ENGAGING DIFFERENCES OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF: STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH AN INTERGROUP DIALOGUE COURSE

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined the experiences of eleven students who engaged in conversations across religious difference during an intergroup dialogue course. Phenomenology was utilized in order to best discover the essence of the shared dialogue experience of these participants. Two, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes in length were conducted with each participant. Individual case profiles were then created and later aggregated to determine the findings for this research study.

The participants in this study came from varying religious backgrounds and had prior experience talking about religious doctrine and practices with family and friends. These earlier conversations did not necessarily help or hinder these students as they engaged one another in conversation during the dialogue course but they did serve as a type of foundation for talking about religion with others. Throughout the semester, students shared their ideas, perspectives, and beliefs about religion as course facilitators introduced such controversial topics as abortion, interfaith dating and marriage, and religious dress. As these discussions among classmates were occurring, students were learning how to ask questions of others, to be less judgmental, to challenge the stereotypes associated with varying religions, and to further identify with their own religion.

As we encourage administrators and faculty to facilitate student engagement across differences, we need to look at additional avenues that assist students in exploring
their religious beliefs and interacting with religious difference. Additionally, we need to continue to examine the introduction of trending and controversial topics to determine if this approach is an effective method for encouraging dialogue. Further research related to religious dialogue ought to include examining whether prior experiences with religious dialogue helps or hinders students with engaging their peers in conversation, as well as the long term impact of the intergroup dialogue course on the perspectives of self and others of religious difference.
To my mother, Ann Marr Hoefle,

who encouraged me throughout my entire academic career and forever reminded me

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The influence of religion has ebbed and flowed in the formation and function of colleges and universities throughout the history of the United States. In the beginning of U.S. higher education, religious principles were paramount and served to guide decisions about both college and university mission and personnel (Thelin, 2004). Although religious doctrine and values held sway in the academy for almost two hundred years, by the mid-1800s new ways of thinking emerged (Thelin, 2004). Secularism began to influence and shape postsecondary learning, valuing the observable and promoting the scientific process that supported it (Thelin, 2004). The distancing of religion from the laboratory fueled higher education for the next one hundred years and led to the creation of the current modern research university. This separation has come at a cost, however, with growing numbers of students experiencing a disconnection with the large and impersonal scale of such institutions (Thelin, 2004). This detachment can intensify as students discover limited opportunities to assist them in connecting classroom teachings to their own lives. In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest among students in regards to questions of meaning and purpose on the college campus (Higher Education Research Institute, 2010). For some students, these questions of meaning manifest as spiritual and religious beliefs that have once again begun to exert an influence on their decisions, purpose, and life choices.

Early Colleges and Universities

In the beginning, religion served as an integral and foundational framework for the development of the first colonial colleges (Thelin, 2004). As religious leaders sought to uphold the core principles and beliefs of their respective denominations, religious doctrine was overtly and subtly infused in the mission statements, hiring practices, and course offerings of each of these early institutions. Some quoted scripture or cited denominational doctrine to describe the
mission of their college. Mottos highlighting religious thought and practice, for example, appeared in foundational documents of the University of Pennsylvania, where ‘Leges sine moribus vanae,’ warned that “laws without morals is useless,” while Brown University expressed “a hope in God with ‘In Deo Speramus’” (Thelin, 2004, p. 41).

Some institutions, such as the College of Rhode Island, selected governing board members only from the Baptists, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Anglican denominations (Thelin, 2004) in order to maintain a specific religious influence on campus. Some presidents, administrators, and faculty were asked to express their allegiance to sponsoring denominations through written and verbal statements. At the College of William and Mary, for instance, all professors were required to take an oath of allegiance to the crown and to the Church of England (Thelin, 2004). The religious denomination of the college founders often dictated the principal educational goals of such institutions and their students. Thus, the Puritans were committed to offering a rigorous education, which taught their young men how to be Christian gentlemen (Thelin, 2004). For most students, families, and college officials of these early colonial institutions, the ultimate goal was to develop young male students who were serious about their studies and their religion (Thelin, 2004).

**The Expansion of Higher Education**

By the mid-1800s, the role of religion began to wane and its influence diminished as new ways of thinking emerged, institutions broadened their purposes, and the U.S. higher education system expanded (Thelin, 2004). Universities increased course offerings to meet the demands of growing industries, and the former push to educate religious leaders gave way to the training of young men to serve in the military and to work in agriculture and technology (Thelin, 2004). Such a shift in educational focus escalated further as the federal government sold western lands,
under authority of the Morrill Act of 1862, to assist states in establishing universities that offered courses in agriculture, mechanics, and mining. What had previously guided leaders of reigning denominations had now acquiesced to the goals and purposes of government legislators and private benefactors (Thelin, 2004). This was a momentous time when institutions also offered new educational opportunities and reached out for the first time to women. In the South, for example, institutions were created especially for women as some thought it better for their daughters to be taught traditional religious and regional values in local colleges rather than risk suspect ways of thinking in the North (Thelin, 2004). Clearly, higher education had become not only a mechanism for discovery and scientific advancement, but also for social progress, though not at an equal pace for all groups.

Changes set in motion during this formative period continued well into the 20th century, as institutions expanded in both number and size. Following World War II, a powerful boost to enrollments came as new student populations were granted entrance into the nation’s colleges and universities when the 1944 G.I. Bill provided financial aid to cover the costs of tuition, books, and supplies of returning veterans (Thelin, 2004). Two decades later, a further sharp increase was realized with the inauguration of a government student loan program for financially disadvantaged students, the effect of which was not only to support new constituents in the cost of tuition and living expenses, but to preserve flexibility as loans became portable currency in an economy of institutional choice (Thelin, 2004). The result of this period was a system of higher learning that, although rich in opportunity and access, had become over-sized and impersonal (Thelin, 2004). This impersonality made it challenging to retain the qualities of a powerful educational experience (Thelin, 2004). Consequently, students searched for other sources of
connection and renewal that would restore a sense of purpose and meaning in their educational endeavors. For some this led to an interest once again in things ineffable.

**Religious Renewal**

An increase in spirituality research, journal articles, and conference presentations concerning religiosity on campus, and students’ desire to speak about faith and spirituality all have demonstrated a resurgence of religion’s influence once again on U.S. higher education. Subsequently, researchers from psychology, sociology, social work, medicine, and education have begun to study more intently the spiritual development of college students and religion’s influence on physical and mental health, work performance, and social relationships (e.g., Lee, 2002; Pargament, 1997; Parks, 2000). Student affairs researchers have also examined the faith development of college students, legal issues related to religion and state institutions, and the impact of interfaith dialogue courses.

The work of Alexander and Helen Astin, with the UCLA Higher Education Institute (HERI) in particular, has had a profound influence on this line of inquiry. Established in 1966, the *Cooperative Institutional Research Program* (CIRP) questionnaire has been providing student affairs professionals and higher education administrators new insights from first year students. This group began a new research project in 2003, examining the ways in which colleges assist students develop their religious and spiritual lives. In identifying first year college students’ self-reported behaviors, the research team has discovered a growing interest in religion and spirituality. As these researchers have discussed their findings via conference presentations and journal articles, members of the higher education community have become increasingly aware of how religion and spirituality intersect with the college student experience (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Bryant, 2007; Lindholm, 2006).
In addition to the data from CIRP, educators have also had the opportunity to learn more about religion in the United States from the Pew Research Center and the National Center for Family and Marriage Research. Since 1990, the Pew Research Center has been providing the public with information regarding the issues and developments influencing the United States and the world (Pew Research Center, 2013). In 2001, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life was launched with the goal of providing individuals information about issues related to religion and public affairs (Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, 2013). Some of the issues addressed by this forum include abortion, stem cell research, and gay marriage (Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, 2013). Another avenue for information regarding the religious life of individuals comes from the National Center for Family and Marriage Research. A component of this center’s research interests includes the examination of religion as it relates to marriage and family (Burdette, Haynes, & Ellison, 2010; Mahoney & Hernandez, 2009; Perry, 2010). Both of these centers provide educators with an insight into the religious life of others as well as the national trends associated with religion.

Stewart (in press) reviewed the emergence of research about issues of religion, spirituality, and faith in student affairs literature. According to her review of the literature, professors and administrators such as Love and Talbot (1999) and Laurence (1999) began to challenge the student affairs profession and higher education to address students’ growing interest in religion and spirituality beginning in the late 1990s. Since this time, publications, such as the Journal of College Student Development, the official journal of ACPA: College Educators International and the Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, one of the journals of the NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, have increased the number of articles related to religion, spirituality, and faith on campus (Stewart, in press).
Additionally, these associations have further experienced an increase, during the last ten years, of professional presentations at their annual regional and national conferences (Stewart, in press). Lastly, the creation of ACPA’s Commission for Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Meaning (CSFRM), and NASPA’s, Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education Knowledge Community (SRHE KC), have drawn additional attention to the matters of faith on campus (Stewart, in press).

This renewal of religious activity has the potential to have an impact on campus in multiple ways. The design and implementation of university policies and practices related to religious differences, the creation of meditation spaces on campuses, and the placement of high holy days and religious celebrations on academic calendars each has the potential to become campus issues should religious diversity increase among students.

**Research Questions**

According to CIRP results, students are reporting an increased interest in religion, which could be leading to a renewed consciousness of spiritual matters on campus. With this budding curiosity, students are surely engaging one another in conversations about religion and religious differences. As students explore their spiritual life, some will be open to share their journey while others may not. Those who chose not to discuss their religious life may not want to run the risk of rejection or ridicule by their peers. Additionally, there are students who become hostile toward others holding different beliefs. Still others may view religion as a source of ignorance, weakness, judgment, or danger. Regardless, educators must challenge students to interact with and relate to those from varying religious backgrounds if they are to function well in a culturally diverse society.
The ways in which students speak with one another about religion and spirituality is the subject of this study. This dissertation examined the experiences of college students as they engage in conversations that cross boundaries of religious and spiritual difference. There are multiple challenges associated with teaching students how to engage one another in conversations about religion and spirituality, yet relatively little is understood about how to do that successfully. An assessment of the nature of such experiences from the perspectives of students who engage in them is an important place to start and the point at which this study entered this line of inquiry. What leads students to engage in these conversations in the first place? What influences their level of engagement? How do they relate to those whose beliefs are most different? What are the consequences of these encounters for their own tenets and commitments? It is through the broad exploration of such questions that this study hopes to further an understanding of the dynamics of religious dialogue in students’ lives and therefore gain insight about how to encourage such among them.

**Significance of Study**

The importance of this study is the potential for generating new insights about how students may benefit from encounters with difference. Additionally, this study explores how students might discover alternative explanations for the questions in their own lives and how all of this might prepare them for successful citizenship in a diverse world. This study examined the process of religious dialogue between college students enrolled in a course.

The college setting is replete with opportunities for students to discover multiple perspectives. Moral conversation and intergroup dialogue are two methods educators can use to teach students how individuals process information and approach the world across diverse perspectives. Moral conversation is a “manner of living whereby people keep company with
each other and talk together in good faith, in order to exchange sometimes agreeable, sometimes opposing, ideas” (Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008, p. 8). Intergroup dialogue, on the other hand, occurs in an organized setting where students from different social identity groups come together to share personal experiences and examine ways of working with others to address societal inequalities (Zuñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). Discussing views regarding religion and spirituality can teach students about issues related to diversity and equity. These conversations can also lead students to reflect upon their place in the larger society. Understanding the interactions students have with varying religious groups will provide educators with tools as they assist future generations to interact across difference.

Second, as students are challenged by managing busy schedules and hearing of national and global unrest, some are searching for ways to personally explain what is going on in their world. Some are asking such questions as: “How does my life fit into the larger picture of the world?” “Does my presence make a difference in this world?” “How can I impact the world around me?” “What is my life’s passion or calling?” Parks (2000) suggested that the process of asking these “big questions” is, in one sense, the mode young adults use to make meaning of the world around them. Pursuing this study will yield a more defined perspective of the ways in which students look for answers to life’s questions.

Lastly, our world is becoming increasingly ethnically and religiously diverse and students will need to learn how to live and function within the changing society. In this evolving age of the global economy, learning to interact with diverse individuals is no longer a skill needed just for students pursuing degrees in international business. Rather, all students need to grow in intercultural effectiveness, regardless of their chosen major. Examining the interactions of
students from varying religions will provide educators insight regarding cross cultural and religious communication.

Failure to explore the ways in which students respond and relate to difference will leave an absence of knowledge for educators thus limiting the production of new programmatic approaches. The findings of this study will address the areas where the literature of higher education and student affairs falls short. A continued lack of understanding about the dynamics and consequences of such dialogues or ways in which to respond effectively to them will put the field at a disadvantage.

Concerning the need for increased awareness of interactions across difference, specifically religious difference, the field of student affairs ought to encourage more research on this subject. Empirical research has been conducted on intergroup dialogue but these studies address the process of engaging varying ethnic groups or men and women in conversation. (Nagda & Zuñiga, 2003; Schoem & Stevenson, 1990). There is a void in the literature regarding how discussions relating to religion and spirituality are developed, structured, managed, and/or concluded within the college setting. Since the United States is becoming increasingly diverse on multiple levels, we must seek ways to understand how students best learn about difference and further, how to engage the difference they do encounter. The lack of research in this area leaves professionals wondering how to implement these types of conversations on their campuses and how to manage the issues and challenges that occur within times of dialogue.

As educators begin to understand the value of intergroup interaction, the support for activities and programs that encourage diverse students to engage one another in conversation ought to increase. Dialogue groups and diversity training sessions can serve as programs that inform students about religious difference. Highlighting a method of dialogue that encourages
religiously diverse individuals to engage in conversation can possibly provide educators a measuring stick by which to assess the religious diversity programs available at their respective campuses. A continual failure to comprehend varying ways of bringing religiously diverse students together will leave educators at the trial and error stage of programming, placing the burden on them to discover the most effective ways to encourage and promote these types of events on their campus.

Examining the relations of students across religious differences will offer educators vital information about the ways students encounter and engage others as well as showcase methods that can be used to help them process internal questions that arise from these encounters. Limited pursuit of these interactions will only perpetuate the existing gap in the literature concerning religious dialogue. It will also leave educators wondering about current and best practices for designing dialogue groups and establishing programs on campus that teach students about religious difference. This study proposes to remedy, in part, the limited understanding, educators have in the experience and consequences of religious dialogues and encounters.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An understanding of the phenomenon proposed for this study entails an examination of how the constructs of religion, spirituality, and faith are defined, the process of religious identity development, the influence of the college student experience on religious belief, and methods used to encourage student dialogue across religious differences. Such knowledge is important for critical insight regarding students’ approaches to religion and religious practices, and the subtle and overt meanings they come across during religious dialogue.

Definitions of Religion, Spirituality, and Faith

Anecdotal reports indicate that conversations about religion, spirituality, and faith usually begin with a discussion of their meaning. Several authors have noted the multiple meanings and definitions attributed to these terms (Fromm, 1950; James, 1902; Pargament, 1997). Religion has been described as a set of beliefs based on a spiritual leader (Nash, 2001) or principles and practices established by a denominational institution (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). Spirituality is viewed as a way to live a simple, peaceful, and harmonious life (Massoudi, 2003) or as the human desire to be connected to something larger than self (Palmer, 2003). Finally, faith has been defined as an individual’s or group’s search for meaning (Fowler, 1981). Included here are some additional considerations of the topic rooted in a literature that spans the 20th century.

James (1902) was among the first to describe religion as the “feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine” (p. 31). More recently, Pargament (1997) defined it as “a process, a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (p. 32). Further, Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) characterized religiousness as the “attendance of religious
services, participation in religious groups, and engagement in prayer or meditation” (p. 724). In contrast, Sigmund Freud (1927) had a differing view of religion, suggesting an individual’s religious belief was a form of neurosis. He proposed “religious ideas are teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one’s belief” (Freud, 1927, p. 31).

Although these definitions highlight divergent points about religion, they generally refer to activities engaged in alone or in groups for purposes of connecting to some transcendent entity.

Spirituality has been defined through an examination of its difference to religion. Tisdell (2003) emphasized the distinction between spirituality and religion suggesting that “spirituality is more of a personal belief and experience of a divine spirit or higher purpose [than religion]” (p. 29). Turner, Lukoff, Barnhouse, and Lu (1995) have explained that “spirituality was not distinguished from religiousness until the rise of secularism in this century, and a wide spread disillusionment occurred with religious institutions that seem to prevent rather than facilitate a personal experience with the transcendent” (p. 437). Lastly, Pargament also highlighted the personal aspect of this construct in suggesting that spirituality is an individual’s approach to the sacred (Pargament, 1997).

Although the definition of the term faith is not fixed and sometimes it encompasses descriptions used for both religion and spirituality, it is typically used to describe an individual’s religious life or search for meaning. Fowler (1981) affirmed this as he suggested that faith is a “person’s way of seeing him-or-herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (p. 4). Also, Parks (2000) believed faith was an “activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of one’s experience” (p. 7).
Although many psychologists, clergy, and professors have explored the definitions given for religion, spirituality, and faith, few of these professionals have actually studied the ways in which individuals develop a religious identity. Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000) both went beyond defining these constructs to examine how individuals became aware of religious beliefs and mature within a particular faith tradition. Fowler studied how children, young adults, and mature adults developed religious identity while Parks learned of the faith development process primarily of young adults.

**Religious and Faith Development**

In Fowler’s (1981) examination of religious and spiritual identity development, he spoke with men, women, and children from multiple religious backgrounds. From these conversations, Fowler concluded that the faith development process occurred in stages over one’s lifetime. Stage one, *Intuitive-Projective Faith*, occurs from ages three to seven, when children are influenced by the faith examples of adults close to them. A child, at this time, follows the parents’ lead in church attendance, interpretation of biblical stories, and understanding of right and wrong behavior. The second stage, *Mythic-Literal Faith*, develops for individuals during the school years and can also be found in some adolescents and adults. Children and adolescents in this stage begin to take on for themselves the stories and beliefs, including those of a religious nature, of those around them. The influence of those most immediate to them is obvious as they memorize and mimic the saying of particular prayers and adhering to certain dietary practices. *Synthetic-Conventional Faith* is the title of stage three and emerges typically in the young adult years. During this time, peers, society, and co-workers influence an individual and it is these relationships that contribute most to the young adult’s faith development. Therefore it is likely that an individual will reconsider previous held beliefs about God and reflect on the pre
judgments made about varying religious groups. Stage four, *Individuative-Reflective Faith*, transpires during late adolescence and adulthood, as individuals come to rely more on self as opposed to others for the formation of a personal worldview and faith. Thus, they are inclined to read religious texts and listen to spiritual leaders, translating the messages on their own and seeking ways to apply these teachings to personal circumstances. In *Conjunctive* faith, a fifth stage that usually occurs prior to mid-life, an adult is forming and embracing connections that surpass social, racial, or religious difference and it is these relationships that contribute most to their faith formation. Finally, at the *Universalizing Faith* stage, according to Fowler (1981) exceedingly rare among adults to attain, individuals complete the faith development process and seek to transform those who oppose them and their beliefs. Such individuals are also concerned with bringing about justice and equality for all.

For this study, stage three, *Synthetic-Conventional*, holds particular significance in that this is the period when young adults form personal beliefs, albeit some unconsciously, but have not yet had many opportunities to “test” them. Fowler (1981) suggested that an evolving formation of a personal myth or parable is occurring for individuals at this stage. This myth is of “one’s own becoming in identity and faith, incorporating one’s past and anticipated future in an image of the ultimate environment unified by characteristics of personality” (Fowler, 1981, p. 173). It is logical to infer then that stage three individuals especially might be struggling with preconceived religious beliefs and how such viewpoints might relate to their daily decisions about personal matters and societal issues. If this is the case, then dialogue across differences is potentially a very challenging process.

Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) explored the faith development steps of young adulthood in particular. She suggested that young adults develop their sense of faith in the presence of
community while exploring questions like, “Who and what can I trust? [and] What is my purpose in this world?” (p. 53). Like Fowler, Parks suggested that individuals develop their faith in stages. In stage one, Adolescent/Conventional Faith, one receives, believes, and trusts the information given by authority figures, such as parents, clergy, and teachers, being wholly dependent upon them in the formation of their worldview and religious beliefs. As the individual matures, however, he or she begins to break away from these authority figures and forms independent ways of thinking and being. During stage two, Young Adult Faith, the individual begins to explore multiple forms of truth and uses the information gathered to create his or her own sense of the world and of faith, while also remaining semi-dependent on parents or other authority figures as sources of knowledge. However, as the individual begins to test information and experience gained in earlier years, elements of stage three, Tested Adult Faith, begin to appear. In this stage, the individual assumes his or her place in the world and begins to see former authority figures or mentors as peers, who, although might provide additional insight into matters of faith, they do not define it. In the final stage, Mature Adult Faith, individuals are able to not only interact and embrace an extended world around them, but are further able to depend on others without fear of losing their religious self. Parks’ Young Adult Faith stage, in particular, can serve as an appropriate framework through which to observe college students as they engage in religious dialogue. During this stage, “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” (Parks, 2000, p. 67).

Much of the early research regarding religion and young adulthood focused on the faith development theories of Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000). Educators looked to these theories to help them understand the religious evolution of those 18 to 22 years old. Although these theories
gave us a blueprint of how one develops a religious life, they did not address the issues related to religious diversity and interfaith dialogue. The examination of religion in higher education began to increase as researchers and educators studied the role of religion in college student development and later as intergroup dialogue programs included religion as an area of focus (Ariel, 2011; Bryant et al., 2003; Burrell, 2010).

**Religion and College Attendance**

A number of studies have examined how college attendance contributes to or changes the religious or spiritual beliefs of students (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Graham & Cockriel, 1997; Lee, 2002). Some of the findings found in these studies are a result of exploring the larger question of how college impacts a student’s personal and moral growth. For example, Lee (2002) studied the results of the 1994 and 1998 CIRP survey and sought to identify factors in the college environment that influenced changes in the religious beliefs of first year students. In this study, she discovered that more students experienced a strengthening of their religious convictions while attending college than those whose faith weakened during their time in school (Lee, 2002). She further learned that “when a student attends an institution whose peers frequently go to religious services there is a strengthening of that student’s religious beliefs” (Lee, 2002, p. 382).

Bryant et al. (2003) also examined the religious life of first year college students by reviewing the 2000 CIRP survey and 2001 *Your First College Year* survey results, finding that, while students became less religiously active (e.g., attending religious services, praying/meditating, and discussing religion) in their first year, “they did become more committed to integrating spirituality into their lives” (p. 736). They also found, as did Lee (2002), that
socializing with peers who held similar faith beliefs was positively related to a student’s religiousness.

Graham and Cockriel (1997) studied the impact of college on students’ personal and social growth, in particular its relationship to religious beliefs. For their study, they analyzed the American College Testing (ACT) survey results and found that the college experience “moderately affected how individuals develop moral principles, learn how to be tolerant of religious beliefs different from their own, and take responsibility for themselves and their personal values” (p. 213). Their study also highlighted that, while some college environments are not explicitly charged with influencing a student’s religious beliefs, there are factors within the college setting that challenge the way one student views another in this regard.

**Intergroup Dialogue**

Assembling diverse individuals to engage in conversations that lead to racial, cultural, or religious awareness and to social action can be a challenging process. A method called intergroup dialogue has been created to encourage individuals to interact with one another across, for example, religious differences and to explore avenues of social justice and change. Intergroup dialogue is a “face-to-face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups that strives to create new levels of understanding, relating, and action” (Zuñiga, 2003, p. 9). Zuñiga (2003) identified a social group as a group whose affiliation is “based on a common status or history in society resulting from socially constructed group distinctions” (p. 9). Conversations are typically organized between various groups, for example, men and women, African Americans and European Americans, or Christians and Atheists.

This method of dialogue also offers a setting, which encourages “honest, thoughtful, and significant conversations about difficult or controversial issues across race and other social group
boundaries” (Zuñiga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002, p. 7). This technique is also used with individuals to help them to discover their commonalities and to explore ways in which they can work together (Zuñiga, Nagda, Chesler, Cytron-Walker, 2007). In order for this dialogue technique to be effective and successful, participants are required to “learn to listen, to ask questions of others, and to commit to understanding the perspectives of others, even if not agreeing” (Gurin, Nagda, Sorensen, 2011, p. 46). Lastly, through intergroup dialogue participation, students are better able to work with difference and interact in diverse settings while attending the university and later in varying organizations (Zuñiga et al., 2007).

Ariel (2011) argued that more opportunities to engage in intergroup and interfaith dialogue ought to be offered because even though “interfaith relations have progressed dramatically, they have not brought about a full reconciliation between Jewish and Christian groups, with pockets of bitterness and suspicions remaining unresolved” (p. 17). Further discussions are needed between these two groups as “not all Catholics and Protestants, even members of mainstream churches, have accepted the legitimacy of Judaism” (Ariel, 2011, p. 17). Brown and Brown (2011) addressed this need by suggesting that “through extended positive inter-faith contact, religious bias and conflict can be reduced as people learn about their similarities with others, and subsequently, begin to think of themselves as members of a more inclusive religious in-group” (p. 327). Their 2011 study’s central findings suggested that “Jewish –Christian interfaith contact is grounded in a set of similar experiences and a general consensus that American Christians and Jews have much in common” (Brown & Brown, 2011, p. 338). As these groups and others participate in interfaith dialogue, Sapp (2011) suggested a key point that ought to be considered. She stated “interfaith dialogue requires revealing a bit about oneself and one’s commitment to a tradition” (Sapp, 2011, p. 287). We must recognize,
however, this type of dialogue “does not involve simply sharing the basic tenets of faith with one another, but it means standing within a tradition and representing that tradition with integrity” (Sapp, 2011, p. 287).

There are several educational goals associated with intergroup dialogues, including “consciousness raising; building relationships across differences and conflicts; and strengthening individual and collective capacities to promote social justice” (Zuñiga et al., 2007, pp. 9-16). Consciousness raising challenges students to explore the history of dominant or majority populations and their oppression of subordinate or minority groups. It further invites participants to examine their personal and social identity and how that identity shapes the way they see the world (Zuñiga et al., 2007). Discussing these realities can allow students to share with one another their “ways of thinking about privilege and marginalization that stem from their own passions and concerns” (Small, 2009, p. 17). As individuals build relationships across differences they discover how to talk with one another in a sustained effort and learn how to bridge differences with those from varying social identity groups (Zuñiga et al., 2007). Additionally, as students engage in this dialogue process, anxiety about intergroup contact decreases and communication skills across differences, conflict exploration, perspective taking, and comfort dealing with diversity are improved (Zuñiga, 2003). Further, as students participate in a supported intergroup dialogue process, a “space for civil engagement with a clear purpose of fostering greater civic engagement” (Gurin et al., 2011, p. 51) is promoted and encouraged for them. Gurin et al. (2011) noted that through this civil engagement is led by facilitators, “students develop a passion for thinking, relating, and acting not only for personal fulfillment but also for a larger social project of effective collaborations across differences to enhance community life” (p. 51). Finally, when combined with other campus activities that promote inclusion and social
justice and instilled in polices and practices of the institution, intergroup dialogue has a even
greater chance to influence the campus community (Zuñiga et al., 2002).

Intergroup dialogue additionally encourages individuals to consider social change and to
seek ways to bring it into existence (Zuñiga et al., 2007). This occurs as they hear of the
challenges of others and create ways to alter social systems that discriminate and oppress.
Burrell (2010) did caution that “intellectual and spiritual humility is a necessary condition in
order for genuine exchanges to occur among believers” (p. 419). He further suggested that the
“know it all” attitude is adverse to a genuine sense of knowing-by-faith, which in turn rules out
the speaker’s words in the face of the authentic believer (Burrell, 2010). Tyagananda (2011)
suggested some additional conditions are needed for a meaningful dialogue to occur. First, those
engaged in the dialogue need to “accept the possibility that they may have something new to
learn from the encounter” (Tyagananda, 2011, p. 229). Next, participants must “listen to one
another with respect, care, and understanding” (Tyagananda, 2011, p. 229). Third, those
involved in the process must “refrain from making any assumptions” (Tyagananda, 2011, p.
229). The last condition requires individuals to “speak frankly and openly not just about what is
shared in common but also about where they differ” (Tyagananda, 2011, p. 229). As these
conditions are met and the dialogue is successful, she stated several benefits are extended to the
participants. These participants are able to “improve their understanding of the other, discover
that every religion has something unique to contribute to the world, and gain a better
understanding of their own religion” (Tyagananda, 2011, pp. 229 - 230). Further, Suomala
(2012) cautioned that we must “take people with complex religious identities seriously and
recognize the contributions they can make to interfaith dialogue” (p. 367). He shared that
although this endeavor “may be more difficult, but it is definitely the more honest, and ultimately
the most fruitful course of action… Especially as those of us engaged in interfaith dialogue realize that ‘they’ are probably ‘us’ (Suomala, 2012, p. 367).

Another factor to consider is emotions. Gurin-Sands, Gurin, Nagda, and Osuna (2012) suggested that emotions are an important aspect of the dialogue process. “Attending to and learning from emotions is not always accepted as a legitimate concern in academic courses, but in intergroup dialogue courses emotions and affective learning complement cognitive learning” (Gurin-Sands et al., 2012, p. 75). These authors suggested that by including emotions in the active listening process, facilitators can “help students become more comfortable and effective in expressing, recognizing, and responding to emotions in later dialogue sessions” (Gurin-Sands et al., 2012, p. 75).

Intergroup dialogue not only offers students an opportunity to learn about others but also extends the chance for them to discover more about self. Burrell (2010) suggested each of us ought to be prepared to “allow others to lead us into a richer understanding of what we profess” (p. 416). He stated that as we encounter believers of other faiths we are led to have a “deeper appreciation and understanding of our own” (Burrell, 2010, p. 416).

Research conducted on intergroup dialogue has focused on differences of both racial and religious kinds. With regard to racial groups, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and European Americans have been included in a number of dialogue studies. For instance, Nagda and Zuñiga (2003) studied racial/ethnic based dialogue groups at one university and found that a student’s awareness of racial identity increased as a result of their participation in the dialogue. They further discovered that the “more students valued the dialogic learning process, the more likely they were to benefit from the overall intergroup goals (e.g., strengthen a desire for interracial bridging)” (Nagda & Zuñiga, 2003, p. 123). Schoem and Stevenson (1990) examined
the effects of a Black-Jewish dialogue between first-year college students, finding that such an encounter allowed students to learn of the complex issues facing Blacks and Jews and to come to a realization of just how little they had known about either group. Lastly, several studies (e.g., DeTurk, 2006; Nagda et al., 1999; Schoem & Stevenson, 1990) have found that participation in dialogue groups creates an awareness of diverse individuals, develops an increased confidence for engaging in these dialogues, and making a commitment to join social justice efforts, and challenge students to consider the struggles of others.

Although most researchers have sought to understand how students of differing racial backgrounds engage one another in conversation and how these dialogues encourage them to create social change for diverse populations, faculty and staff members have also expanded intergroup dialogue topics to include student conversations about religious differences. Recently, Small (2009) utilized focus groups to explore spiritual growth and religious diversity by using interfaith and intrafaith dialogues. She found that the students who participated in these sessions learned about their spiritual identity and were encouraged to reflect upon their own beliefs while considering the ideas of diverse others in the group. Dialogues such as these are used to create an awareness of varying religious beliefs and serve as platforms for students to share the joys, challenges, frustrations, and desires of being a religious or spiritual individual. These conversations can occur in a variety of settings. Informally, students might gather in a residence hall to discuss their own beliefs in “moral conversations” (Nash, 2001). More formally, they might debate the merits of teaching creationism versus evolution in an elementary school. Whatever the case, the goal of such discussions is to encourage individuals to share their personal beliefs and experiences and to learn from the perspectives of others.
Interfaith Cooperation Efforts

Dialogue across religious difference is occurring within and beyond the walls of the university. Interfaith youth organizations, interfaith councils, and faith clubs have sought to educate and promote interfaith communication and cooperation. One such group working for the cause of interfaith cooperation is the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC). This organization was established in 2002 by Eboo Patel and is located in Chicago, Illinois. IFYC primarily seeks to build interfaith cooperation on college campuses but have also worked beyond the university level as well. IFYC believes that interfaith collaboration leads to religious pluralism, which they define as “respect for people’s diverse religious and non-religious identities; mutually inspiring relationships between people of different backgrounds; and common action for the common good” (Interfaith Youth Core, n.d.).

Additional efforts for interfaith cooperation include the establishment of interfaith councils at varying colleges and universities. At Iowa State University, the Ames Interfaith Council seeks to promote religious diversity and advocates for the religious and spiritual needs of its students through a series of social activities and educational events (Interfaith Council of Iowa State University, n.d.). Within the Harvard College Interfaith Council’s informational statement, they state their purpose to “encourage dialogue between different religious communities and people of various backgrounds” (Harvard College Interfaith Council, n.d.). A different approach to education is taken by the Interfaith Council at Salem College. At this institution, the college chaplain offers support to this student group comprised of different faith traditions. Like Harvard College, this interfaith council provides an opportunity for students to connect and speak with individuals from varying religious backgrounds but they also offer
monthly interfaith services and trips to Hindu and Buddhist centers (Salem College Interfaith Council, 2012).

Another group, called The Faith Club, was formed by three mothers from the Islam, Christian, and Jewish religious traditions following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. One of these women was seeking to answer her children’s questions about Islam, God, and death (Idliby, Oliver, & Warner 2006). She reached out to two other women and they began to meet to discuss their views and beliefs in an effort to write a children’s book to highlight the connection between the three religions (Idliby et al., 2006). They later shared their discussions in the book, *The Faith Club*. This book has been utilized by churches, temples, and mosques as an avenue to generate interfaith discussion groups (Idliby et al., 2006). Each of these efforts represent the growing assistance being offered to individuals to learn about their own sense of faith, as well the religions and religious perspectives represented within their respective communities.

**Diversity Education**

When colleges and universities offer courses, programs, and events that provide students with an opportunity to learn about difference, they give their students the chance to deepen their education. Institutions are now including religion as an aspect of the diversity education offered to students. It is important to note the ways in which this particular education impacts the intellectual and social development of an individual. Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, and Pierson (2001) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the impact of diversity experiences on critical thinking skills. Their study suggested that the “challenges presented by diverse college environments and the exposure to different worldviews in itself fosters development of critical thinking in college students” (p. 269). One of these researchers would later revisit this study and
further determine that “the cognitive benefits of diversity experiences may be substantially shaped by the different characteristics of the students who engage in them” (Loes, Pascarella, & Umbach, 2012, p. 20). Pascarella et al. (2012) confirmed this finding in their study suggesting that “student characteristics may often shape the developmental influence of postsecondary education” (p. 9). Similarly, Hu and Kuh (2003) found in their study that “intentional efforts to promote interactions between students from diverse backgrounds will likely have desirable effects across the board, student and institutional characteristics notwithstanding” (p. 330). Additionally they noted that “the magnitudes of these effects vary slightly by student race or ethnicity and by type of institution” (Hu & Kuh, 2003, p. 330). It does appear from each of these studies that at some level there are students who are benefiting from diversity experiences when provided on campus. This idea is supported by Fischer (2008) as she found in her study “considerable evidence that racial and ethnic diversity on campus leads to the formation of cross-group friendships, which presumably entailed meaningful cross-group interaction along the way” (p. 652).

In addition to the impact of critical thinking, diversity education and bringing diverse individuals together also influence the social development of students. Moody (2001) suggested that when “students of different races have the opportunity to work together for collective ends in settings of relative equality, substantive integration results. This finding by Moody (2001) may assist individuals in becoming more acquainted with one another and address the statement offered by Kao and Joyner (2004) in their study. They stated that “cultural beliefs about the importance of friends and the appropriate types of activities shared with friends may matter, as our findings suggest first-generation youths are less likely to report shared activities with friends” (Kao & Joyner, 2004, p. 571). Diversity education may offer an avenue for some
students to develop friendships within and beyond their own racial groups. As students are engaging in these diversity activities and intergroup dialogues, it is important to take into consideration the environment in which these events are occurring. Researchers have examined the impact of environment, and specifically the physical environment, on student learning.

**Environment**

As many academic courses meet in a traditional classroom, it might be a natural occurrence for most staff and administrators to assign a religious dialogue course to a classroom. But is the traditional classroom the most conducive environment for dialogue among students to occur? A review of past research and literature regarding the physical classroom environment and its impact on learning is needed to help answer this question.

In an examination of campus environments, Strange and Banning (2001) suggested that if active learning is an institutional goal, then “institutions must also look beyond issues of belonging, stability, and comfort to consider the nature of environments that might encourage engagement and the investment of time and effort, in other words, those that call for participation and involvement” (p. 137).

In considering the classroom setting, if the physical structure and design allows participants to do as they desire, then they may take full advantage of the setting (Strange & Banning, 2001). “Common sense and experience suggest that when the physical environment of a campus, building, or classroom supports the desired behavior, better outcomes result” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 20).

A study of student perceptions regarding the community college classroom conducted by Veltri, Banning, and Davies (2006) supported this idea. Veltri et al. (2006) examined college students’ perceptions concerning whether specific classroom traits contributed or hindered their
They noted the several negative and positive impacts expressed by the students concerning the classroom environment. These were some of the negative impacts Veltri et al. (2006) noted: “inadequate space and furniture did not encourage interaction; the particular arrangement of room materials and technology equipment impeded interaction; distracting noises inside and outside the classroom interfered with student concentration; low lighting; and excessively warm temperatures fostered lethargy” (p. 520). The positive impacts for student learning also were related to the physical space features. Students expressed appreciation for “furniture, which allowed for group work and interaction; a room arrangement, which allowed them to see visuals regardless of where they were seated; and a classroom, which had a light and cheerful atmosphere” (Veltri et al., 2006, p. 521).

As administrators and faculty look for ways to further promote learning and encourage engagement in the classroom, they ought to consider the many ways in which students acquire knowledge beyond listening to a traditional lecture while sitting in a desk. Calcara (1999) suggested “creating flexible classrooms means designing spaces with proportions to accommodate a variety of functions, instead of just one specific learning activity that could potentially hinder future possibilities” (p. 34h). Lyons (2001) gave an additional charge to school administrators and others suggesting “individual classrooms and entire facilities need to be evaluated, not only on how they meet changing educational requirements, but also on how they meet the environmental requirements for health, safety, and security” (p. 6). Like Veltri et al. (2006), Lyons noted that attention ought to be paid to temperature and ventilation, acoustics, and lighting when examining the physical space of our educational institutions. Lighting was also noted by Morris (1997) as an important component in school design. “The students found the natural light to be comfortable, the teachers appreciated the low glare, good color rendering,
and good behavior by the students under this light” (Morris, 1997, p. 20). In their study of grade schools in Fresno, California, The Heschong Mahone Group (2003) also found that ventilation and acoustics, in addition to sources of glare and direct sun penetration impacted student learning. Similarly, Lackney (1999) found during his study of public schools in Baltimore that ventilation in addition to temperature and air quality had a strong link to student academic performance and student social development. Lastly, concerning the design of college classrooms, Griffin (1990) proposed that administrators create classrooms with moveable student seating; adjustable lighting; insulated rooms to reduce noise, adjustable temperature gauges; and decorations that included warm colors.

**Summary**

Religion, spirituality, and faith carry with them a multitude of meanings (Fowler, 1981; James, 1902; Pargament, 1997; Tisdell, 2003). Literature has suggested that the discussion of these distinctions and religious identity development are necessary foundations for understanding how such dialogues occur among students. Research has also established that college attendance does affect religious beliefs (Graham & Cockriel, 1997; Lee, 2002) and further that intergroup dialogue can assist students in learning about the experiences and perspectives of diverse individuals (DeTurk, 2006; Schoem & Stevenson, 1990). Additionally we know that diversity education does impact, at some level, college student critical thinking abilities (Hu & Kuh, 2003; Loes, Pascarella, & Umbach, 2012; Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2012) and social development (Fischer, 2008; Kao & Joyner, 2004; Moody, 2001). What has not been studied directly is the process of religious dialogue and how such conversations might alter a student’s notions about religiously diverse individuals and encourage them to act for the benefit of those who do hold varying religious beliefs. While Small’s (2009) study examined dialogues
that occurred during a brief exposure in a research setting, this study seeks to understand the experiences of students who engaged in these conversations over an extended period of time as an element of the college curriculum. Lastly, although there have been studies examining the classroom environment and its impact on student learning (Heschong Mahone Group, 2003; Lyons, 2001;), these studies have focused their attention on primary and secondary schools. Although educators have done some research regarding the college classroom environment (Griffin, 1990), more ought to be conducted. The following section details the methodology which will be use to conduct this study.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This study used methods associated with naturalistic inquiry. This entailed an understanding of the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism informed the research methodology, techniques applied to implement it, and frameworks used to support its quality and ethical outcomes.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of college students as they engaged in conversations and dialogues across religious differences. This study sought to understand the process of religious dialogue and how students entered into these conversations, their experiences while engaged in times of dialogue, and the outcomes for them associated with these types of conversations. The following questions were sought to examine religious dialogue:

1) What are students’ prior experiences and motives for engaging in these dialogues?
2) What are the experiences of students as they engage in dialogue across religious differences?
3) What attitudes, perceptions, and/or beliefs change, if any, as students engage in religious dialogue?
4) How do participants experience the physical space of the intergroup dialogue course?
5) How do participants talk about what they gained from being a student in the intergroup dialogue course?

The exploration of these questions helped me to determine the avenues and conditions that best allowed students to enter into religious dialogue and further assisted me to discover the experiences and outcomes of students as they engaged one another in these conversations.
Paradigm

A paradigm is a set of beliefs and assumptions, which guide individuals as they think about the world around them and their place in it (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Within the context of research, paradigms direct the process of inquiry and help to frame an individual’s search in discovering what can be known about a particular phenomenon (ontology), exploring the relationship between the inquirer and the subject of study (epistemology), and determining ways in which to examine an experience (methodology) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The constructivist paradigm, also known as the naturalistic, hermeneutic, or interpretive paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) presupposes, that multiple realities exist for any given phenomenon, and the researcher learns of these varied experiences through an interactive interview process.

Naturalistic inquiry is situated within the constructivist paradigm and served as the best framework for this study. This type of inquiry provided me an opportunity to more deeply explore the numerous experiences of college students as they engaged in conversations across religious differences. Through the exchange of information and a review of written material, knowledge of the religious dialogue process began to emerge and the participants’ realities surfaced.

Relativist Ontology

Ontology is concerned with assumptions about the nature of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). More specifically, a relativist ontology presumes that individuals’ perceptions of their experiences constitute the existence of reality for each person. Accordingly, naturalistic inquiry pursues the exploration of numerous ideas and events to tell the story of a particular phenomenon. Thus, I examined a number of participants to learn their varying experiences with religious dialogue. The constructions of participants’ reality can be enhanced as personal
experiences are explored in conversation with the inquirer. This exchange does not necessarily lead to overall constructions that are “truer” but rather ones that are more informed since they reflect multiple views of the phenomenon.

**Subjectivist Epistemology**

Epistemology addresses the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). In particular, a subjectivist epistemology suggests that one cannot interpret an experience or an event for another person (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Discovering a phenomenon entails an interactive process between the researcher and participants, in which the latter are given the opportunity to explain their perceptions and understandings during an interview as well as provided the opportunity to review their reconstructions for correction or clarity. Due to the interactive nature of naturalistic inquiry there is an expectation that the values of the researcher will inform the process as well. As I listened to the participants share their experiences of talking with others about religion, my ideas about religious dialogue found their way into the questions asked and in the interpretation of participants’ experiences. Because of this, I worked to make sure that the individuals’ voices and stories were heard by offering them the opportunity to read and revise transcripts, provide additional information during their second interview, and review and amend their individual case profiles.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenological research examines the shared meaning of several participants as they engage or encounter with a particular idea or occurrence (Creswell, 2013). Researchers conducting this type of study “focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The phenomenological study centers on
“exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, not individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Specifically, the researcher gathers information from these participants and develops a composite description, which explains the essence of the experience for all of the individuals (Creswell, 2013). This approach is further defined as hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology provides a foundation and direction for phenomenological research and “focuses on the uniqueness of the lived experience or essence of a particular phenomenon” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 47). In order to examine the shared experience of religious dialogue, each participant was interviewed as Patton (2002) stated to gather such data of a particular phenomenon, “one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, have lived the experience” (p. 104).

This study of dialogue across religious difference follows the suggested template as described by Creswell (2013). Later in this chapter, I share my personal interest, educational background, and professional experiences as it relates to religion, spirituality, and religious dialogue. The next step is found in chapter four as my description of what the participants experienced individually and as a group with the phenomenon of religious dialogue is detailed. Creswell (2013) described this comprehensive account as a textual description of the experience. Additionally, throughout chapter four a description of how the participants experienced the phenomenon is provided. Creswell (2013) called this explanation the structural description. A combined description of the what and how for all participants and their experience with religious dialogue is offered in chapter four. These descriptions serve as the “essence of the experience and represent the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 194).
Methods

Methods are the techniques used that allow the researcher to gather information, critique transcripts, and examine documents (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). They further provide an avenue for the exchange of information between the researcher and participant. Within naturalistic inquiry, the hermeneutic dialectic circle is the process by which the construction of participants’ realities takes form (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In the hermeneutic circle, the inquirer and each participant engage in a process whereby stories and experiences are shared and later enhanced by additional information in subsequent interviews until satisfactory construction of the phenomenon is created. As a researcher engaged in naturalistic inquiry, I interviewed participants, gave them opportunities to review transcripts, explored the stories of other participants, and provided them the chance to expand upon their own experiences with religious dialogue. Ultimately, this process lead to a further developed and more informed co-construction that best illuminates the phenomenon of interest.

Intergroup Dialogue Course

This study examines the experiences of students who engaged in dialogue across religious difference during an intergroup dialogue course. The information about the intergroup dialogue course and the program that administers it that I describe below was shared with me by the program directors. This course was found in a large, research extensive, Midwestern institution and is part of a program which has been formed under a partnership between the arts and sciences academic unit and an office within the student affairs division. This program has run intergroup dialogue courses in the past focusing on topics including gender, socioeconomic class, and race and ethnicity. The main purpose of the course is to fulfill the program’s commitment to address social inequality and social injustice between diverse social identity
groups. Specifically, the goals of the religion intergroup dialogue course include creating a safe space on campus for difficult dialogues to occur, deepening one’s understanding of the meaning of faith, as well as thinking and learning more about Christian privilege.

The course is led by student peer facilitators who are trained by program directors. Part of the facilitators’ role is to lead discussions, which include conversations about controversial subjects including prayer in school, societal views of premarital sex, and interfaith dating. In addition to participating in class discussions, students are expected to complete course readings, assignments, and papers. Students who desire to take this course register for it prior to the start of the semester. There were two sections of the course offered, with 10 students assigned to one section and 13 students assigned to the second section. As the researcher I was allowed to interview the participants selected but I was not allowed to observe class sessions. The program directors were concerned that my presence might prevent some students from fully participating during class discussions.

I have provided information concerning the background and nature of the interfaith intergroup dialogue course to help contextualize the conditions of the dialogues that participants were engaged in during the course of my study. This phenomenological study, however, is focused on the participants’ experiences with interfaith dialogue. It is not intended to evaluate or assess the effectiveness of the intergroup dialogue course as a pedagogical strategy as would be appropriate for a case study methodological design. Consequently, although these details have influenced my conclusions and recommendations (presented later), they will not be analyzed as pieces of data.
Participant Selection

Naturalistic inquiry utilizes purposive sampling to select individuals for a study. With purposive sampling a researcher is able to fully explore the varied experiences and issues associated with a particular phenomenon (Erlandson et al., 1993). In other words, this sampling technique allows for maximum variation of participants within the context to be examined. For this study, I used criterion sampling, seeking students who met the criterion of engaging in religious dialogue within a classroom setting. My procedures for identifying such students are explained further below. Because purposive sampling afforded me the opportunity to select specific participants as well as a smaller number of participants, this technique enabled me to explore, in greater detail, the experiences and contexts of religious dialogue.

In my search for participants, I contacted an intergroup dialogue program located within a large, state-sponsored, research university in the Midwest. I was given permission to interview and study participants who were enrolled in an intergroup dialogue course being held during the Fall 2009 semester focusing on the topic of religion. Students in this course explored the experiences of religious individuals and the matters facing them as a social group. The goal of this course was to encourage students to engage in open and constructive dialogue and to examine ways to address issues that occur within a community of religious and spiritual individuals. A condition of the access granted was that once my research was completed I would share the results of my study with the team leading the intergroup dialogue program.

Eleven individuals committed to this study and they offered a diversity of perspectives regarding their experiences with religious dialogue. The participants came from a variety of religious backgrounds and had prior experience engaging in conversations surrounding religion before enrolling in the intergroup dialogue course. I recruited participants by distributing a
participant request letter (Appendix A) to the students enrolled in the course. This letter detailed the design of the study, procedures for interviewing, and benefits of participation. I was able to secure participants who varied in ethnicity, gender, and parental religious influence, which led to the constructions being richer in content. Once students agreed to serve as participants, they were sent an informed consent letter (Appendix B) stating the objectives of the study, what their participation would entail, and issues of confidentiality. They were asked to carefully review the document, sign it, and return it to me via hand delivery prior to the first interview.

**Interviews**

Interviews allowed me as the researcher to learn about the phenomenon of religious dialogue from first-person accounts. Gathering information regarding a particular event or phenomenon from the individual associated with the experience gave credibility to and deeper insight into the story when it was later retold. During naturalistic inquiry, interviews take on the form of a dialogue or interaction between the researcher and participant (Erlandson et al., 1993). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested, “interviews allow the respondent to move back and forth in time; to reconstruct the past and interpret the present” (p. 273). The naturalistic inquirer is generally more interested in learning the participant’s opinion or perspective concerning the reality rather than confirming the inquirer’s preconceived notions about it. Again, my goal was to learn of the participant’s experience and allow that emic perspective to inform my understanding of how these participants’ experienced the phenomenon of religious dialogue.

For this study, two interviews with each participant were conducted to gather data. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. I utilized a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C), and I asked follow up questions as necessary to elicit a deeper description from the participants. The first interview was conducted at the beginning of the 2009
fall semester. I sought to understand the prior experiences students had with such dialogues within the context of the course, and to learn their expectations for this encounter. The second interview occurred at the end of the semester and concentrated on the students’ experiences in the course and any actions they considered as a result of having participated in these discussions.

**The Human Instrument**

The researcher as the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is involved in the construction of a participant’s experience or reality. The data are collected and analyzed in an interactive manner between the human instrument and the participant (Erlandson et al., 1993). A number of qualifications have prepared me to serve as a human instrument, and to engage in the examination of this topic. Thus, personal interest, educational background, and professional experiences all have contributed to my sense of readiness to explore conversations across religious difference.

**Personal Interest**

For a number of years, I have been personally interested in the religious and spiritual development of traditional-aged college students. I find it intriguing to learn how college students utilize religion and spirituality to discover the meaning of life events and of their desire to share matters of faith with those around them. During my observations of religiously oriented students, I have witnessed the challenges many encounter as they try to remain faithful to their beliefs while living in secular environments. Understanding that discussing matters of religion can, at times, produce moments of anxiety for some students, I paid particular attention to the participants in this study to determine if any of them were expressing moments of crisis and distress as they were sharing their experiences in the intergroup dialogue course. Further, I have
listened as they shared stories about times of spiritual growth and about moments when they were frustrated with other individuals who did not understand what they were going through.

I am curious to discover how and when students engage one another in conversations relating to religion and spirituality. Through this study, I had the opportunity to learn of the settings and circumstances by which students engage their peers in conversation. I intend to use this information to teach students how to discuss matters of religion and spirituality with their peers and also to teach student affairs professionals about how to create conducive environments for such conversations to occur.

**Religious Background**

I was raised in a traditional Catholic home with a father who went to church every Sunday and a mother who only went to church during Christmas and Easter. As part of my Catholic faith, I was baptized, attended Catechism classes, and was confirmed as a teenager. When I was in high school and during some of my college years, I taught Sunday School classes for grade school children. When I was in graduate school, I began to study the bible, pray and meditate, fast, and tithe to the church. This was the first time in my life when I began to develop consistent religious practices as part of my faith development.

During my childhood and young adulthood, I mainly spoke with individuals from my own religion. It was not until I began my professional career in student affairs that I began to engage individuals from varying religious backgrounds in conversation. These conversations with others grew in number as I began my doctoral work and, specifically, during times when I attended professional conferences. I highly value discussing matters of religion and faith. I believe these conversations can assist us as we work through challenging life questions or circumstances, as we desire to learn about different religious perspectives, and as we seek
answers to public affairs and global concerns. My own religious experiences were always in the back of my mind as I listened to the participants share their stories but I bracketed those so that I would stay in an active listening mode in order to capture the essence of their experiences.

**Educational Background**

The graduate education I have received at Bowling Green State University prepared me to study and research the phenomenon of religious dialogue using these qualitative methods. My cognate and research courses provided me with the knowledge to examine religious issues in higher education and to conduct qualitative research. For my cognate, religious and spiritual issues in higher education, I completed a series of courses dedicated to the experience of religious identity development. These four courses: Spiritual Dimensions in Higher Education; Directed Readings: Religious and Spiritual Issues in Higher Education; Religion in Postmodern Culture; and Psychology of Religion and Coping allowed me to explore religious differences, society’s marketing and use of religion, and higher education’s approach to religious and spiritual matters.

My qualitative research course gave me an understanding of the constructivist paradigm and taught me the concepts and techniques needed to conduct a qualitative study. In that context I had the opportunity to complete a small qualitative study, which allowed me to learn how to examine an emergent experience designed to capture the individual perspective of a phenomenon. Accordingly, this course taught me how to conduct and transcribe interviews, maintain a research log, and write a case report.

**Professional Experiences**

My work experiences also have contributed to my understanding of the religious and spiritual development of college students. I served as a resident director for two years at
Simpson University, where I also advised the student government association and several ethnic student organizations. For two years at Bowling Green State University, I was an instructor for a first-year student college success course, and part of this role included working with a student leader who served as a peer mentor to the first-year students enrolled in the course. The student leaders I advised in these professional roles were students who sought to develop their religious and spiritual identity. These college students shared their personal challenges and joys of being a religious and/or spiritual individual. I also had the opportunity to observe them as they engaged others in conversations surrounding such issues. My professional experiences have thus provided a foundation for observing college students develop as religious and spiritual individuals and engaging them in conversations surrounding the topic of religion, and have served me well as I conducted this study.

Because my personal interest, educational background, and professional experiences accompany me in naturalistic inquiry as I took measures to ensure that the methodology employed was sound, the experience of each participant were told, and the phenomenon of religious dialogue was informed. Qualities of trustworthiness and authenticity helped me achieved these goals as I assembled and presented my study.

**Measures of Quality**

Measures of trustworthiness and authenticity ensure the quality and thoroughness of naturalistic research. If a study is to be added to the body of knowledge regarding a particular phenomenon, then it must guarantee some measure of trust in what is being inquired. This includes providing an application for its intended audience and a means to verify the findings (Erlandson et al., 1993).
Data Analysis

As data are being collected, they must be analyzed to identify emerging themes, potential problems, and initial findings. Following data collection, I organized the information into themes, and developed working hypotheses. The data analysis allowed me to begin the reconstruction of the participant’s reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Accordingly, I unitized the data, identified or confirm emerging themes, and began to test these working hypotheses. I developed a profile for each individual that described his or her experiences with religious dialogue first (see Appendix D). Then, I analyzed the data for common themes and disconfirming evidence across the participants (see Chapter 4).

Throughout the data collection and data analysis, the participants and I exchanged information, which led to the co-construction of the participants’ reality. This interactive experience was not designed as a platform for the participant to defend his or her own perspectives or criticize the views of his or her classmates. The method was conducted to show the connection between the participants, which allowed for a joint exploration of their experience in this dialogue course. The participants and I engaged in mutual exploration of the phenomenon and together told their stories of religious dialogue.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness demonstrates for the reader that the methods used for inquiry are valid and reliable, among other things. Trustworthiness, in this study, was established as I used indices of quality that provided “truth value through credibility, applicability through transferability, consistency through dependability, and neutrality through confirmability” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 132).
Credibility

In naturalistic inquiry, I was able to demonstrate the “truth value” of my work by detailing the multiple experiences of my participants. Additionally, I took measures to ensure that their constructions were their own (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). Triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking were used in this study to support the achievement of credibility.

Peer debriefing helped establish credibility as I secured the assistance of a graduate of a doctoral program who was familiar with naturalistic inquiry. This individual read transcripts, provided feedback, helped me identify emerging themes, and discussed methodological concerns. This technique also confirmed the participant’s voice or version of the experience is actually being shared.

Finally, member checking gave participants the opportunity to identify their voice as well as mine within the written re-construction of their experience (Erlandson et al., 1993). Participants of this study were given a copy of the interview transcripts and their individual case profile. They were given the opportunity to offer any corrections or suggestions for improvement related to the authenticity of my interpretations and conclusions.

Transferability

Transferability determines the extent to which the findings of a particular inquiry are applicable to another context or individual (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The naturalistic inquirer believes that “no true generalization is really possible; that all observations are defined by the specific contexts in which they occur” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 32). The inquirer assists the reader in determining transferability of the findings by offering a thick description about the context or experience being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Thick description provides the reader with a variety of details, (e.g., events, critical incidents, sights) about the phenomenon being studied. Further, it provides all the information needed for a reader to understand the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description in this study was given as I illustrated the classroom setting where students engaged in conversation, shared their conversational experiences with family and friends prior to the dialogue course, and detailed the views expressed by the participants during their course discussions.

**Confirmability**

Finally, another criterion of trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability helps to ensure that the information, interpretations, and findings of the constructions are those of the participants and not a reflection of the inquirer’s biases and perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The audit trail, which included interview notes, peer debriefer suggestions, data analysis sheets, and journal pages, drew distinct correlations between the interview data and my interpretations and conclusions. This then served as evidence of confirmability.

**Authenticity**

Given the ultimate goal of the constructivist paradigm, the improved construction of the participant, evidence must be established to demonstrate this achievement. This study sought testimony from the participants concerning their experience with religious dialogue as well as what they learned from others about their understanding of such conversations. These purposes translated into ontological and educative authenticity and further showed that all participants were offered equal access to the constructions. Two types of authenticity, fairness and ontological authenticity, were utilized for this study. Catalytic and tactical authenticity go beyond the scope of this study, as they detail the decisions made and actions taken by participants as a result of the constructions developed.
**Fairness**

This first criterion of authenticity ensures that the participant has access to the construction of his or her reality and to the evaluation of that construction. The objective of fairness is to give all participants an equal chance to inform the phenomenon. To achieve fairness, I sought participants who could inform the phenomenon of religious dialogue and then discussed with them the method for gathering information and creating a detailed account of their experience. Once participants were identified, they were given a letter that detailed the steps of inquiry. The informed consent letter (Appendix B) and participant access to evaluating the construction served as the two steps for achieving fairness in this study. All participants had the opportunity to review emerging themes and read the re-construction of their reality. Member checks enabled the participant to correct or enhance each construction.

**Ontological Authenticity**

Ontological authenticity refers to the extent to which a participant’s own story is improved, enhanced, or matured (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Personal testimony and the audit trail provided evidence to this particular criterion. Participants expressed having a new appreciation for an issue they previously failed to understand and/or noted changes in their profile in the audit trail.

**Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical guidelines I considered throughout the entirety of this study. Professional organizations and federal laws have sought to address four areas of concern within the experience of conducting research: guarding participants from harm; guarding participants against deception; guarding the privacy of participants, and keeping the information gained from them confidential; and obtaining fully informed consent (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).
**Harm**

Information gathered for this study was collected via two interviews with each participant. Each interview was approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. Participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the inquiry at any given point. Once the interview was completed and transcribed, participants had the opportunity to review the transcription and their individual case report and offer any deletions, corrections, and suggestions to their statements.

**Deception**

Deception prohibits the construction of a participant’s reality. Deceiving a participant regarding the aims, purposes, and steps of the inquiry is counterintuitive to naturalistic inquiry. Since its aim is to explore the multiple constructions of varying participants, a researcher cannot adequately access this information if the individual is confused or misled prior to or during the interview (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Participants in my study were informed of the purpose and goals at the beginning of the data collection. Initial contact letters, informed consent letters, and open dialogue provided participants the opportunity to learn the purpose of the study and later served as a reminder of the aims and goals of the inquiry.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**

It is difficult to ensure a participant anonymity during the research study. For this study, I provided confidentiality to my participants by using pseudonyms for all places, names, and organizations. The individuals’ stories and experiences remained accurate, but common identifiers were not disclosed, which assured participants that they could not be easily identified. Lastly, the intergroup dialogue team at the university where the dialogue course was held also knew the identities of the study participants.
Informed Consent

Individuals were asked to sign a letter of informed consent (Appendix B) once they agreed to participate in the study. Participants were fully informed about the nature of the interview and of the steps associated with the research study. For instance, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that fully informing a participant includes telling the individual of the potential risks associated with the inquiry. Participants for this study had the opportunity to ask questions throughout data collection and analysis and had the freedom to withdraw, without penalty, at any given point.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Within this chapter, I present the findings of my research study. These data are organized by the themes reflected in each of the five research questions. As part of my examination of their experiences in this religious dialogue course, I desired to understand the participants’ prior involvement with and motives for engaging in these types of dialogue. Additionally, I wanted to learn about the interactions they had across religious difference during the course and if any changes in attitudes, perceptions, or beliefs occurred as a result of engaging in these conversations. Next, I sought to study the conditions and settings of the course to determine if a traditional classroom or a lounge was the most conducive venue for engaging in dialogue. Lastly, I aspired to talk with these students to learn the outcomes and benefits they gained as a result of engaging in religious dialogue over the course of a semester. Participant answers to each of these inquires are expressed within the individual sections of this chapter.

Participants were first asked to describe their experiences and motives for engaging in conversations regarding religion prior to enrolling in the religious dialogue course. I wanted to learn how these participants had engaged in such discussions and with whom. Had they spoken with family members, friends, religious leaders, teachers, and/or strangers about religious beliefs and practices? I further wanted to know if these prior conversations had prepared the participants to engage their peers in dialogue during the class sessions. Ultimately, I wanted to know if prior experience with dialogue helped or hindered these participants as they engaged their religiously diverse peers in conversation. As I sought to gather the responses, I learned that each participant had engaged others in conversation about religion prior to the dialogue course. It is not clear, however, the extent to which this prior experience assisted or stalled the participants as they engaged one another in dialogue.
To protect individual identity, pseudonyms were given to each participant. The pseudonyms are Brandi, Traci, Jonathan, Greg, Brandon, Rene, Kathryn, Christy, Richard, Angie, and Jamie.

**Participants**

Eleven participants, seven women and four men, were interviewed for this study. Each participant was a student at the university and enrolled in the religious dialogue course. There were two sections of this dialogue course with 10 students enrolled in one section and 13 enrolled in the other section. Greg, Kathryn, Rene, Richard, and Christy were enrolled together in one section while Brandi, Brandon, Jamie, Jonathan, Traci, and Angie were enrolled together in the other section. In addition, each individual had prior experience discussing the topics of religion with family and/or friends, held viewpoints regarding their own sense of faith, and learned several life lessons as a result of enrolling and engaging in this course. The participant profiles detailed in this chapter are an abbreviated version. To read the profiles in their entirety, please see Appendix D.
Angie

Angie was a sophomore, interdisciplinary study of evolution major who decided to enroll in the dialogue course after she received positive reviews from others about the class. Angie is a member of the Sikh religion and was taught, by her parents, the religion’s tenets through religious texts and prayer sessions. Even though Angie was being educated in the Sikh faith, her parents communicated to her that it was all right to question the religion’s principles. They also encouraged her to learn more about her own beliefs by asking other individuals about their religious viewpoints. By doing so, Angie learned how to engage her family and friends in religious dialogue. Angie hoped this dialogue course would allow her to learn more about the religious beliefs of others and lead her to be a more open-minded individual.

Brandi

Brandi was a sophomore, undeclared major who enrolled in the dialogue course after receiving a recommendation from an individual who lived in her residence hall. Brandi grew up
attending an Apostolic/Pentecostal church and was active in this church serving as the assistant to the congregation’s youth pastor and organizing activities for the youth. Brandi’s religious education was taught to her through church services and while speaking with her stepmother who is a pastor. As Brandi had questions regarding faith and personal matters, she turned to family, friends, and God for advice. Brandi utilized the practice of prayer as a means of finding direction from God regarding such life decisions as which college to attend. While Brandi was building her relationship with God, she hoped to also develop friendships with her dialogue classmates as she learned about their personal and religious experiences.

**Brandon**

Brandon was senior, philosophy major who enrolled in the religion dialogue after a positive experience in a previous dialogue course. While Brandon grew up in a Protestant-Catholic home, his home was not particularly religious. Even though religion was not a major aspect of family life, Brandon did engage in a number of conversations with his friends about religion and, in particular, religious doctrine. He also had the opportunity to engage in debates with varying church leaders. Brandon stated these experiences with dialogue taught him about the beliefs of others, and he hoped to learn even more about varying viewpoints as he engaged his peers in conversation during the dialogue course. He further desired to gain an understanding of religions with which he had not previously encountered.

**Christy**

Christy was a senior, industrial and operations engineering major who enrolled in the course to learn how individuals decide to passionately pursue their religious beliefs. Participation in religious practices and involvement with holy day celebrations was not a major aspect of Christy’s family as her parents are Atheists. Christy attended a high school with a
diverse student population so she did have an opportunity to speak with fellow students about religion. She also spoke with her parents about why they chose not to follow the religion of their parents. Christy believed these previous conversations would prove beneficial as she spoke with classmates during the dialogue course. In addition to learning why individuals practice their faith as they do, Christy was interested in discovering more about the beliefs within each religion.

**Greg**

Greg was a sophomore, brain, behavior, and cognitive science major who enrolled in the dialogue course after receiving an email about the class. He had previously taken a religion course, which he enjoyed, and liked the idea of being a member of a class where he could discuss religion with others in a safe environment. Greg grew up in a Muslim household and today loosely observes the principles of the Muslim faith. The practices of prayer, fasting, Mosque attendance, and holy day celebration were taught in Greg’s home and the religious education continued as he developed relationships with his peers. Greg has spoken with his parents, sibling, and friends about a variety of subjects including religion. He believed these previous conversations would prove beneficial as he engaged his classmates in dialogue. Greg was hopeful that once the semester ended he and his fellow students would be more open-minded regarding religious difference.

**Jamie**

Jamie was a junior, psychology major who enrolled in an intergroup dialogue course at the encouragement of one of her sorority sisters. She was raised in a Jewish family and grew up attending Hebrew school, religious services, and holy day celebrations. As a teenager, Jamie learned how to speak with others as she discussed social and academic issues with family and
religious practices with friends. As Jamie was taught the beliefs of the Jewish faith and learned of the religious views of others, she began to formulate her own thoughts about religion. Jamie hoped to continue this religious education as a student in the dialogue course. She desired to learn more about varying faith communities as well as discover what individuals think about the Jewish faith and, in particular, why some hold anti-Semitic beliefs.

**Jonathan**

Jonathan was a sophomore, industrial and operations engineering major who enrolled in the course after one of his fraternity brothers told him about the class. Jonathan grew in a Catholic home and as a child and teenager observed each one of the religious rites. While Jonathan’s parents were not particularly religious, he felt as if his extended family members and friends were religious because they regularly attended church and prayed before every meal. Jonathan rarely spoke with his family and friends about religion and he carried this limited interaction with him into the dialogue course. Jonathan hoped this course would teach him about the varying beliefs within each religion as well as how to speak with others about religion.

**Kathryn**

Kathryn was a junior, science/psychology major who was interested in taking the dialogue course in an effort to learn more about individuals from differing religious backgrounds. When Kathryn was a young girl, she received most of her religious education from her friends because her parents did not attend religious services or practice spiritual disciplines. Her awareness of religion increased as she attended church services with her friends. Participating in these religious activities gave Kathryn the opportunity to speak with others about the aspects of religious life such as reading the Bible and singing spiritual songs. Later in her teenage years, Kathryn’s parents did develop an interest in religion and began to speak with her
about their religious choices. She felt as if these interactions with friends and family have prepared her to engage her peers in religious dialogue. She hoped this course would lead to new friendships and the discovery of some different ways in which to talk with individuals about religion.

**Rene**

Rene was a sophomore, business major who enrolled in the dialogue course to learn more about the religious backgrounds of others. Rene grew up in a Jewish household, and she attended a Jewish day school, which allowed family, neighbors, friends, and teachers to continuously nurture her Jewish faith and culture. Rene did have an opportunity through class assignments to learn about the beliefs and practices of those from differing religions. While interactions with individuals from diverse religious backgrounds were limited, the meetings Rene did experience taught her how to speak with those who held differing beliefs. These conversations would later serve as a means of preparation for the dialogue course. As the semester began, Rene wondered how her beliefs would change and develop, as a result, of engaging her classmates in conversations regarding religion.

**Richard**

Richard was a sophomore, economics and environmental studies major who became interested in the dialogue class after receiving an email suggesting he consider enrolling in the course. Richard grew up in the predominately Muslim country of Pakistan and was raised in conservative Muslim family. His faith in God was strengthened as he was taught how to pray by his mother, shared his beliefs with those outside of Islam, and had conversations with Muslim peers about varying aspects of their religion as well as other religions. Richard viewed this dialogue course as an opportunity to learn.
Traci

Traci was a sophomore, biology major who enrolled in the dialogue course because she saw it as an opportunity to share her views and learn about the beliefs of others. Traci was born in India and moved to the United States when she was five years old. As she was growing up, Traci’s parents taught her the principles and practices of the Sikh faith. Traci continued to learn about her faith as she engaged her parents and friends in conversation about the religious and cultural aspects of Sikhism. Traci believed these previous conversations helped to prepare her for the discussions she would have with others during the dialogue course. While Traci desired to discover other religious, she was particularly interested in learning about Christianity. And like other students in her class, Traci hoped to develop friendships with her fellow classmates.

Religious and Spiritual Beginnings

The participants in this study came from different religious backgrounds and had varying levels of interactions with family and friends regarding religious and spiritual practices. Each of these individuals did have the opportunity to speak with their parents, siblings, and friends about religious doctrine, spiritual practices, and holy day celebrations. These encounters and conversations have shaped the way in which these participants approach religion within a variety of personal and social settings. The quotes used below were given in interviews in response to the following questions:

- How did you come to develop an interest in this course?
- Had you had experiences, uh, in the past with conversation, difficult kind of conversations or discussions around religion, spirituality?
- Did you have discussions about religion, spirituality, faith, growing up in your family?
• As you have conversations with them and with your peers about religion, spirituality and faith, have your opinions been shaped by those conversations?
• Have you had a conversation with someone and that conversation went badly?

**The Influence of Family**

Several participants grew up in households where religious and spiritual practices were a constant among family members. They discussed the frequency with which they attended religious services with their parents and siblings. The regularity of temple or church attendance and the encouragement to engage in particular rites of passage (e.g. baptism, Bar Mitzvah) by these participants’ parents communicated the level of dedication family members had for their respective religion. For example, Traci’s parents drove out of town in order for their family to attend temple and learn about the Sikh religion.

A lot of people do not know much about Sikhism because it is a recent religion. It is only about five hundred years old. My parents did a great job of engraving that in me because we went to temple, and we tried to go every Sunday. It was 45 minutes away from our town but we still went every Sunday because we wanted to keep it with us. Traci expressed, as other participants did, that the example of her parents led her to become more knowledgeable of her religion’s history, leaders, and beliefs and taught her the value her parents placed on implementing religious principles into their daily lives.

Although participants were frequently attending religious services and learning the core tenets of their religion, there were participants who were learning that religion was not a major aspect or an aspect at all in their parents’ lives. Jonathan is one such participant who grew up in a non-religious home and described his childhood experiences with religion, stating:
When I grew up, my parents were both Catholic but we did not necessarily practice church a lot. When I was in fourth grade, my brother and me got baptized. We did the whole Catechism thing, got confirmed. Ever since eighth grade, after the confirmation, we have only been to church less than ten times. My grandmother got us a student Bible. I did not read it all but I did skim through it. It was the thing we had to do because it was Catechism.

Jonathan, like most participants, followed the teaching and modeled the behavior of his parents regarding religion and living as a religious or non-religious individual. The influence of a parent’s religious choices and practices was felt and applied by participants in this study. This was true for Greg as he watched his mother and father observe their Muslim faith. Through their example, he began to gain an understanding of Islam and the Muslim culture.

I knew growing up I was Muslim. I knew I was a Sunni Muslim. I knew that there were things that Muslims do. Muslims pray, Muslims fast, Muslims give to charity, Muslims go to Mecca for the Hajj. I knew these were things we did. I did not know why yet but I knew those were things we did. I knew that if we did those things we would be in God’s favor and God likes Muslims to do those things.

Learning about the family’s religious beliefs by engaging in prayer was expressed not only by Greg but by several other participants as well. Richard also learned about the Muslim faith by watching those around him engage in the spiritual practice of meditation. He is a member of a conservative Muslim family and grew up in an area where everyone he knew practiced Islam.

Growing up in a predominantly Muslim country, religion is a part of your lifestyle. From the beginning my mother was after me to pray. I have thought about how religion is something you practice and started thinking about it really early.
Although prayer was an avenue for learning about the Muslim faith for Richard, other participants revealed that Bible study, participation in church activities, and fasting served as the way in which their parents taught them about faith. Beyond these spiritual disciplines, there was still yet another practice that taught one participant about living as a person of faith. For Angie, family members communicated the importance of religion and religious practices through articles of clothing. She said her father did the same as he demonstrated his commitment to the Sikh faith by presenting a particular outward appearance.

My father looked like he was some sort of Shaman. He was very spiritual, very calm. When I was little I just considered that religious. He wore a turban and had a big white fluffy beard. I think most of my ideas about religion came from him. He was always very strong and practicing it.

As Angie and other participants were learning about their family religion and participating in a variety of spiritual disciplines, one participant was discovering a religious lesson of another type. During a conversation with her father, Christy asked him why he and her mother had chosen not to follow the religious paths of their parents and instead chose to live as Atheists.

Well my father was raised Christian. His parents made him go to church, and I think after high school he just had no interest in really pursuing it. He did not have bad things to say, necessarily, he just did not feel attracted to it. Neither was my mom. My mom’s parents gave her the choice of choosing a religion so they let her attend all kinds of religious services with her friends. She decided not to choose one either. My parents are practical and direct, and I think they have this idea that religion is more abstract. I think they felt like it would dominate their [lives]. They saw it dominating other peoples’ lives, and I do not think they really liked that. I think a lot of their personal views on hot
topics like abortion or same sex marriage, religion conflicted with those views so that was even less of a reason to identify with it.

Early interactions with family members taught Christy and the other participants about the religion of their ancestors as well as allowed them to witness how these individuals lived out their religious beliefs on a daily basis. The connections with parents and other members of the family would serve as a first encounter with people of faith and shape how participants approached other religious individuals in the future.

**The Influence of School and Friends**

Family members were not the only individuals assisting these participants in learning about religion and religious practices. Friends were also providing a religious education to the participants both inside and outside the classroom. Not only did the participants learn more about their own sense of faith while making friends at school, but they also had the occasion to discover the faith perspective of others. For Greg, the opportunity to learn about varying faith backgrounds began when he started attending school and his sphere of religious influence expanded to include the examples of his friends.

As you grow up your friends came into the picture, and they were like the devil’s advocate at points. You were going to have fun with your friends so you did things that were not necessarily allowed by religion. Going into sixth or seventh grade or maybe eighth grade, I was a religious person, not that I am not now, but I was sticking with everything, and I probably did not do things wrong. Going out with friends strengthened my belief in religion because we would have encounters and share our viewpoints with each other. I finally understood what a Muslim was. We would discuss our sects, Sunni
and Shia, and after that go into Christianity and Judaism. Those encounters definitely strengthened my belief in my own religion.

As some participants, like Greg, were being introduced to varying religious viewpoints by talking with their friends, other participants were receiving their religious education through their school’s curriculum. This was true for Rene as she was given the opportunity in school to learn more about her own Jewish faith while becoming acquainted with the religion of her peers.

As part of my education, we learned about other religions a little bit. It was not that I was unaware of it [other religions] or did not understand what they were; I just had never developed a friendship or relationship with other religions. There was something interesting about seeing a different way of life. In the fourth grade, there was a program with a Christian school and throughout the year we would meet with each other and they would come to our Synagogue and we would go to their church. We could see the different things but it was never that in depth or extensive and we did not really develop serious relationships with them.

For Kathryn, however, this setting would provide an even deeper level of education regarding the religious beliefs of others. Throughout her grade school years Kathryn received much of her religious education from her friends, as her parents did not participate in a religion or spiritual faith. She shared that her friends “were really religious and taught me about the meaning of church, respecting religion, and respecting what you believe in.” As her friends continued to share aspects of their faith, Kathryn’s interest in religion grew.

My friends were really religious and when we were talking about stuff, they were saying, ‘well we are going to church on this day’ and asked, ‘would you like to come along?’ So we would spend some time together as friends and from that point they started to talk
about, ‘it is not good to do this’, or ‘it is not good to do that,’ and ‘our religion says that we should do it like this.’

As others discovered school as a way to learn about the religious and spiritual life of those with differing beliefs, Jamie saw it as an opportunity to reaffirm her own religious beliefs. Jamie was raised in a Jewish family and a consistent aspect of her family life was attending religious services and celebrating high holy days. As a child and teenager, she attended Hebrew school and it was there she learned the foundations of the Jewish faith.

I grew up going to Hebrew school my whole life, through my whole elementary and high school education. I facilitated learning my own religion and trying to understand other people’s religions. I was learning the foundations of my own religion, in particular, and why I believed and having my own viewpoint as opposed to what I grew up with and developed my own understanding of Judaism.

As with the other participants, friendships would serve as a way for Christy to experience the religious practices of others while strengthening her own thoughts and approaches to religion. Although religion was not an aspect of her family dynamics, she did attend an international high school where students from varying ethnic and religious backgrounds were present. Christy shared that this exposure to differing religious backgrounds taught her, at a superficial level, about the basic customs and traditions of religion.

I grew up in an environment where no one was really religious. I went to religious ceremonies for Christmas. I went to church with some friends, and have friends who were ‘Bar Mitzvah’d.’ Some of my best friends were Muslim. But none of them were very religious, per se. They went to these things due to family custom, the tradition of going to church or temple but none of them were really religious, per se. So it was never
really an issue. A lot of my friends did not even practice anything. Out of my ten best girlfriends: one was Muslim, one was Christian, one was Jewish, and the rest did not practice anything. It was not different to not have a religion. It was not considered abnormal.

As parents and family members were laying the religious foundation for these participants, other worldviews of faith were also being shared as these young people watched the actions and heard the stories of their classmates and friends. These moments of learning about the beliefs of friends and strangers would later lead to times of engaging others in dialogue about religious doctrine, religious practices, and personal choices.

**Conversations with Family Members**

While living at home and prior to enrolling in the dialogue course, these participants had conversations with family members regarding academic endeavors, relationship challenges, and religious practices. Some of these exchanges with family members were light-hearted and easy-going while others were more intense and serious in nature. Such a conversation was described as Brandi recalled a time when her mother wanted to speak with her about the discovery of self.

When I was thirteen years old my mother sat down with me and talked to me in a way that she had never talked to me before. I was like, ‘okay mom.’ She said, ‘you are growing up,’ and this was as hard for her as it was for me. It was weird for me and hard for her. She was like, ‘you are growing up, you are becoming a young lady and you have to be centered in yourself.’ That talk to me was about balance and about being centered and about knowing who you are and being comfortable with whom you are. That has been one of the most influential times of my life. My mother just sat me down and she asked me, ‘who are you?’ She asked me, who am I, and she waited for me to tell her.
And of course, you tell her the obvious things, my name is, I am thirteen years old. That really was not what she was looking for but she waited for me to get into whom I am. She talked to me about being okay with that and finding balance in that. That was a big deal.

Traci also had the opportunity to speak with a family member about being true to self and the choices one makes in his or her daily life. During a particular conversation Traci had with her father, she learned more about the religious practices and cultural aspects of her faith.

My dad and I are constantly talking about our culture. I call it lectures because sometimes I am just like, ‘okay, dad.’ He usually really emphasizes the fact that I need to remember who I am and remember my culture. Sometimes you get caught up in a different environment and you may follow their lifestyles. For example, in my culture we do not date, we usually have arranged marriages. As culture changes and views change, some families stay more traditional than others and my family is traditional. In high school our family was the only Indian family. My town was a pretty small town and people would be asked to the prom but I would have difficulty talking to my parents about it because their views are traditional, strict, and, Indian. My views are mixed. I understand why people date here but I also understand my parents’ view. I join those two and form my view about what I think. The whole respect issue; respect your parents, respect what they teach you; I usually side with my parents and go with that. I usually talk to them about my culture and sometimes ask them, ‘why? ‘Why is this that?’ Sometimes the whole dating thing is frustrating. I do not talk to my dad mostly about it but I talk to my mom. I am just like, ‘mom, why is this?’ She explains her view on it
and sometimes, trust me, I do rebel and contradict what they are saying. We try to find a happy medium because I am different from them.

Like Traci and other participants, Angie spoke with her parents about personal issues as well as sought spiritual guidance from them. Depending on the matter at hand, Angie made a decision as to which parent she spoke with regarding a subject.

When it comes to issues of faith, I talk to my mom if I am trying to dissect ideas and my belief in God. My belief in God has changed dramatically over the past few years. I always talk to her because my dad is more of someone who just has his faith and does not really question it all that much. Not to say that he does not think about things. He is very pensive and but my mom thinks of things rationally. She is a realist and will always think of things in a rational manner and my dad on the other hand is my spiritual counselor. If I am ever having problems, whether it is being stressed out or confused with my own identity, I always turn to him for that.

In Kathryn’s dialogue experience with a parent, she had the unique opportunity to speak with her father about living life as a person of faith. As Kathryn described this occurrence, she had a moment of self-discovery realizing she did not normally have such conversations as this with him.

I talked to my dad one time about religion and he was telling me about how saints live their lives and how we still try to do some of the things that they did. To me all of the things they did were a little extreme, and I do not think I could do that. He was trying to tell me how I could do it and it was really meaningful to me because I was talking to my dad about these things, and I did not use to talk to him like that. It was interesting to see him and how involved he got throughout the years. He knew so many things and was
trying to make me a better person; trying to make me more connected with my religion.

It was a nice experience to have that conversation with him.

As some of the participants spoke only with their parents about personal challenges and matters of faith, other participants discussed private and religious subjects with both their siblings and parents. Greg described a time when he spoke with his brother about his views regarding the practice of prayer.

My brother and I were having a conversation like two years ago. He does not pray. We were in Syria at that time and people were trying to talk him into praying. Then he said something pretty interesting. He said, ‘is praying necessarily something I have to do, I mean what if my faith is enough?’ And I thought that was pretty interesting that he felt that way. I do not necessarily agree with it really. I feel prayer is something that is prescribed by God to the Muslims, to pray five times a day. There are certain things that are prescribed for you like praying and fasting so you have to do it. Also giving to charity and doing the five pillars of Islam are things you have to do. But then there are certain things that they say you have to do that I do not agree with. If it is something that is prescribed and I do not agree with it I still have to abide by it because it is in our books, and I have to do it. But if it is something that is a little loose like not as strict as prayer or fasting, and I do not agree with it then I think from my own logic that if I do not agree with it then I should not do it. If I am contradicting something that we have to do but I do not agree with it then I feel like if it is a loose thing, and I cannot abide strictly to it. But if it is something really that is just without question and you have to do it, I go ahead and do it. There are certain things, mostly small issues, I do not agree with, and I feel like it would be wrong for me to do those things if I do not agree with it.
These conversations allowed the participants to discuss a variety of personal and religious topics with their loved ones and discover ways to ask questions and seek the opinions of those individuals without the fear of judgment or ridicule. Through these discussions the participants also began to formulate their own views about religious practices and societal issues and how to express those views to others.

**Conversations with Friends**

These participants were given several opportunities throughout their middle and high school years to speak with their peers about religion. Actually more participants reported slightly more instances of speaking with their friends about the topic of religion than they reported speaking with their family members about the subject. Christy shared a conversation during a summer camp in which she and her roommate discussed the lifestyle choices one makes as a young adult.

I went to a summer camp workshop the summer between my junior and senior year and my roommate was Christian. She had a promise ring, which was something I had never seen before. I asked her what it was, and I stayed up with her all night talking about it. I had never met someone so religious. She went to church on Sundays no matter what. She prayed every night and again she had her promise ring. I would say most values associated politically with Christians she followed and believed in. That was something very different for me and was really eye opening.

Christy admitted that as she listened to this individual speak, she felt as if this young woman’s thoughts were foolish. Christy explained that while she respected an individual’s right to utilize religion as a way to create a sense of peace, she became frustrated by her roommate’s views because she thought her roommate was “following something to the point where she could not
even formulate her own thoughts or opinions besides those that were told to her. She could not deviate at all from it.”

Like Christy, Brandon also learned about the viewpoints of others as he took advantage of the opportunity to speak with his friends about varying controversial topics. Brandon acknowledged that as he matured and listened to the stories of others, his opinions on these topics began to alter.

We [Brandon and his friends] had all known each other our whole lives and had gone to school together. There were times when it [conversations] got heated but I do not think it got to the point where there was anger. I do realize though that there were times when I was a lot younger, beginning middle school, I had been raised with more conservative values from my parents. Eventually I re-thought them and then most of them changed. I realize I still have some of that moral intuition from that. There are certain topics, which will resonate with certain people and it is almost like you cannot put a certain viewpoint forward in a way that will not anger them. I experienced that with views on homosexuality, which I had adopted from my parents. These have since changed but I was voicing the opinion that it is not sustainable in the Bible, and I did not realize one of my lifelong friends was gay at that point. That caused a conflict but we were able to resolve it.

Traci also saw dialogue as an avenue to clarify one’s personal views as well as the unique beliefs within each religion, religious doctrine, and/or religious sect. She shared she and her friends would talk about their religious beliefs and compare notes as to which religion asked believers to follow certain tenets.
Some of my closest friends, we might be friends for like two years, and then they suddenly say, ‘wait, aren’t you Hindu?’ or ‘Wait, aren’t you Muslim?’ That is where it sometimes goes from they have already assumed something about me and we have been friends. From there I can say ‘no, no, no, my religion is Sikhism, we believe in one God.’

Many people who do not know much [these religions] about have a cloudy view of Hindu, Islam, and Sikhism. They mix them all together. They might say ‘wait, isn’t Sikhism the one where they believe in Allah?’ I say, ‘no, no, no.’ I clear it up for them and that is how our conversations went. We had teachers in my religion and when they come to my house we have pictures of those teachers. I remember the first time one of my friends came, I went to the bathroom, and I came back out and saw her just staring at it. She was trying to say the names of them, and I just started laughing because she totally mispronounced them. She was really interested and from there I said, ‘well this one taught us this,’ and from there we would go on. They do not have to say, ‘okay, this is really cool, I believe in it too.’ They just see that difference and learn from it.

Like other participants, Jamie has talked with others about her religion and religious doctrine. These conversations have generally centered on Temple attendance and the religious practices of others. There was one conversation Jamie had with a friend of her sister, however, that she considered especially meaningful.

I was having separate conversations with my sister’s boyfriend and my own boyfriend and both of them do not go to services for the High Holidays. At first I got very defensive. I can be open with them because I have known my sister’s boyfriend for five years and my own boyfriend for two years. I do not really mind being disrespectful to them because they will go back and say it is okay. I vent to them and say, I do not want
to say that I am so observant but I just think, from my own point of view, it is necessary to go to temple

For Rene, talking about religion and religious beliefs was a regular occurrence for her and her friends. Throughout Rene’s middle school and high school years, she had several conversations with her family and friends about the existence of God, Jewish practices, and the importance of religion. Some of the conversations Rene had with friends in high school were generated after listening to the teachings of her religious educators.

In high school I would have discussions with my friends, not that we did not agree with our rabbis and different teachers [but they] were more religious than a lot of my friends so there were things that we did not agree with or thought they were extreme about so we would discuss that. I am very questionable of the existence of God and a lot of my friends are not. It was interesting to discuss that with them and how even though I did not necessarily believe in [existence of God] I would still consider myself a pretty observant and religious person.

Like other participants Richard has also explored his beliefs through talking with his friends. He shared that when his friends are together they talk about religion and the conversation is usually focused on their Muslim faith. Richard said he and his friends have a decent understanding of Islam. One topic that is not generally discussed amongst Richard and his friends is the existence of sects within a particular religion.

The more difficult topic is talking about the sects within a religion than the religion itself. We hardly ever go into that. That is really a lot more complicated and subject to a lot more problems. For some reason, it is easier to talk about different religions than sects [within a religion]. In sects there are such small things that are different like you pray
with your arms open and the other sect prays with their arms closed. They just keep fighting about that non-stop and it is hard to really pin point why you are fighting. It is definitely interesting to see how different sects as well as different religions come into play because it is a matter of interpretation. It is kind of sad how every religion gets cut down into so many sects and every sect fights with each other. They are not tolerant of each other and they cannot really live together in one place because everyone has to be the right one.

**Difficult Dialogues**

These participants have had the opportunity to engage in conversations with family members, friends, and acquaintances prior to attending college and enrolling in the dialogue course. These conversations included an even exchange between the participant and other that while on some level may have been intense, generally felt positive and casual in nature. There were instances, however, when participants engaged in conversations with individuals that lead to disagreement between the two involved. The topics of these tough conversations ranged from relationships to religious beliefs to international events. Brandi recounted a time when one such difficult discussion occurred between her and her parents.

The boyfriend conversation went badly. My parents are still uncomfortable with me dating. But they are getting used to it because I am 19 and they will have to. That conversation was like, ‘you do not need to date, you do not need a boyfriend, who is this person calling our house?’ And I said, ‘because I like him.’ That was not a good conversation and it ended up in the three of us in a shouting match. At the end of the conversation nobody felt better and nothing was resolved. We had to come back to it when we were in a better place. We had all thought about what we could decipher
throughout the screaming and come back with a better attitude. And we did and it has been a lot better.

Brandi stated she walked away from that conversation learning she does not like to argue. She shared in her large family that she is the peacekeeper and tried to think things through before she said them. In this instance, however, she said she “knows that she did not think about the things she was saying and was not trying to keep the peace with her parents and afterwards felt horrible for it.”

Similarly, Angie shared a difficult conversation she had with individual about the topic of religion. During this particular discussion, Angie was talking with a member of her own religion and found she was disagreeing with his perspective.

I had a conversation with another Sikh and he was the only other Sikh I have met here [college]. He started talking about the violent aspects of Sikhism and actually believed in them. That is how he practices his Sikhism, not by obviously inflicting violence upon others but he had a shirt of somebody who was a very violent figure in Sikhism and that is how he projected it. I did not really express my opinions to him at that time, I just walked away thinking, ‘I do not agree with that part of Sikhism and the way he was talking about it scared me.’ This was probably the least successful conversation I have had with somebody, which is ironic because it was with another Sikh.

Like other participants, Traci learned that not all conversations are enjoyable or uplifting. She detailed one unpleasant conversation about the terrorist attacks that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001 with a boy in her school.

He was one of those people who was like, ‘wait, aren’t you Muslim or something?’ It was after the September 11th attacks. We were talking about turbans or something and
he made a very rude comment. I forgot what it was but it was about turbans. He used some discriminating word. He was referring to the Islam religion but he did not have knowledge that turbans can be worn in Sikhism and Muslims also wear it too. Sikhism wear a different style, they have a different meaning to why they wear it. Muslims have a different meaning and that is where the meaning comes in. I remember him saying, ‘well, that is not entirely true,’ and I was not trying to say, ‘you cannot say that.’ I was like ‘well that is not entirely true. My faith says this too and we still wear it.’ He said, ‘are you not a Muslim anyways?’ And I was like, ‘No.’ I have known this kid for three years and it was really surprising. Sometimes when you are with somebody and you realize they assume something about you, you are like, ‘wow, maybe I should have brought it up.’ You think when I first meet somebody should I just say it flat out, ‘Okay this is my religion, so do not assume this about me’ or should you just wait? Sometimes if you wait too long, they might think you are something completely different. That is why I hate assumptions. Everyone does it, and I do it all the time.

These peer encounters opened up new and different vantage points for the participants and assisted in the preparation for them to engage their religious dialogue classmates in conversation. Not all of the conversations these participants had were positive or affirming, which proved beneficial as they had opportunities prior to enrolling in the dialogue course with how to express their thoughts and listen to others in the midst of a challenging exchange.

Classroom Dialogue Experiences

Throughout the semester, these participants were asked to share their thoughts and beliefs concerning a variety of subjects. Students discussed such topics as interfaith dating, abortion, and prayer in school. As some of these controversial areas were discussed, students further
defined their own beliefs and had the opportunity to learn the perspectives of their classmates. The students noted that in all the discussions held during the semester, there were conversations that were particularly powerful, difficult, and engaging. They shared the details and insights about each of these special moments of dialogue. During interviews, the following quotes came in response to these questions:

- Can you give me an example of a time when someone from a different religious identity other than yourself, shared an experience that had an impact on you?
- Can you tell me of a time when a conflict arose in class?
- Can you tell me about a time when you were fully engaged, fully present during a dialogue, during conversation?

**Powerful Stories**

During class discussions, students revealed their spiritual beliefs, explained the doctrine and tenets of their religion, clarified the practices within their respective religion, and talked about the conversations they have had with others regarding religion. As stories were shared in class there were moments when the students became touched by the experiences of their classmates. Students were given the opportunity to share about a time when one of their classmates of a different religious background other than their own that had a particular impact on them. For Angie, this moment came as another student was sharing her spiritual journey.

I had this assumption, and I hate saying it because it sounds really wrong but I come from clearly a different background. My family, a minority in every sense of the word, was raised in a really diverse culture. My grandparents always stressed traveling so I have seen a lot of different cultures, and I assumed my cultural experience and my spiritual experience was somehow richer than other people’s because they have not traveled as
extensively. I am really ashamed I thought that other people who were speaking had not been out, they had not really seen a lot of diversity. They have been a part of a lot of majority groups; they are a part of the majority groups in a lot of senses so I just thought they would not understand and they would not have as much to share. It was amazing that the people I thought that about, I had the most in similar, most in common with. I think it is interesting because I found the most commonalities with people from religions other than my own. Then with the other Sikh girl in the class, I really do not see any similarity so that was really striking to me.

Angie shared that several feelings came up for her as she was experiencing these revelations about her classmates.

I was just thinking that I was just very self-righteous, thinking that I had this really unique, diverse perspective. It is just funny because I hate the mentality that other people have of not liking diversity but I was actually having the exact same thing. It was diversity in the opposite sense. I thought people who had not experienced a lot or had not been part of a minority could not understand and did not feel oppression. And that is not true at all; everybody has something. There is no normal person. I think it is really hard to forget that when you see someone who might come off ordinary in their experiences, like you would not miss in class. I think that is something really important. It has made me realize that everybody has a background and story, and everybody can understand.

Like Angie, Christy also had the opportunity to learn the religious perspective of one of her classmates. Christy stated she engaged in some self reflection as she listened to a classmate describe her experience of feeling as if she is a minority member in a religion of the majority.
There is one girl in class who I believe is Romanian and of a Christian denomination, not quite sure which, but Christians are considered the predominant, biggest religious group in this country yet she feels she is still a minority because she actually follows her religion pretty closely. She pretty much observes all the rules, traditions. She had a very different experience, which is interesting because usually people of the dominant group do not really have that kind of experience. She seemed very genuine about why she felt like she was still a minority even though she is Christian. I think back home she felt people were much more dedicated to their religion and more open and obvious about their religious identities. I guess I have the opposite experience. I think I am a minority because I do not have any religious affiliation both in the world and U.S. I actually feel like I am not disadvantaged at all because I do not have an affiliation. I am actually able to dabble in things without it conflicting with my religion. I think it is very difficult to observe your religion because high holidays conflict with your exams. Who is going to take a day off of doing homework because they are going to religious service? It is just not realistic. I do not even have to think about that. It does not have to bother me, does not have to stress me out. It also, in a way, made my life a little bit easier. I guess I am missing out on the community that a religion brings, but it is just funny that I had the opposite

As described by other participants, Rene began to ponder her own views about her religion and religious identity when she encountered an individual of a differing faith. Her reflection process was initiated as a classmate shared his perspective about physical appearance as it relates to religious beliefs.
One of the Arab students in class talked about he does not necessarily look religious or other people may characterize him as not religious enough because of ways they perceive him. But he does consider himself as a very religious person, and he knows that what he does is right for what he believes. I relate to that in some sense. I do not think I come off as religious, and I do not think that I need to in order to be the way I want to be. It was interesting to see that even though it was within different religions, we both felt that way.

Like Rene, a discussion concerning physical appearance and religion also had an impact on another participant. During a class session, Brandi stated one of her classmates discussed the way in which he used his appearance to demonstrate his faith beliefs.

In class we had two people who were of the Sikh faith and they talked about when growing up they were always different and how people like looked at them differently. They do not cut their hair and their fathers wore turbans. They felt singled out sometimes. I was just like, wow that is really true. They are being judged for something that they cannot really help. I can understand that, not so much as a Christian, but as a person of color. I know what it is like to be different in your surroundings and not being able to control that and have people think of you differently because of it. It was just because of religion and that is even more so because it is so personal. I just was like, wow to have someone look at you differently just because of the faith that you believe in.

Brandi said she could identify with what these students were sharing. She shared she could not identify with the Sikh faith but could identify with being different and that brought her to their level and that was something she understood.
The religious experiences of a member of the Sikh faith also served as a point of impact for Jonathan. He was touched by the stories two students shared regarding challenges they and their family faced for being members of this faith.

There were two people who are of the Sikh religion. One told us a story of oppression she and her family, especially her dad faced when they came over here. There was another girl in class whose parents came over and her Dad does not wear his turban anymore and cut his hair. One girl in our class, her dad still wears a turban because he is proud and does not really bother with what other people around him say. I really admire that. The other girl in the class, I still respect her and her family but it is just different that her dad does not wear the turban and cut his hair. A lot of their cousins do not wear the turban and all cut their hair. I just found that a little different how even though they are both from the same religion and the two of them view it completely different.

Jonathan was surprised by the story details of this Sikh classmate and left the conversation with several feelings and thoughts about this student’s experience.

I could not believe that people would have to do what he did. He came to the United States and could not even wear his turban or keep his hair long because he felt he would be oppressed. Eventually he had to sort of give up his beliefs and values. He cut off his hair, took off the turban, and that is how he lives his life now. It is unfortunate he had to do that.

The influence of family on the practices of faith was a topic of discussion, which also touched Traci as she listened to her classmates share their stories. Traci shared of one particular story, which had an impact on her more than the other stories she heard.
There was one girl and her religion was Greek Orthodox. She was talking about how her family has been going to their church every Sunday and going through rituals or something every day. She said she never really knew what it meant; she was just going through it and it just became a part of her. It just became right. I found that interesting because that is exactly how mine was also. My parents just took me to my temple, and I automatically thought ‘well this is me, this is who I am supposed to be and this is my place.’ That is how it was for her and that is how I found out that everyone was like that also. We just go through the routines and then you come to an age when you start to question and ask, ‘why am I doing this?’ That is when other aspects come into play.

As Traci was listening to this student share her perspective, she began to feel a connection and form a sense of empathy develop.

I felt I could share more with her. She even said, ‘I even felt kind of guilty that I did not know what I was being taught really until I grew up and actually thought about it.’ I remember telling her, ‘I do not feel guilty.’ I said, ‘everyone is like that.’ We just go through the process and then you come to an age when you do; you are at that understanding and you can actually think about what you are doing. Then you can make a choice for yourself rather than your elders or anyone else making it for you.

Jamie also learned about the influence of family on the religious choices one can make as she listened to one of her classmates describe how her mother and the Divine inspired the direction she would later take on her religious journey.

One of the girls, her mom is a pastor at her church at home. She was trying to describe to us when she knew this is what she wanted to do. It was almost like her enlightening. I found that very interesting. She had a specific experience and an affect over her that
made her understand why she thinks the things she does. I have never experienced a thing like that, where there is this one thing that reinforces why I believe the things I do. I just grew up and was socialized to know that this, I am a Jew, this is what I believe, this is what I do not believe. By hearing that kind of an account was interesting since I have not experienced something like that.

Jamie admits as this classmate was sharing this story, she began to feel envious of the student and her experience.

Thinking back now I almost had an air of being jealous because she had that kind of an experience. But I also treasure my upbringing, treasure my identities. Just because I did not have one specific experience, it was a compilation of all my experiences that helped shape who I am and my religious identity. It was not one specific ‘aha’ moment; it was just a compilation of all my life experiences.

Kathryn had the opportunity to learn a similar lesson as to Jamie, as she listened to one of her classmates discuss the religious example of her parents. After hearing this student’s story, Kathryn made some decisions about how she felt about those who do not observe a religious faith or doctrine.

One of the girls in the dialogue is not a part of any religious association. She identifies as an agnostic. She was saying how she grew up with a Chinese mother and she did not really have any religion. Her father was Christian but they never brought her up going to church and believing in God. It was hard for me to imagine how people do not have a religion. It is not that I disapprove, but it is just hard for me to understand. I see the world as everybody having a religion and everybody believing in something. It is hard for me when I find somebody who does not believe in anything. It is hard for her
because she does not know the meaning of prayer or the meaning of attending a religious holiday. It is just something that is not there that should be there. During the dialogue I realized that everybody believes in the same morals and just because she does not have religion does not mean she is going to go out there and kill people or be mean to people. I have encountered this before but I did not get the chance to talk to that person and get their experiences and understand how they came to this point to not believe in anything.

Throughout the semester, Brandon was given the opportunity to learn about the religious experiences of two of his classmates. Listening to these students as they shared their stories enabled Brandon to gain new perspectives about religious difference.

There was one girl who found her own church. It is really surprising because most people that are still religious are religious because they follow the religion of their parents. But even the people that followed the religion of their parents had thought about it and had their own views. I have had discussions with people who have honestly never thought about it, to the point where it is not something that even goes through their mind; that they could be wrong. They should think about it themselves but it is just what their church or pastor says and that is it and the end of the question. I was actually happy that there was not anybody like that in the class. You cannot get anywhere with that because they do not really even understand their views; it is just acceptance. There was one girl who was the daughter of a pastor and she was extremely Christian. I was worried about it in the beginning because she had said that she does not believe in evolution and she used words like holy ghost experience when describing her past. From my experience that sets off triggers of the fundamentalists and campus preachers. But it was really nice that she actually had moderate views and that really surprised me. We were in the hot topics and
she was strongly Christian but she did not follow the views of her religion. She had really thought about it. That was the most surprising and good thing that I found.

Brandon shared that by listening to the experience and perspective of this particular student and of others in the class, he discovered he would be able to have future conversations with those who were different from him about religion.

It made it easier for me to talk to people and explain my position. Most people in the room had heard of Christianity and Judaism and they had experiences with them. But there were several people that had never really met or interacted with an Atheist before. It made it easier to talk about. The only thing that really made my journey go one way and theirs go the other is that I purposely did not use faith and that changed it for me to a different path. But really we have the same journey; it is just that we had different priorities.

Lastly, Richard found himself also relating to a fellow classmate as she shared her religious journey, and of moving from one place to another. As this student shared her story, Richard began to further see connections between her experiences and his religious perspective.

One girl in our dialogue was Christian. She was born somewhere else but moved here when she was a young child. Her experience changed coming from a Catholic majority. Here you are in the U.S. and seeing how they are not really as strong anymore. She had some opposition in school and from other non-believing people who were against Christianity. That really had an impact on me because that was something that I could kind of relate to, coming to a different environment and having to settle in. I was fortunate enough not to have gone through anything as drastic as opposition as far as religion goes. It was something that had an impact on me and resonated with me. It
related to me so I could see where she was coming from probably more than other people in the class. The feelings she had and the beliefs she held were really important and other people totally discarded them. Things like that really stood out for me. You meet a lot of people who do not believe in God or your religion, or any religion for that matter. So they basically have this tendency of not respecting any religion and that is the most painful part. If you are not a believing person but are a tolerant person that works out fine. But if you are intolerant and non-believing, that is a bad combination.

Throughout the semester these participants were given the opportunity to learn about the personal and religious views of their peers through the method of dialogue. As students shared their experiences with religion, fellow classmates had the opportunity to discover the dynamic lessons within each story. They also learned a bit more about themselves as they heard these testimonies and further defined their own personal and religious beliefs. But not all of these conversations went smoothly, it was also through an element of conflict in these discussions that ushered in some moments of learning for these students.

**Challenging Conversations**

At times, throughout the dialogue course, serious and controversial subject matter was introduced in class by the facilitators. The topics of sexual education, prayer in school, societal views of premarital sex, and interfaith dating were predetermined by the program staff as subject matter to include during the hot topics portion of the course, but there were other topics including religious dress, LGBTQ rights, and abortion that were brought up by the students as issues to discuss. As each topic was brought forth students were asked to share their viewpoints, thoughts, and beliefs and there were instances when some of the conversation around this material became heated and created moments of conflict for the students. The participants
shared that the topics of religious dress, prejudices and perceptions, abortion, and interfaith
dating and marriage generated the most intense discussions for them and their classmates.

**Religious Dress.** Early in the semester during one particular class session students began
talking about clothing. As students were sharing their opinions the conversation turned into a
discussion about turbans and that is when Angie began to feel some inner turmoil.

I know there were times when I felt triggered and did not act on it. I guess that would be
more like internal conflict. One of the first days of class we were talking about turbans.
I was telling them the identifying marks of a Sikh person. For women it is really long
hair and steel bracelets for both sexes. For men, and sometimes women, it is turbans. I
was explaining that most people who wear turbans are not Muslim. If you see a person
wearing a turban on this campus, they are almost a hundred percent a Sikh. One girl in
class said, ‘well yeah, whenever I see a person with a turban on a plane that I am on I get
really nervous, and I am wondering they should go through more security checks.’ I did
not confront her, and I kind of understood it. I have personal experience, my dad wears a
turban, and we get stopped every single time we go to an airport. He is 67 years old and
it is really hard for me to see that they cannot understand that my dad is harmless. There
was definitely conflict there within myself. In terms of an actual argument arising, one
time the same girl was talking about the stereotypes that applied to us because of our
religion. She is Jewish and she was saying how she hates how people assume that she is
rich. One of the other girls in class, who is one of the more outspoken ones, said, ‘well
aren’t they? Are not all Jewish people rich?’ And she said, ‘no, of course that is not true.
I know a lot of Jewish people that live in ghettoes or whatever else.’ Then she said, ‘well
yeah, I know more black people that live in ghettoes. Jewish people for the most part are
And so it was kind of tense and then it simmered down. Later the Jewish girl was talking about privileges we received because of our identity, and said, ‘well it is not really my religious identity but my dad is a doctor and he is well known in his field. One day I went to the hospital because I fell and chipped my tooth. I got to the front of the line and got my tooth replaced and got a veneer that day.’ The girl was asked, ‘well, how can you say that you’re not rich?’ Everybody stopped talking and were arguing saying, ‘Jewish people are rich!’ It was difficult because I could see where both of them were coming from and at the same time I could see that there was this disconnect and they were just miscommunicating.

Angie took a moment to reflect on this conversation and shared how her identity as a member of the Sikh faith played a role in how she responded to this class discussion.

I was the arbitrary third party in a way. I did not belong to a religion that people had a lot of assumptions about. I had considered my spirituality a lot before entering the class. There were a lot of arguments that happened directed at Christianity, directed at minorities, directed at Atheists, and I felt that I was on the outside of some of the rings. That is sort of how I acted. I could mediate. I picked a side usually, not trying to pick a side, but I had my opinion and I would mediate between the two. We split off into groups of people that had been privileged by society in terms of being the majority, which were mainly the Christians and Catholics in the class and then the minorities. I was sort of in the middle because I am a minority in terms of my religion. But in terms of education or social class I guess I have more privilege that way. There was the minority and the majority and then I, somewhere in the middle. When they were talking
about privilege it was interesting for me to be in that position, looking at the sides and not really fitting into either of them.

**Prejudices and Perceptions.** Brandi also discovered that she was experiencing more of an internal conflict as opposed to a struggle with her classmates as they were discussing varying subjects in class. She felt as if her peers wanted her to respond and act in a stereotypical fashion for her religious identity when in fact she did not hold those conventional views.

This is not so much of a conflict for the class as it was for me. I was raised differently than your traditional Apostolic Pentecostal family. They think of apostolic people as Bible throwers, fanatic, have harsh beliefs, and are judgmental. I did not know people thought like that because the way I was raised. You do not hate anybody and you do not judge people. I do understand there are some Christian people who say you do this and you are going to hell. The way I was brought up, you do not have any hell to put anybody in so you can never say that; you can never judge anyone. I know telling people to go to hell is something people say randomly but in my house you never said that; you never told someone to go to hell because you really cannot. I just came in with a different mindset than what they were expecting. A lot of time they felt like I was being politically correct because I would not I think that all gays go to hell. That is not how I feel. They were expecting me to do that. I told my friends, ‘you guys want me to have a fanatic moment, you want me to come out and just say something offensive because this is what you are expecting from me and you are not going to get it because that is just the way I was brought up. Why do you want me to be what you are afraid of.’ It was hard for me to help the class get past that. I cannot speak for everyone I can only speak for myself and this is how I feel. I am not being politically correct, and I am not walking on
eggshells because other people hear this is what I was taught, this is how I feel. I would not do that. I would not blatantly lie to their faces about what I am thinking if the whole purpose of this class is to share what we believe. That was hard at first; that was really hard.

Brandi shared how her identity as a Christian played a role for her during these conversations with her classmates.

The way I was brought up is to love your neighbor and you turn the other cheek to people. When I was upset I felt that is why I did not retaliate in the way that I could have. I thought they just do not understand. I am turning the other cheek. I have been offended but that is no reason for me to freak out. I just have to explain to you why this is not okay. After that I tried not to hold any grudges against people because as a Christian I am not supposed to do that. I am supposed to forgive you and not think this way about this person. I have to let this go. It was hard at first but you get used to it.

**LGBTQ Rights.** A particular heated exchange occurred in class as the students began to discuss equal rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community. Brandon shared that a comment made by one of his classmates altered the established communication dynamics of the group.

One thing that really shook the whole class was during the hot topic discussion of gay rights. One girl said that she does not have anything against gay rights or gays in particular but if her sister turned out to be gay she would kill her. She was completely serious. She had thought about this and she said she had told her sister. That really shook up the discussion to where it was not even a conflict anymore; really made people not feel safe. It ruined the kind of safety that we had developed and it really surprised all
of us. She had said things before like that without thinking and it was just amazing how it was something that she had accepted, that she had thought about it. That was really strange.

Brandon said his religious beliefs did not necessarily play a role in how he responded during this particular class discussion. He further shared how he views his Atheist faith in relation to such subjects as abortion and LGBTQ rights.

I do not know if it really did play a large role, especially in the hot topic discussions. They are more separable from religion. I do not really base my views on abortion or gay marriage on religion. I did not have to discuss it and we actually did not focus so much on what the Bible says. When it did get into those kind of discussions, there was one, for a good portion of the gay marriage debate and gay rights, they were talking about whether or not gays should be able to be married in a church. I really did not feel like I had much to say there because I do not have a church. We were going over whether we would feel comfortable if they were allowed to marry in our churches. That was a point where I did not have as much to say because it was more focused on people who had that religion.

**Abortion.** Another controversial subject discussed during the semester was abortion. Several participants mentioned abortion as the most heated discussion they engaged in during the course. Jamie’s class was surprised to learn some of the views of her classmates as they shared their opinions about the hot topic.

I think one of the most heated ones was abortion. We discussed if abortion was okay and stem cell research. Two people in our class are devout Catholics so clearly they were very much against abortion. The one classmate whose mother is a pastor, she, which we
all thought would be very against abortion, told us this story about how her grandmother or great-grandmother years ago had to get a back alley abortion and how she is very much pro-choice because of that and to avoid all the complications that will come with that. Everyone was really shocked by the fact that she was so for women’s choice. It did not so much make a conflict but I think within the Christian people in our class, they were almost bothered by that because they thought that she would be like the figurehead for Christian religion and having a sense of pro-life. It is interesting that not everyone follows a religion as the book says. They take what they want and use it to help them find their own religious identity.

Jamie did not tie her religious beliefs to the way in which she responded to this particular classmates and others during this discussion. She feels as if her religious beliefs ought to be separate from her stance regarding abortion.

I do not think my religious identity played a role because my conservative, Judaism is also pro-life. My beliefs with abortion have nothing to do with my religious identity. I do not think religion should play a role in that. Personally, just knowing friends and family members who have had to get abortions, I do not think I would ever subject myself or subject someone to forcing them to have a child if they did not want one.

Jonathan also felt as if the discussion of abortion led his classmates into an engaging conversation and stated this particular class dialogue included thoughts shared by his course facilitator. For Jonathan, this subject also caused some internal debate to occur.

When the abortion topic came up one of our facilitators, she did not push her opinions on us, but our facilitators were pretty actively engaged in the dialogues as well. She told her opinion on it and then other people were telling their opinion. A lot of the class was on
the same level, pretty pro-choice. We all favored life obviously but we felt in certain cases that pro-choice was obviously the best thing. But then there were some people, maybe two people, marched in pro-life, abortion rallies. I did not get mad or angry but in my head I am thinking, ‘that is completely wrong, that makes no sense. I am an engineer, I need a logical sense and that does not make sense at all to me.’ The past two class periods our facilitators allowed us to bring up things that were bugging us and that was something that somebody brought up, the abortion thing. They asked the person about it just to get it cleared up. That was really political correctness. That was a big topic for two classes. We felt in our class being so politically correct is not always the best thing to do. I was interested by that because some people around me try to be so politically correct and think they are better than you. But in that class people were open to everything.

As Jonathan considered how his Catholic faith played a role in this abortion discussion he shared that, “Catholicism is pro-life, and I think people should have the choice to do whatever they want in their life and should be able to do what they want.”

Traci believed the conversation on abortion was beneficial to her and her classmates because there was a certain amount of disagreement, which occurred among peers.

I think abortion was probably our most successful discussion because we had those conflicts. It was not so much of a conflict; it was just trying to get our view across of why we believe that and why our faith believes that. I think the problem was that it came from our faith because some people were saying, ‘you are like this because your faith kind of affects you.’ But those people were saying, ‘no, it is my faith but it is also my
personal beliefs.’ It was just accusing each other, like, ‘oh, I really think your faith affects it.’

Traci felt this discussion was successful because her peers “came to an understanding at the end and were in a comfortable setting because they all got to hear each other’s view.” She further stated that by the end of the conversation she and her classmates “were all smiling” and recognized that while the discussion “did get heated they were all glad it got heated because that was the only way they would learn and get to know people.”

Traci was not really able to draw on her Sikh faith for talking points she was discussing abortion with her peers. She shared that she “was really quiet in the beginning because her faith does not really talk about it much.” Her approach was to “just sit there and listen to everyone instead of putting her view out.” By the end of the conversation, however, her thoughts had settled and she stated to her classmates, ‘well, you know it could be this way’ and then began to offer more of her own opinions about the subject.

**Interfaith Dating and Marriage.** The topic, which attracted the most participant response, was interfaith dating and marriage. According to these students, opinions from all sides were offered during the discussion of whether those from different religious backgrounds ought to date or marry one another. Christy shared how this topic created intense exchanges among classmates.

It was probably the most heated part of the class because people really had strong feelings about it and were expressing them. The class was definitely divided in many ways. There were people who strongly believed in interfaith marriage. So people who do not think it is right made the argument that the kids would be confused by not having one or the other. I gave myself as an example, honestly, maybe I was a little confused for
a while but it really has not affected me very much. It is awesome that I can celebrate being in the West and East. I think a lot of kids feel the same way about being of two religions as well. I have lots of friends who have parents of different religions and they enjoy doing both. If anything, it is a unique experience to have two different backgrounds rather than just one. It sort of makes your perspective a little bit different because you are not just dedicated to one. I always think about the Olympics and the U.S. and China always do really well in the Olympics. I am really happy when both win but what if they play each other, you do not want to put one identity down over the other. I guess you could say I am more American because I was born and raised here but I grew up with my mom who is Chinese and she instilled a very strong Chinese culture in me. It is almost fun in a way to have all these different identities. I think kids of different religious identities would benefit from it. I do not think it is a problem but that was just a difference of opinion. It was very heated and people had very strong opinions about that.

Greg also noted the interfaith dating and marriage discussion as one of the topics that created some intense conversation for the class. He suggested, however, that this particular conversation was not necessarily a severe debate but rather a true dialogue among peers.

In the dialogue on interfaith dating there was a conflict but a good conflict. It does not necessarily have to be conflict, as everyone perceives it. If everyone had disagreements, everyone gave up their differing opinions. It was more bouncing different ideas off of one another because some students were saying that they do not think interfaith dating is right but others saying it should be right and you should not look at religion. So it was more, ‘okay, I believe this, you believe that and this is why I think that your thinking is
not correct.’ So it was more of a bouncing off ideas and it was a very emotional and heated up dialogue that day.

Greg did utilize his Islamic faith as he talked about interfaith dating and marriage with his classmates. He was cautious, however, to make sure his peers knew that he had personal views as well about the subject.

The fact that Islam says that anyone from the three monotheistic religions is okay is definitely what I portrayed to the class. Beyond that I said that it is not a criterion I have when looking at dating, just religion. I was definitely giving off my answers based on Islam and what Islam says but this is what I also believe in. I was not going to be a blind follower of what my religion says. I had to interpret it and discuss it. At the end, when I come up with my own conclusions that is what I am going to go based off of. It is definitely, like I said earlier, a reference point, and then based off that reference point, I come up with my own conclusions.

For Kathryn she remembers the interfaith dating and marriage topic creating a debate among members of her class. After these individuals finished stating their views Kathryn found the entire conversation thought provoking.

When we were talking about interfaith marriage there were two girls of the same religion and one of them said she would never marry outside of her religious group. The other girl said she did not mind if she married somebody of another group. When she heard the other girl saying that she would not mind then she got triggered and she said, ‘well I just do not understand how people can shut down other people of other religions just because you do not believe in what you believe.’ They have different opinions and with the girl
that would not marry outside of her religion was not so much about her religion as much as it was about the culture. So I just found that really interesting.

Kathryn spoke from more of a personal place than a religious perspective when addressing her views on interfaith dating and marriage.

When we believe in something and then go out there and date outside of our religion it is hard to integrate that person in our religious life. So to one point, it is fine but when it comes to me going to church if my partner is religious then what do I tell him? What if he is very religious too and he does not accept what I believe in? It is kind of hard, and I do not see myself doing that.

Rene also mentioned the interfaith dating and marriage as the topic of conversation that created the most conflict for the class. She also stated that some inner conflict occurred for her as she listened to the perspectives of her classmates.

Our most controversial dialogue was the one when we talked about interfaith dating and marriage. There were people from every side and was the most diversified in terms of opinion and struck the most people personally out of any other thing that we talked about. I was very surprised by what a lot of people said and especially in terms of the opinions of people of my own religion. I felt more personally connected to it so it upset me more to hear things that I did not agree with. It was confusing. I left after not really understanding how they could think what they thought or not see what I thought.

Like Kathryn, Rene looked to her personal involvements to formulate the views she shared as she responded to questions concerning this subject.

Mostly my opinions were based on my experiences and what I have observed from other people and what I have been told. I do not think I would just believe it if someone just
said it to me, and I did not see it, especially coming from where I came from and being so involved in Jewish things. There are a lot of examples where you can look at interfaith marriage and see how it may affect my community or Judaism in general.

Lastly, Richard agreed with several of his classmates in stating that the interfaith dating and marriage topic was the most intense discussion of the semester. He further discussed how one particular student’s opinion caught his attention and offered his thoughts on her perspective.

The interreligious dating was, by far, the most heated discussion we had. One of the girls was Jewish, and she got heated up because she was really stubborn. She said, ‘I am going to marry a Jew.’ It was not aggressive ignorance but it was more inquisitive ignorance. When asked, ‘why do you believe it?’ She said, ‘just because I do. Just because my family and my ancestors have done it, I will do it.’ That was an interesting thing I personally found about her and her beliefs specifically. That was something that was really new to me because in Islam you have to believe in one Allah and Mohammed being the last prophet. You are a Muslim. Anything you do after that makes you a bad or good Muslim. Those two things either define you as a Muslim or not. There is no other way to be a Muslim. But she said, ‘Religious belief-wise, I am an Atheist but culturally I am a Jew.’ So my practices, I fast, I do everything but not because I believe in a God but because my family and my ancestors have done it. That is where culture and religion were separated for the first time. Usually they go hand-in-hand. In everyday life they are synonymous. There was one point where we were finally were able to differentiate them and talk about them. Belief-wise it makes sense that God is telling you to do so but that does not really makes sense if you are just a culturally; if you are celebrating all your events and Christmas along with it. I mean, what difference does it
make? For example, me being a Muslim I have these two strong beliefs. I celebrate Thanksgiving, and I celebrate Christmas. I have been to churches and synagogues. As long as I have that belief it is irrelevant. But she said, ‘no, I will not do anything that my ancestors or parents have not done.’ That was an interesting point for me, personally, and for the class as well, it was a learning thing.

Although the concept of conflict can be an intimating factor for many, some of these participants embraced it and used it to further define their belief systems and dissect the perspectives of others. Through the discussion of such hot topics as religious dress, prejudices and perceptions, LGBQT rights, abortion, and interfaith dating and marriage, the students learned how to listen to others share their views about these controversial subjects as well as how to craft their own argument as they presented their thoughts on the matter. Besides these conversations on controversial topics, there were other discussions in which the participants found themselves feeling fully connected and in the moment while talking about religion.

**Feeling Engaged and Present**

The introduction of hot topics proved to be the catalyst that caused the participants to feel the most engaged and present during the dialogue course sessions. The discussion of LGBQT rights, specifically, was the topic most cited by participants as the dialogue with which created the deepest connection for them. Other dialogue topics such as abortion, intelligent design, interfaith dating and marriage, stereotypes, and evolution were also mentioned by participants as subjects that led to deep discussions among class members.

Brandi was one of the participants who noted the LGBQT discussion as one of the dialogues, which produced the most feelings of engagement for her. She also stated that as this
discussion began she felt as if her classmates were waiting for her to respond to the subject in a particular way.

Halfway through the semester we had a talk about gay marriage and the whole gay rights movement and we pretty much got into it. That was the first time I felt they wanted me to say something fanatical. I had felt it before, like this is not what they are expecting from me and that this is not what they wanted to hear. But that day, that was the day it was as if you should not feel this way. I said, ‘that is how I feel, what do you want from me?’ That day I really felt I needed to tell them and explain why I feel this. My best friend is gay and if she finds someone that she wants to spend the rest of her life with, I really feel she should get every right there is. I do not care if I decided to spend my life with my dog, he should get all my rights. I have seen it happen with a gay couple and someone dies and because they are not legally joined and they are not related, they do not have a right to make the choices for their loved one that they would have wanted. It is not fair, and I do not like that. That is why I feel that way. I understand the religious side of it but as far as my vote goes, you know.

Brandi shared that her classmates made it possible to feel fully engaged by giving her “positive reinforcement” as she spoke. She said she “tried not to focus on the negative things because sometimes people would shut her down, which was not fun.” In the end, Brandi stated she was able to communicate what she felt about the subject and did receive affirmation from the other students. She said the conversation “evened out, which made me not shut down.”

Christy agreed with Brandi that the LGBTQ discussion was among the most engaging conversations held during the semester. Christy grew up in a neighborhood that celebrated the gay community so this particular subject was very close to the heart for her.
When we were talking about LGBTQ status and religion that is something I feel pretty passionate about. I grew up in a neighborhood in D.C. that was considered to be like the gay neighborhood. Not necessarily because the residents were gay, there were some I guess but mostly a lot of gay bookstores, coffee shops, and souvenir stores where there. Their struggles were very apparent to me because the gay pride parade marches took place a block away from my house. You cannot really hide from it so it was always around me. I feel very passionate about the issue. I felt engaged because it was something that I felt strongly about.

Christy shared her views regarding the class dynamics that made it possible for her to feel engaged and present during this dialogue.

People were open about sharing. It is annoying when one person dominates the discussion and I do not want to be that person. If I know others are aggressively sharing things I am more likely to share my own views and be engaged and that makes me engaged when I am talking and listening.

Like others, Greg selected the LGBTQ dialogue as the most engaging conversation for him during the dialogue course. Greg shared that it was some comments he made about the subject that caused his classmates to stop and ponder what he had said for a moment.

During the queer dialogue a fellow student was saying that he thought he could relate to them and was okay with them being who they are because he could empathize with them. Then I said it resonated with a lot of people and this is when I felt most engaged in the dialogue. I brought up a point that we always say we can feel what they feel but unless we are them. We cannot say that we know how they feel because it is something that is not normal. Unless you are queer then you are not going to know. That was the point I
brought up and it was a moment where everyone was just staring and everyone was thinking. You could definitely see that people were thinking attentively and the facilitator also said, ‘wow, we have to think about this for a second.’ I definitely thought my contributions to the dialogue were beneficial to everyone, hopefully.

Greg believes difference was the factor that led him to be engaged and present during this particular discussion.

There were so many different opinions and so many different backgrounds, which is the structure of the dialogue in and of itself. There were so many open minds because we established group rules at the beginning to keep an open mind and empathize with one another. Do not be so close-minded all the time definitely contributed to the overall progression of our dialogue. Definitely each individual brought something new to the table as something diverse. It was such a diversified group with so many different opinions.

Angie suggested that while she was engaged during each class session, she was the most engaged during the LGBTQ discussion. She was particularly interested in watching her classmates interact with one another as they shared their respective viewpoints.

Every class I felt really engaged. We always made it really relevant to ourselves and to each other. The hot topics we discussed were probably when the most people were really heated and really engaged because they are issues that are really strictly tied to our beliefs and they are relevant in society. Especially during gay rights I really was because there were some people in class that were not comfortable with homosexuality. I was very engaged because I was seeing how some people were contradicting themselves. There were two girls who are Catholic. We were standing in the room and were doing an
activity. On one side it was, ‘I agree with this statement.’ On the other side was, ‘I disagree with this statement.’ After they asked a question, you moved yourself to the part of the room where you stood, quite literally. They asked the question, ‘do you feel comfortable with allowing homosexuals to get married in a church?’ Most people varied towards the middle and to the agree side of, ‘yeah, people should get married in the church.’ Then they asked the question, ‘how many of you would feel comfortable with a homosexual couple getting married in your church, that you go to?’ All the people that were to the agree side in the middle went to the ‘no’ side. It was like, ‘yeah, they can get married but not where I go to church.’ I was very present for that conversation because it made me realize just because it is not happening where you are means it is still happening. You are okay with it when it is happening somewhere else but you are not okay when it is happening in front of you. My point of view was, ‘you are a part of this world, just because you are uncomfortable with what is happening, does not mean it cannot or should not happen in front of you.’ People were just afraid. They can say being politically correct, ‘yes, I support gay rights,’ but they are much less apt to actually have that affect their lives. I was trying to make the point that, ‘alright, so if everybody is okay with gay rights, we agree that we should be a proponent of homosexuality and making it equally understood under the law and everything else.’ But everybody still says, ‘but not where I am.’ Where does that leave us? You have to take some responsibility for the change that you want to see in this world. That is when I was really present because it was just a contradiction that I was realizing. That is why a lot of things in politics and everything are at a standstill because nobody wants to take responsibility for something.
Angie felt engaged during this conversation because she felt free to share her views. She also reveals that she was the individual, however, who was doing the most talking during this class discussion.

I never felt like I could not share my beliefs. I just felt like nobody else was. I was pretty much the only one saying anything at that point. I was questioning, ‘why do you believe this if you think that it is wrong to believe.’ The student replied, ‘I think homosexuals have every right but I cannot help feeling that I do not think it is right and would not allow that to happen in my church or wherever else.’ I was still engaged because I was talking but it would get to a point. I was engaged all the time but it was not a very productive conversation.

The subject of abortion was the most engaging topic for four of the participants. During this discussion, Brandon helped the more conservative students in the class express their opinions about this topic.

The discussion about abortion was really when I felt the most in it because I got to explain, and I think I surprised a lot of people being on a more pro-life side than being pro-choice. I am very liberal on other things. I was able to assist the people who were more conservative Christians. I felt bad for them because in the discussion people were almost ashamed to say that they were against abortion it seemed. There were some people that were really supportive of abortion rights. One of the girls in class and one of the instructors were really supportive. One of the instructors was Catholic and maintained a Catholic view on it. One student, his mom, actually performs abortions. That is why it got really deep. Both of them were the most conservative Christians. The instructor said, ‘yeah, I know it might be me forcing my view and my opinions on other
people.’ And I said, ‘no you have a moral view, and if that is your moral view it is not wrong to think it should be implemented in a law. You are being consistent, so it is not forcing your views on people anymore than murder should be wrong.’ It was interesting because I was more of a moderate, in between. There was another girl who said her views but then other people were talking about how capital punishment relates. She supported capital punishment and then one of the people started attacking her saying she was being inconsistent and how could she do that. She got kind of shy and said, ‘yeah, okay and maybe I am being a little inconsistent’. I stopped right there and said, ‘no, because you can say that, you said that life is always a good thing.’ That is when I got triggered because people were talking about how we have to think about the life the baby will have in the orphanage and people were saying it would be better if they were not born if they were going to live in like an orphanage. That is when I got a little bit out of the dialogue thing because I was angry. I have friends who grew up in orphanages and were adopted late in life. You cannot judge other people’s worth of life and she was saying the same thing. But then she said that people could be killed in capital punishment. I thought and said, ‘well no, actually that is really consistent because she is saying life is always a good thing, therefore the biggest punishment you can get is to have it killed. That is really when I got the most involved.

Brandon discussed the dynamics of class that enabled him to feel so engaged during this discussion on abortion.

We never had people yelling. We got heated but it always stayed respectful. People thought about what they were going to say and they really were intent on listening. Even the more opinionated people in our discussions would ask questions that really were
about understanding how people could hold those views. There were points when it got more towards convincing people but it always had the feeling that people really wanted to know about the views and how the views were held.

There were three participants who felt the discussion on interfaith dating and marriage ushered them into a feeling of being engaged and present. Jamie felt a personal connection to this topic and strongly defended her position on the subject.

Interfaith relationships are something I am really passionate about. I will not seriously date a non-Jew. I do not see myself ever doing that, and I will not let myself do. Because in terms of numbers, if Jews do not marry Jews there will not be any Jews left at the end and bad things will happen, that is what I believe at least. When we discussed that, most people in class were pro-interfaith marriages. I thought I was one of the only ones who was really adamant about staying in your own religion when you are dating, married. I was very triggered. I think people understood my side of it. I think Christians are not as adamant about that maybe because there are so many Christians. I do not know but that is what my synagogue has always told us. You marry a Jew. My family says, ‘you marry a Jew’ so that is just what I have come to understand as true.

Jamie feels as if her personal experiences with this subject allowed her to be more engaged in this discussion than the group dynamics of the class creating that sense of involvement.

In our group, oftentimes one person will have a really emotional story that makes everyone come to realize that is okay. Mine is emotional but my mom is one of five siblings and she is the only one who married a Jewish person. She is really hurt by that. No one else took it as seriously. My life experiences and my family dynamics definitely played a role in my thoughts with that.
Rene agreed with Jamie by stating that the interfaith dating and marriage conversation was the one in which she felt the most engaged. Rene did not necessarily have a positive experience while sharing her views on the subject during the discussion.

Not like I needed to prove my point to others but I felt I needed to defend my point almost the most. I thought interfaith dating was the most important one that we had. I felt I was being attacked at some points. There were certain points when I would say something and somebody said that I was really close-minded for thinking one way or it was really upsetting that I would not consider something. That was surprising to me because I felt the exact opposite towards them, and I did not see it that way.

Rene believed that the topic led her and others to be engaged in this discussion. She said, “we had a more controversial topic; people were more engaged in it because the more opinions you have, the more you have to discuss and the more you have to learn.”

Richard also shared that he was engaged throughout each dialogue session but had the opportunity to explain the tenets of his religion during the interfaith dating and marriage discussion. As he was stating the beliefs of his religion regarding this topic there were many questions that were asked by his classmates.

During the whole time I was involved with the whole thing because I felt like I was there, representing my religion and my country at the same time. Islam, right now, has a very bad reputation in the world and unfortunately so do Pakistanis. My aim was always to show the Islamic point of view in everything and the correct Islamic view, differentiated from the common Islamic view that people have or people practice. You are more likely to find an extremist person but who has incomplete knowledge of their religion but they are really stubborn about it and they do not know why but they just do. That does not
make sense to anyone and everyone thinks are you fanatics. If you give reasons for stuff, that is when things start to make sense. For example, a small thing that I had to explain in the religious dating and marriage thing was the difference between why men in Islam are allowed to marry people of other religions while women are not. Everyone in the beginning was said, ‘why? That is bad for the woman.’ I explained the fact that Islam basically teaches that all Muslims believe in all the prophets of other religions. The man, generally, holds the head of the family status. Even here as well. If a husband and wife get in a fight, if he is tolerant, if he respects her religion and her prophets already, the last thing he will do is go and attack them and be disrespectful to her religion. A woman though, if she gets married to a non-Muslim person who does not respect or believe in Islam, the first thing he is going to attack is her religion. It is basically that respect thing. I feel like I made sense to the other people.

Richard believed the varying views of others allowed him to feel engaged during this dialogue. He suggested that if all the beliefs were the same then the discussion would be somewhat dull in nature.

Listening to the different religions’ point of views made it engaging. If it was an all Muslim dialogue, I definitely would not have been that engaged because I would have said, ‘oh, whatever, I know this stuff.’ Listening to other people’s point of views and listening to the points they had to make and then coming up with arguments to either answer their questions or to refute their thoughts at times was something that kept me on my toes most of the time.

Kathryn shared that any discussion that addressed or highlighted the varying stereotypes of her religion or the religion of others led her to become engaged in the conversation. Kathryn
believed it was her personal experience and religious beliefs along with the encouragement of the facilitators that allowed her to feel even more engaged during this discussion.

Some of the stereotypes for other religions I found myself, sometimes, saying the same thing like, ‘this group has is this or that.’ I felt they were so true prior to going to the discussion and meeting people of that group. Then when I heard the stereotypes about my religion I saw how I really felt. I understood that it is really not what it might identify with some people but that does not mean the whole group is like that. People are so different and everybody has a different experience and everybody takes the message however they want. The fact that I had, maybe not experience with every topic that was out there, but opinions and views based on my religion. Also the facilitators encouraged us to talk more about things and even when somebody seemed disengaged they called on that person and asked, ‘what do you have to say or what do you think about this?’ I thought was really helpful in getting everybody to participate in the discussion.

Traci chose a different topic from others as she stated that a discussion on evolution was the class session in which she felt the most engaged and present. She mentioned she was careful in how she presented her thoughts to her peers and utilized some earlier research she had gathered as she explained her position.

The evolution discussion was really interesting. I talked a lot in that one. We were talking about evolution and whether it should be taught in schools. I actually remember being triggered a little bit when some people said, ‘well, I do not think evolution should be taught. Religion should also be taught then in schools.’ When they said religion, they were talking about Christianity. They said that view should also be taught about God along with evolution. I remember sitting there thinking, ‘what about people who do not
believe in God.’ Obviously evolution would be for that. I remember wanting to say something but I had to force myself to sit back and think about what I was going to say to that. And then say it in a well-mannered way. You have to sit there and think about how you are going to say something without offending somebody. That is how it was. It was really interesting. I was pretty fully engaged in that because I actually did my research on my faith. Because I did my research I could talk more openly.

Traci shared that the relaxed setting of the group environment and the freedom to take time before answering a question or giving your opinion allowed her to be even more engaged during this discussion.

Nobody pressured you to say anything, first of all. There were pauses where people had to stop and think and sometimes you have a pause and it is like awkward. Our pauses in class were not awkward at all. You just sat there and thought and everyone respected it. If anyone wanted to talk, they talked. That is what made it really more comfortable for everyone to speak their mind because nobody was pressured to say anything they did not want to say.

Lastly, Jonathan did not state one specific topic that led him to feel fully engaged and present during the course but rather shared that each of the hot topic discussions allowed him to feel connected to the group and to the course.

When we did the hot topics I was more interested in listening because some people were radical and extreme with it. They had their opinion and other people had their strong opinions. I said, ‘do what you want, the choice is yours.’ But the dialogues up to the ones that included hot topics were my time to find myself and relate to the people in class. I found that I did and those were the times that I felt I talked the most. The other
times, I may not have talked a lot but I was extremely listening because I was trying to learn.

Jonathan shared that the varying backgrounds and views caused him to be even more engaged during the discussion of hot topics.

There were many different people and many backgrounds. There was not just one person of one thing. I was not singled out as the non-religious Catholic person. There was also another one similar to that. There were two people of the Sikh religion. Even though they were two Sikhs, they were completely different in how they practice it. There were two Jewish girls and they were both completely different in how they viewed it. It was nice having somebody similar to you but yet so different in the aspects and angles that they take it. I thought we had a really, well balanced class. We had an agnostic and Atheist. We had a really knowledgeable and well-balanced class, which helped us. The dynamic we had was well balanced. It allowed us to bring a lot of different view points to the table and allowed people to feel comfortable because somebody else in the class was similar to them but not too similar where they would be boring because they still had their own differences of views.

Much like the hot topics generated conflict among classmates, they also created moments of connection and presence for the participants. The more they felt engaged, the more they seemed to share their philosophies and perspectives regarding such topics as abortion, interfaith dating and marriage, and evolution. After a few weeks of talking with their peers about religion the varying elements connected to those beliefs systems, the students were given the opportunity to offer their impressions of the course.
Midway through the semester students were given the opportunity to reflect on these conversations with classmates as well as course dynamics and share what aspects of the class were influencing them concerning how they thought about the topic of religion.

Angie shared that a few weeks into the semester as controversial topics began to be discussed, she experienced a self-revelation concerning the purpose of this dialogue course. When discussing abortion, I finally understood what this class is about. Being strictly and adamantly pro-choice, I was ready to fight, to argue my point of view in order to convince others. However, I started to realize the discrepancies between the two parties, getting into the mindsets of those with differing opinions rather than simply looking for a way to counter their argument. I am usually really talkative in class, but towards the end of the session I did not say a word. I just stared at the ground. I don't know how to describe what I felt; I was upset, pensive, enlightened, confused, angry, and sad. I was upset that my view was challenged, angered by the beliefs of other people in my class, sad that they would not share my beliefs, but enlightened in realizing that they don't have to. The people sitting across from me won't ever share my beliefs, we won't agree, but I am realizing that isn't the point; it isn't the goal. Perception, identity, and experience all differ so dramatically between person to person that we can't possibly come to a consensus. We shouldn't be striving for some wonderful political in between that will let all groups live peaceably together because it doesn't exist. Rather, we just need to learn that we can still live side-by-side, we can still understand each other; we can do this even if we cannot agree with one another. I think people have to learn the hard way. They have to get out of their comfort zones enough to feel irked, to be upset, and feel vulnerable. This is still not a realization that I am completely comfortable with, having
that fighting nature in me, but I think I need to constantly remind myself, constantly relive that realization until it too becomes a part of my nature.

Brandi stated that as potentially controversial themes were introduced in class, she “tried to keep an open mind about all the topics.” As she kept an open mind while pondering these topics she shared she looked at her own life for understanding.

As Christy reflected on course sessions, she revealed the discussion of controversial themes caused her to formulate beliefs about religious individuals and her approach to them.

I have many strong opinions on social hot topics, such as abortion and LGBTQ treatment/rights. I think the more religious groups use their religion as a platform to oppose my views, the more I feel alienated from all religion. In fact, I feel less inclined to join or remain positive about religious identities when this occurs.

Greg shared that the opportunity to exchange ideas and beliefs about religion with diverse individuals has been a source of influence for him during this course.

In general, this course has been very beneficial for the sole reason that it is truly a dialogue. Many topics we discuss are deemed taboo in society but the effect it has on awakening me to these many topics is enormous. Just the fact that we can actually discuss the kind of topics we discuss is making a difference in and of itself. Many times prior to this course I have had many similar discussions to those we have in our dialogue, however, these discussions take place with people of the same culture or religion. It is very unique to have Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Agnostics in our course discussing these things. The input given is something I would have never received in any other setting than this. The fact that this is truly a dialogue and the effect it has had on me personally has stood out the most.
Jamie stated that speaking with her classmates and listening to their perspective has been the greatest source of influence for how she thinks about the topic of religion at this point. She stated influence was developed as she began, “talking to others of the same religion and seeing that they have differences. Religion is not the only identity I have, even though it is the one that strongly shapes who I am and the decisions I make.”

As Rene reflected on this course she shared which factors served as a source of influence for her as she thought about the topics of religion. She said, “I think I often consider my personal beliefs as well as what I have been taught from my family and culture back home.”

Traci shared that during the first half of the semester recognizing that an individual is more than his or her religion is the concept that has most influenced her as she thinks about the topic of religion.

The thing that has stood out for me in discussing these topics is just realizing that someone's religion is not what someone is; it is just a part of them. Without realizing I was doing it, I would sometimes learn of what faith someone was and simply identify that person in my mind as that faith and automatically stereotypes would swarm my mind.

My biggest lesson is not assuming that people of certain faiths think or act a certain way. Like I said, everyone has a unique story.

Several weeks into the semester, students were discovering how their peers related their religious beliefs to personal life decisions and the choices made by others. These beginning discussions would set the stage for how these students would interact with one another throughout the remainder of the semester and for the moments of dialogue they would have in the months and years to come.
Attitudes, Perceptions, and/or Changes in Belief

As these participants engaged in dialogue with others from a wide range of religious backgrounds and perspectives, their thoughts about self and others began to change. During these conversations some long-held, preconceived notions about certain religious groups were challenged and dissolved. Students gained new insights about personal philosophies, their own religious views, the belief systems of others, and their individual morals and values. Answers for this section were generated as I asked participants questions:

- Was there a key moment um, this semester, when you began to think critically about your religious practices or your religion?
- What are your thoughts about developing relationships with others of different religions?
- How were your own religious beliefs or practices affected by what you learned in this class?
- Has your awareness and your values, morals or practices, changed as a result of taking this course?
- How have your relationships with people who are different from you been affected by the dialogue, by this course?

Lessons About Self

These students were given the opportunity through this dialogue class to learn how to consider their personal perspectives and how to present those thoughts to others. Additionally, they learned how to listen as others shared their viewpoints. The skills acquired in this class can be utilized during future classes, careers, and personal relationships.
Angie discovered new ways to inquire about the ideas of others and how to be more accessible to difference. She shared that because of these insights and lessons she has learned about herself and others, she is now more excited to meet someone who is different from her.

I probably would be more excited now [to meet someone different from me] because of this whole dialogue process. Learning all about their experiences in my class has been really good. The first thing I would think of is, ‘Ooh, diversity. Ooh, dialogue. Chance to build cultural and spiritual bridges.’ I think now it would be immediately associated with my experience in the dialogue class, whereas before, I do not think I would have discriminated or anything, I do not think I would have done anything differently. This last class we talked about how people are afraid to ask questions about religions. So I guess what I would do differently is I would not be afraid to ask certain questions, be very blunt about, wanting to learn more. I think a big problem we have and why there is such misunderstanding between different religions and spirituality is because we are very politically correct. That can be a good thing but it can also be a really bad thing. Just because people are not saying things as they normally would does not mean that they are ok with it and does not mean they understand it. I think there was a certain degree of political correctness that I probably will not reserve anymore.

Brandi shared that a discussion on LGBTQ rights allowed her to further examine her personal views, how she felt about people in the church, and how she felt about her classmates. Brandi also shared how these statements from her classmates suggesting she was not being authentic made her feel in the moment.

Well the conversation really did it make me understand why I felt this way in comparison to the way most people think. There are people in the church who are completely
homophobic. It made me understand why I am not and why I do not feel like that. I need to talk to them about hate. You cannot be hateful. That is one of the things that I feel is so odd. People in the Christian faith, they preach love and understanding and then they go out and bash people. I do not like that. This was not what they [classmates] were trying to hear from me. People were shocked. Some people were surprised, pleasantly. Some people were surprised like they thought I was not being honest. Some people were like, ‘I am glad to see that you do not have these kind of fanatical views.’ Others were like, ‘you do not feel like that, you are walking on eggshells, you are being politically correct for the class’ It made me feel like the people who were telling me that I am supposed to be judgmental were judging me. People were talking about how Christians in this country are the majority. So outside of the majority, Christians judge everybody else. And I felt, ‘You are judging me right now.’ You feel like Christians have all these stereotypes of you and you have stereotypes of me, and I felt that was not fair. Christians get singled out as being judgmental and overbearing with other religions and yet you are doing the same exact thing with me.

Lastly, Brandi stated that throughout the class she appreciated the positive reinforcement she received from others and tried not to focus on the negative aspects.

Sometimes people would kind of shut you down and that was not ever fun. But I could say, ‘I feel this way’ and have someone go, ‘oh that is great.’ So it evened out, which made me not shut down.

For Brandon, he discovered that as other students talked about their experiences and beliefs, it made it easier for him to share his thoughts and views. Brandon shared that as these conversations were occurring in class, he did not necessarily begin to critically think about his
own sense of belief as he had already been doing so for years prior to the course. He did state, however, that this class caused him to become more understanding of the thoughts of others.

Most people in the room had heard of Christianity and Judaism and had experiences with them. But there were several people that had never met or interacted with an Atheist before. It made it easier to talk about and then saying the whole difference between what made my journey go one way and theirs go the other is that I did not use faith. That changed it for me to a different path but really we have the same journey. It was just that we had different priorities. It [the class] was more about understanding the positions of the other people. I do understand more now, and I felt like it was a good experience because I was able to confront; as I talked about last time, I get a little tense when I am around really religious people. But it was not so much that I was because for me the structure of the dialogue was not set up for me to really critique my beliefs. For me to change my beliefs, it would have to be more like a debate setting because I do need to have people critiquing my reasons. We did not do that but I got something else out of it. It was more the understanding of the other people and being more comfortable. I mean everybody in the class was really nice and really cool.

Christy shared of an experience in class where her views were in contrast to those of her peers. During a particular discussion about interracial marriage some intense moments were created for Christy, especially given that her parents come from different racial backgrounds.

I found myself disagreeing a lot with my classmates. There were a lot of things that did bother me a lot. It did not change my opinion necessarily but it definitely affected me greatly. For example, there was one girl in class who said that she opposed interracial marriage within her own religion. She is Jewish and gets upset when Jews marry non-
Jews. That was sort of personal in a way because even though I do not belong to any religion, my parents are of different races. You can draw a lot of the same parallels between interfaith and interracial marriage. And to think I am sort of diluting the White race or Asian race. However you want to look at it, it is upsetting. Maybe I am less White or less Asian but I still am able to appreciate both. I am still able to celebrate both. They are two really beautiful cultures, and I really like being a part of those. I feel like you can do the same with religion. I do not see why your diluting is a bad thing. I think a lot of children end up choosing maybe one or the other to practice or they celebrate both. I have friends who are half Christian, half Jewish who celebrate both holidays with both the parents. They are all just doing it together. I am a little more understanding if you are very religious and you feel like your religious beliefs would clash with someone else’s. But if you are just talking about the culture of religion, I do not see why that is necessarily upsetting. So that struck me in a personal way.

This discussion of interracial marriage continued among her peers and actually led to a class conflict for Christy and her peers during the class session.

Well this was a conflict. It was probably the most heated part of the class. I think the reason why it was so heated was because people really had strong feelings about it and were expressing them. The class was definitely divided in many ways. There were people who strongly believed in interfaith marriage. A lot of people made the argument that the kids would be confused by not having one or the other. I gave myself as an example. Like honestly, maybe I was a little confused for a while but it really has not affected me very much. In fact, I think it is awesome that I can celebrate being in the West and East. I think a lot of kids would feel the same way about being of two religions
as well. I have lots of friends who have parents of different religions and they enjoy doing both. And if anything, it is a unique experience to have two different backgrounds rather than just one. I think it sort of makes your perspective a little bit different because you are not just dedicated to one. You could say I am more American because I was born and raised here. I grew up with my mom who is Chinese and she instilled a very strong Chinese culture in me. It is almost fun in a way to have all these different identities. I think kids of different religious identities would benefit from it. I do not think it is a problem but that was just a difference of opinion.

As a result of engaging in class discussions Greg shared that his relationships with his family and friends have been slightly altered. He now seeks the opportunity to talk with them about their beliefs and discover their viewpoints on societal and religious issues.

There are much more intellectual conversations between my friends and I. I see myself going back to my parents and family and discussing things and seeing their stance on the issue. You want to see what your parents believe in and you want to hold similar beliefs to your parents. When you get older and you are coming up with your own beliefs, you want to always bounce back ideas off your parents. I am definitely seeing myself bouncing more ideas off of them and seeing what they believe. I take into consideration where they grew up and that they did not go to a liberal college where they had dialogue courses like this. I am definitely taking these ideas and concepts from dialogue and applying them to a lot of my family and friends.

During the class sessions, Rene really allowed herself to listen to the beliefs of others and ponder what those comments meant for her own life. “There were times when somebody would
make a point and it would confuse me so I would sit back and think, ‘Well, what do I believe about this?’ because I do not want to start saying things that I am not sure that I believe.’”

Rene felt this process of self-reflection was good for her because she thinks it is important for one to know what he or she believes especially when needing to represent oneself to another. She said, “I can say that I believe this but until you really are forced to think about it, you do not really know if you believe it or not.”

The conversations in this dialogue class have helped Richard to become more tolerant toward and understanding of other religions. Richard shared that he “was definitely tolerant of others” before this class but the discussions with his classmates during the semester “opened his eyes a little more.”

The probability of me offending someone in daily life is lesser than before because now I actually know about other religions more than I did before this dialogue started. I know what the general feelings are about religion on campus and with the people around me. That definitely has helped me and will help me in the future on an international level. These people, the same group is going to move on along with me all over the world. This is what our generation will grow up, getting to understand people from different places and with different ideologies. This definitely helped out a lot. I feel like I have a better understanding now of these things.

Through these course discussions participants took advantage of the opportunity to learn more about their personal views as well as to assess their level of comfort when talking and addressing controversial issues. The facilitators and classmates helped one another gain relational and conversational skills that will assist them throughout their college career and
beyond. In addition to attaining these abilities, students also examined and enhanced their own religious belief systems.

**Views Regarding Personal Faith**

Since the discussions in this particular dialogue course centered on the subject of religion, participants had a unique opportunity during a college class to examine their religious beliefs. Through these semi-structured discussions students changed, developed, deepened, and maintained their sense of faith.

For Angie, she altered her views about the Christian religion and those individuals who identify as Christian. As a result of being in this course, she now reserves judgment of others until she has had an opportunity to talk with and learn about that individual’s personal experiences.

I am definitely less apt to make assumptions when people say they are Christian. The reason I had feelings about Christianity is because I felt that was the force that was oppressing a lot of other religions and very against my own beliefs. There was one girl in our class whose viewpoints are extremely different from her religion. When people say, Pentecostal, they have definite associations they bring up. She was great and her opinions were so grounded in her experiences. She is who she is as a person and not just her religion. I thought it was really important to understand that she is not tied to her religion in every aspect. I think that is how I am going to approach people, to stop altogether making any assumptions. There are even basic assumptions you think you can make about people, and I am going to stop making any of them. There were Jewish people in our class that practice their religion the exact same way certain Christian people
did, and I practice my religion the same way as agnostics did. There is nothing you can say about somebody when they tell you what their religion is.

As Brandi was learning about the experiences of her classmates, she was taking the time to examine her thoughts about her own religious beliefs. Brandi shared that attending the service of another faith also helped her learn more about self and her beliefs. Even though this experience was a bit scary at first, she later learned that some of the religious text passages she reads and believes in were actually the same as this other religion.

When we started to do the group project we had to think about what we wanted to do and my group decided we were going to go to each other’s place of worship. We were going to experience a service with each religion. And before I said I wanted to do that I had to really think about is this what I wanted to do. I had to think would this make people uncomfortable or if it did was I okay with that. How different was I okay with being, and I had to think about are there things that would offend people. I really had to delve into my religion without feeling personally attached to it before I prepared to take someone of another faith there. Judaism was the one I was most afraid of because I knew that when I got there everybody was going to be like you are not Jewish. I was going to be the only person of color there, which was true. When we got there it was like you are not Jewish and everybody turned like you are not Jewish and all eyes were on me for a second. I was a little freaked out about that at first but I got in and knew that Christianity and Judaism were really tied together. They have the same history but I did not know how much of it was going to be the same things that I knew. They read psalms and it was all in Hebrew but they had the English translation on the other side and I knew some of those psalms. Some of Hebrew words that they use I understood because you learn those
as part of a Bible study. So it was not so odd. And a lot of the psalms are really pretty. So I was like, ‘This is great.’ The language barrier was there because I do not speak Hebrew, and I was like, ‘What is going on?’ But I understood the meaning of it, and I understood why it was important. The psalms and the prayers that they say I can identify with it.

Christy shared how one classmate’s experience with the Christian faith and feeling like a minority member in a religion of the majority caused her to consider her daily activities in relation to religious practices.

I have the opposite experience. I think I am a minority because I do not have any religious affiliation in the world and in the U.S. I actually feel like I am not disadvantaged at all because I do not have an affiliation I am actually able to dabble in things without it conflicting with my religion. I think a lot of people struggle. It is very difficult to observe your religion because high holidays conflict with your exams. Who is going to take a day off of doing homework because they are going to religious service? It is just not realistic. I do not even have to think about that. It does not have to bother me; did not have to stress me out. It has also in a way made my life a little bit easier. I guess I am missing out on the community that a religion brings but it is just funny that I had the opposite experience of her. I am a minority yet I feel like it is my advantage.

For Greg, he has thought about how others in his own faith would respond to some of the controversial topics discussed during the dialogue course. This course has led Greg to consider the reasons why certain individuals believe as they do or the motives they may have for engaging in particular behaviors.
I have taken a lot of the topics we have discussed in the dialogue course outside the classroom and it has made me think of how other Muslims look at the issues. I have noticed that people are much more conservative. I am not looking down on them at all because who are we to judge? But I question why they believe and why their belief is so strong. Is it because of their parents or because of their community or their friends? Is it really because they questioned it and they wound up back at the same conclusions? I think it is the former. That is just my personal opinion. I do not think that they have questioned themselves yet and not to say that being conservative is wrong. I am definitely not saying that but when I look at conservative Muslims for example, I just question why it is that they are conservative. If they question themselves and they wound back, that is completely fine. I just cannot believe that yet because I have met a lot of people, especially on campus, that are very strict. I believe that God is just and God is not going to for example, condemn you for you talking to a woman. I think it all comes down to intentions. That is my first and foremost belief is intentions. If you do not believe in your intentions then you do not trust yourself. But back to viewing other Muslims, I question their questioning of their faith. Are they really questioning their faith? Muslims believe God says you should never follow blindly and you should always question. One of the very prominent quotes in our religion is, ‘A man who follows a wise man is the one who questions, and the foolish man is the one who just abides blindly.’ This following blindly aspect that I have talked about a couple times is very important, and I just question whether that is what is going on with other Muslims. At the same time, I look at secular Muslims and it is just this battle between two extremes of the spectrum
The conversations occurring during the dialogue course led Jamie to reflect upon and question her own beliefs. As she began to question her beliefs, she “felt guilty at first” and felt as if she “should not be questioning her religion” because she equated her religious beliefs with “a huge part of who she was.” As the dialogues continued, she decided it was good for her to question her beliefs.

Even if you think you are a hundred percent for something, just to sit down and ask yourself why, and listen to other people’s perspectives, that is really beneficial in forming yourself. Jamie further believed that the process of questioning the principles and tenets of her religion has allowed her to further “shape her own religious identity.”

As Jonathan listened to the stories of his fellow classmates, he found himself beginning to critically think about his own religion and religious practices. The instructors asked the class to write their life story and about their sense of religion. Jonathan admits that when this assignment was given to them, he did not feel as if he would have much to say in his essay. Jonathan stated that when it came time for assignment to be due, the instructors asked the students to read aloud their stories. Jonathan shared that he thought to himself; “mine is going to be terrible.” He shared what this exercise was like for him that day in class.

All the people shared and it was like we were not too different. We kind of have similar things; we are all trying to find what we want. That was a big turning moment. I thought it was over for me. I thought I am never going to be religious. I am Catholic but I am not going to church. I am not going to do anything with it. But there were other people like that too but they are actually trying to do stuff. I thought, ‘why can’t I.’ That is when I started realizing maybe I should do it because I can follow that and start my own
religious journey just like people my same age are doing. As we read them aloud, the facilitators kept reassuring us just like when they made comments on my journal. Even though I am not super religious, I still have my own opinion. I still have my own views, and I still have my own religious identity. They kind of helped it a lot too, making me feel more comfortable speaking about it in class.

As Kathryn was considering the experiences and viewpoints of others, she took the opportunity to also critically think about her own beliefs as well regarding religion. Brandi shared that attending the service of another faith also helped her learn more about self and her beliefs. Even though this experience was a bit scary at first, she later learned that some of the religious text passages she reads and believes in were actually the same as this other religion.

I remember when they were talking about stereotypes and some stereotypes came out about my religion. They were about how it is just so easy to be Christian because you go to church and confess and all of the sudden you are forgiven of all your sins. It is like you can go back and sin again. To one point yeah I do that too but I was not taught that way. It is inevitable sometimes to be perfect but it is not the thing that I do believe that if I am forgiven then why not do it again or just start from where I ended. It did not trigger me but it had me thinking about my way of being and how my friends are and how my family is. I was thinking about other people that I know are Christian, and I could see that once they go to church and after they say they are forgiven and everything is back to normal to the bad normal. I realize that stereotypes have a true say in what people believe. My parents always say if you really want forgiveness you have to stop doing it. Once you do something and you realize it is bad and you go to confession you say you did it but then you have to not do it again if you want forgiveness. I do realize that but
then it is hard sometimes to do that with certain things. It is just hard; it is just human nature.

Richard shared that as he engaged in conversations during the dialogue class, there were times when he also critically thought about his own religion. He said during each session there was a comment by others that made him think about his religion and Pakistan from both a Muslim and non-Muslim point of view.

There were a lot of times when I had to critically think, especially before class when we were having a heated debate. For example, we had this talk about LGBTQ individuals. In most places around the world, including Pakistan, it is not considered an issue. I mean it is not an option, so it is not an issue. It is not something you talk about ever. I had to search online and go to friends and ask them about the Islamic point of view. Obviously, off the top of your head, you are like ‘every religion is against LGBTQ.’ But I had to go in and if it was, then why was it? I had to go and see the reasons behind it, because a lot of times when you believe in religion you just take some things for granted. God said so, so it is so. When you have to reason with others and convey your point of view, you have to find the reasons. I feel that helped me improve my religious knowledge as well.

As Traci listened to the experiences of her peers, like other students, she began to critically think about her own faith beliefs. It was during a discussion about evolution when this process began to occur for her.

I remember the week we were going over evolution and whether we believed in evolution and science or science and faith; how it conflicted, what we believe, what our faith believes. I remember sitting there and everyone had a view of what his or her faith said. I never really looked into it. I just knew I am Sikh, a good person. I only knew simple
things of it but I never really took the time to actually learn what my faith is truly trying
to teach us. I remember that week I had to do research for my journal entries so I could
put in what my faith also states. I remember thinking; in a way I was kind of relieved
because my personal views did match my faith views. That is when I kind of realized
that maybe instead of just going through the motions, I should really focus on the internal
meanings and what it is actually trying to teach me.

Traci said these conversations forced her to more closely identify with her faith and allowed her
to see her faith from another’s perspective.

I did not really know I identified myself with that faith but I did not really know what the
true meanings were tagged on with it. I think that is how it affected me. It forced me to
kind of identify with myself more. To have a meaning for whom, I am instead of just
stating I am this. It was also nice looking at my own faith from a different person’s point
of view. It puts it into a different perspective. For one of our projects, we visited other
temples and churches. I remember taking three girls to my temple. Since I go through
the routine every Sunday, we walk in, take off our shoes, walk upstairs, bow down, go sit
down on the girls side, the guys sit on their sides. Having them along with me, and them
asking questions, ‘why do you do this? Why is this this way? What is that?’ It forced
me to think about it; why is that, and why do I do that. It really helped me engage myself
more into my faith and them questioning made me question. I remember some of the
questions I did not know the answer to, and I had to nudge my cousin and ask, ‘why is
that again?’ or I had to go talk to some uncle and ask. It was really interesting and was a
great experience.
Whether it was a comment made during a class discussion or through an out-of-class assignment, these students took advantage of the moment to examine their religious and spiritual beliefs. There were times when statements were made that caused these students to consider their faith perspectives in a way they never had before. This class also led them to consider the thoughts and world-views of others in new and different ways.

**Relationships with Difference**

As these participants gathered together to share their respective beliefs and perspectives, they began to learn the unique aspects of varying religions. They learned about tenets and doctrine, spiritual practices, religious attire, and guiding creeds for decision making. Once they began to listen to one another’s stories and pay attention to one another’s perspectives, relationships started to form. Several of these participants hoped these new relationships would continue outside of the classroom and after the semester had ended.

Angie shared that through the conversations she had with her classmates in the dialogue course, she learned lessons about herself and those of varying religions. She stated that her relationships with those who are different from her have changed and she now calls these individuals friends.

Now I have all these different friends that I never would have made before. A lot of the people I love so much in that class, I probably would never have talked to. It is sad that these people that have such amazing, different perspectives from mine and I enjoy so much, before I probably would not have been friends with them simply because they have such different perspectives from mine. This one kid in class came off as this typical frat boy and not really knowing a lot about, politics, world issues. I probably would have judged him for that. He was one of the sweetest, warmest people I have ever known. I
am going to miss him after this class because I will not see him as regularly. I would not have known that otherwise, and I would not have given myself the opportunity. His childlike perspective on things was so refreshing. I am really glad that they were there to contribute. I would not have known anything about their perspectives otherwise.

While in class, Brandi had the opportunity to learn about the religious viewpoints and experiences of her peers. She shared of a time when students of the Sikh faith told of their background and how their story had an impact on her.

In class we had two people who were of the Sikh faith, and they talked about how when growing up they were always different and how people looked at them differently. They do not cut their hair and their fathers wore turbans and they felt singled out sometimes. I was just like, ‘Wow, that is really true people.’ They are being judged for something they cannot really help. I can understand that, not so much as a Christian, but as a person of color I know what it is like to be different in your surroundings and to not be able to control that and have people think of you differently because of it. And it was because of something like religion and that is even more so because it is so personal to me. I just was like, ‘wow’, to have someone look at you differently just because of the faith you believe in.

Brandi shared she could identify with what these students were saying. She said she could “identify with being different” and felt this relation “brought her to their level.”

Brandi noted another course experience that was especially powerful for her. She had the opportunity to attend a religious service, which helped her tear down some previously held viewpoints she had about Judaism and Jewish individuals.
I did not really have an opinion about Judaism. I live in an area where a lot of the Jewish community lives. You see the people with the long coats and the long beards and the tall hats and you are like, ‘Oh that is what Jewish people look like.’ But going there I was thought Jewish people looked like everybody. It dismantled a lot my stereotypes. That was interesting to know; people I know personally from my class or different groups that I am in are Jewish and I did not know that. This whole project made me feel that religion is not a big difference to focus on. It does not matter what religion someone is as long as they are a nice person. It is not that big of a deal.

Throughout the dialogue course Brandon discovered that as he listened to the experiences of others, those experiences were comparable to his own even though these individuals had diverse religious views.

What had an impact was that a lot of the people had similar experiences to me even though they had such different views. There was one girl who found her own church. It was really surprising because most people who are still religious are religious because they follow the religion of their parents. But even the people that follow the religion of their parents all had thought about it and had their own views. I have had discussions with people who have honestly never thought about it, like to the point where it is just, it is not something that even goes through their mind, that they could be wrong. They should think about it themselves; it is just what their church or pastor says and that is just it, that is the end of the question. I was actually happy that nobody in the class was like that. You cannot get anywhere with that because they do not really even understand their views, it is just accepted. There was one girl who was the daughter of a pastor and she was extremely Christian. I was worried about it in the beginning because she had said he
does not believe in evolution. She used words like holy ghost experience when she was describing her past. From my experience, that sets off triggers. It was really nice that she actually had moderate views. That really surprised me. We were discussing hot topics and she said she identified as a strong Christian but she did not follow the views of her religion. She had really thought about it. That was the most surprising and good thing that I found.

As Christy heard the experiences of her fellow classmates, she was able to learn about and ponder the challenges they face as religious individuals. There were times, however, when the topics discussed did not necessarily cause Christy to critically think about her own religious beliefs. She shares that these discussions made her realize that she has differing views than her peers concerning religion and religious life. She discussed a time in class when she had an opportunity to gain an understanding of one of her classmates.

There is one girl in class who I believe is Romanian and of a Christian denomination, not quite sure which. Christians are considered the predominant, biggest religious group in this country yet she feels like she is still a minority or a target because she actually follows her religion pretty closely. She pretty much observes all the rules or traditions. So she had a very different experience, which is interesting because usually people of the dominant group do not really have that kind of experience. She seemed very genuine about why she felt like she was still a minority even though she is Christian. I think back home she felt like people were more dedicated to their religion and more open and obvious about their religious identities.
Throughout the semester there were moments when Christy disagreed with some of the perspectives presented by her classmates. But there were also times when she noticed several other students shared similar beliefs to her.

I definitely noticed that there were certain people who had very similar beliefs to mine. It was easy, not only to relate to them, but to have them understand where I was coming. I could appreciate their point of view a little bit more. There were definitely times though, I think after that, people were not as ready to be as honest and open about their feelings. Maybe they felt like they did not want to offend anyone. There were other topics, like religious stereotypes, and people were not as vocal about that because I think it is a little bit more controversial. People were tiptoeing around the topic. The only real conclusion that came out of them is that they are wrong. We did not really discuss why they are wrong or why they were formed or why were they used and how they make people feel about it. I know people of no religion or Atheists are stereotyped as being heartless or immoral, and I think that is totally wrong. You are just as able to be a good person as someone who has a religion.

Greg stated this dialogue course has taught him how to engage others in conversation and caused him to become more compassionate toward those who are different from him. He shared he is now more open to difference and willing to talk with individuals from varying religious backgrounds.

I can definitely talk to them [individuals who are different from him] and really understand where they are coming from. People say that all the time, ‘I know where you are coming from,’ and I think I can really say that now. Not just with religion, it helps with any social interactions that I may encounter. It definitely helps to understand and
see things through their perspective. I think that is what I will use more than anything. I cannot begin to put into words how effective it was putting myself into other people’s shoes.

Greg further explained the phrase “putting myself into other people’s shoes.”

For example, if I were to meet someone new for the first time and sit down with them to hear their stories I can see things from their perspective. Those experiences I have learned from my peers in the dialogue class have given me that sense, that direction that they are going in. For example, someone saying they do not feel close to God or they are always questioning their faith, in the dialogue I asked them, ‘why do you feel this way?’ So when I am talking to someone else I can definitely put myself on the same path that they are speaking of.

Greg continued to share that as he has listened to his fellow classmates share their experiences and viewpoints he has become more aware of difference.

I am more aware now. It is naïve to say that I do not see anyone different than I because there are differences among people. It can be a good thing to notice other people and say we are all unified other than we are all one. I believe that when I see different people, I am aware that we are different and it is great. It is such a valuable tool to really understand that there are other people who are different, not the obvious sense, but in the sense that there are different views. This course gave me the perspective that there are so many religious people. I am definitely more aware that everyone has their own connection to religion, connection to what they perceive to be religion, their books, and their God. It is just being aware of this that really helps because when you are trying to
move forward you have to put all that into account in order to progress towards social justice and equality.

Greg believes he is now better able to relate to difference as a result of this course. He stated this course enables individuals to create a deeper connection to another because you understand where he or she is coming from.

I thought of myself as open-minded but now I really feel open-minded. I listened to their faith, listened to what they believe in; why they believed in it and it was fine, they are different. I have never believed that it has to be the same and now that view has strengthened. It is fine to be different and have those different beliefs.

As Jamie began to form new relationships with her classmates, she noticed there were shared commonalities between her and those individuals from other faith backgrounds. She explained that engaging in these dialogues allowed her to “find more similarities between the religions than conflicts.”

I found my Conservative Judaism is extremely similar to Catholicism but is not viewed that way. I have never seen the links. In that sense, I have found a lot more links between religions and how everyone in the end has very similar morals but just takes them on different tangents.

Jamie suggested that if more people could see the similarities between groups, there would be less conflict in the world.

Realizing these similarities made Jamie feel good about herself. She said is was a “good feeling to know that I she did not have one type of person that she could mesh with” and she could in fact have a “conversation, laugh, and be friendly with someone who was not like her was a nice thing to know she could do and was capable of doing.”
Through this course experience, Jamie has discovered ways in which to begin and nurture relationships with those who hold diverse beliefs and/or come from various backgrounds.

I am more open to form relationships with people who are different from myself. There are some girls who I really never would have even spoken to if I had not taken the course. They are really genuinely good people who I should have given the time of day to before, but just never thought to. This course encouraged me to open myself up to other people who I am not usually accustomed to forming friendships with.

For Kathryn as the semester progressed, she had the opportunity to listen to several students share of their personal and religious experiences. She learned of their religious beliefs and views regarding abortion, interfaith marriage, and LGBTQ rights. There was a story shared by a classmate that had a particular impact on Kathryn.

One of the girls in the dialogue was not a part of any religious association. She identified as an agnostic and she was saying how she grew up with her Chinese mother and she did not really have any religion because her father was Christian. They never brought her up going to church and believing in God. That was hard for me to imagine how sometimes people do not have a religion. It was not that I disapproved but it was hard for me to understand. I just see the world as everybody having a religion and everybody believing in something. It was hard for me when I find somebody that did not believe in anything. Kathryn stated this classmate’s perceived lack of religious influence was difficult for her to because she feels as if this student “did not know the meaning of prayer or the meaning of attending a religious holiday and it is something that is not there that should be there.” As this student was sharing her experience, additional feelings and thoughts came to Kathryn.
During the dialogue I realized that everybody believes in the same morals and just because she does not have religion did not mean that she was going to go out there and kill people or be mean to people. I have encountered that before but I did not get the chance to talk to that person and get their experiences and understand how they came to this point to not believe in anything.

Kathryn also had an opportunity to reflect on her thoughts and beliefs as the class discussed the hot topic of interfaith relationships. This particular topic led to a heated exchange between classmates.

When we were talking about interfaith marriage there were two girls of the same religion and one of them said she would never marry outside of her religious group and the other girl said, ‘Well I do not mind if I marry somebody of another group.’ When she heard the other girl saying she would not mind she got triggered and said, ‘Well I just do not understand how people can shut down other people of other religions just because you do not believe in what I believe in.’ They had different opinions. With the girl that would not marry outside of her outside of her religion it was not so much about her religion as much as it was about the culture. I just found that really interesting.

Besides the interfaith marriage discussion, Kathryn shared that another conversation regarding stereotypes held some powerful moments for her.

For some of the stereotypes for other religions sometimes I found myself saying the same thing. This group is like this or like that. I felt they were so true prior to going into discussion and meeting people of that group. Then when I heard the stereotypes about my religion I saw how I really felt, and I understood that it is really not. It might identify with some people but that does not mean that the whole group is like that. People are so
different and everybody has a different experience and takes the message however they want.

In the process of discovering more about herself, Rene became increasingly aware of others and realized she wanted to learn more about their religion. Rene stated that even though she was learning more about varying religions and religious individuals, the dialogue course did not necessarily affect her relationships with individuals who are different from her.

When you come into the dialogue it is not a factual education. They are not teaching us facts about the religions. There have been things that were more ambiguous to me or I have gone in having no understanding of Islam. At certain points, someone would say something and you wanted to know more actual information about it. I did not notice a clear change. One of my closest friends here is not Jewish but I do not think that our relationship necessarily has changed. She knows that I am Jewish and I know that she is Christian and we respect that we have our religions. It is not like our friendship is based on the religion. For instance, if you know that like your friend has a different political view, you are not going to talk about that all the time because then you are just going to fight with them all the time. I do not think it [the class] has affected our friendship because we do not sit there and argue about our religion. I accept her and she accepts me. I want her to have what is right for her and she wants me to do what is right for me. The fact that we are different does not necessarily hinder our friendship.

While Rene does not think her relationships have changed, she does recognize that she is more aware of others and how Jewish students are viewed on campus.
I am definitely more aware of other groups. I still am very much involved in Jewish aspects of campus but my idea of how my group is perceived has changed and the way that we fit in with the rest of campus.

Rene furthered explained the meaning of “fit on campus” saying that she realized, as a result of being in the course, Judaism is a minority group on campus. She did not necessarily recognize this before because she is involved with Jewish groups on campus and spends time with primarily Jewish students.

During this dialogue course, Traci had the opportunity to hear the experiences, stories, and beliefs of her fellow classmates. She shared that the experience of an Orthodox Greek student had a particular impact on her.

She was talking about how her family’s been going to their church every Sunday and going through rituals every day. But she said she never really knew what it meant; it just became a part of her. I found that interesting because that is exactly how mine was because my parents just took me to my temple, and I automatically thought, ‘Well this is me, this is who I am supposed to be, and this is my place.’ That’s how it was for her and that is how I found out everyone was like that also. Going through the routines but then you come to an age when you start to question, ‘Why am I doing this?’

These students learned about difference during course discussions and class assignments. Their views and perspectives about those who are different began to change as these relationships started to form. There were also moments of surprise as some students realized their beliefs were not so different from others. The lessons continued to be learned as some these participants noticed that their values, morals, and practices began to transform and evolve.
Values

This dialogue course led several participants to really examine their personal views and religious beliefs. As a result of the self-inspection and by listening to the perspectives of others, some of the old ways in which these participants saw the world and interacted with others began to change. They shared some examples of how they began to alter their personal philosophies and embrace the difference around them.

For Angie, this class taught her how to recognize the conclusions she had made about others and how to challenge those preconceived notions. The only concern Angie had about learning this lesson is that she will not be able to maintain this new mode of thinking once the semester ended.

I am less apt to judge somebody and to assume things about him or her. I thought I was doing that before, and realized I was really only doing that on paper. When you actually come across somebody, it is really hard to not make judgments. By studying evolution, I know we make judgments because that is what helps us survive. You have to make assumptions about people and group people together so you can know your environment and surroundings. It is really hard to combat that because it is such an inherent part of how we think. I really have tried to accept and understand people more and catch myself making judgments. I am really happy about that. The only thing is, I am worried that it was going to go away because it is hard to keep that up when you are not being constantly reminded of it when you are in a class. When you are in a class you have assignments that mean it and talk about it. You have class discussions on it and it is always on your mind. It is always on the forefront because you are in a class, and you are talking about it for two hours every week. I am not sure what realizations people made in
class and how those will linger on after the class ends. I really hope they do not go away. I am sure they are going to diminish somewhat because they are not as active with that thinking anymore.

Brandi also shared how her religious beliefs and practices changed as a result of the discussions and encounters she had during the semester. She shared that at times in the dialogue course her thoughts and views about certain controversial subjects were difficult to process and communicate to her peers.

I understand a lot of my own feelings a lot more now. The abortion class was probably the hardest one for me, and I really did not have much to say because I did not understand my own thoughts. I know that I feel this way but I could not explain it. That is why I feel like I did not have, not so much of a right, but I did not have the authority to really talk in that class. I do not know why I feel this. If someone were to ask me I would not be able to explain it. I was really withdrawn from that class. I was listening to everyone to learn more about myself and that really was helpful. It made me understand why I feel certain ways and it made me okay with that. This may not be what the classic Christian believes but it is okay because this is what I think, this is how I feel.

As Greg has pondered the religious practices and experiences of others, he has also begun to wonder about and question his own set of beliefs.

It is more of, ‘Why do I believe in this? Is it sufficient to say that God said that it is right and therefore I have to abide by it?’ There is definitely an aspect now where I question that. I question a lot of things, every little thing. For example, a friend and I were having a discussion a few weeks ago and he brought up something he heard from a friend. A friend told him that God is just for the poor people. I thought that was very interesting.
We started discussing it and he said what he heard was that God is for the poor people because people that are successful do not need God. We sat there and started questioning ourselves asking, ‘Why do we need God?’ We needed to come up with an answer, a logical answer, not a faith based answer as to why we need God. I have questioned myself majorly there asking, ‘Why do we need God?’ It is not a mistake for me going down the path of not religious but I think it actually makes me more religious because you have to question yourself. You have to not follow blindly. I think once you come up with those answers then you are a true believer; if you really come up with those answers and can express them to people by logic not by faith. So definitely that questioning aspect is strengthening me, and I am seeing that it is okay. It is okay to do all that stuff now, much more than before.

Not only did Jamie begin to shape her religious identity as she engaged in dialogue, her awareness of her values also increased.

I think I am more attuned to my values than I was before. I have never sat down [and thought about] interfaith relationships and established, ‘I am a hundred percent never doing it.’ I think that through thinking about it and through exploring why I am so adamantly about it definitely strengthened my values.

Kathryn also shared that her values and morals have been altered as a result of being in this class. She stated the discussion on stereotypes allowed her to reflect on her actions and the actions of others and compare these acts to what Christianity says about them. Kathryn shared that if she has an opportunity to examine the behavior of another to what the Christian religion says about that particular act, she will do so. She explained what this scenario might look like in real life.
If I have a friend, for example, and she is going to confession and then comes out of there and tells me what was going on, even though we are not really suppose to be so open [about confession]. If she were to say that to me and then go on and do the reverse then maybe I will tell her, ‘Hey wait a minute you said that is not good.’ I would get her to think, not that she is harming herself, but she is harming the religion as a group based on the message that she is getting out there to other people.

Lastly, Richard stated that his values and morals have not necessarily changed but he did, however, share that his beliefs have been altered as a result of being a member of this dialogue course.

I have the same values and morals as I did before and my morals are pretty much the same. If anything, my belief in Islam has strengthened because this is the first time I have actually had to think about why I am Muslim, not just be a Muslim. And find reasons about why everything I follow has been implemented in the first place. Fortunately I have agreed with most of what I have found. I have been able to find good points, good enough for me, to be able to counter all the arguments that have come to me. That has definitely strengthened my faith, if not anything else.

There was much to learn for the students enrolled and engaged in this dialogue course. Beliefs, perspectives, attitudes, values, morals, practices, and interactions all changed at some level for each of these 11 participants. Several even expressed concern, as to whether these positive changes would last once the semester ended. The entire group, however, did not question the value and advantage this course has brought to their lives. They shared some of these benefits of this class as they spoke about the outcomes of the dialogue course.
Settings for Dialogue

Participants met once a week for the dialogue course. One group of students held their class in a traditional classroom while the other met in a residential lounge. Each participant was asked to ponder the physical space of his or her own class meeting location and assess whether he or she thought it was an effective place to talk about religion and religious identity issues. Some students felt as if the classroom served as adequate location for the course, while others believed the lounge setting was a more conducive environment for conversation and discussion. Answers for this section were generated as I asked participants this question:

- “Do you think the classroom is an effective place to talk about religious identity issues?”

Classroom Setting

Brandi’s class met in a basement classroom for the entire semester. As they sat in their small classroom setting, Brandi stated her course facilitators told them there were more comfortable places, such as a lounge, where they could meet. The class, however, did not move to a lounge or a larger classroom because space was limited. Brandi shared what it was like to meet in that classroom.

[Moving] would have been nice because we were all in our little circle in our desks and you do feel like a class at first. I just wanted to pick up my pencil and write notes but I wish it were in a more comfortable setting. I think it would have been more casual in the lounge.

Brandi stated that while her classmates may have preferred the lounge setting to a traditional classroom, they eventually adjusted to the environment.

People would have been more comfortable. At first everybody came in they had their coats on and it looked like when you were in class and the bell is going to ring and you
have to run to your next class. But after a while people came in, they took off their coats, and talked to each other about things before class started. We were more comfortable with one another, and we looked more comfortable.

Jamie’s classmates also met in a traditional style classroom as opposed to meeting in a lounge. She shared how the physical environment of a room can impact dialogue.

[The classroom setting] reminds me of note taking, lectures, and things like that; nothing fun; nothing that makes you critically think. It is like PowerPoint; write it down, kind of thing. I think that if [the class] had been done in a comfortable environment with couches and comfy chairs, it might have been a more easygoing environment, where you felt very free to speak openly. But because we established the guidelines at the beginning of class, the expectations, I think [dialogue], still was accomplished. I just think [dialogue], would have been accomplished more promptly if we had done it in a more comfortable environment.

Like the other participants, Jonathan took a moment to reflect on the physical environment of his dialogue class and consider whether he felt as if the classroom setting encouraged his peers to talk about religion. After pondering the physical space, he stated that he did feel as if the classroom was a good setting for such dialogue to occur.

It was a neutral place. It was not a religious place. It was just a random room in the basement of a building. White walls and a bunch of little chairs with the desks attached to them. I could not see any posters and anything distracting. Just a blank room where you could really be free of everything and open up to each other.

Richard agreed with the other participants by stating he also believed the classroom served as a beneficial meeting space for him and his peers as they talked about religion.
People are willing to say what they want to say and people are willing to hear what everyone else has to say. It was definitely is a conducive environment. People from all different faiths were coming in together, face-to-face. You had everyone’s perspective and their take on everything at the same time. If someone agreed or disagreed, they could just speak out. It was definitely the best possible environment.

Lastly, Traci thought the classroom was an ideal location to engage others in conversation and discussion.

I think a classroom was a perfect place to just sit there because it was in that atmosphere where we were there not just to talk about ourselves but also to learn about each other. The setup that we had sitting in a circle and nobody was higher than the other person. Even the people leading the dialogue, they would not sit up in front of everyone or in the center of everyone. They would be right in the group and helped us engage in it more.

These participants expressed a sense that the physical surroundings of a classroom did not hinder them from sharing their views about religion with one another. They felt as if course activities and the exchange of ideas could be done freely and without distraction. Other participants, however, offered a different perspective as they revealed their thoughts about meeting in a residential lounge.

**Lounge Setting**

Christy’s course met in a classroom for the first three weeks. During the fourth week the class moved to a lounge where they continued to meet for the rest of the semester. She did note a difference between the traditional classroom and lounge setting.

The lounge was more physically comfortable. The type of chairs, carpeting, I think changed our comfort. Since we were all relaxed and comfortable physically that
translated a little better to being comfortable and relaxed emotionally and that made us more open to each other. I just felt more comfortable. [The move] was not hugely felt among my peers because it happened pretty early in the semester. We did not really know each other that well anyway but I noticed myself. I just felt more comfortable, and I just preferred it.

Kathryn also discussed meeting in the residential lounge instead of the classroom and described the difference between the two settings. Kathryn further expressed how the lounge setting changed the dynamics of the course and the comfort level of her classmates.

We had it in a lounge and we did not have it in a classroom. I felt like that was much better just because we did not feel like, ‘oh we are in a school and we have to focus or we have to pay attention.’ It was more of an interaction between people of different groups. It did not feel like a class, which I think was better than if we were in a classroom setting where you feel like you have to take notes or you have to pay attention. It was not you have to, it was more of you would like to. It was really nice to pay attention and really nice to tell people what I think and how I am. I could see some people were more relaxed than others. I did not really pay attention to that but I lived in the building where the course took place so it was really nice for me because I was right there. It was just different. We had a nice room to have a conversation in and it was nicer than being in a classroom. Also I was more relaxed.

Similarly, Brandon shared that while his course took place in a classroom, he felt as if a lounge setting would have been a more comfortable setting for him and his classmates as they talked about their religious experiences.
I did not think [the classroom] was as good. Some of the activities that we tried to do were cramped. We had to make a circle, instead of the line, and we stepped into the circle and out of the circle but it was crowded. It was not bad but I felt like when you are in the lounge and you are sitting on couches you get more comfortable. It was a better experience. Sitting at the little desks can be a little bit uncomfortable for two hours when you are in the circle. But I mean it was not a bad place. It was not like because it was a classroom, it was uncomfortable to talk. It was just those chairs are not comfortable.

Like Brandon, Rene agreed that a more comfortable setting would serve as a better motivator for dialogue. She did state, however, that she and her classmates would have shared their experiences regardless of the type of physical environment they were in.

I do not think there was anything that would have prevented us from getting to an effective dialogue or conversation, but I think that, maybe even subconsciously, the comfort level needs to be there in order to not be as inhibited in what you are saying. I do not think it would not have been there in the classroom, I just think it was better in the other room. I think that people felt more comfortable, and I think sitting in the circle, in comfy chairs was more like sitting around having a conversation with friends rather than sitting in a classroom.

Additionally, Angie shared she and her peers could have met either in a classroom or lounge but no matter where they met the environment had to be one that promoted safety for her.

It was not the fact that it was a classroom but it was a confined, small space. It made it easier to talk about things. It was not as if we were in a coffee shop. I really do not think that would have been a very good setting to have a dialogue. It just needed to be somewhere where you can see that you are in a protected place where you can talk about
these things. Having desks in a circle, I thought it worked really well. I think everybody was an equal; it was not like there was somebody at the front of the room. Everybody was in a circle, talking and speaking equally.

Finally, although it did not particularity matter to Greg if he and his fellow peers met in a classroom or lounge, he did state that a lounge was his preferred setting for the dialogue course.

I do not really think it made a difference. The fact that you are in a classroom; if you see a chalkboard, you feel like, ‘oh this is academia.’ I do not really think it made a difference. I will tell you the truth, if anything it brought out the academic in you, if that makes any sense. But I do not think it made too much of a difference to tell you the truth.

I guess I can say that when we went to the lounge it was much more comfortable. It was kind of like our home and that whole sense that this is comfortable. It was warm; it was a safe place to be; whereas the classroom was uptight and nerve-racking. There was definitely a much more safe environment in the lounge.

For these participants the residential lounge offered them a place of comfort and gave them a sense of freedom as they shared of their religious experiences and listened to the faith perspectives of others. They expressed a degree of partiality to the lounge setting and believed this environment allowed them to become more open with one another as they discussed their personal experiences with religion. Although there was no clear distinction as to whether a classroom versus a lounge served as a more conducive environment for dialogue, several students did note that the lounge setting did lend itself to serving as a place of comfort. This particular type of comfort might allow some students to become more open, thus sharing more of their experiences and beliefs about tough and controversial topics. Regardless of the setting, these students did communicate that class rules and norms ought to be established, by the
facilitators and students to ensure that each participant feels as if he or she can share their stories and views in a safe and welcoming environment.

**Outcomes**

As the semester was ending participants were given the opportunity to share their thoughts about the dialogue course and the skills and abilities they gained as a result of engaging in conversations with those who come from varying religious backgrounds and perspectives. As they shared of the lessons learned, each participant stated how they now perceive others, how they will apply this training to future situations and individuals, and the benefits of enrolling in this course. Participants provided answers for this section as I asked them questions including the following:

- Has your awareness of others from varying religious backgrounds changed as a result of this course?
- Has your relationship with friends and family changed as a result of this course, and if so, how?
- If you were to meet someone of a different religious identity now, would the way you react be different from the way you would’ve reacted before taking the class?
- What about with other people who share your religious identity? Have there been any changes or has that been impacted or affected as a result of this course?
- What do you think you will take away from this course?
- What skills, techniques have you learned as a result of this course?

**Perception of Others**

As participants shared stories of their childhood and young adulthood and of their experiences with religion and religious difference, a certain level of understanding and
compassion began to form. The way in which these students approached and interacted with difference also began to change as they listened to the challenges each one of them faces, as religious individuals.

Angie shared that her perceptions of others and members of her own religion have been changed through the conversations and discussions she had in this dialogue course. She said that now she is more aware of difference and of those from the Sikh religion.

When I see somebody wearing a Sikh turban or an Indian girl I think might be Sikh, I look at her wrist for a steel bracelet to see if she really is, I want to go up to them and say ‘Sat Sri Akal,’ which is a Sikh greeting. I always have this sense of identity and pride that we are together. I think people feel that is sort of the mentality, that people feel very secure with people they know are like them. Reflecting on it just seems ridiculous because this entire time I have just been talking about how religion means nothing and about how much you have in common with a person. So maybe that sense of unity and us being together, maybe that is just really false.

Angie’s perception of those who belong to the Sikh religion and of those who do not have been shaped and developed through the conversations she has had with her mother regarding the comments shared by her classmates in the dialogue course.

I have been speaking to my mom a lot about what has been going on in class. I think her understanding of who I am has changed, which is weird because I bring up these things to her. I was talking to her about a comment a girl made that if somebody was raped, they still do not deserve to have an abortion. I called my mom, and I started crying on the phone with my mom because I was so upset by this. She said, ‘Why are you crying?’ I said, ‘because she does not understand that people that have been raped have all these
psychological issues. She does not understand it. How could she say somebody who has been raped and has gone through that experience is then going to have a child and is completely responsible for bringing up this child they did not want and it was a product of something so dark in their life.’ I was just getting really upset about it. I remember my mom said ‘it is ok, you have to calm down, you cannot let things upset you like this.’ I said, ‘but I cannot help it, and I do not understand how people can think like that.’ I was getting really upset. The last thing she said was ‘just love the person you are and I love. I am just so happy you are my daughter.’ It was a really good moment to have with my mom. We talk about this stuff a lot but we used to talk about it in the way of, ‘people do not understand what actually is the right reason to believe and what is the good opinion to have?’ We talk about it like that and not on a personal level and how it affects us. My relationship with my mom is probably the better for it.

Angie shared that in regards to other people [from varying religions], she “hopes to, in the future, build up relations.” She said she now understands that she “can interact really well with people she thought she could not before” and has “enjoyed getting to know people she would not have had the chance to know before.” Lastly, Angie stated that she now understands that everybody has “a unique experience to share with you and it is a really good realization to have.”

For Brandi, she stated the conversations in class helped her further define her thoughts about certain subjects and her beliefs regarding religious practices.

My awareness probably has changed because I know why I feel certain ways now. I know why I would never have an abortion. I would never get an abortion because it is just not in my faith and it is not what I was taught. But I know why I vote pro-choice.
Not only has her opinions about abortion taken shape, Brandi shared she is now more open to talking with others about religion.

My previous conversations initially molded the way I came into the class, the way I wanted to talk about religion, and the way I was comfortable talking about religion. But being in the class made me open up about it more. I am a lot more interested in others’ differences now. I know that it should not matter but when I do find out that something’s different I do not feel uncomfortable asking.

As Brandi has become more open to others, she stated her cognizance of difference has increased. She stated she is now more “sensitive to the difference between people” and cautious about the terminology she uses.

Recently I am more cautious about saying ‘winter break’ with people instead of Christmas break because they do not have to celebrate Christmas. Not everybody does. So I am more cautious about being, not necessarily being politically correct, but being sensitive to others’ needs and to their individual situation.

In addition to these transformations, Brandi stated her reaction to an individual of a different religious background has also changed.

As far as the whole inquisitive thing goes, that is really changing. I have a friend and she is Muslim and before it was like I did not want to talk to her about certain things or I did not want to share certain things with her because I did not want it to be awkward. But now I do not feel like it is so bad for things to be awkward. It is not that awkward. It was weird for me at first but now like the other day I had all these questions, and I just came to her and asked, ‘why do you do this? What does that mean? What is the purpose
of this?’ She answered my questions, and I did not make her uncomfortable. So that has been a big change from the class.

Brandi shared that while her reactions have been altered, she has always tried to be friendly to others regardless of their religious beliefs.

My reaction toward people that I do not know or that I do know is not so much different because I have always made it a practice to love my neighbor and be nice to others and to be the kind of person that my parents raised me to be; to be a good, honest, trustworthy, and friendly person. But from this class I have gained a better understanding of religion and therefore people’s beliefs. I am more conscious of the things that I say or do now.

As Brandi was becoming more comfortable approaching and talking with individuals from various religious backgrounds, she was also reflecting on her views about persons from her own faith.

I am not going to call them faults but I see some of the things that are not so great in my friends and family especially now. The homophobic views or the Bible bashing, like the fanatical responses. I see them, and I am like that is not cool and you cannot do that. It has opened me up to a lot of new things, and I just want to tell people to love your neighbor. Is it that hard to accept people’s differences? I am actually going to do an exertion at church about the love of the God and loving your neighbor like you love yourself. It is important, and I do not want people to feel hate when they think about Christian people. I do not like that at all and that made me very uncomfortable in the class.

Lastly, Brandi stated the relationships with her friends and family have been altered as a result of this course. She shared she is now more at ease with voicing her thoughts and opinions.
I am more comfortable expressing my feelings to my family. I can explain it better, and I am okay with them feeling differently than I do. I am okay with them knowing that I feel differently than they do. I am more quick to step in when I see a hate based thing. We talked about this last class. I am becoming an ally. I am actively doing that because I do not like the whole hate thing. If I did not learn anything from this class, I learned that I am not okay with hate, and I am not going to sit around and let people do that. Like I told my mom that and she said, ‘Oh that is a really great idea.’ That is why she is letting me implement these kinds of things into our church. I am doing some things for a lesson plan with the Bible study, and I am doing an exertion and bringing it into other classes within the church. Just to love your neighbor. Do not hate people. You cannot judge them. You are not God and you do not have a right to say anything negative about these people. God has his opinions about things and what we are supposed to do above all is to love. That was the biggest thing for me, learning in this class.

Brandon learned a slightly different lesson as he listened to the experiences and conversations of his peers during this course. He shared that as a result of this class he is now not so quick to have a strong reaction when he encounters difference.

I do not have that reaction when people describe themselves or not as strong at least. I think I will be able to continue to weaken it. I think that is going to be the biggest thing. Most of my friends are different as far as religion goes and so other than the reaction when I meet new people, I do not know how much it will actually change, given that most of my friends we already talk candidly about religion.

In addition to a change in his response to difference, Brandon stated that he is now even more aware of those who are different from him. He shared that he knew there was diversity in the
world but to explore the depth of an individual’s beliefs as he did in this course has been the
difference for him.

I knew that they were really diverse, that they had their own beliefs but I learned just how
diverse they are and that they may identify with a religion but really not believe much of
the religious doctrine. You have to try and treat everybody as an individual. That is one
thing I wanted people to do for me. That is just one of the issues with labels, like, ‘I am
Catholic.’ That was one of the discussions that we had was how much leeway is it okay
to still call yourself Catholic? If you agree with so many other views, are you still
Catholic? Because the Catholic Church does identify its official positions on everything,
and the perfect Catholic ideally would be in their mind one that follows it all. That is
why I think it is hard when people identify as a specific religion because naturally then
the official positions of those religions come in to play. That is one reason why I did not
like it when people hear ‘Atheist’ and then they think of all these immoral things because
it really only has to do with God, there is not an official doctrine. One of the best things
to come out of this class is that a lot of people had to put a little more of a good face, a
moral face to Atheists and they may not have had experiences with them.

Lastly, Brandon shared that his view on fellow Atheists has not necessarily changed as a result of
being in this class.

It [my view] has not really changed that much. I realize there are a whole bunch of
different types of Atheists. There are militant Atheists that go out and proselytize and
there are quiet Atheists for their own reasons. I did comment though, earlier, that I felt
that I was the only Atheist in the bunch, even though there were other people that
described themselves as non-religious or Agnostic. You could see they still kind of had
beliefs, one of them did not want to and one of them was not sure and that’s why I said they are more alike because they both described themselves as spiritual. I think Atheist would be the right way to describe them.

Christy shared that even though her relationships with friends of different faiths have not been altered as a result of this course, her relationships with her classmates have changed.

I think it was pretty clear who each person related to, agreed with or disagreed with. So I knew I had to be more careful sometimes about what I said to people who I know have different views than me. I have more of a cautious relationship with those people.

In addition to this, Christy stated her awareness of others from varying faith backgrounds has also increased since taking this course.

I am definitely more aware that people of faith differentiate between the religious side and the cultural side. For example, a lot of people in my class consider themselves of a religion but identify more with the culture than they do necessarily with the religious practices of praying. For example, they celebrate more the holidays as being with family and the foods and customs but are not necessarily the religion because they are not praying; they are not necessarily going to services all the time.

Although her awareness of religious differences among individuals is greater than before, Christy shared that her reaction to them has not necessarily changed.

I have always had friends from all types of religious backgrounds so it is not like I met someone of a new religion for the first time in this class. I have had a lot of interactions with people of all types of religions before so I feel like I did not draw any new conclusions about certain religions.
Greg shared that as class sessions occurred throughout the semester he began to learn more about the perceptions he had concerning individuals from varying religious traditions and lifestyle backgrounds. He encountered a challenge of belief as members of his class discussed same-sex relationships.

The biggest challenge was when we were discussing the LGBTQ community. I saw myself saying, ‘I do not know,’ to a lot of the questions. It is not because I do not know the issue at hand and my stance on the issue but when religion plays a role I really do not know. Religion says equality for all and justice for all and God is just. When you put the queer communities, as we want to call it now, the politically correct term, it is very challenging thinking about my religion. There are a lot of contradictions, and I was challenged the most and constantly thought about it even after the dialogue.

Greg stated these discussions about the LGBTQ community where the times in which he felt the most engaged in dialogue. He shared he was able to formulate a sense of compassion for others as his classmates offered their views regarding this community.

I felt most engaged in the [LGBTQ] dialogue when I brought up a point that we always say we can know what they feel but unless we are “they,” we cannot say we know how they feel… it was a moment where everyone was just staring and thinking… I definitely thought my contributions to the dialogue were beneficial to everyone, hopefully.

Greg stated that discussions such as these have given him some tools with which to utilize as he talks with others about matters of social justice.

Before I was enrolled in this course I was very in tune with social justice and progression towards that goal. This course gave me a heftier toolbox to deal with those injustices and gave me more leverage over issues that I want to tackle eventually. I would not say my
values changed but they have become stronger and, I’m more in tune and have a closer
tie with the values I had before.

Greg shared that one value in particular has been strengthened as a result of this course. He said he is now able to “really empathize with others and understand where they are coming from.” He stated this course helped him to discover the challenges religious individuals face and learn how they work through those struggles.

Before coming to this course I do not want to say I was naïve but I did not know of the many issues that are so prevalent. I thought everyone who said they were religious was close to God and was strict by the book but that definitely was not the case.

Greg further explained this revelation and what he learned about his classmates as they shared of their religious beliefs and experiences.

Hearing them come out bluntly and say they question their beliefs and their books was really eye opening. The concept of them discussing that aspect of their lives definitely awakened me and strengthened my value of seeing things through other people’s eyes and not just through that narrow scope of religion and being religious. There are so many different things that you can contribute and so many different things that you can say about being religious. I can look at every single one of those views now a little bit better and be more emphatic toward others and seeing things through their eyes.

Jamie believed she gained a sense of tolerance and empathy of others as a result of engaging in dialogue across religious difference.

[I learned], to be tolerant of other people’s religions and that they do not have to have the same views as myself. I understand that they have their own religions for their own reasons. They have their beliefs for their own reason and to be tolerant of their beliefs
and not attack them because of them. Also, just being empathetic, being able to try to picture yourself in their shoes and being able to try to know where they are coming from.

I think has been very beneficial in forming relationships.

She went on to explain that conflict in the midst of dialogue also taught her a lesson about herself and others. She stated that dialogue gave her a “greater understanding of other religions and the concept of conflict.” She went on to suggest:

Even though [conflict] can escalate to a negative side, conflict and dialogue can be a beneficial aspect of a conversation. Conflict will lead to critically thinking about your own religion and your own beliefs and it will make you form an even stronger identity.

Jonathan shared that his relationships with others who are different from him are getting better and are increasing. He shared he is now aware of the comments that his friends make and at times, laughs to himself and says, ‘they really have to take this dialogue class.’ Jonathan said that after this class he is “more careful, not necessarily walking on eggshells, but it has become part of life, like second nature to respect people and respect others of different religions.” He went on to say that he cherished his own beliefs more instead of just thinking, “O, wow, I am a Catholic who does not practice, I am a bad person.” He also shared that his awareness of difference and those who are different from him have changed.

I have more respect for them and a better understanding of why they do certain things. Some things I still do not understand. All of the people in my class I understand the things that they do but we bring up other religions and some things, a lot of us, still do not understand about other religions. We still have a lot of questions about Hinduism. But of the ones in the class, it is like a whole new respect for them and their religion. It
would have been nice to go to other people’s temples so that I could learn. Just by talking with the people you have a greater respect for them.

Jonathan shared that because of what he has learned in class when he now meets an individual from another religion, his approach is different.

Just having knowledge of their religion, having the basic, facts of their religion, I would not go in there with all kinds of questions. I would go in there having knowledge of them so I could skip by all that factual stuff. If I were to ask questions to an outside person, I would probably offend him but in the class we could ask questions and not offend people. Now that I have knowledge of the religion, I can skip that, and just start going straight to talking to the person on a personal level instead of a religious level. Now I know the struggles they went through, and I would have a better respect for that person, depending on what religion.

As Jonathan was learning more about others from varying religions, he learned some lessons about his own religion.

At first I thought I was going in to the class with a reason why I did not practice my religion, much because I always thought it was hypocritical. It’s written here, you should do this but now with the dialogue they are just personalizing it. They are just trying to make it their own so they have that something to believe in. So now I understand that they are not hypocrites, they are not going against it. The times are different now and they are molding their religion into their life. Now I understand that better so now I should do the same. There is probably nobody who could follow every little rule that is written. I do not think it is possible today. It’s kind of nice to know that you could personalize your own religion.
Kathryn shared she has gained friends she might not have ever met had it not been for this course. She stated this class allowed her to meet diverse individuals and brought them together in a way that might not have occurred otherwise because they are from different religions. She shared this dialogue course has enabled her to be more at ease with talking to individuals from varying religious backgrounds.

If I would had a friend that is, let us say, Muslim, I would probably never ask about their religion because I do not think I would feel comfortable asking about what they believe in and what they do. I would feel like that person thinks, ‘what if she is criticizing me’ or ‘what if she thinks what I am doing is wrong’ or ‘what if she is questioning what I am doing.’ I would not feel comfortable but in that setting, in a dialogue setting, where we could talk about what our experiences were with our religion, I feel like I was more comfortable asking about that because that is what the topic was.

Kathryn stated that if she were to meet someone outside of class who was from a different religious background she would not be afraid to ask them questions. She said she is now “more open to different religions and has an interest in finding out more about them.”

Kathryn shared that this response to difference is a result of her being in the dialogue course. She believes her reaction to diverse individuals has changed from how she reacted to them prior to the start of the semester.

It is not that I would not want to be friends with somebody of a different religion but I think before I would just want to keep it to where if you were in my class I can talk about it, give you my notes but that is it. We cannot hang out, we cannot exchange phone numbers to talk about how your life is going. Now I feel like even if I have a friend of a different religion it would not bother me to have them as a friend not just a classmate.
Kathryn shared the “knowledge about other religions and people’s experiences with their religion” has led her to this change. Kathryn further explained how this awareness has guided her to this new perspective of difference.

I realize that the religions are not that different from each other. Before I thought that they were completely different things but now I see that we all believe in pretty much the same morals. We have the same morals and it is not that we believe in the same person but we believe in a higher being. There are so many things that are similar to religions that I have never thought of before.

Kathryn reflected on those individuals who share her religious beliefs and explained how she now feels about them.

I do see how people can fit with certain stereotypes but that makes me see that it is not completely their fault but it is part of their fault of what people believe about my religion. My opinion kind of changed about some people but it has not changed to where it is so bad that I do not want to be friends with them anymore.

Kathryn feels as if these individuals who share similar religious beliefs should “really sit down and revise their relationship with God and their religion.” Additionally, she said she feels as if “some people are just so ignorant and they should not be if they really want to be a part of their religion.”

Rene’s relationships with those who share her faith also began to change as a result of this class. Rene said the conversations she had with the Jewish students in the course caused her to be “more interested in what they believe especially because they believe in the same things but to different degrees or different ways.”
In regards to those individuals who do not share her faith, Rene said she now sees these students on campus. She says she is now more aware of her social interactions with others.

I know that I associate with a lot of Jewish people because of the things I am involved in. It was interesting for me to see one of the Muslim kids in class in the library or somewhere else. I may notice it more that I will be with some type of group that is very similar to me in one way or another and often it [the similarity] can be based on religion.

While Richard does not believe that his relationship with those who are different from him have changed as a result of this dialogue class, he did state that he is more comfortable talking with others about religion.

I do not feel like there’s really been a significant change. I have been involved in more religious talks with my peers. There’s this Jewish kid who lives one door down from me, and he was basically my encyclopedia when it came to Judaism. I would go to him before every class, especially during the heated debates [and talk with him]. There are Christians who are just Christians and there are Christians who go to church. I asked, ‘So what does your religion state about that?’ I had a lot of talks with the Jewish person about his religious beliefs. I had a pre-dialogue before the dialogue and that got me warmed up and ready for what was to come. If nothing else, I have definitely become more comfortable talking about religion in my everyday life. I feel I am more prepared to talk about it without offending someone, like I was before.

While Richard’s relationships with others have not necessarily changed after engaging in these dialogues, he does believe that his tolerance of other religions has changed. He feels as if he has become more tolerant of other religions.
There was this one girl in our class, who was an Atheist/agnostic. I personally feel like she was the driving force in our whole dialogue. She was there to learn about all different religions and she was not shy to ask questions. I feel like she brought the best out of all of us, by asking us questions like, ‘What does your religion say about it?’ Seeing an Atheist, a neutral, non-believing point of view, was interesting because I have never really talked about religion with an Atheist before. She also learned a lot about all three religions but we definitely got to learn a lot from her experiences coming from a totally non-religious background and not believing in anything. I cannot even relate to that. I have always been a Muslim. Since the time I was born, I was told to be a Muslim and then afterwards, I chose to be a Muslim. But just never having been in contact with this, I have never really seen that side before. She definitely brought that aspect of life into it.

Richard shared that if he did meet someone of a different religious belief; he would now react differently to that individual because he has taken this course.

Before I might have been a little ignorant in what I said to the other person. When you hear about someone or something, there is an image that comes to your mind. It happens with names, happens with everything. For example, if someone said their name was Mary, I would be like, ‘Oh, you don’t look like a Mary.’ You just have that image in your mind and it can sometimes be based on stereotypes. Now I can relate more on a personal level if I come across a person from another religion. I feel like I am more comfortable talking to him. If nothing else, I am a little more tolerant. I will go in with a better image of them.
Lastly, much like his response regarding individuals from varying religions, Richard does not believe this dialogue class has had an impact on his feelings and views of others from his own faith. Though he does admit he now has two different perspectives on the Muslim religion, his perspective and the perspective of an American Muslim.

I got to hear the American side of Islam. It was a lot more liberal than mine. In this class, one important thing that we did was separate culture from religion, which is really hard to do. We both were Muslims but I came from a more culturally Muslim society than he did. That showed me how culture has an effect like having to marry a Muslim woman. Coming in with a specific mentality I got to see a more liberal perspective on it, just because the cultures were different. I became more of aware of stereotypes. I feel now there are not as many rigid Muslims over here. Back home there are people who obviously are and say, ‘this is what is right and everything else is wrong.’ Now that I have looked at the story from other people’s point of view I feel I would not be very comfortable with that. It showed me both sides of Islam.

Concerning Traci, she shared that her relationship to her faith, those who are of the same faith, and those of who are from a different faith had been impacted as a result of engaging in discussions in this dialogue class. Regarding those from varying faith backgrounds she said:

I have actually made some really good friends. We sometimes call each other up and say, ‘Hey, you want to get lunch or something?’ It is a really accepting feeling, which is really nice because we know this personal part about each other. Even my close friends do not really know that much about my faith. In this class, you were talking to a complete stranger and you were talking about your faith and why you believe and they still accept you for that. That is even stronger than your other friends that you might have
because you have that personal connection with that person. A lot of the people in my class are really open-minded and everyone is really nice. I remember we were all talking and we said, ‘Our problem for this class is we were all too nice sometimes.’ That is why some of our conversations never really got heated because everyone was like, ‘oh I don’t want to say that, I do not want to offend them.’ We all came to a thing where we said we have to question each other, even if it is a negative view we have to let it out because otherwise we will never get anywhere. I think we have all grown together in that aspect.

Asking questions of her peers, attending religious services of differing faith backgrounds, and hearing the experiences of others has created a new awareness of difference for Traci.

I always try to have an open mind. You can just say, ‘I really respect your faith,’ but you have to really interact with that person and attend the services. With an experience you really learn a lot and in the future when you think of that experience it shapes you more than just talking to that person. It has also made me more aware. More aware but then it has given me an extra kind of experience talking with a person of a different background. Also aware of their different views, aware that they may believe in this, but I do not. That should not affect our relationship, should not affect my thinking of that person, who that person is. Before I could say this, but this time I actually believe it.

Traci said that because of this dialogue class she is now more comfortable with difference and more aware that there is difference.

We say everyone is equal, everyone’s the same, but nobody is the same. Everyone should be treated equally but no one is actually equal because everyone has their own privileges because of who they are. Some people have less privilege, but you see that. Whether it makes you angry, whether it makes you happy, you are going to have to
acknowledge that difference. I think I am more comfortable around it. Being able to know and have that knowledge or experience behind you makes you more confident to talk with them. If they ever questioned you, I do not mean question in a negative way, asking you, ‘What is your faith? Or what is this?’ You know how to talk to them instead of asking, ‘Oh, why are you asking me that.’

Traci’s view of her family has been changed by this course. She shares that she is now more understanding of why her parents believe as they do and is more confident telling them about her religious experiences.

Since I have had this experience, actually attending other temples and churches, I feel like I can share that experience with my parents, especially because they are older. If you are older, you are wiser. It is really nice because it makes me feel confident when I can sit there, and I can say, ‘Yeah dad I went to this Jewish temple and this is how it was.’ It was really nice to see his reaction as to how I felt about that experience.

The breadth and depth in which these participants experienced a change in perception of others did vary from student to student. But at some level, each participant’s perception of those from varying faith backgrounds and, in some instances, their own faith backgrounds was altered as a result of engaging in dialogue during course sessions. Students further shared how they will apply the principles and viewpoints they gained to their daily interactions with others.

**Intergroup Dialogue Course Benefits**

This dialogue course offered participants the opportunity to acquire skills that can be utilized beyond the classroom walls. They learned new conversational abilities such as active listening, preparing and presenting an argument, and asking questions and seeking clarification.
Participants shared a desire to practice these talents with others and, especially with others who come from difference, once the course was complete.

Throughout this dialogue course, Angie did learn several life lessons. She shared that some of the lessons came as she heard about the experiences of others and as she spoke with her peers about class assignments.

For one of the class projects, the other Sikh girl in the class took everybody to the gurdwara [place of worship for the Sikh religion]. After the service, everybody goes downstairs and you sit on the floor with plates. Whoever volunteered to come in and cook the meal before the service, he/she serves it to everybody. You can say, ‘Yes or no, I do not want this.’ It is a great free meal. One of the girls from class who went, I think she was either Jewish or Christian, I asked her, ‘What was your experience there, do you think people accepted you?’ She said she did not want anything they said, ‘No no no, try it; try it. You are going to like it, you are going love how this tastes, you have to try it.’ The fact there was nobody that felt they were not welcome in this place of worship made me just so happy about that. I always feel there is this sense of hatred among religions and that they do not understand each other. I think that is on such an institutional level. People are way more accepting than we give them credit for. I think that is really important to understand. I think that is why people do not allow themselves to overstep their boundaries because they are scared of how people will react. I think it is a strange fear to have because we live in a very safe environment, luckily. I think if we overstep, especially on a liberal college campus, there are not any really negative consequences, depending on how you do it. It was a really nice realization that people are more accepting then maybe we think them to be.
Another takeaway from this class came for Angie as she was talking with one of her male classmates about a presentation he had to give for a course assignment.

One of the guys in my group, who was the typical frat boy, was talking about one of our class projects. We had practiced presenting it to the class, but he did this completely impromptu thing. At the end we were talking about our own reactions and experiences and I said, ‘I hope that we dissuaded those, who we gave the surveys to about Sikhism, from discriminating and thinking before they associate terrorism when they see a turban.’ He said, ‘Yeah and even if we did not persuade anybody that took the survey, if nobody really took anything away from that, I still think this project was really worthwhile because I changed my opinions. I used to associate terrorism with Sikhism and with turbans. I will not anymore and I am thankful for that.’ I just had to go up and hug him because I am going to take away the fact that you really can change people’s opinions. I feel like the barriers I saw between different spiritual groups, different religions, different races, any type of diversity, which I realized were really invisible barriers, I thought they were very strong, solid barriers between people that you really could not penetrate, and I think I have completely changed my opinion on that. It is about understanding what they are. They are completely constructed; they are not real. The barriers we put up and that are there in our minds, they are not there at all. I bet a lesbian couple would experience the exact same thing or an interracial couple’s experiences is the same that somebody who’s handicapped; it is all the same oppression. It is just depending on who is giving it to you. If people understood diversity somewhere is diversity everywhere and oppression somewhere is oppression everywhere. It is not, ‘how do we overcome these barriers?’ It is just realizing that they really are not there, they are just in our minds and it is not scary.
Developing new relationships is one advantage Brandi will have once the semester is complete. She hopes the individuals she met in class will become long-lasting friends.

I met a lot of cool people. That was fun. I am hoping to leave this class with some friends. People that I get to see and hang out with. I have really fond feelings of this class even though I came in really kind of not expecting this at all.

Leaving the dialogue course with positive thoughts about her experience makes Brandi glad that she took the class.

I am so happy and it is such a relief. My mom told me that this would be a growing experience and this class would be a huge part of my spiritual growth and my journey. I was said, ‘Mom this class is going to make me angry,’ but it did not. I did grow. I am so thankful that I got to take this class. So thankful that I am going to try to take another one next semester; maybe be a facilitator because this is great and everybody needs to do it.

For Brandon, he said that he now has a more positive reaction when someone describes himself or herself as Christian. When he hears this identifier, the thought of the person on the street quoting the Bible does not automatically come into his mind.

I think less of the campus preachers and more of how similar we actually were. In the hot topic debates, I was more on the side of the Christians than I thought I would be. It is really not that I think they are bad people; it is just that I get a little afraid if I have to tell a Christian person that I am an Atheist because I have had people get really angry. People just view Atheism as a bad thing, period. It is nice that I have met people that none of them have that reaction. All of them just wanted to learn more about it.

Brandon has also altered the way he talks about his views on such hot topics as abortion.
The abortion dialogue helped me to be a little more set on how to describe my views. It is not so much that they change; it is just that I used to describe myself as just in the middle. I have come to think about it a little more, and I think it made me a little more comfortable. I still do not like saying, pro-life or pro-choice because that gets people upset. I am just a little more comfortable in describing what I believe and the reasons for why I believe it.

Lastly, Brandon stated that a significant life lesson for him this semester was learning how to listen differently to others as they shared their views and beliefs.

The whole idea of empathetic reasoning or listening would be the key learning point.
Learning how to listen in a way that was not aggressive because for the past three and a half years, I have been told that I listen aggressively and find where people slip up.
Being able to listen empathetically and charitably is a better. That was an important learning point for me, to not operate like a philosopher in the daily conversations.
Christy shared this course did alter her views of the campus community but did not necessarily change her thoughts about her own belief system.
I definitely felt I understood the university community better than I did. I feel the people at this university often share very similar views. There is a liberal attitude of this university. I think my first assumption is that everything has that liberal attitude until it comes out that they do not. I think that has changed but I do not make those assumptions anymore.
Christy continued to explain how this course led her to consider her religious beliefs but those principles were not altered throughout the semester. She said she “still has very strong values and they have not really changed much either. She is now more able to see what she does not
value.” Christy examined her commitment to her beliefs as well as the beliefs held by her peers. She stated “my classmates have different values and different beliefs and I decided I do not agree with them definitely now. Maybe I have come out knowing more of what I do not believe in so I still have my same beliefs.”

Although Christy explains that her views of religion have not changed, she does admit that she was reminded of a lesson about how she perceives religious individuals. I do not think I really came out changing my beliefs and practices. Maybe I do not make the assumption that people are super religious just because they have a religion. There are tons of people who identity with a religion but maybe just identity with the culture and not so much of the faith side. People are just more spiritual. They interpret it differently and that is one thing I tend to forget.

Lastly, Christy shared that because her “personal views on issues, like interfaith marriage, often conflict with what religion says she is a lot less inclined to follow it—any of them for that matter.”

Regarding his experience in this course, Greg shared that while he has learned much about himself and others, he still feels as if further dialogue experience and personal reflection is needed for him to fully embrace religious difference.

Regardless of how open-minded I think I am and how much I know about others and how much I say, ‘I am all for social justice and equality;’ I am really not yet there. That comes I guess with experience and with age even though age is just another argument. I think that will come but as much as I think I am; I’m not there yet. This is just the first step. So I am reflecting on myself a lot more, asking, ‘am I really like that religious?’ ‘Do I really believe these stereotypes that I am always propagating?’ I question myself a
lot more now. That is what I say a lot, ‘Am I really this, am I really that?’ It is cool to see yourself in a different light.

In addition to realizing a need for further interaction with those from various religious backgrounds, Greg shared this course has taught him the importance of looking beyond the surface when encountering difference.

It is a simple thing you learn when you are in elementary; do not judge a book by its cover. But at the college level it is do not judge a religion or do not judge someone’s label, like being religious, as the norm because there is so much more to it. So do not judge the book by its cover but more than that realize there is much more out there.

Religion is such a complicated issue and you cannot even begin to put into words how many different hats one can take in terms of religion. Definitely understand that there is much more to it than the surface as elementary as that may sound.

Jamie feels as if the experience of being in this course has real-life application. She said this course is the “only course where I have learned life skills” and that “it is the only course that you can directly take what you learned into the real world.” She said while other courses may have a “blurb that you can bring into the real world,” everything in the dialogue course “applies to reality, cause it’s reality.”

Religion is a huge part of our world and being able to speak about things that are so relevant to our lives, I am like, you get to walk out of there just feeling fulfilled and you want to call your friends and call your parents and say ‘I now know why I believe this.’ I think it is really a fulfilling feeling.

Jamie spoke once again of fulfillment when describing another life application skill she acquired from her involvement in this course. She said being a part of this class made her “feel
very accomplished” because she “worked so hard and found so many internal conflicts” and to be able to “resolve them through dialogue with other people was really a fulfilling feeling.”

Jonathan stated that the lessons he learned in this class would assist him as he further develops his own sense of faith.

I learned a lot more about the religion itself, the practices, the traditions. I will take some of that away from the class and hopefully start practicing it myself. For one of our last journals the instructors asked; ‘What are you going to do now that you learned, have this knowledge? What are you going to do to move on after this class?’ I really want to go on my religious journey. I want to start attending church and do all the things I learned in the class. I don’t have to follow everything that the guys out there are saying. You can sort of pick and choose, you can make the religion; you can personalize it. That’s what I want to, hopefully, what I want to start doing.

Another self-revealing moment came when Jonathan started thinking about how he would relate to others once the semester was complete. He said as a result of this class, he wants to form alliances with others and perhaps, greater than this, he has gained a sense of self-respect.

After being in that class, I met so many different people. I know all about them now. I can relate to other people in my fraternity. I can get on a different level with people now, which has been really great. I respect myself more for the person I’m becoming. I respect people of other religions, all their beliefs and other identities. You respect them a lot more because you realize what they had to go through.

For Kathryn, she stated that a key learning point for her this semester was discovering the importance of being open to individuals who come from varying backgrounds.
I feel like if we do identify with a religious group we still have to be open to other religious identities. This is beneficial to the world as a whole because we would not be discriminating so much. We would not be hating people of other religions or we would not turn our back on people of different religions.

Rene said that before this class, she might have heard a difference of thought but did not listen to that difference. She stated that in the past she would listen to the thought of another but disregard it because it was not something she would want to think about. These days she tries to understand what individuals are saying and understand what they mean by that for them. She said from there she thinks about what they said and then states a reaction to their thought. Another life application of the course for Rene was the unique experience of sitting with her peers and discussing topics that they may not have otherwise received the opportunity to discuss.

We don’t really get the opportunity to talk about things that if you talked about them in another place, it would be taboo or too controversial to bring up. I think it [the class] is special in that way.

Rene further discovered that through the conversations she had with her classmates she more fully defined her beliefs and acknowledged that her faith is important to her.

I think that I am more confident in my beliefs, especially because I have had to defend them, present them, or make sure that I am saying what I want to say. I think that in terms of [religious] practice, nothing about my practice now has changed but it [the class] has made me think about things that I would like to practice. I feel like coming to college has put what I would like my religion to be on hold. I know that I could do certain things but if I were to observe the Sabbath then I’m not supposed to do any work on Saturday. I am not saying that it makes it right or wrong but I am think, ‘Well, after college I can
consider that because I do not know how I would survive.’ So I guess it [the class] just made me think about what I would like to be.

Lastly, Rene said this course was a good experience because it was fulfilling and taught her a lot about others and a lot about herself.

Richard learned, during the course of this semester, how to be respectful of other people’s beliefs and religion. He shared that tolerance is the greatest life lesson he has learned in this course.

I have learned to be respectful to other people, their beliefs, their religion and giving everyone their personal space. Actually, we were having a talk about that in our lounge the other day. We discussed the idea of secularism—giving freedom to everyone but at times they can steal freedom. The reason we were talking about that was the recent rule that was passed in Switzerland about the minarets. They have banned making minarets on mosques over there. Just because of a voting ballot system, which does not make sense. It is your country, you are not an Islamic country; you can do whatever. How would Christians feel if the cross was banned? It is not something that makes us not Muslim anymore. Without having it our prayers would still count. But why even bother doing something like that? We were talking about how people feel women covering themselves, makes them oppressed. A lot of believing people that I have talked to for them that is how they prefer to be, and it is a choice they make. Freedom and tolerance is basically allowing other people do whatever they want to do. You cannot put bans on one thing and allow the other thing because that is your idea of freedom. That might not be the other person’s idea of freedom. You need to keep everyone’s ideas in mind when you’re making things like that.
Traci learned numerous life lessons about difference and about her own faith. She is more confident in what she believes and talking about that belief with others. She has moved from telling others she believes because that was how she was raised to believe to now being able to communicate with another as to why she believes.

Whenever anyone asks me, ‘Why do you believe that?’ I sometimes say, ‘Well I have just been raised up that way.’ It was tied to me having my conversations with my father or mother; ‘Well I remember my dad was telling me this’ or ‘family members told me this so that’s why’ or ‘I have just been raised to believe.’ That is how it affected the class dialogue; it made me think, ‘What do I believe?’ instead of, ‘they told me that.’ It makes you think, ‘what is your personal belief?’ One of the biggest things in my class with everybody is, ‘yeah, we have been raised that way.’ But the most important thing ended up being, ‘What is your personal belief and how has your religion affected it?’ Just separating the two opens everything up for us to see and it was actually really nice.

In addition to changes with her sense of belief, Traci said her values have deepened as a result of being in this class.

Coming to school my parents and even I were afraid that since I will not get to attend my temple each Sunday, I am going to lose my language, lose the closeness I had. But seriously, it has made me so much closer. Really I go home, and I say, ‘Let us go to the temple.’ I want to go instead of me feeling like I have to go. I actually want to go. It actually changed me a lot. Now that I think about it, now that I am talking about it, it has actually made me think that to say you are something; isn’t as effective as knowing that you are. If you understand it, then that is more effective than just saying, ‘I am this.’
Lastly, Traci shared she has learned not to make assumptions about others’ beliefs and feelings.

You cannot just look at someone and know their faith and assume that they believe in this because it may be the complete opposite, trust me, do not make assumptions because I do that without realizing that I do it. You just sit there and think, ‘Oh, ok, I won’t do that.’

Just understanding that everyone has their differences even if they classify themselves with the faith, they each have their personal stories. Even people of the same faith may have a completely different personal story. They are completely different people; they are not the same people just because they are of the same faith. You just cannot assume.

As these participants were learning how to ask questions of others and share their personal opinions, they were quickly implementing these conversational techniques with their family and friends. Their confidence with approaching difference also grew as they talked with one another and discovered their respective beliefs and perspectives. There were still even more benefits from being members of this class that the students shared as they discussed their experience in the dialogue course.

Most of the participants stated that they would recommend this course to their friends and other students because of the benefits they gained after taking this course. Discovering more about their own sense of faith, learning the beliefs associated with a variety of faiths, developing conversational skills, and deepening the relationship with family members are just some of the benefits these students expressed about this course.

In addition to changing her perception of others, learning more about her own views regarding the Sikh religion, and applying course lessons to her life, Angie has gained some skills she can now use as she moves forward from this class.
I think I will be less of a debater. I have always been a very argumentative person, and I blame my mom partially for that because we are very strong, opinioned women. I am going to take away that I do not have to be right, which is a huge thing for me to realize. In class, I am not looking to prove myself right or to have the best opinion that trumps everybody else’s. It is a different way of thinking; it is not thinking there is a right and wrong opinion. It is to think there are different opinions and different reasons why people have those opinions and they are not competitive. I used to think of opinions, as one has to win out, they are at odds with each other and they are not. I do not really think anybody would want to live in a world where everybody had the same opinion on everything, even if it was some right opinion; that is not how the world is. I have realized, when I talk to people, I am not going to see our opinions, if they are different, as having to be at odds with each other. I will just see that they are different and there is good reason for why they are different.

Angie feels as if the life lessons learned and skill sets attained from this course are not only beneficial for her but would also be helpful for others. She said that if she had the opportunity to persuade other students to take this course, she would try “to convince them that it was a mandatory course that they had to take in order to graduate.” She further shared she would tell them “school is not just place to have textbooks and memorize things to take tests and build a career but if you are given the opportunity to build yourself as a person, then that is part of your education as well.”

I think a lot of people might be deterred from taking a class like this because they do not see how it fits into the bigger scheme of things. I think that is ridiculous because this is
the bigger scheme of things. I would tell them that they have to take this course because they won’t otherwise know the person they could be after taken it.

Brandi shared the skill she gained most from being enrolled in this course is learning how to work through difficult situations.

[I learned how to] cope with things that hurt my feelings on the inside and then also how express that to others; how to accept change and how to accept difference; how to welcome difference, honestly. I like being in a room with others, with different people now because it is so great to have other opinions rather than just your own all the time.

As Brandon stated earlier, he will take away from this class the ability to more deeply listen to what others are sharing and stating. He said he is looking forward to putting that skill into practice as he talks with others about Atheism.

I learned how to listen empathetically. Maybe I will look for one of those religious action groups, the pluralism groups in Minnesota when I go back. I think that would be interesting and would be a way to get people to see Atheism in a different light. I think part of the issue is that they do not see Atheists. If they see good people, they do not assume that they are Atheists unless they know. So, the only time that they do see Atheists is either when it is brought out by the news, if a criminal is an Atheist they mention it or in cases of more aggressive Atheism, where they are trying to actually convert people like Richard Dawkins.

Finally, Brandon has learned how to talk with instead of debate with another as views are being exchanged.

I have learned the process of talking, of dialoguing rather and being able to effectively implement that with somebody. If I did try and debate them, then it would turn into a
nasty conversation. I think the whole technique is really the biggest thing that I have learned and obviously still have to work on.

Christy credits this class for giving her an opportunity to learn more about self and for teaching her about how to talk with others about religion. She said a key learning point for her was not to be “afraid to express what you have to say, just say it, and try not to offend anyone.” In addition to learning how to express herself, Christy has gained a better understanding of how to engage another in conversation. She stated she has to differentiate “between dialogue, debate, and discussion. They overlap a lot but there is a key characteristic to all of them. It helps to understand situations and when each is appropriate.”

Lastly, Christy said she is taking away from this course the perspective that she “does not see herself as being religious.” She explained she has “questioned why she does not [identify with a religion] and feels as if there is really no reason for her to.”

Greg stated he gained several skills as a result of taking this course. He has learned how to talk with others when challenging subjects are introduced and how to listen as they share viewpoints and personal testimonies.

To really narrow it [skills] down to one is tough though I would say empathy and listening attentively [are skills I learned]. If I want to put a general label on it, it would be dialogue and how effective dialogue is. It is safe to say I did not understand what dialogue was before. I pictured it as maybe discussion or debate. I did not really understand dialogue but this course really taught me how effective dialogue is and how productive you can be when you are engaged in a dialogue with others.

Greg continued to share what the word empathy means to him and how this skill can be utilized in dialogue.
It is more of the bouncing of ideas off one another without crossing lines and without crossing the border. It is taking into consideration the group that you have at hand. It is genius because you have to look around and read body languages while you are discussing and seeing if anyone is affected. Then you kind of have to shy away but not shy away to the point where you are just speaking for the sake of speaking. It is important to bring everything to the table and to be truthful because what is the point of dialogue if you are just beating around the bush? I think the whole aspect of listening effectively and empathizing all comes under the label of dialogue. The most important aspect is bringing assumptions to the table. Empathy, attentive listening, assumptions, reading body language, and seeing when one is triggered, all comes in hand in dialogue, and it is so effective and progressing.

Lastly, Greg shared there were class sessions where the dialogue was one-sided. He would listen to the viewpoints of his classmates but was not always quick to offer his thoughts and opinions. I can listen much more attentively now and it is amazing because I wrote about this in one of my journals. One of my facilitators would not come out and say it but would imply that she wanted to hear more from me. She felt that whenever I spoke it was a compelling point that I brought up. She saw me staying quiet a lot in dialogue. I told her, ‘I am not staying quiet; I am listening.’ I really listened to everyone and formulated my own idea and then I presented it. I will never just speak for the sake of speaking. I think I am sharpening my tools of listening and connecting all the pieces to come up with my own idea.
Jamie credited the course with forcing her to step out of her comfort zone and giving her the opportunity to speak with diverse individuals she might not have otherwise spoken to in her daily life activities.

I do not think that if I had not taken a class about it [dialogue], I ever would have really sat down with people and spoken about it. So for me, it was an effective place. I also do not think I would have, on my own, gathered myself with people who are so different from me. You have all different races, religions, genders and I do not think I would have had the ability to just grab the people, really diverse people, and sit them down and make them discuss religion. I do not think that is something I would do in my free time, before this course. You know, who is to say I will be able to do that after this course but with my family and friends, I definitely am interested in learning about these kinds of things even more with them.

Not only did Jamie feel as if she would not have spoken with certain individuals had she not taken this course, she also felt as if she would not have discussed controversial topics with others either. She stated participating in the class was a “good experience because I would not have had the opportunity to have these kind of conversations if I had not been enrolled in this course. I do not think I would have had conversations about religion, abortion, and gay marriage.”

Lastly, through this course, Jamie learned how to handle her emotions when she hears a statement that is contrary to her beliefs.

One of the things I learned and had been utilizing is the concept of being triggered and hearing something that you are so adamantly against, is really beneficial in real life.

Oftentimes we talk to someone and they will say something that irks you so badly, you
want to sue them, you want to attack them. Addressing what bothers you and trying to discuss it with them is a really beneficial skill that I have learned through this course.

Jonathan stated that he is now thinking and viewing life through different points of view. He said that instead of taking life as a discussion or debate, he is now going through life like a dialogue. He shared that he now engages others differently by seeking to understand them as opposed to judging them. He also stated that his communication skills have improved.

When I get into conversations with people, I do not immediately think you are wrong and I am right. You get a better understanding of people and of talking skills. It actually helped me in my fraternity. I won vice president of my fraternity and it was the speech I gave. I probably would have done this before this class but it probably wouldn’t have been as empathizing. I really know how to communicate better with people. I am an engineer, so people are like, you do not know how to talk to people but after this class I have learned a whole new means of communication. I have learned a more effective and efficient means of communication, something like the dialogue. I think that is a great skill to have, to have learned how to do that.

In addition to gaining better communication skills, Jonathan says he has learned how to put himself in the shoes of another.

I do not judge a book by its cover, for sure. I give everybody the same respect that I would want to get. I try to put myself in other people’s shoes so I can see things from their viewpoint, to see where they are coming from. Religion does not have to be a chore; it can be something that you enjoy. Many people in the class do enjoy it because they personalize it. You do not have to be afraid to be in a religion class and not be religious. Everybody respects you in the class and I felt trust in class. The class would
not have been anything without trust. You really have to trust people so that you can get on a better level with them.

Jonathan says that he now has the “motivation and the drive to really make a difference and that is what he wants to do.”

Lastly, Jonathan believes this course will benefit him in his future career. He believes he has gained great skills in being able to talk with and accept people.

I think the skills learned from this class alone are great for being able to work with people, especially in the engineering realm, where there are people from many different backgrounds. It will now be easier to relate to them, to accept them, to know what they are going through and to be able to better work with them.

For Kathryn, this class helped her to learn skills and techniques, which she can utilize as she meets new individuals and talks with others about religion.

I learned to be more open and that I want to know more about other religions and about people that identify with different religious groups. Also to be friends with them and to help them when they need my help.

Kathryn added that another benefit of the course was the opportunity to view religion in a different light.

It [the class] was really beneficial for me as a student here. This university is so diverse but when we think about diversity we look at people who are from different socioeconomic status or different ethnicities. We do not really look at religion. I feel that is so critical because there are so many religions and we do not seem to care so much about that.
In addition to the changes in personal relationships, Rene noted traits and skills that she has gained from being a member of this class.

I have learned that I can relate to an individual. I have definitely become more comfortable with what I think. I think that it is good that I was able to force myself to think about those things that are sometimes hard to just sit down and think about.

Rene continued by saying this course made her realize that she has good listening skills and the ability to accept things that maybe she didn’t necessarily agree with or think is right.

I think the ability to acknowledge that it is okay the other person thinks that and it is not a matter of necessarily right or wrong, maybe for you but not in a general sense it is not a factor, but it is good to be able to hear different things.

Richard shared that he gained skills and techniques from engaging in dialogue. He shared he has learned how to deal with other people’s religion and how to make people comfortable with him and vice versa. He said he would recommend this class to others as it helps you to learn about the religious perspective of others.

It does not matter whether you believe in a religion or do not, this class will be your guide. This class will be the door to you learning about other people’s religions and their other religions’ perspectives. It is something that will help you in every part of life because you are going to run into people of different religions and sometimes of no religion in any office you go to, any job you apply for. Learning how to deal with other religions and different people is the most important skill you can have. This is the most important part of public dealing, learning how and what to say to different people.

Again, you have limits of what you cannot cross. My limit with you or what I can say to you is different, from what I can say to my roommate. Those are things you learn by
interacting with other people. There are people who, on the first day you can be really open with, then there are people who, even after a lifetime of knowing them there are things you cannot say to them. This is a big step towards that whole experience and learning process.

Besides the life lessons that Traci has learned about herself and others, she has gained a skills as well from being a member of this class. She shared she learned “how to talk with someone of a different faith, how to know what to say, and how to question things.” In addition to these skills, Traci said she has learned how to share her views without imposing them on the other person.

If I were to talk to you about my beliefs, I would say it in a way where I say, ‘I feel this way’ or ‘my faith feels this way’ instead of assuming everyone should be that way. That was a major thing we had in our class. Sometimes we had to correct a person, saying, ‘You mean, you believe that, not everybody.’ You have to stop and think, not everybody. You know sometimes you get caught up in talking in class and say, ‘Well, everyone’ and others would say, ‘Wait no, I or my faith.’

As some of the participants shared, this was their first opportunity to consider their beliefs, controversial issues, and another’s perspective. Others stated that they might not have had such conversations with individuals from varying religious backgrounds had they not enrolled in this course. Lastly, they gained skill sets and valuable life lessons as a result of engaging in conversations across religious difference, which can now be used in future relationships and in their respective careers.
Conclusion

Each participant in this study engaged in conversations with family members and friends regarding religion. There was not a clear distinction as to whether these prior conversations helped or hindered them as they spoke about their views and listened to the perspectives of their classmates. Additionally, each student did participant in course discussions and, at times, challenged one another regarding the beliefs and views expressed during the conversation. As a result, of being enrolled in this course, participants shared that their personal religious views did alter in some form while other participants shared their perceptions of difference did change. In each case, this change in perception appeared to be positive in nature. Finally, each participant listed personal, social, intellectual, and spiritual benefits of this course. Participants even expressed how the lessons learned in this course will help them once they are in their chosen career. Overall, this course did assist the students in learning more about themselves, others, and how to better engage those who are different from them in conversation. The course provided them with a set of tools to take into the remainder of their college career and in their future work experiences. It taught them how to better express their religious and spiritual views with their family members, friends, faculty members, religious leaders, supervisors, and with those who come from a different religious background or who hold a difference of opinion.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of 11 participants as they engaged in interfaith dialogue. Previous studies regarding religion and dialogue have focused on such areas as defining the terms religion, individual faith development, religion and college attendance, and intergroup dialogue between diverse populations (Bryant et al., 2003; Fowler, 1981; Gurin et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Massoudi, 2003; Nash, 2001; Parks, 2000; Schoem & Stevenson, 1990). Little to no research has actually been conducted to assess the experiences with dialogue among religious and non-religious individuals, especially among individuals ranging from 18 to 22 years old. This current study aimed to fill this research gap by looking at the experiences of college students as they discussed their views on religion, spirituality, and faith. Specifically, this investigation explored the prior involvements these students had with conversations concerning religion, the interactions they had with one another as they discussed life as a religious or non-religious person, the physical environment in which these conversations took place, and the learning outcomes each student experienced as a result of being enrolled in the dialogue course. This concluding chapter reveals the key findings in the data, their meaning in the context of existing literature, and the implications for student affairs professionals and future research.

Each interview session with the participants was interesting and quite thought provoking. The experiences and lessons these students shared produced a moderate amount of data, which has implications for current and future student affairs professionals, faculty members, administrators, and researchers. The finding revealed the types of conversations students have with family and friends prior to attending college, the manner in which they approach discussing
potentially controversial material with their peers, the setting that was most conducive for discourse, and the benefits students gain as they engage in dialogue with one another.

**Prior Experiences with Religious Dialogue**

Each participant in the study engaged, at some level, in dialogue throughout his or her childhood and teenage years. The subject matter for these conversations ranged from academic challenges to relationship issues. Some participants talked with their parents about personal matters, other participants spoke with their siblings about occurrences happening in their daily lives, and others discussed concerns with both their parents and siblings. Most participants also took the time to speak with their friends and peers about a wide variety of topics.

In addition to talking with others about interpersonal concerns, these participants also discussed religion with their family and friends. These conversations were generated though a multitude of means. For some, the discussion ensued after being encouraged by their parents to participate in a spiritual practice, while for others, the conversation began as the result of attending the church service of a peer from a differing religion. There were instances in which participants actually engaged in debates with peers or spiritual leaders regarding religious doctrine and/or practice. From the detailed accounts of these participants concerning past experiences with dialogue, it is apparent that each one of them engaged in conversations with others about the topic of religion. Additionally, as they described these conversations there was no clear distinction as to whether these discussions opened the door for them to talk with others about the topic of religion during their religious dialogue course. Even though there was no clear connection between prior experience with dialogue and their ability to discuss the subject matter of religion in this college course, participants engaged their religiously diverse classmates, on a weekly basis, in conversations about religious beliefs and practices.
**Intergroup Dialogue Experiences**

This particular dialogue course followed other intergroup dialogue courses that had occurred in the previous years. The program administrators and leaders designed this course with those previous course experiences in mind. For this dialogue course that focused on the subject of religion, the curriculum, facilitators, students were selected prior to the start of the semester, and the rules for dialogue and student interaction were established during the first class session. These details are important to note and remember while reading about the participants’ in-class experiences. The program leaders and facilitators chose topics for the students to discuss that would lead them to examine their own religious beliefs as well as take into account the beliefs of others.

During the first class session, facilitators asked the students to discuss the concept and components of dialogue. This discussion set the stage for how the students would reflect on their beliefs as well as enter the conversations to learn the perspectives of one another. Each week students were introduced to varying topics, including religious identity, Christian privilege, discrimination and oppression, premarital sex, and ally formation. Introducing these topics, which followed the method of dialogue as described by Zuñiga et al., 2002, served as a platform for students to begin discussing their knowledge of and experience with the subject thus revealing some of their personal and religious beliefs. Once these views were expressed, the participants began to question, probe, and challenge one another similar to the suggested ways as detailed by Gurin et al. (2011). It is this constant exchange, which led each participant to consider the doctrine of their respective religions and ruminate on the principles of the varying religions represented. Participants shared that these class discussions ranged in intensity. There were classes when students felt very engaged, there were times when they got into heated
exchanges with one another, and moments when the words of their peers touched and moved their hearts. Whether the class discussion was calm or intense, the curriculum plan of introducing topics to incite conversation was effective.

Several weeks into the semester, the participants were given the opportunity via email to share their thoughts about the course and class discussions. The students were asked to share what stood out for them as an influencer for how they thought about the topics being introduced in each class session. Although participants were requested to submit a response to this question, students also offered their general thoughts and impressions about the course overall. Additionally, even though each participant was invited to share ideas about the course, not all participants took advantage of the chance to share their opinions. Participant responses that were submitted, however, ranged in degree and content. One student shared the course discussions enabled her to further understand the practice of dialogue and another expressed appreciation for the dialogue course stating it was an avenue for her to discuss topics that are deemed taboo by society. Additionally participants said listening to others share their religious beliefs served as a means for influence for how they thought about the topics discussed in class. Lastly, one student offered that when individuals use religion as a platform to prove their point, the more alienated she feels from all religion. Based on these responses, it seemed as if the class format and dynamic allowed students to learn the principles of varying religions as well as the way in which an individual looks to his or her religion to address faith related or social issues, which is consistent with how Zuñiga (2003) described the goal of intergroup dialogue.

**Changes in Attitudes, Perceptions, and Beliefs**

This course provided participants the opportunity to change their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about self and others. The changes came as they spoke with one another during class
sessions, visited the religious ceremonies of other religions, shared course discussions and occurrences with family and friends, and completed course assignments. Some of the changes, which occurred for the students throughout the semester, were subtle and some were more intense and transforming. The changes described by the students, learning how to ask questions, to stop making assumptions and judgments of others, to empathize with another, and to engage in an intellectual conversation, were consistent with how Gurin et al. (2011) described an effective dialogue session. Additional adjustments to their perspectives came as they listened to how individuals of their same faith practice their religion, discovered the stereotypes associated with varying religious groups, learned the doctrine and beliefs of those religions represented in class.

Participants also stated this course caused them to further identify with their own personal religion and to learn that there are those who do hold the same or similar beliefs from them. Zuñiga (2003) stated that when students engage in the dialogue process, anxiety about the intergroup contact decreases. The participants in this study expressed a similar result when they stated that as they shared their viewpoints and experiences, they came to realize that it is all right to hold differing beliefs from others. Additionally these participants discovered how to make friends with individuals they may have never met otherwise and to be more open to form relationships with individuals who are different, which are some of the goals of dialogue as suggested by Zuñiga et al. (2007).

Lastly, as a result of this course some of the participants are more understanding of their own personal feelings and more attuned to their own values. These discoveries of self as described by the participants affirm the statements Burrell (2010) made regarding the ways in which dialogue enable individuals to learn more about their personal beliefs. This course
enabled these participants to learn more about self, more about others, and to further learn more about both.

**Settings for Dialogue**

An element of this study included an examination of the physical environment. The environmental section was added to determine if the classroom setting or lounge setting would serve as a more conducive location for dialogue. At the beginning of the semester, both class sessions were meeting in a classroom. This would change, however, as after a few days into the semester, one session moved to a lounge setting. It was not clear from the participants why this change was made by the facilitator.

Each participant offered his or her views about the location of his or her dialogue course. One student expressed that meeting in a classroom was beneficial because the room provided a neutral site that was free of any distractions, which encouraged students to open up and share their thoughts. Several researchers, including Heschong Mahone Group (2003), Griffin (1990), and Veltri et al. (2006), also noted distractions as a factor in their studies of environment and student learning.

Another student stated that it was the set up of the classroom, which made the physical space favorable for conversation. She said placing desks in a circle and having facilitators sit among, not in front of, them encouraged dialogue. This participant comment supported the findings of Veltri et al. (2006) regarding classroom space and furniture.

Additionally, one participant also felt as if the classroom was a conducive setting because it reminded her of lectures, note taking, and as a place where students engage critical thinking as they process information. This student further noted that the established class rules and norms for discussion allowed the flow of exchanging ideas to occur. Lastly, this participant did suggest
that had the course met in a lounge setting, dialogue among classmates would have occurred more quickly.

Other students agreed with this participant stating the lounge setting did provide the more conducive environment for dialogue to occur. One student stated that she could see her classmates relax as they sat in the lounge setting. She said this setting allowed for more interaction among the participants. Regarding the setting, it could be argued that the creation of rules and guidelines for engaging in dialogue, not the physical location, is the key aspect for ensuring that an open and continuous exchange of ideas occurred for participants during the course.

Outcomes

Numerous changes, lessons, benefits, and skills were mentioned as course outcomes for the participants. Students noted the perceptions of self and others changed, new social and business-related skills were acquired, and an increase in the awareness and knowledge of varying religions occurred, all as a result, of engaging their peers in conversation during the course. As a result of being members in this course, participants stated they are more willing to approach others of seemingly different religious backgrounds and were more curious to learn about the doctrines and principles of differing religions, which are similar to the findings Nagda and Zuñiga (2003) discovered after students engaged in racial/ethnic dialogue group discussions. Further, they are more knowledgeable of the challenges their peers face as religious individuals, less critical and judgmental of difference, and more aware of social justice issues after engaging their peers in conversation. Each of these outcomes confirm what DeTurk (2006), Nagda et al. (1999), and Schoem & Stevenson (1990) discovered concerning the connection between
intergroup dialogue and a student’s awareness of others, ability to consider the struggles of diverse individuals, and commitment to social justice efforts.

Additionally, these participants have learned new skills, which they can utilize in future classes and places of employment. Students shared that during this course they learned how to talk about, not just debate, the ideas expressed by others and work though hurt feelings. They also learned how to listen with an attentive and empathetic ear as others were sharing their stories, identify with and relate to others from different perspectives and backgrounds, and express their beliefs and thoughts about controversial topics. The discovery of these insights and development of these skills confirm what Small (2009) found in her study of interfaith and intrafaith dialogue. Each participant noted one or more personal gains as a result, of being a student in this dialogue course. This course offered and delivered multiple benefits for students engaged in the dialogue process. Students not only learn a base knowledge of varying religions, but also acquire practical social skills, which can be immediately used with persons and situations they encounter.

Implications

This study and the results of this study have implications for faculty and student affairs professionals. In order for the effective and beneficial implementation of a religious dialogue program to occur on campus, educators need to increase their own religious literacy, establish intergroup dialogue classes, create environments that are conducive for dialogue, learn how to assist students through an examination of their own religious beliefs and the religious beliefs of others, understand the legal aspect of religion in the university setting, and conduct additional research in this area.
Practice

As I examine the results of this study, four action steps or practices emerge for assisting our students to become more aware of their own religious views, the religious views of others, and ways in which to engage and interact with that difference. As educators, we must discover avenues to bring religious differences together in a space where mutual understanding and respect can be encouraged and created. Refusing to do this will cause students to silo themselves, alone or in like-minded groups, fueling potential ignorant and damaging ideologies. In an effort to support interaction between groups of varying religions, we must offer intergroup dialogue classes, which encourage students of different religious backgrounds to talk with one another in a controlled environment. Student affairs professionals ought to work within a partnership between an academic office and the office of student life to offer such courses. This avenue has pursued by colleges and universities across the country. As professionals consider offering such courses on campus it is worthy to note that only providing an intergroup dialogue class for one semester may not be an effective way to produce significant changes in student perceptions and attitudes of others. These courses ought to be offered during a three-hour session once a week for an entire academic year. By doing so, educators will be able to assist students engage in a deeper level of dialogue, which might include moments of distress and discomfort that allow for them to wrestle with the issues and experiences associated with being a religiously diverse individual. Additionally, the course examined for this study allowed for students to self select the course. The concern of self-selection is that although educators bring into the course students who desire to learn about others and engage in conversations with individuals from differing perspectives, there are also groups of students who could greatly benefit from the course but chose to opt of for varying reasons. One way to address this concern
is to offer an intergroup dialogue component to a first-year success course. It would be important, however, to require all first-year students to enroll in this course. This requirement is needed to ensure that each student has an opportunity to benefit from hearing the experiences of diverse individuals and learning lessons relating to intergroup dialogue.

Lastly, in addition to offering intergroup dialogue courses, educators must further consider recognizing religious holidays on academic calendars, establishing meditation spaces on campus, offering opportunities for students to visit varying places of worship, and providing education to our faculty, administrators, and staff regarding religious diversity. Each of these activities communicate to students that educators recognize the religious diversity on campus and desire to provide the support necessary for developing and nurturing a religious life.

**Future Research**

There is still much for us to research in order to fully understand the exercise of religious dialogue and the conditions and settings needed for its success. As we look for opportunities to study these conversations, we would be wise to recognize and remember that this particular type of dialogue comes in many forms. Students are discussing religion in their living spaces, student organization meetings, locker rooms, local coffee shops, places of employment, and academic classes. Further, these discussions are occurring within a snapshot of time and/or during the duration of an entire academic semester. Additionally, as we study this phenomena, we need not limit ourselves solely to examine the intergroup dialogue sessions being offered by academic departments or through formal courses. As educators and researchers we must be willing to go where the students are having these conversations to collect our data and not rely only on them coming to us to participate in a sit down interview.
An aspect of this study included an examination of the settings in which this dialogue course took place. We need to continue to study settings to discover if there are additional correlations between environment and dialogue. A central question regarding this examination is whether a physical space helped or hindered the dialogue process. Researchers ought to examine furniture, lighting, temperature, and decorations to determine if one, all, or none have an impact on the amount or level of discussion that occurs between students. Additionally, further research ought to be conducted on the lounge setting. Does a setting with comfortable sofas and natural lighting create an atmosphere that is calm and relaxing, which leads a student to feel more free and safe to share their viewpoints and opinions? Answering these questions concerning environment will be a necessity for administrators and faculty as they design and implement future dialogue courses and sessions.

Lastly, we need to research these dialogue utilizing longitudinal studies. Although these courses may be impactful for students in the immediate or short term, they may not have a lasting effect on them. My study did not examine the contributions that the readings and reflection papers had on participants’ learning and growth throughout the course. However, future research ought to determine if the discussions held and assignments completed are truly changing their perceptions and viewpoints of others. One question to consider is whether the changes in attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs continue to be altered after several months or years after the course? Another question to pose to participants is which activities or discussions do you remember and why from your dialogue course? As administrators and faculty gain insight into these questions, they will be in a better position to design courses with activities and assignments that are more powerful and produce long lasting effects.
Limitations

In this study, I sought to understand the experience of dialogue across religious difference. Gathering information for this examination occurred as I sat with each participant for two separate interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes in length. Throughout the semester, I did not have access to the course sessions in order to observe the actual dialogues in process. I was only able to learn about the experience of religious dialogue through the individual participant’s viewpoint of what occurred during the discussions. Although these interviews enabled me to learn about thoughts and feelings of each participant as he/she engaged others in conversation, they did not allow me to see the body language being expressed, hear the questions being raised, and observe how the physical space played a role during the class discussions.

Additionally, this examination occurred in a finite time and space. I was not able to follow up with these participants during the subsequent semester or a year after their course ended. This limited exposure to the participants only allowed me to determine their immediate feelings and thoughts regarding their experience. I was only able to discover the lessons learned and skills gained by the participant in the moment. Having the ability to meet with the participants six to twelve months following the dialogue class would have given me the opportunity to ask them if they remember the course activities and assignments, if the changes in their perceptions of others have remained, and if the views of their own faith have endured. This additional interview would have provided a deeper insight and understanding of the impact a religious dialogue course can have on the student experience.
Conclusion

This study sought to further inform what is known about engaging religious difference in an intergroup dialogue course. An examination of the participants’ prior experiences with conversations regarding the topic of religion, their interactions with classmates during the course, their views regarding the lessons learned and skill sets gained as a result of being a member in this course each took place as I spoke with the participants about their lives before and during the dialogue course. Each participant had spoken with family and friends about religion prior to the course and each student, at some level, engaged his or her peers in conversation about religious doctrine and practice during class discussions. Further, each participant noted one or more personal benefits after completing this course. Additionally, there were opinions expressed by each student about the physical environment of the classroom and the lounge setting. Lastly, and most importantly, each participant shared that in some degree their views about their own religious beliefs had shifted as well as their perceptions of others had changed. From this study, it is apparent that when we bring students from diverse religious backgrounds and perspectives they learn about themselves and gain a sense of understanding about the other.

As I reflect on this study, I recognize and acknowledge that I and my fellow student affairs professionals must complete a further examination of the results of this study in order to assist students learn more about themselves and others. We not only live in a racially and socially diverse society in the U.S. but we living in a time in this country when individuals of varying religious backgrounds are becoming ever more present. As educators, we must become religiously literate and seek avenues to help our students learn more about the world’s religious doctrines and practices. One method by which this education can happen is by bringing our religiously diverse students together on a regular basis to talk with one about their beliefs, views,
and perspectives. This study provides supporting evidence that this dialogue method does usher students into conversation with one another, allowing them to become more self-aware and cognizant of the differences around them.
REFERENCES


ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/working_papers/file78715.pdf


APPENDIX A: REQUEST FOR PARTICIPANTS LETTER

Dear Student,

I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program at Bowling Green State University. For the completion of my degree, I am conducting a study to examine student experiences as they engage in conversations across religious differences. I am hoping that you will consider serving as a participant in my study.

Design of the Study
I plan to interview 8-10 students who have experience in discussing the topic of religion and/or spirituality with religiously diverse individuals. The study will seek to illuminate the following questions:

1) In what settings have you engaged another individual in conversations about religion and spirituality?
2) What has been your experience participating in dialogues across religious differences?
3) What attitudes, perceptions, and/or beliefs have been altered, if any, as result of participating in such conversations?
4) What conditions and/or settings make religious dialogue conducive for you?
5) What have you learned as a result of being a part of these dialogues?

Procedure
Once participants are identified, involvement in the study will consist of two one-hour interviews, which will be recorded. These interviews will take place at your home institution. The first interview will occur in late March and will seek to understand your previous experience with religious dialogue and discover your thoughts concerning the dialogue course with which you are enrolled. A second interview will occur in May and will serve as an opportunity for you to confirm and clarify any statements made during the first interview as well as provide additional information. All study related data and information will be safeguarded and personal and institutional identities will be kept confidential. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw, without penalty, at any point in the process.

Benefits of Participating
Exploring your participation in dialogues across religious differences will lead to a discovery of your experience with such conversations. Further, it will illuminate the challenges encountered and lessons learned during these dialogues. Your insight will help faculty and staff members to learn of the environmental conditions that are most conducive for such conversations to occur.

Participant Selection
I hope you will be willing serve as a participant in this study. If you know of other students, who have engaged in conversations across religious dialogue, they are likely to be an ideal participant for this study. Please indicate to me, via email or telephone, their contact information, and I will follow up with each individually to confirm his or her participation.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at 419-575-6753 or shoefle@bgsu.edu or the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Dafina Stewart at 419-372-7382 or dafinas@bgsu.edu.

Many thanks for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

Nicole Hoefle
Higher Education Administration
Doctoral Student
Bowling Green State University
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

You are invited to participate in a research study of religious dialogue. For the completion of my doctorate in Higher Education Administration at Bowling Green State University, I am conducting a study to examine student experiences as they engage in conversations across religious differences.

Design of the Study
The study will seek to illuminate the following questions:
1) In what settings have you engaged another individual in conversations about religion and spirituality?
2) What has been your experience participating in dialogues across religious differences?
3) What attitudes, perceptions, and/or beliefs have been altered, if any, as result of participating in such conversations?
4) What conditions and/or settings make religious dialogue conducive for you?
5) What have you learned as a result of being a part of these dialogues?

Procedure
Once participants are identified, involvement in the study will consist of two one-hour interviews, which will be recorded. These interviews will take place at your home institution. The first interview will occur in late March and will seek to understand your previous experience with religious dialogue and discover your thoughts concerning the dialogue course with which you are enrolled. A second interview will occur in May and will serve as an opportunity for you to confirm and clarify any statements made during the first interview as well as provide additional information. All study related data and information will be safeguarded and personal and institutional identities will be kept confidential. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw, without penalty, at any point in the process.

Risks
The anticipated risks to you are not greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

Confidentiality
All study related data and information will be safeguarded and personal and institutional identities will be kept confidential. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw, without penalty, at any point in the process.

Benefits
Exploring your participation in dialogues across religious differences will lead to a discovery of your experience with such conversations. Further, it will illuminate the challenges encountered and lessons learned during these dialogues. Your insight will help faculty and staff members to learn of the environmental conditions that are most conducive for such conversations to occur.

Contact Information
If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at 419-575-6753 or shoefle@bgsu.edu or the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Dafina Lazarus Stewart at 419-372-7382 or dafinas@bgsu.edu. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or at hrsrb@bgsu.edu.

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 above terms.

Investigator’s Signature ___________________________ Date ______________

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www.bgsu.edu/colleges/edhd/hesa
APPENDIX C: INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Greeting

1. Thank you for serving as a participant in my study
2. Review Purpose: Exploring the experiences of students as they engage in conversations across religious differences.
3. Review Procedures: I will ask several open-ended questions. Please feel free to answer them as fully and completely as you would wish. I will be digitally recording what you say during the interview in order to accurately record our conversation. If you would prefer something not be recorded, please indicate this and I will pause the recorder. All recordings, transcripts, and other documents will be coded and altered to safeguard your and the institution’s identity.
4. Do you have any questions before we start the interview?
5. Review and sign the two consent forms. Give one to the participant.
6. Prepare the recorder and begin.

Initial Questions

1. “How did you come to develop an interest in this course?”
2. “What do you hope to learn in this course?”
3. “What has been your experience with conversations around the topic of religion or spirituality prior to this course?”
4. “How do you feel about engaging peers in discussions about spirituality and religion?”

Summary Questions

1. Is there anything you think I should have asked that I have not asked you?
2. Is there anything you would like to add to your comments?
3. Are you willing to meet with me again to discuss this topic further?

Closing

Thank you for sharing your time and thoughts with me. In the following weeks, I will send a transcript to you as well as some of my thoughts and findings from this interview. You will be invited to review the transcripts and notes and make whatever comments you would like. Thank you again for your time.
DATE: April 1, 2013

TO: Nicole Hoefle, M.S.

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [323518-3] Engaging Differences of Religious Belief: The College Student Experience

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: April 2, 2013

EXPIRATION DATE: April 1, 2014

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on April 1, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation
for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrbo@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.

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