for providing the “recognition, support, challenge, and inspiration” (p. 134) that heightens each individual’s personal expedition into knowing, understanding, and applying. Accordingly, it is during the young adult years in particular, when students engage in the ongoing task of composing meaning and experience concomitant forms of dependence and community, that they evolve from an authority-bound, dualistic, codependent, and conventional posture to a more relativistic, interdependent, open-minded, and committed station of faith.

Much like the stages in Fowler’s model, each posture achieved in Park’s framework constitutes a distinct intact composition of how one constructs the world in the most comprehensive terms. For example, composing as viewed through Fowler’s (1981) third synthetic-conventional faith stage, begins with the “implicit clash or contradictions in stories” (p. 150), when literalism begins to dissolve, accompanied by a certain questioning and disillusionment with authorities. This is the point at which most traditionally-aged students enter college, when “formal operational thinking” emerges, “bringing with it the ability to reflect upon one’s thinking” (p. 152), and a tendency to conform to one’s closest peers. Similarly, Parks (2000) identified a stage of “probing commitments,” when one “explores many possible forms of truth – as well as work roles, relationships, and lifestyles – and their fittingness to one’s own experience of self and world” (p. 67). It is also a time when commitments are developed on “the other side of the encounter with the relativized character of self and world” (p. 67), signaling a progression of faith especially relevant to the college experience, as it “offers a network of belonging in which young adults feel recognized as who
they really are and as who they are becoming . . .,” including both their “emerging strength and . . . distinctive vulnerability . . .” (Parks, 2000, p. 95).

Another approach to examining the domain of spirituality among college students is found in the form of Nash’s (2001b) religio-spiritual narratives, or personal stories that “help us understand our history, shape our destiny, develop a moral imagination, and give us something worth living and dying for” (p. 60). Such stories reflect the recollected accounts and perceived interpretations of personal experiences, and often give potent clues into the spiritual dimensions of students’ lives. Furthermore, Nash (2001b) suggested that storytelling facilitates the composing process of understanding self, others, and the larger world and is essential to the development of a self-identity. He averred that as one “find(s) the stories, you find the person. Find the person, and you find a particular take on religious truth” (Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008, p. 95).

Nash (2001b) depicted six religio-spiritual narratives that function as distinct compositions of faith. Focused less on “the content of specific religions and spiritualities and more about personal journeys and discoveries” (Nash, 2001b, p. 64), three mainstream narratives – orthodoxy, wounded belief, and mainline, and three alternative narratives – activism, exploration, and secular humanism, comprise categories of religious and spiritual stories reflective of a range of college students. For example, Nash’s (2001b) “wounded believer” story includes experiences of religious injury or abuse at the hands of authority figures. Often angry, fearful, or disillusioned, many of these spiritual seekers tend to be “gravely suspicious of organized religions and its official hierarchies,” having been profoundly damaged by “abuse that authority figures of one kind or another have imposed upon them,
[and they] want desperately to understand what might have gone wrong in the religions of their youth” (Nash, 2001b, p. 76). In contrast, the core of Nash’s (2001b) “orthodoxy” narrative, regardless of ideological or theological persuasion, is the principle that “Truth is unimpeachable, absolute, and final” (p. 71). Although proponents of this narrative might have compassion for wounded believers and contempt for any damage that was inflicted upon them, they would never question the character of their Supreme Being or the fundamental tenets subscribed to within their faith. These two, in concert with the other four narratives, are helpful in articulating some aspects of the individual spiritual journeys of many students during the college years. By implication, though, such stories also bring attention to the reality of student engagement with increasingly diverse spiritual questions in recent years, reflective of a continuing religious and spiritual demographic shift among students.

While the dominant religio-spiritual belief system in the United States remains Judeo-Christian (Nash, 2001a; 2001b), new scholars in the field are preparing for an influx of non-Western beliefs on American campuses and are focusing their attention accordingly. For example, in her study of the faith development of non-Christians, Small (2007) has begun to examine a more religiously and spiritually diverse pool of college students. In parting from the study of the “development trajectories” of predominantly White Protestant and Catholics “historically dominant religious groups” (Small, 2007, p. 2) featured in Fowler (1981) and Parks (1986; 2000), Small has focused her work on the purported 26% of students at four-year colleges who now self-identify as adherents to non-Christian religions or no religion at all. While respectively taking issue with Fowler’s claim to a theory that transcends other religious and even secular ideologies, Small has pursued “cross-cultural faith development research . . .
with the intent to develop a better understanding in general of religiously diverse groups” (p. 3), specifically as it pertains to Jews, Muslims, and Atheists. By way of illustration, Small (2007) consulted the work of scholars more familiar with Jewish observances, passages, values, and beliefs, and suggested several modifications of Fowler’s stages for purposes of accommodating these new forms and contexts. Thus, for Fowler’s (1981) aforementioned synthetic-conventional faith stage, she distinguished between Christian teenagers and Atheist adolescents who might reject such a belief or the existence of supernatural or mystical realities of any sort. This is but one of many examples of how different traditions potentially shape the spiritual and religious realities of college students.

In addition to the above line of inquiry focusing on various developmental progressions of student spirituality, important and intensive research in recent years has also substantiated the extensity of this phenomenon in students’ lives, documenting the fact that four in five university students have an interest in spiritual matters, and almost half of them are in pursuit of practical ways to grow spiritually (Astin & Astin, 2004b). Clearly, there is a growing wave of spiritual and religious interest among today’s college students (Astin & Astin, 2004b; Lindholm, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), a phenomenon that has caught the attention of higher education researchers. In 2003, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) initiated one of the most comprehensive studies of the spiritual lives of university students, and the findings were extraordinary (Astin & Astin, 2004b). In this multi-year research project involving more than 112,000 students and including a national sample of 236 colleges and universities, data revealed that “today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement . . . and that many are engaged in a
spiritual quest and are exploring the meaning and purpose of life” (Astin & Astin, 2004b, p. 3). The strength of these findings has provided the impetus for additional complementary initiatives, most notably the inauguration of the *National Institute on Spirituality in Higher Education*, in November of 2006, as a forum to discuss the implications of this line of research. It is fair to report that while the distinguished scholars and higher education practitioners who attended this event espoused a variety of interpretations of the data, they nonetheless concurred that spirituality as a curricular and co-curricular component within the auspices of higher education warrants further consideration (Bryant & Schwartz, 2006). Furthermore, HERI has commissioned an ongoing multi-institutional and longitudinal study (Astin & Astin, 2004b; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011) that seeks to identify trends, patterns, practices, and principles of spirituality and religiousness among students, particularly as they pertain to a range of questions: (a) How many college students are actually on a spiritual quest and inquisitive about spiritual issues?; (b) How do students self-identify in terms of their own spirituality?; (c) What spiritual or religious activities are most familiar, attractive, and practiced by these students?; (d) What effect do these practices have on academic success and personal development during college?; (e) What is the relationship between traditional religious practices and spiritual development?; and (f) What about the undergraduate college experience contributes or obstructs students’ spiritual or religious pursuits?

From this and other research, it seems clear that college students are increasingly engaged in spiritual matters of all kinds and are eager for engagement with important questions of a spiritual nature. After all, they are at their core spiritual beings (Nash, 2001a & 2001b; Pargament, 2007; Parks, 2000), and there are many reasons for this high level of
spiritual interest and involvement among contemporary university students. But most notably, college is a time to pose big questions, when young adults in particular examine their relationships, identity, and calling in the midst of college environments designed with the questioning process at their core. Searching and questioning are fundamental activities associated with this life transition, often including a shift of authority from older and more traditional mentors to close friends and confidants, as well as an increasing commitment to independent decision-making. The college years’ transition finds students dissembling their belief systems and wrestling with new questions about such matters that might have never been previously considered, resulting in the creation of new ways of thinking.

Purpose of the Study

In summary, the spiritual dimensions of college students warrant a continued robust research agenda that examines the causes, contexts, and compositions of students’ meaning making as they construct and reconstruct spiritual questions in their lives. Young adults in their late teens and early 20s are increasingly looking to spirituality as one of the tools for making sense of their lives. Although surprising to some researchers, given the self-centeredness, suspicion of spiritual authorities and structures, rejection of boundaries, and strong appetite for autonomy typical of this age group, compelling evidence suggests that young adults in the college years continue to tap into their spiritual core and explore the transcendent realms of life as they progress in their developmental journeys, especially as they advance through the challenges of the college experience. What is missing in this literature is an explicit and comprehensive understanding of the spiritual questions students pose in the course of their journeys. What are these questions from the student’s point of view and in their own words?
This study explored the constructions, conditions, and consequences of spiritual questions in the lives of undergraduate university students, within the following fourfold framework: the nature of spiritual questions students construct; how such questions relate to the various areas of their lives; the sources and motivations for these questions; and factors that influence such a questioning process. This study also examined how such constructions align with a range of potential identifiers, such as undergraduate college level and age, major or course of study, gender, race/ethnicity, or religious background and tradition? In doing so, it adds to the growing body of research on the spiritual dimensions of college student development and through exploration of these points and related issues, extends the knowledge base on the spiritual lives of college students in particular.

Significance of the Study

Pursuing the constructions, causes, and categories of students’ spiritual questions is an important and timely research initiative that cannot be ignored. Indeed the conversation on spirituality’s connection to college student learning, growth, and development has gained considerable traction and momentum in more recent years within the academy. Scholars and researchers have noted the importance of this general topic for many years, substantiating that spirituality is an important facet throughout the various seasons of people’s lives (Pargament, 2007). This study expands this knowledge base in regards to college student development in general, while addressing the spiritual dimensions of students in particular.

Furthermore, this line of inquiry better equips scholars and practitioners to both identify and accommodate spiritual questions in the lives of students. To do otherwise is to ignore an important dimension of college student growth, in as much as the preparation of globally-
minded graduates entails an understanding of the dynamics of interfaith spirituality and the nature of students’ spiritual beliefs, perspectives, and questions. Additionally, with the recent call for the creation and implementation of new spiritually-related initiatives in both curricular and co-curricular domains at many institutions, a depth of understanding of the spiritual questions on students’ minds and hearts provides an indispensable tool for higher educational administrators and practitioners.

Finally, since student success is at the heart of the post-secondary educational experience, it seems obvious that a broad understanding of and appreciation for the spiritual dimensions of student development is crucial to higher education professionals, since these dimensions often contribute to their sense of purpose and direction in life. In addition, it can only better serve the higher education community to have more comprehensive data at its disposal in regards to such concerns. Both exciting and perhaps unexpected by enrollment management experts, spiritually inquisitive students are stepping onto our nation’s college campuses in record numbers. Consequently, in light of the recruitment and retention challenges that institutions face, higher education professionals must not only provide space for these individuals, but learn as much as possible about this growing demographic, including students’ approach to spiritual concerns. The present study attended to this important dimension of a select group of undergraduates for purposes of addressing this perceived shortcoming in the extant literature.

The next two chapters review, trace, and summarize relevant literature that informed the research questions of this study and describe the methods by which data were generated in response to the study’s goals. Situating the aims of this study within the current body of
relevant literature not only demonstrated further the significance and importance of this research topic, but also exhibited the need to explore specific issues not previously examined.
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Young adults, and college students in particular, attempt to make sense of the external and internal changes and transitions that are expected in this stage of life. Inevitably, they explore, question, and ultimately evaluate their beliefs and values in their quest for meaning and hopes of interpreting their experiences. Through an exploration of the models of college student development, and with an explicit focus on the spiritual dimensions of this development, the present study is informed by the literature on the processes of spiritual development in general, evidence of its role in the college experience, and the nature of the spiritual questions that accompany and potentially fuel students’ spiritual search.

A review of relevant literature generated several threads that framed the context for this study. Consideration is given first to general notions of spiritual development within individuals of all ages, how each person’s meaning making journey describes and shapes an understanding of life and experiences, with special attention given to the numerous and diverse attempts to define the notion of spirituality. Then, highlighting this emerging trend within the college experience, special consideration is given to the spiritual dimensions of college student development, as interpreted and analyzed through proposed stages, forms, narratives, and faith trajectories. Finally, literature on the extensity of the growing phenomenon of spirituality on the college campus will be explored, particularly in understanding what contributions, if any, the college experience makes to the spiritual growth of students. Recent outcomes literature will highlight the effects of college on students’ spiritual development, and the chapter concludes with the kinds of spiritual questions thus far identified in the lives of college students.
Definitions of Spirituality

Some scholars note that spirituality is fundamental to being human (Albright & Ashbrook, 2001; Buttery & Roberson, 2005; Fowler, 1981; Nash, 2001b; Parks, 2000; Shahjahan, 2005; Speck, 2005), a tool by which people make meaning of the world around them (Tisdell, 2001), a motivating force for making a positive contribution in the world (Zohar & Marshall, 2004), and an integral part of the ordinary lives of people (Pargament, 2007). This might be true for those who adhere to more traditional religious belief systems, but also for those individuals and communities who might express their spirituality in less conventional ways (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken & Echols, 2006). Even those who would self-identify as seekers or skeptics, agnostics or atheists, or even the growing bloc of spiritual scoffers who might be offended by the idea of any supernatural otherness beyond the human experience are exhibiting spiritual qualities within their own unique categories of understanding (Nash, 2001b). Fowler (1981) employed the notion of “faith” as a substitute for a non-religious spirituality and distinguished from “belief or religion” as the “most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence . . . a generic, universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief” (p. 14).

There is arguably a difference between religion and spirituality (Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000), and a variety of notions have informed this distinction (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Spirituality, in its broadest interpretation, is humanity’s sacred sense of identity, purpose, and calling, as expressed in various aspirations, passions, beliefs, and values, whereas religion is a “corporate and public . . . doctrinal and
traditional” system that is shaped by an “institutional set of beliefs, values, and practices, based on the teachings of a spiritual leader or sect” (Nash, 2001b, p. 25). Peteet (1994) expressed the difference in this manner: religiousness as expressing “commitments to beliefs and practices characteristic of particular traditions” and spirituality as apprehending “the human condition in a larger and or transcendent context . . . therefore concerned with the meaning and purpose of life and with unseen realities, such as one’s relationship to a supreme being” (p. 237). Love (2001) wrote of religion as a “shared system of beliefs, principles, or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe” (p. 8), while failing to define spirituality in the same article entitled, “Spirituality and Student Development: Theoretical Connections.” Instead, Love (2001) referred the reader to Parks (2000) and other theorists.

Sheldrake (1992) explained that the ongoing tension between religion and spirituality is fed by the combination of human understanding and shifting historical-cultural norms that together shape individuals’ perceptions and interpretations of the sacred. Furthermore, this distinction between religion and spirituality is observed among college students, as well, in that “spirituality can stand apart from religion, leading some individuals to classify themselves as spiritual, but not religious” (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003, p. 724). In another study, students differentiated between religion and spirituality, describing spirituality as “an inner private process” and religion “an outward public practice in a particular community of belief” (Rogers & Love, 2007, p. 701). Nash (2001a) took issue with the deliberate separation of the two terms, so he “intentionally combine(s) the two words ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ in my teaching because, in spite of students’ widespread popular disdain for the former and their near
unanimous approval for the latter, I believe the two terms represent two closely related perspectives” (p. 4). Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) concurred that, while spirituality is a topic of renewed interest in recent years, important discussions concerning the notable similarities and differences between spirituality and religiousness have been sidelined and skewed: “traditionally broad and balanced characterizations of religiousness and spirituality are giving way to narrower and more polarized depictions, and in the process, this area of inquiry is losing its focus” (p. 897). Pargament (1999) agreed that the disregard of “institutional” religion in favor of a more “personal” spirituality within an increasing individualistic and isolated culture devalues religion’s intrinsic and inseparable connection to spiritual substance and motivations. Furthermore,

spirituality is the heart and soul of religion, and religion’s most central function.

Spirituality has to do with the paths people take in their efforts to find, conserve, and transform the sacred in their lives. Whereas religion encompasses the search for many sacred and nonsacred objects of significance, spirituality focuses specifically and directly on the search for the sacred. (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999)

Clearly, definitions and descriptions of spirituality in particular abound in the literature. Palmer (2002) believed that spirituality is about “our ultimate understanding about what is real in our lives” (para. 8) and includes the exploration of the larger questions of life. Parks (2000) accentuated this idea by positing that such spiritual questions are a byproduct of “longing for ways of speaking of the human experience of depth, meaning, mystery, moral purpose, transcendence, wholeness, intuition, vulnerability, courage, the capacity to love, and the apprehension of spirit (or Spirit) as the animating essence of the core of life” (p. 16). Astin
(2004) joined the conversation when he described spirituality as “the values that we hold most
dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here . . .
and our sense of connectedness to each other and the world around us . . . [as well as] such
things as intuition, inspiration, the mysterious, and the mystical” (p. 34). Additionally, Astin
(2004) also included the notion of “our interiors” when writing about spiritual matters, in
contrast to the outward and objective places of models and measurement, or rationality and
reason. Strange (2000) understood “spirituality as an ongoing process of meaning making
about the whole of life and its relationship to ultimate purposes” (para. 5). Nash (2001b)
emphasized that spirituality highlights the “vital principle or animating force within all living
beings, the ‘breath of life’ that is incorporeal, the force that makes us truly who we are” (p. 25).
Similarly, from a cultural indigenous perspective, Paris (1995) defined the spirituality of people
as the “animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for
individual and collective experiences” (p. 22).

Lindholm and Astin (2008) acknowledged that there are numerous definitions of
spirituality interspersed throughout higher education literature, but also concurred that there
are certain themes that continue to emerge, such as “seeking personal authenticity,
genuineness, and wholeness; transcending one’s locus of centricity; developing a greater sense
of connectedness to self and others through relationships and community; deriving meaning,
purpose, and direction in life; being open to exploring a relationship with a higher power that
transcends human experience and human knowing” (p. 185). Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, and
Echols (2006) posited that when conceptualized through college students’ viewpoints, the
notion of spirituality is often connected to the ideas of “journey or quest that takes them
inward into the unknown, unexamined regions of their inner lives . . . a journey of introspection and reflection that students sometimes take alone and at other times in the company of others” (p. 1). Burchell, Lee, and Olson (2010) summarized the mystery and ambiguity of spirituality in noting that “regardless of how spirituality is defined, these multiple definitions support the process of questioning and making sense of the world and how an individual relates to it” (p. 115).

The spiritual dimension of human beings defines and drives who we are, what we care about, and what we believe to be right and true. No matter how it is defined or practiced, the notion of spirituality seems to have a place among people of all cultures and backgrounds, regardless of race, gender, age, or place of origin. If spirituality is merely the “living out of the organizing story of one’s life . . . everyone has a spirituality” (Speck, 2005, p. 3). People from all over the world speak of spiritual matters in the context of their own experiences, traditions, and beliefs. Although crisis and change can often stimulate one to ponder the spiritual realm in a more intentional and focused way (Pargament, 2007), spirituality is intricately woven into the fabric of everyday experiences. At the core, everyone who exhibits “consciousness [or] the awareness and understanding of [their] surroundings” (Buttery & Roberson, 2005, p. 37) is a “spiritual being” (Astin, 2004, p. 34).

Despite the recognition by higher education scholars as an ambiguous, hazy, vague and often misunderstood term, the research on spirituality, outside the constructs of religious ideology, has accelerated within student affairs circles since the early 1990s, with special attention given to public institutions (Burchell, Lee, & Olson, 2010). In fact, the concept of spirituality has broadened in recent literature, and has been approached both quantitatively,
employing large data sets (Astin & Astin, 2004a; 2004b) and qualitatively, in an ethnographic research initiative that has mapped out the influence of religion in a variety of campus settings (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001).

What seems clear is that even a central construct such as spirituality is a debatable idea (Love & Talbot, 1999; Speck, 2005) among individuals of diverse perspectives as will be noted throughout the remainder of this literature review. It is for this reason that notions of spirituality are most often considered matters of social construction that cannot be pinned down or precisely defined, what Speck (2005) called a “definitional dilemma” (p. 3). Even Love and Talbot (1999), who are responsible for developing an often-cited five-point framework for spiritual development, acknowledged that “there is no commonly accepted definition of spirituality” (p. 363) in the academy. As a result, there are those who not only are hesitant concerning the scholarly study of spirituality as a general topic, but also as it pertains to the spiritual dimensions of student development, since the “variations in students’ spiritual experiences make it difficult to develop parsimonious theories of spiritual development” (Love & Talbot, 1999, pp. 370-371). Consequently, for purposes of this study and drawing from these various interpretations and points of view, spirituality as a topic is understood here to be about ineffable matters that are ultimate, comprehensive, and sacred in nature and are reflected and acted upon with consequences for identity, relationships, and purposes. It was these thematic notions that grounded the pursuit of the research questions in the present study.

**Spiritual Dimensions of Student Development**

Spiritual formation is by nature a developmental process that can be articulated and analyzed in a variety of ways, such as forms, stages, or sequences. In particular, the study of
how young adults within an undergraduate college environment engage in the spiritual
development process has been the focus of aforementioned scholars such as Fowler (1981),
Parks (1986; 2000), Nash (2001), and Small (2007). While incorporating their unique paradigms
and distinct language in an attempt to describe how students progress spiritually, each
researcher has sought to explicate both the meaning making processes and their resulting
compositions that characterize the spiritual journey.

*Fowler’s Stages*

Beginning with the seminal work of Fowler (1981) and his Stages of Faith Theory (SFT), it
must be noted that he is motivated by the belief that faith is a universal matter relevant to all
human beings and a basic and generic feature of human living. He expounded upon the
fundamental nature of this conviction:

Prior to our being religious or irreligious, before we come to think of ourselves as
Catholics, Protestants, Jews, or Muslims, we are already engaged with issues of faith.
Whether we become nonbelievers, agnostics or atheists, we are concerned with how to
put our lives together and with what will make life worth living. Moreover, we look for
something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to
honor and respect that has the power to sustain our being. (p. 5)

Although he credits the “immense richness of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson . . . as the
timbers and foundations of his work” (Fowler, 1981, p. 39), many spiritual development
theorists now cite his research as instrumental to their own contemporary studies of the
spiritual dimensions of college students’ lives. Fowler appreciated the epistemological focus
and interactionist perspective of previous structural-developmental and psychosocial logicians,
but believed that a faith development theory would have to also include the “integration of modes of knowing and valuing” (Fowler, 1981, p. 99) that Piaget (1932; 1977) and Kohlberg (1969) avoided. Rejecting Piaget’s assertion that intuitive thought is separate from informed imagination, and that emotions are distinct from the intellect, Fowler sought to reverse this theorist’s limitations in his own stage theory. As for the psychosocial influences on faith development, Fowler (1981) commended Erikson’s (1963) emphasis on “the growth and crises of the healthy personality” (p. 110) and Levinson’s (1978) chronological time orientation in the measurement of age. Furthermore, Fowler (1981) esteemed Levinson’s emphasis on transitions, noting that the “impact on one’s way of being in the world resulting from the transition from one era of life to another is inevitable, unvariable, and necessarily profound” (p. 110).

Fowler’s Stages of Faith Theory (SFT) examines the human side of faith while purposefully avoiding the restrictions of theology. He chose a stage theory as a framework, in that “stage theories gain their great power by describing predictable changes in largely formal terms . . . presenting to us the characteristic patterns of knowing, reasoning, and adapting” (Fowler, 1981, p. 90) despite the many unique differences between individuals. Fowler’s SFT takes into strong account the decisions, actions, and commitments of people, as well as the influence of their social communities. Fowler (1981) posited that choices color character and that meaning making in the context of community shapes the manner in which human beings see and interpret the world around them. Accordingly: “the persons, causes, and institutions we really love and trust, the images of good and evil, of possibility and probability to which we are committed – these form the pattern of our faith” (Fowler, 1981, p. 4).
### Figure 1: Fowler’s Stages of Faith

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Faith</th>
<th>Approximate Age</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Undifferentiated</td>
<td>0-2 years</td>
<td>Knowledge meets language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Intuitive-Projective</td>
<td>3-7 years</td>
<td>Conceptually grasp spiritual realities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mythic-Literal</td>
<td>8-12 years</td>
<td>Distinguish between reality and fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Synthetic-Conventional</td>
<td>13-early 20s</td>
<td>Clashes and contradictions in belief system and authority structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Individuative-Reflective</td>
<td>Mid 20s-Late 30s</td>
<td>Intrinsically motivated and personally responsible for beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Conjunctive</td>
<td>Mid-life crisis years</td>
<td>More at ease and secure with differences and ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Universalizing</td>
<td>Rarely if ever achieved</td>
<td>Incarnation of the noblest qualities of a fully integrated faith life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In his theory, Fowler (1981) described “seven stagelike, developmentally related styles of faith” (p. xiii), which he equates to seven stages of faith development. The first stage (Stage 0), otherwise referred to as *Undifferentiated Faith*, is the pre-stage development period that includes the time between birth and 2 years of age. Fowler (1981) believes that these years are foundational to potential spiritual vitality. The warmth, safety, nurturing, security, and relational stimulation of this earliest life chapter are crucial to establishing the building blocks for future faith development. Neglect, abuse, or environmental inconsistencies are potential threats that might “lock the infant into patterns of isolation” (Fowler, 1981, p. 121). Conversely, emotionally healthy kids are fused with “seeds of trust, courage, hope, and love” (Fowler, 1981, p. 121), where a baby’s narcissistic centrality begins to evolve into mutuality and immature interdependence. The transition from Stages 0 to 1 takes place when a young child...
begins to develop immature communication abilities that precipitate the ritual of repetitively naming familiar people and objects. In this stage, knowledge meets language.

Stage 1, called Intuitive-Projective Faith, encompasses the 3 to 7 year old period. These children can begin to conceptually grasp spiritual realities. Both precious and comical responses follow questions such as: Where did these trees come from? Where is heaven? Who lives there? What does God look like? Fowler (1981) commented that children in this stage “combine fragments of stories and images given by their cultures into their own clusters of significant associations dealing with God and the sacred” (p. 128). Here we might have the first talk of death, sex, and family taboos. The danger to a child in this faith development stage is the forceful imposition of adult values upon them, restricting their ability to make meaning and express themselves without rebuke. Overreacting to a child’s innocent and misguided remark might stunt the faith development process. It can be expected that what’s and why’s will abound in an effort to identify cause-effect relationships. Deductive and inductive reasoning is difficult during this stage, as the child holds firmly to the belief that his or her perception of a situation is the only reality.

During the transition into Stage 2 (Mythic-Literal Faith), the child’s magical, fluid, and illogical thinking will morph into “concrete operational thinking” (Fowler, 1981, p. 134), at which point the child will be able to distinguish between reality and make-believe. Unlike preschool children, 10-year-old boys and girls can assemble a more organized and reliable world for themselves, as they begin to understand cause and effect relationships and are able to envision the steps along the way that connect the beginning to the end. This stage includes the faith development of 8 to 12-year-old children. Still maintaining a vivid and imaginative
fantasy life, the child is now able to distinguish the actual from the pretend. “The great gift to consciousness that emerges in this stage is the ability to narratize one’s experience” (Fowler, 1981, p. 136). The same stories that were instrumental in the cognitive growth of a Stage 1 kid are just as important here. However, youngsters can now tell “self-generated stories that make it possible to conserve, communicate, and compare their experiences and meanings” (Fowler, 1981, p. 136). Nevertheless, these maturing children have not yet arrived at a place where they can step back from their stories, able to think about them critically and thoughtfully. In interviews with such children concerning the sacred, one will encounter anthropomorphic interpretations of God. From their perspective, God is much like their parents: caring, compassionate, and strong. Most of their descriptions of God are influenced by family and cultural experiences, but not in a parroting way, absent of internalized meaning. These adolescents are starting to own their personal beliefs, but not outside of parental and other authoritarian models. Fowler (1981) insists that “reciprocal justice” (p. 143) is the driving force of this stage. Life is fair. Good things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. The “ultimate environment is based on the strong intuition of a built-in, divinely-constituted, natural lawfulness” (Fowler, 1981, p. 146). Although this is mostly observed in school age children, some adults may find themselves stalled out in this stage. Individuals who believe that they must perform for God’s appeasement and approval are more prone to embrace the philosophy that God functions within a paradigm of payback.

The transition into the third stage of Synthetic-Conventional Faith begins with the “implicit clash or contradictions in stories” (Fowler, 1981, p. 150) that challenges meaning making. Literalism begins to dismantle. Questioning and disillusionment with authorities
begins to happen. Customarily, this stage spans from about 13 years old into the early twenties. Most important to this analysis is the fact that many young people transition into college during this somewhat turbulent stage. “Formal operational thinking” kicks in, “bringing with it the ability to reflect upon one’s thinking” (Fowler, 1981, p. 152). Such an individual can think about what is being thought about. Ideal notions of reality emerge over the course of this stage, and with them come a sense of judgment as others fail to live up to these expectations.

Interpersonal encounters with peers rule this stage, in that acceptance and relational intimacy are preserved at all cost. The conflict between cultivating an individual self while residing in a perpetual state of comparison to others and their ideas, interests, and preferences can make for a bumpy ride into adulthood. Moreover, God is reimagined as something more personal and weighty, “having inexhaustible depths and being capable of knowing personally those mysterious depths of self and others we know that we ourselves will never know” (Fowler, 1981, p. 153). Adolescent conversion is often tied to this hunger for a God who simultaneously and unconditionally knows, loves, and accepts the individual. Association with friends who have personalized similar values is normal during this stage. Conformity to those with whom one has the greatest contact and closeness is a strong tendency. Fanatical religiousness for the parents’ sake or a fervent secularism for the friends’ sake might both materialize out of this same desire to self-identify with intimate associates. Fowler (1981) probed into this reality:

This is not to deny that adolescents make choices or that they develop strong feelings and commitments regarding their values and behavioral norms. It is to say, however, that despite their genuine feelings of having made choices or commitments, a truer
reading is that their values and self-images, mediated by the significant others in their lives, have largely chosen them. (154)

Notably, many older adults find permanent equilibrium in Stage 3, especially for those reared in strongly religious homes where inquisitiveness might have been discouraged. For these individuals, either adolescents who are moving through this stage or for older adults who have settled into this stage, spiritual images and values are tacit and unexamined. They can only articulate that they know, without knowing how they know. Potential dangers during this stage are that the autonomy of an insecure person might be jeopardized by the difference of opinions from a confident authority figure or close friend, and intimacy with God might be structured, formulaic, and ritualistic.

Stage 4 (Individuative-Reflective Faith) usually sets in during the mid-20s and persists into the late 30s or beyond; however, it is accelerated for those who enroll in college. Often its onset is precipitated by a major crisis that will no longer sustain the untested belief system, “serious clashes or contradictions” (Fowler, 1981, p. 173) between two or more valued sources of authority, changes in symbols or rituals, or encounters with a diverse and other-minded group of people who seem relatable and relevant. As a result, authority on spiritual matters begins to untangle itself from outsiders to now dwell within the individual. Others’ input might still carry some weight, but becomes subservient to the internal value system. Chaotic and tumultuous, this stage is saturated with transformational change at every turn, as beliefs grow into convictions. Symbols and rituals are challenged. Tacit beliefs now become explicit. The sacred props are replaced with spiritual substance. The spiritual pilgrim now takes personal responsibility for his or her beliefs and lifestyle choices. For many who enter this stage, it
comes at great personal cost. The death of a loved one, the diagnosis of cancer, divorce, or even a job loss might send this individual into a season of suspicious reevaluation. Fowler (1981) explained that this transitional spiritual upheaval might last five to seven years or longer. Additionally, one hazard in this stage might be the “excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought” (Fowler, 1981, p. 182). This season might usher in a second wave of narcissism that boasts in a supposedly advanced, sophisticated, and postmodern reality.

Moreover, it is the crack in this “superior” rationality that thrusts someone into Stage 5. *Conjunctive Faith*, which often occurs during mid-life crisis, begins when the mystery of the past (or another worldview altogether) garners a greater appeal than the tidiness of a well-ordered value system. Radical and disconcerting inner voices start whispering murmurs of doubt into the soul of this now complex-thinking adult. Outdated but familiar modes of thinking are hauntingly alluring once again. Ambiguity seems strangely appealing. The defensive posture that used to demand conformity is much more at ease with differences and contradictions. Now able to see the multifaceted and multicolored dimensions of the same issue, this spiritual journeyer now suspects that things are more organically interrelated than once assumed. Reclaiming some of the shadowy perspectives of the past and reintegrating them with the best of the present, the Stage 5 individual proceeds into the future with less certainty but more confidence. Men and women with conjunctive faith are more secure in their own truth traditions, while able to listen to other perspectives with an open mind. These individuals know pain, suffering, defeat, and despair. They may have been weathered by a life of contradictions and confusion. However, they are now comfortable with unanswered questions.
Stage 6 (Universalizing Faith) is a rare but liberating incarnation of the noblest qualities of a fully integrated life of faith. Reflecting the most dramatic expressions of love, justice, and self-sacrifice, these individuals would be counted among the ranks of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa. They call into question common corporate cultural convictions of what is good, right, and just – assisting humanity in rewriting their scripts on genuine faith. These uncommon individuals of great faith are doggedly hopeful for a better tomorrow, compelling them to sacrifice everything if necessary in their pursuit of a selfless and servant-hearted activism.

Some postmodern critics have taken issue with Fowler’s theory in recent years, and have even recommended that he “flatten all hierarchies in obeisance to a pervasive relativism” (Fowler, 2001, p. 167). In response, Fowler insisted that the “structural stage sequence is sequential, invariant, and hierarchical” (Fowler, 2001, p. 171). Other theorists, such as Small (2007), have also questioned whether this SFT model is applicable to people or groups who maintain a secular ideology or one based in a tradition other than the Judeo-Christian model implicit in Fowler’s work. Committed to strengthening his SFT model, Fowler and Dell (2006) insisted that future SFT research initiatives need to account for gender, racial, and religious differences.

Parks’ Forms

Like Fowler’s stages, Parks’ (1986; 2000) model is expressed as stage-like forms as well. Embedded in Fowler’s (1981) work, Parks, who was Fowler’s colleague at Harvard, posited a developmental model that described a “faithing” process that evolves through forms of knowing, dependence, and community. Each of the three forms includes a sequence of four to
five positions, demonstrating a progressively transformative maturation process. In particular, Parks (2001) added to Fowler’s model by accentuating the role of communities in either sustaining or challenging both the composing process and the compositions themselves.

**Figure 2: Park’s Model of Faith Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of Knowing</th>
<th>Adolescent</th>
<th>Young Adult</th>
<th>Tested Adult</th>
<th>Mature Adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority-bound</td>
<td>Unqualified relativism</td>
<td>Probing commitment</td>
<td>Tested commitment</td>
<td>Convictional commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of Dependence</td>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Counterdependent</td>
<td>Fragile inner-dependence</td>
<td>Confident inner-dependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of Community</td>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>Diffuse</td>
<td>Mentoring community</td>
<td>Self-selected group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Previously referred to as the form of cognition in Parks’ (1986) earlier work, the newly retitled “first forms of knowing” consists of the big questions that are consistently and repetitively asked across the span of a lifetime. In particular, the five knowing positions beginning with authority-bound and unqualified relativism, and proceeding to probing commitment, tested commitment, and convictional commitment reflect an individual’s interaction with sources of authority. Parks (2000) pointed out that individuals are often unknowingly “swayed, moved, enticed, compelled, persuaded, and more or less swept along, in varying measures obedient to powers that are acting authoritatively upon us, influencing our perceptions and judgments” (p. 53). For example, a first-year student, although inquisitive about a roommate’s Jewish background, could face resistance from his or her Christian parents. They might demand that this student request a transfer to another room in the residence hall in an attempt to shield the student from perceived destructive belief systems.

Drawing upon Perry’s (1968) shifts in students’ interactions with knowledge, Parks (2000) modified them in articulating five primary positions, the first of which is authority-
Dualistic in nature, this position enforces the notions of right and wrong, good and bad, and true and untrue. Rejecting any sense of ambiguity, this position “functions in an all-powerful, determinative manner” (Parks, 2000, p. 55). The content of the knowledge might differ significantly among individuals who are each driven by a rigid and unquestioning loyalty to their respective sources of authority. Regardless of the substance of the beliefs, individuals who find themselves at the authority-bound point along the continuum possess an “inner self (that) is primarily composed by others . . . composed by values, circumstances, and judgments outside of one’s self” (Parks, 2000, p. 55). Parks (2000) noted that a shift might be forthcoming between the authority-bound and the unqualified relativism positions when there is a clash between the unquestioned belief of a confident individual and a challenging circumstance that introduces complexity or contradiction into the experience. When an “uncomfortable discovery that established patterns of thinking do not fit lived experience” (p. 56) enters the picture, it might persuade an authority-bound individual to expand his or her categories of meaning making or problem solving to include the possibility that knowledge is relative. Figured prominently in her model is the power of what she called the “shipwreck experience” (Parks, 2000), where what has been faithfully relied upon and in an unexamined way suddenly fails the individual. The shipwreck experience is increasingly common among students who arrive at college with untested beliefs and unchallenged life paradigms, who then must face potentially troubling encounters with a diversity of people and perspectives. However, in some instances, this defection from authority might occur more quietly and less dramatically in what Parks (2000) referred to as a “pushing away from the dock,” where a student might “begin to choose differently out of a responsible loyalty to one’s own perception and knowledge” (p. 63).
Regardless, this shift might happen slowly or quickly and with either minimal or significant disequilibrium, depending on how the complex scenario intersects and interacts with the conflicted individual. Ultimately, this is an “invitation to develop critical thinking: the ability to stand outside one’s own thought” (Parks, 2000, p. 57). Parks (2000) admitted that “this new way of seeing and knowing may offer some new power and freedom, but it is achieved at the cost of an earlier certainty” (p. 58). Furthermore, unqualified relativism is too challenging to sustain over time, as the mantra, “all truths are equally valuable truths,” proves unsatisfying and unhelpful in distinguishing between life options or in making difficult choices. As a result, an individual might seek out the most adequate, logical, or meaningful truth among the multitude of truths in “search for a place of commitment within relativism” (p. 59).

In her earlier work, Parks (1986) traced the transition from unqualified relativism to commitment in relativism. However, in more recent years, Parks (2000) inserted a new position in the sequence, which she defined as probing commitment: a tentative, uncertain, and exploratory posture that has confounded developmental theorists as it can be misinterpreted to be transitional in nature. This position includes seemingly ambivalent characteristics of indecision and fickleness, but is “qualitatively different from adolescent experimentation in search of self-definition” (p. 67). Instead, the “probing commitment of the postadolescent is a serious, critically aware exploration of the adult world and the potential versions of future it offers . . . through which society’s vulnerability, strength, integrity, and possibilities are assessed” (pp. 67-68). Probing commitment is the station of many college students who, at this young adult stage, are engaging in the meaning-making process in a wary and often wearisome manner with unsophisticated tools and untested resources. However, as an individual arrives
at the fourth position of tested commitment, the once uneasy and uncomfortable adult comes to a place of peace and personal security. Parks (2000) stated that “in the period of tested commitment, the self has a deepened quality of at-homeness and centeredness – in marked contrast to the ambivalence or dividedness of the earlier period” (p. 69). The fifth and final position within the form of knowing is what Parks (2000) referred to as convictional commitment. This station is reserved for the mature adult, and is believed to “not emerge until well after the ordinary college years, indeed, not until after midlife” (Parks, 1986, p. 50). Paradoxical in essence, convictional commitment internalizes the reality of a personal truth at a deep level, while appreciating that truth might be altered or revised at any moment. Corresponding to Fowler’s (1981) fifth stage (Conjunctive Faith), convictional commitment can be summed up best as “mature wisdom (that) is not an escape from, but an engagement with, complexity and mystery” (Parks, 1986, p. 51).

Secondly, as a complement to the forms of knowing in Parks’ model come forms of dependence, which give attention to the emotive dimensions of the faith journey. If Parks had halted her model with the forms of knowing, it might be misperceived that spiritual transformation is merely a cognitive exercise that relocates and reorders pieces and parts of relevant information within the various lobes of the brain. In contrast, Parks (2000) noted that this:

shift in thinking affects not only cognition but also our feelings and relationships . . .
cognition and affect, mind and heart, are intimately interwoven in the fabric of knowing and integral to the fabric of faith. To make this epistemological journey is to be affected and moved. (pp. 71-72)
Furthermore, this movement takes place in the context of relationships:

we learn in relationship to the natural, more-than-human world, in relationship to texts, peoples, and institutions . . . in the dynamic interconnectedness of all life . . . in a shared tissue of being . . . fundamentally and inescapably, we are social, interdependent beings. (Parks, 2000, p. 73)

Thus dependence is an inevitable reality of life, and the nature, intensity, and objects of an individual’s emotional reliance will affect the development of her or his faith. Moreover, as with the forms of knowing, forms of dependence also mature and develop across the spectrum, in what Parks (2000) articulated as a sequence of five positions: dependent, counterdependent, fragile inner-dependence, confident inner-dependence, and inter-dependence. The dependent position corresponds to the authority-bound stage within the forms of knowing in that individuals are emotionally dependent upon something or someone outside of themselves for confidence and clarity, even if there is a logical rationale for their beliefs. Connecting this position to Fowler’s (1981) conventional stage, Parks (2000) noted that “here a person’s sense of self and truth depends upon his or her immediate relational and affectional ties in a primary way” (p. 74). When traversing through the next counterdependent position an individual might begin to withdraw or even oppose sources of authority that were once highly regarded in an attempt to make sense of “devastation . . . bewilderment . . . or restlessness” (Parks, 2000, p. 75). This occurs when authority figures are no longer able to provide satisfactory answers or explanations to increasingly perplexing questions or painful situations in the spiritual pilgrim’s life. This position permits an individual to rebel against authority without completely alienating himself or herself from perceived absolute truth. This individual’s opposition to authority is
softening the soil for the impending transition into a state of future interdependence, but at this point, the authoritative structures, though shaky, persist and remain intact. Though potentially complicated and frustrating for an individual situated in this position, the time will come when the “counterdependent pilgrim begins to look less toward resisting authority and more toward the self, taking responsibility for fuller participation in the discernment of the truth” (Parks, 2000, p. 76).

It is at this point when the next position of fragile inner-dependence is entered as a recomposition and reestablishment with authority occurs, but with far different parameters. Authority is still appreciated, but no longer unquestionably obeyed. However, this emerging appreciation for the inner self and its ability to make wise, discerning, and truth-laden decisions is somewhat fragile for a reason. Parks (2000) assuredly suggested that fragility does not denote weakness, but this new inner strength will vacillate and fluctuate with hesitation and doubt until each individual feels at ease in this new spiritual position. The newly inner-dependent person must face fears, embrace vulnerability, and grieve the loss of easy answers and quick fixes. It is at this point in the spiritual journey when mentors and close friends are most crucial. In fact, it is the healthy and relational connections to safe and sane people during this period of uncertainty that might propel a delicate inner-dependent individual into the confident inner-dependent position. Parks (2000) stated that “if the fragile inner-dependence of the young adult is met with encouragement and confirmation” (p. 84), the passage from insecure to assured inner-dependence will occur. Within this position, mentors are no longer viewed with naiveté and unquestioned devotion, but rather as cojourners in the transformational process of becoming spiritually vital. “When this occurs, authority previously
located outside the self, though ratified within, becomes more fully equilibrated within” (Parks, 2000, p. 84). Consequently, the tested adult emerges into a mature adult as one takes the final step into a position of interdependence. “Trust is now centered in the meeting of self and other, in the recognition of the strength and finitude of each, and in the promise of the truth that emerges in relation” (Parks, 2000, p. 86). The “deep self” emerges, able to face reality as a friend, welcoming the resolution of childhood and adolescence issues, and trusting oneself and others more fully. Parks (2000) asserted that communion with “God” is most natural in this position, as the person “can recognize and know with the whole self the truth of the interdependence that we are” (p. 87).

Finally, it must be noted that “one of the distortions of most psychological models is that their attention to the particular and inner experience of the individual obscures the power of social dynamics in the shaping of personal reality” (Parks, 2000, p. 88). It is for this reason that Parks (2000) also includes forms of community in the sequence of her developmental faith model. “Location, social context, and general surroundings” (p. 88) cannot be overstated in their influence on faith experiences, spiritual progress, and the formation of religious convictions. Parks (2000) articulated the notions of the “networks of belonging,” “tribal groups,” and “the surround” as descriptive reinforcements for her case for the sequential forms of community in their various positions: conventional, diffuse, mentoring, self-selected group, and open to other. Thus, aligned with the authority-bound and dualistic cognitive forms, the conventional community is “marked by conformity to cultural norms and interests . . . (distinguishing between) us and them” (Parks, 2000, p. 92). However, when a conventional individual encounters others who possess and reflect different beliefs, values, backgrounds,
perspectives, and social arrangements, and those differences are met with intrigue and not judgment, a transition into the diffuse community position might ensue. The ambiguous process of wondering about, questioning why, and investigating how are customary waymaking activities within this position. Parks (2000) asserted that an “exploratory, experimental, and tentative quality of relationship may prevail as one ventures into a wider horizon of belonging” (p. 92). Relationships become more fluid during this period, as a spiritual searcher might feel empowered to explore and experiment with “the potential power of every possible relationship” (p. 92). However, unable to sustain this relationally unstable and personally disordered stage indefinitely in the midst of a culture of norms, expectations, and choice-making, an individual predictably “begins to seek an adequate pattern of meaning, a place of commitment within a relativized world” (p. 93). The mentoring community is the logical next step where a “new kind of belonging” emerges. When an individual assumes personal responsibility for his or her faith life, “the recognition, presence, care, and faith of others can make all the difference” (p. 93) in gently moving a spiritual pilgrim forward toward mature adult faith. In fact, it is the “character of the social context to which the young adult has access (that) may be the most crucial element in transforming or maintaining what a young adult knows” (p. 94) and upon whom and what they depend. Community is inextricably intertwined with knowledge and dependence. It is a mentoring community that “offers hospitality to the potential of the emerging self” (p. 93) in the context of the three forms of knowing, dependence, and community. It does so through creating a network of belonging, posing big enough questions, offering encounters with otherness, encouraging habits of mind, exploring worthy dreams, accessing dreams, and being communities of practice (Parks, 2000). However,
the mentoring community has a dark side, potentially and unknowingly morphing into a counterproductive and stagnant club. A robust mentoring community that once welcomed questions, appreciated diverse perspectives, and celebrated ongoing spiritual progress can become an isolated tribe of its own, offering inhospitable and limited access to new people and ideas. Unexpectedly, though:

one’s new network of belonging may be much more diverse in some respects, its members may nevertheless hold similar political, religious, and philosophical views and values and share the loyalties of a particular economic class. Even the most cosmopolitan and liberal of mind often discovers, upon close examination of one’s own network of belonging, that those who count are also of like mind. (p. 100)

It is for this reason that a spiritual journeyer must proceed through the *select group position* before arriving at mature faith. Those who find themselves in this position of forms of community need not be rebuked, but simply encouraged to stay alert to the quiet and destructive forces that litter the path to mature faith. The roadblocks of apathy and arrogance need to be removed before mature faith can be achieved. As Parks (2000) explained:

Critical awareness that prompts movement to a self-selected . . . group represents an adequate structure of knowing, but it may not necessarily represent an advance in the inclusiveness that fosters deeper reordering . . . those of critical but like mind may even represent diminished concern for others, if critical awareness leads only to forming a network of belonging marked by cynicism or a systematic view too narrowly drawn. (p. 100)
Complexity, inclusiveness, a passion for social justice, and a humbling awareness of individual limitations are hallmarks of the final *open to the other* position. Matched to the convictional commitment and interdependent positions of forms of knowing and depending, “open to the other” stage is characterized by a:

longing for communion with those who are profoundly other than the self, not as a matter of mere political correctness, or ideology, or ethical commitment, but as a longing in the soul for embodied faithfulness to the interdependence that we are. (p. 102)

*Nash’s Narratives*

Parks (1986; 2000) and Fowler (1981) take a developmental approach to spiritual development, while Nash (2001a; 2001b) assumes a slightly different narrative approach to describing the various ways in which college students examine and express their spiritual journeys. Fowler (1981) wrote in terms of hierarchical stages; Parks (1986; 2000) packaged her model in the language of evolving forms, and Nash (2001a; 2001b) arranged his ideas within a storytelling genre that he coined *religio-spiritual narratives*. Initially, Nash (2001b) depicted six religio-spiritual narratives that function in effect as distinct compositions of faith. Focused less on “the content of specific religions and spiritualities and more about personal journeys and discoveries” (Nash, 2001b, p. 64), three *mainstream* narratives – orthodoxy, wounded belief, and mainline, and three *alternative* narratives – activism, exploration, and secular humanism, comprise categories of religious and spiritual stories reflective of a range of college students.
Figure 3: Nash’s Religio-Spiritual Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Orthodoxy</td>
<td>Belief in one absolute truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Mainline</td>
<td>Value traditions, tolerance, and predictability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Wounded</td>
<td>Tentative, fearful, anti-authoritarian, and unsatisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Activism</td>
<td>Motivated by faith in action, justice, and social reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Spiritually inquisitive, experience-driven &amp; syncretistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Secular Humanist</td>
<td>Rejection of organized religion in favor of logic and reason</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Granted, Nash (2001a) offered a variation on these six narratives in another piece published in the same year by renaming one narrative (activism to social justice activists) and introducing four additional micro-narratives that fit under the exploration (mystics) and secular humanism (existential humanists, postmodern skeptics, and scientific empiricists) meta-narratives. Nonetheless, the central theme of his work remains the same – that there are both mainstream and alternative narratives represented among students on college campuses today.

Nash’s (2001a) three mainstream narratives are rooted in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religious traditions. The orthodoxy narrative is assumed by those who believe:

there is a Truth that is unimpeachable, immutable, and final, and it can only be found in a particular book, institution, prophet, or movement. The mission of the Orthodox Believer is to deliver this Truth to others as an act of love and generosity. (p. 13)

Adherents to the orthodox position reflect a wide range of belief systems, though a large percentage of them on American college campuses are evangelical Christians. As Nash (2001b) reflected upon his time with orthodox students, he clarified that “some are stridently religious,
others moderately so; some are anti-intellectual and self-righteous, whereas others are reasonable, charming, even modest in their claims” (p. 69). While this narrative was composed with mostly Christians in mind, “no single religious, political, economic, or educational ideology has a corner on the market of the orthodoxy narrative” (Nash, 2001b, p. 69). The orthodox narrative might possibly reflect the beliefs and behaviors of Atheists, serious-minded Muslims, Zionist Jews, or even evangelical Tea Party conservatives.

The second mainstream story is the mainline narrative. Neither excessively conservative nor liberal in their political persuasions, averse to authoritarian structures and tolerant of diverse perspectives, this narrative reflects the experiences of a large segment of the college student population. Furthermore, these more reserved religious practitioners “prefer a life of traditional worship that balances traditions, standards, self-discipline, and moral conscience with a degree of personal freedom, Biblical latitude, and the joie de vivre of close community life” (Nash, 2001a, p. 13). Mainliners prefer the predictable practices and time-tested traditions of their ancestors and the clear distinction between the sacred and secular, and exude a mild-mannered comfortability with content and even complacent parishioners. Nash (2001b) described this large bloc of college students as “solidly committed to their beliefs, but not triumphalistic, quiet not noisy, and civil not contentious . . . holdouts against modernity and the religious experimentation and deconstruction that so often accompany it” (p. 86).

Unlike the orthodox and mainline believers, self-identified victims associated with the wounded narrative are not satisfied with their religious or spiritual experiences because of the abuse they endured at the hands of religious authorities in the name of religious virtue. These
individuals, who often experience negative emotions derived from depressing memories, are asking a similar question: Where was God when all this was happening to me? The struggle with theodicy (i.e., the problem of evil) is inevitable for those who “suffered at the hands of hypocritical, over-zealous clergy, lovers, parents, relatives, and friends” (Nash, 2001a, p. 14). Wounded believers share a very different story than their orthodox counterparts, even though it is likely that many wounded individuals were once immersed in orthodoxy or its mainline cousin. Nash (2001b) described them as “highly tentative in their religious views, extremely self-effacing, fearful, genuinely ambivalent, and almost obstinately anti-authoritarian . . . very angry or very resigned . . . all of them have wretchedly sad stories to tell” (p. 76).

Nash’s (2001b) three alternative narratives articulate an “overall religio-spiritual view that intentionally integrates a number of beliefs and practices from a variety of sources into new expressions . . . that go way beyond traditional and modernistic understandings of Christianity and Judaism” (p. 93). Alternative adherents come from a diversity of backgrounds, including traditional religious homes that “mixed and matched beliefs from a number of religio-spiritual systems,” (Nash, 2001b, p. 94), non-religious families who deemphasized spiritual matters, and religiously-neutral environments that encouraged exploration and self-discovery for children and adolescents. The first of these alternative stories is the activism narrative. Also referred to as “social justice activists” (Nash, 2001a), these believers are more concerned with making a positive contribution in the present rather than being preoccupied with the speculative rewards and consequences awaiting individuals in the afterlife. Advocating an “energetic faith dedicated to the liberation of oppressed peoples, equal rights for all, and radical social transformation marked by full democratic participation in decision-making “(Nash,
activists push for social reform in the name of godly justice underscored by a faith-in-action liberation theology. Activist believers might also self-identify with many of the other religio-spiritual narratives, although it is rare for them to align themselves with either the orthodox or wounded narratives. Social justice is the theme that runs through the activist narrative in that “religion makes the most sense whenever it tells a story of human rights and social transformation” (Nash, 2001a, p. 15).

Next, those associated with the exploration narrative might be activist in some fashion, but are most often characterized by the spiritual quest that drives the purpose of this study. Nash (2001b) claimed that it was this story that was most common among both undergraduates and graduates at his institution. These explorers reflect the “cry for meaning” (p. 105) at colleges and universities that have incited and excited modern researchers in higher education. Such stories reflect a restless mobility that focuses on process over product, experience over creed, and questions over answers . . . best described as a “rolling account of an unfinished spiritual odyssey” (Nash, 2001b, p. 105). Nash (2001b) cited his own inability to clearly define the explorer because of the multifaceted and syncretistic nature of the beliefs. However, the one thing that explorers seem to:

share in common is an infectious sense of wonder, and, in religious matters, they exude a spirit of adventure and experimentation . . . (in) the unceasing search to find
something to believe in, something to love, something that will tie together the tag-
ends of people’s chaotic lives. (p. 108, 110)

An emerging subcategory of the explorers is what Nash (2001a) called the mystics, who pursue the transcendent, “not through idle chatter or abstract concepts, but by way of meditation,
mindfulness, and above all, a pervasive calmness” (p. 14). In this regard, Nash attempted to classify, with little success, not only the mystics, but also the perspectives of Neo-Paganism and Eastern Mysticism within the explorer narrative. This feat was challenging since the “exploration narrative is the most pluralistic religio-spiritual story of all” (Nash, 2001b, p. 108). Regardless, explorers all have strong spiritual appetites for personally meaningful spiritual paradigms that will inspire them without defining them. Open-minded, reflective, and spiritually engaged, these true pilgrims are content in embarking on an adventure that is more about the “process of exploring rather than in the act of foreclosing” (Nash, 2001b, p. 109).

The final alternative narrative is, at first glance, in opposition to the previous five narratives, since it finds its source of meaning in rationality and reason as opposed to the sacred and the supernatural. The secular humanist narrative is for those who reject the teachings of any organized religion while embracing a “scientific worldview . . . a this-worldly (secular) approach to telling a particular story about reality” (Nash, 2001b, p. 116). Moreover, this narrative paradigm is populated with a variety of secular individuals, including existential humanists, postmodern skeptics, and scientific empiricists (Nash, 2001a), who are diverse in their understanding of truth and unique in their expressions of meaning making. However, secular humanists find common ground with one another in their “disdain for absolutisms” (Nash, 2001b. p. 120), skepticism about illogical religious systems, and a no-nonsense commitment to make life work in the here and now. Even Nash himself, in his own self-identification as a “spiritual seeker . . . (whose) childhood Catholicism continues to have such a strong hold on me today (2001a, p. 2, 8) . . . (who is also) an existential humanist, secular to the core, with a postmodern flair, but also a closet explorer, always looking, forever on the prowl
for something more” (2001b, p. 122) resembles and reflects the expansive landscape of ever-growing religio-spiritual narratives that are taking root in our country and finding unique expressions on private and public colleges and universities. Even as the articulator of religio-spiritual narratives, Nash is but one exemplar of the diversity of traditional and alternative stories that are being constructed on college campuses across the country that describe the various ways in which college students examine and express their spiritual journeys.

Recent Reconceptualizations

Small (2007; 2011) is among the more current researchers who are reflecting upon these matters, and in doing so, she has contributed to this field of research in two important ways: envisioning an additional stage and articulating differences and nuances in this line of inquiry to incorporate previously marginalized populations and traditions. Having Fowler (1981), Parks (1986; 2000), and Nash’s (2001a; 2001b) writings at her disposal, Small emerges as a scholar during a period when interfaith and alternative perspectives bring into question all previous scholarship in the arena of spiritual and religious development. Small (2007; 2011) questioned the assumptions, as well as the diversity of samples and participant pools used by these earlier researchers, most specifically in regards to Fowler’s earlier research on the stages of spiritual development. Without challenging the notion of stages, Small (2007; 2011) instead took issue with current prescriptions and iterations of spirituality among college students, focusing on Fowler (1981) as both a touchstone and target. In fact, she stands uniquely within the same line of inquiry, drawing attention to how limited these iterations have been in respect to non-majority trajectories of spiritual development. As a result, she includes a Stage 3.5 to highlight the different religious and spiritual traditions slowly emerging within American
culture. By doing so, Small (2007; 2011) not only includes the sequential movement through the stages but also reconceptualizes and incorporates the unique trajectories by which many students travel between stages. Moreover, she takes issue with the limited purview and contexts of the model and the presumed paths that students of minority spiritual perspectives must traverse in order to arrive at each developmental stage. Small (2007; 2011) appreciated the evolutionary nature of stage development, while emphasizing the different traditions that provide the context for such development. Small does not reject, but instead refines the previous notions of faith and spiritual development. This is an acknowledgement that previous understanding of stages and forms was generated in the context of only select religio-spiritual narratives and traditions. In doing so, scholars have failed to acknowledge the various ways that other minority traditions proceed in this development. She specifies new trajectories for students within three minority traditions in their spiritual development, resulting in a new form, stage, or expression within already-established frameworks that had not been previously articulated or documented.

Furthermore, to the extent that Fowler’s ideas are also reflected in the latter work of Parks, whose research is also rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions, and also the initial interests of Nash, Small (2007; 2011) has provocatively introduced a fresh way of examining such spiritual questions and developmental processes through the lens of non-Christian perspectives. Nash (2001a; 2001b) was one of the first to challenge the exclusion of other alternative faith and belief perspectives in favor of spiritual and religious research through a traditional Judeo-Christian lens. Nash prompted scholars to think more broadly about both the composing and the resulting compositions.
When Nash began to write about religio-spiritual narratives, he stretched the framework to include a wider range of perspectives such as the mystics, social justice activists, existential humanists, and postmodern skeptics. In fact, most everything that came before Nash was deeply rooted in a Judeo-Christian framework for studying and analyzing spiritual development, in spite of the claim that these models are inclusive of diverse populations and participants. So Small (2007; 2011) borrowed Nash’s (2001) focus on diversity of religio-spiritual beliefs and united it with Fowler (1981) and Park’s (1986; 2000) stage- and form-like
models, now situated in “new conceptualizations” and expressed in the language of “trajectories.” Accelerating and contextualizing the scholarship in this arena beyond that of her predecessors, Small (2007) has begun to study a more religiously and spiritually diverse population of college students, and has pursued “cross-cultural faith development research” (p. 3), specifically as it pertains to Jewish, Muslim, and Atheist students. In this research effort, Small (2007) attempted to expand upon the only identifiable and retrievable works on the religious identity formation of Jewish (Shire, 1987), Muslim (Peek, 2005), and Atheist (Achermann, 1981; as cited in Oser, Reich, & Bucher, 1994) adherents.

However, preceding the alterations to Fowler’s (1981) model as it pertains to underrepresented faith perspectives, she first initiated a series of modifications to the model as it pertains to Christians. Small (2007) accomplished this by compiling the recommendations of seven Christian researchers (Astley, 2000; Downs, 1995; Droege; 1992; Fortosis, 1992; Gibson, 2004; Gorman, 1995; Steele, 1990) who had already proposed revisions themselves and then blended and synthesized these changes in coordination with Fowler (1981) and Parks’ (1986; 2000) thoughts on these matters. Small (2007):

- pulled themes out of each researcher’s suggested developmental tasks and stages and compiled them, as well as included research findings from relevant literature on Christian spiritual paths, beliefs, and values and that presents Faith Development Theory (FDT) from a Christian perspective. (p. 5)

The most notable change was the insertion of a Stage 3.5 in all four paths or trajectories in order to reflect Parks’ (1986; 2000) focus on the transitional period in young adult that seems to fall between Fowler’s (1981) synthetic-conventional and individuative-reflective faith stages.
Furthermore, five themes emerged through Small’s (2007) effort to reconceptualize and fine-tune Fowler’s six stages that she would subsequently analyze in regards to the trajectories of the other three faith traditions:

(1) progressively more complex thought; (2) inclusion of more people into one’s circle of concern; (3) commitment to God through stronger and more self-directed faith; (4) an eventual giving up of the self for God; and (5) radical individualism is accepted, despite the seeming paradox with the widening circle of concern, as it embraces a direct relationship with God and an understanding of one’s personal role in conducting God’s work on this earth. (p. 7)

Using Fowler’s (1981) model as a consistent construct, Small (2007) employed the aforementioned research literature for Jewish, Muslim, and Atheist devotees to revise and modify each of the six stages of faith development in light of the particular tradition. Moreover, Small (2007) also included insights on unique identifiers within each context, such as age, gender, family background, and community composition. For Jewish believers, spiritual development differs from the Christian trajectory. Their minority status and the resulting vague identity, group involvement prioritized over individual reflection, a more comprehensive worldview from a young age, action superseding belief, and a superficial devotion to community is distinct from the Christian tradition. Moreover, Muslim adherents also experience a distinct non-Christian trajectory that includes identity confusion, the supremacy of God’s will over individual preferences, total immersion into the faith community, an emerging strong and defined religious identity in the face of societal marginalization of Islam, and the harmonizing feat of the sacred and secular. Additionally, Atheist devotees’ experience is quite
different from the process of Christian faith development in the following anticipated ways: a nonbelief or disbelief in God or other supernatural involvement in human affairs, a disruption, rejection or abandonment of a previous worldview that precedes disbelief, and an appreciation for a temporal and visible humanity as opposed to the notion of an eternal and invisible power (Small, 2007). At the conclusion of her study, Small (2007) was able to identify “minor nuances” and “major differences” that included discussions on “markers of religious identity” (p. 19), religious education, rites of passage, relationship to the sacred, crises and conflicts, the tension between the individual and the community, religious expectations for conformity, internal and external motivating forces for religious involvement, and types of transitions.

Summary of Spiritual Development During the College Years

By way of synthesis, in Fowler’s model (1981), college students often find themselves caught between the third (synthetic-conventional) and fourth (individuative-reflective) stages of faith in navigating the reimagination of God and restructuring of faith when faced with external diverse perspectives and internal personal contradictions. Parks (2000) positioned college students as young adults in probing commitment, experiencing their initial steps into the realm of inner-dependence, and in pursuit of a mentoring community to help them plot a course through the college years. Nash (2001a; 2001b) reminded the research community that students reflect a variety of mainstream and alternative religio-spiritual narratives they carry with them into and through these stages and forms of faith. Finally, Small (2007; 2011) reconceptualized and refined the process and product of spiritual development as they pertain to students of minority and marginalized faith perspectives, that are in turn influenced by varying circumstances and identifiers, and particularly, an increasing diversity of religious and
spiritual traditions in America. This insight causes contemporary scholars, such as Small, to think more broadly and more critically about research agendas, methodology, and nuances of the past in the face of a rapidly changing religious and spiritual landscape on college campuses.

Beyond the wealth of theoretical scholarship on the spiritual dimensions of student development, a burgeoning empirical literature combining demographics, trends, and outcomes relative to the spirituality of college students has also evolved, most especially in the past ten years. This literature suggests that there is an increasing flurry of spiritual questing on the college campus, materializing in both formal and informal environments, and affected by extrinsic and intrinsic factors that are worthy of consideration.

Spirituality on College Campuses

Astin and Astin (2004b) contend that a majority of college students exhibit an unusually high level of spiritual interest, engagement, and dedication. In a recent national sample, more than half (58%) of them expressed that the integration of spirituality into their daily lives is a personal priority. Seventy-seven percent of students surveyed stated that all people are “spiritual beings,” and 71% indicated that they trust in a “higher power” for strength. A sizeable number of students (84%) also have experienced at least occasional spiritual encounters, while three in four report that they pray (Astin & Astin, 2004b). Strikingly, despite their strong personal religious commitments, these same students exhibit a notable tolerance for religious differences and acceptance of their non-religious peers. Almost 75% of first-year students articulate a feeling of a personal connection to a relational God. In fact, more than half (56%) classify God as “love” or “creator,” with half perceiving God as exercising protection over their lives. When surveyed about their present spiritual and religious perspectives,
students fall among five different categories: secure (42%), seeking (23%), conflicted (15%), disinterested (15%), or doubting (10%). Finally, there are several interesting similarities and differences between students who would self-identify as either religious or spiritual (Astin & Astin, 2004b).

The literature seems to point to a phenomenon that is growing, especially among college students, and the selective and limited impact of the college-going experience. This impact can be understood in terms of the change in students’ spirituality that occurs during the college years, and the net, between-college, within-college, conditional, and long-term effects of the post-secondary experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) wrote about general college-aged changes in “religious attitudes and values” in the 1990s’. At best, results were mixed. Of the five studies they identified, there seemed to be an overall increase in religiosity or more particularly, in the notion of religious values. However, external religious practice did not keep pace with the internal religious priorities. One study (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003) pointed to a decrease in students’ religious involvement during their first year in college, united with an increase in a desire for a less formal spiritual integration. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) asserted that the research question concerning religious values should be reframed to divert scholarly attention away from increases or decreases in religious vigor, but instead how students are reimagining, reexamining, and reshaping their religious beliefs. Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield (2001) concurred with this notion that strength of spirituality does not assumedly translate into religious involvement.
Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identified two studies (Graham & Cockriel, 1996; Graham & Donaldson, 1996) that addressed net effects of college on spiritual and religious development, both of which employed data from a 1993-1994 ACT survey of 9,300 students who were approaching college graduation. Students reported that both their personal religious growth and the university’s contribution to that growth were miniscule. Neither study controlled for pre-college religious perspectives, beliefs, nor convictions, so these scholars attached little significance to the studies. Furthermore, Lee’s (2002) study that found that over one third of students gave testimony to the fact that their religious beliefs were strengthened over the course of their college years, while only 13.7% indicated the opposite result. Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) focused specifically on the effects of college on first-year students, finding that while many of them experience a renovation of their concepts of religion and spirituality, their personal characteristics might have much more to do with this religious transformation than institutional qualities, college environments, or university experiences.

Examining between-college effects on spiritual and religious development, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) cited four studies that examined the unique institutional effects on students’ religious values. The two primary studies reached two different conclusions: Astin and Antonio (2004) believed that selectivity had a negative relationship to changes in religious belief and dedication, whereas Lee (2002) found no effects attributable to the type or the geography of a particular institution. Kuh and Gonyea (2005) concurred with Lee (2002), who also agreed that while there is a broad range in the differences among institutions, the religious affiliation of a particular institution has no effect on religious devotion whatsoever. Gonyea and Kuh (2006) contributed to the research on between-college effects by proposing that
students who attended private institutions did show a markedly higher score on a variety of outcomes than did their public school equivalents: “participating in spiritual activities, engaging in deep learning, and in self-reported growth in spirituality, ethical development, personal and social development, and intellectual skills” (p. 2). Kuh and Gonyea (2005) took the argument to the next level by inferring that “campus environment matters much more than institutional type” (p. iii) in all expressions of campus engagement, educational experiences, and desired college outcomes, regardless of their religious or spiritual influence. However, Railsback (1994) reinforced an earlier finding that ultra-conservative Christian colleges are a notable exception, in that these unique bastions of restrictive and narrowly interpreted religion may strengthen students’ evangelical religious beliefs more so than secular institutions.

Researchers and scholars have also written about within-college effects on spiritual and religious growth. Notably, Lee (2002) discovered that students who participated in activities that celebrated diversity had little to no effect on the potency of religious convictions. Alternatively, Lee (2002) found that students who were attending religious services at college experienced a strengthening of personal religiosity. Getting married while in college also had a positive relationship with spiritual or religious vitality (Lee, 2002), which the researcher attributed to the increase in attendance at religious activities that many young couples seem to experience in the earliest stages of their marital relationship. Contrarily, the liberalizing effect that college has upon many students is negatively correlated with the strengthening of religious convictions (Lee, 2002). She also posited that the aspiration of “improving society, influencing social values, and helping others in difficulty” (Lee, 2002, p. 379) is positively correlated to religious fervor, whereas financial ambition was negatively correlated to burgeoning religiosity.
Finally, the beliefs and values of college students’ closest peers and friends have one of the most profound effects on religious or spiritual strength, either lessening or intensifying it, depending on the trajectory of the friendship circle’s beliefs and ideals (Lee, 2002). As for involvement in campus religious organizations, Bryant (2007) found that religious communities typically attract first-year students who were already religiously active in high school and were predisposed to possessing an aversion to the practices of smoking, drinking, and casual sex. Religious organizations do not typically recruit or retain those who do not already possess spiritual or religious interest (Bryant, 2007); however, the potential for involvement in a religious community increases with each consecutive year in college. According to Bryant (2007), the good news for campus religious organizations is that student participation and involvement is positively correlated to social development and healthy networks of belonging, as well as emotional health. Such organizational religious membership does not relate as strongly to cultural awareness and academic success, but in regards to spiritual development and religious growth while in college, it is robustly correlated (Bryant, 2007). However, religious involvement does seem to relate positively, although mildly, to student engagement in broader co-curricular activities and “educationally purposeful activities” (Kuh & Gonyea, 2005, p. iii), which research has confirmed is a strong contributing factor to positive academic outcomes (Bryant, 2007). Fiesta, Strange, and Woods (2002) took this notion a step further in positing that existential well-being also has a positive relationship to academic accomplishment.

Even though Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) failed to discuss either the conditional or long-term effects of spiritual development during the college years, researchers such as Kuh
and Gonyea (2005) did explore conditional effects and found that African-American students benefit more from spirituality-boosting college activities than do their White counterparts. Furthermore, women are more likely than men to both value and develop in spiritual or religious terms (Astin & Antonio, 2004; Bryant, 2006; Buchko, 2004; Kuh & Gonyea, 2005). Bryant (2006) also asserted that the differences between men and women are influenced by socially constructed and differentiated societal gender expectations, an individualized understanding of religious language, perceived relevance to daily life, and personal interpretations of the meaning of spirituality. Nevertheless, women showed higher rankings on all measures of character development (Astin & Antonio, 2004) as developed in college, including civic and social values, volunteer service, and the nobility of raising a family. However, “attending an evangelical college, being religiously engaged, charitable involvement, discussing the meaning of life with friends . . . and in class . . . showed comparable positive relationships to self-rated spirituality, regardless of gender” (Bryant, 2006, p. 843). Full-time students, probably due in part to the ongoing exposure to campus religious and spiritual opportunities, have an edge over the part-time students in the development of the spiritual dimensions of their lives (Kuh & Gonyea, 2005). As for GPA, field of study, or first-generation status as possible predisposing factors or conditional effects of religious interest or spiritual development, Kuh and Gonyea (2005) concluded that these three factors are inconsequential. Finally, not one study surfaced that addressed the long-term effects of spiritual development. In summary, the outcomes research suggests that questions of religion and spirituality either increase or decrease in importance depending upon perspectives, background, experiences, values, priorities, convictions, peer relationships, ethnicity gender, marriage and enrollment
status, institutional type, campus environments, level of personal engagement, religious organization affiliation, and college aspirations.

Furthermore, the questions that emerge from students’ religious and spiritual engagement or lack thereof are of particular interest to both researchers and practitioners. In fact, colleges and universities are tailor-made for big questions concerning the world around us. Courses and academic disciplines help facilitate and frame these questions in a more formal regard. However, college also provides the opportunity and stimulus for students to turn the questions in on themselves, transplanting the same sorts of questions in their own personal lives. Shaped by the questions that are posited in both formal and informal educational environments, students often translate and internalize the theoretical and hypothetical questions posed within both curricular and cocurricular contexts, and make them personal. Some of these questions might reflect big ideas that have resurfaced among every generation since the beginning of human existence, and yet other questions are peculiarly situated in particular eras of history, among certain communities or societies, and individuals of different faith traditions, or within specific spheres of inquiry. For some scholars or philosophers, these might be defined as big questions, life questions, or questions of meaning and purpose. However, for faith professionals or spiritual advisors on the college campus, the significant ideas that are imbedded within these questions might be construed in their essence as spiritual.

Spiritual Questions in Students’ Lives

Alluded to within these theoretical models and outcome research are the very questions that students ask, ponder, and reflect upon, as they encounter differences and unconsidered viewpoints, are challenged by the gaps between their experiences and the perspectives of
others, and attempt to make sense of their lives. At this point, it must be noted that there is a
difference between researchers’ use of questions as a means to get at students’ spiritual
questions and the students’ questions themselves. In an attempt to discover students’ spiritual
questions, various strategies (Astin & Astin, 2004b; Fowler, 1981) have been employed (e.g.,
interview probes) that point students to arenas and aspects of their lives where spiritual
questions are presumed to reside. Now other investigators (Nash, 2001b; Nash, Bradley, &
Chickering, 2008; Nash & Murray, 2010; Parks, 2000), while not having engaged in such probing
research activities, have drawn from their scholarship, informed imagination, and extensive
interaction with students within formal classroom settings and informal cocurricular
environments to predict and then propose what student responses might be and even where
these questions might fit within certain predetermined categories of student experience, such
as self, of one’s community, and purposes served.

Theoretically and empirically, a limited amount of literature has focused on the nature
of these questions. Recent literature underscores the theoretical possibilities of questions
students might be asking, ranging from the explicit to the implicit. Initially, Fowler (1981)
hinted to these kinds of meaning making concerns in his five-part “faith development interview
guide.” More recently, there have been scholars who have theorized, conceptualized, and even
categorized spiritual questions, such as Parks (2000), who explicitly articulated a list of “big-
enough questions”; Strange (2000), who formulated three “core categories” of such questions;
Nash (2001), who posited a list of questions to assist students in articulating their religio-
spiritual narratives to others; Nash, Bradley, and Chickering (2008), who created an inventory of
“moral conversation” questions; and Nash and Murray (2010), who developed two lists of
questions: “existential questions of meaning” and quarterlife (Robbins, 2004; Robbins & Wilner, 2001) questions “unique to that place between adolescence and adulthood” (p. 7).

Fowler (1981) developed an extensive rubric of interview questions that his research team utilized in investigating the faith development of adolescents and adults. His interview guide was divided into four parts that included life review, life-shaping experiences and relationships, present values and commitments, and religion. The interview was intended to probe and discover the participants’ stage of faith by allowing the researcher to “overhear their ways of shaping and interpreting meanings from their lives” (p. 308) through the interviewees’ own constructions of life experiences, significant people, personal perspectives, and religious themes. A sample of such queries that seek to identify memories, values, events, relationships, crises, and religious or nonreligious beliefs are:

What gives your life meaning? What makes life worth living for you? Have you experienced losses, crises, or suffering that have changed or colored your life in special ways? Have you had moments of joy, ecstasy, peak experience, or breakthrough that have shaped or changed your life? Can you describe the beliefs and values or attitudes that are most important in guiding your own life? Are there symbols or images or rituals that are important to you? When life seems most discouraging and hopeless, what holds you up or renews your hope? What does death mean to you? What feelings do you have when you think about God? What is your image or idea of mature faith? (pp. 310-312)

Approaching the solicitation of spiritual questions in less formal terms, Parks (2000) concluded that it is often in the rich context of communities of inquisitive and open-minded
individuals that such spiritual questions emerge, and that mentoring communities have a profound capacity to assist students in identifying the big, bigger, and biggest questions in their lives. These are questions that matter in the grand scheme of things, far different from those “questions of little consequence or those that only skim the surface of things [that] can distract and preoccupy us” (Parks, 2000, p. 137). These are “big-enough questions” that stretch the mind, probe the possibilities of what might be, and pry into untouched parts of the human spirit. In her book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, Parks (2000) highlighted a short list of such questions with which young adults might wrestle. Here are a few notable exemplars:

- Who do I really want to become? How do I work toward something when I don’t even know what it is? Am I lovable? Who will be there for me? Why is suffering so pervasive? Who am I as a sexual being? Do my actions make any real difference in the bigger scheme of things? When do I feel most alive? What are my fears? How am I complicit in patterns of injustice? What is my society, or life, or God, asking of me?

- Where do I want to put my stake in the ground and invest my life? (p. 137-138)

Similarly to Fowler, Strange (2000) arranged spiritual questions into “core categories” so as to identify and better understand the “queries, concerns, and urgings” (para. 8) of students. Within the groupings of questions that address self-definition and understanding, relationships with others, and purpose and direction, Strange (2000) articulated a short list of questions that are illustrative of student concerns within the spiritual realm, a few of which are:

- What are my fears and hopes? What inspires me? What creates a sense of balance and wholeness in my life? What does it mean to be faithful? How have I experienced love
and intimacy? Where is my journey or path leading? What do I reflect upon and imagine? For what or whom would I be willing to die? (para. 8)

Strange accentuated that “it is not so much the particular answers to these questions that are most important, but rather it is the searching process itself that constitutes that essence of students’ spiritual journeys” (para. 9).

In reference to spiritual journeys, Nash (2001) posited that everyone has a spiritual story worth telling, and they often will, if “safe and mutually respectful spaces” (p. 124) are established for expressing personal religio-spiritual narratives. In fact, Nash is persistent in asking a series of questions to those who enroll in his college courses or participate in his workshops, lectures, or discussion groups. The seven questions that are posed to those who have demonstrated interest in these matters are:

(1) What do you believe?; (2) Why does this belief have such a strong appeal to you?; (3) Where, in your opinion, is your belief strongest and weakest in its storytelling appeal?; (4) Where, in your opinion, is my belief strongest and weakest in its storytelling appeal?; (5) What, in your narrative, do you think might, and might not, work for me, and vice versa?; (6) Why does any story have to be the only true story?; and (7) What does your particular need to have others adopt your religious story tell you about yourself and the rest of us? (pp. 125)

Nash’s questions, designed to encourage inquisitive students to continue in the search for meaning, are more overtly religious in nature, since he believes that conversations about spirituality devoid of the religious connections are shortsighted and limited in their
effectiveness in telling the bigger story in students’ lives (personal communication, March 8, 2010).

Furthermore, Nash, Bradley, and Chickering (2008) heralded the notion that spiritual questioning, repackaged as “moral conversations,” should be front and center within the academy. They believe that certain questions have the ability to tap into complex spiritual and religious paradigms more quickly, ultimately assisting “moral conversationalists to dig a little more deeply into their own background beliefs, their taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge and truth” (p. 59). A sampling of such questions is:

Do you think of your “truth” as something “out there”? Or as something “in here”? Is it possible for you to possess multiple truths, some of which might even be contradictory?

How do you arrive at your truths in the first place? Is it ever possible for you to extricate your truths from the way you were raised, trained, and socialized? On what grounds do you privilege some of your truths over others? (pp. 59-60)

Such queries have the potential to prompt university students to construct and confront a fresh reservoir of new spiritual questions within their own lives.

Moreover, students are personally reflecting upon spiritual questions, not only in formal multifaith discussion groups facilitated by pluralistic educators, but also in the internal corridors of their private lives. Regardless of whether universities facilitate the expression of these questions or not, many students will themselves engage in a meaning-making process that is as “multidimensional and complex as each of the meaning-makers” (p. xvi). Nash and Murray (2010) disappointedly recounted that there are scarce opportunities at most public higher education institutions, in either curricular or cocurricular environments, for spiritually
inquisitive students to gather and dialogue about matters of faith, spirituality, personal
religious beliefs, or the meaning of life. Often left to navigate these meaning-making journeys
alone, they still create the necessary mental space to ask their own “existential questions of
meaning” (p. xv), even in the absence of intentional campus environments or devoid of the
direction of skilled campus mentors. The substance of these students’ questions is believed to
be:

  timeless, yet reflecting the age in which they live . . . a fascinating admixture of the
abstract and the practical, the universal and the particular . . . representing well the
tensions that exist for so many college students who seek to find the delicate balance
that exists in the difficult space between idealism and realism, between macro- and
micro-meaning. (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. xv)

Imagining the questions that are on students’ hearts and minds, Nash and Murray (2010)
proposed the following for consideration:

  What does it mean to be successful? Why do I hurt so much when a relationship ends?
  Why do innocent people have to suffer? Can I be a good person without religion? Why
  am I so vulnerable? Why am I here in school when I could be doing something far more
  constructive in the world beyond my campus? (pp. xv-xvi)

Nash and Murray (2010) considered these kinds of questions existential in nature: “there is only
being or existence, and it is up to us to create our own values and meanings in a world where
older certainties have disappeared” (p. 31). They posited that the students’ doubts,
uncertainty, uneasiness, and fear during the college years are a seedbed for these kinds of
questions. The anxiety and often anguish can be increasingly observed in the raw articulation of questions that are emerging in the lives of this generation of students:

Why? So what? What sense does it make? Who cares? Is there a larger purpose to any of this beyond brute luck and dumb circumstance? How much freedom do I really have to craft a life? What is worth knowing? What do I stand for? What should I believe? What should I hope for? Whom should I love? Why should I be moral? What is the difference between faith, spirituality, and religion, and which do I have? Why should I even bother? (pp. 30-31)

This quarterlife generation (Robbins, 2004; Robbins & Wilner, 2001) is believed to encompass most traditionally-aged undergraduate and graduate students who are enrolled at American universities and colleges. As a result, Nash and Murray (2010) were not surprised to find that there are a series of questions emerging among the quarterlifers that often resemble the spiritual queries other researchers are identifying in the lives of students. These researchers place such questions into six categories: hopes and dreams, educational challenges, religion and spirituality, work life, identity, and home-friends-lovers-family, and then identify questions that are similar to what has been noted already:

How do I find my passion? When do I let go of my dream? How do I start over, if I need to? Am I studying what is right for me? What is the right religion for me? Why is it that a noninstitutional spirituality seems, at times, to be so powerful for me? Can I be good without God? Will I always have to choose between doing what I love or making lots of money? Is it possible to find a career that is congruent with my personal values? Why is it so hard to live alone but also so hard to sustain a relationship? Is there really such a
person as a “soul mate”? Why can’t I find close, enduring friends who stay the course without drifting away? Why is adulthood, at one and the same time, so threatening to me yet also so attractive? Why can’t I like who I am? Will I ever be truly happy with myself? Why does my college experience neglect all the really important questions that come up for me regarding my hopes and dreams for the future? (pp. 5-7)

Nash and Murray (2010) have noted similarities between students “regardless of the particular narratives they may inhabit” (p. 5), and have concluded that all quarterlifers, particularly those on the college campus, are composing such questions as these.

Astin and Astin (2004a) have also concluded that college students are “actively dealing with existential questions” (p. 22). Despite the fact that contemporary students are a “diverse group ethnically, socio-economically, religiously, and politically . . . and having high ambitions and aspirations for educational and occupational success” (p. 22), spiritual questions are central for most of them. The spiritual perspectives and practices of college students have been extensively studied as part of the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) Higher Education Research Institute’s *Spirituality in Higher Education: Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose* over the course of the past decade. In this multi-year research project that has involved more than 100,000 students, and included hundreds of colleges and universities, this study provides data to better understand the level, intensity, and trends of spiritual experiences, behaviors, and growth patterns among this generation of college students. The findings provide extensive insight into the broader domains of spiritual perspective and beliefs, spiritual vitality, spiritual self-identification and self-assessment, stimulating and inhibiting factors to spiritual interest and growth, and a variety of other spiritual and religious aspects in
the lives of students. These researchers have developed sophisticated survey instruments to retrieve data from students, probing into students’ “spiritual search and religious engagement. . . spirituality and religiousness . . . political orientation and attitudes . . . spirituality, religiousness, and well-being . . . (and) religious preference” (Astin & Astin, 2004a, p. 1).

Specifically, within the dimensions of spirituality and religiousness, the researchers developed the distinct scales of spirituality, spiritual quest, equanimity, religious commitment, religious engagement, religious/social conservatism, religious skepticism, religious struggle, charitable involvement, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview (Astin & Astin, 2004a, p. 8). Initially in 2004, the two-page College Students’ Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Survey was added to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, and included 160 items that address matters of spirituality and religion in students’ lives, including probes that explore students’ perspectives on the relationship between science and religion, conceptions of and experiences with God, triggers for religious and spiritual beliefs, engagement in spiritual or religious activities, as well as motives and rationale for involvement in or care for such matters (“2004 College Students’ Beliefs and Values Survey,” n.d.). Soon after, the spirituality and religiosity items were imbedded within the larger instrument, and the findings have been helpful in assisting higher education scholars and practitioners in better appreciating and understanding this phenomenon among today’s college students.

In summary, there are research probes employed to extract spiritual questions from students, as well as the students’ questions themselves. Most empirical research has been focused on discovering the answers to these questions, while at least one recent attempt has been made to identify the students’ self-constructed spiritual questions. As part of the ongoing
national study of college students’ search for meaning and purpose, it appears as if the HERI investigators initiated in-depth interviews with individual students in the past couple of years ("Spirituality in Higher Education Methodology," n.d.), in order to probe more deeply into students’ spiritual beliefs and their search for meaning and purpose during their college years. Employing a qualitative approach to accompany their statistical methodology, the researchers have posed eleven questions to each interviewee, the fifth of which is most relevant to this proposed study: What are the spiritual questions or issues in your life that you are grappling with right now? ("Spirituality in Higher Education Student Interview Protocol," n.d.). To date, it appears as if this might be one of the few studies, as yet published, that has examined the nature of students’ spiritual questions from an emic ("insider") perspective. Though admirable in this one occasion, it must be noted that qualitative inquiry approaches designed to probe more deeply into the lives of university students are rare and merely skim the surface as to the kinds of spiritual questions that students are asking.

In fact, as one peruses the range of questions through the etic ("outsider") eyes of these various researchers over the course of the past 30 years, it can be observed that some of the questions appear more overtly spiritual in nature than others, as they relate to character (Who am I now and who am I becoming?), calling (Where am I going and what is my purpose?), and community (With whom do I connect and share life?). However, the potential shortcoming of these numerous theoretical approaches to identifying and analyzing students’ spiritual questions is that these scholars and researchers come at this topic from an outside perspective. The topic of spiritual questions has been examined, but rarely from an empirical basis. As those who think about such matters, higher education experts predict and posit what questions are
constructed in the minds of students, without necessarily soliciting such information from the insiders themselves. Thus, the purpose of this study was targeted toward discovering the nature of spiritual questions that undergraduate students are constructing in their own lives: the underlying conditions, the construction of, and the identified consequences of these questions.

Summary of Research

It is the debatable understanding of spirituality, ways of describing its evolution and sequence in students’ lives, the impact of the college-going experience on its various aspects, and an initial sense of the kinds of questions that such understandings are meant to address that emerge as the primary themes in the research literature on the topic of the past 30 years.

In conclusion, particularly in reference to the general threads of understanding that have recently emerged regarding spiritual questions in students’ lives, the literature provides only a scant examination of the content and/or categories of these fundamental questions among undergraduate students of diverse backgrounds and belief systems. Even less is known about the spiritual questioning process itself, including but not limited to the sources, triggers, and motivating forces for these questions, as well as their construction and articulation. While the researchers’ questions thus far seem reasonable and are easily situated in sensible categories that seem to reflect, at first glance, what is commonly understood as the human experience within the college context, these kinds of treatments and analyses lack any clear empirical support. The unique contribution of the present study is its careful and empirical exploration of these questions in students’ lives, the particulars of which are the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

Finding its roots in the French word *rechercher*, implying a quest to discover and understand, research can be defined as a “careful, systematic, patient investigation undertaken to discover or establish facts and relationships” (Mertler & Charles, 2008, p. 5). At times, the motivation to research a phenomenon is the pursuit of pure knowledge; in other instances, the investigative incentive is to solve problems or predict the future. Regardless, the attraction to research is intertwined with human nature. However, the choice of research design in each research endeavor is shaped by the investigator’s assumptions about truth, reality, and knowledge. Often unknowingly, each researcher approaches situations, scenarios, issues, or problems through the lens of a particular interpretive paradigm. The paradigm is tacit, implicit, and at play in the background, assisting the researcher in shaping questions, analyzing problems, interpreting results, and devising solutions. Creswell (1998) defined a paradigm as the “basic beliefs or assumptions that guide inquiries” (p. 74). Guba (1990) included an applied component, when he wrote of a paradigm as a “basic set of beliefs that guide action” (p. 17). Inevitably, these inherent beliefs, assumptions, values, and perspectives that constitute a paradigm direct and shape each step of the research process.

Several scholars have attempted to define and describe various paradigms, but Guba (1990) chose four broad categories: positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism. For example, the conventional positivistic paradigm suggests an objective and static reality that is driven by fixed natural laws that are predictable and dependable. Within this paradigm, new knowledge can be discovered through data (quantitative or qualitative) that are retrieved in a scientific manner. Research questions are proposed before the inauguration
of a study and subjected to rigorous empirical evaluation under carefully controlled measures. The data are presumed to be context- and value-free, assuming that the research environment was shielded from outside influences and that the investigator maintained a distant and demonstrably unbiased posture throughout the research process.

Conversely, a constructivist paradigm suggests that truth is relative and reality is shifting as it responds to various personal, sociological, and cultural inputs. Through the lens of constructivism, it is believed that knowledge is subjective and not simply discovered, but also explored and understood best in natural settings where the investigator is immersed and appropriately interactive in the process of inquiry. Words, behaviors, and artifacts are utilized in understanding the human phenomenon in an attempt to make meaning of each participant’s experience and give voice to each individual’s perspective. Different from approaches rooted in conventional positivism that adherents claim to be the “naturally sanctioned way to determine the definitive and enduring truth about states of affairs” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 103), the “naturalistic [constructivist] paradigm assumes, however, that there are multiple realities, with differences among them that cannot be resolved through rational processes or increased data” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 14). Much more emergent rather than conventional in nature, constructivist inquiry employs the human instrument to observe, record, evaluate, analyze, thematize, and then synthesize the research contexts and content in an attempt to create new understandings, rather than to measure or substantiate existing data. The co-construction of knowledge between the investigator and research participants is inevitable within this paradigm and is not considered problematic. Constructivists recognize
that not only are values inherent to the process of constructing and documenting reality but are also to be accepted and affirmed.

It is for these reasons that this study employed emergent methods of naturalistic inquiry to explore the constructions, conditions, and consequences of spiritual questions in students’ lives. According to Erlandson et al. (1993), the “design of the study is the attempt of a researcher to give order to some set of phenomena so that they will make sense to the researcher and so that the researcher can communicate that sense to others” (p. 73).

Qualitative inquiry into these students’ lives, experiences, and perspectives through observations and interviews as part of an evolving research process was effective in mining the descriptive data required to answer the research questions. The desire to understand the nature of spiritual questions within the individual contexts of students’ lives necessitated such an approach. Moreover, the naturalistic investigator recognizes “the complexity of human settings . . . [and so will go] into the setting with only as much design as he believes is faithful to the context and will help answer questions about it” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 73). This study maintained a discovery orientation throughout in hopes of more comprehensively understanding and clearly communicating the reality of the phenomenon under study, noting that the nature of spirituality, spiritual development, and the spiritual questioning process are interconnected to and resultant of many other internal and external influences present during the undergraduate years. In particular, spiritual questions do not emerge in a vacuum, so a focus on interesting back stories and illustrative nuances was required to do justice to the research questions.
Therefore, as a research paradigm, constructivist inquiry was the most suitable approach to study the research questions and the knowledge they purport to understand, given four assumptions of the constructivist model related to its underlying ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (how reality is known), axiology (the role of values in knowing reality), and methodology (how to proceed in seeking to understand reality).

Ontology

Identifying and articulating the “nature or structure of reality or existence” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 9) is the study of ontology. Reality is perceived differently for each individual, informed by background, present context, relationships, and perspectives. The understanding and interpretation of reality is a highly individualized and personal endeavor that is ongoing, complex, and ever-changing. This phenomenon is true for both research participants and for the investigators themselves. As a result, what is knowable is shaped by the personal worldviews or paradigms of everyone connected to the whole. “All tenable statements about existence depend on a worldview, and no worldview is determined by empirical or sense data about the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 97). Consequently, both the participant’s experience and interpretation of a particular phenomenon as well as the researcher’s past experiences and resulting assumptions co-create unique perspectives of reality that affect the process of inquiry. The “local and specific constructed realities” (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 256) within social, cultural, and research contexts can be perceived by logical positivists as problematic in understanding and documenting the findings within educational research. On the other hand, constructivist inquirers are comfortable with this dilemma,
knowing that “all aspects of reality are interrelated” and that ontological relativism compels the researcher to formulate “truth” from the multiple and varying constructs of the participants.

**Epistemology**

While ontology concerns the nature of reality, epistemology refers to the construction of knowledge about reality. Specifically, how does one know something about anything or anything about something? “Related assumptions about the acquisition of knowledge . . . [and] the origins, theory, or assumptions“ (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 9) are at the heart of epistemology. More conventional positivistic researchers attempt to understand pure and static knowledge through objective facts and statistically significant data, whereas constructivist inquirers engage in transactional learning, interactive observation, and reflective inquiry throughout the duration of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). More subjective and relational in nature and inherent to discovery and understanding through qualitative means, the constructivist’s research methodology is marked with an iterative process of astute observation, ongoing verification, and compounding knowledge formulation. The epistemological aim of the constructivist inquirer is to create new knowledge by immersing oneself into the research setting as an insider, in an up close and collaborative relationship with the research participants (Creswell, 2007), minimizing “distance” or “objective separateness” (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 94). It is this distinct constructivist way of knowing and learning that next prompts a discussion of the role of values and subjectivities in the research process.

**Axiology**

Values are those personal beliefs and preferences that inspire, drive, and motivate individuals. Values represent those concerns that most matter to people. Inherent to any
research venture is the presence of values. They can be detected, should be identified, and are welcome within the constructivist paradigm. Unapologetically, qualitative inquiry is “value-laden work” (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991, p. 218) for the constructivist inquirer who is engaging in naturalistic research. Furthermore, not only are values present, but they are instrumental to the process in that they are a “means of understanding” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, p. 5). However, it is very important that the researcher report his or her values and sources of subjectivity as straightforwardly and honestly as possible. A constructivist researcher’s transparency regarding personal values replaces the positivist’s insistence on eliminating values from the research venture.

Methodology

Methodology is the overall strategy that guides research. Methods reflect the decisions and details of the research process. Aware that the nature of research questions should dictate the methodology in pursuit of an approach that will most effectively answer such questions, the present study employed qualitative methods in exploring the lives of undergraduate students. Good research requires that the nature of the research questions drive the choice of research design. So, unlike positivistic inquiry, which promotes a research course from the general to the particular, with questions that are mostly predetermined, this study employed an emergent and qualitative methodology that began with attention to the details surrounding students’ spiritual lives and the resulting spiritual questions, followed by a consideration of general themes and ideas. Although several preliminary research questions were suggested prior to data collection, the qualitative inquiry approach here necessitated adjustments throughout the
processes, as Ely et al. (1991) noted: “a key characteristic of naturalistic research is that questions for study evolve as one is studying” (p. 30).

In light of the nature of examining the internal mechanisms of students’ lives, the methodology here sought to understand the complex, interconnected, and multi-layered attitudes, feelings, perceptions, motivations, passions, and desires, as well as the contexts, relationships, and environmental factors that potentially shaped the students’ constructions of spiritual questions. Furthermore, beyond the spiritual questions are the conditions or triggers, as well as the consequences and results of those questions, which required a comprehensive, probing, and relational inquiry approach that qualitative research tools are designed to deliver. As noted above, most of the research that has been conducted on this topic appears to be more confirmatory than exploratory in nature. The present study contributed to the literature in more discovery-oriented and descriptive ways. Interviews with students and the analysis of select artifacts together informed the students’ constructions of spiritual questions, thus generating a more seamless and cohesive portrait of each student’s experiences. The researcher served as the human instrument who gathered data, observed situations and scenarios, and developed themes and categories, thus resulting in the creation of knowledge and the identification of meaning as it pertained to the participants’ creation and interaction with spiritual questions. As a result, the researcher was then able to comprehend and communicate the reality as displayed in the findings. Committed to consistently functioning within a constructivist paradigm throughout the past several months of research, this inquirer investigated “real-world situations as they unfold naturally [with a] nonmanipulative and
noncontrolling [demeanor]. . . [while maintaining an] openness to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens and/or situations change” (Patton, 2002, p. 40).

Recognizing the “complexity of any human setting” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 73), this researcher anticipated an acceptable degree of ambiguity as he sought to create meaning from the encounters and conversations with the research participants as they articulated the construction of spiritual questions in their lives.

**Participant Selection and Procedures**

Research within human settings requires interaction with human beings. Second only to a self-assessment of one’s paradigm or worldview, the first task in designing the methodology for a study is to carefully select the participants. Unlike the random or representative sampling that occurs within conventional positivistic research, constructivist researchers utilize purposive or directive sampling so as to select informants who are most compatible with the problem-focus and are likely candidates to provide relevant data in response to the research questions. Deciding specifically who and generally what to investigate is central to the constructivist research process. Furthermore, the source of data in qualitative inquiry is not referred to as a subject, but as a participant. In the constructivist model, it is the researcher’s duty, as the human instrument, to “maximize discovery of heterogeneous patterns and problems that occur in the particular context under study. . . [rather than to] generalize the findings of the study to a broad population” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 82). In pursuing this important research task and in an attempt to maximize variation among participants, sixteen undergraduate students with very specific characteristics were chosen from the Brownstone State University (BSU) population. In fact, Creswell (2002) posited that maximal variation sampling is a “purposeful
sampling strategy in which the researcher samples cases or individuals that differ on some characteristic. This procedure requires that you identify the characteristic and then find sites or individuals that display different dimensions of that characteristic” (p. 194). As a result, this selective sampling course of action will “increase the range of data exposed and maximizes the researcher’s ability to identify emerging themes that take adequate account of contextual conditions and cultural norms” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 82).

Student characteristics of particular interest to this study were undergraduate college level and age, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, and religious background or tradition. The manner in which the construction of spiritual questions aligned with these identifiers had the potential to add scholarly substance to the rapidly expanding body of literature on the spiritual dimensions of college student development and interfaith dialogue. This study examined current male and female undergraduate students from a variety of faith-specific and other backgrounds from across the college level spectrum, and including a range of races, ethnicities, and nationalities. Given the dimensions of variance noted, this study primarily examined the construction of spiritual questions from students of diverse faith, religious, spiritual, and other belief backgrounds and persuasions, and secondarily, explored any connections, relationships, or themes based on college level and age, gender, race/ethnicity, and nationality. Therefore, the researcher secured the involvement of sixteen participants: eight male and eight female undergraduate students from the traditions of Atheism, Agnostic Pantheism, Buddhist-Taoist Paganism, Catholicism, Catholic-Christianity, Christian Orthodox, Evangelical Christianity, Gnosticism, Hinduism, Islam, Non-denominational Christianity, Protestantism, Reformed Judaism, and Tengri-Islam. A proactive and rigorous attempt to maximize the variation among
students resembling the aforementioned dimensions was a high priority during the first month of the study. The timeline can be found in Appendix A.

Upon receiving final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board from the Office of Research Compliance (Appendix B), the researcher made contact via email (Appendix C), by phone, and even in person with several gatekeepers within BSU, beginning with the Campus MultiFaith Alliance (CMA). As the chairperson of the CMA and a visible faith leader on campus and in the surrounding community, this researcher drew upon his contacts to assist him in identifying viable candidates for participation in the study. According to Creswell (2002), a gatekeeper is “an individual who has an official or unofficial role at the site, provides entrance to a site, [and] helps researchers locate people” (p. 192). Ironically, this researcher fulfilled many of the qualities of a gatekeeper at the chosen institution and is highly connected to constituents from a wide spectrum of belief traditions. However, the investigator was certain to network within the campus and community to identify other gatekeepers in an attempt to diversify and maximally vary the participation pool. As a preliminary list of potentially “information rich” (Patton, 1990, p. 169) and willing participants were compiled, those students received a brief questionnaire (Appendix D) by email to further determine their eligibility for involvement in the study. Students who were deemed eligible were informed of the decision, formally invited to participate, oriented to the study, and provided with the necessary permissions of informed consent (Appendix E). At which time a suitable number of participants were secured, the interview process commenced, using an interview protocol for the first (Appendix F) of two interviews intended to facilitate data-producing conversations between the researcher and the participants. From the beginning of the study, the researcher carefully and
consistently maintained an ongoing and up-to-date field log that contains contact records, interview transcripts, and all reflective field notes that now serve as the official record for each activity throughout the research process. This comprehensive and all-inclusive field log became the:

fundamental database for constructing case studies and carrying out thematic cross-case analysis . . . [replete with] descriptions of what [was] being experienced and observed, quotations from the people observed, the observer’s feelings and reactions . . . and field-generated insights and interpretations. (Patton, 2002, p. 305)

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study were retrieved primarily through interviews and observations. Given the assumptions and the general nature of constructivist inquiry, the research participants generated the data from their unique viewpoints and expressed them in their own words. The researcher assumed both a privileged participant-observer and a limited participant-observer role (Wolcott, 1988) with participants, dependent on the nature of the relationship with each particular student. The participant-observer had a previously established trust-relationship with the student, which allowed for immediate access to the student’s spiritual narrative, whereas the limited participant-observer slowly developed a friendly and trusting relationship as the interview process progressed. Due to his ministerial role and visibility on campus, this researcher recruited participants who represented a wide range of contact and connection to the researcher, including new contacts and familiar acquaintances. As a human instrument, the investigator was uniquely suited for the collection, organization, coding, categorizing, thematizing, analyzing, and the reporting of data as he looked and listened. These
observations, as described by Marshall and Rossman (1989) as “systematic description[s] of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study” (p. 79) were noted as he maintained an “attitude of curiosity and heightened attention . . . to those very details that most of us filter out automatically in day-to-day life” (Ely et al., 1991, p. 42). These data, collected in participants’ familiar campus classroom settings, informed the research questions and assisted the researcher in making sense of the constructed realities. Chronicled in a field journal for later review, these data, in the form of transcripts and descriptions, and included with analytic notes, documents, summaries, and reflections, provided both a research tool and an audit trail.

Two semi-structured interviews, conducted in a one-on-one format with each participant, were audio-taped and transcribed. Moreover, hand-written notes were taken during the course of each interview to assist the researcher in developing emerging questions that assisted the researcher in enhancing the focus and quality of the interview conversation.

Finally, in a few situations, the analysis of documents and other relevant artifacts took place as part of the research process in order to learn more about the participants’ interests, experiences, relationships, and faith communities. Particularly in regards to the research focus on spiritual questioning, the investigator examined sacred texts, personal journals, online musical chants, and even clothing artifacts in tending to the problem-focus. Obviously, sensitivity and tact were employed in the investigation of such personally meaningful items to the participants.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) reminded qualitative researchers that “data analysis must begin with the very first data collection, in order to facilitate the emergent design, grounding of
theory, and emergent structure of later data collection phases” (p. 242). This researcher is committed to this notion, in accordance with Ely’s et al. advice as well: “the start of analysis starts early, with the very first log notation. This is because analysis is part and parcel of the ongoing, intertwined process that powers data collection” (p. 86). The iterative review of data through interview transcriptions, observation notes, and document examination allowed for the process of analysis to take place in a manner that satisfied the indices of quality. This analysis included the unitizing, coding, categorizing, and organizing of ideas into main themes within each case and across all cases. This process resulted in the drafting of individual case reports followed by the creation and presentation of an aggregate report that represents the overarching findings of the study.

Human Instrument

“The instrument of choice in naturalistic inquiry is the human” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 236). From the perspective of a qualitative researcher, this is genius and by design:

since the human instrument ensures that data will be collected, analyzed, and interpreted within an interactive process . . . [that] merely follows the normal process by which humans solve their daily problems . . . data are obtained, tentative meaning is applied to them. When new data are obtained, meaning is revised. (Erlandson, 1993, p. 39)

The ability to hear and see data in real time, to process and understand what is being seen and heard, and to employ high-level interpretation and synthesis in the moment, makes the human instrument indispensible to acquiring a depth of understanding in any situation. This iterative task of simultaneous gathering and refining data, as well as engaging in observation and sense
making, cannot be duplicated even by the most sophisticated technology. Erlandson et al (1993) concurred in that “relying on all its senses, intuition, thoughts, and feelings, the human instrument can be a very potent and perceptive data-gathering tool. Moreover, the human brain is unparalleled and unrivaled in its countless complex functions and capabilities” (p. 82).

Patton (2002) candidly assessed that:

qualitative inquiry offers opportunities not only about the experiences of others but also to examine the experiences that the inquirer brings to the inquiry, experiences that will, to some extent, affect what is studied and help shape, for better or worse, what is discovered. (p. 27)

While Ely et al. (1991) encouraged the qualitative inquirer with this word of advice: “we have found it less rewarding to agonize about becoming perfectly objective than to do something about becoming more objective” (p. 54), this researcher admits to the importance for readers to consider the researcher’s personal interests, educational background, and professional experiences that inevitably tinted the co-constructions that emerged during the research process. An abbreviated version of this section is included here, while a more detailed and descriptive first-person narrative is placed in Appendix H. This overview includes a description of the researcher’s personal interests, educational background, and professional experiences as they relate to the task at hand.

The topic of student spiritual development is of great personal interest to the researcher, a fact that has undoubtedly shaped this process. Nonetheless, the goals of qualitative research are embraced here to give clear voice to the emic (i.e., insider) perspective. Indeed, the researcher brings his own perspectives, experiences, and insights to the research
process, but this is done so only within a personal commitment to the highest standards of scholarship practice.

From a personal perspective, his own restrictive religious childhood and adolescent upbringing, his spiritual quest as a seeker-skeptic during his undergraduate years, and his varied experiences with campus ministry all have fueled a passion for diversity and interfaith dialogue, and a personal commitment to matters of social justice, equality, and tolerance.

Previous to entering a Higher Education Administration doctoral program, the researcher achieved a bachelor’s degree in journalism from Ohio University and a Master in Ministry degree from Moody Theological Seminary (MTS). Moreover, he has participated in numerous theological and ministry conferences and educational workshops, retreats, and conferences over the past twenty years.

Of particular interest might be how a seminary degree from a very conservative Bible seminary has shaped the researcher’s etic constructions throughout this project. At MTS, his reputation was that of a feisty young campus minister who enjoyed challenging the status quo, asking the questions that others were too afraid to ask, and exposing shortcomings and contradictions in the curriculum and institutional policies. All of this is to illustrate that the researcher is an independent and complex thinker, who can navigate his way through the jagged terrain of both the secular and sectarian arenas with an important blend of relational intelligence, humility, and critique.

Now in the final stretch of a doctoral program, the researcher has completed a course sequence in quantitative, qualitative, and applied research, and also has served as a research assistant to his advisor. He has been introduced to constructivist inquiry and its corresponding
philosophical underpinnings, assumptions, and methodology. Furthermore, he has assisted his advisor in conceptualizing and designing the SEARCH residential theme community and the *Big Questions Café*, both designed as interventions in the spiritual dimensions of undergraduate seekers. Throughout his educational career, the researcher has not only personally and professional engaged in spirituality, but has also formally studied the spiritual dimensions of student development including its theories and high impact practices.

For the past 21 years, the researcher has worked professionally as a campus minister at two different universities. Particularly at one of these institutions from 1995-2008, his work focused on reimagining and redesigning campus ministries for a shifting undergraduate clientele by creating powerful environments where students could ask honest questions in pursuit of satisfying answers without the confusion or pressure of religious jargon and coercion. He also serves as the chair of a multifaith organization of ministry professionals and campus affiliates. In summary, the researcher’s personal interests, formal preparation, and relevant experience have uniquely positioned him with a degree of theoretical and practical sensitivity to the problem addressed and the means to approach it.

*Indices of Quality*

Constructivists are “suspicious of causal explanations and empirical generalizations applied to complex human interactions and cultural systems” (Patton, 2002, p. 546). Consequently, research methods and techniques must submit to measures of trustworthiness to demonstrate their quality, rigor, and scholarship rather than validity, reliability, and generalizability. Different criteria are required from constructivist inquirers to justify and certify interpretations and conclusions than from those with a positivistic bent. Constructivist
researchers are “more interested in deeply understanding the human dimensions of the world in general . . . [and] in deeply understanding specific cases within a particular context than in hypothesizing about generalizations and causes across time and space” (Patton, 2002, p. 546).

Trustworthiness

The value of qualitative research methodology is authenticated when it exhibits measures of trustworthiness that are deemed to be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. As attention is given to these measures of trustworthiness, the findings are reinforced, substantiated, and believed to be transferable contributions to the understanding of a particular subject area.

Credibility. Ultimately, credibility is achieved with the larger scholarly community through prolonged engagement with the participants and substantiation of persistent observation (Erlandson et al., 1993). It is appropriate to evaluate that indeed the “researcher’s judgment is reasonable given the nature of the topic and the circumstances” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 130), and prolonged engagement is the primary way to ensure such credibility. Prolonged engagement is the ongoing interaction of the participant-observer with the participants on their turf and in their contexts, while actively listening to their emic perspective over the course of a prolonged period of time. The purpose of this is to be immersed in the stories and narratives of these individuals for a sufficient length of time to acquire an accurate understanding of each participant’s perspectives. Thus two lengthy interviews were completed with each participant over the course of four months. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that at least two interviews be performed to ensure proper expansion and elaboration of data. Furthermore, since all the participants were situated within
one campus community where the researcher also resides, additional opportunities for ongoing interaction and observation with several of the participants occurred.

It is for this reason that the investigator restricted the data collection to one campus, so that he had ample opportunities for both formal and informal observation of the participants. “While prolonged engagement serves to temper distortion caused by the researcher’s presence, persistent observation accentuates that presence by actively seeking out sources of data identified by the researcher’s own emergent design” (Erlandson et. al, p. 136).

Moreover, a triangulation process was used that compared and contrasted data to strengthen credibility. “By using different or multiple sources of data . . . [and] methods (observations, interviews, videotapes, photographs, documents)” (Erlandson et al., 1993, pp. 137-138), the researcher stays alert to the convergence of data, which is “as suspenseful as it is important” (Ely et al., 1991, p. 97). Since there is the ongoing interplay of etic and emic in all qualitative research, it is especially important to apply consistent triangulation standards during the analysis stage to certify that findings and conclusions are not merely the imaginative notions of a value-laden and narrow-minded constructivist, but are grounded in rigorous cross-checking and comparison of the data.

Yet another safeguard against constructivist researchers conceiving of neither data that are absent nor conclusions not warranted is the assistance of a peer debriefer and member-checking with the participants themselves. In peer debriefing, two sets of eyes are always better than one. The study’s advisor, as well as a doctoral colleague trained in qualitative inquiry and yet who is not relationally or emotionally invested in this particular study, have read the interview transcripts and reviewed the field log to monitor the primary researcher’s
thematizing, coding, and categorization of the data. Consulting a “disinterested peer” who reviewed data “for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308) was a helpful step in the process. The corroboration and validation of more than one researcher as it pertained to these data and their tentative analysis strengthened this study’s credibility. As for member-checking, though, this is by far the “most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314), because if each participant reviews the content and analysis of the interview transcripts, relational interactions, artifacts, or environmental settings and agrees that the attached reconstructions, analyses, and conclusions are accurate and appropriate, maximum credibility is arguably established. This has occurred.

Recognizing that each of these components were necessary and important to authenticate credibility throughout the research process, this study included formal and informal encounters, interviews, conversations, and observations with each participant in individual case study reports, as well as a comprehensive aggregate report, both of which were reviewed by one qualified peer debriefer and the study’s advisor. Moreover, each participant had the opportunity to weigh in concerning how his or her interview was transcribed and analyzed, so that verbal confirmations or corrections could occur. Member-checking occurred at two points in the research process. Each participant reviewed and responded to their individual case report as well as the larger, comprehensive aggregate report. Furthermore, prolonged and persistent engagement and observation episodes were triangulated against each other and then woven together in an insightful and readable work that “open[s] up a world to
the reader through rich, detailed, and concrete descriptions of people and places” (Patton, 2002, p. 438).

Transferability. Generalizing findings to all members of a population is not a concern for a constructivist inquirer, but transferability is instead preferable as the goal is to “describe in great detail the interrelationships and intricacies of the context being studied” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 32), so that knowledge might possibly be applied from one case to another at the discretion of the reader of the research findings. In addition to the aforementioned purposive sampling, the thick description of the data, with supporting exemplars and quotations, enhanced the specificity and precision of detail necessary for the relevant transfer of research insights from one context to another. Moreover, the reflexive journal that chronicled the feelings, thoughts, presuppositions, and values of the researcher’s etic perspective throughout the entire research project further contributed to transferability in that an auditor would be able to distinguish between researcher-laden contributions and participant-initiated data.

Dependability. If peer debriefers have been allowed to participate throughout the entire research process by being invited to review procedures, read transcripts, and examine field logs for researcher identified themes, dependability of the study is also reinforced. Additionally, dependable methods, including the manner in which the field log and reflexive journal are utilized, should yield a consistent process of inquiry that could theoretically be reproduced by a different researcher with similar naturalistic inclinations. The research project “must meet the criterion of consistency” (Erlandson et al., 1003, p. 33) to be deemed dependable. This researcher has considered the need for consistency and has, therefore,
established his own research protocol, that includes the timing, manner, structure, and style of interview transcriptions, field log recording, and reflexive journal entries.

**Confirmability.** Member-checking, evidence of the triangulation of data, and a traceable audit trail are important steps to be taken in order to assert that the study’s findings are accurate and truthful. Confirmability within the constructivist paradigm “means that data (constructions, assertions, facts, and so on) can be tracked to their sources, and that the logic used to assemble the interpretations into structurally coherent and corroborating wholes is both explicit and implicit” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 243). The naturalistic inquirer is not worried about proving that observations are free from any etic influence or insights, but “rather to trust in the confirmability of the data themselves” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 34).

**Authenticity**

A constructivist qualitative researcher is not only concerned that her or his work is trustworthy, but that it is initiated, progresses, and concludes with an overarching spirit of authenticity. To present a research study that is believable is important, but also explicitly worthy, genuine, meaningful, honest, and commendable. Ely et al (1991) were eager to state that these “[constructivist] terms are not just different ways for qualitative researchers to say the same things as positivists say. They indicate real differences” (p. 95). Assessment of authenticity involves considerations of fairness, and ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical authenticities, all of which highlight the relationship between the investigator and the participants and their co-constructions throughout the study. Since “naturalistic inquiry takes its strength from the separate realities that have been constructed by different individuals,” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 151), these realities are adequately noted in the findings section of
this document. Most specifically, the three concepts of fairness, ontological, and educative authenticity are integral to the methods and purposes of the present study. Beyond this study’s scope are the notions of catalytic (activating broad action) and tactical (empowering active change) authenticities.

**Fairness.** Taking into account that research participants are personally invested in this study and are opening their lives to probing exploration and evaluation, it is only right that they have “equal access to the process” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 153). An attention to fairness suggests that open access to the research process is available to participants, thereby creating a collaborative relationship with the researcher and a strong comfort level with the process itself. Of advantage to both the researcher and the participants, this allowed for a recursive analysis of data so that the participants provided ongoing feedback to the researcher concerning the accuracy of their constructs. At several points, the researcher altered the case reports to reflect participants’ suggested changes. Furthermore, the concept of fairness assumes that both the researcher and participant will uphold the tenets of the research contract, as specified in the informed consent (Appendix D), which occurred.

**Ontological and Educative Authenticity.** These components of authenticity imply a unique mutuality and improvement-oriented trajectory for both the researcher and participants that did occur during the course of this qualitative research project. Ontological authenticity refers to how the researcher and participant’s self-understanding or self-awareness grows from engaging in the research process. From the participant’s perspective, ontological authenticity might be expressed in the sentiment: “I understand myself so much better now because of the questions the investigator asked me.” Personal development and
growth is one of the positive byproducts of constructivist inquiry and its methodological tasks such as interview dialogue, member-checking, and through reading the final report. Educative authenticity moves beyond a greater understanding of self to a more comprehensive and appreciative understanding of others’ experiences and constructions. This can occur for either the researcher or the participant at any point in the process, but is often most felt when diversity is encountered, understood, and appreciated. When the emic perspective reshapes the etic viewpoint of the larger world, it is this co-construction of truth that responds to the question, “What has been learned from this?”

**Ethical Considerations**

The same research values that drive the criteria for authenticity also inform the ethical obligations of the inquiry. However,

unlike the traditional researcher, for whom ethical considerations often seem a necessary burden that must be attended to if the research is to go forward to accomplish more noble ends, the naturalistic researcher proactively initiates ethical standards into the research process because they are the essence of what research is all about and can only enhance it. (Erlandson, 1993, p. 155)

Human beings are at the center of qualitative research, so it is of highest importance that participants in the study be respected, honored, appreciated, and most notably, protected. Naturalistic researchers, by the very nature of their paradigm, are eager to protect, empower, educate, and connect to their participants. This reality makes ethical choices “more comprehensive and proactive” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 158). Punch (2001) noted that “professional and ethical codes have been developed” to protect the integrity of the data and
the dignity of the participants. “These embody principles related to the dignity and privacy of individuals, the avoidance of harm, and the confidentiality of research data” (p. 507).

Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1989) recommended that investigators must be attentive to protect participants from physical injury, psychological harm, and deceptive behavior. Consequently, confidentiality and anonymity remained intact throughout the research process, and participants signed an informed consent document previous to the study. These professional standards helped to ensure that this researcher acted with forethought, care, caution, and integrity in protecting the people, process, and protocol of the study.

Ethical considerations are no different than paradigm or methodological considerations, as there are always tradeoffs. While the goal is never to harm or hurt anyone or anything in the process, there are no hard-and-fast rules when it comes to making ethical decisions in this context. However, the ethical bent should be first and foremost toward safeguarding the process by protecting the participant and preserving the emic perspective that requires a reflective and participant-prioritized researcher. The exercising of ethical principles has as much to do with the spirit of the process than following a predetermined and prescribed set of ethical rules (Ely et al., 1991). Miles and Huberman (1994) concurred: “ethical choices nearly always involve tradeoffs, balances, [and] compromises among competing goods and threatening bads. . . You often have a choice between goods, where choosing one means, to some degree, forgoing the other” (p. 290, 295).”

Informed Consent

In accordance with all research policies and procedures mandated by the Office of Research Compliance at Brownstone State University and by self-imposed professional and
ethical guidelines of constructivist inquiry philosophy and practice, participants were informed of the purpose, design, procedures, risks and benefits of participation, and the means of participant selection for this proposed research project before they provide written consent (Appendix D) indicating their ability and willingness to participate, as well as their agreement to abide by the expectations as outlined in the informed consent document. If participants posed any questions or concerns, these matters were clarified before their participation commenced. As noted above, participation was completely voluntary and participants knew that their involvement could be terminated at any time.

Harm

As stated in the informed consent (Appendix D), “Your participation is voluntary, and there are no projected risks involved with participating in this study.” The researcher had no expectation that any part of the research process would harm or hurt any participants, nor did he intentionally seek to “denigrate, cast blame, find fault, deny opportunity, or stifle the progress” (Mertler & Charles, 2008, p. 11) of the participants. It is believed that the students’ small investment of time and energy did not disrupt their schedules. Conversely, the small $25 remuneration encouraged and benefited the participants. Finally, each participant had access to the transcripts and thematizing process, and member-checking was encouraged at two points in the process. This eliminated the possibility that harm might have come upon the participants because of inaccurate or inappropriate transcriptions or interpretations.

Deception

The establishment of trust between the researcher and her or his participants is foundational to good qualitative inquiry. Knowingly deceiving those who are making the
research possible is not only unethical, but morally reprehensible. Guba and Lincoln (1989) posited that deception in collecting data is adverse to the heart of constructivist inquiry in accurately and honestly depicting and describing emic constructions. In this study, the investigator offered an informed consent document (Appendix D) that clearly stated the initial purpose, design, and procedures of the study, and he has made every attempt to maintain complete honesty with his participants in regards to emerging purposes, directions, and processes of this study. This researcher is in firm agreement with Mertler and Charles (2008) who stated emphatically: “the principle of honesty is absolutely essential in the research process” (p. 11).

Confidentiality

Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) noted that confidentiality “refers to the treatment of information that an individual knowingly disclosed in a research relationship . . . guarantee[ing] respondents that the information they provide in the research context will not be shared” (p. 155). Consequently, pseudonyms were utilized to shield participants from being identified as the actual sources of the data they have consented to be collected and cited in the research study.

Research Questions

This study employed the above methods and techniques to explore the constructions, conditions, and consequences of spiritual questions in the lives of undergraduates at a large public university in the Midwest. The data were collected and considered in response to the following research questions:
1. What is the nature of spiritual questions students construct during their undergraduate college experience?

2. Specifically, what are common and unique spiritual questions that emerge during these formative years?

3. What are the sources, motivating forces, and factors that trigger the materialization of these questions?

4. What circumstances and contexts are present that influence the spiritual questioning process?

5. How do such spiritual questions relate to and impact the various aspects and arenas of students’ lives?

6. What effects can be attributed to the spiritual questions that students construct and consider?

7. How does the construction of these spiritual questions align with a range of identifiers, such as college level and age, major, gender, race/ethnicity/nationality, and religious, spiritual or secular background or tradition?

The investigation of the above questions expanded and deepened the knowledge about undergraduate students’ construction of spiritual questions, the presence of precipitating conditions as they were composed, and the resulting consequences that followed their construction. These data are the focus of the next chapter.
CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to report this study’s findings in light of its research focus: the nature of college students’ spiritual questions, the spiritual questioning process, and the conditions for and consequences of these fundamental concerns in students’ lives. The results of this study begin with a brief sketch of the sixteen student participants, providing an overview of their demographic indicators, noteworthy characteristics, and sacred or secular traditions. The composite results are then organized within four sections: the construction and articulation of the spiritual questions themselves, the conditions that facilitated their formation, the consequences that resulted from engagement with such questions, and any intersecting personal characteristics, identifiers, or qualifiers.

Participant Profiles

Sixteen diverse undergraduate students were interviewed for this study. Each of the eight female and eight male students, all between the ages of 18 and 22, were interviewed twice. Eight of these students were Caucasian, while the others self-identified as African-American, Asian, Asian-Kyrgyz, Caucasian-Mediterranean, Han, Indian, or Yellow. Ten of the students are American, and six are from China, India, Kyrgyzstan, or the Ukraine. The college levels represented included first years (four), sophomores (four), juniors (three), and seniors (five), across fourteen degree programs: accounting, applied health sciences, art, biology, communications, developmental disabilities and rehabilitation, early childhood education, marketing, philosophy, political science, pre-law, psychology, supply chain management, and women’s studies. Finally, fourteen different, participant-labeled spiritual, religious, or secular traditions were represented in this sample, including Atheist, Agnostic Pantheist, Buddhist-
Taoist Pagan, Catholic, Catholic-Christian, Christian Orthodox, Evangelical Christian, Gnostic, Hindu, Muslim, Non-denominational Christian, Protestant, Reformed Jewish and Tengri-Muslim. Among the sixteen students, only the Reformed Jewish and Non-denominational Christian identifications were repeated twice. The following profiles were constructed by the researcher from the data to provide a brief introductory overview of the context for and characteristics of each participant at the time of data collection; additional confirmatory details are outlined throughout the chapter. All participants are enrolled full-time at Brownstone State University (BSU).

Alex

Alex is a 20-year-old Asian-Kyrgyz senior-level student from Kyrgyzstan who is studying political science. Alex, his parents, and three siblings define their religious tradition as a combination of Islam and Tengri, the latter being a longstanding indigenous tradition that honors the spirits and the souls of ancestors. Referring to himself as a “soft Tengri-Muslim,” Alex has been impressed with the logic and attractiveness of this faith tradition since childhood, but is not as faithful and committed as some in his community might hope. The conflation of the Tengri and Islamic traditions works for him, even though he perceives religion to be an artificial and backward institution that needs reformation. Consequently, Alex self-identifies primarily as a spiritual individual who is not religious. Alex is a critical thinker who is continually inquisitive about life and eager to decipher and understand its complexities. A curious individual with an insatiable appetite for knowledge about himself and the world around him, Alex is engaged in a spiritual quest to both identify and find answers of a spiritual nature.
Chen

A Chinese-Han 20-year-old first year student from Mainland China, Chen is studying philosophy. Raised as an only child of Communist Atheist parents, he traversed a complicated and often conflicted spiritual journey that included three years as a Taoist, two years as an Agnostic, a few months as a Protestant, until arriving at his current faith tradition of Catholicism. However, Chen’s appreciation of pluralism and his relativistic perspective about salvation prompt him to label himself as a “non-traditional Catholic.” Chen is enthusiastic about philosophy and politics, personal passions that shape both his theoretical and practical spiritual concerns. Furthermore, he is an inquisitive and provocative individual who adheres to strong convictions about truth and morality while in the process of ascertaining answers to his many spiritual questions. Considering himself both spiritual and religious, Chen relies mostly on his spiritual feelings and perceptions to assist him in navigating toward discovering “capital-T Truth.”

Cheyenne

Studying art at BSU, Cheyenne is a 19-year-old Caucasian-Mediterranean sophomore student. Although Cheyenne’s background was rooted in Christian teachings and religious participation, she diverged five years ago from her childhood faith and began an alternative self-guided spiritual quest. Gnostic is how she now describes her faith tradition and has done so for the past five years. This alternative perspective accentuates Cheyenne’s perceived attraction to ideas from Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, and prompts her to engage in the spiritual practices of reiki, Tarot card reading, meditation, and prayer. Preferring to avoid religious labels altogether, Cheyenne identified herself as a spiritual individual who is
enthusiastic about spiritual questions, especially as they relate to loving and helping others. Profoundly inquisitive, compassionate, and empathetic, Cheyenne’s ultimate priority in life is to expend herself for the betterment of humankind.

**Dante**

Dante is a 22-year-old African-American senior communications major. Reared by his mother and her “girlfriend,” both of whom consider themselves Christians, Dante self-identifies as a Non-denominational Christian whose relationship with Jesus Christ is the most important aspect of his life. Following his conversion experience during his first year of college, Dante has been reading his Bible and praying every day. Having little tolerance for friends or family members who exhibit a seemingly marginal faith experience, Dante credited Jesus Christ for paying the price for his sins, giving his life meaning and purpose, and granting hope for his future in this life and in the next. Unsettled and uneasy about the recurring spiritual questions in his life, Dante often avoids engaging with those queries that might shake his Christian identity or shed doubt on Christianity’s truth claims. Describing himself as both religious and spiritual, Dante’s spiritual journey and questioning process are focused on the topics of God’s calling and purpose for him, as well as right choices, tough decisions, and correct paths.

**David**

David is a 21-year-old Caucasian senior studying biology. Raised by a Jewish father and a Christian mother, David and his two siblings were reared in a home that reflected the Reformed Jewish tradition. David has personally identified with his Reformed Judaism since he was eleven years old, as he prepared for his Bar Mitzvah, and he has since been involved with Jewish education and practices throughout high school and most of his college experience,
including a trip to visit his ancestral homeland of Israel. Currently, David no longer associates with the religious aspect of his tradition nor attends temple services, but his identity as a cultural Jew remains salient in his life. Consequently, David self-identifies as a spiritual, but not religious, individual who focuses more on the larger themes of Judaism, such as balance, commitment, integrity, fair treatment of others, and living a good life. Finally, David is intermittently engaged with his spiritual questions, depending on the intensity of his schedule and his motivation level at the time of their emergence, but he does believe that finding answers to these questions is a worthy pursuit.

Garrett

Garrett is a 19-year-old Caucasian first-year student majoring in Women’s Studies. Reared by a very religious mother and a non-practicing Catholic father, Garrett spent his childhood attending a conservative Baptist church with his mother, but since then, has become cynical about the relevance of religious institutions. Over the past year, Garrett has begun to self-identify as a Non-denominational Christian whose beliefs about God and religion are continually evolving. As an emerging gay leader on campus, Garrett is a spiritually inquisitive and intuitive individual who perceives spiritual influences in every facet of life and is enthusiastic and visibly excited by the prospect of entertaining his large inventory of spiritual concerns. Moreover, Garrett craves conclusions and answers to his spiritual questions, even though he is inclined to no longer seek wisdom from organized religion. However, Garrett unashamedly considers himself both spiritual and religious, and even though he is pondering a plethora of spiritual questions and is open to a wide variety of spiritual perspectives, he is a
product of his upbringing, often carrying certain orthodox beliefs with him as he constructs his
probes, to the surprise of many within his campus social network.

Kayla

Studying early childhood education, Kayla is a 19-year-old Caucasian sophomore. Raised
by Catholic parents, she and her older brother were exposed to the beliefs, traditions, and
practices of Catholicism from an early age. However, despite ongoing family pressure to
conform to a strict Catholic ideology, Kayla explicitly labels herself as Catholic-Christian, in an
attempt to rationalize her laissez-faire adherence to religious creeds and rituals, her perception
of the Catholic Church’s overemphasis on external behaviors above internal spirituality, and her
freedom to explore alternative Christian worship services and activities. Describing herself as
both spiritual and religious, Kayla entertains a wide variety of spiritual questions, but is
disturbed and discouraged by the deficiency of conclusions and answers. Bright, motivated,
and emotional, Kayla is spiritually curious, religiously conflicted, and quite reserved when
speaking of her salient spiritual questions with others.

Kushanu

Kushanu is a 21-year-old Indian junior from New Delhi, India, pursuing a degree in
accounting. Raised by Hindu parents, Kushanu and his three siblings have associated
themselves with the Hindu religion since birth. Originating from an elite Hindu caste, Kushanu
is preoccupied with the future of his wealth, success, and a quest for perfection, power, and
enlightenment. Enamored with the scope, size, and mystery of both the visible and invisible
components of the world around him, Kushanu is often constructing spiritual questions that
relate to the mysterious perfection of the universe. Kushanu observes and interprets the world
through more of a spiritual, rather than a religious, lens. However, in an attempt to honor and preserve his religious heritage, he continues to educate himself about Hindu beliefs and regularly engages in the practice of meditation. Finally, Kushanu’s spiritual questions surface every day, often in an unpredictable fashion and consuming much of his time, and finding answers to such questions is his personal passion and pursuit.

Lashawna

Lashawna is a 19-year-old African-American sophomore studying supply chain management at BSU. Raised by a Nigerian Anglican mother and a Muslim father, Lashawna has attended a Presbyterian church for most of her life. Despite her father and grandmother’s encouragement to associate with Islam, Lashawna chose at a young age to affiliate instead with the Christian tradition. As a self-identified Protestant, she currently attends a Black church on campus that caters to college students. Describing herself as both spiritual and religious, Lashawna values the rules and moral guidance of religion, as well as the feelings and meaningful experiences of spirituality. Although hesitant about exploring ideas that might threaten her spiritual beliefs, Lashawna carefully ponders a variety of spiritual questions without insisting on answers. Inquisitive, confident, and opinionated, Lashawna has found her voice and clarified her spiritual beliefs during her first two years of college, as well as assumed personal ownership for her spiritual journey.

Ming

Ming is a 19-year-old Chinese “Yellow” first-year student from Beijing, China; she is studying accounting. Raised as an only child of Atheist parents, Ming grew up in a culture devoid of any belief in the supernatural. Until studying in the United States, Ming’s exposure to
any religious or spiritual tradition has been miniscule. Consequently, Ming is a committed
Atheist who considers herself neither spiritual nor religious. However, Ming exudes a striking
inquisitiveness about spiritual matters, but has concluded that any related questions are
unanswerable. She does not speak of her spiritual questions to family or friends, and although
she shows excited curiosity about spiritual and religious people, stories, ideas, and experiences,
she has no intention of changing her perspective to accommodate her newly acquired
knowledge in the States. Therefore, Ming lives her life fully in the present, striving to
contribute to the betterment of her society and the world through hard work, service, kindness,
and benevolence.

Miranda

Miranda, a 20-year-old Caucasian junior studying applied health sciences, was raised in
a Christian home with her parents and seven siblings; she has identified as an Evangelical
Christian since her conversion experience at five years of age. As the daughter of a pastor,
Miranda was reared in an environment where religious instruction and practice were family
priorities. However, it was not until her sophomore year of high school that Miranda personally
and emotionally solidified her parents’ faith tradition as her own. Since attending college,
Miranda has continued to mature in her faith journey by taking time to read her Bible and pray
on a daily basis, as well as engages on occasion in the disciplines of fasting, silence, and
solitude. As an active member of a Christian campus ministry, Miranda distances herself from
the notion of religiosity, while fully identifying as a spiritual individual wholeheartedly
committed to the Evangelical Christian tradition and a relationship with Jesus Christ. In regards
to her numerous spiritual questions, Miranda believes that the spiritual questioning process is
more meaningful to her than the answers and has highlighted the benefits as character, moral development, and intimacy with God.

Peter

Peter is a 21-year-old Caucasian senior studying marketing. Despite his baptism and confirmation as a Catholic, he diverged from his family’s faith tradition and began an alternative spiritual quest in college that redirected his focus away from certainty to a belief in mystery. Currently self-identifying as an Agnostic Pantheist who believes that everything seen, said, and done is spiritual in essence, Peter subscribes to the idea that everyone is a part of God. Currently unable to label himself as spiritual or religious, he assumes that he is neither, although he attempts to remain in a constant state of prayer and meditation for purposes of personal growth. Exuding the qualities of a critical thinker, social activist, and spiritual inquirer, Peter is a complex and complicated individual who considers all of his questions to be spiritual in nature, none of which have definitive answers. As the president of a social justice organization on campus, Peter lives out his passion for spiritual questioning in the context of a local transformative community of close friends who assist him in his personal spiritual journey of finding himself, exploring the complexities of the world around him, and serving the global community.

Sabrina

Majoring in developmental disabilities and rehabilitation, Sabrina is an 18-year-old Caucasian first-year student. Raised by Jewish parents, Sabrina and her two sisters were reared in a home and local community that reflected the Reformed Jewish tradition. After attending Hebrew School as a child in preparation for her Bat Mitzvah, Sabrina ceased her formal Jewish
education and currently focuses merely on the cultural aspects of Judaism. Apart from her connection to the Hillel chapter on campus, Sabrina has had minimal involvement with the religious practices and observances of her religion since coming to college. Unclear and unsettled by the notion of spirituality, she prefers to self-identify as marginally religious. As for her salient spiritual questions, she believes that there are no answers available to truly satisfy her curiosity or satiate her uneasiness about such matters. Despite the fact that Sabrina is a culturally Jewish woman, who is confused about spirituality and conflicted about her religious beliefs and questions, she maintains a loyal devotion to her faith tradition and considers Judaism an important part of her life.

**Sebastian**

Sebastian is a 19-year-old Caucasian first-year student studying psychology at BSU. Sebastian has diverged from his Lutheran upbringing and began an alternative spiritual quest at fifteen years old that led him to embrace a mystical spirituality that incorporates many perspectives into his self-constructed belief system. Currently and simultaneously self-identifying as a Buddhist, Taoist, and Pagan, Sebastian is drawn to these three traditions because of their shared emphasis on meditation, mindfulness, energy forces, and connectedness to nature. Suspicious of religion itself, Sebastian prefers the label of “spirituality” to describe his essence and experiences. In his attempt to achieve oneness with the universe, Sebastian is a thoughtful, reflective, and exploratory individual who is consumed by his spiritual questions and seizes every opportunity to reflect upon them. Unconcerned about finding answers for his questions, Sebastian is more interested in the wonder and awe of the journey itself.
Serena

Serena is a 22-year-old Indian Asian senior from Mumbai, India, who is studying psychology at Brownstone State University. Raised by devout Muslim parents and a large extended Muslim family in her homeland, Serena and her siblings have self-identified as Muslim since birth. However, it was not until her first year of college in India when she began wearing her hijab (headscarf), and it was at that point when her family’s Islamic beliefs were embraced within her own life. Educated in a private Catholic school during her primary and secondary years, Serena has a unique appreciation for diverse religious and spiritual perspectives and is committed to working toward global harmony and unity. It is for this reason that Serena is reluctant to call herself religious, but instead prefers the term spiritual. As a college student in the United States, Serena continues to practice Islam by praying, fasting, and making financial donations, but is also thoughtful and reflective about eliminating barriers between people of all backgrounds, traditions, and perspectives. Eagerly engaging with spiritual questions on a regular basis, Serena is committed to advanced education, active personal investigation and reading, and interactions with trusted mentors and friends to find answers to her queries.

Sofia

A 21-year-old Caucasian junior from the Ukraine, Sofia is studying pre-law. She was raised as an only child of divorced Christian Orthodox parents, who are now both deceased, and she maintains a cultural and familial loyalty to this faith tradition, despite the fact that she feels more inclined to associate with the informality of Protestantism. Unable to find a nearby Orthodox church while in the United States, Sofia has suspended her corporate religious involvement, but continues to pray the Lord’s Prayer every evening. Self-identifying as both
spiritual and religious, Sofia is a thoughtful, reflective, and critical thinker who entertains a wide variety of spiritual questions that are shaped by her thoughts, feelings, people, and experiences. Finally, Sofia is an energetic, spiritually interested, and personally conflicted individual who spends significant time and energy to honor the faith tradition of her past, while forging new spiritual possibilities for her future.

Figure 5: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
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Students’ Constructions of Spiritual Questions

Numerous themes and categories became evident in the data. Accordingly, each of the four sections of this chapter begins with an overview of the major themes that emerged from the one or two related research questions. Themes are then further demarcated into categories, variations, and hypotheses featuring the perspectives of the participants as substantiated by their quotations. The composition of each student’s constructed spiritual questions was unique, and yet the 948 spiritual questions that emerged throughout the course of this study shared a number of qualities. This first section responded to the first two research probes concerning the nature of spiritual questions among undergraduate students, with special attention given to both the common and unique questions that emerged among these participants. Specifically, this vast inventory of questions (see Appendix G) has been examined through two different frameworks: topical and typological.

**Topics of Spiritual Questions**

Eighteen different topical groups of spiritual questions (i.e., universal causes; earthly beginnings; God; Satan; extra-terrestrial life; reality and realms; supernatural phenomena; identity, self-awareness, choices, and feelings; purpose, calling, and direction; community and relationships; pain and suffering; social justice; morality and virtue; religion and spirituality; sacred texts; death; post-death journey; and afterlife) are explicated here within six broad categories: origins; divinity and deity; the mysterious; human experience; truth and belief; and destinations.
Topic #1: *Origins*

Half of the students in the research study identified spiritual questions that were rooted in the notion of ultimate sources, first beginnings, and the natural order of things. Encompassing the themes of universal causes and earthly beginnings, questions emerged that probe absolute starting points, as well as the shapes, size, and scope of the materialization of existence. One participant, Kushanu, the Hindu student from India, was particularly elated when speaking about his questions of origin, confessing that his “biggest” (KUS1, 306) and most revisited question is, “Where does the world come from?”

It must have come from something. Where did that something come from? There has to be a starting to everything. The start is the power. So I would say a certain power [or] a very powerful substance [is] where the world came from. *That’s my question.* That power must have birth [from] something. It must have been created by something. If that happens, where did that thing come from? (KUS1, 719-727, 301-305).

Similarly, Alex, the Muslim-Tengri student from Kyrgyzstan, remarked that the origin of the universe is “one of [his] biggest” (ALE1, 797) questions as well.

I always keep in mind: where did the world come from? Or where [does] the universe come from? Or where [does] all this stuff come from? I can’t understand how everything has started, and I really want to know how it started. We [might] be like some kind of programs in the movie, *The Matrix.* We can be just cells, or we can be just viruses, or we can be anything else, but nobody knows who we are. (ALE1, 797-809)

For some of the participants, concerns of this nature felt too weighty and incomprehensible, so although such questions might enter their consciousness on occasion,
they chose not to ponder them. Sebastian, the sophomore who identifies as a Buddhist-Taoist Pagan, is one such student. He expressed his hesitation in entertaining questions of this magnitude.

I believe in the Big Bang Theory, but why it happened is another story. I believe that there is the great prime creator of the universe, but I feel like we can’t even begin to understand it. I feel like that is so beyond what I could ever comprehend, I just don’t even really think about it. I try to focus on the things that are at the next level for me, so I can grasp them. (SEB2, 257-270)

**Topic #2: Divinity and Deity**

Somewhat related to these ideas of origin, earthly causation, and universal beginnings is participants’ wonderment concerning, “Who or what is out there?” In contrast to the seemingly impersonal tone of the queries about origins, questions of divinity (divine otherness) and deity (ultimate divine otherness) assume a more personal posture. Such questions seem to assume that whatever or whomever is dwelling in the invisible realm possesses a measure of personality features that allows for the potential of its interpersonal interaction with humankind. Predictably, questions related to a Higher or Supreme Being, often referred to as God by the participants, comprised the majority of questions in this particular topic category. One hundred and fourteen of the 948 study’s recorded spiritual questions include the word God, most of which tend to focus on the existence, placement, and physical attributes of this Being rather than its qualities, characteristics, or actions. Additionally, questions of divinity about Satan and extra-terrestrial life also emerged. Furthermore, divinity and deity questions
explicitly connected to a specific religious tradition are addressed below as part of the results related to the fifth topical category of truth and belief.

First, the continuum of deity questions about God, in particular, range from queries regarding its actual existence, attributes, attitudes, actions, appearance, gender, and whereabouts. Several students posed the question, “Is there a God?” including those who subscribe to faith traditions for which God’s existence is central. Both Reformed Jewish students inquired about God’s existence. David mentioned his consideration of the ontological theory as rationale for his question, “Does God exist? What was the first cause that caused existence and all that stuff?” (DAV2, 773, 782-783). Sabrina, on the other hand, while she also wondered, “Is there a God?” (SAB1, 624), is quite unsettled when questions of deity or divinity emerge in her life. She expressed her discomfort with the topic: “I think I would maybe put the God thing in the category of spiritual questions. I can’t think of that greater thing, or spirits and [other] things around me that are unknown” (SAB1, 713-717, 721-722). The Ukrainian student, Sofia, questioned God’s whereabouts: “Even though the Earth is round, where is God? Is it around the Earth, or is it within the Earth?” (SOP1, 941-943). Garrett, the first-year gay non-denominational Christian student, acknowledged a specific interest in God’s appearance and gender.

What does God look like? Is it just a light behind some clouds, a floating orb, or just a giant face? Is he even perceivable to the human eye, even after we’ve passed? Is it something we can even look upon? Is God really a man? Why does God have to be a man? So, I wonder – is God a woman? It would make a lot more sense sometimes. Is
God either? Why does God have to be a gender? God shouldn’t be a gender. God is God. (GAR2, 125-127, 129-131; GAR1, 732-733, 746-747, 752-758)

Additionally, several students were interested in God’s attributes, attitudes, and activities, most particularly when related to this deity’s perceived involvement and interaction in their personal lives. This interest was most often detected in the Christian and Catholic students’ narratives, such as those of Chen, Dante, Kayla, and Miranda. Chen, the Catholic Chinese student, posed two questions of this nature, “What does God want from us? If you think that God is kind and good, he must be fair, too, right?” (CHEN1, 856, 427-428). Dante, the Non-denominational Christian student, posited many questions about the deity that were often self-focused, such as, “What is God going to do next in my life? Where is God taking me? Where does he want me to be? If I diligently seek God, will he reward me?” (DAN1, 904, 1191-1192, 567-568). Kayla, the Catholic-Christian student, expressed through her tears, “Is God testing me? Why doesn’t God talk back to me?” (KAY1, 1105-1106, 761). As for Miranda, her futuristic success-oriented mindset in combination with her strong Evangelical Christian foundation also prompted similar questions focused on the deity’s interests and intentions: “Am I doing what God wants me to? What does God want me to strive for? How does God define success? Would a good God and all-knowing, perfect creator really say that? (MIR2, 1084-1085).

Secondly, divinity questions about ghosts, spirits, Satan, demons, and extra-terrestrial life also emerged, though far less often than questions about a deity. The participants’ questions about these divine forces, powers, or beings were never about their existence but always about their intentions and influence. Furthermore, these topical questions were more
evenly dispersed across a diversity of students in the study. Garrett, Kayla, and Sofia’s questions about Satan, Miranda’s concern about demons, Sebastian and Peter’s fascination with extra-terrestrial life, and Cheyenne’s interactions with ghosts and spirits resulted in a variety of queries about divinity. By way of illustration, Peter, the Agnostic Pantheist, could not imagine that extra-terrestrial life does not exist, particularly as he pondered the enormity of the cosmos.

When I look up into the universe, I think, “Holy shit! What the fuck? This is incredible!!”

If there are questions on this planet... and I believe that there are other planets that harvest life. What is that life? What do they think? What kind of questions do they ask? Do they ask questions? Do they just simply exist? What’s out there? I constantly look up into the sky and I’m just amazed! (PET2, 822-830)

Another example of how student participants make sense of these questions of divinity is exhibited in Cheyenne’s concerns about ghosts and spirits. This Caucasian-Mediterranean Gnostic student spoke of personal encounters with the paranormal that prompt a series of divinity questions.

Whenever I see a spirit, a ghost, or something, I always wonder why I can see them and not others, and why they’re choosing to be here right now? What do they want us to know, and what do they want me to do? Because I can see them and other people can’t. I just wonder why a spirit would choose to come back to Earth or be shown. I ask a lot of questions about this. I just wonder what they’re trying to accomplish, or [if] they are giving us support or love, or teaching us things, or just show[ing] that they’re around us. (CHEY2: 1071-1103)
Topic #3: *The Mysterious*

This third topical category contains spiritual questions even more obscure and abstract than origins, deity, and divinity. Beyond explanation, eluding understanding, and completely outside of human experience, these represent a small minority of the hundreds of questions in this study. Nevertheless, such questions were articulated by three participants and encompass the themes of reality, realms, and supernatural phenomena.

Kushanu, Peter, and Sebastian drew upon their Hindu, Agnostic-Pantheist, and Buddhist-Taoist Pagan traditions to reflect deeply on a unique series of obscure and outlying questions. All three sought to define, by asking *what*, many common and ordinary terms to which understanding is assumed. These questions of reality, or *what is*, include, “What is reality? What is enjoyment? What is talking? (KUS2, 294-295, 1374, 1415-1425); What the fuck? What is existence? What is fun? What is love? What is work? What is time? What is infinity? What is a moment? What is here? (PET1, 916-917, 1163, 1523; PET2, 867, 920, 753-757, 735-736); What is the relationship between the common way of thinking and different realms of possibilities that aren’t conventional, scientific, or studied, but actually happen, [nonetheless]?” (SEB1, 617-621). Moreover, Sebastian suggested that he entertains a “huge realm of questions that a lot of people never think about” (SEB1, 763-764), particularly in regards to the themes of reality and realms.

I think about the power of intention, what my mind creates and how that relates to reality, and how that manifests in reality or if it does or does not manifest in reality. I think about healing and how my intentions and my actions help or hurt healing. Then I think a lot about what happens when we die – in the next realm that we enter, how that
relates to this realm, and maybe if those two realms sometimes cross – or if some sensitive people can pick up subtle frequencies from different spiritual realms. (SEB1, 429-439)

Kushanu also pondered a similar question that runs parallel to Sebastian’s thoughts and also exposes his Hindu ideology, “Is the whole universe in your mind?” (KUS1, 497-498).

**Topic #4: Human Experience**

This fourth topical category, human experience, constituted just over fifty percent of the questions that emerged during the course of this study and were expressed by every student participant. In fact, spiritual questions from the first two sub-categories, related to purpose, calling, direction, identity, self-awareness, choices, and feelings, represent the majority of the inventoried concerns. The driving force behind such questions is to resolve this concern: “How do I make sense of my life here and now?” Within this expansive category, there are six smaller groupings of questions worthy of special consideration in and of themselves. However, a comprehensive report of such results is unrealistic for the purpose of this presentation. Therefore, just one or two striking exemplars for each of the following seven human experience sub-categories will suffice.

**Human Experience Sub-Topic #1: Identity, Self-Awareness, Choices, and Feelings**

First, students in this study recounted a multitude of questions regarding identity, self-awareness, choices, and feelings. For example, participants recalled and articulated questions such as, “Why am I the way I am? How did I become the person I am today? (ALE1, 673-678); Who am I really? Who is Cheyenne? What is the true I am? (CHEY1, 1432-1433); Why do I feel that way? What’s making me feel that way? (DAV1, 1321-1322); How do I know when
something is a wrong choice, and how do I get back on the right track? (KAY2, 919-920); What are my values in this world?” (SOF1: 236).

Lashawna, an African-American Protestant student, has struggled with her identity for many years, as a result of not ever believing that she was “cute or beautiful” (LAS1, 822). She revealed that her father never affirmed her physical characteristics, creating significant feelings of insecurity for her. At college, Lashawna’s identity issues intersected with her spiritual journey, which then resulted in spiritual questions after reading her Bible one day.

I read, “When a man finds a wife, he finds a good thing and he also is highly favored.”

So regardless of whether someone thinks I’m beautiful or not, I am a jewel to be had. I should value myself and appreciate myself for who I am. This [idea] is just something that’s carried me on until now. I really have started to think about this more [now] that I am really becoming more religious. So, if I am highly favored in the Lord, who is perfect, and if he loves me regardless of however messed up I look or however messed up I act, why should I allow myself to feel this way about myself? (LAS1, 826-831, 835-846)

Similarly, Peter has wondered how the role of names has affected his personal identity. His foundational identity question, “Who am I?”, is also a spiritual question Peter ponders regularly.

I keep having this thing in my head all the time that my name is Peter. Somewhere in the Bible, it has a phrase about names, something like, “The first thing they gave us was names.” I look at myself and think it’s okay to resonate myself with Peter, but “Who am
“I?” is a much deeper question, so if I can release myself of that name, then maybe I can find out more about myself. (PET2, 618-619, 635-638, 646-649)

Moreover, Peter spoke about how a sense of personal identity can be clouded by its cultural connection to activity, which might cause some identity confusion. “Now maybe sometimes, ‘What do you do?’ applies to like, ‘Who am I?’ Is who you are what you do? Is who you are how you think when you’re not doing anything? So it’s a really deep question” (PET2: 666-669).

Human Experience Sub-Topic #2: Purpose, Calling, and Direction

Questions of purpose, calling, and direction constitute another set of predictable thoughts for these undergraduates, regardless of their background, identifiers, or tradition. Moreover, these participants not only expressed a rich inventory of purpose, calling, and direction questions, but also explicitly identified them as spiritual questions in their lives, seemingly eager to know and understand just how they should be living in the present and anticipating their future. Queries about desires, passions, motives, choices, goals, plans, dreams, hopes, contributions, and legacy pepper hundreds of pages of interview transcripts, including this small sampling: “Why are we living in this world? (MIN1, 635); What is the reason that I’m here right now? (CHEY1, 662-663); What am I called to do? (DAN1, 632); What big impact, if any, am I going to make on the world? (KAY2, 899-900); Are my dreams and goals going to coincide with God’s plan for me?” (LAS1, 369-370).

Dante is one of several participants preoccupied with future possibilities. This African-American communications student was particularly concerned about the potential effects of unforeseen circumstances upon his life course. On a daily basis, Dante said he wondered,
whether I’m going to be the president of this university or whether I’m going to be a pastor of a church, whether or not I’m called to ministry or to make a difference in students’ lives on campus, whether I should go to seminary or [graduate] school, whether or not I made the right decision to jump right back into a relationship after I got out of one, whether I’m going to get an A on the quiz, whether I have a homework assignment due, whether or not I’m going to have a job when I graduate out of college, and how the world is going to have an impact on my life in general. (DAN1, 632-637, 647-648, 767-772)

For Kayla, pondering questions of purpose, calling, and direction was a source of anxiety as she struggles to find a single purpose in life.

I guess everybody has a purpose in life, so for [your] whole life, you’re trying to figure out what is that one purpose? It’s hard enough to find your one soul mate, but then you’ve got to find your one purpose on Earth? I think that’s really hard, so I keep evaluating myself, like, “I’m good at this. I’m not good at this,” so I go towards my strong points and keep trying to put it together and figure it out, and that’s really hard. (KAY1, 903-917)

Human Experience Sub-Topic #3: Community and Relationships

This third sub-category of human experience questions address service, socializing, conflict, abuse, dysfunction, sexuality, belonging, communication, confrontation, loneliness, and perceptions of people in a variety of relational contexts, as noted in the following exemplars: “How should I treat others? (DAV1, 615-616); Why did I let this person into my life, and how is that affecting me? (CHEY1, 1427-1430); Should I intervene when I observe someone
Sabrina was one of several participants whose concerns about community and relationships emerged from reflections and experiences where divergence and conflict with human beings was the focus. This Jewish first-year student often wondered about “coexisting questions” (SAB1, 756), specifically stated, “Why can’t people coexist?” (SAB1, 760). These questions of coexistence were united with Sabrina’s more general spiritual question, “Why do people do the things that they do?” (SAB1, 583-584), that resulted from the challenging relational dynamic on her residence hall floor. She recounted that,

I live on an all-girls floor, and people are bickering at each other all the time [about] little things. People talk behind each other’s back. Why did they do that? What was the point of that? Like, why wouldn’t you just go up to the person and say, “I have a problem with this.” Little things like that [make me] question: why are they doing that? (SAB2, 61-68)

Sabrina’s reflections upon this drama in her dormitory then instigated her thoughts about, religions not being able to coexist, [because] I think everyone has the right to have a religion, but I don’t think anyone has the right to be like, “Your religion is worse than mine.” Obviously, they’re all different and everyone believes in different things, so I think that’s a spiritual question. (SAB2, 75-80)
Moreover, Garrett took his concerns about dysfunctional human relationships to a heightened level, as he explored his spiritual questions about killing others (GAR1, 288-298) and other manifestations of hate. Whether it was America’s jubilation over Osama bin Laden’s execution, wars that occur as a result of different religious perspectives, or specific religious communities’ disdain for homosexual behavior, Garrett posed the questions:

How do people hate without understanding? I just don’t understand how a God who we say is based entirely on love could ever condone his disciples or worshippers hating anyone. It just boggles my mind sometimes how much people can hate, I guess. (GAR1, 438-439, 447-450)

Human Experience Sub-Topic #4: Pain and Suffering

These concerns relate to the longstanding and disconcerting issue of theodicy, or the problem of evil. Pain and suffering was a significant theme represented among this study’s participants as expressed in their spiritual questions. In seeking to resolve the problem of evil, as well as hoping to reconcile the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent God with the rampant effects of evil in the world, these perplexing issues prompted a series of spiritual questions in these students’ lives, such as, “Why do bad things happen to good people? (KAY1, 1461-1462); If life is here to enjoy, then why is there pain? (KUS1, 599-600); Are hurt and pain present so that we can learn from them? (LAS1, 1058-1059); Why is the world so unfair to me? (MIN1, 1037-1038); If there is a God, does he make things happen or allow things to happen? (SAB2, 426-434); Why does the God make me cry? Is crying a part of the lesson?” (SOF2, 463-465).

Again, Garrett succinctly summarized what many of the other students expressed:
Why do terrible things happen in our lives? What’s the reason behind the bad things that happen to people? With all these terrible things happening, is it the hand of God coming down and never doing something, or is it human action deviating from what he would want from us? (GAR1, 372-373; GAR2, 26-29)

However, it was Serena’s personal encounter with a terrorist attack in her native city of Mumbai, India in 2007 that provided the most striking exemplar of the relationship between tragedy, hardship, and crisis and her spiritual questions of pain and suffering. This Muslim woman described the event as though it took place yesterday.

I was there. I was in college, and I remember my teachers, my parents, and everybody was so worried. We were so scared. It was a scary moment... I think these are times when you actually start thinking about faith and hope and ask, “Are people doing what they’re supposed to be doing?” I think these are things that are triggers. It got me thinking a lot more because I experienced it. I could see how the city actually stood still. Everybody was tensed, and nobody knew what was happening. That experience was crazy, and I think it’s since that time that I have actually started questioning these things a lot. (SER1, 1126-1144; SER2, 864-907)

Human Experience Sub-Topic #5: Social Justice

This sub-category of human experience questions is an extension of the pain and suffering theme, as it contains concerns of fairness, equality, impartiality, resource allocation, poverty, racism, and political oppression. Such questions of social justice are situated in a variety of contexts, including interpersonal relationships, religious communities, nations and their governments, and the global community. Only six participants directly posited questions
of this nature, including such queries as, “How do we make the world a fairer place? What needs to be done differently? (SER1, 924-925, 944); Why am I here in a privileged place while others are in an impoverished place? (CHEY1, 995-996, 1014); Why is our society set up in a way that is obviously not healthy for us? (SEB1, 130-131); What are we, as individuals, doing to the environment? (SER1, 1229); What is going to happen to my children, grandchildren, and entire country because of environmental problems?” (SOF1, 226-227).

Of all the participants, Peter, the president of a social justice organization on campus, seemed to speak most passionately about his concerns for the welfare of others as well as his corresponding spiritual questions.

Oh, this is really unfair. There are so many wrong things! Why aren’t people helping? Oh, my gosh! Twenty-four thousand deaths every single day from preventable causes? Are you serious? Why, human race? Why can’t we figure this out? Is this a distribution problem? Is this an apathy problem? Is this a faith problem? Is this a stupidity problem? What is the issue? Why can’t we figure this out? (PET1, 761-766, 801-802, 808-814).

Moreover, Chen, a Chinese Catholic student, offered some unique questions that were unlike any other participants’ queries in the arena of social justice. He described a series of spiritual questions that were political in nature, fueled by his political ideologies and concern about the propaganda and activities of the Chinese government. Chen posited that his aspirations for freedom, liberty, and democratic ideals for his homeland were as spiritual as his questions about theology. Chen connected his two spiritual questions, “Is the Communist Party justified?” (CHEN1, 844) and “Should we overthrow the Chinese government?” (CHEN1, 845-
846) to a more general and overarching question, “Specifically, what is the right thing to do?” (CHEN2, 612). Relatedly, Chen did ponder the differences between right and good, as expressed in this spiritual question: Can doing the wrong thing be good for people?” (CHEN1, 682-683).

Human Experience Sub-Topic #6: Morality and Virtue

This final sub-category of human experience questions is about morality and virtue. Several students posed spiritual questions that generally and specifically explored morality, characterized as the differentiation of motivations and actions between those that are right and wrong, such as, “Is this moral? How do I stay moral? (SOF1, 432, 1048); What am I doing? Is this right? Is this wrong? (SER2, 987-988); Am I doing everything right? How do I know when something is the wrong choice, and then how do I get back on the right track? (KAY1, 737; KAY2, 920-922); Does doing religious things make up for [poor] moral decisions?” (GAR1, 298). One student even offered a string of questions that was about virtue or a personal quality that were tagged as morally excellent. Peter asked, “How do I do goodness? How do I do faithfulness? How do I do love?” (PET1, 1073-1074). These questions consider the character and worth of life choices, as well as the present and potential consequences for behavior or actions.

Chen once again contributed to this point, since his primary spiritual questions were inherently about morality. He clearly stated that the two main spiritual questions in his life are, “What is the right thing to do, and what does God want from us?” (CHEN1, 835-846, 856). In fact, Chen believes, in one sense, that these two questions are actually one in the same (CHEN2, 198-200, 297-301). Because Chen believes that “there is a good and bad and right and
wrong” (CHEN1, 705-707), he had established a sophisticated four-step framework by which he approached these spiritual concerns: (1) God exists; (2) God is Truth; (3) We are to live according to that Truth; and 4) What is the right thing to do that will coincide with that Truth? (CHEN2, 825-841).

Additionally, Evangelical Christian student Miranda’s first question about morality inquired of its actual meaning: “What would my definition of morality be?” (MIR2, 188-189). Furthermore, Miranda provided a large inventory of moral questions she recorded for herself for future reflection beyond the busy college years. Her moral concerns of right and wrong were in reference to the issues of euthanasia (MIR2, 439-444), stem cell research (MIR2, 446-447), fertility drugs (MIR2, 484-485), war (MIR2, 506-507), sex education (MIR2, 546-547), homosexuality (MIR2, 698-699), tattoos (MIR2, 628-635), drunkenness (MIR2, 623-625), and the death penalty (MIR2, 506). Miranda’s compass for making moral decisions is the Bible, because she believes that God reveals his will on moral matters in the pages of this sacred text. However, most of her moral questions, as previously noted, concerned topics that are not explicitly addressed in the Christian Scriptures. Therefore, Miranda posed many of her moral questions in the absence of clear Biblical direction.

Topic #5: **Truth and Belief**

The fifth topical category of spiritual questions is fueled by participants’ quest to explore and often resolve the broad question, “What do I believe to be true, and how do I know when I’ve discovered truth?” Many of the students sought to investigate these questions of truth and belief through a religious framework, while others through a spiritual lens. However, for both the religious and spiritual students, reference was often made to sacred or revered texts or
manuscripts that guided students’ pursuit of truth. In an attempt to clarify what they actually believe about a wide variety of topics, students in this study asked questions such as, “What should we believe in? (MIN1, 641); What should I believe in, and what if I choose a belief that is wrong? (ALE1, 916, 924-925); If there are so many other beliefs, is one better than the other? (KAY2, 127-128); Is the stuff that I heard in that first sermon during my first year of college really true? (DAN1, 95-97); What if what I believe isn’t real?” (DAN1, 546-547).

It was the Evangelical Christian, Gnostic, and Agnostic-Pantheist students who posited the broadest of questions in this category. Miranda asked, “What do I hold to be true?” (MIR1, 1319); Cheyenne inquired, “What rings true in my own heart in my pursuit of finding truth?” (CHEY2, 48-50); and Peter wondered, “Is this right? Is this truth? And how do I know? (PET1, 1003-1004, 1012). Ironically, Peter thinks about such questions, even though he is often annoyed by such discussions of truth and belief, because he “hates the word truth. I hate talking about objective and subjective truth, and even stupid terms like ‘half-truth’ and ‘maybe truth.’ Is it truth? Like, what does that mean? I don’t know. I think truth is a very heavy word” (PET2, 1083-1084, 1088, 1094-1095; PET1, 981-982). Unlike Peter, Miranda and Cheyenne do not feel uneasy about their quest for truth, but these women approach truth and belief from different perspectives. Miranda looks to the authority of the Bible in her quest for truth, and as a result, does not ask spiritual questions that are already answered in this text, such as the nature of her salvation or the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, because she is already “at peace” with those questions (MIR2, 99-102). In contrast, Cheyenne looks inside herself as she considers such truth and belief questions.
Seeking truth and finding truth in my own way gives me a chance to explore different ideas. As I piece things together, there is always something that really touches me. So I find my own rules for living by what is right with me. Truth is different for every person based on their own life experiences. For me, I just live my life, knowing what’s true and what’s not. I take what rings true to me and then I just leave the rest. Being Gnostic is so open. (CHEY2, 37-97)

Furthermore, there was a multitude of specific truth and belief questions that were tailored to address the very specific and narrow concerns of each participant’s religious or spiritual journey that have been since grouped into the two sub-categories of religion and spirituality, and sacred texts.

First, religious and spiritual questions abounded in the study, some of which were more general, such as David’s inquiry, “Should I follow my Jewish practices more?” (DAV1, 1045), Kushanu’s inquisition, “Why do religions try to maintain their existence?” (KUS2, 934-937), and Ming’s query, “What makes people believe in religion?” (MIN2, 65-66). Also, it must be noted that while most of the participants would identify as either just spiritual or spiritual and religious, most of their questions had a distinct religious overtone. Even the participants who were averse to religion had numerous religious (and not spiritually-themed) questions, although many were rooted in negative perceptions or hurtful experiences at the hands of religious people or in the context of religious institutions.

Nonetheless, there was a plethora of queries about religion that were raised to garner very specific details about religious truth, such as these examples: “When is Christ coming back? (KAY1, 1121); What is the difference between Christianity and Islam? (LAS2, 195-196);
Does baptism mean submersion into water or submersion into the Holy Spirit? (MIR1, 786-787);

Why do I have to tell my priests my confessions? Why can’t I just tell God? (KAY2, 213-216);

Why has the feminine aspect of religion been shut down and ignored, particularly in Christianity?” (CHEY1, 729-730). These questions, as well as many others that address world religions, global and national religious issues, religious practices, doctrines and creeds, religious leadership structures, interreligious conflict, and religious attendance and monetary requirements also surfaced as the data were analyzed. Notably, students who self-identified with mainstream traditions (e.g., Protestant, Catholic-Christian, Non-denominational Christian, Evangelical Christian, Muslim, Reformed Judaism) presented more explicitly detailed questions about religious specificities than did participants from alternative (e.g., Agnostic Pantheism, Gnostic, Buddhist-Taoist Paganism) traditions and backgrounds.

Secondly, questions about religious and other sacred texts emerged. Challenges to the the reliability and authority of the Bible were most prevalent, but there were also queries about the Quran and the Torah. Serena recounted asking her father and older brother questions about the Quran: “Why are these things written? Why do we say these things in Islam? How do I make sense of it personally at my level?” (SER2, 173-176). As a Muslim woman, Serena was encouraged from early childhood to verbalize her questions, even about a topic as sensitive as her religion’s sacred book. Her Jewish peer, Sabrina, also did not hesitate in expressing her viewpoint, particularly as it pertained to selective and unequal application of religious texts.

One big thing I have a problem [with] is when people pick and choose what they want to believe in the Bible or even in the Torah, saying like, “I’m going to not believe in gay rights, but I’m going to go out and drink before I’m twenty one.” It’s like, “You can’t pick
and choose. You need to follow the whole thing. Or if you feel that strongly that a man can’t lie with a man or a woman can’t lie with a woman, then don’t be going out on Friday nights and getting drunk.” [Also], no one really knows who wrote the Bible or the Torah. So we’re kind of putting our lives in the hands of someone that... we don’t really know what happened. (SAB2, 183-193; SAB1, 837-841)

In summary, these questions about religion, spirituality, and sacred texts underscore students’ pursuit to discover the source, find substantiation, and experience security in the truth as they perceive it, as well as achieve a reasonable certainty and personal confidence in the corresponding beliefs that were chosen as a result of their opinions and convictions about truth.

Topic #6: Destinations

The sixth and final category of spiritual questions addresses the topics of death, the afterlife, and the mysterious passage or crossing between these two points. Students’ questions of destination that concern purpose and direction situated within the context of this present lifetime have been classified within the human experience category. In contrast to those questions, destination queries, as defined in this study, consider a much larger scope: “Where will I ultimately arrive, how will I get there, and what is the nature of that final location?” Most of the students in the study posed questions within this topic area, but with a diversity of specific interests, motives, and feelings in regards to these ultimate questions about ineffable matters.

First, questions about death and the act of dying itself attracted much attention from the participants, including the general rationale and specific reasons for death, strategies for
preventing death, predicting death’s date, as well as the physical sensations and emotional realities of dying. Ming, Kushanu, and Sebastian posed similar generic questions about death with little visible emotion or personal concern, such as, “When people die, what will happen to them? (MIN1, 640-641); What comes after death? (KUS2, 1256); What happens when we die?” (SEB1, 368).

However, Kayla, the Catholic-Christian sophomore, seemed more conflicted about her own impending death, and asked several questions in this topic area. In fact, more than one-third of all of her questions were about her ultimate destination.

I guess with the whole death and afterlife thing, I don’t really like to dwell on it, because you try not to focus on things you can’t change. Like, everybody dies. I can’t change that, [but] what’s it going to be like? Or what’s it going to feel like? Or when is it going to happen? (KAY1, 1223-1229).

Secondly, the *post-death journey* after a human being’s last breath was a point of inquiry for a few of the students. Queries about a Judgment Day scenario at the entrance of heaven, as well as the timing and upward trek of the Rapture were asked. However, it was questions about the duration and darkness of the passage between this life and the next that were most striking, including the burial process. Reflecting upon a movie clip, Kayla attempted to make sense of this mysterious passageway. “It was about purgatory, or the stage between Earth and heaven, [where] a bunch of people are waiting around in chairs. It’s like a doctor’s office. They call your number. You get in the elevator and go up” (KAY2, 398-402). Kayla suggested, “I don’t think that’s real, but it [brings up] a lot of unknown questions” (KAY2, 402-403), such as “Is it a light or dark tunnel? How far is heaven? Will I be wandering once I die?
until I get to heaven? Does it take a long time to arrive or are you just there? Is the journey through the death tunnel happy or sad?” (KAY1, 1131-1132; KAY2, 393-404).

Thirdly and finally, the topic of the afterlife garnered a vast reservoir of spiritual questions, related to the requirements and standards for access to heaven or hell, as well as the potential artifacts, activities, appearance, and relationships in this final location. Dante’s questions were most explicit, inquiring about the exact content of conversations with Jesus Christ, the possibility of tossing a football with God, and the similarities between a celebration in heaven and a hotel party (DAN1, 693-698). Moreover, David was also quite interested in the “picture” of the afterlife, entertaining the possibilities of reincarnation, a place called heaven, becoming a ghost, or even decomposition (DAV2, 346-367). However, Garrett articulated the largest number of questions about the afterlife that included a discussion of both heaven and hell.

One [question] that I’ve always thought [about] is when people always say, “Well, if you don’t get baptized, you go to hell.” I mean, how does hell work? What are the criteria for hell? Off that question, how do you perceive heaven? There was that book, Ninety Minutes in Heaven, [where] the guy died in a car crash and claims to have spent ninety minutes in heaven, and he describes how it was and everything. But how can we truly know what heaven is like? Or what happens? Like, the second you die, you’re there? Or is it the pearly gates idea that we all see in commercials and TV? What is heaven? Is it streets of gold? Is it mansions? What is it? (GAR1, 194-209)
Summary of Topics

In this first of two sections on the constructions of students’ spiritual questions, the researcher reported and illustrated the six different topics of questions that emerged in the study, with special interest given to showcasing the students’ questions in their own words. The exemplars have demonstrated how diverse undergraduate students construct a wide variety of spiritual questions that address topics such as origins, divinity and deity, the mysterious, human experience, truth and belief, and destinations. At this point, the discussion turns from the topics represented to the types of questions participants composed, as well as offers a framework for considering several typological hypotheses.

Figure 6: Topics of Spiritual Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-Categories</th>
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<tr>
<td>Origins</td>
<td>Universal Causes, Earthly Beginnings</td>
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<td>Divinity and Deity</td>
<td>God, Satan, Extra-Terrestrial Life</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Mysterious</td>
<td>Reality and Realms, Supernatural Phenomena</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Experience</td>
<td>Identity, Self-Awareness, Choices, and Feelings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Purpose, Calling, and Direction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Community and Relationships</td>
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<td>Pain and Suffering</td>
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<td>Social Justice, Morality and Virtue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Truth and Belief</td>
<td>Religion and Spirituality</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sacred Texts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Destinations</td>
<td>Death, Post-Death Journey, Afterlife</td>
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Types of Spiritual Questions

As for the types or kinds of spiritual questions, twenty-three different groupings (i.e., purposefully pursued; spontaneously encountered; privately contemplated; publicly
communicated; strategically utilized; intentionally avoided or postponed; answers anticipated or unexpected; fleeting; enduring; frequent; intermittent; shifting; primary and secondary; cognitive and emotional; philosophical and practical; weighty and light; personal; self-focused; urgent; general and broad; specific and focused; integrated and multiplying) emerged within four broader categories of the approach, duration, relevance, and scope of spiritual questions.

Type Category #1: **Approach**

The manner in which these participants approached their spiritual questions was varied, intersecting with a wide variety of factors, conditions, and indicators. Students advanced toward their questions in purposeful, spontaneous, or strategic ways, and in either public or private contexts. Moreover, some of the questions were intentionally avoided or postponed, while others were explored in hopes of ascertaining answers.

*Approach Sub-Type #1: Purposefully Pursued*

The first approach to spiritual questions is best characterized as *purposeful pursuit.* Spiritual questions emerged more often in the lives of the students who intentionally engaged in focused environments and opportunities where reflection was intended and conversations were spiritual by design. As a Muslim-Tengri individual, Alex invested in the month of Ramadan each year to “think about all the spiritual questions I already had up until that moment” (ALE2, 799-800) without the distraction of food. Sebastian regularly sets aside time for meditation retreats to exercise his Buddhist and Taoist practices. During these purposeful getaways, he “clears [his] mind, experiences what is happening in [his] life, and directly experiences living” (SEB1, 86-95), which cultivates a greater openness to spiritual questions. Sabrina recounted the breakout sessions at her Jewish youth conference, where she and her friends from around the
country engaged in deliberate conversations about the existence of God, this deity’s purpose, the rationale for belief in God, and other religious beliefs (SAB2, 558-565). Occasionally at Miranda’s Christian Bible discussion sessions, the pastors introduced a question of the week conversation that facilitated focused interaction around specific concerns (MIR2, 718-720). Peter shared his perspective on the importance of being purposeful in pursuing spiritual questions.

I think that our life is defined in those focused moments, which is kind of an interesting thought. For the [most part], we just kind of move around, going to class because it’s how [we’re] supposed to fit into this world, but imagine if every person had these focused trips, moments, or experiences where they had to talk about spirituality like we are talking about today. More questions would become spiritual in nature. (PET2, 1141-1147)

Approach Sub-Type #2: *Spontaneously Encountered*

This second approach to spiritual questions included *spontaneous encounters*. Several students spoke of this impromptu urge to “wonder” about spiritual questions in daily life as unplanned circumstances happened, unexpected situations transpired, or contact with acquaintances or strangers occurred. These natural events, experiences, or conversations might bring about sufficient disruption to the normal rhythm of life to prompt a new consideration or a fresh perspective. More than any other participant, Cheyenne expressed how “everyday normal things” prompted spiritual questions in her life.

Yeah, [it happens] when I’m pumping my gas, when I’m at airports, taking short road trips, or when I’m paying the tolls and [I] talk to that person. I heard that you’re
supposed to be really nice to them, because [they] are the most depressed in their jobs. For some reason, those people make me question, “What are all those people doing and what do they want?” A lot of times I think about, “What do they believe?” (CHEY1, 1090-1106)

Approach Sub-Type #3: Privately Contemplated

Private contemplation comprises a third approach to spiritual questions. Students’ unwillingness to speak of their questions to others is a multifaceted issue dependent on many factors. Some students experienced apprehension or fear when approaching some of their spiritual questions, so they decided to wrestle with their thoughts on their own. For Lashawna, she honestly does not want to know the answers to some of her questions, so by keeping her questions private, she can leave them unresolved (LAS1, 913; LAS2, 888-918). Additionally, Lashawna, Sebastian, and Garrett keep some of their spiritual questions concealed to avoid experiencing social consequences from those who might be prone to judge or mistreat them because of the nature of their musings (LAS1, 1474-1483; SEB2, 885-890; GAR2, 879-910). Alex is willing to speak with friends and family about questions of origin, but when it comes to personal identity questions such as, “What kind of person do I really want to be?” (ALE1, 820), he prefers to “figure it out by myself” (ALE1, 1075-1077). Similarly, Ming and Kushanu also followed suit in reflecting upon their spiritual questions in private, so as to not put them in vulnerable positions with other people who might not appreciate their spiritual quest (MIN1, 901; KUS1, 539, 833-836).

David, a Reformed Jewish biology student, was willing to consider public discussion about his spiritual questions, but only if the nature of his question does not put his reputation
at risk and if the individual or group with whom he might share exudes a perceived openness to
spiritual discussion. By his own admission, David is a fairly reserved young man who is more
prone to reflect upon spiritual questions alone. David interacts with these kinds of questions in
the context of community on some rare occasions, but he believes “questions that are more
specific in a spiritual way” (DAV1, 1032-1033) are best asked and answered alone, such as
questions about the “meaning of life and how I’m living at the moment” (DAV1, 1038-1039).
From David’s perspective, he is “open about these questions” (DAV2, 1074-1075), but he
believes that personal spiritual questions are,

not something you talk about too much in a community context unless there’s an
outline for it, a structure or format behind it, or pre-planned. I think these questions
come up a lot when you’re by yourself, when you’re just wondering on your own.
(DAV2, 1048-1059; DAV1, 847-849)

Approach Sub-Type #4: Publicly Communicated

On the other hand, there were also students in the study who were more prone to

*public communication* as their preferred method for approaching spiritual questions. This
fourth approach is ideal for those students who hope to find assistance in making sense of their
questions through verbally processing them with others. Granted, there is always a risk for
publicly articulating spiritual questions, because listeners respond in a variety of ways to
delicate dialogue. Expressing spiritual questions can either strengthen or strain relationships
with others, which is why some students choose to privately contemplate them instead. For
Miranda, she has experienced both the benefits and drawbacks of talking about her spiritual
questions. With her mother, she doesn’t always “see eye to eye and [they] kind of butt heads,
causing some tension” (MIR1, 1204-1207), but with a close friend who was battling with comparable spiritual issues, Miranda’s transparency about her own spiritual questions brought both of them “encouragement and comfort” (MIR1, 1222). Cheyenne has had similar experiences, where for some peers, her questions “ring true to them” while others “reject it” (CHEY2, 449-450). Similarly, it can get edgy at Sabrina’s home when she begins to ask tough questions about the Jewish practices and decision making at her synagogue, and because her “whole family kind of questions everything” (SAB1, 1174-1175), her honest queries and strong opinions can temporarily cause household friction.

Furthermore, sharing such questions with trusted individuals, as Peter learned firsthand, also has the potential benefit of normalizing new and positive norms for future conversations about personal ideas with close confidants (PET1, 1546-1547). Peter also appreciated the possibility that his and others’ spiritual concerns are more vulnerable to changing and shifting when they are spoken out loud in the context of community, because of the power of “appealing people and appealing apologetics” (PET2, 419, 460).

One other twist when reporting on the public communication approach to the spiritual questioning process is a crossover scenario where this fourth approach intersects with the topic of deity. For Garrett and Miranda, they have, on occasion, directed their spiritual questions to God. Their rationale is that answers to these questions are “God’s domain” (GAR1, 269), so why not ask? When confused, Miranda will often express her questions to God “audibly, asking him out loud, ‘Hello. What does this mean?’” (MIR2, 1045-1047).
Approach Sub-Type #5: *Strategically Utilized*

A fifth approach to spiritual questions is to *strategically utilize* them as means to other ends. For one student, in particular, she employed them as tools for making important decisions in life (SOF1, 344-346). Specifically, Sofia used her spiritual question, “What are my values in the world?”, to weigh her options, evaluate potential choices in a variety of situations, and then chose what seemed to be the best decision in light of her values.

Moreover, for Miranda and Peter, they leveraged their spiritual questions at fitting times with suitable people to intentionally influence them to think or act in a way they deemed worthwhile and valuable. Although these students come from different traditions and embrace far different perspectives on life and spirituality, both of them sought to persuade others to consider the merits of their perspectives. For Miranda, she established relationships with non-Christians so that she can better understand and find common ground with them. For instance, she believed that initiating dialogue with a Muslim woman, as well as other students of diverse perspectives within her residence hall, was a strategic initiative.

A basic understanding of them allows me to have conversations with people. So when I ask them, “Well, how do you practice? What does this look like for you?” maybe one day they’ll ask me, “Well, what do you do? What do you believe?” and that opens the door for me to share my faith. (MIR2, 198-203)

Peter is just as evangelistic as Miranda, but his intention is not to convert others to the Christian faith; rather, he wants to plead his case for social justice causes by “engaging people in spiritual questions to make people think the way that [he] wants them to think, and then to
live a more positive, influential life” (PET2, 501-502, 493-494). In particular, Peter utilized the questions, “What is existence,” and “Who am I?” as creative devices to, urge people to dedicate themselves to that last minute of their lives and the things that they would wish for the world. I [want] to make them question the way that I question and make them think for a moment how I think about the world. (PET2, 1000-1002, 1183-1185)

Approach Sub-Type #6: Intentionally Avoided or Postponed

Not all students in the study were as assertive and proactive when it came to their own spiritual questions. In fact, there were several students in the study who intentionally avoided or postponed their spiritual concerns. This sixth approach was employed at times even by students who were passionately engaged with their questions. It seemed that students purposefully sidelined, either permanently or temporarily: complex questions, threatening questions, and distracting questions.

First, Garrett, Kayla, and Sabrina avoided complex questions to prevent the possibility of becoming too overwhelmed. Garrett mentioned that he “leaves those big questions to be asked by [others], because I don’t think we can ever come to conclusions without driving ourselves insane about some of the bigger questions” (GAR2, 191-194). For Kayla, she sidesteps the questions about death, and for Sabrina, she finds that reflecting on the existence of God never resolves the question. This Jewish student honestly confessed,

I hate to think about if there is a God. I never say I believe in God and I never say I don’t believe in God, because I don’t understand why, if there was a God, all these bad things [are] happening. I never want to say either, because I don’t know. (SAB1, 624-631)
Secondly, African American participants Dante and Lashawna avoided *threatening* questions that potentially jeopardized the strength of their belief systems or the stability of their spiritual journeys. For Dante, the imperfection of the Biblical authors concerned him, because it causes him to doubt the trustworthiness of his tradition’s Scriptures (DAN2, 116-129). Lashawna, on the other hand, posited that some spiritual questions have the potential to divert her from her spiritual path.

Why question your journey, because when you start questioning your journey, you build another path, and why would you step off the path that is being created for you? Why would you forge another path and make it harder for yourself? By asking questions, you can possibly mess up something, and then you have to go through this whole round-about way just to get back to where you were, because of a question that was going to be answered anyway. (LAS1, 1212-1216, 1245-1249)

Thirdly, some participants perceived that there are some questions merely too *distracting* for their busy and complicated lives as college students. Both Miranda and Cheyenne felt this way about certain questions and during specific seasons of their lives (MIR2, 473-487; CHEY1, 1259-1273). While they are both spiritually inquisitive students who enjoy asking such questions, there are times when they choose to postpone them for future consideration.

*Approach Sub-Type #7: Answers Anticipated or Unexpected*

The seventh and final approach to spiritual questions addresses a significant topic that persistently materialized throughout the study: *finding answers* to these questions. The focus of this study does not include the exploration of how undergraduate students answer their
spiritual questions. However, for many of the participants, they approached their questions with the intent to discover personally satisfying answers. Twelve of the students acknowledged that finding answers to their spiritual concerns was either a requirement or a benefit to their spiritual journey. Lashawna, Sabrina, Peter, and Sebastian were the exceptions to this rule. Lashawna suggested that asking questions for the sake of asking questions was a worthy endeavor in and of itself, and Sabrina, although she might prefer answers to some of her biggest questions, is resigned to the fact that she will never reach certain conclusions in response to them.

No one knows, or people want to say they know, but they really don’t. I don’t think there are any answers to spiritual questions, [regardless] of what you spiritually think is happening or what you believe to be happening. I think everyone kind of interprets things differently, so that’s why rabbis and priests sit and talk and talk and talk, but there’s no conclusion. (SAB2, 444-460)

Peter and Sebastian agreed with Sabrina. They also believed that spiritual questions do not have definitive answers. Peter remarked about his perception of absolutes.

I find it hard for anyone to give a right answer to most things. Things are wrapped up in experience and bias. When someone answers something definitely, I’m turned off pretty quickly, because it seems like there’s no wiggle room for a new way of looking at things. Mystery implies that there’s an unknown variable and an unknown answer to all of these questions, and that unknown answer is spiritual in nature. (PET2, 258-268)

Additionally, Peter posited, as well, that having a preoccupation with finding answers to spiritual questions might actually derail the prospect of asking big and mysterious questions in
the first place by “constantly pulling these [individuals] into a particular paradigm” (PET2, 1104-1105). Similarly, Ming, Chen, and Garrett also concurred that some spiritual questions are so big that finding answers to those questions is an impossible venture (MIN1, 881-882; CHEN1, 905-907; GAR1, 225-226), but this presumption did not prevent them from seeking after and hoping for answers, nonetheless.

Regardless, most of the students in the study seemed lured to the insatiable draw to search for answers. Alex, Kushanu, and David were most outspoken about the necessity of finding answers. Alex, the international student from Kyrgyzstan, actually organized his college schedule to include a “little bit of physical activities, little bit of education, and little bit of looking for answers to my spiritual questions” (ALE2, 123-126). He takes his quest for answers very seriously: “While seeking this knowledge, I encounter these questions, and now I still try to give answers to them, and I’ll probably keep thinking about them and keep seeking the answer or clue for them” (ALE1, 1034-1035, 1465-1466). Sadly for him, despite his expectations, he did not find answers to all of his questions during his one year at BSU, even though he “thought that in the United States, I would find the answers for all of my questions, but it turns out that it’s just another stage in my seeking” (ALE2, 522-524). Kushanu, the Indian Hindu student, was as passionate as Alex about finding answers for his spiritual queries, particularly his question about the origin of the world. He commented that,

I wanted to know the answers about the universe. I am waiting for that answer. That’s it. I want that answer. That’s the main point. I want to get that answer [about] where this world is from. I want to know those answers right now, as quickly as possible. (KUS2, 26-28; KUS1, 307-308; KUS1, 1107-1109; KUS2, 500)
Furthermore, David contributed to this discussion by speculating that it is illegitimate and unproductive for a spiritual questor to probe without being on the lookout for specific answers.

I think these are questions that everybody should ask themselves, and I think it’s important to move forward with your answers. I think people who don’t answer them [get] discouraged. They get stuck where they are, and the questions are just going to come back for them. (DAV1, 1205-1211)

Finally, it should be noted that for some of the students in the study, finding answers might not always be the goal in their spiritual questioning process, but it is often an enlivening experience for them when answers actually appear.

In summary, undergraduate students in this study were purposively selected for this research project because of their perceived spiritual curiosity and personal engagement with spiritual questions. However, the manner in which they approached these questions varied significantly.

Type Category #2: **Duration**

Spiritual questions for students in this study also emerged along a continuum of differing lengths of time. Some questions appeared and then disappeared over the course of hours or days, while others had been salient in the minds of students for many years. There was a series of questions that remained static over time, and yet there were others that fluctuated as a result of different factors. Within this second type category of spiritual questions, five unique characteristics of duration appeared in the data, here labeled as **fleeting, enduring, frequent, intermittent, and shifting.**
Duration Sub-Type #1: Fleeting

The first duration sub-category comprises fleeting queries, those spiritual questions that emerge in a student’s life, but only for a moment, an hour, or a day. Like a passing thought that unexpectedly appears and then vanishes are those fleeting spiritual questions that might temporarily invade a student’s psyche. During her first interview, Lashawna explained that most of her questions are short-lived, and that “there are no questions that truly make my brain hurt, because most questions are fleeting thoughts. I’m constantly thinking and half the time I don’t go to sleep because I’m thinking, but my questions are passing thoughts” (LAS1, 968-973).

Duration Sub-Type #2: Enduring

A second duration sub-category includes questions that are enduring. For example, Sebastian revealed that, “I am one hundred percent encompassed by these questions” (SEB1, 469-470), because for this sophomore student, there are certain questions that have lodged themselves in his mind and still remain. Similarly, Garrett shared that his salient questions about hate are “always on my mind” (GAR1, 1113-1114). Chen noted that his primary spiritual question, “What is the right thing to do?” has been something he has “been thinking about for years” (CHEN1, 662-664). Serena faced a similar scenario in that her question about the definition of a good religious person is something that she admitted, “I still go over it in my head” (SER1, 767-777). However, it is Kayla who best illustrated not only the presence of, but also the struggle that enduring questions might create for some undergraduate students.

I guess one thing that always occupies my mind is why stuff happens. I know you’re not supposed to worry about things you can’t control. I know that I’m [just] supposed to go
with it, [because] everything happens for a reason, but I find myself questioning, “Why did that happen? Or if I have to wait, like, why do I have to wait?” (KAY1, 528-534).

Duration Sub-Type #3: Frequent

The third descriptor for the duration of spiritual questions is frequent. Several students expressed that their spiritual questions emerge every day. Peter thinks about his important spiritual question about how to best engage people “on a daily basis” (PET2, 487). Kushanu had a similar experience with his origin-of-the-Earth question: “Every day, it just comes up, and I can’t stop it” (KUS1, 312-317). Kayla’s questions about God, as well as the testing that she endures, surface “all the time” (KAY2, 916). Daily encounters with spiritual questions are also commonplace for Dante and Alex, as well (DAN1, 900; ALE1, 243). Chen and Cheyenne engage with their spiritual concerns even more often than the others. For Chen, he thinks about his questions “an average of twice or three times a day” (CHEN1, 1157-1158), and for Cheyenne, she admitted her spiritual questions “feel like they’re always around” and come into her mind “hourly” (CHEY1, 1227).

Duration Sub-Type #4: Intermittent

Moreover, some students in the study encountered some of their spiritual questions on an intermittent basis. Unlike fleeting questions that are quite temporary in nature, this fourth descriptor of duration refers to those questions that cycle and recycle in sporadic or periodic intervals. Spiritual questions that have been previously resolved might resurface again in the consciousness of students requiring reconsideration. For instance, David believed that he already answered his question, “Should I be more religious?” when it surfaced again: “I think I have already answered that, and I think you just answer it the same way, but sometimes it just
comes up again. Sometimes when you see other religious people, it comes up” (DAV1, 1177-1190). Furthermore, a common spiritual question might come and go throughout the various seasons and circumstances of life. Such is the case with Miranda, whose spiritual questions can be characterized as intermittent in nature.

I wouldn’t say all of my questions [come up] on a weekly basis, but they kind of cycle through. I haven’t really thought about the creation one much lately, but since I have friends who’ve been having issues with demonic influences, that has definitely been a little bit on the forefront of my mind, like, “What does this mean?” (MIR1, 1130-1138).

Duration Sub-Type #5: Shifting

Finally, shifting questions constitute the final duration category observed in the data. In the lives of several participants, their spiritual questions were prone to change and alteration. For a student like Ming, her connection with new people and ideas between the first and second interview added to her list of spiritual questions. When she arrived at the second session, she was eager to tell the researcher, “I have thought of some other question: Should I probably believe in another religion?” (MIN2, 14-16). Peter also admitted that his lengthy list of spiritual questions would most likely change to some degree if we met again for a third interview, because for him, the exercise of identifying spiritual questions in his life is not a “pragmatic or logical sequence,” but more of a “feeling that I got” in the moment (PET2, 127, 123). Chuckling, Peter admitted that “if I were to go back into this [interview] and did it again, unfortunately for your study, I would probably have different questions that would be qualified as spiritual” (PET2, 127-135). That was also the case for Garrett. When speaking about his most important spiritual questions, at the first interview, he tagged two examples: “How can
people hate and what’s heaven like?” (GAR1, 1095-1096). However, at the second meeting, he noted that “I think the two most important to me are, ‘How accurate is the Bible?’ and ‘Is homosexuality against the Bible?’” (GAR2, 1169-1171). Furthermore, not only can spiritual questions change from one interview to the next, but the intensity of feelings attached to each question and the motive for asking a particular question might shift as well.

In summary, the duration, timing, pace, and consistency of spiritual questions for the students in this study were varied and somewhat unpredictable. Each spiritual question for each individual student had its own time stamp that ranged from fleeting to enduring and frequent to intermittent, while on occasion, shifting in salience and substance.

Type Category #3: Relevance

The manner in which spiritual questions connect to each individual student and the role that these concerns play in their lives comprises the third typological category. Relevance denotes the suitability or fit of these questions within the context of student expectations and experiences. While the topics of these questions have been already noted, the focus of this section is on the varied applicability of these questions as they intersected with these students. Participants in this study interpreted their spiritual questions through a cognitive or emotional lens while perceiving their assorted queries to be of primary or secondary significance, philosophical or practical in nature, or weighty or light in force. As well, it is also worth reporting that some questions are personal, self-focused, and urgent in direct relationship to students’ lives.
Relevance Sub-Type #1: Cognitive and Emotional

This relevance sub-type of students’ queries is the lens through which they experience and interpret their questions **cognitively or emotionally**. For some students, logic and rationality are employed in thinking about spiritual questions, and yet for others, feelings and emotive reasoning drives their spiritual questioning process. Kushanu, Sofia, and Alex are the prime examples of participants who constructed their questions as an intellectual exercise. Kushanu admitted that he thinks too much about these questions. “This is the negative part: they have consumed so much time thinking about it. Sometimes, I feel like the time I spend thinking about these questions, I could have utilized that time to get a 4.0” (KUS1, 765-770).

Alex’s perspective aligned with Kushanu’s thoughts, but he took it a step further in suggesting that “there are no questions that evoke an emotional response in me. If I have questions, I always try to use my mind and to try to understand the question and give the reasonable answer” (ALE1, 950-955). Ukrainian student, Sofia, was most explicit when asked about the origin of her spiritual questions. Her response was brief and precise: “From my mind and from my brain” (SOF1, 612). Her challenging life circumstances seemed to have played a role in some of her comments about the difference between dealing with spiritual questions cognitively or emotionally. Even though she described herself as an emotional individual, she made a choice to live her life and process her spiritual questions with her head and not her heart.

I decided, “You should think with your brain with no emotions,” because if I did everything in accordance with my emotions, it would be really scary. At that time, I
should turn on my brain and think how to stop these emotions and not let my body to follow the emotions, but [use] my brain as the filter. (SOF1, 640-641, 599-604, 668)

In contrast, for many of these students, their spiritual questions were emotional for them. Throughout the study, dozens of feelings associated with the emergence of the extensive inventory of questions were noted, such as fear, excitement, frustration, worry, uneasiness, anger, anxiety, peace, confusion, sadness, doubt, passion, hurt, disgust, guilt, struggle, shock, joy, and simply being overwhelmed. Despite the fact that philosophy was his passion, Chen was one of many students who constructed and engaged with his spiritual questions about truth and rightness through an emotional lens.

I like philosophy questions, but sometimes I believe that the only way we can perceive the Truth with a “capital T” is to feel it. It helps if you argue with logic and think with reason, but the only way we perceive “capital T” Truth is to feel, because spiritual feeling is how we perceive the world. So since “capital T” Truth is not objective and not material, we can only feel it. That’s what I would say when I am thinking about spiritual stuff” (CHEN1, 943-953).

**Relevance Sub-Type #2: Primary and Secondary**

The second relevance sub-category is in reference to the level of priority to the participant. Some questions were primary questions that were foremost in students’ minds, while others were secondary in importance. More than half of the research participants were able to distinguish between their central and peripheral questions. Alex verbalized words and phrases like “basic,” “essential,” “primary,” and “my first and most important” (ALE2, 63, 75; ALE1, 914-915) to describe his most prominent questions. David spoke of his “biggest” (DAV1,
questions, while Chen differentiated between his primary question, “What is the right thing to do?” and a secondary question, “Is abortion right?” with descriptors such as “whole thing” and “sub-question” (CHEN1, 834-841; CHEN2, 179-180). Peter cited his question, “Am I loved?” as a “really important question that everyone asks themselves and is pretty vital to our human emotions and existence” (PET1, 1663-1665).

Relevance Sub-Type #3: Philosophical and Practical

The third relevance sub-type is about the application of these questions. Some questions were of a philosophical or theoretical nature, suitable for pondering and speculation, while others were practical and tangible, in that they directly relate to life experiences, relationships, choices, or feelings. Most spiritual questions in this study are not situated at far extremes but find themselves somewhere along a continuum between philosophical and practical.

As for philosophical questions, there are queries of an abstract and speculative nature that have little to do with the practicalities of life, such as “What is fun?” (PET1, 1163). This is a philosophical question the Agnostic Pantheist senior-level student was “perplexed by” (PET1, 1156), but even Peter admitted that pondering such a theoretical question makes little difference in the grand scheme of things. Chen also admitted, while chuckling, that “what I usually think about does not affect my practical life” (CHEN1, 1321-1322). One such theoretical conflict that Chen considered is the difference between doing a good thing and doing the right thing. Here is his proposed philosophical case study:

For some people, they would say stealing is both bad and wrong, but sometimes it could be good. If I steal your gun, it keeps you from stealing [from] people. Or I know you are
insane, have a gun, and are telling me that you plan to kill all the students. So I better just steal it from you, right? But isn’t it still wrong to steal something? So could [doing] the wrong thing be good for people? You kill Hitler, right? So it’s pretty good. You saved all the Jews, but isn’t it still wrong to kill someone, no matter how bad he is?

(CHEN1, 670-686)

However, practical spiritual questions are far different in nature. These questions often have an immediate effect on an individual’s daily choices, feelings, or interactions. For example, David was most interested in one of his primary questions, “What is the good life?” (DAV1, 602), so a few of his follow-up questions were, “How do I feel? Why do I feel that way? What do I need to do to feel good?” (DAV1, 645, 1321, 647-649). So as a result of these questions, David then takes action, by considering other tangible and practical questions: “If I’m tired, should I go get some sleep? Do I have time to get sleep?” (DAV1, 650-651).

Moreover, Alex summarized the distinction between philosophical (or transcendental) and practical (or tangible) questions succinctly: “I think that spiritual questions for me are the questions that are kind of practical and have a very big importance for yourself [in] finding your way, but these questions are related to something transcendental” (ALE2, 14-18, 55).

Relevance Sub-Type #4: Weighty and Light

The fourth relevance sub-type is about the intensity of these questions. Some questions are of a weighty or serious nature that are likely to engage the more sensitive and vulnerable dimensions of the human spirit, while others are light and sometimes silly, and can be amusing to consider with little concern for personal repercussions. There is no doubt that spiritual questions that emerge during personal crisis and tragedy tend to be more solemn and somber,
while questions of a light-hearted nature occur more often during blissful seasons of the human experience.

For several of the students, their spiritual questions about pain, suffering, death and the afterlife were most weighty, often inciting the most intense of emotional responses, even in the midst of the interviews. Undoubtedly, though, the thought of death was really troubling for many of these young undergraduates. Kayla cried almost every time the topic came up, and through her tears, she said at one point, “Like, the death and heaven questions, I would really like to know the answers to those” (KAY2, 811-812). Moreover, Kayla explained through her tears that she lost a close college friend just two months previous to the second interview, because he overdosed on oxycotin. His death was heavy on her heart and prompted several new death and afterlife questions in her life. David was another student who was very uneasy about death and the afterlife. He admitted with an emotional quiver in his voice, “It is depressing to me... just that things have to come to an end” (DAV1, 733-734, 738-739). It is for this reason that his question, “What is going to happen in the afterlife?” (DAV2, 499-500) is of such serious significance to him. Likewise, Garrett, as a Christian who believes in an afterlife, was all the more sober about his destination questions after a current dream.

I recently had a dream, and in the dream, I was shot. I know, really scary. I didn’t wake up immediately either. I was just lying there, knowing I was going to die, just thinking, “What’s going to happen? Do I go to heaven?” I mean, if you can’t comprehend something, how can you know it’s there? So, I mean, I believe there’s a heaven, but there’s always a question of, “How can I know it really?” (GAR1, 401-412).
Ming, in particular, as an Atheist student, was very somber concerning her questions about death. She does not have questions about an afterlife, since that does not correspond with her secular tradition, but she does still wonder, “When people die, what will happen to them?” (MIN1, 640-641). Ming is afraid of death, but was quick to acknowledge that she was not alone in her uneasiness.

I think most people will feel fear about death, and because what I believe is that everyone can live only once, if I die, I will have no spirit, and I won’t think anymore. I just don’t know what that will feel like when I disappear from this world and will never come back. There is no me anymore. I just feel fear and sometimes blank. I just don’t know what to think. (MIN2, 257-270)

Indeed, these are serious questions about weighty topics, and more than half of the students in this study have their own personal list of spiritual questions that are grim and gloomy.

Nevertheless, there are those spiritual questions that bring levity to even the most dismal of days, ranging from amusing questions about the amount of gold and the size of homes in heaven (GAR1, 1178-1180) to comical queries concerning the reason for being bound to Earth and unable to fly (KUS1, 436-441). However, it was Miranda who articulated the most lighthearted of spiritual questions.

I go back and nit-pick at the fun, silly questions. It doesn’t have really anything to do with my salvation, but it makes for good table talk. I love debate, so I [enjoy] asking other people about hair-splitting, theatric, silly, insignificant questions, like, “Did Adam
have a belly button? Did Adam walk around with dinosaurs? Did Noah have dinosaurs on the ark?” (MIR2, 103-105, 114-117, 125, 139-141)

Relevance Sub-Types #5, #6, and #7: Personal, Self-Focused, and Urgent

Finally, there were three other characteristics of relevance that were discovered during data analysis: personal, self-focused, and urgent questions. Peter postulated that “all questions are spiritual in nature” (PET2, 518-519), but also that there are those personal and “deeper questions that a lot of people would garnish as more spiritual… those questions where people start to feel uncomfortable” (PET2, 549-553). In fact, during the first interview, Peter proposed a few such “very personal questions that everyone asks: ‘Am I loved? Am I liked? Am I cared about? Will anyone listen?’” (PET1, 918-922).

Additionally, it appears as if most of the questions that emerged during the study were self-focused, or at the very least, asked with self-interest as an underlying motive. While it seemed as if this was the pattern among the students in the study, it was only Alex who admitted to his preoccupation with himself.

I can’t say that one question is better than the other, but in terms of importance, there’s a certain sequence. The question about myself, “Who am I?” is the main question, because you have to figure out who you are first, and then the other questions would be easier to decide. Probably it’s my selfishness, but this question seems to be the first question to decide, and if I find the clue to that question, the rest of them will go easier. (ALE1, 1433-1448)

Lastly, the final sub-type of relevance is urgency. Some students, when they spoke of engaging with their spiritual questions, there was this relaxed wonderment to their quest, but
for other participants, certain questions felt pressing. Often, this sense of urgency was connected to an expectation or rush to discover answers to the questions, but as in the case with Sebastian, his motivation was to merely avoid squandering his life or missing out on the progression toward spiritual maturity.

My questions bring up like a sense of urgency, and a sense of, “This is the time I really need to start working on these questions, devoting my time and energy to understanding these questions better, and incorporating them into a larger part of my life. I do feel an urgency to keep exploring and figure out what I want to figure out.”

(SEB1, 449-459; SEB2, 815-816)

In conclusion, the relevance of spiritual questions is in the mind of the muser. The role these spiritual questions provide in the life of each individual student and the manner in which these queries intersect with their personal journeys comprise the fourth type category of relevance. The study of the applicability of these questions is noteworthy, regardless of whether they are personal, self-focused, or urgent in the lives of students or perceived as primary, secondary, philosophical, practical, weighty or light in their significance.

Type Category #4: Scope

The fourth and final category of spiritual questions is in reference to the breadth and depth of the questions, as well as their span and reach across a range of possibilities. The scope of these questions might be general and broad, specific and focused, or integrative and multiplying.
Scope Sub-Type #1: General and Broad

First, general and broad questions are positioned at a meta-level in an attempt to understand a macro reality of large and expansive ideas. More indefinable and less answerable, these seemingly oversized and more generic questions, at times, require big-picture thinking and imagination. For instance, “What is existence?” is a question that Peter expressed, but even to his own admission, “I don’t go there” (PET2, 753). Chen asked, “What is good?” (CHEN2, 968), which is general enough and sufficiently broad enough to think about for a lengthy period of time. Other questions of this wide-angled scope include, “What is our purpose here? (CHEY1, 733); What is reality? (KUS2, 294-295); Why am I myself? (MIN2, 883); What is destiny?” (SER1, 731).

A few participants endeavored to explain the difference between their general and specific questions. Sebastian commented that the origin of the universe and the possibility of an afterlife were “big questions I think about sometimes” (SEB1, 369-370), whereas his more specific questions include, “What do I need to be working on? And what do I need to be doing?” (SEB1, 366-367). Additionally, Kushanu drew an interesting comparison between general and specific questions to the trunk and branches of a tree (KUS1, 1033-1068). From his perspective, his primary question, “Where did the world come from?” is the trunk, while his question, “Is the world to be enjoyed?” is one of the branches.

Scope Sub-Type #2: Specific and Focused

Secondly, specific and focused questions are explicit, detailed, and pointed in their content. Similar to the broader queries, these “branches” (KUS1, 1038) span and often overlap across questions that can be of primary or secondary importance, weighty or light in
significance, fleeting or enduring in duration, avoided or pursued in their approach, or interpreted through a cognitive or emotional lens. Examples of exact and narrow questions are abundant in this study, including, “How do the ceremonies in the Catholic Church relate to theology? (CHEN1, 927-929); Why doesn’t my father want to be in my life? (CHEY1, 873-874); Will my mother get saved? (DAN1, 656-657); Should you raise your kids Jewish? (DAV2, 584-585); If there’s so many people in heaven, how do you find somebody there? (KAY2, 777-778); What is the Islamic view of Jesus? (MIR2, 216); Am I allowed to get drunk? (PET1, 993-994); Why is the Earth round?” (SOF1, 219).

Topical questions of origin and mystery appear to constitute the largest percentage of these general and broad questions, whereas destinations and truth and belief tend to catalog numerous questions that were detailed and exact in their specifications. For example, there are many questions about heaven, religion, and sacred texts that are explicitly narrow. The topical categories of divine and deity and human experience have a wide sampling of both kinds of questions of scope.

Scope Sub-Type #3: Integrated and Multiplying

Thirdly, integrated and multiplying questions are synergistic and reproducing, or as Peter articulated, “complex and interwoven” (PET2, 748). Oftentimes, spiritual questions that emerged in the participants’ lives were interconnected to other questions and intertwined with other factors or influencers in the students’ reflective or experiential processes and contexts. At one point during an interview with Dante, the researcher took note of how questions of identity, deity, and relationships influenced the construction of his many emerging questions (DAN2, 372-423). This pattern of intersectionality between and among questions frequently
manifested itself as these students shared their personal narratives in tandem with their spiritual questions. Notably, spiritual questions stemming from identity, purpose, and calling were a launching pad to other topical spiritual questions (ALE1, 1433-1438; CHEY2, 1223-1233). Moreover, current spiritual questions had a tendency to spur other new spiritual questions for students such as Peter, Sofia, and Serena (PET2, 734-740; SOF1, 226-236, 956-958; SER1, 1018-1022). Kushanu and Lashawna also gave testimony to this cascading phenomenon happening in their lives, as well. Kushanu often repeated the phrase, “another question popped up” (KUS1, 597, 800; KUS2, 874, 1339) to describe the multiplying effect of his questions, and Lashawna remarked that “each question brings up another question, and even if I don’t want the answer, or whether I know the answer or not, there’s always another question to be had” (LAS1, 973-975). For a few participants, if too many spiritual questions emerged at one time, they felt confused and beleaguered (DAN1, 909-910; KUS2, 1327-1329). This sense of being overwhelmed was most definitely the case with Kayla, as a conflicted Catholic-Christian, especially when her questions were religious in nature. She exhibited one such example when one question about sin quickly multiplied into a parade of spiritual questions.

Like, can you sin too much? Sometimes when I go to church, it seems like God is just this nice guy and everybody’s going to get into heaven, and then other times, it’s like, “Not everybody is in.” So it’s like, “Crap. Am I doing everything right, because I have to go to heaven, right?” So am I doing everything right, so that when I get to the gates, I am going to get in? Can you sin too much, or how do you know if you’re forgiven for those sins, and if there are so many different religions, like, is one better? Am I supposed to be going through all of these religions and examining them and then
making my choice, so that when I get there, it is like, “Okay, you picked the right one. You’re in”? (KAY1, 732-747).

In conclusion, the scope of spiritual questions is in reference to both the density and magnitude of these students’ queries. Some are general and broad. Most are specific and focused. Few to none are isolated from each other and detached from the contexts and conditions in which they emerge. Instead, they are often integrated, interconnected, and synergistic.

**Common and Unique Questions**

Within six of the seven topics, there were several questions from a cross-section of the pool of participants that were common and often repeated, even exactly articulated at times. The most common questions were about the origins of the universe; the reason for human existence; life direction and calling; identity and personal development; personal relationships; the point of death and the subsequent afterlife; God’s existence, motives, and activities; God’s expectations for humanity and the individual; the purpose of and response to corporate and personal pain; and religious differences, beliefs, practices, and priorities. Even though there were noticeably common themes present throughout the index of spiritual questions, students articulated their questions in a manner that resonated with their characteristic voices. However, there were some distinctive questions that emerged in the study that were particularly unique, most of which are classified within the mysterious category.

**Summary of Typology**

In this second of two sections on the constructions of students’ spiritual questions, the researcher reported and illustrated the four different types of questions that emerged in the
study, with special interest given to showcasing the students’ questions in their own words.

The exemplars have demonstrated how diverse undergraduate students construct a wide
variety of spiritual questions that are typologically organized in approaches, duration, relevance
and scope of such questions.

**Figure 7: Typology of Spiritual Questions**

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**Summary on the Constructions of Students’ Spiritual Questions**

To summarize this first section on the findings concerning the construction and
compositions of spiritual questions among undergraduate students, it must be noted that
hundreds of spiritual questions, encountered through the voices and narratives of sixteen
diverse research participants, were organized within a comprehensive framework of results.
Arranged in topical and typological categories and sub-categories, complete with exemplars,
responses to the first two research probes on the nature of spiritual questions for college
students were reported. Furthermore, a brief summary of the common and unique questions that materialized throughout the study was offered to merely restate what was previously outlined and discussed. At this point, the chapter turns to the variety of sources and situations that appear to precipitate and facilitate such questions.

Conditions for Students’ Spiritual Questions

For these sixteen college students, their spiritual questions did not emerge out of a vacuum, but rather, a variety of conditions seemed to have precipitated their construction. In response to the third and fourth research questions concerning the sources, motivating forces, and factors that trigger the materialization of these students’ questions and the circumstances and contexts that influence the spiritual questioning process, this section proceeds.

Specifically, conditions that facilitated these spiritual questions have been classified within eleven major categories and thirty sub-categories: personal dynamics (i.e., identity and personality; beliefs and worldview; reflections, thoughts, and feelings; and passions, pursuits, and choices), religious and spiritual influences (i.e., personal perceptions; people and places; practices; events and experiences; holidays; and texts and manuscripts), family factors (i.e., connections; conversations; and conflict and crisis), close friendships (i.e., connections; conversations; and conflict and crisis), college campus (i.e., transitions; curricular components; co-curricular engagement; community and environment; and research interviews), pain and suffering (i.e., intrapersonal; interpersonal; and impersonal), everyday exposure to people (i.e., observations and interactions), societal and cultural norms, encounters with nature, media and music (i.e., news and entertainment), and daily living (i.e., experiences and activities; and possessions).
Condition #1: *Personal Dynamics*

Each participant in the study brought with him or her a unique personal makeup that influenced the construction and composition of his or her spiritual questions. These distinctive features became inputs that shaped the students’ personal journeys as well as the formation of their spiritual questions.

Personal Dynamics Sub-Condition #1: *Identity and Personality*

First, *identity and personality* emerged as one sub-condition of personal dynamics. Alex expressed how his personal challenge of “finding himself” (ALE1, 821) had ripened the conditions for his process of spiritual questioning, because he believes that he was “created in a certain way” (ALE1, 292-293). Similarly, Kayla’s developing racial identity, as a White female who has immersed herself in a predominantly Black culture, caused her to wonder why God situated her in a Caucasian family (KAY2, 687-690). Moreover, Cheyenne explained that her questions about the feminine aspect of religion were shaped by her gender.

The feminine aspect is really important to me. Well, obviously that’s something to do with being a woman. I guess I just like to think about the reason behind things, and so I wonder: what has happened in humanity to cause [femininity] to be put on the back burner? It’s a spiritual question for me because there are men and women on Earth, and I think that we are reflections of God, like male and female aspects of God. (CHEY2, 399-411)

Personal Dynamics Sub-Condition #2: *Beliefs and Worldview*

Secondly, student *beliefs and worldview* is an important facet of personal dynamics. Students are what they believe to be true, so whether these beliefs are about politics (CHEN1,
the magnitude and mystery of the world (KUS1, 211-212, 573-586), social justice (PET1, 761-774), or a general philosophy of life (CHEY2, 326-389), these students’ perspective and interpretation of the world fostered the development of their spiritual questions. For Chen, his emerging belief about God facilitated questions about this deity’s attributes.

I think that, no matter, if it’s the true God, [if] it’s a Christian God or not, I think it’s a loving God, right? God must be loving. God must be holy and it loves people, the world, [and] the whole thing, right? (CHEN2, 558-563)

Personal Dynamics Sub-Condition #3: Reflections, Thoughts, and Feelings

Thirdly, the thoughts and feelings that reside within students’ minds and hearts also shaped their questions. As they reflected upon their opinions and emotions concerning death and the brevity of life (ALE1, 734-735), the reasons for their emerging emotions (DAV1, 1314-1322; DAV2, 220-223), important milestones in their lives (LAS1, 1102-1110), and tragic memories (SOF1, 805-816), these reflections, thoughts, and feelings were fodder for many of the students’ spiritual queries. Sofia often reflected upon global and regional resource scarcity and other related environmental issues. As she considered the suffering of much of the world’s population from war, poverty, and lack of natural resources, she asked closely related questions that then evolved into a series of new spiritual probes.

What is going to happen to my children and to my grandchildren in fifty years because of the environmental problems? What is going to happen to people in those poorer countries, [because] according to the prognosis, by 2050 the whole [world] is going to suffer? [Will] the Third World War [be about] water, resources, or oil? Also, what lesson did my parents want to give me? What did my parents want me to achieve?
What are my values in this world? What are my preferences in this world? (SOF1, 226-236)

Personal Dynamics Sub-Condition #4: Passions, Pursuits, and Choices

The fourth and final sub-condition of personal dynamics includes passions, pursuits, and choices. Thus, questions surfaced in the lives of these students because of desires that were acted upon. These tangible pursuits and activities then became specific triggers for a variety of spiritual questions. For example, Kushanu’s self-imposed pressure to be successful and wealthy (KUS2, 1336-1353), Peter’s personal dedication to the well-being of the global community (PET1, 801-821, 828-835), Serena’s daily reflection and self-evaluation exercise (SER2, 1198-1211), and Sofia’s desire for and decision to pursue self-actualization (SOF1, 1399-1404) each prompted spiritual questions in their lives. Several other students suggested that their own independent exploration and self-education about the plurality of religious and spiritual belief systems was instrumental to personally engaging with their concerns. Miranda’s personal study and investigation of world religions was a significant condition for the emergence of new questions in her life. Even though Miranda has a firm understanding on the many tenets, beliefs, and practices of the Christian faith, she has been encouraged from a young age to explore other religious and spiritual perspectives, and that she did.

I’ve probably explored all of the major Eastern religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Chinese religion. I went to a seminar over Christmas break about Islam. I enjoy learning about Islam, and I like seeing that so much of it is rooted back to the one true God. [Muslims] just missed the mark by a little bit. I like to put myself in their shoes, like, “What would my life be as a woman who practices Islam? What would that look
like? What kind of questions would I have? What would my definition of morality be? How does God view this religion? How does the rest of the world view this religion?”

With Islam and looking at Allah, I [ask], “Is that my God? [Is] Islam a violent religion, or is it not? Is it only the strictest people who are violent? How much have they really missed the mark?” You know, they believe in my God, but they don’t believe in Jesus as their Savior. (MIR2, 166-190, 215-220)

Condition #2: Religious and Spiritual Influences

Every participant in this study was influenced by one or more religious or spiritual factors in the construction of their queries. Representing the largest category of conditions were influences that included students’ vague and specific perceptions of religion and spirituality, interactions with people and places, engagement with spiritual or religious practices, participation with events and experiences, celebration of holidays, and reading sacred texts.

Religious and Spiritual Influences Sub-Condition #1: Personal Perceptions

First, personal perceptions emerged as one sub-condition of religious and spiritual influences. For some students, the mere thought of religion or spirituality, apart from any specific experiences or encounters, solicited an opinion or a viewpoint on the matter. This is true, in particular, for religious institutions. As a Muslim, Alex voiced certain concerns related to perceived impropriety within the Islamic establishment, but even with the Catholic Church, of which Alex is not a member, he also exerted a strong viewpoint about this faith tradition. Two of his spiritual questions – the need to spread one’s religion and the role of religious institutions in the development of personal faith – are prompted by his frustration that
religious communities “get corrupted and sometimes cause more harm than benefit” (ALE1, 871-873). He supported his case by referencing both Catholicism and Islam.

We can see, even from the history of the Catholic Church that they sold indulgences and got a lot of money. In Islam, we have the same. Some priests [sic] in Islam abuse their power. For example, people donate to the mosque, and [these priests] take this [money]. So they didn’t go to the religion because they really believed in God, but... you get easy money. [Another] prominent example is that Catholic Church tries to say that, “Here are you Christians, and here is the God, and we are between you. You should come to us in order to get connected to Jesus.” I really doubt that you have to go to church in order to get in touch with Jesus... So those religious institutions look very suspicious to me. (ALE1, 569-578, 877-890)

Religious and Spiritual Influences Sub-Condition #2: People and Places

Secondly, students’ visit to religious or spiritual venues and interactions with people from a variety of religious backgrounds and spiritual persuasions is another sub-condition of this category. People and places was the sub-group within religious and spiritual influences that garnered the most data. For a few students, their perception of the places and their interactions with religious or spiritual devotees was positive and constructive, while for many others, their spiritual questions resulted from feelings of discomfort, confusion, or bitterness. While some students spoke about the geographical location of religious buildings (MIN 2, 138) and the physical environment inside of the sacred structures (PET1, 1458), most accounts predominantly referenced dialogue with religious or spiritual people. Stories about such
conversations interspersed throughout the data are numerous and lengthy, but three poignant exemplars that span the continuum between positive and negative experiences are featured.

It was the Atheist, Ming, who felt most pleased with her interactions with God-believers on campus. Specifically, Ming “had taken some lessons [from] people who were teaching Chinese students about the Bible” (MIN1, 357, 353). During these two sessions (MIN2: 410), Ming heard about a “powerful” God who “created everything” (MIN2, 316-317). Although she didn’t believe in what she heard about this God, nor the “prophesies [that] have already [been] fulfilled” (MIN2, 321, 363, 367), Ming acknowledged that “I don’t know much about God, and I actually don’t believe in God, but I still got curious and want to know more” (MIN2, 334-336). Furthermore, these encounters caused her to question, “What’s God like?” and “Why do people say that God created us?”

Peter, however, found himself somewhere in the middle of the continuum between satisfied and annoyed, as he encountered people and places of organized religion. As an Agnostic Pantheist, there is “no specific thing or practice, so it’s kind of hard, and church just confuses me” (PET1, 553-554, 557-558). Consequently, Peter finds himself making it up as he goes by “either supplementing” his spirituality “with some conversation, a prayer before I go to bed, a smile when I wake up, going to church, or reflecting on the idea of church” (PET1, 554-557). On some days, Peter’s disillusionment keeps him away from church, because of his aversion to the overt message of, “This is how it is! This is the arch narrative! This is what you’re supposed to listen to! You’re going to Hell! This is how you [can] get to Heaven!” (PET1, 560-563). Nevertheless, despite his discomfort with some of the aspects of these environments, Peter continues to sporadically participate, while asking the following spiritual
questions along the way: “How do you know? But if you don’t have that system, if you don’t have that syllabus, what are you going to do for that hour that you’re together?” (PET1, 564-567).

Reflecting several participants who experienced disillusionment in their encounters with religious people and places, Kayla highlighted her frustration with her Sunday school teachers at her Catholic Church who did not seem to appreciate it when students would pose tough spiritual or religious questions during class discussions.

Mostly the guys would just say like, “Okay, so if I cuss or if I get in a fight, I can’t go to heaven then? Or how do I know when my sins are forgiven?” The Sunday school teachers would just yell at us for being loud, but they never really answered a lot of our questions. I think that’s why I have so many questions, because they were never answered. We would ask them: “Well, why do I have to tell a priest my confessions? Why can’t I just tell God? If the relationship is between me and God, why does a priest have to get involved?” Those are good questions. Then the [teachers] would be like, “Well, you just need to.” Like, that’s not an answer. (KAY2, 201-218)

Religious and Spiritual Influences Sub-Condition #3: Practices

The third sub-condition of religious and spiritual influences is practices. For six of the participants, their personal experimentation with fasting (ALE2, 798-814), prayer (KAY1, 759-768; SOF1, 77-86), meditation (KUS2, 1004-1018), communion (MIR1, 1108-1112), and Gospel music (KAY1, 1177-1181) made either a positive or negative impression. For instance, after Sofia endured a strenuous prayer session, this spiritual question surfaced: “Why is my religion the religion of suffering and patience?” (SOF1, 823-824). Granted, many of the other
participants also engaged in religious and spiritual activities, but only six of the students
demonstrated explicit connections between these practices and the subsequent conditions for
their spiritual questions. During periods of personal prayer and worship, Lashawna
encountered spiritual questions about campus commitments as well as related questions of
deity, in particular, *who* or *what* was speaking into her life.

> When I pray [and] and when I worship, what am I feeling? [That is] a spiritual question. I wonder, “Is it actually God, or is it the Holy Spirit?” Because spirituality can go two ways: there’s positive and negative. There’s a positive belief in God and angels, and as well, there is what is below us: the devil and demons. So [am I] feeling something positive, or [am I] feeling something negative? Or can I even tell the difference? Because I have been taught [that] the devil will mask something bad to [appear] good. So when you pray for something, are you praying for it because it is what is good, and what is right, and what you should have? Or are you praying for it because this is what he said you should pray for? So the [question] is like, “Okay. Yes, this is something that’s supposedly good, but [can] it also be a bad thing?” (LAS1, 627-656)

**Religious and Spiritual Influences Sub-Condition #4: Events and Experiences**

Distinguished from practices, events and experiences are isolated incidents that are special and unique. These particular conditions facilitated spiritual questions in seven of the students’ lives. Events are more corporate in nature and include youth conventions (SAB2, 558-579), meditation retreats (SEB1, 82-95), and public baptisms (MIR1, 1004-1006), while experiences are more personal in essence, such as spontaneous spiritual experiences (PET1,
197-262; SEB1, 559-586), spiritual impressions and spirit visitations (CHEY1, 341-357; CHEY2, 1035-1045), or seasons of struggle and doubt (MIR2, 294-314).

One event worth noting is David’s pilgrimage to Israel. This Reformed Jewish student traveled to his ancestral homeland of Israel during the summer before his senior year of college as a delegate for the Birthright program. During this event, David befriended Jewish students from around the United States, engaged in conversations with Israeli soldiers, and visited the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. David’s face brightened as he described the sight of this sacred place of prayer: “It was just amazing! It’s an old and significant place. It’s like the gathering place for [our] religion. It’s like the Mecca” (DAV2, 630-631, 640-641). While in the Middle East, David wrestled with several spiritual questions that were prompted by considering matters of Israel’s safety, security, and identity (DAV1, 1098; DAV2, 582), such as: “What is my commitment to the religion? What is my commitment to the state of Israel? Should Jews move to Israel? Should I raise my kids Jewish?” (DAV1, 1092-1093; DAV2, 584-585)

Another prominent spiritual experience in the data was Chen’s supernatural encounter with a Voice that he believed to have originated with God. Chen recounted that in the middle of a personal crisis with self-image and self-worth and literally within days of taking his own life, he “heard a Voice coming from my heart” (CHEN1, 164-165). This experience not only activated Chen’s spiritual journey, but also doubled as a condition that fostered several of Chen’s spiritual questions.

I noticed that Voice was not coming from myself. It was not a physical Voice... you feel that Voice, right? You know every single word that Voice is saying, but you don’t really hear the words. I asked, “What the hell are you?” And he said, “I am God, the Creator
of the world and the whole universe.” Well, then, that Voice says, “Life is good, and you should not kill yourself.” It taught me many things like philosophy stuff, but I cannot understand most of those, because those are too deep for me. (CHEN1, 165-194)

So upon reflection these past few years, Chen gave credit to the Voice for the spiritual journey he continues to travel even now in the United States. Although it was a “super super strong and weird feeling which I never had before” (CHEN1, 289-290), Chen concluded that this supernatural encounter was the point at which his spiritual questioning started.

If I never heard this, I won’t be here and I won’t be thinking about these kinds of things. I [would have] never gone to church and studied other religions. The reason why I keep thinking about “capital T” Truth, morality and justice, and good and bad and right and wrong stuff, is the Voice I heard. Before that, I was just so dumb. I never thought anything about this deep stuff. The big questions: never; but after I heard that Voice, I began to think a lot about those things. (CHEN2, 452-460; CHEN1, 1112-1118)

Religious and Spiritual Influences Sub-Condition #5: Holidays

Two Jewish and two Christian students provided data suggesting that religious holidays prompted spiritual questions in their lives. Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Passover, and Yom Kippur were directly mentioned as religious influences in the construction of spiritual questions. During religious holidays, the distinction between practicing and non-practicing Jewish relatives becomes more pronounced for Sabrina, since these occasions are more about family than even the religious rituals themselves. Nevertheless, Sabrina remarked that “all the religious holidays” (SAB1, 997-998) promoted spiritual questions in her life. Passover is an important holiday for David, as well, but it is Yom Kippur that tends to stimulate spiritual questions in his
life. “Its focus is on washing away your sins. So you think about all the bad things you’ve done this past year. It’s basically a New Year’s resolution [about] what you should do better, so the big questions [come up]” (DAV1, 1107-1116).

Moreover, Christmas and Easter are two religious holidays that prompt a series of spiritual questions in Kayla’s life. During the Christmas season, Kayla suggested that “thinking about the birth of Jesus makes you want to learn more about why he went through everything. So is he testing me? That just brings up questions. (KAY1, 1102-1106). Additionally, Easter instigated even more spiritual questions.

So when’s he coming back? People are like, “Oh, he’s coming back in 2012,” but in the Bible it said, “No man could ever predict when he comes back,” so I’m feeling good that it’s not going to end in 2012. [Easter] also brings up questions about the afterlife, because he ascended into heaven. But straight up to heaven? So I have to be buried in the ground? Everybody saw him ascend. Now, of course, I’m not God, so I don’t get to do it like that. So for [me], is it a dark tunnel you go through, or is it a light tunnel?

(KAY1, 1120-1132)

Religious and Spiritual Influences Sub-Condition #6: Texts and Manuscripts

This final sub-condition comprised texts and manuscripts that ten of the students read and studied. For a few of these students, the Bible was highlighted as a formative and transformative manuscript (CHEN1, 286-298; DAN1, 275-300; LAS1, 825-827; SOF2, 66-79), but the literary works that students noted as stimulants for spiritual questions was diverse, including Nag Hammadi Library and Siddhartha (CHEY1, 286-298), The God Delusion (GAR1, 98-99), Castaneda’s work on The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge (SEB2, 903-
906), ancient alchemical texts as seen on the Internet (SEB2, 907-909), and an unknown piece by Eoin Colfer (DAV2, 439). Some of these books were assigned for college course work, while other manuscripts were read merely for personal investigation.

Serena seemed to be the most avid reader from among the participants. She admitted that she is constantly reading at least one book that addresses spiritual themes. As a result, she “thinks a lot more and definitely has these questions popping up in [her] head every other day or at least twice a week” (SER1, 1367-1370). Serena reads “at least a page almost every night before going to bed” (SER2, 80-81) from Jalal ad-Din Rumi’s writings. As one of her favorite mystic poets, Rumi addresses a theme that “really connects with me: the deeper you go inside [yourself] as an individual, the higher you rise. These ideas get me thinking about, “How am I developing, what have I done in the past, and where am I going?” (SER2, 96-110). Serena also spoke about Paulo Coelho and his book, *The Alchemist*, and another piece called, *The Secret*, as two more influential works that have shaped her spiritual journey and her understanding of and appreciation for positive energy. After learning about this topic from these authors, she now wants to know how “you [can] use that energy to work for you. I just want to know, ‘What it is? How does it start? How do you really work with it? How do you make it work for you?’” (SER2, 547-554).

Furthermore, Garrett is underscored here as a representative from the students with mainstream Christian faith traditions, because of his personal and academic engagement with the Bible. As an assignment for one of his honors courses at BSU, Garrett was required to read the *Book of Genesis* from the Bible. The primary spiritual question that emerged as he read this
sacred text for his Great Ideas class was, “How accurate is the Bible?” He explained the conflict that he felt as he wrestled with the Genesis account:

I just sat there thinking, you know, “I believe in God, but I’m not sure I prescribe to this, and I’m not sure I fit in with this Biblical idea of God... that God is this angry, wrathful figure in the Old Testament. I know [God] is like a parent, someone who guides you and may punish you from time to time, but I don’t see God as being so wrathful or so unforgiving. On a larger scale, I’m not sure that I can say that the Bible is entirely true, because I don’t think God brought his hand down and wrote it. (GAR1, 125-143)

Garrett noted that these questions emerged during the course, but he has now been finding himself pondering these same questions outside of class (GAR1, 160-161). In fact, Garrett’s exposure to the Bible in a variety of settings and at different periods of his life has prompted a series of spiritual questions that range from homosexuality to creationism to gender issues, as illustrated in this comprehensive personal exposition:

I think before reading [the Bible], here’s always the argument: is homosexuality against the Bible? You know, just hearing about Sodom and Gomorrah I just thought, “Well, obviously in the Bible it says that God is against homosexuality.” Then actually reading it, you realize that it’s a story less of the fact [that] they are homosexual and more that they’re rapists, that they’re immoral, and that they’re against God. It’s not because they’re gay; it’s because they’re morally terrible in God’s eyes. So before having read Genesis, I was like, “Okay, so homosexuality must be outlined somewhere. There’s a part in the Bible that says gays are bad or something, where it’s clearly outlined.” Then you read it, and these are people interpreting it to mean what they want it to mean.
Then I guess there’s always the evolution versus creationism debate. I believe it was creationism, but I don’t necessarily believe entirely in the Garden of Eden. Because again, the woman is the one who ruins everything. I look and say, “Well why does it have to be the woman? Why wouldn’t the guy make that mistake? Why is she made from him? Why isn’t she made as her own being? So I believe in creationism, but not necessarily the Garden of Eden story. I mean, it’s a nice story but I’m not sure I can entirely believe in it. (GAR1, 805-868).

To recap, every student in this research project was significantly influenced by one or more spiritual or religious influences in the formation of her or his spiritual questions across the spectrum of personal perceptions, people and places, practices, events and experiences, holidays, and relevant literature.

**Condition #3: Family Factors**

Thirteen of the participants in this study were influenced by family culture in the construction of their spiritual concerns. Only three students (David, Ming, and Peter) did not demonstrate evident intersectionality between family dynamics and the spiritual questioning process. Family influences are classified here into the three sub-categories of connections, conversations, and conflict or crisis. However, as with any attempt to distinguish between data that examine relationships, there will be some overlap within this third condition for spiritual questions.

**Family Factors Sub-Condition #1: Connections**

The participants spoke often about how simple connections with family members influenced their spiritual questioning process through their bonding presence, company, and
encouragement. Sebastian’s father contributed to the nature of his spiritual questions by introducing him at a young age to “meditation and releasing attachments” and Buddhism (SEB1, 38-47) through his example and instruction. Before their death, both Sofia’s father and mother contributed to the nature of her spiritual questions through their personal example and parental provision. This condition of family connection is well articulated by Sofia herself.

My [parents] are those people with [whom] I have the most connection. They made me a Christian, gave me education, [and] were the people who made me grow up. They gave me food to think about this world. They were the first people who surrounded me. So their opinion on this question, “What did my parents want me to achieve?” [matters] and is now an example for me how to be led in this life. (SOF2, 270-293)

For Sabrina, her vague memories of and present reflection upon the birth of her sisters is a condition for spiritual questions, and even now, encourages her to consider questions about the “life and death thing. I was very young when they were born, but it was cool, because someone was brought into our family. I think bringing life in brings up questions” (SAB1, 945-951). Similarly, Miranda has a teenage sister who is low-functioning. This adopted sister’s presence in the home brings spiritual questions of success, as well as pain and suffering, front and center in Miranda’s mind.

She kind of defines [and] helps to illustrate what success means, because she is, by society’s standards, she could be written off as a failure, as a waste, [or] as a mistake, but God doesn’t make mistakes. So what does that mean about her? If she’s not a mistake, then what purpose does she have here? (MIR2, 1153-1165)
Family Factors Sub-Condition #2: Conversations

It is not just connections with relatives that facilitate spiritual questions, but also the formal and informal conversations with family members that occurred. Whether these opportunities to dialogue were planned or spontaneous, older and more mature relatives engaged several of the participants in meaningful conversations about their spiritual concerns. For Lashawna, it was her mother’s encouragement to be inquisitive in all aspects of life that prompted her not only to ask big questions, but also explicitly spiritual questions. Her mother crafted a culture at home that encouraged Lashawna to “ask me any question you want” (LAS2, 91-92). Lashawna proudly noted, “When I was a child, I just asked questions, because my mom said she’ll answer any question I have” (LAS2, 77-79). Moreover, Serena had a similar relationship with her Muslim father. Serena commented that “my dad talks [with me] about these questions a lot” (SER1, 1081). Specifically, Serena recounted “debates with my dad” (SER1, 739) when he would train her to critically think about these matters. One topic that Serena remembers asking her father about was the meaning and practicality of destiny when “he would try to explain it to me, but I didn’t get it until I realized I had to find an answer for myself” (SER1: 733-742). In reference to Islam, Serena would approach her father and ask, “Why are these things written, why do we say these things in Islam, and how do I make sense of it personally at my level?” (SER2, 172-176). Miranda, as well, had ongoing theological discussions with her father, was receptive to his encouragement for her to explore other religions, and believed that his verbal input into her life forged her inquisitive temperament as well as the construction of her spiritual questions.
My dad has always encouraged me to ask questions. He’s like, “I might not have the answer, and you might not have the answer until you get to heaven, but ask questions because God wants your curiosity, such as, ‘Well, what do you mean, God, when you say the Earth was created in seven days? Or what does baptism really mean to you, God?’” My dad will be like, “Okay, well here’s Scripture, and here’s authors from [both] sides of the story, or here’s a book about that, or here’s Scripture that relates to that. Go to this seminar. Go to that seminar.” My dad challenges me to, “Figure it out for yourself. Don’t just take my word for it.” (MIR1, 900-923)

Family Factors Sub-Condition #3: Conflict and Crisis

Thirdly, conflict and crisis within the family system were significant shapers of spiritual questions for some of these students. Stress and strain is inevitable in every family, because the most intimate of human relationships experience some level of tension. Furthermore, difficulty and trouble are also unavoidable. Life is unpredictable and, at times, downright discouraging. Thus, various situations and scenarios of crisis and conflict within the family unit provoked, or otherwise shaped, the construction of spiritual questions among the study’s participants. Lashawna reported that her father’s lack of affirmation instigated self-image deficiencies in her life that, in turn, prompted spiritual questions (LAS1, 931-966). Furthermore, Chen admitted that his relationship with his parents has shaped some of the spiritual questions he is asking. Their insistence that he not explore spiritual questions of a political and philosophical nature and their attempt to squelch his spiritual questioning process motivated Chen to pursue his questions all the more. So now, as a self-proclaimed “social activist”
and pursuer of “capital T” truth, Chen is committed to doing the opposite of his parents’ wishes.

Additionally, Miranda’s religiously wayward teenage brother, Mark, is a significant source of conflict in her family. As an adopted brother who encountered significant abuse while with his former biological family, his presence in Miranda’s Christian home has been volatile, “doing so much damage to our family with verbal battering and physical violence” (MIR2, 1250-1256). Miranda sadly recounted the kinds of spiritual questions that Mark’s presence in her life has produced.

I prayed with Mark to accept Christ, and we talked about that. So now I’m questioning, “Well, maybe... is he a believer?” He doesn’t identify himself as one, but is he? Like, “Is it once a Christian, always a Christian?” Or, “Can we turn our back on God and somehow lose our salvation?” So that’s brought up new questions for me. (MIR2, 1232-1243)

Condition #4: Close Friendships

Slightly fewer students were influenced more by important friends than family members in the construction of their spiritual questions. Granted, close friends still comprised this fourth condition for twelve of the participants. However, the four students who did not exhibit this condition were all male (Chen, Dante, David, and Kushanu). All eight female participants presented qualitative data that associated the role of close friendships with the formation of their spiritual concerns. As with family factors, this fourth condition was also classified into the three sub-categories of connections, conversations, and conflict or crisis to assist in reporting
the results. Nevertheless, to repeat what was noted with family influences, any attempt to
distinguish between data that examine relationships, there will be some overlap.

Close Friendships Sub-Condition #1: Connections

The participants shared with the researcher about how relational connection with their
close friends influenced their spiritual questioning process. Generally, friendships with peers
are formative in college students’ lives. This was apparent among these particular college
students, as well. Specifically, several participants referenced friendships with peers in high
school who came from diverse sacred or secular perspectives. For both Sabrina and Garrett,
exposure to friends who came from different backgrounds and held different beliefs were
powerful forces for encouraging their own spiritual quests. Sabrina commented, “I think my
friends who aren’t Jewish make me think more, because there is another side to every story”
(SAB1, 903-905). For instance, holding hands and praying before mealtime at her Christian
friend’s house was a “weird culture shock” for Sabrina, but she admitted that it was
“interesting, and I enjoyed it” (SAB2, 641-665). Moreover, Garrett spoke of his Agnostic and
Atheist high school friends in similar ways. As a Christian, he felt that the essence of these
friendships was different, but beneficial. These friends would comment, “You’re so smart,
Garrett, so I don’t get how you believe in God” (GAR1, 708-709). However, these friends’
challenges to Garrett’s beliefs did not discourage him from pursuing his spiritual questions. In
fact, just the opposite transpired in that it “strengthened my resolve, because I knew I didn’t
have to prove why I believed what I did” (GAR1, 717-718). For Alex, his interactions with
friends who preferred to party rather than focus on his perception of more productive activities
became an unexpected and encouraging effect on Alex’s spiritual questioning.
They always ask me, “Hey, Alex. Let’s go here. Let’s go there. Join us here, and let’s do this and that.” Sometimes I join them, but sometimes when I was really thinking about it, I don’t join them. Their discouragement sometimes converts to encouragement because they don’t care about [spiritual questions]. This is the [different] way I want to live. I have my own questions and I really try thinking about them. (ALE1, 1115-1124)

Stories of how close friends of both similar and divergent perspectives abounded in the data. Peter, Ming, Cheyenne, and Sebastian each also expressed in rich and thick description how their friendships encouraged, pushed, and challenged their spiritual and religious beliefs, and the process by which old questions were revisited and new questions were created.

Close Friendships Sub-Condition #2: Conversations

Moreover, it was not just connections with close friends that facilitated spiritual questions, but also the many spontaneous conversations that transpired in the normal rhythm of socializing and school life. Miranda described how the unique combination of her likeminded Christian and non-Christian friends, and the many conversations that ensued between them, had a positive influence in her life. Whether it is a spiritual discussion with her boyfriend as to whether “God commands tithing” (MIR1, 949-950) or the sincere questions about life from her non-Christian friends, it causes Miranda to think more broadly and critically about spiritual and religious topics. Particularly in reference to the non-religious seekers and skeptics in her life, she commented,

I don’t think they know that they do it, but they’ll just be talking about what’s going on in their life, and it’ll cause me to think, “Well, what does God have to say about that?” I don’t always bring it up, but sometimes I [think], “Well, here’s this thing that they’re
striving for, but is that really what God wants me to strive for?” and that kind of prompts me to then think, “Well, do I want what they want? Or do I want what God wants? Or is it the same thing?” (MIR1, 954-964)

Additionally, Peter described two separate conversations that occurred during his sophomore years of both high school and college. Peter is motivated by relationships, and he often recounted the many friends and peers who played a role in the development of his spiritual questions. Peter spoke of one such instance with his high school sweetheart.

I was sitting down with my girlfriend at the time, and we both had been going through these big questions, and I asked her, “What if what we thought was god was really the devil and hypothetically, he wrote the whole Bible, and we were following it, and that was leading us to all of these foreseeable issues and problems, and that’s just what has happened with us?” (PET1, 1355-1364).

Then, just two years ago in college, when a close friend asked him, “What is love?” (PET2, 1055) it caught Peter off guard. Subsequently, this conversation made Peter aware that “What is love?” was actually a spiritual question for him, “because it’s the foundation of why I do a lot of what I do” (PET2, 1069).

Undoubtedly, it is Serena who was one of the most intentional spiritual conversationalists among the study’s participants. She regularly discussed with her close friends whatever she was reading at the time. Serena commented that she and her friends are “reading similar kind of books, like to question, and are engaged in similar activities” (SER1, 1570-1572), so the conversations are formative in the development of her spiritual questions. She remarked that most of her friends who are reading Rumi with her are not Muslim students,
but are American friends who “generally engage in questions like these” (SER1, 1528). Serena explained that, “we’re talking normally, and then we suddenly go back and start talking about Rumi in our daily conversation, and we talk about positive energy and all those things, and it’s just on a daily basis now that we discuss it” (SER1: 1529-1533).

Close Friendships Sub-Condition #3: Conflict and Crisis

Thirdly, conflict and crisis within friendship circles made an impact on the construction of spiritual questions. Similar to family relationships, strain and pain are inevitable in friendships among twenty-somethings, as well. So the circumstances and interactions that are laced with crisis and conflict among friends are often fodder for spiritual concerns. This was true for Lashawna, after she engaged in an intense argument (LAS1, 1120-1122), and for Miranda, when she interacted with friends who were struggling spiritually with issues of demonic influence, sexual orientation, and loneliness (MIR2, 704-705, 384-405). However, it was Sofia who best articulated the connection between her long-distance relationship with her boyfriend and her spiritual questions about her personal values (SOF1, 293-297). Cultivating this friendship across the ocean was no easy task for Sofia nor was the termination of this romantic relationship months before her return to the Ukraine. These relational stressors, in combination with the death of her parents, prompted a series of questions about morality, as well, particularly, “How do I keep my morals and values from the Ukraine?” (SOF1, 1048-1049). Sofia further described her thought processes.

One of my aims to come to the United States was to figure out whether I loved my boyfriend or not, because we are dating for more [than] two years. During these eight months I was kind of, “Well, I love him.” Then some time later, I realized that, “Probably
not.” So I was thinking, “Okay, how to move on?” I will hurt his feelings. I will hurt the feelings of his family, since I became a part of that family. Then I think, “What I should do with that?” I should not lie, because this is one of [my] values. If I just come back to my country and continue lying – in that “I love you” – or just say nothing, it is a lie. No matter if it is good or bad lie, it is still lie, and I don’t want to lie. So this is kind of a mechanism when I stop myself, and this [question] is one of the things that influence me. I very often stop myself from doing something, because I think it’s immoral. It’s my moral values. (SOF1, 302-334)

In summary, connections, conversations, and conflict or crises with family and friends make an impression on the construction of spiritual questions for most of the students in this study. The conditions of these salient familial and friendship relationships can be observed within a variety of environments and contexts. At this point, the focus turns to one specific setting: the college campus.

Condition #5: **College Campus**

Students’ college careers are highly formative experiences, replete with opportunities for learning, development, and the construction of spiritual questions. For every participant in the study, the transition to the college campus was a prominent fifth condition for the development of spiritual questions. Beginning with the transition to the college environment, followed by exposure to curricular components, engagement with co-curricular activities, and connections to the various communities on campus, the students in this study contributed a large amount of data to substantiating the significant condition that the college experience exerts on the spiritual questioning process. Lastly, five of the participants were explicit in
crediting the interviews conducted as part of this research project in assisting them in forming and shaping their spiritual questions, as well.

**College Campus Sub-Condition #1: Transitions**

First, *transitions* to and from the university emerged as the first sub-condition of the college campus. Three of the four students who made explicit connections between their spiritual questions and the transition to the college environment were international students, and the fourth student was Sabrina who remarked that she expected to feel like a minority at BSU as a Jewish woman. In fact, that was the case for Sabrina. Living outside the Jewish community while at college has actually prompted Sabrina to “think a lot more about my [spiritual questions], because I’m not in contact with as many Jews anymore. I’m not going to synagogue as much, so I’m thinking about it a lot more” (SAB1, 1096-1101). For the international students, Alex and Sofia, they related how the impending transition to the States instigated spiritual questions of purpose, identity, calling, and direction, such as “How do I become better? (SOF1, 1041); How do I help other people? (SOF1, 1045); How do I stay moral? (SOF1, 1048); What kind of person do I want to be?” (ALE1, 820).

**College Campus Sub-Condition #2: Curricular Components**

The second sub-category of the college condition included coursework, class sessions, and instructors. These *curricular components* subsumed reflections on the course content which then led to spiritual questions (ALE1, 1010-1045; CHEY1, 911-912; KAY1, 1402-1412; MIR1, 1028-1038; MIR2, 439-459; PET1, 1366-1377), required reading of religious texts and other manuscripts that provided counterarguments to these sacred works (GAR1, 98-167), viewing and subsequent classroom discussions on provocative video commentaries (LAS1, 410-
429), and instructors’ overall enthusiasm about students who are inquisitive and take learning seriously (SER1, 1429-1462).

The courses that were mentioned as influential in prompting questions were situated in anatomy, anthropology, critical thinking, early childhood education, philosophy, physiology, psychology, and sociology, and some of the corresponding concerns were, “Why has the feminine aspect of religion been shut down and ignored, particularly in Christianity? What has happened to humanity that caused the feminine aspect of religion to be put on the back burner? Why can’t the two different sides of God be reflected? (CHEY1, 729-730, CHEY2, 402-454); Does God exist? What was the first cause that caused existence? (DAV2, 773-783); Why does bad stuff happen to these inner-city kids? Did they deserve it or is it to make them stronger? (KAY1, 1408-1411); What happens when your brain says you’re a girl but your genitalia say you’re a boy? Is homosexuality an abomination or a man-made creation? Would I support a gay friend by standing with them at their civil union ceremony? (LAS1, 418-456); What right does man have over life? Where does euthanasia fall in? Do I have the right to end my own life? What’s God’s view on suicide? Do I take part in technology that has come from stem cell research? Where do we draw the line? How many degrees of separation do we have to get before it’s okay to take part in technology that’s been advanced from things that are morally questionable?” (MIR2, 439-459).

For example, Dante personally struggled and felt a certain degree of animosity toward his psychology of religion and spirituality course. Despite his personal feelings about the course, there is no question that Dante’s encounter with his professor and classmates has precipitated a series of spiritual questions in his life.
Is believing in Christ just a coping mechanism? That makes me uneasy, because when I tend to think like that, I’m thinking like a lot of other people in the class. That’s how the class was taught: from a coping mechanism perspective. In my class, they were talking about divine experiences and spiritual experiences. One of the key main factors in that teaching was that no matter what your experience is, you can’t fully describe what it was like for you to have that personal encounter with God to someone else in order for them to believe you, especially if they don’t have a relationship with God. So the question came up: how is it that my relationship with God is different than your relationship with God but yet we have the same spirit that is being fed into both of us? So that’s kind of a question that arose. (DAN2, 191-239)

Kushanu also cited his college course work as formative in the development of some of his spiritual questions. He shared one instance when he was “reading a book in preparation for an exam,” and he noticed a “diagram of the evolution of man, [specifically], the [progression] from the monkey to the human being” (KUS2, 367-370). Kushanu then began to wonder, “Who made this? How did it come into being? Why is it that the monkey came into being? From a cell? If that cell came into being, there should be a reason behind it, right?” (KUS2, 366-377).

Another academic scenario when Kushanu was confronted with spiritual questions about death was in a philosophy class. He was reading an article that prompted him to think about death. Kushanu recounted his reflections from this class session:

I think death is one of the most amazing things that is going to happen to you. I am very curious. I was thinking about it yesterday. There has to be something behind it. It’s an end of something. That means that there has to be a new life behind it. If that’s a new
life, then it’s the way that I will be able to get the knowledge of everything. What are you going to do with the knowledge? Are you trying to invite [this knowledge] yourself? (KUS2, 1203-1235).

Moreover, outside of class, when Kushanu is studying, he often wonders to himself, “‘Is this valuable enough to study?’ Then I start to think about the supreme stuff” (KUS1, 808-814). As his mind wanders, these questions “pop up again” (KUS1, 800), and Kushanu thinks about his pursuit of being successful and wealthy, and then inevitably asks himself, “Why am I doing this? Again, the question comes up: If there is no start, [will] there be an ending?” (KUS1, 820-821).

In conclusion, it should be noted that twice as many participants referenced their curricular experiences as instrumental in their spiritual questioning process as those students who credited co-curricular involvement, which is the sub-category of the college campus that is reported on next.

College Campus Sub-Condition #3: Co-Curricular Engagement

Thirdly, students’ spiritual questions were affected, not only by course material and related discussions, but also other activities and events as part of their co-curricular engagement. Conferences (PET2, 300-339), workshops (MIN2, 33-117), seminars (DAV1, 904-930), leadership retreats (DAV2, 154-178), stateside and international immersion trips (CHEY1, 995-1215), service projects (CHEY1, 995-1008), and involvement in student organizations (LAS1, 433-470; DAV1, 1043-1045) were all ideally ripe environments for the initiation and investigation of spiritual questions. As an international student from China, Ming was actively involved on campus beyond her courses. One particular evening, Ming attended a diversity workshop on campus that “wasn’t about religion” (MIN2, 33-34), but prompted spiritual
questions nonetheless. At this event, Ming made connections between this presentation on how to fairly treat diverse students and her subsequent queries of “what makes people believe in all sorts of religions and what can belief in a religion bring people?” (MIN2, 65-73, 139-140). Ming reported a compelling testimony from one woman at the workshop who attended a church “where people’s religions were different from hers, and they talked something bad about her religion” (MIN2, 116-117), which surfaced another question in Ming’s life: “Should I believe in a religion?” (MIN2, 139-140).

Moreover, Peter, as a social activist leader on campus, took advantage, as well, of co-curricular opportunities. In fact, his passion for social justice issues was fueled by his participation in social justice conferences for activists, one such event being the *Alleviating Poverty Through Entrepreneurship Summit*. He attended this conference with his peers and they were interacting over spiritual questions such as, “How can we fix things? How can we make things better? What are some systems that we can create? Why aren’t people helping?” (PET2, 196-200). Throughout the weekend conference, Peter and his friends were also talking about the idea of utopia and practical theories like capitalism and socialism, in trying to determine how to best help others. Peter believes that “the question, ‘Why aren’t people helping?’ is spiritual in nature because I find the act of helping to be very spiritual” (PET2, 309-310). Consequently, these conferences’ formal presentations and informal discussions facilitated numerous spiritual questions:

*Why aren’t people helping?* That question of *why* has kind of directed me towards, “*Who* isn’t helping? What are the *systems* that are currently in place that are not allowing people to help? When someone does help, *when* do they help? Then *how* do
they help? How do they feel the most fulfilled [in helping]? What have I attributed to this?” (PET2, 321-328)

**College Campus Sub-Condition #4: Environment and Community**

The fourth sub-condition of the college campus discovered during data analysis was the campus *environment and community*. Students emphasized that their exposure to a diverse environment and clientele at the institution was formative in their spiritual questioning process, including but not limited to conversations and interactions within informal friendship circles (SOF1, 915-929; SER1, 786-836), residence halls (SAB2, 61-80) and residential learning communities (DAV1, 969-1000; CHEY2, 689-693), informal and formal training with campus life coaches and mentors (DAN1, 781-783), and physical artifacts (SER1, 1767).

Serena established relationships on campus that were unexpected, but yielded specific spiritual questions in her life.

*As far as religion is concerned, there are times when I don’t really follow Islam as is written in the Book or as people would want me to follow. As an Asian-Muslim, it’s more of a cultural thing. [In India], I was in my own world. I thought religion was something really different that was my thing. I called it spirituality, and I was with my friends, and we had the same culture, so I didn’t really feel out of place. Then here, I’ve met so many Middle Eastern Muslims, and I somehow I feel I don’t connect with them so well, but I have American Muslim friends, who are from other parts of the world, and I somehow can talk to them better. I just want to know, “Why are we different now? Like, how are we different? Why and how are Muslims different across various parts of the world?”* (SER1, 786-836)
Unlike Serena, David does not often engage in explicit spiritual or religious conversations with his peers. However, his residential learning community experience was an environment where he would “kind of think about these things when I would stay up late in the lounge areas [talking] with other people about random stuff, while having a good time” (DAV1, 953-983). This residential experience represented one community experience that David, even as an introverted individual, found to be a stimulating environment for significant personal and even spiritual conversations. He described it this way:

You really got to know those people well, and at times, you were like on the same level so much that you were like a mind-meld in a sense, like read[ing] each others’ minds and what they were thinking. I don’t know even if (spiritual questions) were asked, but because you were there, it was more of the experience that prompted your own thoughts about those kinds of questions. (DAV1: 969-1000)

College Campus Sub-Condition #5: Research Interviews

Fifth and finally, even the research interviews were instrumental in the lives of five participants, including David (DAV2, 1230-1240), Garrett (GAR2, 980-982), Lashawna (LAS2, 15-16), Ming (MIN2, 157), and Kushanu (KUS2, 1301-1312). This sub-category of the college campus condition rounded out the report that validated the role that Brownstone State University played in the construction and composition of students’ spiritual concerns. Of the five students who remarked about the significance of “just talking about these things” with someone who is “just asking questions” (GAR2, 980-982), it was Kushanu who seemed most reflective about his encounters with the researcher and the effects on his spiritual journey.
It was interesting [when the researcher] showed up [in my life] talking to me about this, proving that what you think, you attract. I want to know the answers about the universe, and this amazing thing happened. You are something random. This is pretty cool. You just came up and talked to me in the middle of Brownstone State University in the United States of America. If you think about it, it will make you mad, but it’s interesting how it is happening. It feels good. I like it, because you’re kind of a neutral person. You’re just taking everything in. You’re not replying back. I think [these interviews] and this experience – where I am talking to you right now – is helping me to get toward that question answered. (KUS2, 28-53, 1122-1124, 1449-1451)

In summary, the college campus itself was unquestionably a major factor in these students’ spiritual journeys. The construction of their spiritual questions intersected with the transition to and from the university, the curriculum’s content and facilitators, student engagement outside of class, and the wide variety of relationships across and within the campus community, including the researcher himself. At this point, the chapter turns to a more delicate condition that students cannot avoid, and that is pain and suffering.

Condition #6: Pain and Suffering

Students’ experiences in life are marked with joy and disappointment, happy memories and sad circumstances, as well as both the satisfaction and the sting of the human experience. This is true of every participant in this study, and the effects of pain and suffering are clearly evident in the data. Noted as the sixth major condition for the construction of spiritual questions among these undergraduates, this topic will be explored within three sub-
classifications of *intrapersonal* struggles, *interpersonal* difficulties, and *impersonal* reflections on pain and suffering.

Pain and Suffering Sub-Condition #1: *Intrapersonal*

First, *intrapersonal* struggles comprised most of the examples within this condition from which spiritual questions emerged. This first sub-condition of the pain and suffering that is *within* the individual included personal crises, personal challenges, self-inflicted troubles, fears and phobias, responses to daily hardships and difficulties, tough transitions, personal failures, conflicted identity issues, emotional disturbances, and seasons of doubt, guilt, boredom, or loneliness. Due to the sheer volume of descriptive data in this one sub-category of pain and suffering, only a select variety of exemplars to illustrate the magnitude of this condition will be featured. For Dante, it is his own personal state of mind, particularly in times of confusion, when spiritual questions often manifest themselves.

Okay, so when I’m confused... the kind of questions that I have would be, “Where is God taking me next? Am I doing what God wants me to do? What is the purpose behind this confusion?” Also since God is not the author of confusion, “Do I really need to be worrying about what’s going on right now?” Like even now, like *these* questions, like I can’t stop thinking about how these questions are going to help me in areas or hurt me in areas of my life. That’s how I get confused, because I start thinking crazy thoughts. So that’s when I get confused and a question that comes out of that is, “Why am I having these thoughts?” (DAN2, 598-647).

Moreover, Dante’s overall perception and interpretation of personal challenges, tragedies, transitions, and seasons of doubt stimulate the formation of spiritual questions in his
life. Personal challenges, such as “whenever I don’t feel or sense God spiritually,” “whenever I’m bored,” or “whenever I’m faced with tragedy” (DAN1, 949-951) are prone to rattle Dante’s sense of equilibrium which then prompt spiritual questions. When perceived distance exists in his relationship with God, Dante asks the question, “Is God going to do what I want him to do for me?” (DAN2, 679)

Furthermore, Ming’s reaction to personal hardship, difficulties, and self-inflicted troubles are conditions for her spiritual concerns, even as an Atheist. One example of a personal hardship or difficulty in Ming’s life is “when I study really hard for my exams, but I got really bad scores, or when I try to do something hard, but there’s no good result” (MIN1, 1024-1027). When she “meets some difficulties or [when] an incident is happening” (MIN1, 1001, 1014), or “when bad things happen and I feel really upset” (MIN2, 861; MIN1, 1059), these challenging circumstances reveal the following spiritual questions, “Why are we living?” and “Why is the world so unfair to me?” (MIN1, 854, 1037-1038). Self-inflicted troubles, on the other hand, are less about circumstances and more about choices. Ming confessed that “I have done lots of bad things, and when I did something really wrong, I feel scared about the consequence” (MIN1, 1096; MIN2, 677-679). Whether it is stealing from her mother, vandalizing somebody’s car, skipping class, or accidently injuring classmates (MIN1, 1075-1169), the three spiritual questions that emerge are: “Why do bad things happen to me?” “Why can’t I do the things I want to do?” and “Why am I always caught when I try to do something wrong?” (MIN1, 1166, 1134, 1090-1091).

Additionally, Ming is not the only participant who mentioned that poor academic performance is formative in the construction of her spiritual questions, but Miranda (MIR2,
802-812) and Kushanu did as well. Although Kushanu is cautious about sharing his shortcomings in detail with others, the researcher encountered him in a few moments of self-disclosure.

I don’t like getting C’s in any class at all. I don’t like that. That’s a bad one, [but] not the worst bad one. So when I get C’s, I like feel bad. When I got D’s, I was like, “Oh. My God!!” So when I’m very unhappy about something, I think that there has to be a supreme someone watching over you. [Also], after difficult decisions are made, if something wrong happens, then I just [wonder]: “Where did the world come from?” [Asking that question] pulls me back to the alignment. (KUS2, 1098-1105; KUS1, 956-995)

The final example of intrapersonal struggles as a condition for the construction of spiritual queries comes from Sofia, who has personally endured a significant level of pain and suffering in her short lifetime. However, when Sofia is experiencing personal loneliness, most often when she thinks of her deceased parents, she cries alone. During these periods of emotional release, several spiritual questions emerge.

Why is this happening to me? Why should I cry on this issue? Why does the God make me cry? Can I stop doing that? Is crying the part of his lesson? Is it something that He wants to address [in] me? Is it something that he wants to address and wants me to understand through crying [and] through feeling that feeling of loneliness or people not helping me? Maybe this is the way to look at the situation from a different perspective: being surrounded by nobody and being helped by nobody? What should I do when people are not around me? How can I struggle with it? (SOF2, 462-477).
Pain and Suffering Sub-Condition #2: *Interpersonal*

The second sub-category of pain and suffering includes *interpersonal* difficulties, or those dynamics that exist or occur *between* human beings in relational contexts. The most common manifestations of interpersonal conditions in the data were illnesses, crises, and deaths of friends and family members. For instance, David posited that the deaths of his uncle and great aunt stimulated the following spiritual questions in his life, “How did they live their lives? How should I live my life? Should I base my life off of their lives?” (DAV1, 815-830). David also admitted that deceased family members prompted him to revisit one of his primary spiritual questions: “What is the good life?” (DAV1, 602-603). Garrett, Sabrina, Ming, and of course, Sofia shared about their own families and their feelings about their loved ones’ personal struggles, illness and death, but it was the untimely passing of two friends that played right into Kayla’s fear of death. The first friend’s death took place while in grade school. Kayla suggested that his death was a specific event that caused her to think about spiritual questions. He went to sleep and never woke up. He was diabetic, so he went into diabetic shock. So then, you’re this sixth grade person who just went to camp with him, did all these activities, and danced with him, and all I know is he went to sleep and never woke up? So every time I went to sleep, it was like, “Oh crap! I have to pray, because I *have* to wake up tomorrow.” So it was like thinking about death, and what if I lose another friend? We are too young to die, so what did he do wrong? Or did he already find his purpose in life, so that’s it? You find it and then you’re gone? It just really made me think about stuff. (KAY1, 1019-1043)
Josiah was the name of Kayla’s college friend who died shortly before the research interviews. Her memory of this event was fresh and painful.

He overdosed on oxycotin and died in his bathroom. He was a jock and was really good at every single sport, but he partied a lot. So when that happened, I was taking oxycotin, because I just got my wisdom teeth pulled out, and I was like, “I’m not going to take this anymore.” When Josiah died, people were like, “Well, he’s a good kid just making mistakes.” Well, [does] a good kid who makes mistakes make it into heaven? He was so ADD and could never just sit still; he gets bored easily. So he is going to be there for the rest of his life? I’m going to see him, supposedly, when I’m there, but if there’s so many people in heaven, how do you find somebody there? If it’s just your soul, do you look the same? (KAY2: 344-365, 770-779)

One other example of interpersonal pain and suffering comes from one of Serena’s stories, as she shared about the aforementioned terrorist attack on her homeland in India. Serena’s empathy and compassion have developed and deepened through her experiences with and reflections upon that tragedy, particularly when others do not seem to share her caring sentiment. She remarked, “When you see people around you being insensitive to a certain event or certain thing, that is when I immediately think, ‘How can the world be more fair?’” (SER1, 1387-1390).

Pain and Suffering Sub-Condition #3: Impersonal

Thirdly and finally, for some of the students, their reflections of pictures, stories, and accounts of pain and suffering that they did not personally experience, but merely observed from a distance, were also formative in the composition of their spiritual concerns. These
impersonal reflections include natural calamities, disasters, genocide, hunger, poverty, wars, and injustice of all kinds. Oftentimes, reports of far-away pain and suffering come through the news outlets, as was the case with Serena, Sabrina, and Garrett. Reports and images as seen on national and local news networks, and particularly, Garrett’s reaction to the pain, suffering, tragedy, and injustices in the world is a condition for his spiritual questions. Reminiscent of earlier struggles with theodicy, the researcher could sense Garrett’s concern as he explicated,

Just think of all the tragic things you see on news: people killing their children, their wives, their parents. You just wonder what goes through their heads? What are they thinking? We can make them suffer, you know, in a worldly sense, like put them in jail. Then you wonder, “Well, how are they going to suffer in a spiritual sense?” I mean, have they, for all intents and purposes, been a good Christian? Did they go to church? Does that make up for their moral decisions? How does judgment happen after death? When all these terrible things are happening, is it the hand of God coming down and never doing something or is it human action? [Have we] deviated from maybe what he would want for us, [because] we kind of [have] our own interpretation of what we think we should be doing? (GAR1, 288-303; GAR2, 25-31)

Moreover, for Sabrina, her reflections on pain and suffering on a global scale, was a highly salient stimulus for her spiritual questions. In fact, all of these seemingly needless difficulties present in the world today lead her to ask a question she would much rather avoid. I hate to think about this, but [what] if there is a God? I don’t want to say it out loud in case there is. I never say I believe in God, and I never say I don’t believe in God, because I don’t understand, “If there was a God, why would all these bad things be happening?”
I don’t understand why stuff like that happens [and] why people can be the way they are. I understand that God put them on the Earth and there had to be evil and stuff, but I don’t know. I don’t understand how God could be okay with watching [suffering] happen, especially people that are hurting, [some of whom] are the most amazing people in the world. So that’s why God kind of boggles my mind, because I don’t really understand it. I think about worldly things like, “Why are all the genocides and wars still happening?” It’s mind-boggling that everyone believes in this greater thing, [while] they can look around them and there’s poverty and people are hungry. (SAB1, 624-651; SAB2, 251-288)

To recap, students’ *intrapersonal* struggles, *interpersonal* difficulties, and *impersonal* reflections on pain and suffering were factors in the development of their spiritual questions on the topics of death, the afterlife, the existence and nature of a deity, purpose and direction, and personal identity.

**Condition #7: *Everyday Exposure to People***

It has already been noted that the presence of people, in and of itself, is sufficient to prompt numerous thoughts, abundant reflections, and a host of spiritual concerns in the lives of these students. Family, friends and peers, professors, mentors, and life coaches together forge a paradigmatic lens of relationships through which students interpret the world. The seventh major condition for the construction of spiritual questions among these participants also involves humanity, but at a more superficial level than has already been reported. This precipitating factor accounts for the shallow and often informal observations and interactions with people in daily life.
Cheyenne is one participant who often thinks about humanity in everyday situations. Her fascination with people permeated both interviews: “I feel like [spiritual questions] are always around, just because people are always around” (CHEY1, 1239-1244) and “just being out with people is the biggest thing” (CHEY1, 1501-1502). Cheyenne acknowledged that spiritual ideas are always lingering in the back of her mind. She elaborated on this.

When I’m around other people, it just surfaces easier. I just wonder like how we’re all connected and just how it’s all working out. Because as I mentioned, one of my psychic gifts is being empathic to my surroundings. So for instance, last week I was standing in the line at Starbucks, when all of a sudden, I was looking at the people, and I just knew what was going on in their lives and how they’re feeling. So that always makes me think about spiritual things. I wonder, “What is their life plan?” I wish that I could help them, and that’s a question too: “How far do I take it and how personal do I make it?” (CHEY2, 589-622).

Additionally, Lashawna also noticed the small things about people whom she may have never personally met. She expressed that “what I see and what I hear” (LAS1, 1145-1146) in everyday situations encouraged her spiritual questions. This is particularly true when she witnesses one individual hurting somebody else or contrarily, someone “being caring, giving, or uplifting people” (LAS1, 1154-1156). People who are doing their best to make the world a better place is one stimulus of spiritual questions. However, observing and interacting with individuals who are dysfunctional or self-absorbed causes Sabrina to ask a different set of questions, such as “What are people thinking and why are they doing the things they are doing?” (SAB1, 582-584).
Moreover, Sofia was also influenced by her observations, experiences, and interactions with people. For Sofia, this includes even the “people you meet in the street” (SOF2, 518-519), because she does not believe in merely “random” encounters or noncoincidental interactions with people. Sofia cited one specific example of meeting someone in another city who then influenced her spiritual journey and questions.

I was in Carterville with my friend, and I was feeling really bad about finding my religious way, and we went to the church with my friend. It happened on that same day that a pastor from [my college town] came to the church in Carterville and was giving a lesson. Do you think [that] just happened? It didn’t happen without the God’s help. These people who are around you can change your life a lot by just any word [and] by any action. Even a glance or a look at a person can just change your life. (SOF2, 524-546)

As a result, Sofia carefully looked for “signs and signals [that] are coming from [her] surroundings and from people” (SOF1, 449-450), but then carefully examines these messages for their validity. Sofia believes that “every person that surrounds you gives you a lesson. All people who surround me are not just random people. I even cannot know about them, but they make a contribution into my life. They change me somehow” (SOF1, 457-461)

Condition #8: Societal and Cultural Norms

The eighth major condition for the construction of spiritual questions among the participants in this study does not just involve individuals, but encompasses the larger society and culture of a larger group of people, and particularly, their customs, traditions, and general way of life. Of the four students who made mention of this condition as a factor in their spiritual questioning process, three of them are international students. First, Alex attributed
the forces of societal and cultural norms as shaping factors in the facilitation of his spiritual concerns, particularly his queries about identity and calling. He spoke of the ongoing internal tension between who his Kyrgyz family and friends want him to be and who he wants to become. This internal struggle prompted specific spiritual questions of identity and purpose to emerge.

The rules of [my] society are not sacred for me. I can respect the rules of society [as] tradition, and I can go with that, so that eventually I will become an accepted member of society. But on the other hand, I don’t give a crap about these rules and say, “These rules are not for me. I can go the way I want to.” I feel comfortable both going in that way and in the other way. So that’s why I always think, like “Who am I?” and “Which way I should really go? Should I really go in the way that my society or my community has chosen before me? Or should I go the other way?” So that’s why there’s a contradiction with finding myself. (ALE2, 429-452)

Moreover, Ming entertains many spiritual questions about the origin of the world, God, and religion. However, these questions fermented in the context of her Chinese culture. She admitted that “everybody around me are Atheists, so the things they talk to me [about] and what they do, just make me become one of them” (MIN1, 85-87). Ming explained that in her society, there is an absence of support for citizens to believe in anything supernatural. These societal and cultural norms created an environment where “school teachers and especially political [leaders] tell us there is no God in the world and you have to trust yourself. I just grow up in that environment and I know nothing else” (MIN1, 98-100, 133-135).
Furthermore, Peter did not need to travel across the ocean to experience the effects of cultural traditions upon his spiritual questions. Here on the college campus in the United States, Peter was constructing spiritual questions in response to his recent “negative experiences with culture” (PET1, 1175), particularly as it relates to the party scene on the college campus. For Peter, it is difficult to reconcile in his mind the vast human needs on a global scale with the apathy and self-indulgence of his college peers. He described the situation from his perspective:

So you go downtown and the whole idea of it is like, “Let’s go drink, hang out, dance, talk, and stuff like that,” but I feel like eighty percent of the people in that environment are very unhappy, don’t want to be there, or it’s just [their] default, and they’re looking for something more. Why do so many people come here? What are they looking for? I’m always perplexed by the idea of fun (writes fun on his pad). A lot of times people have to define it for me. Like, I ask people, “What is fun?” (PET1, 1151-1187)

Condition #9: *Encounters with Nature*

The ninth major condition for the construction of spiritual questions for nearly half of the students in this study includes the seasons of the year, transitions to a new season, and the natural elements such as the wind, water, sun, stars, clouds, soil, and mountains. Alex thinks more about his spiritual questions in the spring, because “everything is born again, and it’s the start of a new cycle in your life” (ALE1, 1182-1184), whereas Cheyenne, Peter, and Garrett cited winter as a significant season for the development of their spiritual queries. Garrett suggested that this colder season is a convenient time to spiritually question, “because everything is white, and it’s all calm and peaceful and quiet, and you just have time to sit there indoors and
think about things” (GAR1, 312-316). Engaging in outdoor activities in nature was also reported as important for Alex, David, and Miranda. Alex mentioned the spiritual experience of swimming in a lake at dusk (ALE1, 1220-1230), and David appreciated the mental space that recreational activities, such as running, hiking, and camping alone, provided to think about his questions (DAV1, 486-488). Moreover, Miranda thought about the question, “How great is our God?” when she is “walking around nature, with the sights and smells of fresh dirt” (MIR1, 1093-1011). Seven students acknowledged the important role that nature plays in the formation of their spiritual questions, but three students with alternative religious and spiritual traditions offered the most lengthy and descriptive accounts of this condition.

First, Cheyenne articulated an interconnected string of ideas that captured the manner in which nature had profoundly shaped her spiritual questions.

In winter, when things are dying, that is when I reevaluate myself. This winter, I thought about, “Okay, so things are going to change, it’s going to be a new year, and how do I want to make it different?” I always think about how I can better myself, because it goes back with how I think that we’re all here to experience and for our souls to evolve. So I always want to think like, “Am I doing the right thing? Is this going to be good for me to do, so that I can grow as a person?” I think that is a very spiritual thing to ask. Saltwater at the beach makes me think about Mother Earth, and again, the feminine principle of God, and again, seeing, hearing, smelling, or even tasting a body of water makes me ask these questions. Looking at the stars makes me question my existence.

(CHEY1, 1123-1164; CHEY2, 727-736)
When gazing at the stars on a clear night, Cheyenne is prompted to consider humanity’s finite nature.

We are small and the universe is so big! So sometimes it’s like, “How can anything that we do matter?” I don’t know if that’s a good or a bad question, because on one hand, it’s like, “Oh, you don’t really have to take things too seriously,” but on the other hand, it’s like, “Why am I here?” (CHEY2, 463-469)

Secondly, Cheyenne’s fellow spiritual questor and close friend, Sebastian, shared a similar passion for nature. His meditation retreats were often situated in venues where encounters with nature were inevitable. However, Sebastian does not need to be in an isolated meditative retreat environment to enjoy the benefits of nature or the spiritual questions that materialize.

A lot of times the nice weather gets me outside more, and just lets me lie down, look up, and hang out with the trees. What I first do is just take some deep breaths, take in the atmosphere of where I am, try to clear my brain, and clear out all those thoughts from the day that are pestering me. I try to get to a point of peace and quiet, and then if I have a spiritual question on my mind, I might explore it a little bit. The beauty of nature always does it for me, from looking at one blade of grass to a flower to a landscape of mountains. Sometimes it just hits me like, “What am I doing here? Why am I in a body alive right now? Like, what is going on?” I am amazed that I’m actually experiencing living, and that usually ignites a bunch of questions that I try to think about. Then looking at the stars always... you just feel so small. It’s just an amazing sight. Even though they’re there every night, looking at them still does it for me every
time. [Nature] lets me think about these types of questions. (SEB1, 627-630; SEB2, 698-731)

Thirdly, in tandem with the Gnostic and Buddhist-Taoist Pagan students, the Agnostic-Pantheist participant was also fascinated with nature, particularly the sun, clouds, and rocks. His encounters with and reflection upon nature comprise a powerful condition for many of his spiritual questions. First, Peter often mentioned his customary routine, similar to Sebastian, of looking into the sky.

We were sitting in the grass, and we’re looking up into the sky, and we’re like, “The fuck?” Like, “What are we doing?” We’re looking up into a blue sky, but it’s black on the other side of that blue sky, and then you just keep going, and it just continues to be black, and we’re here in this grass, and the molecules are really small. What the fuck?” (PET1, 1212-1218)

Peter noted that he is not alone in his enthrallment, because “when people describe the universe or they make you look at the universe, a lot of people don’t know what to make of it” (PET2, 850-852). Peter offered his most vivid memory of looking into the sky and pondering such big ideas.

I first experienced this when I was outside of Canyonlands National Park. I was sitting on the ground, and looking up there, we saw this very pale but very dark grey spot, and in that spot was 300 billion stars and we were like, “WHAT?” We’re not conditioned to think of 300 billion. So the enormity of things is really weird to think about. Then from that point, you kind of just accept that things are not what you think they are, and life is very huge, and we’re in this life, trying to figure things out. In the meantime, there are
tragedies, and there’s happiness, and people are going to work. So what is work? Why doesn’t everyone do exactly what they love to do? (PET2, 852-869)

This experience at the national park was just one of many encounters with nature that Peter experienced as part of an educational outdoor trip that lasted for almost an entire semester in college. Peter shared more explicitly the significance of these natural resources in the construction of his spiritual perspective, beginning with his interest in rocks.

The idea of rocks takes me to a nature orientation, but I also think of barrenness. So geology and rocks [help me] ask big questions. [For instance], I tend to drift away from the cookie-cutter idea of God. I don’t like using he, him, or father. I also don’t like when people use the direction up. I think it is too simple, and I think it’s like kindergarten. You read that in a picture book, and people just stick with it their entire life. I want people to grow up and see God in everything. So when I see those things in nature, it’s not a negative reaction, because they are beautiful things, and it would make sense to associate God with beautiful things. It would also make sense to associate God with father or a male figure. So I guess, a lot of times when I see beauty, I have this reaction of appreciation, especially [with] that whole cloud-sun thing. (PET1, 1463-1492)

Condition #10: Media and Music

The students in the research study live and interact in a global society that is increasingly connected, and in an ever-increasing technological age where media and music of all genres pervade and saturate their lives. Consequently, digital media, in particular, is a potent force in how students interact with and interpret the world around them, and noted here as the tenth major condition in the shaping of students’ spiritual concerns. Movies,
television programs and documentaries, Internet video clips, news programs, and talk shows have shaped seven participants’ perceptions about reality, the extent of pain and suffering in the world, the nature of human psychology and relationships, and the unexplored galaxies and life forms of the universe.

For instance, Serena’s exposure to written and digital media news sources is a condition for her spiritual queries. As she digested world events through the lens of journalists and television pundits, she pondered questions about religiosity and social justice.

One thing that I definitely think about every day [as] I’m reading the newspaper or watching the news is this [question]: “Is there a possibility of us completely separating religion from the entire world scenario?” Like, I don’t want to eliminate religion as such, [because] there definitely needs to be something for me to follow, but I want something where people can separate religion out of daily life. Like, if you see a terrorist, don’t associate them with Islam, or Christianity, or any religion whatsoever. (SER1, 623-635)

Similarly, Lashawna has also been affected by digital media sources, particularly television and movie documentaries. For Lashawna, this condition is manifested in both academic and recreational environments. She credited two particular media exposures as significant contributors to her spiritual questioning process. The first example was a show that aired on the History Channel. She did not provide a specific name of the documentary, but resulting religious questions about the credibility of the Bible emerged in her life.

I know there are books [of] the Bible that aren’t in the Bible, [but] were supposed to be. I know that, and I want to know, “Why didn’t they make it in?” Was the reason because they weren’t written from what point of view? Or was it just that they were never
found? Or was it that people were so closed-minded? I want to know why those things happened. So I feel like, from a religious perspective, [when considering] Jesus’ walk, everything that he went through, everything that he did, and all the miracles he performed – why is it that we only have these so many books? Why didn’t this [book] make it in, but this one did? Is it because it had a man’s name on it, or what? (LAS1, 558-588)

Secondarily, a Rwandan genocide clip in class in combination with the Hotel Rwanda movie outside of class sparked this question for Lashawna: “Why do atrocities like genocide happen?” The behind-the-scene details and descriptions were a powerful motivator for Lashawna to reexamine her beliefs about being an American, as noted below in the consequences section of this report.

Furthermore, Peter mentioned the role of the Internet in him asking the big questions of the origin of the universe. He is a tech savvy individual who harnesses technology to accomplish his purposes and fulfill his calling as a social justice activist. Consequently, media sources, such as YouTube videos and History Channel documentaries, have contributed to the emergence of spiritual questions in Peter’s life.

There’s this video that I watched before. It looks at the world, and it zooms out to as far as we think we have gone in the universe, and it’s awesome! It freaks me out. I love size. Then the question always comes into my head – excuse me for the language – but like, “What the fuck?” It comes back to that simple question of existence. The question, “Where is here?” is a good [one]. I love that one, because every week, I watch [an interview] called the Pale Blue Dot by Carl Sagan. Then the History Channel did [one]
where it’s like looking at this one specific spot on Earth and then just continues to zoom out to what we think we know, and then back again. So when I look up into the universe, I think “Holy shit! What the fuck? This is incredible!!” So if there are questions on this planet – and I believe that there are other planets – I don’t know why there wouldn’t be other planets that harvest life. What is that life? What do they think? What kind of questions do they ask? Do they ask questions? Do they just simply exist? What’s out there? I constantly look up into the sky and I’m amazed! There are so many things to discover, and those questions are just so interesting to me. (PET1, 787-797; PET2, 765-838)

Condition #11: Daily Living

The eleventh and final major condition for the construction of spiritual questions for more than half of the students in this study includes everyday experiences and activities such as driving (LAS1, 1036), playing guitar (SEB2, 940-955), special non-religious holidays (MIR1, 1044-1046; PET1, 1395-1400), and meaningful possessions (PET1, 778-786). For Kayla, the summer breaks between each academic session provided the mental and emotional margin to let her “mind wander a lot more” (KAY1, 1151). During the summer months, when “hanging out with friends and going to church,” Kayla would “think about churchy stuff more” and have the space in her schedule to deal with “those questions [as] they came up” (KAY1: 1152-1156).

After the death of her parents, Sofia often reflected on her mother’s advice to her during her younger years. In fact, those words of wisdom became motivational artifacts that are now hanging on the walls in her bedroom. These homemade signs on the walls state slogans such as, “As soon as you wake up, smile!” or “If you can’t accomplish something, you
should try again and again” (SOF1, 758-760). As Sofia reflected on these ideas communicated through her artifacts, she is better able to weigh options and opportunities and make informed decisions about her future. Moreover, these artifacts remind Sofia of her mother, which in turn prompts a string of related spiritual questions: “My life has been going on, and I have been asking myself, “Why did my parents die? Why did it happen to me? Why did it happen to me when I was fifteen?” (SOF1, 771-772)

In reference to death, Garrett mentioned that his nighttime dreams had instigated some of his spiritual inquisitiveness, particularly one aforementioned dream, noted here in slightly more detail, when his life was in danger.

The best example: I recently had a dream, and in the dream, I was shot. I know, really scary. I didn’t wake up immediately either. I was just lying there, knowing I was going to die, just thinking, “What’s going to happen? Do I go to heaven?” I mean, if you can’t comprehend something, how can you know it’s there? So I guess a great deal of faith [is needed] for knowing there’s a heaven. So, I mean, I believe there’s a heaven, but there’s always a question of, “How can I know it really?” (GAR1, 401-412).

Moreover, Garrett’s seemingly predetermined and noncoincidental circumstances in his life peaked his spiritual inquisitiveness. He admitted that he is curious about God’s plan for his life and that he looks forward to the day when he will have the opportunity to pose his questions to God: “You know, God, just points out some things in my life. Like, why did this happen? You know, what was the point for this? Was it to push me somewhere? What was the reason?” (GAR2, 175-178). During that conversation with God, Garrett wanted to discover the meaning
of life. He is convinced that “that’s what you would want to know at the end. After you’ve lived your life, you want to know everything: how and why?” (GAR2, 179-181).

Furthermore, two more conditions in daily life that prompted Miranda’s spiritual questions relate to her thoughts and reflections about her future, specifically, her advancement toward the legal drinking age and her impending college graduation. Most college students consider how turning twenty-one years of age will affect their choices, particularly as it pertains to alcohol consumption. Miranda is no exception, but for her, consideration of spiritual questions is also included in this process. She asked, “As I get closer to being twenty-one, I kind of think of like, “Well, what does the Bible mean by not getting drunk? What does drunk mean? Is tipsy being bad? Is being light-headed being bad?” (MIR2, 622-625). In the middle of the conversation about drinking alcohol, Miranda introduced new and seemingly unrelated Bible-oriented questions. She further processed another Biblical mandate about the possibility of getting a tattoo: “Do not put any graven image on your body.” She wondered, “That was the Old Testament, so does that apply to me because I’m under the new law? I’m wearing mixed fabric right now, and I don’t cover my head when I pray” (MIR2, 628-637).

More urgent than Miranda’s thoughts about her imminent drinking choices is the prospect of her college graduation. This event is a monumental experience in the life of any college graduate, and it marks a turning point for those who accomplish such a feat. Additionally, for a spiritually inquisitive student such as Miranda, there is more to consider in the completion of a college degree than career possibilities, such as the nature of the emerging spiritual questions during this time of transition. Some questions seem ordinary, such as the choice of graduate school, geographical relocation, the purchase of a home, and timing for a
family. However, as the series of her futuristic questions progressed, Miranda entered into the
domain of spiritual questions, like, “Where do I want to go to church? Where do I want to
serve in a church? What’s going to be successful in the eyes of God?” (MIR2, 793-796).

*Summary on the Conditions for Spiritual Questions*

To summarize this second section on the conditions of spiritual questions, it must be
noted that for these sixteen students, their spiritual concerns were constructed in the context
of at least eleven major conditions, including personal dynamics, religious and spiritual
influences, family factors, close friendships, the college campus, pain and suffering, everyday
exposure to people, societal and cultural norms, encounters with nature, media and music, and
daily living. The intersectionality of the composition of such questions with precipitating factors
that incorporate personal identity, beliefs, choices, religious and spiritual features, formal and
informal relationships of all kinds, technology, culture, the college experience, and a variety of
aspects of everyday life was informative and enlightening. Illustrated through the narratives of
sixteen diverse informants, these conditions were organized within a comprehensive
framework of influences.

Data relevant to these eleven conditions have been reported here in response to the
third and fourth research questions concerning the sources, motivating forces, and factors that
specifically trigger the manifestation of spiritual questions and the circumstances and contexts
that generally influence the questioning process. At this point, the focus of the chapter turns
from the conditions to the consequences of these spiritual concerns in the lives of the student
participants.
**Figure 8: Conditions for Spiritual Questions**

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**Consequences of Students’ Spiritual Questions**

Numerous spiritual consequences of these spiritual questions were reported and illustrated by these sixteen students. Those data are assembled here in response to the fifth and sixth research questions concerning the relationship of these spiritual concerns to the various domains of these students’ lives. Accordingly, five major categories and nineteen subcategories were constructed to present these results: *personal life* (i.e., identity formation;
perspective and attitude changes; cause orientation; emotional reactions; choices and conduct; self-evaluation and life planning; progress and maturity; decision making; hobbies), *relational life* (i.e., relationship advantages; relationship challenges; relationship choices), *campus life* (i.e., organizational participation and social involvement), *professional life* (i.e., educational engagement; college major selection; career interests and plans), and *religious and spiritual life* (i.e., beliefs and behaviors). However, it must be reported that students in the study spoke more freely and explicitly about the conditions that precipitated their spiritual questions than their results and subsequent consequences.

**Consequence #1: Personal Life**

The reported effects of the spiritual questioning process on the participants’ personal lives are noteworthy. In fact, every participant in the study generated data in this largest first category of consequences, suggesting that spiritual questions in the lives of undergraduate college students impact their personal lives in at least nine arenas: identity formation, perspective and attitude changes, cause orientation, emotional reactions, choices and conduct, self-evaluation and life planning, progress and maturity, decision making, and hobbies.

**Personal Life Sub-Consequence #1: Identity Formation**

Throughout the interviews, many spiritual questions about personal identity emerged. As some of the students began to reflect upon or even answer such questions as “Who am I?” the evolution of their identity progressed.

Kayla definitely believed that to be the case for herself, particularly as her exposure to diversity in college enhanced her exploration of her personal identity and a growing confidence
in “embracing [who I am] and finding out what makes me me” (KAY2, 691-692). According to Kayla’s testimony:

I am confident in who I am. As a White Christian, I’m more confident in my beliefs and knowing to respect myself first, and that I’m pretty funny and that my personality is, you know, one of a kind. I really feel that like there’s not another person that looks like me, [and] I really don’t think there’s another person that acts exactly like me. I’m starting to like that. I like who I’m becoming. (KAY2, 698-706)

On the other hand, while Alex is not completely satisfied with the resolution of his identity issues, he believes as if he has progressed in this regard, particularly during his one-year visit to the United States.

These questions have played a prominent role in my life because of the trip to the United States. This exchange program supposedly would be a key to find myself. I thought that probably [since] I lived all of my life in my country, if I go overseas, I will be able to understand myself completely, and figure out who I am. To some extent, the United States’ experience, or my study here, new friends, the new society, and new country probably helped me out with that, but I still have these questions. (ALE1, 1299-1308)

Personal Life Sub-Consequence #2: Perspective and Attitude Changes

As a result of their spiritual concerns, some of these undergraduates experienced a level of resolution in regards to their personal identities, while even more participants admitted shifts and modifications in their viewpoint and perceptions about a variety of ideas. For Alex, every time he learns something new, he “tries to incorporate this [new information] into my
His spiritual questions in combination with formal and informal education opportunities during college create the spark for new thinking, perspective adaptation, and attitude adjustment. Moreover, Cheyenne exhibited attitudinal changes as well, such as humility, a greater appreciation for a simplistic lifestyle, and an awareness of the brevity of life and the reality of death. Her experiences with the Navajo people, as part of a college immersion trip, prompted many spiritual questions as well as the perspective that “as we grow more spiritual as people, we tend to go back to a more primitive way of thinking” (CHEY2, 564-566). Cheyenne recounted that just “being outside and away from things that are distracting in life today [makes] things easier” (CHEY2, 570-577). During the second interview, she recalled the legendary Aboriginal idea: “the more you know, the less you need.” Cheyenne concluded that “we don’t need all that stuff. We can live without nice cars and fancy clothes, and so it’s a simpler way of living, and we appreciate our surroundings more and the people we’re with” (CHEY2, 571-575).

One consequence for Garrett was a greater awareness and appreciation of the small things in life and that everyday experiences and encounters with people are spiritual in nature (GAR2, 268-280). Garrett has met a diversity of students whom he would call both good friends and acquaintances. His varied college experiences, his spiritual questions, and consequent meaning making have strengthened Garrett’s appreciation for diversity. These challenges to his personal belief system were not always easy for him, but he has “learned to deal with people of other religions or spiritual mindsets while in college” (GAR1, 955-957). Garrett has also realized
that “college is all about learning to deal with other people and work with them and just understanding that not everyone is God-believing” (GAR1, 958-960).

Similarly, Lashawna’s exposure to the situation in Rwanda introduced disequilibrium into her life as she pondered the spiritual questions emerging from the tragic reality of genocide and specifically, her country’s role in such international atrocities. As a result, the personal re-evaluation of her sense of American nationalism and patriotism is a consequence of her pain and suffering questions. These documentaries exposed Lashawna to “different perspectives that shook me to the core about how I feel about being an American” (LAS1, 1429-1439). Her train of thought was expressed thusly:

As I watched Hotel Rwanda and have seen other movies about it, this different perspective showed me what the government and [other] entities did in the process. [When referring to Rwanda], they refused to use the word “genocide” after half a million people are dead. Does that make sense? Yes, I’m an American. Yes, I do hold the principal values of America dear, but [this] also shakes my opinion about the people who run this country. I was just shocked and awed that this is what happened. When you see things like that, and you ask the question “Why?” that’s what happens: you get shaken to your core about what you truly believe and what you accept as a human.

(LAS1, 1429-1463)

Personal Life Sub-Consequence #3: Cause Orientation

For Lashawna, her spiritual questions did more than shift her perspective and change her attitude about genocide and other global atrocities. Considering such matters has moved her to become more cause oriented. She is one of four participants who shared this third
classification of the personal life consequence category. Lashawna’s enhanced personal social responsibility to the world around her was apparent when she connected her spiritual questions and social justice: “I feel as if there is a social responsibility when you learn [about] things and [when] you ask questions” (LAS1, 1492-1494). Her new sense of commitment is obvious.

I feel like at this point in time, I’m grown and I can ask the questions that I want to. As college-educated individuals in progress – [whether] spiritual, worldly, American, or non-American – human beings should ask questions. If you don’t ask a question, nothing will be fixed [and] nothing will be solved. No issue ever arose, no revolution ever happened, and no [situation] has ever been fixed by people who were silent. (LAS1, 1489-1499)

Furthermore, Chen and Miranda have also identified personal causes worth advocating for as a result of their own personal engagement with spiritual questions. It is Chen’s appreciation for Jesus and his extraordinary life that, in some measure, feeds his social activism, as well as this urgent sense of obligation and compulsion to live well and do right while here on this Earth.

I think it’s a sense of responsibility. You know, you got this obligation to do something, to do the right things. And you also got this obligation to think about them, because if you don’t think about them, you’re not justified to say you know them, right? So you have to think, you know, [about] the “capital T” truth. You have to somehow perceive it and feel it. You got this strong feeling of, “It’s something you should do!” (CHEN2, 376-404)
In fact, it is this very feeling Chen describes that prompts him to respond to the following spiritual question with action, despite discouragement from others: “Should we help those in need, even if they are not Christian” (CHEN1, 454-457)?

Just help people. Don’t care who they are, right? Don’t care if you know this guy or not. In China, people will tell you: “Don’t give money to those homeless guys,” but I don’t agree with the teaching, [even] if my money [might] go to someone who doesn’t really need it. My answer to this one is, “I don’t care if they are truly in need.” Even if you know that it’s not really helping their needs, it is still worth it to do so, because for some people, they just feel like they are truly in need, right? We are obligated to do so. You have to! If you don’t, then you’re doing something wrong. (CHEN2, 720-769)

For Miranda, one consequence of the construction of her spiritual questions is an increased commitment to and passion for spreading her Christian beliefs. Specifically, this result stems from questions she has pondered concerning devout adherents to other world religions, especially their unparalleled fervor for beliefs that Miranda considers erroneous. One can sense her inner tension as she seeks to reconcile the devotion of other non-Christian believers with her call to spread the news of the Christian Gospel:

Some people who practice different religions have so much more discipline than us.

Those who practice Islam pray at however many times a day. Or Latter Day Saints: they can give an amazing account for what they believe – and are willing to go door to door, be cursed at, have the door slammed in their face, chased off property – all because of what they believe. I think if Christians who have the truth practiced just a fraction of that, Christianity would be seen in so much more of a positive light. If we were really
living out what our doctrine says, there would be so many more people who have the truth and the hope that we have. (MIR2, 226-242)

Personal Life Sub-Consequence #4: Emotional Reactions

It was noted above in the typological section that some students interpret their spiritual questions through an emotional lens and that feelings and emotive reasoning might drive the spiritual questioning process. However, not only are some emotions associated with the construction process itself, and other feelings might even be a contributing condition to some of those questions, but emotional reactions are also often a direct consequence of having asked the spiritual questions in the first place. Feelings such as fear, excitement, frustration, worry, uneasiness, anger, anxiety, peace, confusion, sadness, doubt, depression, passion, hurt, disgust, guilt, struggle, shock, and joy resulted for more than half of these participants in direct response to their spiritual concerns. The following data illustrate a broad spectrum of these states.

First, Cheyenne’s experience of deep emotions in response to her question, “Why do humans exist?” conveys a diversity of expressions:

Some days I feel so good, I want to cry. Like, people are so brave to be here, to be on this planet. And sometimes it makes me so angry, like, “How can someone do something bad or treat someone a certain way?” But overall, it just makes me feel really passionate. Like, I’m super passionate about people, and so that always makes me feel like, “thumbs up.” (CHEY1, 819-826)

Furthermore, Cheyenne’s spiritual questions about religion incite even more emotions.
The feminine aspect of God makes me feel really angry sometimes – the female principle [being] been shut down and ignored. I think that women are so important and lifegiving. So it makes me feel angry when in college classes like sociology and anthropology where it talks about what has happened to women in the course of history. It makes me feel really angry, but also confused. It makes me feel hurt inside because the more that I learn about different religions, the more I see how it’s all the same. Like, we are all just humans, and it hurts me that we can be so hateful against certain people. It disgusts me. (CHEY1, 903-972)

Cheyenne’s emotions also react to the plight of people and the questions that emerge from her encounters with the poor and disenfranchised, such as her immersion experience in Tijuana.

I feel like I sound so depressing on this recording, but sometimes I just get so sad and I feel guilt that I’m not there with them, like helping them. Like, it’s not fair, and that’s hard for me to understand. That makes me obviously feel really emotional. So why am I here? And why are they there? (CHEY1, 1008-1015)

Similarly, Dante’s spiritual questions also evoke a wide variety of emotional responses that affect him at the deepest level, as well. His perception of “whether or not God approves of me” often caused him to “overthink things too much [and] overcomplicate things” (DAN1, 1029-1032). What began as wonderment evolved into worry as Dante wrestled with certain spiritual questions.

A lot of times, these questions come up and I’ll just be like, “What do I do?” and a lot of times, it will keep me stagnant. But then sometimes, if I’m too stagnant, I worry, but if
I’m not stagnant enough, I worry. So I’m like, “Where’s the medium? Where do I draw the line?” (DAN1, 1032-1040).

Apparent from Dante’s spiritual questions, he wants to always do the right thing and know that he is making the right choices, but not without a certain degree of anxiety in Dante. “If you don’t [make right decisions]... if you don’t get after what God has for you, God is patient, but you can miss your mark” (DAN1, 1171-1173). Dante second-guesses himself often, posing the question, “Is there something I should be doing differently?” (DAN2, 454-455). In the end, Dante asked, “Am I going to get to live the life that I wanted to live?”, to which he responded:

I feel uneasy. I honestly don’t know what to feel, because if his Word says that he’s able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that I can ask or imagine – it keeps me kind of happy with not having what I really want. But then when I have what I really want, I start to doubt. (DAN2, 311-328)

So Dante’s emotions included but were not limited to wonderment, anxiety, uneasiness, and insecurity. However, he also displayed some frustration and anger.

The fact that I know I’m not perfect causes me to be angry. I also feel that it’s the fact that there are questions out there that aren’t answered, and as much as I try to get them answered or seek for an answer, I don’t get the answer. That’s what makes me angry, because I’m like, “Man, I hate struggling with certain areas of my life and not being able to get answers to them.” I don’t know. I’m impatient. (DAN2, 510-528)

Dissimilarly, David does not seem to get angry, although his spiritual questions nonetheless have a real effect on his feelings, dependent on the type of concern being considered. His array of emotions ranges from fulfillment and happiness to depressing, scary,
and sad. Specifically, David’s discouragement often results from his questions about death, the afterlife, and memories of his relatives who have passed on. David admitted as much when he said:

These are the questions that I don’t like to ask myself. The afterlife is depressing to me, just that things come to an end. The thought of the future and the unknown is scary. The afterlife [question] is one that really touches me a lot. I [also feel] sadness, just for those who already left and all that. It also made me kind of sad thinking about death and the afterlife, [because] it’s not something I look forward to, because I still feel like I have things to complete. (DAV1, 728-802; DAV2, 440-471)

Another example of an emotional reaction is found in Kayla’s responses to her often conflicted spiritual concerns. Over the course of the interviews, Kayla teared up on several occasions as she tried to make meaning of the various conditions and circumstances that shaped her spiritual questions. She vacillated between excitement and fear at the thought of the unknown, reporting a full range of feelings as she wondered, “Would I rather know [or not know]?” (KAY1, 828-829), and at times, avoided thinking about the ambiguity and uncertainty of it all.

Finally, Miranda’s reactions ranged from frustration, anxiety, and nagging to peace and elation, when asked about the kinds of spiritual questions that prompted an emotional response: “Can I say all of them?” (MIR1, 816). However, upon further reflection, she noted that “some of the more religious ones” that address creation, predestination versus free will, and baptism sometimes evoked an “emotion of frustration” (MIR1, 830-841) for her, not directed towards God, but is a result of “my silly vessel of a human being not being able to
comprehend the complexities of God” (MIR1, 842-843). As for Miranda’s more “spiritual” concerns, particularly the ones dealing with “demonic things,” she experiences “anxiousness, [because] of this weird parallel between knowing that I have power in Christ, but not underestimating the power of the enemy” (MIR1, 846-849). Because of her penchant for finding answers, Miranda also identified a “nagging ‘I’m-forgetting-something’ feeling” (MIR2, 1339-1340) that often left her unsettled.

Like when you leave the house for a trip, you’re like, “What did I forget?” Or, when you’re doing a Sudoku puzzle, and you’re like, “I’m almost there. I almost know what that number is, but I can’t quite get there.” So kind of like that nagging [sense], like, “Oh, I wish I could figure this out right now.” Sometimes it’s kind of an anxious feeling, because sometimes I wonder, “Well, what if I get asked this question? What am I going to say?” Other times it’s peace, because I’m like, “It’s okay. It’ll be alright. God will answer it in his own time, even if it means when I get to heaven.” Sometimes, when I figure out the answer... when I figure out what God means, it’s kind of like this elated, “Yes! I’ve got it. I know what I believe. I know where God stands on this. We’re on the same page.” (MIR2, 1344-1358)

Nonetheless, Miranda is willing to endure the emotional turbulence of wrestling with religious and spiritual questions, because:

At the end of it, there’s peace. Even though I’m anxious, and I get frustrated, and my brain hurts, if I’m mindful, there’s peace afterwards. I know that all of these questions are hard, and they’re like, big life questions, especially for someone who considers
themselves spiritual. However, in the end, I know God is good, and he’s got it all worked out. (MIR1, 874-882)

Personal Life Sub-Consequence #5: Choices and Conduct

In addition to the internal consequences thus far reported, students also were affected at a behavioral level in terms of their choices and conduct. This fifth personal life sub-category includes participation in various activities, time commitments, moral choices, and healthy life decisions. Lashawna was explicit in admitting that “these questions have mostly played a role in how I conduct myself and the way I act” (LAS1, 1378-1380). Positive conduct is also a priority for Kayla in response to her spiritual questions about God’s attributes and the afterlife. Such questions rise to the conscious level when she is concerned about the appropriateness of her choices.

When I make a wrong choice, it’s like, “How do I know it’s a wrong choice and then how do I get back on the right track? Is [God] testing me to see how far I’ll go with it? Or when temptation occurs, is that a test or the devil tempting [me]?” (KAY2, 918-923). Kayla feels compelled to “always make the right decision, [because] God is testing me all the time” (KAY2, 909, 916-918). She believes that God’s tests are “happening a lot, cause [I] make choices everyday” (KAY2, 934-935). As a result, Kayla is very intentional about “acting right, because the better you are, the happier God and Jesus will be to see you and the better journey [you will have]” (KAY2, 412-422).

Likewise, Miranda is also concerned about protecting her spiritual life from bad influences, believing that her seemingly successful spiritual journey through college is because of her commitment to avoid and abstain from pagan and occultist television shows, movies,
activities, and places. Miranda’s choice to “not watch a lot of supernatural TV, or [attend] séances, or go to haunted houses, or [do] Tarot Cards and Ouija Boards, or watch Paranormal Activity with friends” (MIR1, 1260-1265) is a direct consequence of these spiritual questions: “Why would I even associate with something that’s not of God? Why would I even contemplate [doing] that if it’s so far from God?” (MIR2, 1388-1391). Miranda perceives such influences as bothersome and dangerous:

   Spirituality isn’t just angels and God and happiness. For every action, there’s an equal and opposite reaction. So not that I believe that Satan has any power over me; I have to give him that power. God told us, “Flee away from those things. Run away. Don’t even mess around with those things.” Like, “Why would I even touch illegal drugs? Why would I even go there?” Maybe it won’t cause me to stumble right then, but I don’t think anybody goes into a situation thinking, “This is going to mess up my life.” It’s a slippery slope. Not to say that I would ever become like a pagan just from touching a Ouija Board, but why would I even associate with something that’s not of God? Why would I even contemplate that if it’s so far from God? That’s not something I want. (MIR2, 1369-1399)

   Similarly, Sebastian’s passion for his own spiritual progress led to choices about his own physical welfare: “How do I live in a way that allows me to experience a connection between my mind, my body, and my spirit? How do I get that connection at a level where I can flourish and grow faster spiritually?” (SEB1, 421-425). He spoke about “the balance of three things: intellectual growth, building up your physical body, and functioning spiritually with meditation and cleansing” for the purpose of “exponential growth to the next level” (SEB2, 1086-1091).
One area of life that Sebastian closely monitors for the purpose of spiritual advancement is nutrition and exercise. Such healthy lifestyle choices extend from his spiritual concern, “How do I cleanse my body and soul to receive true information?” (SEB1, 420-421). Consequently, he resolved to “eat healthier, exercise, and then to meditate” (SEB2, 998-999), subsequently undergoing a three-day nutritional detox to “develop mental power over my body and shoot me back to where I need to be spiritually” (SEB2, 1023, 1057-1058).

Personal Life Sub-Consequence #6: Self-Evaluation and Life Planning

Spiritual questions instigate various levels of reflection in the lives of these students, but for at least four of them, awareness and thoughtfulness were taken a step further into a proactive reflective activity that included setting short-term and long-term goals, clarifying personal and vocational mission, inventorying skills and talents, and mapping out future plans. Questions have the potential to clarify personal and vocational mission, as was the case with Peter, David, and Kayla.

Peter spoke of the unifying effect of his spiritual concerns.

They help me focus on how I can bridge the gap between education, community, helping, and then responsibilities, our job, the way that we’re involved with politics, and [how] we govern our families. So yeah, [these questions] have helped me and directed me towards finding my place [and] where I can find myself most useful. (PET2, 346-355).

Moreover, David identified a connection between his “big and biggest questions” (DAV1, 604-606) and his ability to establish goals for his future, as well as his commitment to “execute what I feel is right” (DAV1, 938-940) as he thinks about these questions, and his sense of clarity in knowing “where you’re headed and what you’re doing” (DAV1, 501-502).
Additionally, Kayla’s emerging self-confidence connected to her spiritual questions as she engaged in the process of self-discovery and personal evaluation of her skills and talents in pursuit of a life calling. Her concern about “that one purpose for me on Earth” (KAY2, 904-906) elevated Kayla’s perceived need for focused attention.

I just try to keep evaluating myself. Like, “I’m good at this. I’m not good at this.” I go towards my strong points and keep looking like, “What does that mean?” I try to put it together. So you just keep trying to figure out what is your purpose on Earth, and that’s really hard. (KAY1, 908-917).

Personal Life Sub-Consequence #7: Progress and Maturity

Evaluating oneself in combination with future planning is often difficult for undergraduate students. However, such reflective exercises are very profitable for students who are more personally mature, suggesting a seventh personal life sub-category: progress and maturity. As a result of the students’ willingness to both entertain and engage their spiritual questions, many reported having grown up a bit. Maturity in the lives of the students manifested itself in a variety of ways, including the virtue of gratitude (MIR2, 1493-1500), the development of coping mechanisms to be used in difficult times (SEB1, 905-918), and a growing comfortability and confidence in voicing honest opinions (LAS2, 963-983).

In regards to Sofia, she expressed that her spiritual questions contributed to her character development and a clearer sense of right and wrong. Upon reflecting on her concerns with helping others, morality, and values, Sofia noticed personal progress.

My character has changed. For example, I used to be very aggressive to those people who said something I didn’t agree with. Now I’m just saying, “Okay, you’re standing on
that position. I’m standing on my position. We’re not going to continue this conversation, because it doesn’t go anywhere.” These [questions] influenced my inside world. (SOF1, 1061-1068)

Furthermore, Sofia avoided “opportunities to break the rules” (SOF1, 1050). In light of her strong sense of right and wrong, spiritual questions forged in her life. She gave one example of how such convictions expressed themselves: “The stereotypes that I had in my country, I changed some of them” (SOF1, 1050-1053).

Moreover, Kushanu gave credit to his spiritual concerns for granting him perspective and hope during times of personal disappointment, as well as his burgeoning self-actualization. The two questions, “Where did the world come from, and who made it all?” granted Kushanu the ability to maintain a positive attitude, especially during difficult times.

When I get disappointed about something... when I don’t feel right about something... when I feel very bad about something... when not getting a very high GPA or a very high-paying job or... if I don’t get what I want, I feel very disappointed. Then I think about this thing: imagine where the world came from. There has to be something beyond this. So that way makes [me] feel better, because there has to be something more. If I get through this, then I will be on the top. (KUS1, 336-343; KUS2, 1082-1088)

Although Kushanu has not arrived at the point of “salvation” that enlightenment is expected to produce, he unreservedly credited his spiritual questions for “changing his life a lot” (KUS2, 254, 1436). Proof for Kushanu’s progressive self-actualization is in his own declaration: “I feel like I’m on the right way” (KUS2, 1440-1441).
Personal Life Sub-Consequence #8: Decision Making

For several of the students, their spiritual questioning served more than as tools to assist in the strengthening of their identity, changes in perspective, improvement in attitudes, life planning, and personal maturity; they also served as a compass by which to weigh options and make profitable decisions. Thus, decision making is the eighth personal life sub-category. Both Ming and Sofia look to their spiritual questions about values to inform their decisions. Ming expressed that she considers two questions, “What are my values and what kind of person do I want to be?” (MIN1, 1448-1474) when thinking through various options and potential choices, so that she “will not feel regret” (MIN1, 1462) later. Similarly, for Sofia, there is actually a progressive series of spiritual questions that assist her in making choices, beginning with the question, “What are my values in this world?” followed by, “How to find a path? Is it moral? And is it what you want to do?” At the conclusion of this process, Sofia made a decision that is in sync with her values, direction, moral compass, and desires (SOF1, 400-437).

On the other hand, Chen considered Jesus Christ when deciding the best alternative among several options. Most specifically, Chen’s spiritual question, “What would Jesus do?” is a compass for his decision making. “The teaching of Jesus, right? You know, if I have to make a super, super difficult choice, I think I would be thinking about ‘What would Jesus do?’” (CHEN1, 1318-1320). The consequence of Chen’s spiritual questioning process is that such concerns shed light on seemingly unclear paths in his life when difficult decisions must be made.

Similarly, David’s engagement with spiritual questions is also a guide by which he makes decisions and evaluates his present life circumstances and choices.
How I answer [these questions] is what I do to [make decisions in life]. It’s all about feelings. You got to go with your gut. You got to go with what you feel, and if you don’t, you’re shying away from your emotions and it comes back at you. (DAV1, 1345-1375)

Peter is the final exemplar of one student who employs spiritual questions as tools to make decisions. Moreover, specific spiritual questions about his sense of purpose, calling, and direction, and predominantly what he envisions his legacy to be at the end of his life, sets the foundation for his choices. Peter spoke about his desired inscription on his tombstone to make a point.

I was born in 1989, and I don’t know when I’m going to die. On my tombstone, there’s going to be that dash. What is that dash? What does that represent? Who am I? What do I want to be known for? What legacy do I want to leave? (PET1, 854-857).

It is this image, combined with Peter’s ability to reflect upon the end of his life, that shapes the design of his decision making template. He alluded to the choice of an internship as one such example:

The [tombstone image] is an interesting thing that you have to keep going back to. [For instance], if you’re debating this internship over that internship, spending your time doing this or that, when you figure out what you want to be known for, I think you get on your horse and you ride that horse as long as you can. (PET1, 861-867).

Personal Life Sub-Consequence #9: Hobbies

Finally, personal hobbies is the concluding sub-category under personal life consequences. Both Serena and Cheyenne indicated that their spiritual questions encouraged the development of unique interests. First, Serena’s spiritual queries prompted her creation of
a reflective blog and a personal life book. Despite her love for people and enjoyment of social environments, Serena is a private person who values personal time to think, ponder, reflect, and evaluate, as reflected on her recent post on the existence and relevance of destiny.

I came to the idea of destiny being the entire purpose. I do not know what my destiny is, right? That is what makes it completely workable for me. Maybe God has written it, but I don’t know what it is, so that works for me: not knowing and still going through life each day as if I am doing it, and my actions, my thoughts, and my interactions with the world [are] actually framing it. I think not knowing it makes it the best thing, so I go about doing it as if it’s my thing. That’s where destiny comes in as a hope, as [opposed] to [something] to rely on. (SER2, 205-220)

Secondly, her personal life book is utilized more for the daily evaluation of herself, her interactions, and her life, as well as an opportunity to internalize her spiritual concerns. Serena commented that “it could be [about] anything [that] I go over in my head that I sometimes jot down in my book,” but they tend to be “certain things that are really important” (SER2, 1221-1235).

Another illustration is found in Cheyenne, who as a budding artist, believes that the improvement of her craft is partially a product of her spiritual questions.

They have forced me to be more creative and curious about things. I think as an artist and as a human, you have to be curious about what’s going on around you, and you have to always be learning things. You know, you don’t want to get stuck in your ways. (CHEY2, 754-760)
In summary, the effects of spiritual questions on the participants’ personal lives comprise the first and largest category of consequences. Every student in the study contributed data to this category that spans nine elements: identity formation, perspective and attitude changes, cause orientation, emotional reactions, choices and conduct, self-evaluation and life planning, progress and maturity, decision making, and hobbies. However, the topic of people and relationships, while personal in nature, produced enough data to warrant its own category, which is the focus of the following findings.

Consequence #2: Relational Life

Relationships with people constitute both conditions for and consequences of spiritual questions in the lives of these undergraduates. The effects of the spiritual questioning process itself in the participants’ relationships with family, friends, romantic partners, mentors, and larger communities are considerable. In fact, more than half of the students experienced one or more of the following relational life consequences: relationship advantages, relationship challenges, and relationship choices.

Relational Life Sub-Consequence #1: Relationship Advantages

This finding was sparse in the data, when compared to relationship difficulties, although Miranda, for example, was one participant who encountered both relational benefits and drawbacks to pursuing her spiritual questions. It was in her friendships with peers where spiritual questions have fostered the greatest intimacy and maturational gains.

It has definitely brought me closer to certain people, like [with] my one friend who is suffering from some kind of demonic plaguing. So I was like, “Oh, I kind of experience that too, and you know, let’s meet together.” Or when I was experiencing the night
terrors, I sought out other solid advice like, “Well, this is what I’m experiencing. What does this mean to you?” Then [I received] encouragement and comfort [from others], like, “How are you sleeping? Can I come pray for you before you go to sleep?” It’s helped me reach new maturity with a lot of my relationships, in not only being a taker and asking questions, but also being able to reciprocate [by] giving advice and [sharing] experiences, [saying], “This is what I’ve felt.” (MIR1, 1214-1231)

Relational Life Sub-Consequence #2: Relationship Challenges

The manner in which Miranda, for example, approaches her spiritual questions has not always made for easy interactions with people she loves. In fact, her candor at times has introduced heaviness into her relationship with her mother. However, follow-up conversations have brought about greater understanding and intimacy. Markedly, more than twice as many students spoke of resultant relationship challenges that occurred in connection to their spiritual questions. This second sub-category of relational life included difficult associations with family, friends, and acquaintances. Miranda was honest about some of the preliminary conversations with her mother and the ensuing uneasiness.

Sometimes my mom and I don’t see eye to eye and kind of butt heads. Now it’s not a prolonged strain. Our relationship has not permanently suffered from it, but it definitely causes some tension, with [comments] like, “Well, I don’t agree with you. I don’t agree with you either. I’m right. No, I’m right.” (MIR1, 1203-1208)

Chen also faced challenges with his Communist parents concerning his spiritual quest and the related questions that he is entertaining and acting upon. In fact, Chen believes that his unceasing concern for spiritual questions of both a philosophical and political nature has
real consequences for his relationship with his parents and even peers from China. In
describing his present relationship with his parents, he unemotionally stated, “Of course. Yes,
these questions have an effect on my relationship with my parents. We hate each other. Not
hate, but dislike” (CHEN1, 1241-1242). As for potential Chinese friends both here and back in
his homeland, Chen’s political ideologies, and the resultant questions that he is not afraid to
pose publicly, prevent some Chinese from interacting with him: “I don’t have any Chinese
friends, and I don’t think I would have them in the future” (CHEN1, 1235-1226). The exception
is Chen’s girlfriend, who also studies in the States at BSU. “She doesn’t care. [It affects her], I
think, a little bit. She is not that happy with my political opinion, but she is fine. She does not
support me that much, but she’s not in my way” (CHEN, 1244-1254).

Moreover, from Lashawna’s perspective, engagement with spiritual questions, though
profitable for her life, also poses a risk to her social status. She affirmed, “I’m glad I ask why,”
cautioning, “but when you ask questions, you risk social acceptance” (LAS1, 1474-1479).

There are some [times when] you ask a question and then you have certain people
[challenge], “Why did you think of that? Like where did that come from?” Or if you
[are] young and you said this to an older person, they’d be like, “Shut up. Why would
you think of that or whatever?” They would belittle you because you ask these
questions. (LAS1, 1476-1483)

Relational Life Sub-Consequence #3: Relationship Choices

Furthermore, students in the study seemed to realize the potential effects of their
spiritual questions on their relationships, both their advantages and challenges. It is for this
reason that half of the research participants made decisions about their current or future
relationships in light of their spiritual questions. These *relationship choices* constitute the third relational life sub-category and can be spotted in the friendships and romantic relationships, as well as with mentors and the larger community, of each participant. For Cheyenne, Kayla, Sebastian, Peter, and Sofia, the prominent station that their spiritual concerns held in their lives influenced their choices and perspectives regarding *friendships*, particularly during college. Cheyenne acknowledged that “you meet a lot of people and professors at college, so I have to choose which people to allow into my life” (CHEY1, 1298-1300). Kayla believed likewise. In fact, her spiritual question about God testing her keeps her alert when deciding “who you are going to be friends with” (KAY2, 940). Sebastian is particularly selective in his choice of friends.

I am drawn to people who are similar and who I can be open with about my spiritual questions, and I tend to avoid people who are preoccupied with self-centered kinds of questions like, “What am I doing for the weekend?” I don’t really have common ground with those people, and we don’t cross paths as much. I tend to find those people who are like me. (SEB1, 784-799)

Moreover, Peter shares Sebastian’s passion to associate with individuals and choose friends who will strengthen his spiritual journey and passion for spiritual questions. Both Sebastian and Peter appreciate their interactions with diverse people. However, their close friendships tend to share a common understanding of and commitment to certain values and pursuits. For Peter, the creation of his social justice organization, as well as a variety of other strategies, supports his quest for a community of global-minded activists. His many social justice questions have driven him to “find that group of people” who will share in his passion for helping the Earth’s billions of citizens and ultimately, to contribute to the betterment of the
world. For Peter, it’s about friendships with a purpose. Peter expressed that “I want company,” but not just with any individual, but with a community of friends who “can significantly say, ‘This is my desire as well, and this is what I’m dedicating my life to’” (PET1, 822-824).

Similarly, Peter has also established an informal framework for pursuing friendships as a result of the nature of his spiritual questions. When asked about the role of his concerns in the context of his college experience, Peter responded with how he plans to choose friends and develop those relationships.

We think of our life as a series of transitional times, so I guess in this transitional time of college, these big questions play into my friendships, into how I will actively pursue friendships within these certain realms, because the university is like a cosmos. When I go out into the world, am I going to be asking these questions with similar or different people? Will I be going out to faith communities and non-faith communities and scientific communities and academic communities and asking these similar questions? Who am I going to hang out with? Who are going to be my dudes? Who are going to be my friends? (PET1, 1543-1554)

Differently, Sofia’s spiritual questions do not prompt her to find a group of close colleagues who will help her change the world, but they inform her evaluation of the quality of her friendships. The three spiritual questions that drive her to know true friends are: “Why am I alone? Where are my friends? Do people love me?” (SOF2, 766-767). Consequently, such concerns drive Sofia to a nostalgic state of relational evaluation and assessment.
After I ask this question, I just remember all those people who I love. I understand that it is impossible for people to [know] that you feel bad right at this moment and [should] make you feel better right at this moment, but in general, I just remember all those people who I think love me according to their actions and how they take care of me. [Actions] are more important than words. (SOF2, 782-789)

In the addition to the above effects, there were three students who had established dating criteria for potential dating relationships in the future in response to their spiritual questions. Alex was adamant: “I can’t really date a person who can’t understand these questions or didn’t think about them” (ALE1, 1319-1320). Having already terminated an unhealthy romantic relationship that she regrets, Cheyenne is resolved to avoid this kind of damaging relationship in the future, so one consequence of this situation and the subsequent identity and calling questions was the establishment of criteria for the choice of a future partner. She has decided that she “wants to have someone around [her] who shares the same values and who’s spiritually aware” (CHEY2, 1186-1188). For Cheyenne, this standard functions in combination with her sense of independence and freedom, as she reflected on a past experience.

In that relationship, I was so young and naïve and it wasn’t really that healthy, even though it seemed like it was. I didn’t have a chance to really be myself and do what I wanted to do, and go places that I wanted to go. So I know that I definitely want to have the freedom to be my own person, volunteer abroad, and have a family. (CHEY2, 1176-1185)

Garrett concurred on this issue of choosing a romantic partner.
Like, I would say love isn’t necessarily spiritual, but a relationship is, because I can never be in a relationship with someone who’s not in some way spiritual or religious, or at least open to religious ideas. If I was ever to start a family and have kids, I would want someone who would have similar beliefs to me, so we could share those with our children. I don’t think that I would fall in love with people who I don’t think are spiritually compatible. That’s a big issue with me. (GAR2, 584-595)

Furthermore, Kushanu’s relationship concern is not about friends or a partner, but rather the pursuit of a mentor or a wise guide. Kushanu is so enthusiastic about his spiritual questions and finding the answers to his queries that he “wants to find a teacher” who can point him toward answers to his questions. “I think I will get a teacher [who] plays a big role in proving things and understanding concepts. I am trying to be a teacher for myself for the time being [until] I find a good teacher” (KUS2, 1172-1178).

Finally, choices about the larger community constituted one additional sub-category of relationship concerns. Sebastian, as he reflected upon his question, “How do my intentions and my actions help or hurt healing?”, renewed his commitment to suspending judgment of other people. Sofia, as well, wants to make an impression on the people around her, conducting herself in such a way that her larger community will notice her morals and value-driven choices, and even comment to her, “Sofia, you made my life better and were an example for my children!” (SOF1, 378-379).

Likewise, Alex expects that his spiritual questions will follow him back to Kyrgyzstan and will continue to affect his life and choices, particularly how he chooses to reconnect to his
home culture and community. He anticipated that one of his spiritual questions would
determine his choices and the quality of his relationships.

These questions play a prominent role in my life and the question “What should I
believe in?” is essential in choosing the way I [react] to the traditional values of my
society. For example, if I choose to stick with the values my community believes in, I
would be perceived by my neighbors like a good man, but if I decide to stick with other
values, they will think that I’m a bad guy. So the question “What should I believe in?”
indicates how the society and the people surrounding me will perceive me. (ALE2, 606-
630)

So, as illustrated here, advantages, challenges, and choices regarding informal and
formal human relationships complete the second category of relational consequences resulting
from the spiritual questions of these college students. The effects of the spiritual questioning
process on the participants’ casual and intimate relationships with a wide variety of individuals
appear substantial. The context for these relationships also includes a diversity of
environments, namely the college campus.

Consequence #3: Campus Life

By design, participants in this study are undergraduate college students. Consequently,
many of the consequences these sixteen individuals reported are situated within a higher
education institutional setting. As was noted with the first two consequences, personal life and
relational life, the college campus, as well, constitutes both conditions for and consequences
resulting from participants’ spiritual questions. In fact, a majority of the students in the study
experienced one or both of the following campus life consequences: organizational participation and social involvement.

**Campus Life Sub-Consequence #1: Organizational Involvement**

Students such as Alex, Sabrina, Miranda, Serena, and Peter have experimented with new activities at college, as well as visited, participated in, and even created a variety of student organizations that assisted them in exploring their identities, clarifying their purpose and calling, associating with likeminded students, finding a space that is open to asking and investigating spiritual questions, and developing a place where students with alternative perspectives can learn, grow, and belong. Alex remarked that “I try to do some new activities, like going to museums to study art, because I believe that they can provide a new viewpoint on my old questions and give a clue for the question ‘who you really are’” (ALE1, 1341-1344, 1372; ALE2, 322-323). Sabrina’s spiritual questions led her to join the Jewish Hillel community at BSU to “come closer with the Jewish people on campus” (SAB1, 1227-1228). Additionally, Miranda joined a campus ministry that values inquisitive students and facilitates the exploration of big questions. She wanted to “find an environment” with likeminded Christians who were “accepting of asking questions,” and she discovered that Christians on Campus (COC) was a place that “encouraged my thinking and my questioning” (MIR1, 1238-1254).

Beyond her coursework, Serena has chosen to participate in select cocurricular clubs at BSU “that are organizing based” to pursue “these ideas I have in my head.” Serena explained that she “likes organizing events and interacting with other people. I want to go out there and talk, because I want people to know that just because I’m thinking like this, [it] does not make me different” (SER1, 1586-1599). Garrett offered another scenario. While appreciating the
differences of religious and spiritual perspectives, he is not eager to attend or join any of the campus spiritual and religious organizations on campus. This avoidance of what he considers “church-like atmospheres with group worship is [something] that I’m just not really into” (GAR1, 1004-1006), is a consequence of his spiritual questions.

Neither did Peter find an organization at BSU that satisfied his spiritual quest, so he created a new spiritual and service student organization on campus. Granted, Peter is not a Christian. If he was more of a mainstream believer, he “would probably go to all the Christian organizations” (PET1, 1587-1588), but since he is an Agnostic Pantheist without a spiritual community, he created what he termed a “third space that’s not your church. I created this life of Agnosticism through Campus Change. It’s about this life of passion and compassion where I can live out the practices and the activities that I want and think of” (PET1: 353-363). Peter was not certain how to design an “Agnostic church” for secular humanists on campus, but because of the need for “people with this Agnostic thing” to have a space for themselves, he started Campus Change, so that he and others would no longer need to ask, “What do I do? Where do I go?” (PET1, 368-374). Upon reflection, Peter just “wanted a place to belong, so I created one. Now it’s a place I belong” (PET1, 1596-1597).

Campus Life Sub-Consequence #2: Social Involvement

Secondly, social involvement is another facet as it pertains to campus life consequences. Accordingly, spiritual questions encourage some students to pursue specific social activities during their college years while prompting others to avoid certain social environments. Chen’s college experience is somewhat sheltered because of his spiritual questions, because “I do enjoy thinking.” He confessed, “I’m not that social, so I prefer to come back to my room and
stay” (CHEN1, 1264-1266). In contrast, Kayla enjoys getting out and being with friends socially, but because of her spiritual questions about God’s testing of people, she tries to be selective about her social choices.

[For instance], you can either go out and party where there’s going to be drugs and alcohol, or you can go to the movies with your friends. You know, is that like a test? Cause obviously, you would think that movies would be the right choice. (KAY2, 942-946)

Furthermore, Serena and Dante also restricted their social activities because of their spiritual concerns. Both of these students avoid contact with the college alcohol scene. Serena is active and involved on campus, and she is adamant that her spiritual questions “definitely do not stop me so much from going about life and enjoying myself” (SER1, 1558-1559). However, Serena has made the decision to not drink or dance, or visit pubs or bars, at this point in her life, despite the cultural pressure to do so. Dante took these social restrictions to the next level.

I avoid anything that’s going to cause me to come into conflict with my beliefs in God. I feel like I’m so far into my relationship with him that I don’t want to engage in anything that’s going to put me back at square one. I don’t want to feel like everything that I’ve worked for is just going to go back down the drain by doing one thing that I know that he wouldn’t approve of. So I try to be as careful, because I don’t think that I’m to the point where I can have a drink at the bar with somebody, but still be okay. (DAN1, 1108-1119)

Furthermore, Sebastian also placed some restrictions on his social life because of his spiritual questions and beliefs, but then redirected his energies.
I tend to take part in more things like music and outdoor adventures, rather than going to the bars every weekend, just because in going to the bars, I tend to think of, “Well, you know, there are things that make me feel expressive and alive, and then there are things that make me shrink a little bit.” So I tend to do activities that allow me to express myself and feel more alive, like sports, dancing, soccer, running, Frisbee, and yoga. I feel like a large part of my spirituality is incorporating my body into my spirituality. (SEB1, 806-837)

To conclude this third category of campus life consequences, one participant provided a narrative of how students’ engagement with spiritual questions seemed to intersect with both organizational and social consequences in college, and how they were synergistic in nature. Cheyenne’s important spiritual journey and the corresponding questions have significantly affected her life as a college student at Brownstone State University these past two years, in regards to her value development, the kinds of social environments she frequents, the composition of her selective friendship circle, the manner in which she spends her time, her extracurricular involvement, and her community and organizational associations. She articulated her college experience in relation to her spiritual journey in a rich and descriptive fashion:

I feel like a lot of college kids go out and party all the time and are promiscuous. I have no desire to do that or be that. So I wonder why. Like, “What are they thinking?” but I don’t want to judge. I got to go on the Navajo trip that opened up because of being at college. It was a spiritual experience, and it changed my life and my [priorities] of what I want to do [and] how I want to use my time. So my values and my daily life choices are
also affected, like choosing to be productive, and to be happy, and to meet new people
today, or go out and help someone with something, or do what I can. I [have to] choose
who I let into my life, in terms of close relationships and friends. Because I’ve told you a
lot about being a medium [and] being clairvoyant... well, I don’t tell people that. So
choosing who to share that stuff with [is a big decision]. Do I want to go to a party or
not? Not usually. As for the Arts Village, I’ve lived there the past two years. That is
[my] community. (CHEY1, 1283-1415)

In summary, several of the students’ consequences derived from their spiritual
questions have taken place within the college environment. Such consequences ranged from
their choice of activities and experiences, their membership or non-membership in student
organizations, and their participation in or avoidance of certain social scenes and related
activities. In fact, some of these aforementioned effects have direct ties to the fourth category
of consequences discussed at this point.

Consequence #4: Professional Life

Beyond the personal, relational, and campus life consequences described above, there
were also effects observed of a professional nature. Almost half of the participants in the study
demonstrated that professionally-oriented outcomes have transpired as a result of their
interaction with spiritual concerns. Seven students reported that their spiritual queries have
resulted in changes in three areas: educational engagement, college major selection, and career
interests and plans.
Professional Life Sub-Consequence #1: *Educational Engagement*

This first professional life sub-consequence is illustrated by Alex and Serena, who seem to be two of the most educationally motivated participants in the study, and who both credit their appetite for knowledge and advanced education to their spiritual concerns. Regarding Alex, his life philosophy is “I learn, therefore I am” (ALE1, 690-691). In fact, Alex’s preoccupation with the pursuit of knowledge is expressed this way: “If I learn something new, it means that I’m alive, and if I don’t learn anything during the day, I feel really bad” (ALE1, 691-693). As a result, he seizes every possible opportunity to interact with his professors and instructors, who encourage him in the realm of spiritual questioning.

There are a lot of people who encourage me to ask these questions, who push me to seek something new and try to understand, [including] some of my professors. In Kyrgyzstan and here, there are some professors who are so knowledgeable about their subject that they can really share that information, and their awareness really encourages me to be as knowledgeable as they are. Their knowledge encourages me to seek other knowledge and while seeking this knowledge, I encounter these questions. (ALE1, 1010-1045)

Moreover, Serena’s most pronounced consequence of her spiritual questioning is her commitment to opportunities for advanced education. In fact, Serena traveled to the United States and has prioritized her education at BSU as an end in itself, beyond the conferred degree. This passion for education runs deep in her family’s lineage and has inspired her to “get educated as much as I can and then get involved in something that is radically changing someplace” (SER1, 544-546).
Professional Life Sub-Consequence #2: *College Major Selection*

Alex, Serena, Sebastian, Dante, Cheyenne, and Chen all expressed that their degree program was at least partly a result of their spiritual journey and corresponding questions. First, Alex chose to study international relations over physics and medicine because of his spiritual questions (ALE1, 1392-1400), and Serena was most explicit in “choosing psychology because I had questions like these” (SER1, 1653-1654). Although Sebastian also chose psychology for the same reason, he is not all convinced that it is the best choice.

I want to be in an academic field that lets me put my exploration into what I want to be studying. Psychology does a little bit of that, but I want to start looking for a way to fulfill the needs of both [psychology and spirituality] at the same time. (SEB1, 875-880)

Similarly, Dante chose communication studies for spiritual reasons. “I know that it is God’s will for his strength to be made perfect in my weakness. So I chose this, because that’s always been an area where I’ve lacked the skills and abilities to communicate confidently” (DAN1, 1130-1135).

Furthermore, Cheyenne “wishes that I could have ten majors” because of her many interests and passions. She rationalized her mid-course transition.

Before I was an art major, I was in visual communications technology for one year, and I had to reevaluate it and really just like follow what I wanted to do and something that I was passionate about. So spiritual questions affected how I switched to be an art major. (CHEY1, 1393-1398)
Finally, Chen’s choice of philosophy as his course of study in college and the fact that he plans on teaching philosophy as a career is unquestionably one significant consequence of his spiritual journey these past few years.

I chose philosophy as my major. The reason is... I do philosophy. I love philosophy. I cannot live without philosophy. [I will] teach philosophy. That’s because I love philosophy. I just enjoy it. I do love philosophy. It’s so awesome. Philosophy is everything. (CHEN1, 1282-1304)

Professional Life Sub-Consequence #3: Career Interests and Plans

The third and final sub-category associated with professional life consequences is career interests and plans. As was noted above with Chen, becoming a college-level philosophy instructor is his passion and plan. Three other students also made the connection between their spiritual concerns and their career interests and future objectives. Cheyenne is committed to choosing a career that facilitates an ongoing spiritual quest for her personally, but before she settles into her chosen profession, she wants to “join the Peace Corps after college. I want to do that because I have those questions, and I want to have a new experience and volunteer somewhere” (CHEY1, 1407-1411).

Additionally, Sebastian, as he has “looked at things from different perspectives, tried to understand those different perspectives, and tried to be involved with helping with other people’s spiritual questions” (SEB1, 929-932), he has become purposeful about pointing and directing others to consider “alternative ways to living” (SEB1, 329-330). Consequently, Sebastian is considering a formal career as a meditation teacher or a more informal role as a spiritual guide. So even now, Sebastian is practicing how to discern “when not to help and just
give people space to understand their own spiritual questions [and when it’s time] to talk and
tell them something” (SEB1, 932-935). Sebastian is very interested in figuring out “what kinds
of things people are involved with that are leading to non-productive cycles of suffering” (SEB1,
326-329).

Finally, Alex’s spiritual questions informed his choice of future career, as well. The
various categories of questions, as they intersected with his diverse educational interests, made
for an interesting maze that brought him to this point of pursuing a future career in
international relations. He provided a snapshot into his thought processes along the way:

These questions played a big role in my choice of career, because I really wanted to
[study] physics because they explore the reasons of the birth of the universe. I really
wanted to go to medicine because your human body is so complicated, so it can really
give you an idea of how the world works. Then I thought, “If I go to physics or medicine,
I will have a really narrow specialization, and I will have an opportunity only to talk to
people from these areas.” So I decided to go into international relations because I
believe that people and their behavior can give you really fascinating ideas. (ALE1, 1386-
1402)

In summary, professional life consequences derived from these students’ spiritual
questions focused, for the most part, on their future educational priorities, vocational interests,
and career aspirations. These consequences range from their perspective and participation in
educational opportunities, their choice of a course plan and declaration of a major, and
reflections and research about potential future career paths. The fifth and final category of
consequences is the religious and spiritual life.
Consequence #5: *Religious and Spiritual Life*

This is a study about spiritual questions, and sixteen undergraduate students were purposively selected to participate because of their diverse characteristics and backgrounds, as well as their willingness to speak openly and honestly about spiritual and religious topics. It is no surprise then that thirteen participants reported effects of a religious or spiritual nature in response to their spiritual questions. In this final section of consequences, the data illustrate how students changed in their religious and spiritual beliefs and/or behaviors.

Religious and Spiritual Life Sub-Consequence #1: *Internal Beliefs*

As for internal consequences, or beliefs, students supplied data in regards to the formation, clarification, confirmation, and reconfiguration of personal spiritual and religious worldviews, an increased awareness of personal spiritual needs, a reevaluation of sacred texts, a greater appreciation for religious and spiritual diversity, an increased interest in understanding how others interact with and answer spiritual questions, and overall spiritual maturity. For some of the students, their worldviews were reinforced or reconfigured because of their spiritual concerns. Garrett’s exposure to a critical thinking college course and associated reading assignments, particularly the *God Delusion*, confirmed his theistic beliefs.

I think less than casting doubt, it strengthened my beliefs, because here you have someone basically just tearing apart the whole concept of God or any God-figure. I take it almost as a personal offense, where it’s not just an attack on this religious figure. He’s attacking *my* God that I believe in and saying, you know, “He’s nothing,” just because of some scientific facts throughout his book. So I would say that [reading the book] caused that questioning process, but it then strengthened my resolve. (GAR2, 83-110)
Garrett acknowledged being even more secure in his spiritual journey after the class.

In the course, the whole idea is to expose [us] to all these different ideas by all these thinkers. [It’s about] exposing yourself and then working through it [and] how it makes sense for you. So there were a lot of times when I was challenged and like, “Well this isn’t what I always believed,” but then I came out saying, “This is what I believe now.” After having gone through this process and been bombarded with these ideas, I can say that this is what I believe. I’ve looked at alternatives. I’ve seen different viewpoints, and this is still how I feel. So you come out at the other end, and it’s okay. (GAR2, 97-108)

Moreover, related to his evolving spiritual and religious perspectives, this gay Christian student now perceives the Bible in a different light.

We’re asked to believe that God is perfect, but he clearly isn’t. [Honestly], I guess I don’t like that image of God. I would like to think that God is infallible and beyond comprehension, [but] Genesis almost paints him sometimes as a villain in a story. He’s wrathful and jealous and kills and murders, and I guess that’s not the God I personally think of. So I kind of had to reevaluate how the Bible fits into my belief system after that class (GAR1, 167-174).

As an Evangelical Christian, Miranda was also required to navigate the intersection of her personal faith and college course content. Particularly in regards to her creation-of-the-world questions, Miranda experienced a subsequent tenuous relationship between her personal faith and college education, as well as her ability to reconcile her notions of faith with science.
I’m a science student! So I’m supposed to think this way: “Sure, there might be a God, but he’s kind of like the super cop who watches over stuff or sets things in motion, but he’s [just] the clock-maker.” Or, “There is no God. There’s no proof. You need to be quantitative, and you need to be factual, so it would be ridiculous for you to think this.” (MIR1, 1180-1188).

Nevertheless, it appears as if Miranda has traversed her undergraduate college experience while achieving two significant feats: earning a science degree and sustaining her faith.

Furthermore, some students experienced other effects in the form of an increasing appreciation for religious and spiritual diversity. Such an attitude was most definitely cultivated in Kayla’s belief system.

I didn’t [previously] really look into other religions just because everybody in my family was Catholic. Sometimes, if you had a cousin or an aunt or someone who was a different religion, you might be like, “Really? Like, you’re not Catholic?” You know, it would make you want to look into other religions. Even though my friends were other religions, like Lutheran or Baptist, it just seemed like they were the same religion as me. They just didn’t get communion every Sunday. Growing up, I thought that was the only difference. So I just never really looked into it. Not that it didn’t matter what religion you are, but I wasn’t sure how important it was. (KAY2, 152-164)

However, since coming to college, Kayla’s openness to learning from others and their religious and spiritual perspectives has grown.

Now I feel like people just have so many different views, and I like to hear [about them now], and make my own choice[s], and grow. When I meet new people, I just like to
listen to everything they have to say or what makes them unique. A lot of my friends are different than me now, and I just think [that] if you have a diverse group, then you can get to better places. (KAY2, 165-180)

So Kayla was honest about her personal spiritual need to develop her religious literacy. The other Catholic participant also admitted to a spiritual deficiency, as a result of his engagement with spiritual questions. For Chen, he came to a point where he divulged his need for Catholic community. Despite his inclination to live a cloistered life at college, Chen spoke of his need for connection with likeminded individuals in the Catholic community. “It’s better to find the people who share the similar faith or same faith. I think it’s good. It’s better to find those people around you” (CHEN1, 389-392). This is particularly important for Chen as he pondered one of two of his primary spiritual questions:

Because for now, the point is not to argue if there is a God or not, but to argue like “What does he want?” or something more specific or deeper, right? So it’s better to find some Christians – and especially like Catholics around me – so I can develop my faith somehow, and I can gain more knowledge. (CHEN1, 393-398)

As noted, engagement with spiritual questions affects internal beliefs and attitudes, but interaction with these questions also promotes spiritual growth and maturity. Lashawna testified to this consequence in making this connection.

I believe your life is a maturing process. Even if you’re 90 years old, you are still not as mature as you could be. There’s always some space to grow. I came to college believing, “Yes, I’m a Christian,” but “No, I’m not going to church.” Now I go to church, and I’m improving upon that fact that I’m trying to read my Bible more and more. I’ve
matured in my spiritual walk, and I do believe I will continue to mature. These
questions just play a part in whether or not I’m going to continue to mature, because if
you don’t ask questions, it means you’re not thinking hard enough. If you don’t ask
“why” a few times in your life, it doesn’t make sense to me. (LAS1, 1380-1401)

Additionally, for Peter, one of many consequences in his life resulting from his spiritual
questions is an inquisitive demeanor about how other people answer such questions. This
curious posture is yet another internal manifestation within the religious and spiritual life
consequences.

I think a lot of these questions are really straightforward, and the answers are really... I
can’t imagine what these answers are for a lot of different people. I’d be very
interested in that, because I think that people may ask [or] may answer those questions
in different ways, depending on how they think that they should answer. (PET1, 1679-
1730)

Cheyenne, as well, is on a quest for personal truth. For this reason, she, like Peter,
enjoys hearing others’ perspectives and experiences. Cheyenne, too, has increased her
commitment to explore and practice different world religions as she formulates her own
personalized spiritual worldview.

I guess being Gnostic... and again, gnosis means knowledge... to me, that’s leaving the
door for communication open between me and the higher power, and any other entity
not from this plane. When we talk about seeking truth and finding truth in my own way,
it gives me a chance to explore different world religions. I find a lot of truth in Buddhism
and Paganism and Hinduism, and so being Gnostic allows me to study those and practice
partial things that they believe. Throughout the different religions, there’s always something that really touches me, and it’s like, “Wow, I get it. We are all connected.” So it’s like piecing things together and finding my own rules for living by what is right with me. (CHEY2, 29-50)

As illustrated here, Cheyenne’s beliefs and internal attitudes have now manifested themselves in her behavior and choices. This transition from beliefs to behavior is demonstrated in the experiences of several of the study’s participants, as highlighted next. Thus, behaviors, or external consequences, comprise the second classification of religious and spiritual life.

Religious and Spiritual Life Sub-Consequence #2: External Behaviors

Some students reported an increased desire and/or commitment to participate in public and private spiritual activities, including reading, prayer, and meditation, while others experienced a new level of engagement with other people in regards to their spiritual questions: in the various forms of talking with, learning from, or guiding others.

According to Sabrina, spiritual questions have “helped me stay closer with my religion. I am thinking about it a lot more, so I think these questions helped” (SAB1, 1143-1145). This was also true for Alex, Dante, and Kushanu, who have each increased their spiritual and religious practices as a result of their spiritual questions. Alex, for example, committed himself, in a fresh and renewed way, to the practice of prayer. Within his Islamic tradition, it is expected that adherents would pray on five occasions each and every day. One of the most significant consequences of the construction of his spiritual questions is that Alex has decided to take this religious practice more seriously. “One of my determinations is to try to pray five times a day
and try to follow all Islam traditions in order to help me find myself” (ALE2, 528-531). For Dante, as unsettling spiritual questions continued to surface in his life, he believes that spiritual diligence concerning his religious and spiritual disciplines is even more crucial for achieving a healthy spiritual life.

I’ve been reading my Bible, because I’m like, “Man, I’ve got to have more of this stuff.” I really do. I started reading more. I started praying more. I went to Bible study. The more I understood, the more I consumed what the Word said, [and] the more I began to understand what this life is like and why people live the way they live. I know if I’m not being the best that I can be, or doing the best that I can do, that I really can’t entertain those questions. (DAN1, 148-159, 1008-1013)

Another example is found in Kushanu, whose quest for enlightenment through meditation increased his desire to answer the question, “What is reality?” Kushanu’s life mission is to “go towards enlightenment to know the secrets of the world and to find the real truth of life and to know the real life and real things” (KUS2, 255-277) which continues to encourage his religious behavior within his Hindu tradition.

In addition to accelerated spiritual and religious devotion and participation, four other students noted how they moved beyond their private practices into a more public arena by increasing their involvement with other people. This was true for Dante. Despite what can feel like an emotional roller coaster ride for this African-American Christian, he has been fiercely proactive in staying devoted to his personal faith through both good and bad times. Furthermore, he has also attempted to maintain a positive public spiritual image to those around him, as well as modeled related spiritual behaviors to family and friends. Dante is
cognizant that people are watching him, “recognizing and realizing that people now see me as this person who’s very ambitious, very determined, very active, and trying to make positive decisions” (DAN1, 1075-1078). As a result, he made choices that he believes will portray a spiritual persona that others will respect and might possibly choose to emulate.

For instance, I went out on St. Patty’s Day, and I didn’t drink, and people were looking at me like, you know, “Who’s this guy sipping water in the bar?” They just looked at me. You know, I’ve heard that you could sip a beer as long as you’re not getting drunk, like you can have a good time and drink, but not get drunk. No, you can’t. I believe you can’t, because at the end of the day, the closer you get to somebody by trying to relate to them, it really does them no good because it’s like they can’t really see the difference between you and them. (DAN1, 1080-1094)

Moreover, Cheyenne, Sebastian, and Peter have assumed a mentoring role in the lives of others as spiritual guides. For Cheyenne, her passion for assisting others with their spiritual questions began as she became selectively open to talking with individuals about her beliefs, despite the fact that “it’s sort of weird for a lot of people” (CHEY2, 420-424). As a result, Cheyenne has constructed an introductory hook to spark their interest in her beliefs.

Talking about Mother Nature is a good way to bring it up, and people are like, “Oh, yeah. That’s familiar.” There’s the whole idea of the three stages of a woman’s life, which is like being the Maiden, the Mother, and the Wise Woman. It’s also like the phases of life, like you have spring and summer and winter when everything dies. It’s birth and rebirth, and I just talk about with them. Some people really like it, and it makes sense to them and rings true to them. I think we’re all a little Gnostic in our
thinking, but others reject it because they have been brought up with “there is only one God.” So it’s just sort of strange, new, and uncomfortable for some people. (CHEY2, 429-456)

These kinds of spiritual conversations have resulted from Cheyenne’s passion for spiritual questions and have ultimately taken her down the path to a mentoring role in other peoples’ spiritual journeys. Particularly in the context of Tarot Card readings, Cheyenne uses these sessions to broach spiritual topics in a “really therapeutic way with other people” (CHEY2, 1400-1401). Cheyenne explained the benefit of engaging in such conversations.

Tarot Cards are a really helpful tool to use as reflection and to expose things in yourself, because a lot of times I think we get so busy with life and our jobs and school and our friends that we don’t really know what we’re feeling inside. So it brings that up for people, and it shows a direction and an opportunity. So it’s very helpful and a good way to process information. It can tell you what’s happening and what’s in the future. (CHEY2, 1404-1412).

Cheyenne’s good friend, Sebastian, also takes a keen interest in spiritual direction, and has even articulated a philosophy for his mentoring practices with others.

A lot of times, people come to a point of clarity and they want to teach someone else, but an experience that’s personal and internal can’t really be illustrated. It can sometimes, but a lot of times, it just can’t go from one person’s mind into another through the medium of words, and still be understood. I think it’s a question of free will. Free will is very important to understand when seeking out spirituality, because a lot of times, you’ll understand new things and be really compelled to tell people about
them. So sometimes it feels like a good idea to tell people about them, but other times, trying to tell and teach them is taking away the other person’s free will. I think when someone asks you or if you can tell the situation is right, it’s okay to teach someone something. But a lot of times, they’re doing exactly what they need to be doing when they’re doing it, and that’s perfect for them. So to try to change that is kind of like saying something is wrong, when nothing is really ever wrong, because everything is happening as it should happen at that time. (SEB2, 455-493)

Finally, the third aspiring spiritual guide among the participants is Peter. One of the most pronounced consequences of Peter’s spiritual questions on his spiritual behavior is his self-proclaimed role as a mentor for other spiritual pilgrims. This theme permeated Peter’s story and is increasingly a passion in his life.

Just yesterday, I was with a good friend of mine [with whom] I’ve never spoken about spirituality before and a girlfriend who I haven’t bridged that gap of spirituality before. I know that these [friends] are less comfortable and don’t talk about it very much. So I constructed this [conversation] about philosophy and spirituality [by] having them look up into the sky and imagine eternity or infinity, and [asked] them to describe it to me. (PET2, 186-194, 518-519)

In fact, Peter described his strategy with reference to a unique metaphor imbedded within a series of questions:

What are keys used for? They’re used to open doors. What are doors? Doors are used to open things to rooms. Why do we have rooms? Rooms are for isolated events for gathering together. Why do we need to gather together? To converse over things.
Why do we need to converse over things? Because we’re human and we like to share ideas. Why do we like to share ideas? Because sharing ideas is fun and it helps us grow. Why do we need to grow? Because, “What the fuck?” (PET2, 532-544)

Following up, Peter offered a lengthy response that clarified the power of his poignant question.

Because [it helps] you get down to those deeper questions that I would think that a lot of people would garnish as more spiritual than the first question, even though I connect the first question to that last question very easily. I think those last questions are where people start to feel uncomfortable, and when they start to feel uncomfortable, they need a place to fit, and when they need a place to fit, then they create stories and communities in which people are able to exist... in a space where [we eventually] allowed ourselves to say, “What the fuck?” But for [now], people need these defined boxes, and I’ve seen so many people without these boxes [who] lose it. They lose it so bad and they need it. When they’re in these boxes, they find hope, friendship, and community, and it saved their life. [Saying] “What the fuck?” is [easier] for me, because I’ve opened myself up to that community of everyone, allowing myself to exist within communities that already exist, knowing that we’re all on the same playing field, and that we all have different answers. (PET2, 532-569)

Moreover, during the second interview, Peter came up with a slogan that he now keeps in his spiritual guide’s toolbox to be utilized when the opportunity presents itself. As he was processing how his spiritual question, “What is existence?” inspired him to action, Peter’s personal philosophy and best practices for a spiritual guide continued to crystallize in his mind.
The [question of existence] makes me [want] to ask other people that question, because I want them to ponder it. It also makes me want to use that question to help define what they’re really here for. Everyone talks about how you would feel if you know that you’re going to die like a year from now, a day from now, or an hour from now. What would you do? At that point of nearing death, a lot of us want to do what we think is good, whether that be telling our family that we love them, telling our God that we love him or her. There are a lot of things that we define as good. I think that those five minutes before your death, we need to capitalize on, because time runs out. “Dedicate yourself to the last minute!” might be my next campaign, which goes along with “How can I engage people?” I think it really pulls at you. So imagine that you have one hour to live. What would you do? You think that you have an hour, but you really have fifty-nine minutes. During the last minute, I’m giving you the [opportunity] to write down as many things as you can in one minute: wishes that you would have for the world and things that you would like to dedicate yourself to. You would want things, I’m guessing, that [are worth] dedicating your life to and having other people dedicate their lives to. So these [questions] of “what is existence?” and “who am I?” push me to urge people to dedicate themselves to that last minute of their life so to [accomplish] the things that they would wish for the world. (PET2, 905-1002)

To conclude this fifth category of religious and spiritual life consequences, attention turns to one more student who provided a descriptive narrative of how students’ engagement with spiritual questions intersect with both religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors, and how they are related to one another. Sofia’s conflicted spiritual journey and her corresponding
questions have significantly affected her life as a college student at Brownstone State University this past year. She is on a serious quest to discover and identify her genuine personal religious and spiritual beliefs. Thus, it is unsettling for Sofia to find herself at that station along her spiritual path where there are more questions than answers and more confusion than clarity.

I do not know where I am. I am neither Atheist nor Orthodox. So to be closer to religion, I should make some steps. This feeling makes me go ahead. It makes me learn, study, get more information, and get involved. So [when] you meet a random person that you find out is not random, and who [asks] you, “Do you know about that?” then you stand and think, “No I didn’t. I should learn about it.” Then you find out that you didn’t know anything on this issue and that you probably better read about this issue to understand it better. So this gives power to go ahead, to learn, to investigate, and to live. This is how life is created. If you’re given one more issue, one more task, or one more point that you’re interested in, you can just dig deeply [into] this issue, go ahead, and move ahead. This is the way that you find your path. (SOF2, 884-914)

Summary on the Consequences of Spiritual Questions

To summarize this section on the consequences of spiritual queries for these undergraduates, it is noted that spiritual questions were related to effects and outcomes in at least five major categories, including personal life, relational life, campus life, professional life, and religious and spiritual life. The intersectionality of these questions with consequences highlight aspects such as identity, perspectives, attitudes, emotions, choices, conduct, self-evaluation, progress, relationships, college participation and involvement, educational pursuits, career plans, and religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors within a comprehensive
Figure 9: Consequences of Spiritual Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-Categories</th>
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<td>Personal Life</td>
<td>Identity Formation</td>
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<td>Perspective and Attitude Changes</td>
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<td>Cause Orientation</td>
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<td>Emotional Reactions</td>
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<td>Choices and Conduct</td>
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<td>Self-Evaluation and Life Planning</td>
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<td>Progress and Maturity</td>
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<td>Decision Making</td>
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<td>Hobbies</td>
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<td>Relational Life</td>
<td>Relationship Advantages</td>
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<td>Relationship Challenges</td>
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<td>Relationship Choices</td>
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<td>Campus Life</td>
<td>Organizational Involvement</td>
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<td>Social Involvement</td>
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<td>Professional Life</td>
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<td>College Major Selection</td>
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<td>Career Interests and Plans</td>
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<td>Religious and Spiritual Life</td>
<td>Internal Beliefs</td>
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<td>External Behaviors</td>
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framework in response to the fifth and sixth research questions. At this point, the focus now

turns to an examination of how a range of participant identifiers align or not with the

construction of the participants’ spiritual questions.

Characteristics of Student Questioners

The sixteen participants in this study are a diverse group of undergraduate students,
reflecting a wide variety of demographic qualities, interests, backgrounds, and traditions. In
this fourth and final section of results, the data are examined for perceived connections
between students’ characteristics and the construction of their spiritual questions.

College Level and Age

As noted above, all sixteen of the student participants were undergraduate students
between the ages of 18 and 22 and were evenly distributed across all four class levels: four first
years, four sophomores, three juniors, and five seniors. No apparent differences were
observed between younger and older students in how they constructed their questions, the complexity of their thinking in regards to such questions, or the types of questions they articulated.

**College Major and Course Study**

The chosen courses of study for these students are equally varied and diverse, including fourteen different degree programs in accounting, applied health sciences, art, biology, communications, developmental disabilities and rehabilitation, early childhood education, marketing, philosophy, political science, pre-law, psychology, supply chain management, and women’s studies. Similar to age and college level, no differences in how students of different academic interests and pursuits constructed their spiritual questions were observed. For instance, the two participants who are studying accounting (Kushanu and Ming) and the two students who are majoring in psychology (Sebastian and Serena) are of different genders, college levels, sacred and secular traditions, as well as races, ethnicities, and nationalities, and yet each submitted comparable spiritual questions, in both quality and quantity.

**Gender**

The gender composition of these undergraduates was split evenly among males and females. While published research has documented differences in how college-aged men and women develop in the spiritual dimensions of their lives, no such differences in the construction or compositions of spiritual questions between male and female participants were observed. However, close friendships as a condition for spiritual queries seemed to play a more important supportive role for some of these women, suggesting a potential gender influence in select aspects. For instance, twelve of the sixteen students identified close friendships as a
precipitating factor for the construction of their spiritual questions. Every female student presented qualitative data confirming that close friendships were conditions for their questions, whereas only half of the male participants did so. No other aspects aligned in such a pattern.

**Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality**

The racial and ethnic composite of this group of research participants was fairly diverse, including a variety of nations represented in the study. Specifically, eight of these students are Caucasian, and the other half self-identify as African American, Asian, Asian-Kyrgyz, Caucasian-Mediterranean, Han, Indian, or Yellow. Additionally, ten of the students are American, while six students declared their citizenship in China, India, Kyrgyzstan, or the Ukraine. None of the reported conditions, constructions, or consequences of these spiritual questions was observed to differ across identities of race or ethnicity. For all of the students, regardless of race or ethnicity, topical questions within the category of human experience prevailed as most common. Moreover, even students who were not from the United States posed questions comparable to their American counterparts in each of the topical categories, as well as were influenced by similar conditions. The only identified difference was nationality, and ever so slightly, in regards to the influence that transition into college made on international students. For these participants, the transition into college, in combination with the immersion into a new country and culture, seemed to exert greater influence on their construction of spiritual questions than for American students who were attending college in their homeland. The transition to the United States, for five of the six international students, made a notable impact on the nature of their spiritual questions.
Religious, Spiritual, or Secular Tradition

The final characteristic examined was participants’ religious, spiritual, or secular tradition. Fourteen different, participant-named traditions were reflected in this study, including Atheist, Agnostic Pantheist, Buddhist-Taoist Pagan, Catholic, Catholic-Christian, Christian Orthodox, Evangelical Christian, Gnostic, Hindu, Muslim, Non-denominational Christian, Protestant, Reformed Jewish and Tengri-Muslim. Among the sixteen students, only the Reformed Jewish (David and Sabrina) and Non-denominational Christian (Dante and Garrett) identifications were repeated twice.

While the researcher noted non-existent or perhaps slight connections between the participant characteristics and their spiritual questions when taking into account the first four categories of participant demographics, this particular identifier seemed to make a noteworthy difference in the composition of such questions, as well as in some of their associated conditions and consequences. For example, while those with mainstream Christian, Catholic-Christian, Muslim, and Jewish backgrounds constructed many more specific and focused questions, often related to their religious traditions, practices, doctrines, and texts, those from more alternative perspectives such as Agnostic Pantheist, Buddhist-Taoist Paganism, and Gnosticism seemed to articulate more general and broad spiritual concerns. Granted, all the students in the study expressed questions that were both universal and detailed. However, most of the big-picture questions were pondered by the students with less defined and less regimented spiritual or religious traditions. However, it must also be acknowledged that religious and spiritual influences, including personal perceptions, people, places, practices,
events, experiences, holidays, and texts, were evenly dispersed across the participant pool, regardless of religious, spiritual, or secular tradition.

Moreover, when examining precipitating factors in the other ten categories of conditions that influenced the construction of these spiritual queries, data were, for the most part, consistently distributed across the various conditions for students regardless of perspectives. The only exception that was detected was the manner in which encounters with nature affected participants. There were a variety of students from both mainstream and alternative perspectives who credited nature as a factor in the construction of some of their spiritual queries, but for students who identified as Agnostic Pantheist, Buddhist-Taoist Pagan, Gnostic, and Hindu, the depth and breadth with which they spoke about nature were more impressive than their mainstream counterparts.

Summary of Findings

More than 900 spiritual questions emerged during this study in the words of sixteen diverse undergraduates from one institution in the Midwest, providing a rich reservoir of data on this dimension of a select group of students. Although unique to each student, this vast inventory of spiritual questions shared a number of commonalities. Within a grounded framework of topics and types, the data yielded eighteen different topical groups of spiritual questions (i.e., universal causes; earthly beginnings; God; Satan; extra-terrestrial life; reality and realms; supernatural phenomena; identity, self-awareness, choices, and feelings; purpose, calling, and direction; community and relationships; pain and suffering; social justice; morality and virtue; religion and spirituality; sacred texts; death; post-death journey; and afterlife) across six broad categories: origins; divinity and deity; the mysterious; human experience; truth
and belief; and destinations. In addition, twenty-three different type groupings (i.e., purposefully pursued; spontaneously encountered; privately contemplated; publicly communicated; strategically utilized; intentionally avoided or postponed; answers anticipated or unexpected; fleeting; enduring; frequent; intermittent; shifting; primary and secondary; cognitive and emotional; philosophical and practical; weighty and light; personal; self-focused; urgent; general and broad; specific and focused; integrated and multiplying) emerged within four broad categories of the approach, duration, relevance, and scope of spiritual questions posed. With regard to the sources, motivating forces, and factors that triggered the construction of these students’ concerns, and the circumstances and contexts that influenced their spiritual questioning process, eleven major categories and thirty sub-categories were observed: personal dynamics (i.e., identity and personality; beliefs and worldview; reflections, thoughts, and feelings; and passions, pursuits, and choices), religious and spiritual influences (i.e., personal perceptions; people and places; practices; events and experiences; holidays; and texts and manuscripts), family factors (i.e., connections; conversations; and conflict and crisis), close friendships (i.e., connections; conversations; and conflict and crisis), college campus (i.e., transitions; curricular components; co-curricular engagement; community and environment; and research interviews), pain and suffering (i.e., intrapersonal; interpersonal; and impersonal), everyday exposure to people (i.e., observations and interactions), societal and cultural norms, encounters with nature, media and music (i.e., news and entertainment), and daily living (i.e., experiences and activities; and possessions).
**Figure 10: Summary of Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions 1-2: What is the nature of spiritual questions students construct during their undergraduate college experience? Specifically, what are common and unique spiritual questions that emerge during these formative years?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructions of Spiritual Questions</strong></td>
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<td>Origins</td>
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<td>Scope</td>
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<td><strong>Research Questions 3-4:</strong> What are the sources, motivating forces, and factors that trigger the materialization of these questions? What circumstances and contexts are present that influence the spiritual questioning process?</td>
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<td><strong>Conditions for Spiritual Questions</strong></td>
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<td>Personal Dynamics</td>
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<td>Religious and Spiritual Influences</td>
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<td>Family Factors</td>
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<td>Close Friendships</td>
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<td>College Campus</td>
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<td>Pain and Suffering</td>
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<td>Everyday Exposure to People</td>
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<td>Societal and Cultural Norms</td>
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<td>Daily Living</td>
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<td><strong>Research Questions 5-6:</strong> How do such spiritual questions relate to and impact the various aspects and arenas of students’ lives? What effects can be attributed to the spiritual questions that students construct and consider?</td>
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<td><strong>Consequences of Spiritual Questions</strong></td>
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<td>Personal Life</td>
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<td>Relational Life</td>
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<td>Campus Life</td>
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<td>Professional Life</td>
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<td>Religious and Spiritual Life</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Research Question 7:</strong> How does the construction of these spiritual questions align with a range of identifiers, such as college level and age, major, gender, race/ethnicity/nationality, and religious, spiritual, or secular background or tradition?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristics of Student Questioners</strong></td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious, Spiritual, or Secular Tradition</td>
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Finally, numerous consequences of these spiritual questions were reported by participants and sorted into five major categories and nineteen sub-categories: personal life (i.e., identity formation; perspective and attitude changes; cause orientation; emotional reactions; choices and conduct; self-evaluation and life planning; progress and maturity; decision making; hobbies), relational life (i.e., relationship advantages; relationship challenges; relationship choices), campus life (i.e., organizational participation and social involvement), professional life (i.e., educational engagement; college major selection; career interests and plans), and religious and spiritual life (beliefs and behaviors). All of these data served to illuminate the nature of spiritual questions among a select group of college students, factors that triggered their construction, and outcomes that accompanied their consideration.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the constructions, conditions, and consequences of spiritual questions in the lives of sixteen undergraduate students at one Midwest public university. Previous research has established that students of this generation are increasingly involved in spiritual activities and are eager for engagement with personal questions of a spiritual kind. However, extant data are limited in their capacity to address a comprehensive understanding of such questions, focusing instead on their presumed nature and assumptions about how students choose to answer them. The current study took a decidedly different approach by interacting with a diversity of undergraduate students with the intent of uncovering their expressed spiritual concerns articulated in their own words. In addition, this study also examined the precipitating factors that produced such questions, as well as their consequent effects and outcomes, many of which warrant attention here. This final chapter considers only the most striking findings in the data, their meaning in the context of extant literature on the topic, and their implications for higher education practice and research in the future.

Discussion of the Data

Some thirty hours of participant interviews produced a tremendous volume of data with implications for scholars and college practitioners alike. The following discussion addresses these findings in three sections: spiritual questions, related conditions and consequences, and spiritual questors.

Students’ Spiritual Questions

This first section considers the study’s spiritual questions themselves, with particular attention given to the focus of these concerns in light of previous research and scholarly work
on the topic. Furthermore, the discussion continues with a consideration of the personal
affinity these students have for these questions and the rarity of their altruistic motive.

It was expected that numerous spiritual questions would be introduced into the data in
the course of this study, but unexpected was the sheer volume of such concerns. Sixteen
participants offered more than 900 spiritual questions. At the lower end of the spectrum, with
20 and 24 questions respectively, were Chen and Alex. Cheyenne, Peter, and Miranda each
presented more than 100 questions, with Miranda offering the most with 108 articulated
queries. This study provides clarification to these questions through the construction of a
comprehensive framework that does not just include a large inventory of student concerns, but
also offers a system by which to study the topics and types of such questions, as well as
considering their conditions and consequences. Moreover, for the past several years, a number
of scholars (e.g., Astin & Astin, 2004b; Fowler, 1981; Nash, 2001b; Nash, Bradley, & Chickering,
2008; Nash & Murray, 2010; Parks, 2000; Strange, 2000) have articulated many of students’
spiritual questions from a particular set of assumptions, but with little empirical verification.
The present study accomplished a grounded categorization of student spiritual concerns that is
both more comprehensive and in greater detail than previously featured.

Despite the investigator’s vested interest and involvement with spiritual and religious
students for the past twenty years, he could not have brainstormed such an explicit list of
topical categories and sub-categories or types of spiritual questions, as well as the associated
multi-layered conditions and consequences. However, many of the prominent questions posed
by these sixteen students are yet to be reflected in the research on such matters, particularly as
they pertain to the topical categories of origins, divinity and deity, the mysterious, and destiny
and destinations. The source of questions explored in the present study also includes powerful exemplars of religio-spiritual narratives previously overlooked in much of the research. However, most of the attributed spiritual questions in the extant literature could be situated in the present study’s categories of human experience, and truth and belief, although few have touched upon the topics generated here, for example, of universal causes, earthly beginnings, Satan, extra-terrestrial life, reality and realms, supernatural phenomena, death, and the afterlife.

It was actually Fowler’s (1981) earliest work that first probed into the more traditional deity, death, and afterlife questions of young adults. Nevertheless, over time, scholars who have addressed students’ spiritual concerns have placed a much greater emphasis on questions of identity, values, love, hope, religion and spirituality, calling, purpose, sexuality, relationships, future plans, and life journeys, perhaps to the exclusion of questions about the existence and character of God, the origins of the universe, the nature of death and the dying process, and the afterlife. While the present study’s participants align with previous research in exhibiting concerns about self-awareness, life direction, community, suffering, and morality, they also articulated explicit concerns that others (e.g., Fowler, 1981) have only alluded to, such as the consideration of a deity and the often troubling topic of death. All in all, the present study contributed in novel ways to both the topical breadth and depth of student concerns in this domain.

Students’ sense of spirituality and how they construct it here extended into so many different aspects and arenas of their lives. This finding was not a surprise, but is indeed a distinctive feature of these data. Apparently, spirituality is not a discrete component in these
students’ lives. When questioned about their spiritual journeys, and in particular, asked about their associated spiritual queries, ensuing discussions often spanned a variety of topics that on the surface seemed beyond the scope of spirituality or religion. Nevertheless, for these twenty-something college students, they associated anything and everything with spirituality. To the outsider, some of the participants’ questions might seemingly highlight normal and everyday concerns in the context of college, such as: “How can I push myself? Who do I want to surround myself with? How do I maintain balance? How should I treat others? What is going to happen after college?” However, these students believed that concerns of this nature were just as spiritual as their queries about God, religion, or the afterlife. Questions about their community, relationships, choices, feelings, sense of purpose, need for direction, and emerging identity were inherently spiritual to them just as much as their concerns about universal causes, earthly beginnings, supernatural phenomena, truth, death, God, heaven, and death.

This fact that what students identified on the surface as spiritual bled throughout the disparate dimensions of their lives suggests that spirituality is deeply integral to how they live life in all of its facets. For instance, doing the right thing might be perceived by some as a moral question. However, for some of these students, such matters are spiritual imperatives, reinforcing the observation about the pervasive nature of these concerns. So too, a concern about career choice also turned into a discussion of one’s “calling” for some of these students.

The sheer number of student-voiced questions in this study surely has expanded and extended the previous inventories provided by Fowler, Small, Parks, and Nash in their treatment of stages, trajectories, forms, and narratives. These rich responses now offer an opportunity to explore the nuance of the depth and detail of these concerns as they emerge in
undergraduates’ lives, while traversing from one stage to the next, traveling from one form to
another, and projecting one or more narratives of their spiritual journeys.

In particular, this study provides additional depth and detail to Parks’ (2000) model of
forms of knowing, dependence, and community. In doing so, it offers a new catalog of
concerns that might accompany the transition from an authority-bound and dependent form of
knowing into a stage of probing commitment purported to occur during the undergraduate
college experience. Many of the spiritual questions proposed by students in the present study
clearly reflected the tentative, uncertain, and exploratory posture associated with this stage of
faithing, such as, “Who am I? If you can’t comprehend something, how can you know it’s
there? Am I doing what God wants me to do? What does God want me to strive for? How do I
know when something is a wrong choice? What should I believe in, and what if I choose a
belief that is wrong?” As illustrated, these data flesh out the various categories in Parks’ (2000)
work with a rich display of student-initiated questions and examples.

Similarly, these questions might potentially illuminate Nash’s (2001a; 2001b) narrative
approach to how college students examine and express their spiritual journeys. In as much as
the participants in this study seem to reflect one or more of his three mainstream (i.e.,
orthodoxy, wounded belief, and mainline) or three alternative (i.e., activism, exploration, and
secular humanism) religio-spiritual frames, these data add to the clarity of the description of
the religious, spiritual, and secular storylines of contemporary college students. Both the
journeys and related questions for a majority of the participants (e.g., Alex, Cheyenne, Dante,
Kayla, Kushanu, Lashawna, Ming, Miranda, Peter, and Sebastian) are clearly situated within
either the mainstream or alternative narratives. For example, Dante’s queries about the
inerrancy of New Testament epistles and what constitutes Biblical faith are reflective of an orthodox believer within the mainstream category. From an alternative view, Cheyenne’s journey is an archetypal case study of how an explorer would process the world, as demonstrated by one of her spiritual questions, “With the changing of the seasons, what about my life do I want to be different in this next season?” There are also those (e.g., Chen, David, Garrett, Sabrina, Serena, and Sofia) who resemble storylines and deal with spiritual concerns represented in both schematics. To illustrate Chen’s identification with both the mainstream orthodox and alternative activist narratives, consider these diametric queries: “How do the ceremonies in the Catholic Church relate to theology?” and “Should we overthrow the Chinese government?” All in all, since these sixteen participants span all six religio-spiritual genres, there is much to be learned from the topics and types of spiritual queries they articulated. So while Nash established the core considerations of these six prevailing narratives, the data here also provide associated concerns that might play across all of them.

Furthermore, the nature of these participants’ questions and resulting consequences also seem to align with a number of Astin, Astin, and Lindholm’s (2011) dimensions of students’ inner lives, so measured in terms of equanimity, ethic of caring, ecumenical worldview, charitable involvement, and spiritual quest, as well as religious commitment, religious engagement, and religious struggle. Examples found in these data are numerous in each of these eight spiritual and religious measures, as highlighted by Lashawna and Serena’s sense of equanimity, Peter and Sabrina’s priority for an ethic of caring, Sebastian and David’s expression of an ecumenical worldview, Sofia and Cheyenne’s inclination for charitable involvement, Kushanu and Ming’s search for meaning and purpose in life (spiritual quest), Chen and
Miranda’s commitment to living out religious ideas in everyday life (religious commitment), Dante and Alex’s participation in religious practices (religious engagement), and Kayla and Garrett’s religious struggle in carving out a course that deviates from their family traditions. Thus, the present study further radiates what others have found, and vice versa, in the pursuit to understand the spiritual dimensions of students’ lives.

Interestingly, while these hundreds of questions spanned six topical and four typological categories, every one of the concerns seemed to be self-focused in two regards. First, the quality of personal affinity was apparent in each student. Though varying in intensity and strength, all of the questions that emerged in the study were quite personal for each questor in that they held special significance in his or her life. While some of these questions transcended students’ immediate experience and had limited applicability to their current priorities or needs, all seemed to find their genesis from a very personal place within. This is not surprising, as it might be posited that all spiritual questions, by their very nature, assume some level of personal importance for the questor and connect in some way, big or small, to the epicenter of the human spirit.

Secondly, many of their questions also seemed self-absorbed, or at the very least, posed with self-interest in mind as an underlying motive, perhaps consistent with the quality noted above. The researcher did not detect any truly outward focused questions among students from mainstream backgrounds. Seemingly altruistic questions were asked only by two of the participants: one a Gnostic, and the other, an Agnostic Pantheist. Even for these two students, however, most questions were posited in a self-interested tone around their priorities, their passions, and their predicaments. In the end, only one of the students confessed to such a
preoccupation. This was not surprising when accounting for each participant’s age, level of maturity, station in life, point in their development process, and overall self-interest that permeates the college environment. It is not unusual for students at this stage to turn inward as they grasp for fundamental answers to questions of identity and direction. These are very absorbing concerns at a truly intense developmental moment.

**Conditions and Consequences**

This second section considers the associated conditions for and consequences of the spiritual questions in students’ lives. The plentifulness of precipitating factors, the overlap of conditions and consequences, the role of diversity and close friendships in the construction of questions, and the force of the college curriculum in effecting them was evident in the data.

It was apparent that students were much more ready and eager to chat about conditions rather than the consequences of their spiritual concerns. In fact, there are far more conditions that precipitated the construction of spiritual questions catalogued in this study than their outcomes or consequences. It further appeared to be a challenge for these undergraduates to articulate implicated effects of their questions on their futures, whereas their ability to identify past triggers and motivating factors came about more easily. Although the study’s participants were able to peer into the past with some degree of clarity, they seemed even more uncertain and ambiguous as to the future trajectory of their concerns.

One explanation for this might be that students tend to live in the moment with only minimal attention given to their future. Conditions are most immediate, and as such they find themselves in a condensed and concentrated experience, where what is now is clearer than what is ahead. Furthermore, twentysomethings (Robbins, 2004) more often ponder their past
than consider their future, and in an attempt to better understand how previous periods of
time affect their current lives, they are prone to wonder, worry about, or second-guess their
choices and decisions. In addition, their preoccupation with the present might make today as
well as yesterday easier conditions to consider. Pondering concerns such as, “Where are these
spiritual questions taking me?” might require a much wider angle view than less mature
students are able to master in concrete terms. The consequences of such questions are
situated in the much larger context of a lifetime. Students are often over-challenged to figure
out what their immediate step will be after graduation, yet alone the potential effects of their
spiritual questions on an undisclosed, unrealized, and distant hypothetical future.

Interestingly, when placing the tables of these conditions for and consequences of
spiritual questions side by side, there is significant overlap. For instance, religion and
spirituality was both a condition and a consequence of posing certain spiritual concerns. As a
condition, religious and spiritual people, places, events, and experiences prompted several
questions in the study, while as a condition, religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors also
emerged as an end result of the spiritual questioning process. This was true, as well, for
identity formation, emotions, family, and friends, and engagement and involvement within the
college environment. This was not as surprising as much as it was remarkable in that the same
facet or aspect in life can be both an instigator and an outcome of spiritual concerns.

Surprisingly, participants’ encounters with diversity, though uncomfortable on occasion,
were neither threatening nor transforming. As young adults who find themselves in a dynamic
post-secondary context, it is believed that college students have not fully matured in their
intellectual and interpretative capacities, as they reflect upon the world around them.
However, subsequent levels of cognitive sophistication are achieved as students encounter, acknowledge, and, in time, appreciate a multiplicity of perspectives from diverse sources of truth (King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1968). Immersion into a variety of campus environments where undergraduates are exposed to a diversity of people and perspectives supposedly leaves them wrestling with many questions that lie at the base of the cognitive and emotional changes in their lives.

It was anticipated that numerous examples of discomfort and disequilibrium would have surfaced as these students reported their exposure to religious and spiritual differences in peers and professors. However, that was not the case. In fact, the opposite was true. As students encountered different religious or spiritual perspective and beliefs, they felt more often than not, inquisitive and curious, as opposed to fearful or offended. Such encounters with diversity, in the classroom, clubs, and circles of friends, facilitated clarification of their own beliefs more often than conversion to new ones. Additionally, many participants’ perception of otherness broadened to include a range of identifiers such as awareness, knowledge, understanding, and even appreciation. However, despite their impressionability and malleability, for most of these students, their current religious or spiritual viewpoints remained intact. Now somewhat less static and stationary in their perspectives, conversations and interactions with diverse spiritual questions from dissimilar peers seemed to breathe new life into dormant beliefs and practices.

This reality does not preclude the inevitability of Fowler’s (1981) references to “clashes and contradictions” that often occur during the mid-20s, a stage that is often accelerated for those who enroll in college. This struggle often results from differing viewpoints between two
or more valued sources of authority, changes in symbols or rituals, or encounters with a diverse
and other-minded group of people who seem relatable and relevant. As a result of this spiritual
collision and a possible explanation for the seemingly healthy and productive responses of the
students in this present study, authority on spiritual matters begins to untangle itself from
outsiders to now dwell within the individual. Others’ input might still carry some weight, but
becomes subservient to the internal value system. During this stage, the spiritual questor often
begins to take personal responsibility for his or her beliefs and lifestyle choices. Such may be
the case with some of the participants who for the first time perhaps compared their own
commitments with those of others.

A protégé of Fowler, Parks (2000) spoke of the “shipwreck experience,” where that
which has been faithfully relied upon in an unexamined way suddenly fails the individual. The
shipwreck experience is increasingly common among students who arrive at college with
untested beliefs and unchallenged life paradigms who then encounter a diversity of people and
perspectives. Some of the students in the present study did appear to “push away from the
dock” (Park, 2000) in varying degrees as they began to rethink their perspectives in light of new
information or relationships, particularly those whom Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) might
describe as religious strugglers.

Moreover, diverse friendships encouraged and did not sabotage or sidetrack these
participants’ spiritual quests, but in fact, more often solidified rather than shifted these
students’ positions. Such was certainly true for Dante, Garrett, Lashawna, and Miranda.
However, this phenomenon seemed more the case for peer relationships than authority
figures, such as professors and instructors, who probably exerted a more disruptive power by
virtue of their institutional role and perceived knowledge, or at least that was the perception of
some of these students. Despite some students’ initial concerns that conflicting ideas might be
harmful to their spiritual journeys and religious beliefs, each emerged stronger and more stable
in their previously held perspectives. There is not one instance in the data where exposure to
diversity caused an apparent religious injury or spiritual damage. Even among those students
who exuded a seemingly immature, unstable, or family-driven belief system, inclination to
changing places in response to positive engagement with diverse others and ideas did not
occur.

In regards to peer relationships, for every female in the study, the influence of close
friendships appeared to be a noteworthy condition for spiritual questions, a point that was true
for only half of the male participants. Gilligan (1984) referred to the traditional socialization of
women, who are purportedly socialized through relationships and are threatened by isolation,
whereas men are encouraged to be independent and so are more apprehensive in the face of
intimacy. Theorists have long observed such gendered phenomena, such as Levinson and
Levinson (1996), who noted a similar gender split in their research on the human lifespan.
Furthermore, the sequencing of vectors of development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) was
altered when research on the differences between men and women emerged in their approach
to psychosocial development. Consistent with the literature of the past several decades that
has well established some differences between men and women regarding such issues, it is no
surprise that the women in the present study seemed to stress the role of close friendships in
the construction of their spiritual concerns to a greater degree than did their male
counterparts. Overall, these findings align well with Lee (2002) who observed that the beliefs
and values of college students’ closest friends have a significant lessening or intensifying effect on their religious and spiritual strength depending on the trajectory of the associated friendship circle’s perspectives on such matters.

Moreover, in regards to academic conditions for students’ spiritual questions, coursework, classroom discussions, and professor’s instruction and interaction seemed to emerge as precipitating factors more so than did participation in campus activities or student organizations. For these participants, it appeared that curricular influences surpassed co-curricular and extra-curricular initiatives as formative in the construction of their spiritual questions. This is somewhat surprising, since students spend much less of their time during college with instructors and peers in a formal educational setting when compared to time beyond the classroom. Apparently, as limited as it is, such experience seems to leave its mark on them. On the other hand, spirituality is fundamentally about meaning making. Where else are students systematically exposed to meaning making in a formal manner than in the classroom? Furthermore, undergraduate students, who have an underdeveloped sense of autonomy and prefer pre-reflective thinking, looking to authority figures for answers is a convenient resolution to life’s big questions. Therefore, the power of the in-class encounter versus out-of-class involvement is intriguing when compared to past research on the topic (Astin & Astin, 2004a, 2004b; Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). That the findings of the present study suggest that classrooms are more formative than co-curricular involvement in the construction of undergraduates’ spiritual questions seems to challenge popular notions about such factors in the college experience. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) noted the contribution of experiences like study abroad, service learning, interdisciplinary studies, and civic
engagement to the spiritual development of students, but stopped at giving full credit to the strong impact of traditional class discussions, instructors, readings, related videos, and coursework. The fact that this study’s data underscore the curricular more than the cocurricular in framing students’ spiritual concerns becomes a noteworthy point among some longstanding assumptions of prominent scholars.

**Spiritual Questioners**

This third section concerns the qualities of the participants in this study, particularly their similarities and differences and the intersectionality of spirituality with various dimensions of their lives. While attending to the broad similarities observed among these diverse participants, the discussion also notes the unique differences between students, especially of mainstream and alternative religio-spiritual narratives, and the apparent limited effects of other identifying characteristics.

The pool of undergraduates who participated in this study was quite diverse, reflecting a wide variety of demographic features, backgrounds, interests, beliefs, and experiences. It was thought that spiritual questions might be differentiated by college level, college major, race and ethnicity, nationality, or gender. Even though some scholars posit that many of the spiritual concerns that surface among undergraduates are somewhat similar regardless of their religious or spiritual traditions or affiliations (Nash & Murray, 2010), it was still surprising to observe nominal differences among these students in either the topics or types of their spiritual questions or the categories of their associated conditions and consequences. Even in light of their reported religious, spiritual, or secular backgrounds and beliefs, in combination with other diverse personal characteristics, it was interesting to note how evenly distributed, for the most
part, were the precipitating factors and effects of their questions. Nonetheless, there were some differences associated with specific religio-spiritual narratives (Nash, 2001b).

Mainstream orthodox students (Nash, 2001b) have a reputation for proselytizing to persuade others to convert to their particular religious perspective. While that situation did appear in the data with two of the Christian students, it was three alternative students (Nash, 2001b), more exploratory and activist in their bent, who seemed equally excited about the potential for wearing the hat of a spiritual mentor or guide in hopes of influencing others to appreciate and embrace their views. The fact that alternative participants spoke about such persuasive techniques more often than did students from mainstream persuasions was unexpected. One explanation might be that the zealous nature of alternative students, such as Peter and Cheyenne, exuded an activist stance in regards to issues that impassioned them, such as social justice or the health and betterment of humankind, that they felt compelled to share them with others.

Furthermore, while all students in the study posed some questions that were detailed and pointed in scope, it was the mainstream students in particular who tended to catalog concerns that were most narrow and exact in their specification, especially within topical categories of destinations and truth/belief. For example, Kayla’s articulation of dozens of questions about death and the afterlife in combination with Dante’s spiritual preoccupation with explicit doctrinal minutia within specific sections of the Bible reinforce this conclusion. This is not surprising, as most mainstream students in the study had a formal association with some particular religious perspective that provided explicit guidance of various sorts. Alternative students, however, while asking some specific and focused questions, mostly
expressed their concerns at an indefinable meta-level requiring a vivid imagination, comfort with relativism, and big-picture thinking. Consistently, these alternative students rarely reported being exposed as often to authoritative texts and teachers who might have limited or reshaped their questions.

Encounters with nature was another condition detected among both mainstream and alternative students in the study. However, the sophistication, energy, and passion with which alternative students reflected on nature were more impressive than their mainstream counterparts. One reason for this finding might be the unique role that meditation plays within the Pantheist, Buddhist, Taoist, Pagan, Gnostic, and Hindu traditions. Some of the alternative students in the study (e.g., Cheyenne, Peter, Sebastian, and Kushanu) could be situated within an emerging subcategory of the explorer narrative that Nash (2001b) called the mystics, who pursue “pervasive calmness” (p. 14) often through the lens of contemplative Eastern Mysticism and earthy Neo-Paganism and their related practices of meditation and mindfulness. Consequently, these students’ spiritual activities often take place in outdoor environments that facilitate powerful encounters with natural elements. Another explanation might be mainstream students’ priority on the creator over creation, while alternative proponents seem more likely to resist a defined description of or devotion to an ultimate deity. All of this underscores the potential power of narrative in positioning students for identifying important questions to ask.

Interestingly, such systematic influence did not seem to extend to other key identifiers, including year in college or academic major. First, the year in college did not seem to affect the constructions, conditions, or consequences of spiritual questions among these participants. No
apparent differences were observed between younger and older students regarding their spiritual concerns in relation to topics or types of queries. In light of research on student maturation and development, it would seem that college level would have played some role in, at least, the complexity of thinking required to conceptualize and articulate certain questions. However, seemingly higher levels of cognitive ability, autonomy, and drive were just as likely to be formed among some of the younger participants as those more mature. Why that is so is not readily apparent from the present data.

Course of study in college was another student identifier that was expected to affect the kinds of spiritual questions posed, but that was not the case. Even with fourteen different majors represented in the study, there were no noted differences between science and education students, for example, in their approach to spiritual concerns or between pre-law and psychology students in the kinds of questions they asked. Academic interests seemed to have little effect on the construction of spiritual questions for these students. That is somewhat perplexing, since science students are molded generally to consider the facts, proof, and logic, while liberal arts students are more prone to be creative and imaginative under the guidance of instructors who lean more social constructivist in their perspectives and pedagogy. Again, further focused study is warranted to sort through such effects.

Finally, this study further refined what others have suggested is important to consider, such as Small (2007; 2011) who reconceptualized Fowler’s (1981) early work to include previously marginalized populations and traditions. Religious and spiritual minority students, including those from a variety of alternative narratives, but also global nationalities, were included in this study. This extends Small’s attempt to rework some of the current
prescriptions and iterations of college students’ spirituality to include Muslim, Jewish, and
Atheist students. In response to Small’s clarion to both respect and platform non-majority
trajectories of spiritual development, the participants in this current study were explicitly
chosen to reflect exactly those narratives that have been inadvertently or otherwise precluded
from previous studies on the topic. The researcher’s level of attention to diversity is an
important note, as he now offers suggestions for institutional practices and future research in
the next two sections.

Implications for Practice

The spiritual questions that surfaced throughout this study confirmed that many of
these students are increasingly engaged in spiritual matters of all kinds and are eager to reflect
on questions of a spiritual nature (Astin & Astin, 2004b). The processes by which they
composed their spiritual questions and their resulting compositions can only better equip
scholars and practitioners to both identify and accommodate these concerns in students’ lives.
Furthermore, the fact that many of these students wrestle with questions that seem to go well
beyond ordinary transitional concerns and are best labeled as spiritual, suggests that they may
not reserve such questions for religious or spiritual environments, but bring them into
classroom discussions, course assignments, residential living quarters, and friendship circles,
whether we want them to or not. Clearly higher education must become better prepared to
respond.

To the disadvantage and disappointment of spiritually inquisitive students, some
scholars (e.g., Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006; Nash & Murray, 2010) recounted
scarce opportunities at most public institutions, in either curricular or cocurricular forms, for
such students to gather and dialogue about matters of faith, spirituality, religion, or the meaning of life. Left to navigate these meaning-making journeys alone because of the absence of intentional campus environments and skilled campus mentors and life coaches to assist them, such students do their best to consider such questions by themselves, often in private. In fact, some of these study’s students spoke about the positive effects that the research interviews had on their spiritual journeys, in light of their perception that peers are often ambivalent or hesitant about engaging in conversations of this nature.

Some might not see this as a problem, since religious and spiritual student organizations abound at most public institutions. However, most of these communities attract likeminded students who are already predisposed to particular perspectives (Bryant, 2007). Often designed to reinforce and strengthen such students’ family faith tradition while away from home, these traditional campus ministries and niche religious groups often strive to create a safe space that provides a haven for students who might self-identify as spiritually convinced. However, despite the growing trend of students with alternative perspectives on the college campus, few options exist for spiritually curious or spiritually conflicted students to raise authentic questions, voice doubts or misgivings, or merely be in process when it comes to spiritual and religious concerns. Therefore, institutional leadership should expose themselves to the literature about the spiritual dimensions of student development theory and related innovative campus initiatives from around the country as they consider the design and implementation of safe spaces for spiritual exploration and dialogue within their contexts, including interfaith dialogue initiatives and religious and spiritual literacy campaigns. Doing so
might help to lessen the gap between what campuses provide and what students desire, a point considered in the next two observations.

First, this study elucidated how students possessing diverse characteristics from varied backgrounds might articulate their beliefs, perspectives, preferences, and questions concerning spiritual matters. Several participants declared their personal interest in interacting with students from different backgrounds and perspectives. However, some of them rued that such topics do not come up in daily conversations at the student union, student organizational meetings, or in social settings. The data in this study suggest that students would be eager to engage in such dialogue about differences if like initiatives existed and were marketed in a way that was student centric: interesting, compelling, and relevant. Interestingly, it was the Atheist student who was visiting campus programs and looking for encounters with people to satisfy her curiosity about religion and spirituality. Interest in interfaith conversations did not stop with Ming, but enthusiasm for such pluralistic encounters permeated these data in this study, including those points made by participants such as Kayla, Miranda, Sabrina, Serena, and Cheyenne. This noted, greater effort might be spent in creating institutionally sanctioned pathways for interfaith dialogue to occur.

Secondly, interfaith dialogue is only constructive when students’ knowledge and understanding of different faith traditions, perspectives, and worldviews is present. For several of the study’s participants, while interest and inquisitiveness were present, religious and spiritual literacy seemed lacking. General and specialized knowledge about faith systems and world religions was minimal for many of these participants. In a day and age when world politics, international conflicts, and pressing social issues are shaped by religious and spiritual
ideologies, when student interest is peaked by the uncertainty of an unpredictable global scenario, and when university students are exhibiting a keen interest to interact over these topics, it seems that university decision makers might want to consider including a basic religious and spiritual literacy component in the general education requirements. Students would benefit from acquiring an understanding and appreciation of how various disciplines, multiple faith perspectives, and intellectual traditions inform an understanding of spirituality and shape spiritual dimensions in other people’s lives. Furthermore, possessing the ability to identify and articulate spiritual concerns in their own lives as they intersect with the development of their personal identity, relationships, purposes, and directions can only strengthen a general education experience that is transformative and enduring even beyond graduation. In fact, Parks’ (2000) mature adult station, as described in her model of faith development, highlighted benefits of encouraging a spiritual journeyer to progress in their spiritual growth that would be applauded by most student affairs practitioners. For instance, complexity, inclusiveness, and passion for social justice are hallmarks of what she described as the open to other position, a stage characterized by a “longing for communion with those who are profoundly other than self, not as a matter mere political correctness, but as a longing in the soul for embodied faithfulness to the interdependence that we are” (p. 102). It is for one such reason that the spiritual dimension of college students must be attended to as an interconnected facet of any holistic student development plan at any public institution.

While ultimately, it is crucial that higher education specialists understand the developmental processes that college students undergo during the transitional years of college and have a working knowledge of the psychosocial, cognitive-structural, and typological
theories above, such limited information is no longer sufficient in mentoring this era’s undergraduates. As such, students are re-examining their beliefs, life structure, value systems, and even their spiritual or religious core, and faculty and administrators alike could benefit from becoming more acquainted with conceptual models of spiritual growth and the emerging research on the spiritual dimensions of college student development. The present data feature sixteen students representing fourteen diverse backgrounds and traditions, including Atheism and Agnosticism, and yet all are asking spiritual questions that inevitably will affect the identities they forge, the choices they make, the emotions they encounter, the relationships they cultivate, the course of study they choose, and the careers they consider. The spiritual dimension of students’ lives, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and religious, spiritual, or secular worldview is at play during the college years much more than most student affairs practitioners might be aware of or care to admit. Such a point might apply in particular to those who practice their craft in the context of the college classroom.

Several participants mentioned the connection between professors’ instruction during class sessions and the formation of their spiritual concerns. For some, they appreciated the challenge to think deeply about religious and spiritual topics, while others felt threatened and intimidated by the comments and conversations in the classroom environment. The data here concur with Lowery (2004; 2005) in suggesting that there is a difference between thinking critically and being critical when it comes to matters of faith, religion, and spirituality, particularly in their intersection with the academic disciplines of history, science, and literature. Instructors of all backgrounds and expertise should be briefed on the latest research of the
spiritual dimensions and interests in students’ lives, as well as receive appropriate training on how to interact with sensitivity and tact when engaging students in the delicate topics of religion and spirituality. Students’ worldviews are an important and personal facet of their lives that should be respected, confronted, and probed with both challenge and support (Sanford, 1962).

Implications for Future Research

This study took a broad brush approach to understanding the nature of spiritual questions among undergraduate students. However, each of the main categories (i.e., constructions, conditions, and consequences) alone provides an opportunity to explore further these aspects for additional depth and detail. So in an effort to build upon what has been accomplished here, conducting a more finely focused research approach in any or all of these three areas might yield greater understanding of the phenomenon of undergraduates’ spiritual questions. Using both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, each can potentially deliver a greater catalog of stories and exemplars to further inform this particular topic.

Moreover, students’ spirituality is a moving target. Conducting research on undergraduates in a state of apparent spiritual flux was especially challenging when it came to completing the member-checking process. As students read their own narrative, some requested changes be made to their storyline, not because of any inaccuracies, but mostly due to their own personal changes in perspective, shifts in their own religio-spiritual narrative, or the emergence of new spiritual questions in their lives. In fact, a few of the students had made significant alterations to their religious spiritual identification between the first and second interviews. Undoubtedly, ontological and educative authenticity was at play during the course
of this constructivist project, which many students attested to in their follow-up emails, phone calls, and personal interactions. However, while these components of authenticity imply a unique mutuality and improvement-oriented trajectory for both the investigator and participants, there were also many factors outside the research interviews that seemed to shape and reshape the participants’ perspectives, beliefs, and often altered religious or spiritual course.

Had this study included a third interview six months later, additional and different findings might have emerged. Subsequent personal correspondence with participants hinted to this dynamic. However, this is not surprising, for two reasons. First, the assumption of this study is a relativist ontology that recognizes the time-bound and contextual nature of data. Secondly, scholars have provided well-documented keen insight into the rapid acceleration of growth and development for young women and men during the college years in all facets of life. The spiritual dimension is no exception. The above mentioned shifts seem to suggest that at the very moment students express their spiritual questions, they are themselves in a process of spiritual change. This was evident at numerous points during this research process. As a result, a longitudinal perspective is warranted to consider how students’ ongoing spiritual journeys and their altering associated questions might track and trace through subsequent years. This study covered just one slice in time, while trying to capture such a dynamic phenomenon. Future research could advance this line of inquiry by intentionally examining changes across time, especially in light of extant developmental models’ (e.g., Fowler, 1981; Parks, 1986; 2000) hints of a particular ebb and flow of spiritual concerns at specific developmental moments. Thus, having noticed such dramatic changes in such a short period of
time suggests that scholarship in this domain might benefit from research projects that map out the movement of such questions in students’ lives from one year to the next. To recap, even in its limited span, this study revealed that the construction of students’ spiritual questions is a fluid, lively, and iterative process that is ripe for change, especially during the college years, when the influence of a variety of shaping conditions is paramount. In the future, more sophisticated designs that take into account a greater range of time and context can only improve on what has been done in the present.

While this study explored the intensity of topics and types of spiritual questions and their contributing factors and resultant effects among a select group of undergraduates, it is unknown as to what extent this might apply to a broader pool of students. Instrumenting some of these concerns and evaluating to what extent and for how many such questions arise as salient could be a fruitful line to pursue, suggesting the benefits of projecting this study’s emergent framework and systemization on a much larger collection of students in a quest for potential generalizability. This particular study highlighted the personal journeys of sixteen diverse and dynamic individuals. However, these students were enrolled at one Midwestern public institution, so the questions, “Who is not represented in this study and whose voices are still to be heard?” and “For whom and how many students are these questions of concern, when do they appear, and does that vary by the type of institution?” have yet to be explored.

Future research initiatives might also include students with even more unique religious, spiritual, and secular backgrounds from a greater variety of geographical locations and institutional types, so as to capture further nuances in the data. There might be additional unique cultural differences related to geography both stateside and abroad. Furthermore,
expanding the racial composition of research participants to include Hispanic and multiracial students, for example, could add greater breadth to such an inquiry. Additionally, including different types of institutions and across larger and more diverse samples of students in a longitudinal quantitative research initiative might deliver to future scholars a more thorough and descriptive portrait of the spiritual dimensions of college students today. Finally, it can also be noted that each of these sixteen participants potentially represent a larger group of similar and likeminded students who future research initiatives might reach, and as a result, provide greater depth and breadth of understanding of the demographic and storylines of students who align with a variety of identifiers, such as gender, race, or tradition.

In regards to the relationship of these data to Nash’s narratives, there are opportunities yet to explore the potential intersection of specific spiritual questions with precise mainstream and alternative storylines; the data in the present study also suggest that there are other distinguishing features between these narratives yet to be discovered. This study provides hundreds of spiritual questions to be considered in tandem with Nash’s six religio-spiritual classifications, potentially enriching the core focus of each narrative and improving our understanding of undergraduates’ spiritual journeys and their associated queries.

Notwithstanding, undergraduate students constitute a large bloc of constituents in American higher education. As scholars and practitioners better understand and appreciate the spiritual questions in these predominantly twentysomethings’ lives, the educational experience for students might feel more synergistic and seamless. However, even less is known about how graduate students, faculty, and administrators construct spiritual questions, and particularly, what conditions and consequences emerge as salient and influential in their personal and
professional lives. Knowledge of this might further illuminate how such individuals exert their influence on undergraduates they encounter.

Furthermore, in regards to faculty members, the present data suggest that at this institution, course instructors were instrumental in facilitating, intentionally or otherwise, the construction of spiritual concerns for several of the participants in the study. As authority figures in undergraduate students’ lives, it would be interesting to explore the perceptions that faculty members have about this domain of religious and spiritual interest, as well as the topics and types of spiritual questions among undergraduates in their courses. Yet faculty members are not the only authoritative agents interacting with undergraduates. Student affairs professionals are also actively involved in students’ educational experience as well, often in more personal ways. In fact, more than fifty percent of the nine hundred questions that emerged during the course of this study were within the human experience category.

Furthermore, a majority of these human experience questions participants described as spiritual related to purpose, calling, direction, identity, self-awareness, choices, and feelings, all of which are traditional domains of student affairs practice. Professionals in the field of student affairs at public institutions, whose role and responsibility are to help students develop in each of the aforementioned domains of student development, must realize that it is quite possible that students are viewing these developmental processes as spiritual in nature. If that is the case, future research could benefit from identifying the religious, spiritual, and secular traditions of the students on their campuses and noting any relationship between students’ spiritual questions and their identity formation, sense of purpose and calling, choices and
emotions, or self-awareness in general, as well as student affairs practitioners’ perceptions about and prioritization of the spiritual dimension of students’ lives.

One concluding research implication is in regards to encounters with diversity. The literature is mixed on the effects of diverse encounters and experiences on the typical twentysomething college student, but at the very least, it appears as if there is merit in exploring the potential benefits of interfaith dialogue within public institutional settings in light of this study’s students’ resilient and mostly rewarding response to otherness.

Conclusion

It is clear that this study delivered what it set out to accomplish in unearthing numerous and multifaceted questions from the personal perspectives and in the voices of a diverse composition of college students. Situated in assorted contexts and articulated in the midst of moving personal narratives, the spiritual probes illuminated here, for the most part, transcended gender, culture, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, college level, sexual orientation, personal interests, academic aspirations, traditions, backgrounds, and religious, spiritual, or secular beliefs. Contributing to the work of a variety of scholars who study the spiritual dimensions of undergraduates’ lives, this study provides a systematic framework for examining this phenomenon, as well as offering hundreds of inimitable and distinctive questions into the literature for present consideration and further exploration.

Fascinatingly, the spiritual questions that emerged were more common than unique among the participants, despite their rich diversity. However, while the nature of the topics and types of these questions will not be of surprise to scholars who study the spiritual
dimensions of college students, the manner in which students chose to articulate some of their quandaries are enlightening and will contribute to the literature in significant ways.

The conditions for such spiritual questions, though somewhat unique for each individual in the study, shed light on the kinds of sources and forces that trigger the manifestation of these concerns in the lives of undergraduates from diverse places and spaces. The circumstances and contexts that influence the construction and composition of these spiritual questions are multifaceted, many-layered, interwoven, and overlapping.

The consequences of these questions for these sixteen individuals span the many facets of their lives, while impacting the relational, emotional, physical, intellectual, professional, and spiritual dimensions of their personhood. Regardless of their characteristics, competencies, or convictions and despite of their unique contexts, these students’ spiritual concerns have profoundly shaped their past, impacted their present, and influenced the future trajectory of their lives.

Consequently, whatever can be done to advance an understanding of the spiritual dimension of students’ lives must be pursued further for higher education scholars and practitioners alike. The proper response of educators as cheerleaders for religious and spiritual literacy and champions for the spiritual quest of each student will certainly benefit the educational experience of undergraduates, including their academic success while at the institution and their professional experiences and achievements beyond. However, most importantly, as these graduates step into a complex world where they will be required to navigate life in the various contexts of the workplace, communities, families, and relationships, it should be our hope that these students will not only be professionally talented, but also
intellectually astute, emotionally and relationally intelligent, morally conscientious, civically engaged, and yes, spiritually literate as global citizens in an increasingly diverse world.

In conclusion, college students are increasingly engaged in spiritual matters of all kinds and are eager for engagement with important questions of a spiritual nature. After all, they are at their core spiritual beings. Consequently, it is my expectation that while notions of spirituality, religion, and meaning making of all kinds will continue to vacillate and fluctuate in the years to come, spiritual questors of this multiplicity and spiritual questions of this magnitude are here to stay. Such concerns are inescapable. Not only so, but they are often front and center in students’ personal lives as they traverse and navigate in and out of formal and informal educational environments at their respective higher education institutions. As a result, such questions not only need to be taken seriously, but also proactively nurtured, supported, and facilitated if faculty and administrators are to recruit, retain, and effectively educate the future leaders of tomorrow.
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APPENDIX A. TIMELINE OF THE STUDY

January 2011

- Research proposal approved
- Application submitted to the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB)
- Initial participants identified

January through February 2011

- Refinement of interview protocol and questions
- Full panel of participants arranged
- Interviews scheduled

February through May 2011

- Interviews with participants conducted
- Recursive analysis/coding of data for themes and categories

March 2011 through August 2011

- Transcriptions conducted
- Data analysis begun

August 2011 through February 2012

- Data analysis continued
- Case reports drafted and finalized

February 2012 through April 2012

- Aggregate reports drafted and finalized
- Final presentation of findings
APPENDIX B. HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

March 11, 2011

TO: Michael Brown
HESA

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H11D175GE7

TITLE: The Nature of Spiritual Questions Among Undergraduate Students: Constructions, Causes and Consequences

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. As of March 11, 2011, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on February 27, 2012. You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, send a request for modifications to the HSRB via this office. Those changes must be approved by the HSRB prior to their implementation.

You have been approved to enroll 20 participants. If you want to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/Modifications:
Stamped consent forms are coming to you via campus mail.

cc: Dr. Carney Strange

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7
APPENDIX C. INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO GATEKEEPERS

Dear __________,

I am currently a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program here at Brownstone State University. In order to fulfill the requirements of my degree program, I am conducting an original research study to learn about the process that undergraduate students undertake when constructing spiritual questions. I hope you can assist me with my research by helping me identify both male and female students, who might self-identify as (choose one to insert here: Agnostic, Atheist, Buddhist, Catholic, Daoist/Taoist, Evangelical Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, or Pagan) and who may be able to participate in my study.

Design of the Study
As part of this project, I plan to interview 14-20 students from a variety of religious backgrounds and traditions, and to explore the causes, constructions, and consequences of the spiritual questions in their lives. The study will explore the following questions:

- What is the nature of spiritual questions that students construct during their undergraduate college experience?
- Specifically, what are common and unique spiritual questions that emerge during these formative years?
- What are the sources and motivating forces that trigger the materialization of these questions?
- What characteristics are present and what factors influence the spiritual questioning process?
- How do such spiritual questions relate to the various aspects and arenas of students’ lives?
- How does the construction of these spiritual questions align with a range of potential identifiers, such as college level, gender, race/ethnicity, and most significantly, religious background or tradition?

Procedure
When participants are identified, and if they agree to take part, their involvement will consist of two recorded hour-long interviews, which will take place in a comfortable setting on campus. The second interview will take place some weeks after the first, and will include an opportunity for them to review comments and contributions they made during their first interview. All project-related data and information will be safeguarded, and all personal identities will be kept strictly confidential. Participation is voluntary and participants may limit or end their participation at any time.

Benefits of Participation
Exploring the nature of spiritual questions in college students’ lives will help to establish a greater understanding for educators and students alike. Especially for those who work professionally with college students and pay close attention to their holistic development, the spiritual dimension of their lives has yet to be fully explored. Furthermore, a small honorarium of $25 will be paid to each participant at the conclusion of the study, as an expression of appreciation for the time invested in this project.

Participation Selection
I hope you will be able and willing to assist me in the selection of participants for my study. If you know of any students who fit one of the religious or non-faith traditions noted above, and you have a sense that they might have a propensity to speak about such personal matters as part of this project, it is likely that they would be an ideal candidate for participation. Please indicate to me, via email or telephone, their contact information, and I will follow up with each individually to confirm their participation.

If you have any questions about this study or for further information, please contact me at (phone number) or (email address). Dr. Carney Strange serves as my dissertation advisor, and can be reached at (phone number) or (email address) for further information, as well. Many thanks for your consideration! I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,

Michael Brown, Doctoral Student, Higher Education Administration, BSU
APPENDIX D. SELECTION QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENT CANDIDATES

Student Characteristics

Gender
__ Male
__ Female
__ Other

Class Standing
__ First-Year
__ Sophomore
__ Junior
__ Senior +
__ Graduate Student
__ Alumni

Race/Ethnicity
How would you identify yourself in terms of your race or ethnicity? _____________________________

Tradition
__ Agnostic
__ Atheist
__ Buddhism
__ Catholicism
__ Daoism
__ Evangelical Christianity
__ Hinduism
__ Islam
__ Judaism
__ Paganism
__ Taoism
__ Other _____________________________

Practices
How long have you identified as a member of this tradition? _________

Are any members of your immediate family of this tradition? YES NO

Thank you for participating in this brief questionnaire.
Please return to: Michael Brown ◊ campus address ◊ city and state
Or to (email address)
APPENDIX E. INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Dear Student,

I am currently a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program here at Brownstone State University. In order to fulfill the requirements of my degree program, I am conducting an original research study to learn about the process that undergraduate students undertake when constructing spiritual questions. I hope you can assist me with my research by participating in my study.

Purpose of the Study
Exploring the nature of spiritual questions in college students’ lives will help to establish a greater understanding for educators and students alike. Especially for those who work professionally with college students and pay close attention to their holistic development, the spiritual dimension of their lives has yet to be fully explored.

Design of the Study
As part of this project, I plan to interview 14-20 students from a variety of religious backgrounds and traditions, and to explore the causes, constructions, and consequences of the spiritual questions in their lives.

Procedure
As a participant in this study, your involvement will consist of two recorded hour-long interviews, which will take place in a comfortable setting on campus that you and I will agree upon. The second interview will take place some weeks after the first, and will include an opportunity for you to review comments and contributions you made during the first interview. All project-related data and information will be safeguarded, and your personal identity will be kept strictly confidential. Interview responses might be included in the study’s manuscript, but specific connections between your responses and your personal identity will not be made.

Risks and Benefits of Participation
Your participation is voluntary, and there are no projected risks involved with participating in this study. As a participant, you have the right to limit or end your participation at any time. Furthermore, a small honorarium of $25 will be paid to you at the conclusion of the study, as an expression of appreciation for the time you invested in this project.

Participation Selection
The student eligibility questionnaire that you completed confirmed that you have met all the requirements of participation in this study. As well, you must be 18 years old to participate in this research project.

If you have any questions about this study or for further information, please contact me at (phone number) or (email address). Dr. Carney Strange serves as my dissertation advisor, and can be reached at (phone number) or (email address) for further information, as well. A representative from the Office of Research Compliance is also available at (phone number) or (email address) if you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant.

Thank you for your participation,

Michael Brown, Doctoral Student, Higher Education Administration, BSU

By signing this consent form, I agree to participate in this study having read, understood, and agreed to the above terms.

_________________________________________________________________________ ____________________
Participant’s Signature        Date

I agree to conduct and report this research according to the terms stated above.

_________________________________________________________________________ _____________________
Investigator’s Signature        Date
APPENDIX F. OPENING INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Greeting and Introduction
1. Thank you for your willingness to participate
2. Review of purpose and design of study:
3. Review of procedures of study:
4. Review of risks and benefits of study:
5. Review of informed consent form
6. Are there any questions? Any need for clarification?
7. Prepare recorder and begin.

Themes and Questions
1. Current self-characterization
   - Gender
   - Year in school
   - Race or Ethnicity
   - Faith, religious, spiritual, or other tradition
   - Experiences, practices and longevity with this tradition
     - What does it mean for you to be (specific tradition)?
     - When did you choose to affiliate with (specific tradition)? What did that process entail?
     - How long have you considered yourself a (specific tradition)?
     - What are some significant or meaningful experiences that you have had as a (specific tradition)?
     - Are there any practices or activities that you engage in as a (specific tradition)?
   - Family background and its connection to this tradition
     - Do any members of your family consider themselves (specific tradition)?
     - From your perspective, what does it mean for each of them to be (specific tradition)?

2. Perspective on matters of religion, spirituality, and faith?
   - How do you define religion? Spirituality? Faith?
   - What does it mean to be a religious person? A spiritual person?
   - Do you consider yourself spiritual? Religious? Neither? Or both?

3. Spiritual questions
   - What is most important to you?
   - What kinds of thoughts preoccupy you?
   - What do you daydream about?
   - What is the deepest desire for your life?
   - What do you want to be said about you at the end of your life?
   - What are the big questions that you think about on a regular basis?
   - Based on your previous description of religion, what are the religious questions that you think about?
   - Based on your previous description of spirituality, what are the spiritual questions that you think about?
   - What are examples of questions that tend to bring about an emotional response for you? What specifically do you feel when you ponder these questions?
- What are examples of questions that tend to make you think hard and long (that make your brain hurt)? What specifically goes on in your mind when you ponder these questions?
- Who are specific people in your life that encourage or prompt you to think about some of these questions?
- What are the specific events in your life that prompt you to think about some of these questions?
- What are the times of the year that prompt you to think about some of these questions?
- What are memories from your past that prompt you to think about some of these questions?
- What are sensory inputs (smell, touch, hear, taste, or see) that prompt you to think about some of these questions?
- How often do you think about big questions?
- When are you most likely to think about such questions?
- Are there questions that you push away when they come into your mind?

4. College life experiences, influences, and relationships in connection to spiritual questions
   - What role do these questions play in your life here at college?
   - What role do these questions play in your relationships?
   - What role do these questions play in your choice of activities?
   - What role do these questions play in your choice of major and career aspirations?
   - What role do these questions play in the difficult decisions you make in life?
   - Of all the questions we have talked about today, is there one or two that stand out as more important to you than the rest?

5. Summary questions
   - Is there anything you think I should have asked but failed to do so?
   - Are there any additional comments that you would like to share with me that you feel are relevant to our conversation?
   - Are you willing to meet with me once again to talk further about these matters?
   - Are there events, activities, or places that I should visit, or people I should meet, on or near campus, that might give me a fuller picture of how the spiritual questions in your life have emerged?

Closing and Appreciation
1. Thank you for sharing your perspective with me. I do not take for granted the investment of time you made to meet with me today. In the coming weeks, I will send a transcript of this interview with a few of my thoughts and findings on what you shared with me, and you will be invited to review your responses and offer additional comments as you see fit.
2. Thank you again for meeting with me today.
APPENDIX G. EXTENDED HUMAN INSTRUMENT NARRATIVE

Personal Interest

It must be noted that the topic of spirituality in general and the spiritual dimensions of college students in particular are of great personal interest to me. I am certain this revelation is of no surprise to this committee, as it is well-known within this campus community that my personal and professional aspirations are shaped by these priorities. Furthermore, there is no question that my personal passion for the spiritual development of university students as well as my commitment to encourage the creation of spiritually-friendly programs and environments within higher education has contributed to this research equation.

Some might even presume that the strength of my spiritual orientation will cause me to be more confirmation-oriented rather than discovery-oriented in my pursuit of understanding. Over these past few years, I have become persuaded that the goal of qualitative research is to give a clear voice to the emic (insider) perspective, and I possess a certain sophisticated self-awareness of my inclinations to be leading and confirmatory in my interview style.

Undoubtedly, I brought my own perspectives, experiences, and insights to the research process; however, I did not see this as problematic. The formational components of my family background, formational undergraduate college experience, lengthy campus ministry career, personal spiritual encounters, and both seminary and higher education graduate-level educational experiences that were injected into the research equation better served to motivate me in striving for excellence as a research scholar. Not only so, my spiritual orientation, educational background, and professional experiences were of value in persevering as a doctoral candidate and now in preparing for future research initiatives. It would not be an overstatement to note that the trajectory of my entire life has been informed by such matters. A strong emphasis on religiousness and spirituality has been an intricate part of my life since childhood. However, it was not until my first year of college that an investment in my own spiritual journey became a personal priority. Despite a strongly dualistic and restrictive religious upbringing, I arrived at Ohio University as a seeker-skeptic of sorts, uncertain of what I believed about ultimate questions, and open to exploration. Throughout my undergraduate years, I was on the very spiritual quest that I now study and read about in the higher education literature.

Interestingly, though, unlike many of my spiritually-oriented and religious peers, I did not attend a parochial school as a child or teenager. Furthermore, I attended a public institution as an undergraduate student, and even my master’s-level seminary degree was earned while working professionally at a large public institution. My terminal degree will not be in ministry (D.Min), but will be a Doctor of Philosophy degree from a state institution. While possessing personal convictions concerning spiritual and religious matters that have profoundly and positively shaped my family, marriage, and personal life, my forty-plus years have not been lived in a religious bubble or in a huddle with likeminded individuals. I am drawn to diversity, curious about differences, inspired by interfaith dialogue, and personally committed to matters of social justice, equality, and tolerance.
Educational Background

Previous to entering the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Brownstone State University, I achieved a bachelor’s degree in journalism from Ohio University and a comprehensive sixty-credit-hour Master of Ministry degree from Moody Theological Seminary (MTS). Moreover, I have participated in numerous theological and ministry conferences and educational workshops, retreats, and conferences over the past twenty years. As a first-generation college student, I am an avid reader and highly-motivated life-long learner who is insatiably curious about the world around me.

Of particular interest might be how my seminary degree from a very conservative Bible institute has shaped my etic constructions throughout this research project. During my tenure at MTS, I was a blessing to some faculty and administrators, while simultaneously a thorn in the side to others. I did not resemble the typical seminary graduate student at MTS. I was known throughout the graduate program as the feisty young campus minister who enjoyed challenging the status quo, asking the questions that others were too afraid to ask, and exposing shortcomings and contradictions in the curriculum and institutional policies. The faculty and administrators who welcomed provocative dialogue about tough theological, cultural, societal, and ministry philosophy issues and were willing to receive honest feedback about institutional inconsistencies enjoyed having me on campus for three to four weeks each year from 2001-2008, while others, who were threatened by new ideas and my proposals for change, were glad to see me graduate and move on. I mention this significant season of my educational journey to emphasize that I am an independent and complex thinker, who can navigate his way through the jagged terrain of both the secular and sectarian arenas with the important blend of relational intelligence, humility, and critique.

Now finding myself in the final stretch of this doctoral program, I must acknowledge that I am not an expert researcher. In fact, I am quite the novice. My limited experience with academic research occurred within the coursework phase for both of my master’s and doctoral degrees, the latter of which included a course sequence in quantitative, qualitative, and applied research. Additionally, I have assisted Dr. Strange as a research assistant in a couple of small research initiatives yet to be published. I am a young and emergent researcher who just designed and implemented my first substantive study. However, in the doctoral-level qualitative research course I took in the fall of 2009, my cohort was exposed to constructivist inquiry and its corresponding philosophical underpinnings, assumptions, and methodology, and were required to conduct a case study grounded in the naturalistic and emergent tradition.

Furthermore, within this doctoral program, I had the unique privilege of assisting Dr. Strange in further conceptualizing and designing the SEARCH residential theme community. Commenced in August 2011, the SEARCH community brings together students of all majors, backgrounds, and beliefs in investigating the big questions of life. Exploring personal and contemporary themes through engagement with spiritual questions and traditions, the SEARCH experience includes participation in related courses, extracurricular activities, and mentoring and peer relationships to promote students’ understanding of spiritual questions in their own lives, while appreciating the experiences and perspectives of others. The goal of SEARCH is spiritual literacy: what do spiritual questions sound like and how do people of different traditions answer them? The developmental and implementation role I presently serve in this SEARCH endeavor, in designing a learning community at a public institution that strengthens spiritual literacy, stimulates spiritual dialogue, and sharpens students’ spiritual questions, has unquestionably equipped me for this research project.
Finally, to complement my doctoral education, I conducted a practicum with the Chapman Learning Community that featured the Big Questions Café, a program that I designed, developed, implemented, and hosted that brought undergraduate students together monthly to an evening meal during which we interacted about the big questions in life. The program was executed over the course of an entire year with three intentions in mind: 1) to discover what kinds of questions and issues these students are pondering and reflecting upon in their daily lives; 2) to seek to understand and appreciate their responses to these questions, in an attempt to identify potential patterns and trends; and 3) to facilitate a safe and stimulating community-building where students can engage with one another in meaning-making interaction. It was a very successful activity, and will be featured again as one of thirty-six extracurricular programs that have been designed for SEARCH. This program culminated with a presentation entitled, “Big Questions Café: Engaging, Eating, Enacting” at the annual convention of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. Among my many other responsibilities within the Chapman Learning Community, I was also charged to discover the interests, ideologies, and big questions of first-year Chapman students. I accomplished this by developing a spirituality questionnaire. Reflecting a ninety-eight percent response rate, I submitted a report to the director with results, analysis, and recommendations.

Throughout my educational career, I have not only personally engaged in my own spiritual growth, but have also witnessed undergraduate students develop spiritually along the continuum of spiritual growth, in coordination with a breadth of reading and writing within the spiritual dimensions of student development, in regards to both time-tested theories and best practices. I have a broad and deep educational background in these matters as well as an emerging platform to share such knowledge and expertise with colleagues and educators.

Professional Experiences

For the past 21 years, I have found myself working professionally within the university setting, in an exciting and emerging functional area within student affairs: campus ministry. What began as a two-year internship has morphed into more than 20 years of mentoring college students in the spiritual, relational, emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions of their lives. After four years at the University of Kansas in a developmental apprentice mentoring and leadership program, I was invited to assume the position of Director and Advisor of Cru at BSU. The very same year that Dr. Samuel Riverstone became the ninth president of BSU, I took the reins of one of the largest student organizations on campus. Upon my arrival at BSU seventeen years ago, I was unaware of Dr. Riverstone’s and my shared passions for “intellectual and spiritual growth,” as well as our mutual commitment to the holistic development of students into socially conscious, spiritually inquisitive, and value-driven citizens. The timing of the job transfer was ideal.

As a campus ministry professional at BSU from 1995 to 2008, I worked in close and collaborative relationships with a variety of student affairs professionals, while simultaneously transforming the campus ministry of Cru from an awkward and backward Christian club into one of the markedly engaged and cutting-edge campus ministries in the country. We accomplished the unthinkable by developing a true spirit of camaraderie and partnership with many professionals within our campus culture, as well as crafting a safe place of personal exploration into the deeper meaning of life for spiritually curious and religiously restless college students. As a service-spiritual-social organization, Cru is primarily dedicated to assisting students in their own personal and self-directed journey of encountering the ultimate by putting faith principles into practice through engaging in service projects and partnerships, creating non-religious places of conversation for the spiritually inquisitive student, and promoting satisfying, healthy,
and interactive social networks. The organization’s leadership is committed to being the one Christian organization on campus designed with seekers in mind: to be a place where they are valued, listened to, and understood. We aspire to create safe, sane, and stimulating environments where students can ask honest questions in pursuit of satisfying answers without the confusion of religious jargon or the pressure of religious coercion. We desire to speak their language, connect with them on their turf, and assist them in taking the next step in their spiritual journeys.

However, after twelve years of leading a large staff team of campus ministry professionals, creating innovative environments for the spiritual growth of students, lecturing across campus in a variety of venues, mentoring literally thousands of students in small groups and individual settings, and creating and testing new campus ministry models and paradigms, I chose to more formally associate myself with the field of higher education and student affairs. As a doctoral student, it has been my hope to advance in the world of higher education, with the intent of complementing my campus ministry career with more academic teaching and writing, publishing, lecturing, and research.

Furthermore, I have been serving as the chair of the BSU Campus MultiFaith Alliance (CMA) since 2010, a position I hope to remain in for the next several years. This organization of faith professionals and affiliates from across the campus community meets monthly to support collaboration on spiritual and faith initiatives. Under the auspices of the Office of the Dean of Students, this organization’s mission is to form communities of faith and relationships, explore religious beliefs of various disciplines, deal with ethical issues, educate and work for justice, promote personal development, and develop faith-filled leaders.

In summary, since I have been actively engaged for the past four decades across a wide and diverse spectrum of personal, educational, and professional arenas, the knowledge constructed in this research project was personally meaningful, but also the research venture was approached with a mature thoughtfulness and well-developed skill set that contributed to the production of a worthy and excellent final product. My personal passions, educational preparation, and professional history have established a solid foundation for me that have informed this study in a meaningful and scholarly way, with theoretical and practical sensitivity.
APPENDIX H. COMPREHENSIVE INVENTORY OF SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS

Origins: *(Universal Causes and Earthly Beginnings)*

- Where did the world come from?
- Where did the universe come from?
- Where does all the stuff come from?
- Why are humans alive?
- Why was I created?
- Why do people exist?
- What was the first cause that caused existence?
- Did the world come about by creationism or evolution?
- Where did the world come from?
- What gave birth to the Power that made the world?
- Where did the thing that gave birth to the Power that made the world come from?
- Who made all of this? How did it come into being?
- Where is the Power that created the world? Why don’t I see that?
- Why is the world the way it is?
- Why is there a formation to everything in the world?
- Why is the world so perfect?
- If the world has no beginning, will it also have no ending?
- With lots of souls waiting, why did this one pick me?
- When was the start of the Earth?
- Did the universe have a beginning?
- Is there a beginning and an end?
- *How* was the universe created? *Why* was the universe created?
- What are stars? Why are they here?
- How does the human body work?
- What is this energy in the universe? How does it start? How do you really work with it? How do you make it work for you?
- Why is the Earth round?

Divinity and Deity: *(God, Satan, and Extra-Terrestrial Life)*

- Does God exist?
- What does God want from us?
- Is there a God?
- What is true of the great prime creator of the universe?
- If there isn’t a God, what is there?
- Is God really a man? Why does God have to be a man? Is God a woman? Is God either? Why does God have to be a gender?
- What does God look like? Is it just a light behind some clouds or a floating orb or just a giant face? Is he even perceivable to the human eye even after we’ve died? Is it something even now that we can look upon?
What is the influence of Satan in our everyday lives? To what extent does Satan operate in our lives? How does the devil come in and keep us off track?

Is it Satan, mental disorders, sicknesses, or demons that inspired people to kill and murder?

If you think that God is kind and good, he must be fair, right?

What is true of my relationship with God?

If I diligently seek God, will he reward me?

What is God going to do next in my life?

Is God ticked off at me because of something I said to somebody or something I did to somebody?

Did I do something to tick God off for him not to put this money in my bank account or for me not to have this money in my account?

Where is God taking me? Where does he want me to be?

Where is God taking me next?

What separates God’s desires from my desires?

What’s the line between what I want and what God wants for me?

Am I doing what God wants me to do?

Is God going to do what I want him to do for me?

Does God laugh at me? Does he have a sense of humor?

Why doesn’t God make it more clear what would be best for us?

Why is God so subtle? If there are things you want us to do, why aren’t the signs more clear to us? Why not arrows? Why not big banners in the sky?

Is God testing me?

How did God make everybody look so different?

How did God pick who looks like who?

Why doesn’t God talk back to me?

Thinking about everything God did, why did he do it?

In tough situations: is God testing me to see how far I’ll go with it?

When God puts you through some situation, was it to make you stronger for something that’s about to happen?

When temptation occurs, is that a test or is it just the devil tempting me?

Is the god I pray to there or not?

What is God like?

What does God look like?

Where does the word God come from?

Did God appear?

What made the first person think about God?

Who was the first person to talk about God?

Because no one has ever seen God, why do people say that God created us?

What does God want me to strive for?

How does God define success?

What does God have to say about this or that?

What is God’s role in micro versus macro evolution?

What’s God’s view on suicide?
- How great is God?
- Would a good God and all-knowing, perfect creator really say that?
- What if who we thought was God was really the devil?
- I believe that other planets harvest life. What’s out there? What is that life? What do they think? What kinds of questions do they ask? Do they ask questions? Do they just simply exist?
- If there is a God, why are all these bad things happening?
- If there is a God, does he make things happen or allow things to happen?
- How can God be okay with the evil that people do and just watch it happen?
- How can God let amazing people in the world get hurt?
- Is there a God?
- Why do people believe in God? Why does that belief make people comfortable?
- What do you think God’s purpose is?
- Is there extra-terrestrial life?
- Is there someone else out there in the universe?
- Where is God? Where is that Cosmos? Is it around the Earth? Is it within the Earth?
- Why does the God make me cry?

**The Mysterious: (Reality, Realms, and Supernatural Phenomena)**

- What is reality?
- Is the whole universe in your mind?
- Why are we bound to Earth? Why can’t we fly?
- Why do we feel hot and not cold when we touch fire?
- What is enjoyment? Why do we enjoy? What do we mean by enjoy? Why is the term enjoy even there? Why can’t there be something different than enjoy?
- What is talking?
- What the fuck?
- What is existence?
- What is fun?
- What is love?
- What is work?
- What is time?
- What is good?
- What is infinity?
- When is now and then? When is right now? What is a moment?
- What is here? When is now?
- How do personal, spiritual, supernatural occurrences happen? Why do personal, spiritual, supernatural occurrences happen?
- How does this realm relate to the other realm? Do these two realms sometimes cross?
- Can sensitive people pick up subtle frequencies from spiritual realms?
- What does my mind create and how does that relate to reality?
- What is the relationship between the common way of thinking and different/unconventional ways or possibilities?
Human Experience: (Identity, Self-Awareness, Choices, Feelings, Purpose, Calling, Direction, Community, Relationships, Pain and Suffering, Social Justice, Morality, and Virtue)

- Who am I?
- What kind of person do I want to be?
- What way should I go?
- Why am I the way I am? How did I become the person I am today? Was it doom or destiny? Is it a program in my mind? Or is it my genes?
- What should I be focusing on in my life?
- What is destiny and how does that relate to my choices?
- How much attention should I pay to the different elements of myself?
- What kind of person should I be in order to not fail one more time?
- When I succeed in doing something, why did I succeed?
- How and why do I fail?
- Should I go in a way that my society and community have chosen for me or should I go my own way?
- Should I intervene when I observe someone doing something wrong?
- Generally, what is the right thing to do?
- Specifically, what is the right thing to do?
- Can doing the wrong thing be good for people?
- Is the Communist Party justified?
- Should we overthrow the Chinese government?
- Should we help those in need, even if they are not Christian?
- What is good?
- Who am I really?
- Who is Cheyenne?
- What is my true I am?
- Who am I becoming?
- Who do I want to become?
- What rings true in my own heart in my pursuit of finding truth?
- Why am I doing what I am doing?
- What do I want to do?
- How do I need to accomplish this or that? What steps do I need to take?
- Where am I going to be when I’m older? What am I going to be doing?
- Why did I make the choices I made?
- How is the plan all connected and how is it coming about?
- What is the reason that I’m here right now?
- How can I push myself?
- How can I keep growing as a person?
- Why do the things that happen to me happen?
- What am I going to do with my life? Where am I going to be? Who am I going to be with?
- What am I going to be doing in the future?
- Why am I different? Why can I feel spirits?
o Why can I feel the good feelings and bad stuff in the lives of people around me?
o Why am I here in a privileged place while others are in an impoverished place? Why am I here? And why are they there?
o How far should I take my gifts in helping other people and how personal do I make it?
o With the changing of the seasons, what about my life do I want to be different in this next season?
o Am I doing the right thing?
o Is what I’m doing going to help me grow as a person? Is this good for me or not?
o What is going to happen after college?
o In regards to my spiritual gifts, why am I feeling and seeing these things when others aren’t?
o In using my spiritual gifts, what can I do for others? Where is this going to take me?
  How personal should I get? And should I tell people about it? How should I handle sensitive situations in regards to boundaries?
o What do I want?
o How can anything that we do matter?
o Why am I interacting with these people?
o Why am I surrounded by these people? What’s the purpose of that?
o Why did I let this person into my life? How is that affecting me? What lesson did I learn? What did I gain from this relationship?
o Why do people do the things that they do?
o Why haven’t I met my father? Why doesn’t he want to be in my life?
o How can one person believe that hating someone else of a different faith could be good?
o How can someone do something bad or treat someone a certain way?
o What are all the people around me doing and what do they want? What do they believe? What are they going through? Why are they going through that?
o Why do some people choose to live in more simple and primitive places as opposed to other places?
o What are the life plans of people around me?
o What do I think about getting married someday?
o Who do I want to surround myself with?
o Why am I feeling a certain way?
o Are the emotions I am feeling my own or am I just picking up on other people’s emotions?
o What is the purpose here?
o Is there something I need to learn that’s causing me to be where I’m at?
o What is the purpose of this confusion?
o Do I really need to be worrying about what’s going on right now?
o How can I do this, but yet not believe as I should believe? (2: 81-82); How is it that everyone knows what they want to do, but yet I don’t know what I am going to do?
o What are the thoughts that I’m having? Which ones are most important? Which ones are relevant? Which ones are not? Why am I having these thoughts?
o Am I making the right decisions in life? Am I making the right choices?
o Where do I draw the line between thinking and over-thinking?
o Am I about to make the right decision?
o What am I called to do?
o Am I going to be the president of this university? Am I going to be the pastor of a church? Am I called to do ministry? Should I go to seminary school? Am I called to graduate school?
o What is going to happen in my life?
o What’s going to happen in other people’s lives?
o Is God going to take my mother soon?
o Will my mother, girlfriend, sister, whole family, and friends get saved?
o Is my girlfriend the right person for me?
o Was it the right decision to jump back into a relationship after I got out of one?
o How is the world going to have an impact on my life in general?
o Am I going to get to live the life that I want to live?
o Am I going to be able to make enough money? Am I going to be able to be sustained? Am I going to be able to do everything that I need to do?
o What is the meaning of life?
o What is the good life?
o What do I want to achieve?
o How do I maintain balance?
o How do I live with integrity?
o How should I treat others?
o How did those who die live their lives? As a result, how should I live my life?
o What should I be doing?
o What should I do differently next time?
o Have I gone through tough times that made me stronger?
o Who else is with me? Is it God? Is it my friends?
o Where do I want to be? Who do I want to be around? Who are the people I want to surround myself with? What is the environment I want to be in? Who are my friends?
o How do I feel? Why do I feel that way? What’s making me feel this way?
o How does doing this or that make me feel?
o What do I need to do to feel good?
o How do people hate? How do people hate without understanding?
o How can people claim to be Christian if they’re going to hate other people? How should I react to the hate I see?
o Even though Osama Bin Laden did all these terrible things in life, he’s gone now. Why continue the hate?
o Why do people kill other people? What were they thinking? How are they going to suffer in a spiritual sense for their choices? Does doing religious things make up for their moral decisions?
o When considering murders, homicides, and suicides: how can someone do this? What possesses someone to do this?
o Why? What has been the reason for all of it?
o Why do terrible things happen in our lives?
o What’s the reason behind the bad things that happen to people?
o With all these terrible things happening, is it the hand of God coming down and never doing something, or is it human action deviating from what he would want for us?
o Why did this happen? What was the point for this? Was it to push me somewhere? What was the reason?
o Why am I me? Why am I like this? Why do I look the way I do?
o Why do I feel certain ways?

o What big impact, if any, am I going to make on the world?
o Where am I going to be in the future? What’s next?
o Everybody has a purpose in life: how do I figure out what is the one purpose for me?
o Why do people look the way they look?
o What if I didn’t come to BSU? Why did I make that decision? What if I would have done something different instead?

o Why have I been through the things I have been through?
o If I have to wait, why do I have to wait?

o When something doesn’t work out, is it because it wasn’t supposed to happen? Or was it because you didn’t pray enough? Or you weren’t ready for it yet?
o So why did that bad stuff have to happen?
o Why do bad things happen to good people?
o Why does stuff happen to these inner-city kids? Did they deserve it or is it to make them stronger? Is this a test?

o Am I doing everything right?
o How do I know when something is the wrong choice, and then how do I get back on the right track?

o Can you have sexual intercourse with the one person you want to be with for the rest of your life? Or does it have to be your husband? Or does it really matter? Why would I keep something from my mom and grandma if it’s not bad?

o Why do you meet the people you meet?

o If I never would have met you guys, how would my life be different? How did I ever live before without my college friends?

o Can I date someone out of my race or not?

o If people weren’t supposed to be together, why did they get married?

o If life is here to enjoy, then why is there pain?

o Why does there need to be a scarcity of things in the world?

o Why are we sitting here? Why are we talking?

o How do I reach that place where I reach the answers to my questions?

o If the world is to enjoy, why are there duties that have to be done?

o If the duties weren’t there, how could we enjoy anything?

o How do other people think about these questions that I think about?

o Why do certain things happen?

o Does my purpose coincide with my plan?

o Are my dreams and goals going to coincide with God’s plan for me?
Are the big plans and goals and the things I frame my life around – and everything I have built in my head about my future – is this what is really going to happen, and is it really what God’s plan is?

Am I accepted unconditionally? Am I loved unconditionally?

Am I viewed as beautiful by God?

If I am highly favored in the Lord, why would I allow anyone to treat me poorly or why would I allow myself to feel poorly about myself?

If God loves me regardless of however messed up I look or however messed up I act, why should I feel bad about myself?

If I do this (fill in the blank), what are the repercussions of this (fill in the blank)?

Humans are destroying the Earth, so was our purpose just to destroy this Earth and then die?

In light of all the devastation we have brought upon this Earth, why were humans created?

Why are we here?

What is humanity’s purpose at this point in history?

At this point in time, what is our true purpose? What are we supposed to be doing with our time?

If I’m supposed to be here for a purpose, how do I know if I’ve done it yet?

Can something that seems supposedly good actually be bad for me?

Why do we have emotional hurt and pain in the world? What is the point of us hurting each other? What are people’s motives in hurting other people?

Are hurt and pain present so that we can learn from them?

Why do atrocities like genocides happen?

What happens when your brain says you’re a girl but your genitalia say you’re a boy? Is homosexuality an abomination or a man-made creation?

Would I support a gay friend by standing with them at their civil union ceremony?

What kind of person am I going to be?

What kind of person do I want to be?

Why am I myself? Why do I have the thoughts I do?

Why is it you living in the world? Why me living?

Why are we living in this world? Why are we living?

Why was I born in China?

What are people’s values?

What are my values?

How should I communicate with others?

Why is the world so unfair to me?

Why do bad things happen to me?

Why can’t I do the things I want to do?

Why am I always caught when I try to do something wrong?

What will I do if I’m in a really big disaster?

Am I doing what God wants me to? Could I be doing better?

Do I make my parents proud?
Do I want what other people want for me? Or do I want what God wants? Or is it the same thing?

What is the future going to look like?

What is the parallel between what the world calls success and what God calls success? Where do I fall on that spectrum?

What is the parallel between material success and success with permanence?

Am I failure in the world’s standards? Do I define myself as a good student? Because I’m not on the Dean’s List, does the world think less of me?

Do I measure up to other Christians? What’s wrong with me? Why am I not getting it?

Where should I go to church?

What does God want for my life? Does he want me to go to a church plant? Or do I need to kind of just be fed, and just kind of be rejuvenated?

When will I have children? Are we ready to raise godly children? Am I a picture of what a godly mother is? Are there things like selfishness that I need to get out of my system? Do I need to give that over to God? Are there things God wants me to do before I have children?

How am I going to support raise to go on my year and a half mission trip? Where am I going to live there? Will I make friends when I’m there? How will the language barrier work? Am I going to get sick with malaria?

Why was God putting our church through this? Why was this happening? Why wasn’t he meeting us there? Why does it feel like we’re being punished?

Since God doesn’t make mistakes, what does that mean about my sister? What do I learn from her? If she’s not a mistake, then what purpose does she have here?

What does community look like? How do I find it? What do I do to maintain it?

What would my definition of morality be?

What right does man have over life? Where does euthanasia fall in? Do I have the right to end my own life?

Do I take part in technology that has come from stem cell research? Where do we draw the line? How many degrees of separation do we have to get before it’s okay to take part in technology that’s been advanced from things that are morally questionable?

As I think about having children, what do I believe about fertility drugs? How does that work out?

Is war justified? What’s the line between defending yourself and pacifism? Should we let people come in and rape our women, kill our children, and steal our land? Do we allow that or do we have to be proactive and nip it in the bud before it becomes an issue?

What kind of sex education do we give our children?

Who am I?

Why are we here?

What does that dash on my tombstone represent? What do I want to be known for? What legacy do I want to leave?

What am I doing?

What is my main desire in life?

Where should I work?
- Is who you are what you do? Is who you are what you think when you’re not doing anything?
- What sort of funny thing should I do with my life right now?
- How should I expose something that needs to change?
- How can I engage people? How can I make doing good things for the world seem cool?
- What should I do? We have time, so what should we do with it?
- How can I love people and help people?
- Why aren’t people helping?
- Are you serious? Why, human race? Why can’t we figure this out? Is this a distribution problem? Is this an apathy problem? Is this a faith problem? Is this a stupidity problem? Is this a lack of understanding of what development really is? What is the issue? Why can’t we figure this out? Why don’t we fix it? Does no one have that wrench? How can we fix things?
- How can we make things better? What are helpful systems we can create?
- Who isn’t helping? What are the systems currently in place that are not allowing people to help? When someone does help, when do they help? Then how do they help? How do they feel the most fulfilled? And what have I attributed to this?
- How can education be useful and fruitful to build up community, family, and friends?
- How can I make people think the way that I want them to think? How can I influence them to live a more positive and influential life? How do I engage? How do I market? How do I advertise? How do I connect?
- What video should I make and how could I get everyone to watch that and make them to question the way that I question, or make them think for a moment, how I think about the scary and large world?
- Am I liked? Am I loved? Am I cared about?
- Will anyone listen?
- Do I belong?
- Who should I go talk to?
- Is this really family? Is this what family is all about? Is this what I’m supposed to be thankful for?
- Who am I going to hang out with? Who are going to be my dudes? Who are going to be my friends?
- When I go out into the world, am I going to be asking these questions with similar or different people? Will I be going out to faith communities and non-faith communities and scientific communities and academic communities and asking these similar questions? Am I comfortable enough with these questions that I’m going to ask them to every single person that I come by?
- Does everyone want people to think the way that they do? Why do so many people come to the bars and what are they looking for?
- How do I do it?
- How do I do goodness?
- How do I do faithfulness?
- How do I do love?
○ If I do have sex before marriage, will I learn more about life than if I had sex after marriage?
○ Can I just have sex before marriage and have some sort of redemption, so that I think that I learn and trick myself?
○ Am I allowed to get drunk?
○ How can people be the way they are?
○ Why did this situation happen to my sister? Why does my sister have to deal with this when she’s an amazing girl?
○ Why are all the genocides still happening and continuing to happen?
○ Why are unnecessary wars still happening? Why are there all the wars still happening, and why are they still continuing to happen after like 50 years?
○ Why are people put on this Earth with the disabilities that they have? Why did God do that?
○ Why do some kids with special needs have families that don’t accept them?
○ Why do people get divorced?
○ What are people thinking?
○ Why do people do the things they do?
○ Why can’t people coexist?
○ Why do people do the things they do to not coexist?
○ Why am I here?
○ How do I advance myself to the point where I’m not here anymore? What can I do to advance my ascension or enlightenment?
○ What am I doing here? Why am I in a body alive right now? Like what is going on?
○ What do I need to be working on?
○ What do I need to be doing?
○ How do I cleanse my body and soul to receive true information?
○ How do I live in a way that allows me to experience the connection between my mind, my body, and my spirit? How do I get that connection at a level where I can flourish and grow faster spiritually?
○ How do my intentions and my actions help or hurt healing?
○ How do I mix my spiritual and social lives? And then how do I balance those two things?
○ Why aren’t things perfect on Earth? Why are we separated from perfection on Earth?
○ How can we get this world to a place where things are perfect?
○ What is the final solution to achieving perfection? How can I better understand this final solution?
○ How does society function and nature function, and why is there such a huge discrepancy between these two things?
○ Why is our society set up in a way that is obviously not healthy for us?
○ Why do people put up with a lot of stuff that society just feeds us?
○ What role does the government play in the spiritual development of the population?
○ How do we empower people to start taking control of their spiritual development, war against their temptations, and discover the path to end suffering?
○ What kinds of things are people involved with that leads to suffering?
○ How am I developing and growing as a person?
What have I done in the past? And where am I going?
Where am I headed? What am I doing?
Is this right? Is this wrong?
During each day, where was I strong and what did I achieve?
What am I getting from all my travels? Have I taken the time to do more than seeing, but am I actually looking around?
Are people doing what they are supposed to be doing in their lives?
How do we eliminate the preconceived notions that people have in their heads about others?
How do I stay the way I am without forming any opinion about a person until I know the person better?
Why do people act and say the things they do? How did I react to them? If I had reacted differently, would their behavior change?
How are people thinking like this and why are they thinking like this? What is their mental processing? Why do they say stuff like this? And who told them these things? And why do they just agree with something without questioning it?
Why did I not show my true self to this person? Why did I not say exactly what I was thinking? Why did I change? Why did I manipulate myself before answering?
Why did I get mad? How could I have told this thing differently and still be able to convey that I did not like what they said or did not agree?
How do we make the world a fairer place? What can be done differently? What needs to be done differently? Who are the people involved?
How are people who live in difficult places able to live and survive?
What are we, as individuals, doing to the environment? Environmentally, can we do more?
How do I improve myself every day?
How do I become better?
How do I find this path in my life?
How do I make a contribution to this life in such a way that people remember me?
What are my values in this world?
What are my preferences in this world?
Is this something I want to do?
What will make me happier: friends or material wealth?
Do I want to be a person who follows my brain and accomplished everything or a person who follows the crowd?
What lessons did my parents want to give me?
What did my parents want me to achieve and accomplish?
How do I help other people?
Why am I alone? Where are my friends?
Do people love me?
Why was I feeling alone when people surrounded me and were asking me, “Hey, what’s up? How are you doing?”
Why is this happening to me? Why should I cry on this issue? Can I stop doing that? Is crying a part of the lesson? Is it something God wants to address in me? Is it something...
that he wants to address in me and wants me to understand through crying, through feeling that feeling of loneliness of people not helping me? Is this how to look at the situation from a different perspective as I am being surrounded by nobody and being helped by nobody?

- What should I do when people are not around me? How can I struggle with it?
- What is going to happen to my children, grandchildren, and entire country because of environmental problems?
- What is going to happen to the people in poorer countries when they suffer?
- Is this moral?
- How do I stay moral? How do I keep my morals and values from the Ukraine?
- How do I live correctly?
- Is this person moral?
- How do I let people understand that they are doing wrong?

**Truth and Belief: (Religion, Spirituality, and Sacred Texts)**

- What should I believe in? And what if I choose a belief that is wrong?
- Is this right? Is this truth? And how do you know?
- How do I fit my beliefs with what my parents believe?
- Do we really need other people to follow our religion?
- Is religion dangerous?
- Why should world religions spread out?
- Why is there a rivalry among religions?
- Do we really need institutions like churches, mosques, and synagogues to follow our faith?
- Is abortion right?
- What do people from other religions believe?
- What do I believe about the Catholic Church?
- What would Jesus do?
- Will God send good people, who never had the chance to hear the Good News, to hell?
- Do you have to be a Christian to go to heaven?
- How do the ceremonies in the Catholic Church relate to theology?
- Do you have to attend Mass every Sunday to go to heaven?
- Should I obey the church, even if they are making mistakes?
- Is the Catholic Church the right church for me?
- How do you trust what you see and hear?
- Why is there such a strong connection between different kinds of people who experience the same powerful spiritual experience?
- What would it be like if there was no religion?
- How has religion shaped the government?
- How has religion shaped the world?
- Are the different religions essentially the same?
- How can we fight and not understand each other when religions are essentially the same?
If there was no religion, would we be more open with each other and accepting? However, if we didn’t have the structure of religion, would it just be chaos?

If what happened in history between the Church and State never happened, where would we be now and how would we be affected?

Why is Buddhism different from Christianity where you have to repent for your sins and focus on getting better your whole life?

Does Jesus need to be our Savior?

Why has the feminine aspect of religion been shut down and ignored, particularly in Christianity? What has happened to humanity that caused the feminine aspect of religion to be put on the back burner? Why can’t the two different sides of God be reflected?

Why did Christianity choose to deal with the feminine side of God with the Virgin Mary?

Why can I see ghosts and spirits when others do not? And why are they choosing to be here right now? What do they want us to know? And what do they want me to do? Why would a spirit choose to come back to Earth and be shown? What are they doing and why are they here? What are they trying to accomplish?

What are methods of healing?

When I am sinning, I ask myself two questions: Am I going to hell for this? Could Jesus’ return come right now?

Is the stuff that I heard in that first sermon during my first year of college really true?

What if what I believe isn’t real?

Is believing in Christ just a coping mechanism?

Where does true faith come from?

What does the Bible say about faith?

How can you have faith in something that you don’t have a relationship with? And how can you have a relationship with someone that you don’t have faith in?

How is it that my relationship with God is different than your relationship with God, but yet we have the same spirit that is being fed into both of us?

If I have the same spirit as someone else, but yet I believe that God is calling me in another direction or telling me something that someone else can’t see as legit, why is it that, if we have the same spirit and go by the same rules, why can’t we see eye to eye on a situation, especially if the Word of God backs it up?

When Paul wrote the book of Romans, is there anything he could have been missing in this book?

Is there anything that any of the apostles or any of the people who wrote in the Bible... anything that these godly men could have missed?

Does the fact that man is not perfect when he was writing the Bible mean that he could have written some things down wrong? Or that he might not have added some things that he should have?

What is heaven going to be like?

Is it going to be one big hotel party?

What is it going to be like to see Christ in heaven? What’s it going to be like when I finally meet him? What am I going to say? Am I going to be tossing a football with him?

What’s it going to be like to just live in eternal salvation?
What’s it going to be like to go through the rapture?
What is my commitment to the religion?
Should I be more religious?
Should I follow my Jewish practices more?
Should I be more committed to my faith and religion?
Should I be more [religiously] conservative or should I stay where I am?
Should I mirror what other [Jewish] people are doing?
What is my commitment to the state of Israel?
Should Jews move to Israel? Should all Jews live in Israel?
Should you raise your kids Jewish?
If I raise my kids Jewish, is that enough?
Is homosexuality against the Bible?
How can people be extreme in any religion?
How can someone be so far one way and lose everything else, just because they think their religion is telling them to?
How accurate is the Bible? How valid is it? Depending on who wrote it, wouldn’t it be different?
Was the Bible written by a man?
If the Bible would have been written by a woman, would God have been portrayed as a female?
If you’re fully devout, should you do everything the Bible says, or can you pick and choose from the Bible?
Does it have to be a woman who ruins everything in the Garden of Eden? Why wouldn’t the first man make that mistake? Why was she made from him? Why wasn’t she made as her own being?
If there are so many other beliefs, is one better than the other?
Am I supposed to be going through all these religions and examining them, and then make my choice?
Am I supposed to look through every single religion, look at what makes them unique or different than other religions, and then pick one? Is there a wrong answer?
If you’ve never learned about the other world religions, how can you claim something when you don’t know anything else?
Why do I have to tell my priest my confessions? Why can’t I just tell God? If the relationship is between me and God, why does a priest have to get involved?
Why didn’t God save Jesus when he was on the cross?
Am I just praying to nobody?
When prayers aren’t answered: Was I the only one praying for them or did I not pray enough or long enough?
Can you sin too much? How do you know if you’re forgiven for those sins?
When is Christ coming back?
Why does religion try to save itself? Why do religions try to maintain their existence?
What is the difference between Christianity and Islam?
If God made both male and female in his image, why did he make Eve out of Adam?
Why did God make Adam a sexual counterpart instead of just a friend?
Why didn’t some books of the Bible make it into the Bible as we have it today? Was it because they were written from a different point of view? Was it because they were never found? Or was it because people were so close-minded?

Why is there a Pope? And what does he really do? If there is no longer a need for priests to sacrifice for us, why is there a Pope to be a religious medium between God and the people? Why do we still need him when it says in the Word that we can go to God?

Why do I pray?

When I am praying and in worship, who or what am I feeling? Is it God or the Holy Spirit? Am I feeling something positive from God or negative from the devil, and can I even tell the difference?

When I pray for something, is it because it is good and right and what I should have, or is it because of something I want?

Why am I not one of the people with beliefs?

What should we believe in?

Why do some people believe in God?

Why do different countries have different religions?

What makes people believe in religion?

What can belief in religion bring people?

Which religion is best?

Should I believe in religion?

How much influence do demons have over Christians? Can Christians be plagued by demons?

What if I encounter people who are being plagued by a demon? Will I hold that they’re being plagued by a demon, or will I just attribute it to physiological occurrences?

What can I do if I feel like I’m being attacked with lies or physical ailments?

What do the various doctrinal practices that I’ve been commanded to do really mean?

Is the story of creation literal or poetic?

Did Adam have a belly button? Did Adam walk around with dinosaurs?

Did Noah have dinosaurs on the ark?

Does God command tithing?

The Bible says, “Do not put any graven image on your body,” so should I get a tattoo? That was the Old Testament, so does that apply to me because I’m under the new law?

What does the Bible mean by not getting drunk? What does drunk mean? Is tipsy being bad? Is being light-headed being bad?

What is the line between predestination and free will?

What do I believe about baptism? Does baptism mean submersion into water or submersion in the Holy Spirit?

What does baptism really mean for the modern-day Christian?

What if I go to a country where baptism would label me as a martyr? Would I encourage my disciples to do that?

Did Jesus actually rise from the dead on a Sunday and was it actually three days later?

Is my brother, Mark, a believer? Is it once a Christian, always a Christian? Can we turn our back on God and somehow lose our salvation?
What would my life be as a woman who practices Islam? What would that look like? What kind of questions would I have? How does God view this religion? How does the rest of the world view this religion?

Is the Islam Allah my God?

Is Islam a violent religion or not? Is it only the strict Muslim people who are violent? How much have they really missed the mark?

What is the Islamic view of Jesus?

With other religions, what does it mean to have to worry about your eternity?

What does God feel about war? What’s the difference between what the Israelites did, which God said, “I’m for you. I’m commanding you: go to war,” and what we’re doing in the Middle East?

What does God feel about being homosexual and being a Christian?

Why would I even associate with something that’s not of God? Why would I even contemplate that, if it’s so far from God?

What do I hold to be true?

Where do I stand in my doctrine?

Hello God: What does this mean?

As an Agnostic, what do I do and where do I go to practice?

How do church people know that this is how you get to heaven?

If you don’t have that arch narrative, if you don’t have that religious system, and if you don’t have that syllabus, what are you going to do for that hour that you’re together in church?

Is communion Jesus’ body and blood?

Am I supposed to go to mass on Sundays or every day?

How should I pray? Where should I pray?

What do different religions believe and practice?

Why are there so many different religions and why do people believe in different things?

Who wrote the Torah? Who wrote the Bible?

Why do people pick and choose what they want to [follow] in the Bible and Torah?

Why do Christians follow Jesus differently than Jewish people?

Why are there so many differences between Christianity and Judaism?

Why do they follow the New Testament and we follow the Old Testament?

Why do we have services on Friday and they have services on Sunday?

Why do Christians live their lives to die, just to make sure they die in the right place, when they could live their lives to be the best they could be?

How do we separate religion from the entire world scenario? How do we separate religion from interactions and decisions in daily life? Is it even possible?

Who defines what practices make you a better religious person and what would those practices be?

If I pray five times each day and fast, is that enough for God to feel that I am a good Muslim or is there something beyond that?

Why are Muslims from different parts of the world so different from each other?
Where does religion address environmental issues, particularly about what human beings are doing to the environment? Why doesn’t religion say more?

Why are these things written? Why do we say these things in Islam? How do I make sense of it personally at my level?

Should I really move towards that position of being a more religious person, or just to read it and know it better, so I could be more experienced and educated on this issue?

How can I claim to be Orthodox when I do not know the ten positions of the Orthodox Church by heart?

Can I call myself Orthodox? If I can, why haven’t I read the Bible?

Should I use the word “must” when reading the Bible, or should I use the word “should” when I read the Bible?

When you come to the fact of religion, should you say “must”?

Am I with the devil because I haven’t read the Bible and I claim that I’m an Orthodox, and I do not act sometimes according to the Bible?

Why not read the Bible? Why not ask those questions and try to get answers to them?

Why is my religion the religion of suffering and patience?

How does the person who does not speak, can’t hear, and can’t see everything be religious? How could this person be with the church?

Destinations: (Death, Post-Death Journey, Afterlife)

What’s going to happen in the afterlife?

What is the picture of the afterlife? What does it look like: reincarnation or something like that? Or heaven? Or decomposition? Or becoming a ghost?

What can prevent death from happening to us?

When death happens: Why them? Why now? Why does death happen when it does? Why does it have to happen?

Should we ever be happy when someone dies?

Is there an afterlife?

What is this afterlife? How are we going to get there? Who goes there?

If I can’t comprehend an afterlife, how can I know it’s there?

How could I live for eternity after I die? How can I know really?

Is there a heaven? What is heaven?

How do I perceive heaven? How can we truly know what heaven is like? Are there pearly gates? Are there streets and cities and mansions of gold? Are there mansions? What does heaven look like? What is heaven really?

Is heaven a bunch of personal paradises linked together?

How does hell work? What are the criteria for hell?

What happens the second you die? Are we immediately in heaven at that point?

What does judgment look like after death?

How is Judgment Day going to go? Will God be looking at your life, seeing the choices here or there that aren’t the best or most moral? Or is it just kind of a look back on your life and commentary by God as the director?
What does the series of events look like on Judgment Day? Will a giant projector screen come down?

What’s the deal with the rapture? How will this really happen? Why are certain people taken and others are not? Are they taken because they are most pious? Are the ones left behind to be a symbol of God’s might? As people are being sent up to heaven, if they look back or cast their thoughts back to earth, will they be sent back down?

I have to go to heaven, right?

Am I doing everything right, so that when I get to the gates, I’m going to get in?

What is heaven like?

Where is heaven?

What happens when you are in heaven for eternity? What do you do in heaven? Is it like life [here] or do you just play games?

Did my friend die because he did something wrong? Did my friend die because he already found his purpose in life? Once you find your purpose in life, do you die and are gone? What if I lose another friend?

In the afterlife, is it a dark tunnel you go through or a light tunnel?

What’s death going to be like? What’s it going to feel like? When is it going to happen?

How far away is heaven?

Will I be wandering once I die until I get to heaven? Does it take a long time or are you just there?

Is the journey through the death tunnel happy or sad?

What does heaven look like? Is it houses? Is it clouds?

If we’re in heaven for eternity-ish, like what are we going to do for that long? Are you going to get bored? Will heaven get overcrowded?

If there are so many people in heaven, how do you find somebody there? And if it’s just your soul in heaven, do you look the same?

Will Jeremy make it into heaven?

What comes after death?

Does your purpose dictate when you die? If you fulfill your purpose, what is your point of being here anymore?

What would I do if I lose a family member?

What if I lost my grandpa or grandma when I’m not around them?

When people die, what will happen to them?

Why did the death of my great aunt have to happen?

Why did I have to be away when my uncle died? Why couldn’t I have said goodbye to him?

What happens when we die?

Why did my parents die? Why did this happen to me? And why did it happen when I was 15?