CHANGING PLACES: NARRATIVES OF SPIRITUAL CONVERSION DURING THE FIRST COLLEGE YEAR

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ABSTRACT

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A student’s first year of college study is marked by the transition of leaving a familiar routine of academic, social, and family commitments. Upon arrival at college, a student can learn how to negotiate personal responsibility for intellectual and community development during the first year. New college students are primed for such immense intellectual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development, and it may include consideration of religious practice and spiritual values, their meaning and relevance, and determination of religious habits and spiritual identity.

This study explored the experiences of spiritual conversion among first-year college students, and how the college environment may contribute to such experiences. Religious and spiritual conversion experiences may reflect a creation, diminishment, strengthening, or transformation of a student’s spiritual identity, and this exploratory study sought to include any of these forms of conversion and the factors that challenge and encourage them. By studying the nature of these experiences in the postsecondary environment, educators may learn more about how the experience of college can affect students before, during, and beyond conversion experiences.

Students were invited to share their stories to illustrate how their spiritual lives were created, diminished, strengthened, or transformed during their first college year. They shared insights into the related challenges and opportunities encountered through feelings of loneliness, community inclusion and exclusion, academic achievements in the midst of personal turmoil, and environmental influences that may have shaped their journeys.
The findings of this inquiry suggested the need for additional opportunities for training for personnel in higher education and student affairs to be more attentive to and better able to support students who are searching spiritually and who may experience a spiritual conversion during the first year of college. These findings demonstrated educators’ need to focus on ways in which the college environment can best support safe and healthy student journeys to, through, and beyond the campus. Educators must shape the college environment academically, socially, and spiritually to be a place of change that welcomes and challenges students for success.
DEDICATION

A.M.D.G.

“I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith.”

— 2 Timothy 4:7

This volume is dedicated to my first teachers: my parents and grandparents. All educators in their professions, they taught me to live, learn, and lead with respect and earnest inquiry, and their greatest lessons were of love, family, and generosity. Without these first teachers, I would have neither the privilege of education, the roots of family, nor the foundation of faith.

Thank you for teaching me that a good education and a strong faith are two things that can never be taken away—and are indeed sometimes all I may have. For the rides to and from school, the lunches packed, the after-school care, and for the comforts of home, you have sustained my growth and my learning.

You have put me through, and I share this degree with you.

Judith Ann Murphy O’Neill and Charles Kevin O’Neill

Bernice Grace Smith Murphy and Mary Adelaide Ashworth O’Neill

Robert Edward Murphy and Daniel James O’Neill

“You can’t get through this without faith. You can’t get through anything without faith.”

— EF5 tornado survivor, Joplin, Missouri (29 May 2011)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“People all over the world use words; the writer comes along and has to use these most-in-use objects, put together a few nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives … and pull them together and make them bounce, throw them against the wall and make people say, ‘I never thought of it that way.’”

— Maya Angelou

My education and my work do not end here. I look forward to giving back that which I have received, and to paving for others a smoother road. So many want to learn; few get such opportunities. In gratitude, may my work help others to learn, develop, and grow to be “people for others.” In particular, I am grateful to Anil, Benjie, Diana, and Ezrah for sharing their stories to make this project a reality, and to all others who have led me, laughed with me, loved me, and shaped me on this journey through a very “changing place” in my own life. They include, but are not limited to, the following individuals.

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“The true college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.”

— W. E. B. DuBois
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The college years are filled with opportunities for intense learning and growth, reflection, and development. For traditionally-aged college students (between 18 and 24 years of age), this period is defined by youthful independence, academic challenge, and an uncharted future. Throughout college, students also approach a series of developmental tasks and stages—prescribed, sequential, or otherwise—that comprise growth and maturation, and these observed and measured tasks can take place throughout these years. Multiple theoretical understandings help give shape to these processes and guide research and practice when considering college student growth; they describe these developmental processes intrapersonally, interpersonally, and cognitive-structurally (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Through such intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions, students develop a refined understanding of self in relation to others; cognitively, they demonstrate growth in their critical thinking and reasoning skills. The college experience provides a wealth of opportunities for growth and learning across many realms of development.

One such realm of development among college students is the exploration of personal identity across a variety of dimensions. These dimensions may include gender or ethnicity, ability or socio-economic status, sexual orientation or spirituality, among others. Across these dimensions, students ask “who am I?” with regard to their own perspectives on what they learn, on whom they meet, and on what they encounter, especially when they discover ideas or meet people different from themselves. Baxter Magolda (2001) suggested this to be a “journey toward self-authorship involving movement from external to internal self-definition (Evans et al., 2010, p. 184). The college experience often affords students great exposure to such differences, and
can encourage students to ask such exploratory questions in light of what they learn from interaction with different people and ideas.

For many students, college is a time of separation from home, from family and traditions, and from weekly routines and obligations. Newly responsible for their own schedules and academic progress, students must begin to define their own personal daily routines, carving out time for what they value and eliminating what no longer fits well. For some students, ordinary features of their weekly schedules, such as commitments to regular religious practice, may lose prominence in a new hierarchy of demands on their time; this may call into question what the student values in terms of those practices (Nash, 2001). Away from home, the student is free to define how to spend his or her time, and to determine what role such commitments shall play in daily life. Some students welcome these changed routines; others happen upon them in “shipwreck” moments of crisis (Parks, 2000). Either way, these opportunities can be transforming.

For clarity, the more universal labels of spirituality or faith (and derivative terms) will be used here in reference to one’s awareness of or relationship with a god, deity figure, higher power, or a values system interconnected with or influenced by such an authority beyond oneself. Parks (2000) suggested they help to describe a longing for ways of speaking of the human experience of depth, meaning, mystery, moral purpose, transcendence, wholeness, intuition, vulnerability, tenderness, courage, the capacity to love, and the apprehension of spirit (or Spirit) as the animating essence at the core of life. (p. 16)
Religion or its derivatives will reference any behavior or ritualized practice that enables one to commune or communicate with a perceived spiritual authority within one’s spiritual beliefs. In essence, the religious is a mode of connection to the spiritual and in practicing one’s faith.

The dimension of spiritual identity, through a lens of religious practice, offers a unique example of how a student can struggle with identity development upon arrival to college. Moving beyond the potential change of routine—of either excluding or including something religious from one’s daily schedule—a student may struggle with new religious ideas, or, in the absence of familial influence, may reevaluate what family religious traditions mean and what relevance they may hold in the college student’s new reality. Especially upon arrival to college—these first months of separation and newness—a student may question such beliefs and seek to change one’s religious practice or identity. This change is often referred to as conversion, which means a change to or change from one’s previously-held perspectives, and can reflect a new difference in practice or intrinsic beliefs; it can be practical (i.e., religious) or doctrinal (i.e., spiritual). Upon arrival at college, students begin to explore these differences; for some, such change may take place along this spiritual dimension of their identity.

The phenomenon of spiritual conversion has long been studied in depth in the contexts of theology and religious studies (De Sanctis & Augur, 1927; James, 1936; Rambo, 1993). In the context of college students’ experience with such change, however, there may be distinct stories about how and why the college experience helped or hindered spiritual conversion. Especially during the first college year, when differences are noticed, routines established, and identities are probed, students’ stories of spiritual change may be profound. Educators can learn from these stories ways in which the college experience can help to influence this dimension of growth.
Educators seek to understand these experiences of growth and development of college students so that they may create learning environments to support student success in general, and so that they may support student development in particular. These environments are constructed with curricular and co-curricular elements, which may include such experiences as career preparation courses or job interview practice, structured processes of academic advising, opportunities for social involvement on campus, and life in residence halls. Strange and Banning (2001) posited that “without access to environmental structures for participation and involvement . . . students remain detached from the kinds of opportunities that call for their investment and responsibility for their own learning, key requisites for powerful educational outcomes” (p. 110). Understanding ways in which the college environment may impact or influence a student’s identity development—and one’s spiritual identity and experiences, in particular—will help educators to design environments to be supportive and safe enough to encourage this student growth.

**Theoretical Understandings of College Student Development**

From the psychosocial perspective, engaging both intrapersonal and interpersonal developmental arenas, Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested that students mature along seven tasks or “vectors” of growth: developing competence; managing emotions; developing mature interpersonal relationships; moving through autonomy toward interdependence; establishing identity; developing purpose; and developing integrity. This model served further as a foundation for subsequent theoretical frameworks that focused more explicitly on aspects of social identity, such as ethnicity and race (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1993; Phinney, 1990), gender (Davis, 2002; Josselson, 1987), and sexual orientation (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994). Collectively, these and other psychosocial theories examine personal lives of individuals,
exploring the emergence of an understanding of self-identity and the individual’s relationship with others (Evans, 1996). Consequently, as students change, their ways of comprehending the world and their experiences also shift.

Also accompanying these dynamics of maturation is another process of meaning-making reflected in how students interpret the experiences they encounter. Most notably, “cognitive theories describe changes in how students think” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 6) and illustrate forms of intellectual and ethical development. From mid-twentieth-century scholars like Piaget (1932) to more recent works by Baxter Magolda (1992), King and Kitchener (1994), and others, this set of theories has demonstrated that changes in students’ meaning-making structures result from experiences that cause them to reflect and learn in increasingly complex ways. Whether growth in intellectual or ethical dimensions (Perry, 1970), ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997), or in manners of learning that involve and rely on reflective judgment (King & Kitchener, 1994) or moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1969), students are challenged regularly by the aspects of the college experience that encourage cognitive growth. Unlike psychosocial models though, these stage theories follow a hierarchical progression that charts cognitive growth as subsequent levels are achieved through more complex forms of thinking and an appreciation of varying perspectives, opinions, sources of reason, and sources of truth.

Most recently, scholars such as Baxter Magolda (2001, 2004) have offered theoretical models that synthesize the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive dimensions of students’ lives. One such model, the concept of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004), suggests a movement from receiving perspectives, opinions, values from sources of authority to defining, embracing, and demonstrating one’s own worldviews through reflection and lived experience.
This typically takes place during and immediately after the college years, for a traditionally-aged student in young adulthood. Self-authorship is a process of “movement from external to internal self-definition” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 184) with requisite “cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions . . . associated with each phase” (p. 184). It is a process of epistemological growth, increasing one’s “capacity to wisely choose from among multiple alternatives” (Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. 42), of learning how and why to make decisions based on values and their implications. It is a realization that “the [experience of] self is central to knowledge construction” (p. 42), requiring a strengthened sense of identity and self-understanding, and knowing how one’s values shape one’s perspectives that demonstrates intrapersonal growth. It is learning through shared commitment with others to “participate as equal partners in [a] mutual construction” (p. 42) of knowledge with “the ability to function interdependently” (p. 42) with respect to shared authority and expertise that demonstrates interpersonal growth. Self-authorship is achieved through “trusting the internal voice” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 186) and having conviction in one’s values and commitments, through “building an internal foundation” (p. 187) of a guiding framework and personal philosophy, and through “securing internal commitments” (p. 187), with “integrated . . . internal foundations with the realities of their external worlds, which led to a sense of freedom to live . . . authentically” (p. 187).

With particular attention to these developmental dynamics and an ongoing aspiration to self-authorship, and recognizing that undergraduate students undergo significant identity development during their time in college, such processes also include the pursuit of questions and thoughts of another kind that also influence identity and learning. Such questions illustrate
matters of meaning-making and growth that are ultimate and most comprehensive, ones that are identified in an evolving literature on the spiritual development of college students.

**Purpose of the Study**

A student’s first year of college study is marked by transition, choice, challenge, and change (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Tinto, 1993). Leaving a familiar routine of academic, social, and family commitments, a college student constructs a new, unique routine of learning both within and beyond the classroom (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students learn to negotiate personal responsibility for intellectual and community development, and many factors can influence a college student’s learning, development, and growth during the first year (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994; King & Kitchener, 1994). New college students are primed for immense intellectual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development during this time (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Such development may include consideration of religious practice and spiritual values, their meaning and relevance, and determination of religious habits and spiritual identity—all open to change and transformation as students enter college (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Nash, 2001; Parks, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of spiritual conversion among first-year college students, and how the college environment may contribute to such experiences. Religious and spiritual conversion experiences may reflect a strengthening, transformation, creation, or diminishing of a student’s spiritual identity, and this exploratory study sought to include any of these forms of conversion and the factors that challenge and encourage them. By studying the nature of these experiences in the postsecondary environment, educators can learn more about how the experience of college can affect students before, during, and beyond conversion experiences.
This study was guided by two main research questions to help understand spiritual conversion and the role of the college environment in conversion among first-year college students. First, what stories do students tell of spiritual conversion experiences that occurred during their first year of college? Second, what role do students say the college environment (i.e., classes, co-curricular activities, faculty, staff, and fellow students) played in triggering, supporting, or discouraging their spiritual conversion?

There is an extensive literature about spiritual conversion in the humanities and social sciences. However, few of these studies explore conversion among college students or in the college setting. This exploratory study will have contributed to the literature on spiritual conversion in general, and to the higher education literature in particular. Its findings will have helped scholars and educators in higher education to more fully understand the transformations of religious practice and spiritual identity that students may experience during college, especially during the first year. Further, the study will have revealed yet unknown ways in which the college environment can affect students within and beyond the classroom.

**Significance of the Study**

This study aimed to advance an understanding of the spiritual conversion process among first-year college students. Stamm (2006b) indicated that students “are actively engaged in piecing together their own spiritual homes . . . [and] are less interested in, and often distrust, organized religion, finding spiritual growth through their personal quests for meaning and purpose in their lives” (p. 91). If such dimensions of spirituality and spiritual searches are left unexplored in this way as a specific and critical dimension for study on our campuses, educators may inadvertently cause harm. Educators may ignore those students who require extra sensitivity or support during the various stages of student development, and during
transformative incidents when such dimensions may be at the forefront of day-to-day experience and thought. When forming supportive environments and creating suitable challenges, it is important to ask students big, ultimate questions and to help them determine life priorities. These join academic success as fundamental goals of college life, and furthering the consideration of such questions is imperative to help willing students to identify and define guiding, spiritual purposes in their lives.

Quantitative research confirms the presence of spiritual change phenomena on college campuses (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and educators must maintain an awareness of how to best support students through this growth process, particularly one which transforms students so completely. Lindholm (2007) found that “traditional-age first-year students show high interest in spiritual matters,” and they are “actively engaged in a spiritual quest; nearly half indicate that they consider it ‘essential’ or ‘very important’ to seek opportunities to help themselves grow spiritually” (p. 12). With a majority of students reporting this interest, failure to recognize the need for greater understanding of this spiritual dimension is to ignore an important and essential element of student growth and development.

There is also evidence that, regardless of age or academic class, students will think about religio-spirituality primarily in interpersonal terms. Others will be deeply introspective and private, [and still others] will grow in their faith. Others will find a new faith. Still others will lose or renounce their faith for good, and become apatheistic, agnostic, or atheistic. A few will even do all of these things at one time or another, either on or off schedule. (Nash, 2001, p. 193)

Without doubt, students will proceed with their search for significance throughout their college experience, and some searches will lead to total spiritual conversion. These student experiences
will continue, with or without the support that educators can provide; however, if student success is a main goal of an entire profession within higher education, its leaders must take note and pay attention to all experiences of college students, including the experience of spiritual growth and instances of spiritual conversion.

The following chapters trace and review relevant literature that informed the research questions of this study and the proposed methods by which data were gathered in response to what the study sought to understand. Placing the aims of this study among the current landscape of relevant literature demonstrated the topic’s importance, as the study’s guiding questions had not yet been directly addressed by extant research.
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Young adults, and college students in particular, question and evaluate their beliefs and values, and search for meaning to explain their experiences. This meaning-making process, however it may be enacted by students, can be a tool used to understand their lived experiences. With a focus on the spiritual dimensions of college student development, this study was informed by the literature on spiritual development in general, evidence of its role in the college experience, and the nature of a particular phenomenon identified as spiritual conversion.

It is important to consider the first year of college as one full of potential for significant personal growth and development for the college student. “For most young people in industrialized countries, the years from the late teens through the twenties are years of profound change and importance” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). For some students, it is the first opportunity to be away from home for the first time. For many, college marks the beginning of a new academic maturity, embodied in independent daily routines of class attendance, laboratory participation, library study, and other new intellectual commitments. For nearly all, college marks the start of a process of focusing career interests, discovering and developing dimensions of their personal identities, and structuring new priorities of time and values. “A key feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the period of life that offers the most opportunity for identity explorations in the areas of love, work, and worldviews” (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). First-year college students “often struggle with more specific identity questions based on gender, sexual orientation, race, cultural background, ethnic origin, or disability” (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, p. 3), and they “must make some progress on defining themselves more clearly” (p. 3), especially during this time.

According to Baxter Magolda and King (2004), a holistic outcome of college learning experiences is the student’s achievement of self-authorship. In college, a student may grow in
cognitive maturity, “viewing knowledge as contextual, or as constructed using relevant evidence in a particular context” (p. 9). College experiences of academic engagement and social involvement allow students to develop informed values and beliefs, constructing “an integrated identity [that] requires the ability to reflect on, explore, and choose enduring values” (p. 9). Students learn to “view themselves in relation to others” (p. 9) and build relationships that “respect both [their] own and others’ particular identities and cultures” (p. 9), leading to an interconnectedness with others. When students arrive at college, they find a wealth of such intentional opportunities to ignite intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive growth.

It is critical to first-year student success that certain supports are in place to assist students with the tasks of transitioning into college life. According to Tinto (1993), students arrive at college with developing characteristics, skills, and relationships that are subsequently altered over time by academic and social influences in the college environment. “Rewarding encounters with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution presumably lead to greater student integration in these systems and thus to persistence” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 54). Further, “as integration increases, it strengthens students’ commitments to both their personal goals and to the institution through which these goals may be achieved” (p. 54). Without intentional opportunities for integration in academics and across the collegiate social environment, a new student will lack integral support that yields interest and commitment to college success.

Successful transition dictates the success of the first college year, as an extended process through which one experiences “events or nonevents resulting in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 218). A new student arrives at college and must find ways to cope with the transition into a new academic,
social, and physical environment, and begin to “take stock” (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) of their new situation. They must seek understanding of their new circumstances and the resources available to help deal with and learn from it, and find support through advisors and new social circles. To cope, students are tasked with finding strategic ways to manage stress and navigate difficult moments of moving in, moving through, and moving out (Schlossberg et al., 1995) of challenging phases of the new-student transition to college.

A review of relevant literature generated several threads of knowledge that defined a context for this study. Consideration was first given to general ideas of spiritual development within individuals, and how each person’s process of meaning-making creates or enhances an understanding of the surrounding world. Situating this phenomenon within the post-secondary context, consideration was then given to spiritual dimensions of college student development. Understanding ways in which the college experience can shape and inform student spiritual growth is important for exploring later spiritual phenomena after entry into college life. Theoretical connections between processes of spiritual development and other dimensions of student development further explained ways in which they are similar and distinct. Several examples from the literature then highlighted ways in which spiritual aspects of college student development have been explored recently. Finally, selected findings highlighted an understanding of the phenomenon of spiritual conversion and provided a perspective on how this is currently understood. However, these general threads of understanding produced a limited picture of what was currently known. Even less was known about the role of the first year of college and its influence on student spiritual development and the experience of spiritual conversion. This literature provided a descriptive context for the study.
Spiritual Development

There is a basic human desire to make meaning of lived experiences. Lack of understanding or comprehension exists, as one person cannot know all things. In the quest for understanding, one must make meaning to understand fully a question, challenge, or conflict. The human process of maturation is an extended attempt to make meaning: to learn a subject or a behavioral process; to predict a pattern of life events; to comprehend the nature of ideas; and to discover new ways of thinking and being. Individuals make meaning in search of defining their experiences. This process was defined by Parks (2000) as “the activity of composing a sense of the connections among things: a sense of pattern, order, form, and significance” (p. 19). Although not a universal definition, this explanation served well to frame the following literature and study.

Accompanying the various dynamics of mature growth and development is another process of meaning-making reflected in how students interpret the experiences they encounter. Most notably, “cognitive theories describe changes in how students think” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 6) and illustrate forms of intellectual and ethical development. From mid-twentieth-century scholars like Piaget (1932) to more recent works by Baxter Magolda (1992), and King and Kitchener (1994) and others, this third set of theories has demonstrated that changes in students’ meaning-making structures result from experiences that cause them to reflect and learn in increasingly complex ways. Whether growth in intellectual or ethical dimensions (Perry, 1970), ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997), or in manners of learning that involve and rely on reflective judgment (King & Kitchener, 1994) or moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1969), students are challenged regularly by the aspects of the college experience that encourage cognitive-structural growth. “The extent to
which individuals take advantage of such experiences is the most important factor leading to the
growth in moral reasoning” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 108). Unlike
psychosocial models though, these stage theories follow a hierarchical progression that charts
cognitive growth as subsequent levels are achieved through more complex forms of thinking and
an appreciation of varying perspectives, opinions, sources of reason, and sources of truth. For
some college students, these sources of truth exist in spiritual and religious realms of
understanding and meaning-making.

Spirituality can assume a variety of worldviews, “not only because the term itself is an
abstraction, open to various interpretations, but also because words with metaphysical import
both arise from and inform worldviews” (Speck, 2005, p. 4), and research demonstrated that the
outer world can influence one’s perspectives and values. However, in considering the inherent
physiological roots of spiritual meaning-making, Buttery and Roberson (2005) suggested that it
is not a cultural construct, but rather it “comes from within, part of a person’s genetic wiring” (p.
39). They distinguished spirituality from religiosity, which they defined as “learned in the
classical sense from environmental forces; however, spirituality is more innate” (p. 39), thereby
suggesting religiosity is externally learned. Future research will determine in more detail the
nature of sources of spiritual questioning; Albright and Ashbrook (2001) suggested that neither
the mind nor the body are the sole centers for meaning-making, that it is a joint venture within
each person. This underscored the uniqueness of an individual’s meaning-making process, just
as one’s spirituality is individually created, shaped, nurtured, or ignored.

Other factors of personal identity, including sexual orientation and gender identity, often
intersect with spiritual development. For students who experience struggle or challenge with
such emerging identities, their stories of spirituality often involved “sharing pain, struggle, and
frustration” (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005, p. 208), but for some, their “struggles have resulted in significant growth and a reconciliation of their sexual and spiritual identities” (p. 208). Each can play a significant role in overall identity development and related processes of coming-out and declaring and celebrating achieved identities. This can happen particularly during the college years, “a time in which . . . students [construct] themselves, by carefully examining each part of oneself while reconstructing a new identity internally” (Gold & Stewart, 2011, p. 252). Such meaning-making processes are significant parts of “the human, student, and spiritual development trajectories of students who live in one capacity along the spectrum of sexual orientation” (Gold & Stewart, 2011, p. 255), and are likely truly inextricable from these development processes.

**Spiritual Dimensions of College Student Development**

With regard to the college experience, and as an extension of existing theories of student development, the spiritual domain has been recognized in the literature as one in which students make meaning and attempt to understand significant experiences and ask ultimate questions. For college students, this begins when they first arrive on campus. Students often encounter a series of “firsts” upon entering college that become opportunities for educators to work with them in their process of learning, development, and growth. Such “firsts” may include moving away from parents and home, deciding an academic major or career path, pondering untested values or issues of identity, and exploring new ways of relating with people, places, and things. When life’s ultimate questions of meaning and values are suddenly made prominent, students’ search for meaning can intensify. This process of meaning-making then becomes a primary tool in students’ ability to cope and to understand these experiences.
Initial research by Fowler (1981) described a seven-stage process of faith development that continues across the lifespan. Linking growth and development of reasoning skills with one’s perceptions of the outer world, Fowler articulated stages of growth in faith correlated to an individual’s age. Moving from a “primal or undifferentiated” (p. 121) faith through a “synthetic-conventional” (p. 161) approach toward a “universalizing” (p. 202) stage, a recursive process of building meaning, values, and perspectives continues as an individual develops in an expanding and compounding faith life.

Parks (2000) offered insight into the phenomenon of such questioning and searching in the college years, describing such a “capacity and demand for meaning” (p. 7) as the basic task of the human intellect. It is a process of seeking an understanding at the most fundamental level, while moving toward commitment, that she named “faithing;” more specifically, it is “the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our [human] experience” (p. 7). Individual experiences build perspectives and beliefs, and lead to more developed outlooks on meaning; such “composing,” according to Parks (2000), leads to developed maturity in faith. These experiences, through matured thinking and developed cognition, reliance on others for learning, and participation in appropriate communities, result in “compositions” that signify increasing development and maturity in Parks’ (2000) model.

Accordingly, throughout Parks’ (2000) young adulthood period, faith development proceeds from “authority-bound forms of meaning-making anchored in conventional assumed community, through the wilderness of counterdependence and unqualified relativism, to a committed, inner-dependent model of composing meaning” (p. 102). During this period, often during the college years, “the individual challenges established ideas and identifies new authorities through a variety of curricular and co-curricular experiences, as well as through the
influence of peers and of professors and other college personnel” (Stamm, 2006a, p. 60). The college environment offers a network of belonging in which young adults feel recognized as who they really are, and as who they are becoming. It offers both challenge and support and thus offers good company for both the emerging strength and the distinctive vulnerability of the young adult. (Parks, 2000, p. 95)

The influences of relationships and communities help support students as they “probe commitment” (Parks, 2000) throughout young adulthood in college.

Rather than focusing on stages of development, Nash (2001) approached college student spiritual development in a different manner; he explored students’ religio-spiritual narratives, the stories of their development in this domain. He suggested that the “truth of any theology, religion, or spirituality can be found in the power of the story each tells” (p. 60). Here the truth of spirituality and religion “lies in the eyes of the storyteller” (p. 63), and each story reflects a lived, true experience or understanding of a true meaning made. Moreover, he suggested that students’ stories of religious faith, “or lack of them, help to shape the overall stories that students . . . tell about themselves” (p. 64). Thus, Nash (2001) indicated that the ultimate source (and goal) of meaning-making—achieving a sense of understanding and ultimacy—is an essential dimension of identity itself, a tale within the larger story of a person’s lived experience.

Nash (2001) illustrated six distinct religio-spiritual narratives, mainstream and alternative stories of spiritual journeys lived during college that suggested college affords students the ability to explore convictions as they grow and change. In Parks’ (2000) terms, these function as “compositions” of faith. For example, Nash’s (2001) narratives included the story of the “wounded believer,” the individual who experienced religious injury or damage and exhibited a
profound skepticism and bitterness for religious authority. The wounded believer would ask why a higher power would allow evil to exist in the world, and possibly why wrong had happened to him or her personally. In contrast, Nash’s (2001) “orthodoxy” narrative was the story of an individual who would adhere strictly to the fundamental tenets of a religious faith or a prescribed belief system, often with little to no room for dialogue or debate on issues relative to such faith.

Perhaps one’s lifelong values are suddenly judged irrelevant; maybe one’s religious faith no longer provides spiritual answers. In Nash’s (2001) model, a student whose faithing was described in accordance with a mainline narrative, with its emphasis on the familiarity, comfort, and traditions of religious practice, may experience a change of belief—through rejection or disillusionment or other distinct shift in faith—and become a wounded believer. At these points, such an experience usually entails a shift in meaning, a revolution from one perspective, or an evolution to some further depth of understanding within an established position. Without a doubt, on all levels, the student undergoes a distinct series of developmental shifts. Throughout this period of probation (Parks, 1986, 2000), the student examines options relative to thought patterns, networks of belonging, and degrees of dependence on authority and others to shape the student’s innermost convictions. These shifts alter the path traveled by the student through exploration of values and beliefs which become espoused through a faithing process; Parks (2000) referred to this as a period of probing commitment, as students are drawn to a particular composition of faith, yet remain vulnerable and tentative in their commitment to it.

These narratives helped to explain some aspects of the student spiritual journey, but each journey is individual and unique. Such stories reflected significant engagement with one’s own ultimate, spiritual questions. By implication, it is also understood that students may, in fact, significantly alter their stories as a result of the developmental opportunities of college and
fundamentally shift in their faith orientation. Such students may undergo an experience of spiritual conversion.

Love (2002) suggested that “at the core of religions is the experience of or quest for the ‘ultimate’” (p. 357). With this in mind, Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) described college as “a critical time when students search for meaning in life and examine their spiritual/religious beliefs and values” (p. 726). Among all dimensions of student development, spirituality is an important domain because of the nature of the questions addressed within its realm. These are questions of ultimate concerns, and include such issues as what to die for, what to live for, evaluating one’s deepest beliefs, or choosing which career choice or life path will be best. These questions hold gravity and consequence for students’ college outcomes and the pathways they choose to reach such conclusions.

Spirituality cannot be measured empirically, although studies have explored the degrees to which college students are engaged in religious or spiritual practices (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Still, few studies have explored detailed aspects of the college student experience of spirituality. Although prior research indicated that students’ religious lives relaxed upon arrival to college, more recent research found that college students were spiritually alive, but in differing ways: they subscribed less to traditional practices and doctrines but sought actively to find applicable, relevant ways to make meaning of life and faith (Bryant et al., 2003; Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001; Lee, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Such evidence suggested that “students’ commitments to religious values during the college years may not so much increase or decrease as become reexamined, refined, and incorporated in subtle ways with other believes and philosophical dispositions” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, pp. 284-285). Evidence demonstrated increased
levels of conviction, greater examination of beliefs, and focused evaluation of values. Students appeared to be less influenced by church or hierarchical structures than by their own lived experiences.

Although Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that students’ engagement with religious growth declines during the college years, more recent findings suggested that “college students may not reject religious identity or values but rather refine and reinterpret previously held beliefs into more complex, personalized, and internalized concepts” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 218). In research using national samples of several thousand college students, Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) discovered that, in the first year of college, students largely fall away from religious tradition and become less religiously active, but also develop a heightened spiritual awareness and wonder how they might grasp deeply-held beliefs differently to find answers to life’s big questions. One goal of this research study was to understand the stories students tell of these processes of falling away from or changing religious practice, of heightening one’s spiritual awareness, and of searching for answers to ultimate questions within the larger experience and context of being a college student and spiritual convert.

Other studies confirmed what Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) understood of recent research, and suggested that correlations exist between student spirituality and gender identity, racial/ethnic background, mental health, and even political beliefs. The Spirituality Project, conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California at Los Angeles, undertook a multi-year, multi-institutional study of students to gauge their levels of religious engagement. HERI (2004) reported that nearly half of the study’s participants rated themselves more highly involved in religious endeavors at the start of college as opposed to during their third year, when ratings fell considerably, and reported that the attendance at
religious services declined steadily during the first three years students were enrolled (HERI, 2004). However, there was an overall reported increase in spiritual life and the creation of guiding philosophies and values from the start of college through the third year.

Although suggestive of a reported increase in student spiritual questioning, these empirical attempts to identify such trends only explored limited aspects of this phenomenon. Without the foundational structure of theory, only limited conclusions could be drawn from these and other findings. Theory also would help to suggest other avenues for future research.

These stories of spiritual identity can explain the experience of faithing and formation. But how might spirituality be measured, proven, or predicted? How can meaning-making be observed, contained, or limited? Emmons (1999) discussed many aspects of the scientific study of ultimate concerns and how they might be empirically measured. He suggested that goals (and how they serve as markers of progress towards some greater achievement) are milestones of meaning-making. “The scientific and clinical relevance of the personal meaning construct has been demonstrated in the personal well-being literature, in which indicators of meaningfulness predict psychological well-being, while indicators of meaninglessness are regularly associated with psychological distress and pathology” (Emmons, 1999, p. 145). Further, “the conclusions a person reaches regarding matters of ultimate concern—the nature of life and death, and the meaning of suffering and pain—have profound implications for individual well-being” (Emmons, 1999, p. 145).

This state of well-being is an optimal state or standard against which is measured the personal development of college students, from intellectual achievement to the achievement of identity. When fostered or forced by concerns of ultimacy, this search for meaning illustrates an active exercise of the mental facilities required to sustain well-being. Regarding the challenges
faced by students new to the college experience, this search for emotional well-being can be complicated when seeking a healthy balance throughout all aspects of college life.

**Impact of Spiritual Engagement among College Students**

Few studies demonstrated in detail the effect of spiritual engagement upon college student populations. Given the nature of transition experiences inherent with college life, student spirituality can be influenced by such transition to new surroundings, new environments, and new values. This can be transformative change, marked by an increase or decrease in quality or strength of conviction. It can be the product of questioning and examination of current beliefs when discovering an opportunity to consider other perspectives. Such change is a hallmark of the college experience.

The first year of college features the challenge of transition to new environments and to new styles of learning. Students arrive on campus prepared for greater freedoms and responsibilities for maintaining their own course schedules, monitoring their own academic progress, and exhibiting positive behavior as part of a larger community, without the assistance or immediate supervision of parents or other authority figures who had previously provided such assistance. These challenges of balance and prioritization can lead to difficulty or confusion with intellectual or social issues, and students work through such obstacles by exploring ideas in the safe environment of a college campus, where consequences of choices and behavior are designed to promote the growth and development of educated, civic-minded individuals.

Throughout this period of transition, students may experience a strong struggle to find a role for spirituality as they develop their identity. Several examples in the literature illustrated this process within specific student populations. Without generalization to all college students, these looked into specific cultures or sub-populations to illustrate ways in which spiritual
questions were explored differently, or to learn how spiritual development played an important role in the formation of a student’s identity.

With regard to first-year college students, Seider (2007) discussed ways in which the first-year college transition can have profound effect upon students and their worldviews. Students who experience even one particular event, labeled a “frame-changing experience” by Seider (2007), may have entire perspectives altered, or perceptions of their world shifted. The study described how “the [first] year of college serves as a pregnant moment in a young person’s development for a frame-changing experience to occur and . . . [for] commitment[s] . . . to take hold” (Seider, 2007, p. 3). This illustrated the influence of the first college year, and the need to appropriately address the opportunities and challenges inherent for students during their transition into collegiate life. Such frame-changing experiences can shift entire perspectives.

Low and Handal (1995) explored relationships between religious practices and successful adjustment to college life. During a very powerful time in young adult life, they explored the influences of stress and negative life events as predictors of religious activity as a coping mechanism during the initial periods of adjustment to college. Results highlighted gender differences, with females demonstrating a higher level of engagement than males in belief in a higher power and self-reported closeness to a God-figure (Low & Handal, 1995). They concluded that “religion is not equivalent for all young adults, and it relates differently to aspects of adjustment as a function of school and sex” (Low & Handal, 1995, p. 411). Among their recommendations was the need to pursue more qualitative data to understand better the role of religion in students’ lives at the outset of college, and to explore how stress and reliance upon religion may alleviate, intensify, or remove such challenge inherent in a first-year adjustment experience.
In several research reports by Stewart (2002, 2010, 2013) about students who identified as Black and/or African American, she indicated that “research has pointed to a reliance on spirituality by Black students as a means of navigating through their educational experiences and developing a positive racial identity in the midst of a culturally hostile environment” (Stewart, 2002, p. 579). When transitioning from the familiar to the strange, these students suggested that they treasured their faith backgrounds as the most saving pieces of the identities they were forced to construct upon arrival at college. Whether seen as a piece of home or as essential to their core beings, these identities were not readily forsaken. Further, such faith-oriented “philosophies of meaning making play[ed] [a vital role] in helping Black college students negotiate identity, persistence, and the college environment,” (Stewart, 2013, p. 94), especially through use of “prayer and other religious symbols and practices as fundamental elements of building and maintaining a spiritual perspective capable of transcending their immediate circumstances” (Stewart, 2010, p. 22). Spiritual identity and faith practice form strong foundations upon which “some Black college students have found validation, meaning, and purpose through divine affirmation and have internalized that as a personal resource” (Stewart, 2010, p. 21). This intensification of an intrinsic resource—a personal faith with which one was raised, a deeply personal reservoir of strength—is a primary source of “much-needed support to cope with the challenges of higher education and to resist the effects of race-related stress experienced in college” (Stewart, 2010, p. 21).

Alternatively, Lee (2002) interviewed Catholic college students and discovered that when they considered the big questions of life, they answered from their new perspectives, formed from a period of adjusting to a new independence from family life. Only one [of four participants] was most firmly rooted in the Catholic faith instilled by parental influence,
suggestive of Nash’s (2001) “orthodoxy” narrative. With diversity of background represented among all participants, and although they all shared a common faith tradition, such diversity within similarity provided for interesting comparison and contrast among all cases. From among these, Lee (2002) discovered main themes of “an independent self and the self-as-agent . . . as a context for [the participants’] redefined religious or spiritual self” (p. 347). These new ideas demonstrated a cognitive awakening, a development from a past multiplicity to a current relative state of thinking about faith and religious influence, and the part that religion and faith would play in the lives of these students, specifically suggestive of Parks’ (2000) developmental experience of young adulthood.

Whereas prior research focused largely on mainstream or majority faith traditions, consideration and comparisons of others were advanced through Small’s (2011) exploration of four distinct faith frames, represented by four groups of college students. Small (2011) suggested that, perhaps less visibly so than for their Christian counterparts, Jewish students’ faith tradition “weighed heavily in their life choices and how they viewed the world, historically, politically, and morally” (p. 39). Some Muslim students in Small’s (2011) study “had many questions about determining the religious elements of their identity with the secular world around them” (p. 48) and “bore a heavy social burden for Islam itself, feeling themselves to be obligatory representatives of their people to the non-Muslims around them” (p. 48). Students who did not embrace any certain tradition—or who truly had no idea about God and perhaps did not wish to know—comprised Small’s (2011) fourth faith frame: atheists and agnostics. These students “reject God . . . [and] struggle with an unsettled decision about God’s existence, or perhaps have no inclination to even consider God” (p. 56). However, such a view exclusive of God “does not preclude a full and complex belief system that incorporates the many nuances of
faith” (p. 56). Through dialogue within and among each of the four faith frames, both within Small’s (2011) study and in everyday practice, one can presume natural tendencies for interaction and alienation, for integration and separation. The degree to which students, as members or non-members of these groups, perceive a sense of invitation into this dialogue can yield a sense of privilege and welcome, or alienation and marginalization, either of which can serve as “both an important identity element as well as a lens into other facets of their worldviews” (Small, 2011, p. 130).

Buchko (2004) suggested that recent research reflected three main reasons for a burgeoning interest in spirituality and faith formation in college students. First, there had been growing evidence that students believe that the presence of some kind of faith life indicates a measure of well-being, that a spiritual awakening is conducive to a healthy sense of self. This belief, suggestive of Emmons’ (1999) earlier research, indicates a greater appreciation or awareness of all things spiritual and a deepening of the degree to which they purport to be in tune with themselves on a spiritual level. Second, students themselves began to identify religious awareness or spirituality as necessary for a mature outlook as they get older. Third, with an increase in human diversity on college campuses, there is a need to recognize the plurality of religious traditions or spiritual identities that is represented by students of a variety of backgrounds. This diversity, reflective of the religious pluralism described by Nash (2001), is celebrated in the spirit of learning and must be appreciated for its educative value as well as for the potential to understand more about a common spiritual sense that exists across many religious orientations.

Bryant et al. (2003) explored “the extent to which students in their first year of college were involved in religious practices and considered themselves spiritual” (p. 723), and sought
measurements of religious practice and self-identified student awareness of spirituality-related activities during the first year of college. Specific correlates of religious change were identified, including students’ general practice of religion (the extent to which it was a regular part of their lives), students’ disaffiliation from church-related activities (weekly attendance at services, contact with clergy, participation with family, etc.), and how the proclivity for “religious declines tend to be greater among men, Jewish students, and high-ability students” (p. 724).

Additionally, “the liberalizing effect of living away from home has been well established” (p. 725), and these conditions suggested defined practices in student spirituality are becoming more and more apparent, and are grounded in the living-learning conditions that are more present upon initial entry to college than at any later point during the first year. Further, although students “became less religiously active in their first year of college with respect to [regular religious behavior], they became more committed to integrating spirituality into their lives” (p. 736). This echoed Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) review of the literature, and Bryant et al. (2003) suggested there is room for significant exploration of the effects of this burgeoning spirituality in first-year students’ lives, even if formal religious activity declines.

College student environments can foster growth and development of skill sets among interested and engaged students. With particular regard for student leadership development, college students identify, practice, and refine skills to learn leadership across a variety of personal, professional, or community contexts. When exploring internal values and perspectives that can inform the type of leader a student becomes, such exploration often intersects with questions of spirituality or ultimacy; “engaging in searching for spiritual meaning intentionally through the lens of socially responsible leadership aspects may serve as a means to leadership development in its own right” (Gehrke, 2008, p. 357). Gehrke (2008) discovered “the nature of a
positive relationship between the larger constructs of spirituality and leadership” (p. 355) and recommended that further research commence “to examine specific aspects of spirituality in leadership as opposed to broad connections” (p. 356) between the two general constructs.

Practices in student health were explored by Nelms, Hutchins, Hutchins, and Pursley (2007) in a study of the primacy of the role of spirituality in the overall health of students throughout college. They found spirituality to be significantly related to life satisfaction, but that it was not dependent upon life stressors, conflict, or misfortune (Nelms et al., 2007). They found an overall relationship between “a self-reported level of spirituality and the health risks of college students in a university setting” (p. 264). They suggested that “young adults are partnering a spiritual component with other health dimensions to address today’s important health issues” (p. 264), which seemingly defined spiritual health as a key component of an overall, personal understanding of holistic health for college students.

Similarly, Schafer (1997) considered the relationship between personal distress and college student spirituality. Students’ sense of meaning was significantly inversely associated with personal distress, and that faithing and religious rituals were key factors that helped with reasoning stressors away from making negative impacts upon the individual. He suggested that further research should help illustrate why the “college years offer special challenges to students as they question, refine, and consolidate their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, as well as their stress-coping skills” (Schafer, 1997, p. 643).

With regard to life-changing events, Muller and Dennis (2007) identified ways in which spirituality influenced the navigation of such changes on a cohort of college students. They found that students who reported significant life-changing events also reported having “lack of meaning and direction in life” (p. 57) and also a high “desire to get away from the routine of life,
to seek new experiences, welcome challenges, to move forward and attempt to get more out of life” (p. 57). These students reported being less involved in traditional religious activity, and self-identified as less spiritual as a result. Their findings suggested to educators—especially college health educators—to encourage students to increase their awareness of opportunities for spiritual exploration and ways to promote spiritual health, for its positive implications upon other dimensions of personal health.

The literature demonstrated various themes of transition or change that often takes place upon a student’s arrival to campus, and that significant energy is directed toward introspection, decision, engagement, and cultivation and demonstration of identity. This energy may strengthen habits of the past, or develop into dynamic new ways of thinking and behaving during the first college year. Either way, the first year bears significant influence on student development, including the spiritual domain of development, and an awareness of such is integral to promoting successful student transition. This dynamic period of transition can lead to even further, more significant change that occurs among foundational beliefs and perspectives, reshaping faith and altering spiritual identity. Such a process of comprehensive change is known as spiritual conversion.

The Experience of Spiritual Conversion

Some young adult transitions are particularly intense, and in the college context, hinge upon the successful acclimation to campus life that promotes comfort and safety for further exploration of self and others. With new freedoms and independence from family or other authority figures while in college, students are able to question long-held beliefs or practices that may have been hallmarks of past family life. Student development suggests that young adults become something other than what they once were, taking on new characteristics and critically
examining that which once comprised their identity and beliefs. They either affirm the old or confirm the new facets of their character, which are continually being discovered.

Spirituality, faith, and religion can be prime targets of such evaluation, especially when a student must choose to balance a challenging daily schedule with the expectation to recognize daily or weekly religious obligations. “The emerging adult years often entail repeated life disruptions, transitions, and distractions—which [pose] challenges for sustaining religious commitments, investments, and practices” (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 280). Although managing time seems less consequential than evaluating deeply-held belief systems, it may be the beginning of a process of evaluation that students unconsciously undergo when separated from a family environment. “During this time frame, emerging adults experience a freedom that is historically unparalleled, a life structure that is often at most only loosely governed by older adult authorities” (p. 280). Especially with regard to religion and spirituality, and with the freedom to explore values and beliefs, students may change spiritual perspectives entirely in this process of conversion.

Lee (2002) suggested that, as a way of making meaning and finding understanding, “beliefs can be confirmed or abandoned through challenges to religious thought, often by way of contradictions between authority sources and relativistic points of view. Such challenges can arise through various means, such as curricula, peer culture, and classroom instruction” (p. 343). When a student encounters these influences for the first time early in college, opportunities increase for prolonged examination of beliefs and values throughout the college experience. These influences abound at the start of college life. According to Edmondson and Park (2009), “the interaction of a stressful transition and a context conducive to change may contribute to the likelihood of religious belief change in college students” (p. 291).
But what exactly is conversion, and how has it been defined? Among the earliest working definitions of conversion was James’ (1936) suggestion that to be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. (p. 186)

James (1936) offered this idea of change, of coming-to, that has been recognized as a hallmark of later conversion literature. Put simply, “conversion is a form of passage, a ‘turning from and to’” (Austin-Broos, 2003, p. 1). It is “possibly experimental at first, [then] it becomes a deliberate change with definite direction and shape. . . . To be converted is to reidentify, to learn, reorder, and reorient. . . . Conversion involves an encultured being arriving at a particular place” (p. 2). Further, in his discussion of the sociology of religious conversion, Bainbridge (1992) indicated that “to convert means to transform, to change, to turn around. Thus it implies a radical change in the nature of the person undergoing religious conversion” (p. 187). Similarly, Holte (1992) suggested that “conversion is either a turning from or a turning toward, and this turning most often has a three-part structure: life before the conversion; the conversion experience itself; and life after the conversion” (p. xii). Varying perspectives agreed that this phenomenon is a turning, with defined start and end points, as if a journey marked by departure and arrival; the magnitude of the turning varies, but there is no disagreement that a distance is being traveled.

Rambo (1993) sustained these ideas of conversion as turnings to and from, and as consequences of distinct causes. He characterized conversion further as paradoxical, elusive,
inclusive, sudden and gradual, personal, and communal. He indicated conversion “is a resolution of conflict and an empowerment to go into the world and to confront, if not create, conflict. [It] is an event and a process . . . an ending and a beginning . . . [which] leaves us devastated—and transformed” (p. 176). His exploration of religious conversion, outside the context of higher education, offered a substantial understanding of its causes, processes, influences, and outcomes, and ways in which individuals pursue and survive such experiences. Regardless of cause, this evaluative process of development turns one away from—or even more toward—a particular perspective. It also can increase or decrease the intensity with which one engages with spirituality and religious life. This understanding, contextualized within higher education, suggests the need for more detailed effects of conversion upon a college student population.

A deeper understanding of spiritual conversion was described by Mahoney and Pargament (2004) in a discussion of “life-changing transformations” (p. 481) of conversion that alter the objectives that individuals find to be “of greatest importance in life (significance) and the pathways by which [individuals] discover what is most significant in life (search)” (p. 481). Using Pargament’s (1997) definition of religion, “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (p. 32), Mahoney and Pargament (2004) explored conversion in terms of what distinguishes it from other processes of change or development. They suggested that the “integration of the sacred into the destinations and pathways the individual adopts is the unique element of spiritual conversion” (p. 487), and that such a process is distinct from quantum change (of transformation) because of this integration of the sacred. They suggested that community influence also encourages or supports conversion by aiding in understanding the nature of the sacred, i.e., religious symbolism and communal prayer (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004).
Paloutzian and Park (2005) echoed this idea through a discussion of conversion as a significant and total transformation of some part of life, including systems of meaning-making:

The overall process [of conversion] can be summarized thus: spiritual transformations, religious and otherwise, occur because people are confronted with discrepancies in life that require them to construct a new meaning system because the old one no longer works. Some changes in a meaning system may be partial and may not result in objectively identifiable outcomes, since some changes in people are not expressed in overt behavior. However, when spiritual transformations occur in their fullest form there will be measurable changes in self-perception and identity, life purpose, attitudes and values, goals, sensitivities, ultimate concerns, and behavior. (p. 334)

Paloutzian and Park (2005) suggested that conversion, as a type of overall transformation, yields impactful change across dimensions of one’s life that are not primarily associated with religious practice or identity. Alternately, it may suggest that those seemingly dissociated aspects of life are intrinsically rooted to religious identity, and that it takes a conversion experience to recognize it. When recognized, one can see the journey’s starting and ending points in hindsight. According to Paloutzian and Park (2005), “in contrast to someone arriving at a point of belief through the process of socialization and other developmental mechanisms, the convert can identify a time before which the religion was not accepted and after which it was accepted” (p. 331).

Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) explored the phenomenon of religious change specifically among students in college. With a small sample of Christian college students, they investigated individual students’ changes that resulted from spiritual conversion. They highlighted that “the sacred” (p. 165) is central to this process, and that religion and conversion,
as separate concepts, might only serve to connect an individual to a group or to a development process, respectively. Their findings defined spiritual conversion as a “radical change in the self in response to a great deal of perceived stress through which the self became identified with a spiritual force” (p. 173). They suggested that “religion has the transformative power to create radical change” (p. 178) during this important time of transition, at its height in the college years. This was supported by Smith and Snell (2009), who indicated that

emerging adulthood is not simply an extension of teenage life, which normally remains highly dependent on parents and structured by high school. Nor is it the beginning of fully settled adulthood, as marked by marriage, children, career jobs, and home ownership. Rather, emerging adulthood embodies its own distinctive characteristics, tendencies, and experiences. Many of these have implications for religious faith and spiritual life. (p. 279-280)

Finally, the true nature of these experiences will be told first-hand by those who have undergone and lived them. First-person accounts of what led to spiritual change, the feelings of the experience during such a “turning from,” and the perspectives upon “turning to” can only be truly understood by those who have had such an experience. Further, no two accounts will be alike. “We cannot examine religious experience adequately without acknowledging the uniqueness of each person and the distinctive character of each person’s experience. . . . Each person’s conversion narrative is unique. No two are identical” (Smith, 2001, p. 17). Moreover, “every person goes on a unique journey related to his or her faith and spirituality, and every story matters. The reasons young people drop out [of a particular faith practice], as similar to each other as they may seem, are very real and very personal to those who experience them” (Kinnaman, 2011, p. 25).
However, while change is powerful when associated with a religious turning or strengthening, little is known still about the nature of the experience itself and its effect on the college experience, both for and among students. First-person narratives would help to understand the nature and significance of this experience as shaped in the first college year.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The current literature featured clear and developing understandings of college student spiritual development and of the process of religious conversion. However, there was little that specifically addressed the complex phenomenon of conversion among college students, and particularly during the powerful first year of college. Little empirical evidence exists to demonstrate ways in which the first year specifically influences spiritual change and growth, and existing theoretical structures did not directly characterize this process, one which undoubtedly can lead to transformation of beliefs, values, and self-identity.

There was not a clear consensus from any one body of literature on how to operationalize an understanding of spiritual conversion during the first year of college. However, the extant literature did support the idea that students develop spiritually, that some students change their spiritual orientation, that this change could be caused directly by conditions unique to college transitions, and that the first year of college is incredibly influential on student adjustment. Educators must strive to understand the nature and potential of conversion experiences for college students in order to assist with such complex transitions during the first college year.

The central phenomenon of interest here was spiritual conversion while in college, which, examined in the literature, included ideas of meaning-making, questions about ultimate consequence, and expressions of beliefs, values, and practices (organized or not) that guide individuals’ behaviors in response to the world around them. Exploring particular experiences
through stories told by college students, this study illustrated ways in which students grow and develop spiritually when considering questions of ultimacy and experiencing conversion during the first year of college. Especially since there was little to no information on this topic among relevant research published throughout education, religion, and psychology, this study sought to explore such connections and examine how they may have related to earlier findings.

The following chapter describes the methods by which this study explored and made understanding of these experiences and how it suggested ways in which such experiences draw connections among spiritual development, conversion, and the first college year.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

Research design is grounded by a paradigm or worldview that suggests a researcher’s assumptions about how the observed world works. Creswell (1998) defined a paradigm as the “basic beliefs or assumptions that guide [researchers’] inquiries” (p. 74). Guba and Lincoln (1994) related the idea of a paradigm to cultural knowledge, suggesting that the paradigm is “what it is . . . all about, and what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate inquiry” (p. 108).

A constructivist paradigm suggests knowledge is gained from making observations in a natural state of being, using words, behaviors, and artifacts to understand the human experience of a phenomenon, to make meaning of an individual’s experience. Rather than solely taking a descriptive snapshot of behavior, constructivist inquiry seeks to make meaning of it. “The naturalistic [constructivist] paradigm assumes, however, that there are multiple realities, with differences among them that cannot be resolved through rational processes or increased data” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 14). Researchers who embrace a constructivist paradigm are “more interested in deeply understanding specific cases within a particular context than in hypothesizing about generalizations and causes across time and space” (Patton, 2002, p. 546). Using the human instrument to observe, record, and synthesize, constructivist inquiry is rooted in this emergent paradigm that allows the researcher to create new knowledge, rather than to measure or confirm existing data.

This study employed a strategy of narrative analysis to understand the stories told by students who experienced religious or spiritual change during their first year of college. These stories, shared from a student’s first-person perspective in an semi-structured interview process, illustrated specific episodes in which students explored such a change through their transitions to
college, as the “conversation exchange of the research interview often implicitly or explicitly invites the informant to recount stories” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 59). According to Patton (2002), “the central idea of narrative analysis is that stories and narratives offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings” (p. 116). This study used emergent methods of naturalistic inquiry through a strategy of narrative analysis to open these windows and to explore the experiences of college students and spiritual conversion.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of college students who underwent a process of spiritual conversion during their first year of college. Understanding this experience will help educators to learn more about how the college environment impacts students and how college may shape and influence students’ experiences of religious and/or spiritual conversion. Accordingly, I proposed to address the following questions:

1. What stories do college students tell of religious and/or spiritual conversion experiences occurring during their first year of college and what factors may have led to them?

2. In what ways may the college environment (i.e., classes, co-curricular activities, faculty, staff, students, campus traditions, or physical environments) play a role in students’ stories of religious and/or spiritual conversion?

Prior to this study, questions regarding religious and/or spiritual conversion experiences had not been explored for students completing their first-year of college. The findings of this study will help to describe religious and/or spiritual conversion among first-year college students. These stories and common themes that may be drawn from them will help higher education faculty and administrators better understand how college affects students’ religious and spiritual lives.
According to Erlandson et al. (1993), “the design of a study is the attempt of a researcher to give order to some set of phenomena so that they will make sense to the researcher and so that the researcher can communicate that sense to others” (p. 73). This study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm because of the need to understand experiences of student spiritual conversion, not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a resultant process of many other contextual influences that are present during the first year of college. The very nature of spiritual development suggests an inability to isolate it as a simple, single phenomenon, and that its empirical measurement would be impossible. As a research paradigm, constructivist inquiry, completed through analysis of narrative accounts of lived experience, best suited the nature of the questions and the knowledge they sought to understand, given four aspects of one’s approach to knowledge: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology.

**Ontology**

Reality, perceived individually, is different for each person. Further, constructivist inquiry suggests that perspectives are different for each individual researcher. “All tenable statements about existence depend on a worldview, and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical or sense data about the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 97). Whether regarding the participant’s experience of a phenomenon, or the experience of the researcher and what he or she knows and perceives from past experiences, the perspective of reality (ontology) is different and unique for each, which can lead to complex efforts to understand or portray these distinct experiences. It is the paradigm of “local and specific constructed realities” (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 256). Constructivist inquiry assumes that knowledge and truth lie within the individual’s understanding of reality, and the researcher must construct truth from the constructs of participants.
**Epistemology**

Theories related to the nature of knowledge, and how it is learned and known, are the substance of epistemology. More specifically, it is the collection of “related assumptions about the acquisition of knowledge . . . [and] the origins, theory, or assumptions” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 9) of it. Constructivist researchers take part in transactional learning, more subjectivist in nature, and trust findings that are created through such interactive observation and inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Put another way, “the inquirer and the ‘object’ of inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and known are inseparable” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). This relational subjectivity is inherent throughout the reiterative process of observation, verification, and the compounding creation of new knowledge. It is the aim of constructivist inquiry—through qualitative design—to create new knowledge through making meaning of lived experiences.

**Method**

The nature of the problem to be investigated dictates the method that should be used to sufficiently answer the research questions. When seeking to understand the lived experiences of a student who experienced transition when arriving at college, description provided through interviews with the student, observations of his or her environment, and analysis of artifacts that are part of the experience all help to generate a more seamless, cohesive portrait of the student’s lived experience in such a situation. The researcher—the human instrument—has an ability to observe nuances, seek themes or categories, and help to create meaning of the experience to gain a more comprehensive understanding of it.

Grounded in the constructivist paradigm, the goal of this study was to help create meaning from the stories of the experiences of college students who identify themselves as
having undergone a conversion of a spiritual nature after arriving on campus. A strategy of narrative analysis was chosen as a methodological approach for this study, as it “honors people’s stories as data that can stand on their own as pure description of experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 115-116). The purpose of narrative analysis is “to see how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (Reissman, 1993, p. 2). Interview participants told stories; their stories became working data in the research process. “Stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experience in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 8). Such an approach is “appropriate for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions to understand the human condition through story, which is justified in and of itself as a legitimate way of knowing” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 132). It is “particularly suitable for such inquiries as identity development; psychological, social, and cultural meanings and values; critical/feminist studies; and documentation of the life course—for example, through oral histories” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 132). Participants’ data, woven together by the researcher as strands form a fabric, created a broader understanding of the experience of conversion, and illustrated by the examples shared through students’ stories. According to Widdershoven (1993),

we live our lives according to a script, which secures that our actions are part of a meaningful totality. Our actions are organized in such a way that we can give an account of them, justify them by telling an intelligible story about them. (p. 7)

As constructivist inquiry, the researcher joined the participant in this meaning-making process. According to Rosenthal (1993), “each interview is a product of the mutual interaction between speaker and listener. Narrators do not simply reproduce prefabricated stories regardless
of the interactional situation, but rather create their stories within the social process of mutual orientation” (p. 64) within the interview environment. Findings were mutually constructed when a participant (who lived the experience) shared data with the researcher (who learned about the experience and then analyzed those data). Narrative analysis allowed both the participant and researcher to co-discover the meanings of experiences, and this “qualitative data analysis may be a description of both the story and themes that emerge from it” (Creswell, 2013, p. 75).

According to Saldaña (2013), “among postmodernists, the process of narrative inquiry is not a solitary research act but a collaborative venture between the researcher and participants” (p. 134). Such inquiries “are always strongly autobiographical. Our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121).

Chase (2003) suggested that narrative analysis implies the integration of two principles embodied in the associated research. First, “narration is a major way in which people make sense of experience, construct the self, and create and communicate meaning” (p. 79). In other words, people share experience largely through telling stories that illustrate their thoughts, learning, and the significance of lived experience as they understood it. Further, “narratives, no matter how unique and individual, are inevitably social in character. Thus, in one way or another, narrative analysis combines a focus on people’s actual stories with some form of analysis on the social character of those stories” (p. 79-80). Through understanding these stories and analyzing them as collected data, there was opportunity to contextualize each student’s experience and to find common aspects of those experiences that, in turn, helped to illustrate these experiences of spiritual conversion more broadly.
Constructivism itself suggests that research designs are less structured and are emergent: they are flexible and develop through conversation and details shared by participants. According to Erlandson et al. (1993), this emergent approach suggested the researcher recognizes “the complexity of any human setting, [and] goes into the setting with only as much design as he or she believes is faithful to the context and will help to answer questions about it . . .” and that he or she would “continue to look for ways to improve it even after the study has formally begun” (p. 73). The researcher sought “to understand individual social action through interpretation or translation. . . . [A]ll people, and therefore all researchers, bring with them a lived worldview” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 18).

**Participant Selection**

Central to constructivist inquiry is the researcher’s responsibility to “maximize discovery of the heterogeneous patterns and problems that occur in the particular context under study” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 82), rather than to “generalize the findings of the study to a broad population or universe” (p. 82). Incorporating this with narrative methodology to meet this responsibility, and in seeking to broadly inform a growing understanding of participants’ experiences, a selection of student respondents was interviewed to hear several distinctive stories of spiritual conversion.

Accordingly, the study aimed to collect stories of the experiences of current students who had completed their first year of college. Advanced students (juniors and seniors) were invited to participate, based on the limited availability of sophomore-level participants and the richness of experiences initially achieved with selection-survey responses. Although the study explored an experience particular to the first year of college, the involvement of more advanced students was appropriate as they were able to offer a mature, studied reflection on this experience they
had one, two, or three years prior. Student development theory suggests that “the capacity for critical self-reflection is connected to the duration of one’s college experience and general maturity levels” (Stewart, 2002, p. 583).

Further, the advanced students’ participation required my reliance (and theirs) on their own memories of their first year. According to Wiener and Rosenwald, “the act of remembrance is a choosing, a highlighting, a shaping, an enshrinement (even when it hurts). A life story is not simply that which has escaped forgetting” (p. 31). Seidman (2006) suggested that one’s ability to make meaning of a past experience, although in a memory, strengthens the validity of an account. Therefore, the study involved advanced students both because of their greater ability for self-reflection and depth of response, as well as for the logistical dearth of current first-year students or sophomores who replied with useful responses.

There are varying types or typologies, as well as degrees of spiritual conversion illustrated across multi-disciplinary literatures (Austin-Broos, 2003; Bainbridge, 1992; Holte, 1992; James, 1936; Paloutzian & Park, 2005). For the purpose of this study, four general types of conversion were defined for exploration. These types include a created spiritual identity (a new identity where none existed before); a diminished identity (weakened or disappeared due to a particular experience); a transformed identity (a complete change from one identity to another); and a strengthened identity (made stronger through a particular experience).

Initially, the researcher made contact via mass e-mail message in November 2013 (Appendix A) to approximately eight thousand undergraduate students at the University of Illinois at Chicago (“UIC”), a site selected based on practical, geographic convenience to the researcher. Of nearly seventeen thousand undergraduates at UIC, only approximately three thousand live on-campus in university residence halls. Of that residential population, about half
are first-year students. The message briefly described the research project and contained a link to an online selection survey (Appendix B) that helped me determine whether their experiences would be a good fit for this study. The survey helped students to articulate their own assessments of their spiritual change during college, and to describe ways in which those experiences of change would fit well with the study’s purpose. Survey respondents could indicate in detail how they felt their spiritual perspectives changed in some way during their first year, and some respondents provided detailed descriptions. However, only fifty-two students responded to the selection survey. Through purposeful sampling of those respondents, the researcher worked to “intentionally select individuals . . . to learn or understand a central phenomenon. The standard used in choosing individuals and sites [was] whether they [were] ‘information rich’” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). After a review of the fifty-two completed surveys, a list of twelve survey participants whose experiences fit the study was generated based on the richness and detail of the responses they provided. The remaining forty respondents were discounted largely due to unanswered survey questions, one-word responses, or other lack of descriptive detail that would have otherwise included them in the interview phase. The twelve selected students received, by e-mail, an initial letter of invitation (Appendix C) indicating they had been selected as a participant for the interview portion of the study, and which asked them to review a consent statement for later use in interviews. The other forty survey participants whose experiences did not seem to fit the study’s purpose received a letter (Appendix D) that thanked them for taking part and that told them their participation had concluded. Of the twelve invited students, only four eligible students responded with interest, as the remaining eight who were invited either did not reply to the invitation, or their schedules prevented them from participating further. The four invited students provided consent to be contacted for an orientation to the
study and to begin the interview process after providing the necessary written statement of informed consent (Appendix E) to satisfy institutional review board policies. The informed consent document indicated that, although UIC was not masked as the site of data collection, all participants, organizations, and other specific entities were assigned pseudonyms in order to protect participants’ confidentiality. Once informed consent was obtained, the interview process began, using an agenda or conversation guide (Appendix F) that was designed to facilitate the dialogue between the researcher and participant. From the outset, the researcher maintained a field log to keep accurate records of contacts and interviews (including all field notes) and to journal the experiences of conducting this study for reflection and further learning. With these data included, this log became “the fundamental database for [informing summaries] and carrying out thematic cross-case analysis in qualitative research” (Patton, 2002, p. 305).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through an interview process. Given the assumptions of ontology and epistemology and the general nature of constructivist inquiry, the stories shared by the students became the participant-generated data that were observed, recorded, and synthesized by the researcher. According to Polkinghorne (1988),

often the operative narrative of a person or group is not immediately apparent to the investigator. It may be that the description has to be reconstructed from fragments of the story or from its operation in the interpretation of specific events. The premise the researcher works from is that people strive to organize their temporal experience into meaningful wholes and to use the narrative form as a pattern for uniting the events of their lives into unfolding themes. For a researcher, the basic source of evidence about the narratives is the interview. (p. 163)
The researcher conducted one semi-structured, 90-minute-long interview with each of the four participants, and each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. Notes were taken during the interview to help with the formulation of emerging, probing questions that helped both the participant and researcher to reflect more fully on the experiences being discussed. A strategy of narrative analysis is especially welcoming of data gathered through interviews, as “during research interviews respondents often hold the floor for lengthy runs and organize their responses into stories” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 56), and “the conversation exchange of the research interview often implicitly or explicitly invites the informant to recount stories” (p. 59).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “data analysis must begin with the very first data collection, in order to facilitate the emergent design, grounding of theory, and emergent structure of later data collection phases” (p. 242). Review of data gathered through transcribed interviews allowed for a process of analysis that included organizing or highlighting main themes or “plots” (Polkinghorne, 1988) of the stories shared; in this mode of inquiry, “the unit of analysis is often big gulps of text—entire stories” (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004, p. 2).

The actual process of analysis could have followed a number of procedural forms. “One of the most classic approaches to narrative analysis [is] the six-part Labovian model. Clauses from transcripts are classified into one of six elements, purposed as nearly universal story structure when humans provide an oral narrative” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 133; see also Patterson, 2008). This six-step model (Labov, 1972; Patterson, 2008; Saldaña, 2013) includes an abstract (to explain what the story is about), an orientation (to describe actors, time, and place), a complicating action (an event or condition that changes a situation), an evaluation (to describe
the value or relevance of an outcome), a result (the actual outcome), and a coda (a terminal, summary statement of the situation).

From this process of focusing data through reading stories and highlighting story plots, narrative summaries of all findings of the study were created. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000),

what the writer of a narrative inquiry research text has is a diverse collection of storied field texts. Each field text is, to a degree, an individual and isolated text with its own narrative qualities. Some are more storied than others. In some field texts, the story quality is more implied than expressed. Because these field texts have been collected and positioned within [a] three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, the set as a whole has the potential to represent a more complete sense of the narrative of the inquiry field. The task now facing the narrative inquirer is to find a way to select and fit together these field texts into an overall narrative text. (p. 139)

Consistent with qualitative methods of constructivist inquiry, the study did not seek to generalize findings to a broader population; claiming generalizable findings would be inconsistent with a constructivist paradigm. Instead, “the narrative inquirer does not prescribe general applications and uses [as if to generalize findings] but rather creates texts that, when well done, offer readers a place to imagine their own uses and applications” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42).

As a human instrument, the researcher was uniquely able to collect data and organize them for understanding, including the meaning and context of all verbally shared information and any observed nuances of physical surroundings. Such observations were “systematic description[s] of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study” (Marshall
These data, collected in the participants’ usual surroundings on a university campus, were helpful in understanding their unique context and environment, and provided additional information about their experiences. They were chronicled in a field log and journal for later review.

The Human Instrument

“The instrument of choice in naturalistic inquiry is the human” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 236). Fundamental to constructivist inquiry is the role played by the researcher, the human instrument who collects, analyzes, and interprets data throughout the study. According to Erlandson et al. (1993), “relying on all its senses, intuition, thoughts, and feelings, the human instrument can be a very potent and perceptive data-gathering tool. Moreover, the human brain is unparalleled and unrivaled in its countless complex functions and capabilities” (p. 82). This ability to process and understand data—even during active data collection processes—makes the researcher-as-instrument integral to the constructivist research approach. This reiterative, continual process of collecting and refining data cannot be duplicated as such by any other instrument of observation or meaning-making.

Personal interest. As the human instrument who proposed this study of college students and spiritual conversion, I brought my own experiences, assumptions, and understandings to the research process. These were grounded in my own past learning, my personal convictions, and my professional experiences that oriented me towards a natural interest in this topic. This orientation was of considerable value when completing this study and preparing ideas for future research.

For most of my life, I have lived and learned in religious environments, having been reared in a Roman Catholic home by parents who were regular participants in our parish life.
From pre-school through my master’s degree, earned exclusively in Catholic-school classrooms, schoolwork and coursework consistently reflected progressive Jesuit, Catholic Christian themes of social justice and service to others, especially those who experience economic poverty. Sociological or psychological ideas of spirituality intrigued me, and when combined with studies of college student life relevant to my professional career, I was eager to learn more about their intersections and consequences. Because I had been actively engaged in both realms—as a spiritually-involved person and as an involved college student—I have confidence that the knowledge constructed in this study will satisfy questions of how college students make meaning of their spiritual conversion experiences on college campuses.

**Educational background.** My only experiences with formal academic research are limited to the coursework I have successfully completed for my master’s and doctoral degrees, the latter of which included a course sequence in quantitative, qualitative, and applied research. I am truly a novice in this skill set; I am an emerging researcher, having designed and implemented my first formal study. This study was my next endeavor to put into practice the skills and theories I learned thus far to listen more closely to the stories students told about their particular experiences.

**Professional experiences.** My places of employment have always been my places of learning, and vice versa; I have only ever worked “at school.” Through a series of undergraduate, co-curricular involvement opportunities (in student life and in ministry, at my large, private, urban university), I became familiar with many people and practices that intrigued me: from facility management to appreciating greater human diversity. Four years of undergraduate life unknowingly challenged and changed many of my naïve perspectives and created the valuable groundwork for entry into the professional field of student affairs work.
When making the transition to begin doctoral study at a mid-sized, regional state university, I was concerned by the prospect of being away from such overt and pronounced institutional spirituality. I learned that many people there found it easy to share and discuss spiritual questions and struggles with each other; this community conversation about spiritual growth became a central value of the university. I witnessed how life’s big questions exist everywhere, at all levels of administration and in any corner of campus, and we all strive to make meaning of our deepest lived experiences, regardless of institutional control.

My professional history (each instance in an academic setting) and my engagement with a formal curriculum of study have provided me with a rich reserve of experience that informed this study. Such experiences, with an active interest in these topics, prepared me to learn more through this research and from this process of discovery.

Indices of Quality

Indices of Quality

Measures of trustworthiness and authenticity were required to demonstrate the inherent quality and rigor of naturalistic or constructivist research. “Constructivist inquiry demand[s] different criteria from those inherited from traditional social science” (Patton, 2002, p. 546). These criteria were established as a way to certify knowledge obtained through these methods, just as traditional quantitative methods are certified through measures of validity and generalizability to explain phenomena from an objective, positivist perspective.

Trustworthiness. Good research demonstrates value through measures of trustworthiness that certify it as credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. Through these measures, findings are strengthened and verified as acceptable contributions to a body of original knowledge. Particularly as the naturalistic paradigm continues to emerge, measures of
trustworthiness are integral as qualitative methods are compared to conventional, positivistic methods of inquiry.

**Credibility.** There are several research methods that ensure a constructivist study is credible. Through the process of peer-debriefing, the researcher exposed data and analysis to “a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). This process of peer review contributed to the overall credibility of the study through an unbiased review of the data and their analysis. The peer debriefer for this project was a colleague and alumna of the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Bowling Green State University, and who had served in such a capacity for two other research projects and who had invited others to peer-debrief her findings when she conducted her own qualitative study as part of the degree program. She was provided with the complete set of transcripts for this study first to familiarize herself with the interview narratives and surrounding conversations. She then received drafts of the re-storied narratives constructed as the findings of the study. She provided brief feedback to clarify the masked identities of the four participants, but otherwise offered her absolute agreement that the findings as presented captured all of the appropriate, significant aspects of each participant’s stories. She suggested that the findings appropriately revealed the participants’ major themes and ideas, which reassured me that my interpretations were accurate and based on the facts of their stories.

The process of member-checking, whereby each participant reviewed and read his, her, or their own contributions as transcribed, analyzed, and thematized by the researcher, was another attempt to establish credibility for the study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), this is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314), because “if the
investigator is to be able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own (and multiple) realities, it is essential that they be given the opportunity to react to them” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Each of the four participants was presented with a full interview transcript document via e-mail so that each could review the interview conversation after it had taken place. They were all asked to reply with feedback to make sure the transcript was accurate and free of any errors of fact or the ideas they tried to convey in their narratives. Later they were all asked to read the findings narratives as I presented them, via e-mail, with their own sections highlighted to be distinguished from the other participants’ sections. Through replies received in person and via e-mail, Benjie and Joann responded that no transcription corrections were required, and both agreed that the ways in which their stories were represented in the findings narratives were recognizable from the stories they shared, and that my interpretations of their stories were fair and accurate. Anil replied via e-mail with a spelling correction for Veerashaiva (and its derivatives) so that the transcripts could be corrected. He also corrected one line as it descriptively related to his mother’s reaction upon seeing him arrive in India for his grandfather’s funeral, in order to better interpret the story more accurately than I had reported it. Ezrah replied via e-mail and in person, stating they saw no errors in the transcript nor in the findings narratives as they were represented. However, Ezrah asked if I would highlight more about their purposes for advocacy and their commitment to working with youth spirituality. This addition was made for the final version of the findings narrative. Finally, Ezrah asked that their pseudonym be changed (to Ezrah) from one that I had previously assigned, but no reason was given.

During the actual interview process, clarifying questions were asked of Ezrah and Benjie, with regard to the issues of sexual orientation (Ezrah and Benjie) and gender identity (Ezrah) that
they had discussed through the stories they shared. These additional clarifying questions did not appear on the original interview protocol, but I added them impromptu to help me understand and better represent them through my interpretation of their stories. Both participants verified my interpretations through their member-checks.

Each of these components helped to demonstrate the credibility of the research design. This study aimed to illustrate each participant’s storied experiences that were reviewed by a peer attuned to these research methods in order to offer an objective opinion on ways in which data were interpreted into a final form that helped to verify the findings. Further, member-checking ensured that the data, as interpreted, were credible and the findings were meaningful.

**Transferability.** Naturalistic inquiry would not attempt to generalize findings to all members of a population. Rather, its goal is to be able to cultivate knowledge deeply and to transfer knowledge that may apply from one case to another similar case. It attempts to learn deeply from one experience, rather than learn broadly from all. Through detailed interview data and observations, the “thick description” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of participants’ stories afforded the opportunity to learn deeply about their experiences. In addition to the purposeful sampling discussed above, this gathering of thick description ensured a depth of such knowledge by each participant of the study. Especially through the use of probing questions in the interview protocol, I attempted to elicit as much detail from the four participants as they were willing to share through their storytelling. This detail, as thick description, became useful when rebuilding and reordering their stories, which aided in understanding, interpretation, and presentation.

**Dependability.** Establishing an audit trail through a field log and research journal enabled a measure of dependability to demonstrate that the observations and findings could be traced back to an original source, and that all findings were documented in one particular
location. This audit trail, if followed by another researcher, would construct a similar pathway from data to findings. Although not necessarily aiming to be able to reproduce the study entirely, dependable methods would yield a consistent process of inquiry, and within range, some similarity of constructs. Throughout the process of designing and conducting this study, I kept a written journal as a field log, which included several handwritten notes and e-mailed memoranda that I sent to myself as reminders of certain ideas I had, text resources to consider, and other points of information that could have helped to inform my interpretation of the participants’ stories.

**Confirmability.** Also established by an audit trail, triangulation, and journaling, a study’s confirmability ensures that other researchers could assert the findings are accurate and acceptable, even if each inquirer’s lens is an illusion and unique. While no method can truly be separated from the researcher, the use of an audit trail would help to demonstrate how findings are traced back to original sources and that data and themes can be confirmed, adding to the trustworthiness of the study. In addition to the field log, I kept an additional collection of notes and communications with participants that helped to shape our shared participation in this research.

**Authenticity.** Discussions of a study’s authenticity involve consideration of fairness, and ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical authenticities; these explore the relationship between the researcher and the participants and how both construct realities and understanding from each other throughout the study. Given that “naturalistic inquiry takes its strength from the separate realities that have been constructed by different individuals,” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 151), these realities must have been reflected adequately in a study’s findings. The concepts of fairness and ontological and educative authenticity were central to the methods and proposed
purposes of this study. The concepts of catalytic and tactile authenticities refer to activating and empowering broad action or active change, respectively, and as such, lie beyond this study’s scope.

**Fairness.** An attention to fairness suggests that open access to the research process was available to participants, thereby ensuring a level of comfort and accuracy in their contributions. Absence of fairness safeguards would suggest vulnerability for privacy or misrepresentation among participants, placing the study in severe jeopardy for accurate reporting and sharing of experiences. Striving for a balance of representation among all constructed realities, this study ensured fairness through receiving the participants’ informed consent (Appendix E), and recursive analysis of storied data to accurately represent participants’ constructs. All participants had an opportunity to member-check my constructions to determine if their experiences were fairly represented throughout the study.

**Ontological and educative authenticity.** Ontological authenticity refers to how one’s (participant’s or researcher’s) own emic or self-perspective would be improved through his or her participation in the study. Educative authenticity refers to how one gains a comprehension of others’ experiences. This learning, about self and others, was done through interview conversation, through member-checking testimonial data, and through reading data interpreted as presented in the narrative summaries, especially when data revealed evidence of learning that has taken place or understanding has been achieved. When considering the purpose of authenticity, it was not primarily to discover knowledge and truth, but rather to improve created and perceived constructions and to have seen better from the emic (insider’s) perspective of a person’s lived experience. Thorough documentation and an audit trail provided significant evidence to demonstrate what was learned through the data-collection phase of this study. Finally, after their
interview conversations with me, each of the four participants reiterated how they valued our meetings and their member-checking activities as ways to reflect on how significant an experience their conversion processes were for them. They repeated how they each appreciated the opportunity, and at least two of the participants suggested they likely would not have reflected so deeply again on what they experienced if they had not participated.

**Ethical Issues and Protection of Participants**

Of highest importance in designing a sound study was the protection of those who participated and who provided data within the study. To guide researchers in protecting participants and data, “professional and ethical codes have been developed. These embody principles related to the dignity and privacy of individuals, the avoidance of harm, and the confidentiality of research data” (Punch, 1986, p. 35). Further, Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggested that researchers must be vigilant to guard participants against physical or psychological harm and any form of deception, that participants must have their privacy and confidentiality protected, and that participants must provide informed consent before taking part in study-related activities. Such codes of ethics ensured that the researcher acted with responsibility in safeguarding those who participated in this study and to ensure the safety of the data and information collected throughout the process.

**Harm.** Participants were free to join or leave the study at their will. After being fully introduced to the purpose of the study, the selected participants documented their consent (Appendix E) to take part in the interview processes, and could have ended their participation at any time. With a time commitment of approximately ninety minutes for an initial interview, and up to thirty minutes for a follow-up conversation, it was not anticipated that participants’ calendars would be greatly disrupted from pursuing a typical daily schedule. Finally, each
participant member-checked and reviewed my recording of his, her, or their contributions and their subsequent interpretations for accuracy and appropriateness. These measures avoided causing harm to participants in any anticipated way as a result of their participation in the study.

**Deception.** Guba and Lincoln (1989) maintained that the use of deception in collecting data is antithetical to the nature and purposes of constructivist inquiry, which aims to explore reality as constructed by individuals, and thereby must not confuse, muddle, or misrepresent constructions in the data collection process. Through an initial letter of invitation (Appendix C) and the statement of informed consent (Appendix E), and throughout the interview and member-checking processes, every effort was made to remain forthcoming and clear in the purposes, directions, and processes of this study to avoid any potential deception of the study’s participants.

**Privacy and confidentiality.** Reasonable promises of privacy and confidentiality were made to all participants; however, when collecting vast amounts of data, there may inevitably have been evidence of a specific person’s involvement, but pseudonyms were assigned and used for names of participants and other people, places, organizations, and groups related to the data-collection site, the University of Illinois at Chicago. Doing so helped to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of what students shared, while keeping the data true to the original message without compromising their identities.

**Informed consent.** In accordance with all expected guidelines and requirements of the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at Bowling Green State University and by ethical guidelines of research practice, participants were informed of the nature of the project and the expectations of their role before they agreed to take part in the study. Further, they provided written consent (Appendix E) to indicate their agreement. If participants had questions or
concerns, any issues were clarified before their participation began. Participants took part voluntarily, and they were free to leave the study at any time.

This study sought to demonstrate ways in which students may change in spiritual identity or orientation throughout the first year of college, and to highlight how certain experiences of learning and development make colleges and universities places of inherent change. Understanding these processes in ways that neither empirical nor theoretical studies found in extant literature have done could help to reveal the nature of the phenomenon of spiritual conversion as first-year students arrive to explore such places of change.
CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the experience of spiritual conversion among first-year college students and about any possible influence the college environment has on those experiences. This purpose was achieved with the help of several students, profiled in this chapter, who were interested in sharing their stories. Together, their stories were unique examples of pathways students travel in college toward shaping identities, searching for and deciding about personal values, holding family and friends close, and the significance of engagement with college life, within and beyond the classroom.

Prologue: Setting the Narrative Context

Narrative researchers enter upon their task “in the midst” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63) of others’ life stories as they take place. Those stories already had a beginning, are currently having a present-day, and will continue in some way into the future, regardless of when the researcher steps into and out of their interaction with others. Researchers themselves enter into the midst of their own life stories, with a past beginning, current present-day reality, and future, all punctuated by the researcher’s inquiry and related tasks.

This stepping into and out of the midst of one’s reality grounds a study in time. The research project takes place at a particular time and seeks stories of particular times in a participant’s life. In this study, I stepped briefly into the lives of four students who wished to discuss their experiences of spiritual conversion as had happened during their first year of college life. When I met them, I found busy, mature, and grounded students who were eager to talk about the wisdom they gained through particular experiences. I stepped into a present reality that was formed, in each case, by a past of uncertainty, shifting values, family influences, and developing self-identity. I stepped out of their present realities learning about more grounded
future pathways for career choice, role modeling, and decisions to question or pursue a faith life (or not). They entered into my present reality at a time when I was prepared to complete a research inquiry, after I had received training as a new researcher and as a student affairs educator during my graduate academic program, and while I was working full-time at their institution of higher education. Our mutual sense of time was marked by the stories and spirit shared during our visits.

A sense of place was shared, as our communal location was the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Located in a densely-populated, urban environment near the metropolitan center of a world-class Midwestern city, UIC is proud to celebrate its tradition of having no singular numerical majority student population group among its nearly-29,000-member student body. Diversity is a hallmark of the UIC student body. The university welcomes undergraduate, graduate, and professional students from all states and from many nations across the globe. It is a largely commuter campus, and fewer than one-tenth of its students live in residence halls. This contributes to a very busy, commuting, and transient atmosphere for many. The campus recognizes and celebrates its students’ diversity across varied dimensions of race, ethnicity, religion, gender and gender expression, ability, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and veteran status, and individual stories of hardworking, overly-scheduled, and academically-committed students abound.

Even more locally, the shared inquiry space was located within the university’s student center, a building known and common to all of us (the researcher and the storytellers). This was not only a convenient place for me to meet each of them for our individual interviews, but it was a comfortable environment in which each storyteller had invested time and involvement, and so it was familiar enough to help be a part of their own stories’ settings. Their narratives certainly
include other places, whether physical or geographic locations, or in the sense of milestones along the road of their narratives. However, for the purposes of this study, a main shared, comfortable space for inquiry was in the student center of their university.

Three narratives were crafted after reviewing each storyteller’s individual stories. The essence of a narrative inquiry is to learn of the “plot” (Polkinghorne, 1988) of someone’s story. These are the facts and first-person interpretations (as told) of what happened and what a situation meant to the storyteller. Together with an understanding of the “scene” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 8), which is the storyline of a character in a particular place at a certain time, stories were analyzed based on Labov’s (1972) approach. This approach outlined: a general abstract of how a story began; its orientation to who is involved, when, and where; a complicating action, resolution, and evaluation; and a final “coda” (Labov, 1972) to bring summary meaning to a story. In turn, the following narratives were reconstructed with this structure in mind, as appropriate, in order to appropriately represent the major themes shared across the individual stories.

These findings were framed by brief profile sketches of each of the four storytellers who shared their experiences in this inquiry. Each shared unique stories of past, present, and future of their own life stories, and with regard to the topic of conversion, each happened to serve as an exemplar of one of the four dimensions of conversion as previously defined for this study (i.e., transformed, diminished, created, and strengthened). Their stories, the actual findings of the study, were presented as distinct, brief narratives that addressed their general orientation to ideas of religion, faith, and spirituality; their transitional experiences of searching or quest; and their experiences of spiritual change in college.
Storyteller Profile: Diana (transformed)

Third-year student Diana was eager to discuss her experiences with me after completing the study’s recruitment survey. She is a psychology major with aspirations to enter UIC’s pre-nursing preparation curriculum. She is employed on campus in a physician’s office at the university’s medical center, and serves as treasurer of Greater Strength, a student organization that develops fellowship among members through Bible study, social opportunities, and community service.

Diana lives with her family in the suburban metropolitan area, and commutes each day to and from UIC’s campus; this commute is roughly an hour each way on public transportation. To complement her structured daily schedule on campus, she also has made a regular, weekly volunteer commitment to help at a community hospital, located near UIC’s campus. Since her first year at UIC, each week for a few hours she has enjoyed opportunities to meet, speak with, and transport her patients, and to visit with them while delivering their mail, flowers, and water to their hospital rooms.

Her choice of academic major and aspiration for a career in healthcare, along with her choice of involvement opportunities, have largely been informed by people in her life who are role models for her. Especially since she arrived at college, she has developed a strong sense of independence, not always in agreement with what her more conservative family would have desired for her. Guided by a desire for personal growth, Diana has often made choices that, as she recognized, would benefit herself and her future more than would please her family, but these choices have been made intentionally and largely with the new freedom that she found in college. Although it has not always been easy to make such decisions, Diana is confident that,
after learning from past mistakes, she is able to recognize what academic and social choices will be best for her. This sense of independence grows stronger with each year.

Diana’s family reared her in the Muslim faith, but her family’s commitment to Islam was more cultural than religious. They observed traditional fasting periods and holidays, but were less committed to daily prayer and religious schedules. Even these spiritual and cultural aspects of Muslim life became at odds with Diana’s own developing beliefs as she grew older, as she recalls her former faith life to be one guided by fear of not doing good deeds. She considered her religion to be more about consequences than opportunities.

Upon arrival at college, Diana believed in taking chances with living arrangements, involvement opportunities, social life, and academic success. Through an initial adjustment period, Diana learned, sometimes in a difficult way, that better academic grades come with hard work. She learned that the success of residence hall communities require a commitment from their members, and when there is no such commitment, those communities do not survive. She described an evolving interest of being of service in a healthcare setting, and now, in her third year of undergraduate study, is orienting her degree progress toward a pre-nursing curriculum.

Diana offered examples of how each of these changes came from an internal desire for what she thought was a good opportunity for her, and how each had some influential other person to help guide her thinking. Whether they were family members, a roommate, a friend’s parent, fellow club officer, or academic advisor, Diana’s journey has been shaped by her own desires and by the influences of people she holds close in life. Further, Diana recalls significant moments of difficulty (in classes, living situations, or organization settings) and instances of fear or loneliness (in her living environment and in her social life) that were among the most
impactful and memorable during her time at UIC. She described these instances and influences as very influential in her growth during college.

**Storyteller Profile: Benjie (diminished)**

Benjie is a graduating senior, in his fifth year of undergraduate study, pursuing a bachelor’s degree in biology. He lives in the city’s suburbs with his family, and has commuted to UIC’s campus for most of his undergraduate career. He spent his sophomore year at a school in the South, having transferred there for one year after being dismissed from his academic program at UIC. However, he desired to move back home and so re-entered UIC in pursuit of a different degree program.

Benjie is part of a traditional, conservative Filipino family, many members of which identify as Roman Catholic. Benjie was reared in the Roman Catholic faith tradition, and participated in many of its sacramental rites of passage. These milestones were marked by religious rituals and family celebrations, as his family members remain very closely connected with each other, especially through their faith lives.

On campus and when not in class, Benjie participates with a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer (LGBTQ) interest group when his schedule permits. He admits that sometimes his course load and commuting schedule can limit his time for other opportunities, but this interest group has been consistent among his involvement opportunities for the past few years. He also is employed at an off-campus restaurant in the university’s surrounding neighborhood.

When Benjie first arrived at UIC as a new first-year student, he lived in one of the residence halls on campus, but chose to leave that living environment after his first semester. He
cited the hall’s distance from the rest of campus, its fairly limited social environment, and finances as his main reasons for not returning to complete his first year of living in residence.

Although he was raised in the Roman Catholic faith, Benjie currently does not identify with any religious tradition; doing so makes sense for him at this point in his life. In prior years, he may have searched for meaning through exploration of other traditions. However, after a series of experiences with specific faith groups, student organizations, and his own evolving sense of identity, he no longer feels that he needs to search, and that he can make sense of life’s meaning without the aid of religious practice.

His undergraduate years have been marked by continual transition in academics, enrollment status, living environment, involvement opportunities, and spiritual identity. One constant that seems to have remained for him is a network of friends he has maintained beyond UIC. His job, his friends, and now his pursuit of a degree in biology have been mainstays of stability for Benjie during the past few years.

Given his strong connection with his self-described traditional and conservative family, he wondered at one point what might be the result of his coming-out as a gay man, as well as their opinion on his self-reported spiritual drift away from their traditional Roman Catholic faith. To his surprise, their concern only seemed to address his religious identity, how he needed to have some room in his life for a religious tradition, and to live a good and moral life. Now that he does not identify with any religious tradition, Benjie wonders how his family relationships might be impacted as he moves farther from the family faith.

As Benjie prepares for graduation, my visit with him was an opportunity for his personal reflection upon these past few years, and upon the growth experiences of his first year of college.
in particular. The outcomes of that year—academic, social, and spiritual—were of great impact and continue to shape Benjie’s path into young adulthood.

**Storyteller Profile: Ezrah (created)**

Born and raised in the city, Ezrah first came to UIC four years ago. With family who came to the city from New York and Puerto Rico, Ezrah grew up speaking both Spanish and English in a very busy neighborhood on the city’s west side. Ezrah identifies as Christian, transgender, Puerto Rican, Latino, poor, first-generation, and bilingual, and prefers the use of the personal gender pronouns “they” and “them” for self-reference.

Ezrah was a highly successful student in the city’s public schools, and it was an exciting opportunity to enroll at UIC. Ezrah has an impressive résumé of academic achievements and involvement opportunities, and is preparing for graduation—proudly so in four years’ time—with nearly-completed major courses of study in gender and women’s studies and applied psychology, and with a minor in religious studies.

Living according to a strict schedule with almost each hour committed to study, service, or work, Ezrah maintains a high level of engagement with classes, research, and with other people on campus. Committed to LGBTQ activism and cultural work, as well as teaching others on issues of reproductive justice and comprehensive sex education, Ezrah’s commitment has opened doors from entry-level volunteering to internship appointments during these undergraduate years. Their dedication to the vocational discernment of LGBTQ youth, through their activism and academic pursuits, is particularly noteworthy. From their undergraduate research projects to community organizing to their future aspirations in divinity school and teaching, Ezrah wants to make safe spaces for LGBTQ youth. In particular, Ezrah wants to be sure these youth may hold, explore, and nourish their faith identities in whatever their faith or
religious practice may be, given that such welcoming communities for faith-believing LGBTQ youth are growing (although relatively slow and they face many barriers to growth). This level of engagement is required, as Ezrah lives out a commitment to a self-adopted mission of “queering-up,” or actively challenging, the normative beliefs or practices that are found across the academic and social life of a college campus and beyond in their communities.

Because of their multiple identities, Ezrah is uniquely aware of many ways in which the communities they are a part of can be both inclusive and exclusive for them. Growing up in a household where there was only an occasional commitment to regular religious practice, Ezrah experienced great growth in self-understanding and spiritual strength upon arrival at college. Perhaps because of other aspects of identity formation, Ezrah’s spiritual identity became an academic interest, forming a common thread of focus for Ezrah across many of their other commitments, within the classroom and beyond, including throughout club or organizational life, in many positions of student employment, and across broader social and cultural opportunities for activism and dialogue. Particularly because conversations that blend topics of faith, sexuality, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of human diversity are rare, Ezrah likes to “queer-up” the dialogue and consider new ways to make them more inclusive.

Ezrah is very intentional about self-presentation. From personal wardrobe to language to thinking of self-care and basic survival, Ezrah is highly aware of cultural stereotypes and when Ezrah does (and does not) demonstrate them in personal behavior. Continual attention to this notion of “self-care”—a commitment “to pause from this world, take a step back, vent about it, or just take a break”—is a life-long survival tool that can be accessible to all, not just people who can afford spa days and massages. Growing up poor and focused on thriving beyond survival allowed Ezrah to understand this and make this a daily practice for self-preservation. It likely
contributed to a larger commitment to discipline of self and time that has contributed to Ezrah’s personal success and achievement across all their various commitments. If it led to their current academic interests, Ezrah can point to these experiences as what currently led them towards graduate study in divinity and an eventual doctorate in religious studies.

This achievement has put Ezrah into somewhat of a spotlight. As a student leader in UIC’s honors program, Ezrah is often asked to take part in admissions interviews and related activities for new students, potential applicants, and their families—especially those coming from the city’s public schools. Ezrah has been recognized with several academic and community awards for their activism and commitment to particular issues, programs, or for the change in cultural dialogue for which they have so intently worked. A recently profiled article in the weekly, city-wide LGBTQ newspaper highlighted Ezrah as a community leader and outstanding member of the university and city communities. Throughout all opportunities, Ezrah seeks to “queer-up” the status quo through a commitment to faith, service, and academic excellence.

**Storyteller Profile: Anil (strengthened)**

Anil proudly introduced himself as a second-year student with junior-level academic standing. He is a bioengineering major who began at UIC already with a guaranteed seat in the university’s medical college, pending Anil’s successful maintenance of a high grade-point average and an eventual, satisfactory score on the Medical College Admissions Test. An additional goal is to adapt his medical-school admission to allow him access to a joint academic program that will allow him to also complete a Ph.D. in medical research along with his physician’s training. He credits his family and his college-preparatory boarding school as the main reasons for his outstanding academic achievement.
Born and reared in the city’s far suburbs, Anil attended one of the state’s premiere boarding schools for his secondary-school experience, not very far from where his family lived. Since coming to UIC, he has lived in the city, and spent his first year of college living in a university residence hall.

Family is of great importance to Anil. His parents immigrated to the United States during the middle of their own academic careers to earn their master’s degrees in computer science. Anil is the eldest of three children; he has a brother and a sister who are currently of elementary-school age. Anil is a devoted big brother and enjoys frequent visits back to his family in the suburbs.

Anil has a passion for public service and currently serves as the president of UIC’s student government association. His ability to serve in such a role, during his second year on campus, demonstrates the level to which he became involved and engaged with campus life during his first months on campus. He is interested, across a variety of academic contexts, in addressing issues that are of concern to UIC students and in building connections for UIC’s student voices to be heard among government officials. He has aspirations to campaign to serve as the university’s student member of its board of trustees to further such student coalition-building on campus.

To balance his roles of responsibility and leadership, Anil is also a member or supporter of a number of other student organizations on campus, many of which intersect with academics, but most of which offer different social opportunities. His daily schedule is highly regimented, and mainly features classroom and laboratory commitments, but he still finds time for employment as both a professor’s research assistant and as an assistant in an administrative program office on campus.
Anil discussed, at length, his mother’s religious tradition, with which he also identifies. His father does not identify with any particular religious tradition, although he will practice when invited to do so by Anil’s mother. Both of Anil’s parents emigrated from India, but many family members remain there and he has visited them in India with his parents on a few occasions since childhood. The religious tradition that Anil shares with his mother is Veerashaivism, which is fairly unique to the particular state in India in which his mother was born. Veerashaivism is distinct from Hinduism in a number of ways, espousing very different beliefs on a variety of subjects and practicing rituals differently than in Hinduism. Although ideologically very different, Anil indicated that many times Veerashaivism is commonly (and quite incorrectly) viewed as a sub-sect of Hinduism.

Anil shared stories of uncertainty and challenge regarding his self-identity, especially in terms of religious identity and practice. This formed a cornerstone of family life for him and continued to define his academic and career interests. Particular experiences with family at home and in India, and with high-school classmates and friends at UIC, have sharpened his awareness of morals, values, and the issues which give shape to his daily work. From politics to leadership theory to social events on campus, Anil freely told how each seemed to influence him—and how he influenced them—according to his lived experiences.

**Anil’s faith tradition, explained.** In the spirit of definition, and perhaps more so than any of the other three storytellers, Anil offered specific explanation of the nature of his own faith tradition, Veerashaivism. For contextual purposes to help frame other narratives, his explanation is included here.

Different from Hinduism, followers of Veerashaivism believe in a single, unified God without any form, and according to Anil, it is “that second part, [being] without any form, that
really has been a cornerstone of the differences between the [two] religions.” He explained that in Veerashaivism,

God is one formless being, and as a representation of that, there is only one idol, and it isn’t even an idol that we consider. Each person carries their own personal linga, a small, black stone-like object that we carry on ourselves at all times. . . . It’s meant to represent that formless, expansive idea of God, and it’s called the ishta linga, which means the personal linga. . . . It’s a conduit through which a person can feel closer to God.

Each person would receive the ishta linga only once, and it was imperative to protect it as one’s most prized possession, as it could not be replaced.

There is also a belief in Veerashaivism that one’s work on earth will lead to one’s salvation. This was not dependent on social class, as Veerashaivism is not congruent with caste society. Work equaled worship, and as Veerashaivism does not include a concept of an afterlife, one would worship through one’s work as contribution to society. “There was no difference [among people], and you were judged by whether or not you honestly performed your work,” Anil explained. Work demonstrated “whether or not you keep true to the moral standings and whether or not you are honestly performing your work,” which was seen as one soul’s contribution to the world, not done to earn a posthumous place in heaven, but during a lifetime.

An Orientation Narrative: Storytellers Define Religion, Faith, and Spirituality

At the outset of our interviews, I wanted to learn more about each storyteller’s definitions of religion, spirituality, and faith. I was particularly interested in whether each storyteller would consider each definition in terms of similarities and differences, and then how each might self-describe as a religious, spiritual, or faith-filled person. I believed doing so would help me to
judge how they used such terms throughout their stories. I found an interesting variety of depth to each definition, from surface to substantial, across the four storytellers.

**Spirituality as an Inner Circle**

I first asked what comes to mind when they hear the term *spirituality*. Of all their definitions, their ideas on spirituality were most positive, upbeat, and had little to do with ideas of consequence. According to Diana, when she thought of the word *spirituality*, she thought of “God. I used to think it was kind of following rules and duties, but I don’t think so anymore. I think it’s more of a personal relationship with God.” Diana had grown up in a Muslim family, which she described as having been more culturally than religiously oriented to Islam, and so she had been familiar with practices and procedures that were outward signs of religion, but Diana did not feel much internally when observing those rituals. It seemed that she wondered what that inner impact might be if her spiritual sense was governed less by rules and regulations and more by intrinsic values or divine motivation.

Ezrah demonstrated how they see spirituality at the core of a concentric system of circles. According to Ezrah, spirituality is

the depth of . . . the thing that keeps me moving and going. [Within] spirituality would be practices like prayer time . . . like practicing things for [me] to stay connected with God. That to me is spirituality and that’s something that no one can take away.

Benjie agreed with Ezrah’s characterization of spirituality, that it was likely the innermost essence of religiosity; “it’s more like things to do with, like, soul . . . it’s things you do that could affect . . . like, karma-ish.” Lodged deep within one’s soul or psyche, both Ezrah and Benjie agreed that spirituality was something so personal that it could not be changed or influenced by
external factors. Rather, in agreement with Diana, it was likely the very nature of one’s relationship with a god-figure.

Anil felt that “they all in essence mean the same, but that there are nuance[d] differences.” For him, spirituality “is a little bit more distant in terms of one’s personal investment into the belief in God and religious matters.” He does not view spirituality as the root system of connection with a religious identity. This difference contrasted his perspective from the other storytellers’ perspectives.

**Religion as an Institutional Label**

When asked about *religion*, many of the storytellers alluded to it being a system of practices, of rites and rituals, that either held meaning for them or that were empty actions. According to Diana, “religion is an institution and it’s kind of like a label to me. I don’t see it as—I don’t consider myself to have a religion, I guess.” Benjie agreed, as it seemed to be “the most technical term.” He suggested it is more of a label, “just what I affiliate with . . . just like a thing you belong to.” Anil described it as “a collection of beliefs,” but Ezrah, from another perspective, believes that religion means a number of things. In terms of . . . a Christian way of defining it, would be the Church, but within a larger framework, it would mean those institutions that are upholding tradition that are . . . I don’t know. I think . . . religion gets really dissed in social-justice frameworks . . . but . . . I understand religion to be [a] way that people identify, as well.

Whether seen as a label or institution, these storytellers saw *religion* as an organizing structure that pointed to common or community practice of individuals’ spiritual beliefs and values.
Faith as a Deeper Connection

When asked to define faith, the students described a personal commitment rooted in spiritual belief and perhaps tempered by religious practice. Diana said “faith is what defines my relationship with God. So faith, I believe, is a relationship with God as well as spirituality.” Anil agreed and suggested that “faith says the same thing [as religion], but also is that implication of a person’s dedication to the religion and their implicit belief in the tenets.”

Benjie believed that faith is “whatever you actually believe in, like what you—if you believe whatever religion—like whatever that religion teaches, then I feel like your faith is like how much you actually believe in that . . . like on a scale value.” This was the qualifying factor for Benjie: that faith could be a measure of the intensity of belief, the strength of one’s connection to values and the tenets of what is believed. Similarly, Ezrah suggested that faith means holding onto your identity . . . [in a way] that gives me hope . . . it works in the middle [between religion and spirituality] . . . to connect you to your religion or the broader religious institutions. Faith can also be more practical in that way; it can mean a strategy of survival that can connect you back to your spirituality.

Religious, Spiritual, and Faith-Filled People

When each storyteller finished defining the key terms of religion, spirituality, and faith, I then asked them to describe each term in the context of describing what such a person might do, be, or say. In essence, I asked them to describe a religious, spiritual, or faith-filled person from their perspectives.

Benjie thought a religious person “would be someone who keeps up with their religion, or like, you know, if they have weekly [obligations], like if they go to church or synagogue, or whatever, or if they meditate.” He considered someone religious if that person “keep[s] up with
whatever practice you do.” It seems to be routine- or practice-oriented in Benjie’s understanding.

Ezrah suggested that a religious person could be defined by how someone identifies within a broader community or traditional background or holy book. It becomes an associative relationship. If a person is religious, then that person is associated with a particular tradition’s practice or item related to that practice. Perhaps that person leans on the tradition’s holy texts or carries with them the tradition’s holy book for support. Ezrah saw that as an identifier of a religious person.

In terms of a more generalized, self-description of herself as a spiritual person, Diana admitted that

I find myself being more and more tied-in with God, I guess. Like at first it was kind of like religion is this part of my life and the rest is whatever I want to do. But now God is in every aspect of my life, so I think [on] a higher level, maybe, [of] spirituality [than on a religious level].

Her choice of words acknowledged change over time (“at first” and “but now”), which suggested she recognized she has grown from one position to another in her spirituality. Anil was quick to share a story of the exact instance where he understood such a difference.

It was actually very kind of shocking to me when one of our gurus was hosting a youth session at a religious conference, and the discussion was on faith and spirituality and what each of those means. And he mentioned something that to this day I still don’t fully understand, but what he had said was that “I have full faith in Veerashaivism and everything it stands for, but I don’t believe in God.” And he quickly said, “Don’t tell that to your parents because it’s not something they’re going to understand. But I have faith
in the religion, I have faith in all of that, but I don’t believe in God.” And it was that
dichotomy, I guess, that showed [me] that spirituality can be distinct from faith.

Coda

Hearing from the storytellers their personal, working definitions of these key terms helped to gauge the context in which their stories of conversion would be told. Their definitions of spirituality and faith were more similar, with definitions of religion more distinct. Attempting to learn whether a storyteller situated such a story in terms of changing a mere label versus changing an entire belief structure or values system was valuable to the process of inquiry, as later interview questions would be adjusted to operate on the same language level as the storytellers sharing their experiences.

A Transition Narrative: The Challenge to be Independent

All four storytellers offered a general summary of their pre-college lives, including insights into family, friends, academic preparation before college, and description of their home communities. These details provided a backdrop or landscape upon which I could better understand their stories of conversion, as nearly all had their beginnings in this pre-college period. The pathways that led to the first college year looked different for each, but each was shaped by interesting themes that certainly influenced each storyteller’s experience.

Family Differences and Seeking Independence

Two common themes that were revealed throughout the storytellers’ narratives were the ideas of seeking independence from daily family life, and growing to think differently from parents or family in their personal values. They appreciated their families, but they recognized that college would be a time to prepare to grow independently from them. Some decided to experience life away but intentionally maintain a close relationship with family members; others
sought to leave home behind entirely. For two storytellers, there was a far stronger focus on making new friends and developing an active social life.

**Connection to home.** Ezrah arrived at college ready to continue a strong process of identity-emergence. For Ezrah, the coming-out process began in high school, but it has remained largely outside the family home until very recently. Ezrah’s interest in social advocacy along a variety of issues is rooted in their understanding of their own identity, as a Latino, bilingual, first-generation, urban, Christian, transgender person. They were a successful student leader in one of the city’s public high schools, and continued in such a role when arriving at UIC. However, while the university is home to a vibrantly diverse community, Ezrah said of their arrival to college and leadership among other students,

I can definitely say I was queering it up in terms of my Latino identity, I was queering it up in terms of my gender identity, my sexual identity, the way that—my style—that way that I present myself and am because . . . I still preserve parts of me and hold onto parts of me that speak true to where I came from. I grew up in the Westerfield neighborhood and went through the city public schools. What does that do to the way I speak or . . . the way I move, the way I walk—what does that do? And the way that I think, having come from a very poor family—what survival means to me, what does that look like? What does self-care look like? It’s all these other things because I feel like I was definitely queering it up in various different ways. . . . And not to give into stereotypes because I feel like they’re not stereotypes and you shouldn’t be talking about it in that way, but the fact that I don’t have to dress myself a certain way to please anybody just because I’m me.
Ezrah talked about the relativity of importance, to different audiences, of how one presents oneself, versus the need to end the perpetuation of stereotypes. This was a root of their interest in advocacy and social-justice issues, including sex education: to explain stereotypes against the power of an individual’s character. With special regard to issues of socio-economic status, wealth, and access to education and goods, Ezrah noted that such stereotypes were alive and well across their home and campus communities. This memory of and connection to their home community remained a driving influence in Ezrah’s life, and framed much of their intellectual interest upon arrival to college.

**Differing with the family.** Diana discussed her pre-college experience of being raised in an environment laden with rules to follow. Her family was culturally Muslim, and did not place a heavy emphasis on the religious practice of the faith, aside from fasting and minimally observing major holidays. What did shape her younger years was a discipline of following the rules “to earn a place in heaven.” Whether or not specifically linked to Muslim family life, she remembered it to be a life of constant fear of not doing good deeds.

As a child, I was raised Muslim. And so my family wasn’t very religious, per se. They were more culturally religious. But we always followed some of the rules in the Quran as traditions—mainly fasting. We always did that. So it was kind of like a tradition. But they weren’t very heavy on the praying part. There was also a little bit of superstition. I don’t know if that’s religious or anything, but basically my mom would tell me that I would be cursed if someone gave me a compliment and I didn’t say like, there’s a response in Arabic to say basically God’s name and he will protect me. And so I kind of grew up with a fear of that. And then also a fear of God’s wrath, for some reason. I think I always felt like I’d be punished if I didn’t do this. But as I grew older, my mom put me
in an Arabic school every Saturday. I learned more about the Quran and about Islam. By myself, I became more religious. I started praying five times a day. I fasted; I tried to follow all the rules. But I felt like I was just doing the rules; it never felt like it was more than that. I always was the type to follow the rules. I always had to get good grades in school, and listen to my mom, always that good kid. I wanted to be a good Muslim so I followed all the rules that the Quran told me because I wanted to earn heaven and to earn God’s favor . . . because I didn’t want to suffer in hell. My mom always enforced that part too, as well, you know? That God’s not going to be happy with you if you do that.

Diana framed her pre-college years as a period of rule-following, enforced by her family, and leading up to an eventual point of change upon arrival at college. She mentioned on a number of occasions the desire to be more independent in her thinking and decision-making, having been a rule-follower her entire life. She saw college as the opportunity to do so, and when faced with a last-minute opportunity to move out of the family home and into a campus residence hall at UIC, she did so—without telling her parents until the day she moved. This commitment to self-growth and a new independence followed her into her first college year.

**Life brings different circumstances.** Anil and Benjie shared similar stories of how they both planned to embrace the new academic experiences of college, and how both would be enrolled in pre-professional academic programs. Neither described their pre-college years with any measure of uncertainty, especially with regard to spirituality, and neither anticipated such a change in identity during those first months of college life.

Having shared stories of his family’s immigration to the United States, his cultural heritage, and his mother’s religious identity, Anil spoke of his pre-college years as being intellectually formative. He attended boarding school and fine-tuned his academic curiosity and
let it be informed by his family and his then-latent spiritual beliefs. He valued the opportunity to be immersed in an environment that was sharply focused on mathematics, the sciences, and related academic pursuits, and enjoyed how the school’s student community shared a love of learning as a common bond. His secondary-school preparation and performance earned him acceptance into a special program at UIC designed to guarantee medical-school admission there to selected first-year undergraduates.

Similarly, Benjie spoke of his pre-college plans in terms of his social networks and the communities to which he belonged in high school. He was determined to maintain strong connections to his family and friends while pursuing a rigorous curriculum; he was accepted into UIC’s pre-pharmacy undergraduate program with automatic admission into the university’s pharmacy doctoral program upon completion of the bachelor’s degree. He was excited to move the city, to live on campus and move out of the suburbs, and was eager to meet new friends at the university. However, his plans would not entirely become reality.

**Major First-Year Challenges**

Once Benjie arrived on campus, he admitted that life in the residence hall became “like a weird social experiment because, like obviously I was used to a high school environment, which has smaller classes and things like that, and you obviously knew everybody . . . like life in a fish bowl.” Benjie likely expected that college life would be similar with perhaps a few more people and some different class topics, but he was not ready for how different campus life would become. Instead of a fishbowl, “there was that transition, and suddenly it’s like a kind of ocean. . . . It was really hard for me. I didn’t really have many friends, so I was pretty lonely.”

A naturally very social person, this loneliness proved to have the greatest effect on Benjie during his first year. His academic performance was poor and he was dismissed from the
guaranteed-admission pre-doctoral program to which he was initially admitted in the UIC pharmacy school. He decided that the residential environment of his living community, not the vibrant social atmosphere in which he could thrive, had to change. He moved home and commuted for the second semester of his first year of college.

Diana also shared specific insights about residence-hall living during her first year. She is a naturally introverted person, but in the spirit of new, personal independence and a fresh chance to make friends, she challenged herself to live on-campus with a roommate, who was her best friend from home. Although they got along well, the greater residence-hall community seemed disappointing:

I really liked it at first, because it was just a lot of fun all around. The first couple of weeks they were just all freshmen talking to everybody, so it was always fun watching people go by who would randomly talk to you or say hi. I liked that part of it. But then eventually, it got to cliques—it became cliquey. I wasn’t part of their clique, so that wasn’t fun anymore. Also, I couldn’t go to the cafeteria by myself. I don’t know why I was so scared to go by myself, but I’d always need someone with me. So I became dependent on my roommate to go with me. And when she couldn’t, I wouldn’t eat. I don’t like being alone, and I guess I get too nervous when I’m by myself in a big place and other people happen to be there, too.

Diana did not visit home much during that first year, even when life in the residence hall became more difficult than anticipated. She reported that overall, the new environment that was so exciting at first, came with limitations. After a few months it became scary and she often felt quite lonely. Although she generally got along well with her roommate, they did have their
differences, which made for long periods of no communication between the two, despite them
being best friends.

Finances were also a problem for Diana during that first year. With the added and
unexpected expense of living on campus, Diana had to rely on her parents for financial support at
various times during the year.

It was a financial struggle, very much. I guess when I decided to dorm, I didn’t know I’d
have to pay so much. And so my financial aid only covered so much, and I had maybe
$2,000 left for the first semester. I didn’t have the money and my mom didn’t have the
money, and I wasn’t talking to my dad at the time. But eventually I called him and he let
me borrow money so that was good. It was really stressful, because I couldn’t even
register for classes until a couple days after spring semester started. But I got through. It
was stressful though.

Diana admitted that, aside from the stress of finances, roommate difficulties, and fear of
loneliness, “I was excited to have fun. Academically, I didn’t do well because I guess I wasn’t
very accountable [for] myself. I skipped class a lot and chose to hang out with friends, instead.”
She admitted, “[I am] more of a lazy student, but . . . still managed to get good grades. . . . I was
losing motivation for school in general, so I just stopped trying as much.” She reiterated the
academic challenges that she faced during that first year.

I wasn’t ready for how hard [classes] would be, either. I wasn’t prepared. Yeah, so I
didn’t do as well for that reason, as well. . . . All my classes . . . were more independent
[than in high school]. Like I would have to study on my own.

But her main focus was building her social network in her new community:
“I think I was mainly concerned with making friends. It was such a new environment. And I didn’t like high school because I didn’t feel like I was part of the crowd. So I wanted to be part of the crowd in college, so that was my main concern.”

These ideas of belonging to a crowd, and conversely, not being part of a residence-hall clique, were a recurring theme among Diana’s transitional narrative.

Academics were not a challenge for Anil during the first year of college, but campus culture was. Having arrived from an intensely academic boarding school experience, Anil suggested that it was being part of this university environment that was very different for me. And my first year I really didn’t like UIC. Even now I’m still in some ways struggling with that. But this was definitely not the place that I wanted to be at. . . . There was a lot in terms of the culture of the university that I really didn’t like, and so I was often questioning myself as to why I was still here. The answer was always kind of like, “This is what you’re supposed to do. This is where you can learn what you need to learn to, to get to that place where you can do that job that you want to have. That, and have the life that you want to continue living.” So academics were never the question; it was the culture of the university here that kind of pushed me a little bit at times during my first year.

Anil clarified why academics were not a challenge:

I came from a very, very different environment. College was not a new thing for me. . . . But this campus is very much oriented to providing a practical education; [that] is very stressed here. Everything we do is geared towards providing some outcome, I guess, at the end of the day. Education for education’s sake is not very stressed [here]. With that comes the type of people who take advantage of education here, and the kind of people
that I was used to discussing ideas with at boarding school, and the culture of educational
discussion, is very different here . . . and that was very hard for me. Life [here] is very,
very focused outside of what happens in your classroom.

He elaborated further on UIC as a commuter-student campus:

There’s an artifact of being a commuter school here. That students come and go, and so
when they’re here they talk about the classes that they talk about, but once class is done,
it’s as if the university doesn’t exist. I’m in a very different place when the classroom
[time together] is over.

Anil’s observation of the campus environment and university culture was so salient because it
was a major difference for him from his previous academic environment. For someone trained
and educated in a regimented and intensely academic environment, the relatively relaxed nature
of college life was a new experience.

Ezrah described a first-year experience marked by much self-definition and the creation
of routines and practices that helped them succeed in this new environment. They were
determined to capitalize on being part of this new community, and to be intentional about
pursuing new experiences that, previously, would not have been possible in their neighborhood
or in high school. From academics to social opportunities, Ezrah was determined to be creative
and thorough in establishing a presence on campus:

Yeah, but I feel like I’ve, sort of, created my undergraduate academic experience in
addition to [having created] my [involvement experience] at UIC. It’s very much talked
about and, kind of, pushed for students to [create their own experiences, and I did so] but
in my own ways.
From early in their first year, Ezrah served in leadership roles in student organizations, helped with various campus events, participated in programming sponsored by the Honors Program (of which they are a member), helped with prospective-student admission visits and making sure parents and families feel welcomed at UIC. Especially in those roles,

That’s the place where I’ve been able to connect with Latino families, so that’s also been a large part of my identity, identifying as Latino, but more specifically, Puerto Rican. So every time there’s a Latino family or Spanish-speaking [family] from anywhere, that’s where I feel the most reward from connecting with [them], but also with families whose students come from the city’s public high schools, because that’s just a harsh environment or it can be a harsh environment and a rough transition that I’ve also experienced.

Ezrah’s intentionality in creating their own first-year experience resulted in a disciplined approach to scheduling and safeguarding their weekly time. There must be time for coursework, employment, and advocacy. Ezrah described how this balanced scheduling as necessary to keep a well-rounded undergraduate experience:

I have a lot of different experiences and [have] gone to stuff in the broader community, like the Dyke March, and have spoken at undocumented student rallies on campus. It’s just a number of different ways, but I feel like I’ve contributed to my work as a student activist, but [it reflects] my work on campus and also where I want to take all that in the future.

In discussing the challenges of the first year, Ezrah returned to the idea of discovering the importance of self-care, and how that meant taking care of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs. Finding time for self-care was a challenge, “so whether that pause means going
to therapy, or that pause means going for a run, or that pause means listening to music and just zoning-out, or it just means taking a warm shower to relax,” it was imperative to commit to including self-care as part of the daily schedule.

Ezrah, like the other storytellers, struggled to adjust and adapt to a new environment, and experienced difficulties along the way. Unlike the others, Ezrah spoke openly of their attempt to establish positive coping strategies to manage what otherwise could be a stressful and dangerous transition. Among the storytellers’ many shared challenges was a need to seek greater independence, whether from family or among friends. Some sought to establish new identities through involvement opportunities on campus. In becoming involved as they did, they likely did not know it would be a defining opportunity for their spiritual quests.

A Conversion Narrative: Coming to a Place of Change

Storytellers mentioned on multiple occasions how lonely they felt at points throughout their first year of college. This was due to residence hall social climate, being away from family and friends, an eventual discovery that college life at UIC was surprisingly different from what they imagined, or a general sense of social anxiety brought on by being in a new environment. In their respective contexts, they felt lonely and isolated, and somewhat disenchanted with the campus during their first year. Not all had established coping strategies. In fact, only Ezrah worked to develop a constant ethic of self-care. Their stories of solitude, loneliness, and wandering served as prologues to their narratives of personal change. A large part of this change, according to the storytellers, was a process of spiritual conversion.

Transforming

Diana, seeking a greater sense of independence, made a last-minute decision to move into a campus residence hall nearly without telling her family. Later, facing financial difficulties
because of the added expense, she realized that she needed her family’s help to pay bills. However, on a deeper level, she remained committed to exploring what it meant to be on her own, to think for herself, and to cultivate values and beliefs of her own.

She grew up in a Muslim home with a fear of religion, largely instilled by her mother’s continual reminders to do only what God would approve of her doing. Diana was reminded to earn her place in heaven, and that doing good deeds would build credit for her soul. When she followed the rules of religion, God was pleased.

Without this family culture in her immediate daily environment on campus, Diana felt free to explore other perspectives. Especially since her own residence hall floor was becoming “cliquey,” Diana saw an opportunity to seek involvement and friendships elsewhere. At the beginning of the academic year, Diana attended an information and involvement fair held by the various student organizations on campus. She met and befriended members of the Student Scripture Association, hoping to make friends more easily through a structured organization, which she suggested was a “bright spot” in her first year.

I was thankful for the friends I got to meet, the new friends I made. . . . That’s when I got involved in the Student Scripture Association . . . and it felt like I had a place to go. . . . At first, it was—I felt kind of lonely even though I was making friends, but [it was] like I didn’t belong anywhere. So after I got involved with the Student Scripture Association, I was like, “Oh, this is a cool place, I can just go here any time,” and I felt like part of the family there.

Diana felt a new sense of hope in her social life, especially after meeting with her new Bible teacher. That allowed her to realize that her past Muslim tradition was not a good fit, and perhaps a Christian approach to meaning-making might fit her better.
[My Bible teacher] would ask me a lot about how I was doing, and so I would tell her I’m not doing good in school. And she would motivate me through Bible scripture . . . Like God will help you do it. Yeah, she just gave me verses that really helped me to see the hope that I had.

Diana soon learned to investigate the differences between Islam and Christianity, with the help of her Bible teacher and her student organization friends. She grew to understand their purposes differently:

Like in Islam, it’s more being that good person to get into heaven and too, in God’s favor. But in Christianity, it’s more like daily thanks for God because he died for you. So it’s out of love for us; it’s not an obligation anymore. It’s more of a decision and an offering to him. . . . So the purpose is a lot different because I always had the motivation of just being that good person for God out of fear . . . but now I care more because it’s not out of fear, and learning that it’s just out of thankfulness.

When asked if she could pinpoint the instance where she knew she was changing, Diana told a story of a conference she attended at a camp, in association with the Student Scripture Association. It was during the spring of her first year at college:

We studied and heard messages and we also had time to pray. And after I went and I heard the message . . . I just really asked God to show himself to me, to feel the truth. . . . And I felt like he answered that night. . . . I was praying and I looked up at a picture of God on the [projector screen] and I was like, “That’s God.” I just knew . . . so that’s the night that I decided to believe, but I didn’t want to confess because I was so afraid.

Diana credits her Bible teacher with touching her heart in some way. Regarding her finances, she prayed to God to help with the stress that money was causing, and Diana believed God
answered when her father decided to assist financially, even though she and he were estranged. However, she was afraid to tell her family about her interest in Christianity, as she was certain they would not approve, but she later felt strengthened enough to approach them.

I came to a point where I was ready. I was ready to lose everything because I was so sure that Jesus was the truth. And so I don’t know where the boldness came from. I told my dad first because I was actually talking to him again. Well . . . I kind of hinted at it, but didn’t tell him directly. . . . I told my mom and my sister and my brother. They all got angry at me and yelled at me and there was a lot of argument and—it was really stressful. . . . After my dad found out, he didn’t want to see me anymore. He also said that . . . he doesn’t consider me a daughter anymore, so that was—it made me angry.

Diana had a cousin who was never religious, but the story of her conversion had an effect on him:

After I told him I became Christian, for some reason he became more of an active Muslim. And so he’s more against me. He started praying all the time and reading his Quran and really studying hard. He’s also rebuking me, as well.

Diana gained strength of conviction as she grew from her conversion experience. She found new support for her academic pursuits, as her faith gave her motivation to study harder. Some of her high school friends were amazed at the change in her outlook, and others did not believe she was the same person. In the end, she described a growing sense of confidence that her choice was the correct one for her, and that she still lives by rules—but guided by prayer and thankfulness.
Diminishing

Similar to Diana, Benjie also spoke of feeling an initial loneliness in the residence hall environment when he first began college. He had a hard time making friends, and worked hard to keep connections with friends from high school, despite not having them nearby. Also similar to Diana, Benjie attended a campus involvement fair to learn more about opportunities to join student organizations. He found one group, the Cross-Campus Christians, to be interesting and he signed up to participate with them.

Benjie was reared in the Roman Catholic faith, and his family was very committed to the religious and cultural practices of Catholicism. However, Benjie considered himself a searcher, often wandering (and wondering) around issues of religion. Did he truly agree with Catholic doctrine? Was he comfortable with Catholic ritual? While he sometimes wondered if there was a higher being that existed, he participated in Catholicism because his family wanted him to do so. Yet, upon arrival at college, he did not feel the need to attend Catholic Mass every week. It was time to explore other options, especially options that would help him meet people. He was intrigued upon meeting members of the Cross-Campus Christians:

They were like, hey, what’s up? They really seemed friendly and so often, the guy would introduce himself. I was still religious [Catholic] back then, but this seemed like really interesting to me. It’s not just for like Catholics or whatever, or Protestants or whatever. . . . I was interested, so I attended a meeting. It was cool. It was interesting because I was taught Christianity through Roman Catholicism, which is very structured and stuff. And like here, like it was kind of a faith thing, where people were talking about—just singing songs about God, like freely. I just feel that when I used to go to Catholic church, it was very like, the choir sang and that was it. All these people here were talking
about their faith to each other, not having a priest talk at them. This was new for me, and
I’ve never had, like, much of a forum to discuss the Bible or what it needs to mean to me,
or what it actually means to be a Christian. So this was a new experience.

The more Benjie attended meetings of the Cross-Campus Christians, the closer he
became with their leadership. Having a closer friendship with those students was refreshing, but
it also offered a closer vantage point for Benjie to witness how deeply and quickly those other
students were being immersed in the group. After attending group meetings in other members’
homes, Benjie started to feel out of place, and “things . . . just started to get uncomfortable.” The
more intimate settings would allow members to sing songs and reflect on Bible readings in
smaller faith-sharing groups, and members were expected to attend each opportunity. According
to Benjie, “I thought my group members were getting more out of all of this than I was. I
couldn’t really feel the same kind of connection with the Bible that they did, so I felt kind of bad
about it.”

Around that time, he also noticed significant changes within other members. One friend
who was a mentor to Benjie within the student organization
used to be really into music, and we’d listen to music and talk about religion, but then
we’d talk about music stuff [too]. He had this huge music collection . . . Then he stopped
listening to music really and said something spiritual happened and he’d rather spend all
his time with God. Then he, like, deleted all his music. That was weird; I just thought
that was a weird thing, because I’d never really do that.

Benjie confessed that being part of the group “just got really tedious and I didn’t really want to
going anymore. They were really nice to me, and I felt bad, but I just felt like I couldn’t really
handle this anymore.” He made the sudden decision to end his participation with the Cross-
Campus Christians because of the increased discomfort he felt around them, but he felt guilty leaving them because they were my friends when my dorm wasn’t. These people gave me a chance, but I really liked hearing about [religion and] Christianity less and less . . . and that’s what their friendships were based upon . . . but for me, it just wasn’t working anymore. . . . I just didn’t feel good [being part of this group].

He cited the amount of time the group required and the visible change in some students’ behaviors as supporting reasons for his departure from the group, as well as a perceived lack of a welcoming environment for those who identified as part of the LGBTQ community. However, the major reason Benjie left was because he, personally, just was not interested in constantly discussing religion in his life. He realized, after a while, that he felt more personal connections, as minute as they may have been, to his family’s faith life than to a faith that was not being created within the student organization. According to Benjie,

I feel like my spirituality was just like all over the place. . . . I felt like my core beliefs were just getting weaker. . . . It wasn’t a strong or high spiritual level during that year, even though I had more time to myself, and could choose what I could do with my religion, but that year was a train wreck . . . and I especially didn’t feel a connection with those people [student group members] . . . and I was happy it was over.

Upon further reflection, Benjie arrived at a point of asking whether God’s will for him was more important than his own opinion or desires. He decided that his present and future would “all be up to me now.” He admitted that
I guess, I’m not really looking for anything in particular, unless it . . . hits me on the head or something. . . . I just feel really laissez-faire, and I’m comfortable in saying it. . . . I felt like I was closing more things than opening things, and now I’m more open.

**Creating**

Ezrah self-described their faith background as “agnostic, even atheist,” prior to coming to college. Their family was nominally Catholic, with their parents having married in the Catholic faith years before Ezrah was born. However, the family did not actively practice the religion throughout Ezrah’s childhood, and Ezrah identified as having no real faith tradition or understanding of their spiritual identity before college. Growing up in a self-described “poor” environment, Ezrah became sensitive to issues of access, especially in high school. A commitment to social advocacy and social-justice issues blossomed from Ezrah’s own leadership and service experiences, and they knew it would be important to continue this growth upon arrival at college.

As with Diana and Benjie, Ezrah made the choice to become involved with student groups upon their arrival to campus during that first year. Ezrah had a friend and mentor who reached out to them:

She belonged to a church and so she wanted me to just connect with youth there. It was all about just let’s maintain your connections with young people since we don’t have many families here. . . . And so I would go there a couple times; it was a non-denominational church, and so things there just really spoke to me, as if this would be “your” gathering. Prayers would be in English and Spanish, accessible for people, so they weren’t even just speaking to Latino families. They had people from all over the city there.
Ezrah appreciated how this church reached out to so many different segments of the population. Just going there, Ezrah “felt free, felt welcome. . . . As I was embarking on this four-year thing [college], it felt like a cool space. The only problem was transportation.” It was a significant distance from UIC’s campus, where Ezrah would spend days in class, and soon it became a burden to make that commute on a regular basis, several times each week.

However, at one point, the church invited Ezrah to attend its Autumn Advance, a “large gathering of a bunch of Christians, with a bunch of them on missions,” and it was the first time Ezrah “had ever seen that many Christians in a room together.” There was a band playing that Ezrah had heard before, but did not realize the band was a Christian-music band. Ezrah said “OK, this really resonates with me now.” They welcomed Ezrah to the middle of a gathering space, and welcomed open prayer. According to Ezrah,

My mentor was still there and I was doing one of these same things and I’m like what . . . I don’t even know how to put words to it. I just felt this confliction inside—a spiritual confliction. OK, I want to believe. . . . I took that step and asked my mentor to just go down there with me and just pray with me. It was the first time that I legitimately prayed, I guess, and someone nearby just gave me a Bible. I guess I became a Christian that day.

Ezrah’s mentor recommended that Ezrah seek out a Christian group on campus at UIC to help support Ezrah’s blossoming faith identity. They did so, and “made a lot of new Christian friends, which was great—and a really diverse group of people.”

Another friend who Ezrah met in class discussed Ezrah’s involvement on campus, and learned of Ezrah’s interest in Christian student organizations. That friend invited Ezrah to visit the local Catholic university parish center, and brought Ezrah to a welcoming dinner there.

Ezrah, from a nominally-Catholic family, felt a little more familiar with the events and programs
offered by the parish, and its lounge and common space became a favorite place for Ezrah to visit, meet friends, and do homework. Ezrah developed a wider network of friends from among the students they met at the university parish center.

As the months progressed, Ezrah lessened their involvement in the non-denominational church, as its commuting distance and programs became more out of reach based on commuting time and Ezrah’s more restrictive schedule. Ezrah also began to question what the non-denominational church and the university parish communities would think about Ezrah’s own evolving sexual identity:

If I don’t want to be in a group that’s . . . going to preach something like, “You can’t be Christian and be [gay], so I was really careful negotiating how do I present myself and what things I share, what things I don’t [share] with both groups—because I didn’t know anything—their views on it. . . . I started questioning and received some answers, and I thought it was scary. . . . I could just feel the “I’m different” vibe from everybody and that’s where I was like, OK, I don’t feel safe right now and, sort of, freaked out internally.

The time came for the non-denominational church’s leaders to invite Ezrah to consider baptism, even though Ezrah had been participating less and less with the church. Perhaps they were afraid Ezrah might leave the church for the university parish; Ezrah did not know for sure. Ezrah knew they had been baptized as a baby, but that was not enough for the church. Ezrah felt pressured and finally asked the non-denominational church about their views on gay people: “The [church] group leader was like no, we don’t believe in gay people, straight-up condemnation . . . and so I stopped going completely at that point.” Having invested much of their time in both groups, Ezrah then decided to put more effort into participating with the university parish and the friends
who were part of the Catholic groups on campus. That was during an integral time in Ezrah’s identity development:

At that point, I sort of had an understanding of my identity, which I attribute to just—I don’t know—going to a space like the Center for Gender and Sexuality on campus, where I finally found community in that sense. And . . . they weren’t the mainstream LGBTQ community where it’s like you have to identify yourself and pick-up the label because-just-because. So they were really open and so there were a couple friends there that I would talk to. We’d have separate conversations about it.

Ezrah was living in an apartment with friends from the Catholic university parish while now discovering this new community of involvement in the university’s Center for Gender and Sexuality. The search for groups that would truly welcome Ezrah more continued. Soon Ezrah phased-out their involvement with the university parish when they discovered Amicus, a very queer-embracing, non-denominational faith group, located at UIC, and which needed student leadership. Ezrah fit the bill perfectly:

Over the summer, as I was making the decision [about living arrangements], I connected with the staff director of Amicus. . . . I met with him and I just really started investing my time with the group. And because he saw my commitment, he was like, “Would you like to be our vice president this year?” And I definitely agreed. It was the spiritual home I needed right now. . . . It’s been cool, it’s definitely where I currently am, I guess, in terms of identifying.

In a matter of months, Ezrah traveled a pathway of identity creation. Through working to understand self among others, intersecting with values and purpose, and resulting from external
influences, Ezrah not only found their sexual identity, but found a spiritual home while building
their own self-foundation and practicing a commitment to self-care.

**Strengthening**

Anil was born into a family whose mother reared him in her Veerashaiva faith; he was
Veerashaiva from birth and remains so today. However, Anil traveled his own pathway of trying
to understand that faith. It was not until his first year of college that he was able to connect and
commit to this faith identity. His conversion strengthened an established identity, and as he
suggested, he went from being a nominal practitioner to an orthodox believer. However, in his
own perception, before high school, Anil actually thought he was Hindu:

I actually didn’t know I was Veerashaiva till I was probably, oh, God, maybe in sixth or
seventh grade. I always thought I was a Hindu. When I was in my house . . . we did very
many Hindu prayers, and most of my friends were Hindu. And even the ones that
weren’t Hindu who were Veerashaiva, like me, I never really knew the distinction . . .
And it was only really about in seventh grade when my mom started teaching me more
about my religion in particular, when I started realizing, I guess, the dichotomy of my
mother’s religious background and when I started, I guess, thinking about religion.

Anil became interested in the differences between the two religious traditions, and was
able to understand from his mother the various rituals, teachings, and customs unique to
Veerashaivism. However, during his high school years while he was at boarding school, Anil
admits it was a time where his religious interest died away. “I mean, I was still involved when I
came home . . . but religion was not part of my daily life [at school]. It wasn’t something that
was completely absent, but it was very, very diminished.” Anil reported that he never carried his
ishta linga, his personal linga that he received as a child, even through his high school years.
For Anil, the transition to a different perspective came when he arrived at college:

After years of going to religious conventions, of understanding the things that I did, I started to become much more of an orthodox [practitioner] of Veerashaivism than [even] my mother. . . . And that was when I kind of started bridging-off on my own in terms of religion. And it was the time that I asked my mother if I could start wearing my linga. That was an important step for Anil to decide to take, as there would always be danger of losing it or having it damaged or stolen. But for Anil, it was “a testament of whether I really thought it was worth it or not to carry [my linga] on me. . . . It means enough to me that I want it to be part of the identity of who I am.”

Anil told of several key episodes during his first year of college that helped focus his belief system and that helped to strengthen his resolve to believe in the first place. These episodes were framed by his memory of attending a religious convention in Toronto during the summer months before classes began. It was at this convention that he heard a speaker say that it was possible to define one’s beliefs in the religion, but not to believe in God. “And it took me awhile to start thinking about what [the speaker] meant by it, but I think it’s the idea of God being something that you can identify is not something that’s seen in Veerashaivism.” He mentioned how he has thought about that speaker’s message several times over the past two years, about how he learned there “was no heaven or hell, and only ‘this’ life matters.”

Following that catalyst, the first episode that affected Anil happened as he was walking through the neighborhood surrounding UIC’s campus with a friend from home:

We were going to his apartment, next to all the restaurants, and we turned the corner and walked right up to a dead guy lying up against a garage. It was very shocking to me, just because it was the first time I saw someone dead. Whenever family had died before, I
never saw them, mostly because they were all in India, and my parents never wanted me to see what a funeral would be like there.

Then, later in the same semester, Anil was mugged when visiting a friend off-campus. “That was a shocking experience in some sense, in that it got very dangerous very, very quickly because of certain actions that were taken.” Anil summarized his first semester in that way, and admitted that he was not sure how to interpret any of it. “It was just hard for me to understand what it meant to be, to be safe and to be alive and that kind of thing. It was very confusing for me.”

Anil is a very thoughtful and pensive individual. His comments are marked by depth and sincerity, and as he relayed this story his voice took on a very solemn, deliberate tone. He shared a third jarring episode occurred during his first year of college: his grandfather in India passed away, and he flew himself to India for the funeral, against his parents’ wishes. He noted that his mother was very dismayed to watch him arrive in his grandfather’s small rural village in southern India. She had already been there to help care for her ailing father, but she was not expecting to see her son travel and participate in the funeral customs. Anil knew she was worried about how the whole situation would affect him.

However, Anil understood it as a learning opportunity. “I guess one thing I never knew about my religion until then was what it meant to die . . . and what the cultural practices were that came with that, and their religious significance.” He was glad to have been there to witness his grandfather’s funeral. “Being there and burying my grandfather myself was very, it was a very interesting thing.”

Beyond those three episodes, Anil continued to advance his understanding of his own values systems in the context of his religious identity. He had always chosen a vegan lifestyle;
however, it was not until college that he became articulate in explaining the exact reasons why he ate as he did. For Anil, it was a moral and ethical choice, whether influenced by religious ideals or not. He said “it was very interesting to see how my religious beliefs, once I started believing in them more . . . started matching up very closely with the moral and ethical things that I believed in and how that played out.” This exploration of morals and ethics extended into his politics, as well.

A lot of the religious beliefs that I hold directly tie to my political beliefs, in terms of things like distribution of wealth and abortion . . . which very many times sets me apart from other socialists . . . and so I found myself often trying to look through it and not just prescribe to the belief of socialism as a whole and the things that come with the majority of people who follow it, but really looking back into my moral ideology and finding which portions apply to my beliefs.

Anil’s first year of college—already taking place within a different environment and with a social and intellectual climate quite different than what he was accustomed to—was marked at least three times by violence and witnessing death. He described how he knew he was committed to his religion, as a result of many of these experiences, but also as he continued to discover his own values systems:

I think I was ready to commit when I decided to start wearing the linga, which happened actually before my grandfather had passed away but after the two [other] incidents. And I think it was right around then when I was kind of like—I had always kind of had a hint as to the idea of—you know, I always toyed around with it, but never put too much thought into it, of wearing my linga.
Through those experiences, he committed more to an orthodox approach to a religion he had always identified with, much to the pleasure and occasional chagrin of his family.

**Coda**

Despite a variety of contexts in which the storytellers prepared for college, each told stories of certain complicating actions that impacted their pathways in significant ways. Nothing likely could have prepared any of them for the unique stories they can now tell about how they changed as spiritual people during their first year at college. Just as they are unique characters in the plot, so too are their stories of conversion.

They told stories of internal struggles of identity formation, of their responses to external influences of social communities, family, or peers, and of their desires to move entirely from a pre-college life into a period of fresh independence. Their tales of experiences of spiritual change and conversion offer examples of how such a dynamic, unstable, and uncertain environment—college—can truly serve as a place of change, both within and beyond the classroom.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to hear the stories of students who identified as having experienced a type of spiritual conversion during their first year of college, and to explore ways in which the college environment may have contributed to such experiences. I interviewed four participants, and presented my findings and their relevance in the following sections. The two research questions that guided the study are answered here in consideration of the study’s findings.

Resolving the Research Questions

First, I wanted to know what stories students would tell about their spiritual conversion experiences that happened during their first year of college. Based on my findings, the stories were varied, as told by four students who identified as having experienced some type of spiritual conversion during their first year. One student’s (Anil) stories reflected a strengthening of his original faith, after a series of events that caused him to reevaluate his beliefs, values, and familial influences. Another student’s (Benjie) stories were of a diminished spirituality, caused by withering relationships with friends, a growing distance from family, and a search for self-understanding and identity. A third student’s (Diana) stories described ways in which she desired a greater independence of thought and identity, and required a physical separation from her family in order to achieve it. Declaring her independence included a discovery of a new faith tradition and career interest through friends and mentors; these helped her convert from Islam to Christianity. A fourth student’s (Ezrah) stories told of a burgeoning sense of advocacy and commitment to community, by way of healthy family ties, an appreciation of heritage, and an awareness of their own evolving personal identities. The student’s experiences yielded not just a newly created commitment to faith (where one had never truly existed before), but also their
excitement to enter into the academic study of these intersections of faith, social-justice, advocacy, and youth development. Inquiry driven by this research question yielded a great variety of description within unique stories of spiritual conversion as told by four students who reflected on their lived experiences of such change in very different ways in college.

Second, I wondered what role students would say the college environment had in triggering, supporting, or discouraging such experiences. The interview protocol featured very basic, narrow interview questions that inquired about participants’ favorite aspects of college life and involvement on campus, but did not explore broader aspects of the actual environment of college. At no point in the interview did I ask about students’ opinions or perceived press of the physical spaces, human aggregate, organizational or institutional dimensions, or perceived or constructed influences of the college environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). Aside from the narrow environmental aspects related to involvement (with student organizations or residence hall communities), this research question was not fully answered by the data collected.

**Limitations of the Study**

Throughout the duration of the study, I have observed at least three procedural or content-based opportunities that, if maximized, may have strengthened the study itself. I consider these three among the most significant limitations of the study: leaving a research question partially unanswered; the recruitment of very few participants; and the nature of reporting such sensitive topical details from memory.

First, one major limitation of this study was the inability to answer the second research question. This occurred because I focused too narrowly when asking the students about their involvement experiences on campus, instead of asking more broadly about their involvement and other aspects or perceptions of the college environment. Rather than first defining environment
and its related ideas for the participants, I chose to focus more narrowly on their experiences of student involvement (with student organizations or with their residence hall communities) in place of the broader aspects of environment that I had originally intended to explore. Doing so did not allow me to fully answer the research question as originally proposed.

Second, the nature of the research questions naturally suggested a qualitative approach. I chose a strategy of narrative analysis as the method that would most effectively elicit the first-person, emic perspectives (Harris, 1976) of these particular experiences of spiritual conversion. However, it was very difficult to recruit participants who identified as having experiences relevant to the study. After an initial e-mail message (Appendix A) to over eight thousand students at one institution, only fifty-two responded to an electronic survey (Appendix B) that helped to sort their experiences. Of those respondents, only twelve were deemed to be appropriate candidates to move into the interview phase of the study, and each of them received a letter of invitation (Appendix C). Those who responded to the survey but who were not selected as candidates received a rejection letter (Appendix D) that acknowledged their survey response but which indicated they were not invited to move forward in the study. Strictly based on the invited students’ responses (or lack thereof) to my invitation letters, their schedules of availability, and the timeline according to which data collection was to take place, only four students were available to speak with me. Fortunately, the four participants were available later to engage in a member-checking process. However, I wonder what additional insights I would have gained if more students had participated, and especially if additional students had other types of conversion experiences.

Third, a limitation may exist whenever a participant recounts stories about past experiences, based on the ability to recall accurate factual details, motivations, and emotional
contexts from memory. Especially since I was exploring an experience particular to the first college year, and three of my four participants were at least two years removed from their experiences (one junior-level and two senior-level students, in addition to a second-year student with junior standing), I relied upon their recounting of their first-year experiences as valid data to be collected. In truth, only they can know that their stories were factually valid, that the places, times, and settings were accurate as told. This reliance on participants’ self-reported interview data may imply risk for memories to be obscured by time or opinion. However, given the study’s qualitative approach, seeking an understanding of how participants made meaning of these experiences, “if the interview structure works to allow them to make sense to themselves as well as to the interviewer, then it has gone a long way toward validity” (Seidman, 2006, p. 24).

Discussion and Interpretations

Key themes emerged through the findings that affect personal, professional, and community dimensions of college life. From issues of loneliness to unexpected academic outcomes, the study’s four participants described ways in which their first year of college profoundly influenced their success and persistence.

Mattering on the Margins of Community

First, each participant spoke of the need or desire for belonging upon arrival at college. Whether with a primary goal to make friendships in a residence-hall setting or to succeed along a particular academic path, each mentioned the need to fit into the environment in some way. Tinto (1993) recognized the nature of this need to fit in the campus community as an integral factor that would lead to student persistence and success. When it happened, it was welcomed, and when it did not, they felt personally challenged. To the extent that the participants’ stories reflected events and experiences that contributed to their spiritual conversion processes, the
conversion experiences themselves were part of the students’ own processes of integration into
the college community. This was particularly true for Ezrah and Diana. According to Pascarella
and Terenzini (2005), “as integration [with their new communities] increases, it strengthens
students’ commitments to both their personal goals and to the institution through which these
goals may be achieved” (p. 54). When integration is not fully successful, students like Benjie
may experience a disruption in their academic progress or even leave college without completing
a degree.

More specifically, two participants, Diana and Benjie, discussed the challenges of the
loneliness they experienced. This loneliness eventually influenced Benjie to change his living
environment. The need to be noticed and appreciated is very real. Living with a fear of being
marginalized in one’s community (Schlossberg, 1989) can be debilitating or devastating.
Marginalization or mattering greatly influences a student’s transition into or through a new living
and learning environment (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Two students in this study spoke of their outstanding preparation in high school and how
that experience fortified their confidence as they arrived on the campus. Ezrah suggested that
such preparation made all the difference in terms of excelling in honors courses, while Anil
found the campus to be less academically engaging than his own high school. Both achieved
great academic success despite their differing perceptions on how intellectually challenging the
campus environment seemed to be. They agreed that perceptions of the academic challenge in
college can influence student performance and can either focus or distract a student’s intellectual
attention. This also supports Tinto’s (1993) theory of student persistence and departure, and
Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) conclusion from the empirical research they reviewed that
successful integration either encourages or distracts from student success.
Moving through Independence toward Self-Authorship

Other students spoke of leaving home to find friends and to take advantage of a new opportunity for involvement in academics and in their social lives. Diana was explicit about seeking independence from family and from certain values her family imposed upon her. Benjie spoke of a great need to seek new friends and to explore new social opportunities; developing a social life took precedence over academics. Enjoying this newfound independence came at the expense of academic achievement for these participants. Their stories of residence-hall isolation and poor academic achievement suggested a possible maladjustment to college life.

During and since their experiences of spiritual conversion, all four students reported increased confidence and a commitment to defining their own values, being true to their own spiritual (if not religious) beliefs, and maintaining these new directions for the present time. They shared how they established ways to cope with their first-year transitions that paralleled the factors identified by Schlossberg et al. (1995). Focus on the self by addressing personal wellness (i.e., Ezrah’s commitment to self-care), supportive communities (joining student organizations or seeking social and living environments), strategies for success (speaking with academic advisors and through intense classroom discussion), and situating their own learning (including consideration of new spiritual perspectives) during this time all helped them to deal with this significant transition in their lives. As they arrived at a point of commitment to these newfound identities, they recognized and appreciated the outcomes they reached as a result of their experiences. Citing Baxter Magolda (2008), Hamer and van Rossum (2010) described that “the feeling of ‘being in charge’ of one’s own life (or destiny) is very similar to trusting the internal voice” (p. 59). These students suggested, in their own ways, that their internal voices became stronger during those experiences and have become amplified since. They discovered new ways
to learn about themselves and others, essential elements of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008), since coming to college and during their conversion experiences.

For at least two students, academics were directly impacted by their spiritual conversion process. Ezrah’s awareness was so heightened to religious and spiritual issues that the study of such issues have become Ezrah’s future career focus and trajectory for graduate study. For Anil, his commitment to religious and spiritual tenets, explored more deeply in his conversion, has oriented his eventual entrance into the healthcare and teaching professions. Although each participant engaged with larger questions of essential values and meaning-making across their four contexts, none specifically discussed a struggle with moral questions or moral decision-making. Probing for evidence of their evolved thinking in college likely could have discovered more to inform questions about moral development beyond academic and intellectual engagement.

A significant outcome of this time in college, aside from the spiritual conversion experience, for Ezrah and Benjie, was recognition of their sexual orientation and for Ezrah also their gender identity. Both students discussed ways in which their processes of spiritual questioning took place concurrently with their exploration of their other dimensions of identity, including socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural. However, as they reported them, their stories of their journeys toward identity achievement as gay and transgendered were fairly distinct from their spiritual journeys. Benjie never mentioned that his departure from Catholicism was primarily due to the Catholic Church’s stance on issues of sexual identity; in fact, he indicated he still practiced the church’s rituals knowing the church’s official teaching. Practicing the faith was a family event for him, so there was no significant doctrinal disagreement between Benjie and the church. According to his story, the only apparent intersection of Benjie’s journeys of
conversion and coming-out happened when he told his family he was no longer a Catholic and that he was gay; his family were supportive of his sexual orientation but still wanted him to have a religious practice in his life. Further probing questions likely would have encouraged Benjie to reflect more on the connections between both journeys more significantly in terms of one’s influence on the other, especially as they took place during the same timeframe during his college experience.

According to Ezrah’s story, their journeys of spiritual discovery and sexual orientation and gender identity intersected to the extent that, as they integrated with at least two preliminary faith communities, they soon felt at odds with each. Although the first (evangelical Christian) community spoke to an awakening of faith and charismatic living of Scripture, Ezrah soon found that, culturally, there was less tolerance for those who identified as LGBTQ within that community. Ezrah then entered community with Catholic friends, and while the Catholic center near campus was comfortable and reminded Ezrah of their family’s former, nominal faith life, they knew that orthodox practice of Catholicism would not fit their evolving identity. Once Ezrah came to achieve their identities in terms of sexual orientation and gender, the Catholic center and its student members were less welcoming, and Ezrah found a new faith home and leadership opportunity with Amicus, a non-denominational Christian community. There Ezrah discovered a spiritual community that embraced LGBTQ individuals. Throughout this period, there was no further mention about family influences or outcomes on the evolution of Ezrah’s sexual orientation or gender identity, other than Ezrah had not yet fully come out with any of their achieved identity to their family. Ezrah suggested that many dimensions of their identity were formed concurrently as they grew in appreciation for their own personal background, which was made more visible once they arrived to begin study on UIC’s very diverse campus.
Ezrah likely would have been able to make deeper connections between their processes of conversion and commitment to an evolved identity composition, had I asked further probing questions to encourage them to reflect more significantly on one’s influence on the other. This would be additionally useful and productive if timing had allowed for Ezrah to complete the coming-out process to their family, and to attempt to understand how Ezrah reports any related family outcomes on Ezrah’s own identity development. Additionally, had Ezrah not encountered Amicus as a welcoming community—during the time that they were committing to new sexual and gender identities—it would have been interesting to see how Ezrah’s search would likely continue in hope of finding a new spiritual home.

For both Ezrah and Benjie, these struggles of recognition of their sexual orientations and (for Ezrah) their gender identity were largely influenced by their lives on campus, and to a far lesser reported extent by their families. However, the same struggles of finding a new spiritual home (or lack thereof) as distinct from the family home still “resulted in significant growth and a reconciliation of their sexual and spiritual identities” (Love et al., 2005, p. 208). Their stories suggest that, if asked later or more deeply, Ezrah’s and Benjie’s struggles to make meaning of their evolving spiritual, sexual, and gender identities could (and would) be significantly and inextricably more linked as demonstrated in other research (Gold & Stewart, 2011) than their current stories demonstrated.

Outcomes of their spiritual conversions for family relationships were important to all four students. Family relationships were a part of participants’ stories, and some greatly impacted the students’ spiritual conversion, contributing or detracting as influences or causes of change. However, they agreed that a sense of independence in college—being able to think for themselves and define their own values and beliefs—empowered them to manage their own
change. According to Lee (2002), the college experience encouraged the formation of “an independent self and the self-as-agent” (p. 347), and for these students their independence empowered this process of conversion. For most, they were closely tied to family influence before college, but as they separated from them geographically, they were better able to consider differing perspectives. For these students, college provided the space to safely explore relationships, identity, deeply-held values, and spiritual questions that had possibly been masked by previous religious routines like liturgy attendance or other misunderstood rituals. Diana, for instance, no longer bore the “heavy burden for Islam itself, feeling [herself] to be [an] obligatory representative” (Small, 2011, p. 48) of the faith to those around her. Post-conversion, students referenced religious differences with family members, but they also spoke of maintaining respectful deference to familial admonitions to “live a moral life” regardless of what the students’ beliefs had become. Given the unique contexts of their stories, each student maintained a commitment to some type of conversion, carrying within each an internalized affirmation, similar to what Stewart (2010) described, used as a personal resource. As they committed to self-exploration and declaring their own values during this time, these students learned how to write and tell their own stories of spirituality. Especially for Diana and Benjie, as they shared these stories with their families, some families had hoped for different outcomes.

**Spiritual Conversion in the College Environment**

The participants, as storytellers, told of certain moments, episodes, or critical junctures that became the “complicating actions” (Labov, 1972) of their narratives. These “shipwreck moments” (Parks, 2000) were turning points that illuminated future possibilities for growth. Whether it was an instance of learning about death for the first time, the opportunity to fit-in (or not) with one’s residence-hall floor community, the chance to attend a new church group’s
meeting, or being dismissed from one’s academic program, these moments of transition illustrated tremendous growth potential during their first year of college. Ezrah’s narrative did not exhibit a severe crisis or shipwreck moment; rather, their own conversion shaped an appreciation for new opportunities for academic study, leadership, and activism within their campus and city communities.

Campus living environments were generally disappointing to our participants, and did not play a positive role in the settings of their stories. These residential environments framed the first months of college life in a negative light, and in the students’ perceptions, were not supportive settings for them. If their residence halls had been more conducive to community-building (in the participants’ perceptions), they may have had more profound impact on shaping the students’ journeys of spiritual development. Diana and Benjie both mentioned the residential halls as negative influences, that their expected social opportunities (as anticipated sources of support during that year) were stifled because of lack of community.

Academically, the environmental press (Strange & Banning, 2001) of the campus was only obviously supportive for Ezrah. Anil found his academic ambitions stifled by the lack of a pervasive academic scholasticism. According to Strange and Banning (2001), “close correspondence (or congruence) between individual need and environmental press is presumed to be growth producing” (p. 87). This was not the case for Benjie, once a motivated student, who in college was left wondering and wandering beyond the classroom.

**Narrative Intersections with the Literature**

The participants’ narratives, as exemplars of the four types of conversion defined for this study (created, diminished, strengthened, and transformed), are reminiscent of those proposed by Nash (2001) as mainstream narratives (of orthodoxy, the wounded believer, and mainline) and as
alternative narratives (of activism, exploration, and secular humanism). In this study, Anil’s story of his strengthening conversion was a commitment to orthodoxy in his Veerashaiva tradition. Benjie’s quest to find a spiritual home, and eventual preference to be spiritually homeless suggested a wounded believer’s narrative, as if he were asking how a faith tradition could make sense when so many life situations did not make sense in his daily experience. Diana’s spiritual transformation aligns closely with an exploration narrative; she was open to trying new ideas, reflecting on what fit her best, and committing to those as her new faith identity. Ezrah’s spiritual conversion created a new, empowering commitment to advocacy for personal faith development, social justice, and academic inquiry; theirs could be termed an activism narrative for these reasons. Ezrah did not seek to move away from religion despite an established religion’s frequent challenge toward issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Rather, their conversion empowered Ezrah to move toward a spirituality that was affirming, welcoming, and empowering. The four types of conversion defined for this study helped to illustrate ways in which these students’ stories could also be seen as exemplars of Nash’s (2001) narratives; seen either way, it is evident that a significant pluralism of spiritual experience exists among college students, especially during the first year on campus.

Nash (2001) asserted that college and university communities are comprised of many dimensions of human diversity, and the variety of spiritual identities present on campus can be vast, as demonstrated through religious practices and faith involvement. Nash (2001) advocated for an increased understanding of these storylines so as to achieve a greater understanding of the pluralistic, spiritual nature of a campus community. “The very best way to teach students how to deal intelligently with religious dissent and compromise is to expose students to as much intense,
divergent belief as possible” (p. 39). This is the role of the college and university: to advance ideas and dialogue to understand multiple perspectives that shape a community.

Considering the study’s findings, and given Nash’s (2001) challenge to better understand these stories, I suspect that there are many more examples of students whose stories would reveal a diminished spiritual identity, and that their conversion or change would take place during their first college year. Students arrive at college in the first year and tend to fall away from the religious tradition to which they are accustomed, become less religiously active, but also develop a heightened spiritual awareness and wonder how they might grasp deeply-held beliefs differently to find answers to life’s big questions (Bryant et al., 2003). This would suggest that students are left to their own preferences and commitments, without the college acting in loco parentis to remind them of their prior religious commitments. Especially if the environmental press does not feature any mention of religious practice or ritual, students’ attention may easily turn toward other options to fill their time. There will be instances of other conversion experiences (those created, strengthened, or transformed), as a student’s evolving spiritual identity, formed by significant experiences of spiritual questioning throughout the college years, takes time to develop, and this change often only begins during the first college year. The first year, one of transition, is conducive of this decrease in religious activity (Bryant et al., 2003), and would suggest the opportunity for many students to diminish in their spiritual orientation during this time.

According to Rambo (1993), “some form of crisis usually precedes conversion . . . the crisis may be religious, political, psychological, or cultural in origin” (p. 44). Although they did not use these exact terms, each of the student narratives spoke of some elements of these crisis characteristics. For Diana and Benjie, the crisis began with a religious difference with their
families, and the prospect of gaining greater independence and wider social networks by moving to college. For Anil, his crisis marked a period of deepening understanding of his faith tradition, which itself has cultural dimensions as well as religious. His crisis of strengthening his spiritual identity was framed by his three shipwreck moments (Parks, 2000), one of which was the perceived near-death experience (Rambo, 1993) of being mugged that made him finally commit to his linga. For Ezrah, a positive crisis was the arrival at college, framed by their commitment to seeking spiritual identity across political, social, ideological, and academic endeavors. Their activism and commitment to future academic study of these topics are outcomes of Ezrah’s crisis.

Rambo (1993) asserted that “human beings continually engage in the process of world construction and reconstruction in order to generate meaning and purpose, to maintain psychic equilibrium, and to assure continuity” (p. 56). Benjie exhibited this when he challenged himself to join the student organization that was most welcoming to him, despite not matching its fervor for an active Christian faith life. However, he wanted a stable network of friends, and membership could offer him that. He negotiated experiences of communal prayer, song, and liturgical religiosity among his friends, only to discover that it all held little meaning for him, and eventually became quite discomforting, causing him to leave the environment. Anil reflected on the experiences of witnessing death for the first time in his young life and of being subject to a criminal attack as ways of negotiating ultimate questions in his spiritual life. This was his “search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, 1997, p. 32).

A pivotal point in the process of conversion is that of surrender. Rambo (1993) defined surrender as “the inner process of commitment . . . an inner yielding of control, an acceptance of authority of the leader, group, or tradition, which enables the convert to devote himself or herself
completely” (p. 132) to the new focus of spiritual life. Although none of the participants ever used the word *surrender* to characterize or describe their moments of conversion, my interpretation and contextualization suggest that Diana experienced surrender when she saw the image of God on the projector screen. Diana later confirmed this in her review of my interpretation. Her journey since that point was one of establishing a new outward faith identity as a Christian to her fellow students and family. Ezrah *surrendered* when they committed to making the new experience of college one shaped by a desire to build community based on teaching, learning, and advocating for LGBTQ youth and their spiritual development; it became their main focus of academic effort and social activism. Anil *surrendered* when he chose to wear his linga after a series of significant familial and violent experiences. Benjie *surrendered* in a sense when he simply declared no interest in practicing a formal faith tradition and committed to an agnostic identity, per his story; however, he did not exhibit an outward “disdain for Christianity” (Small, 2011, p. 95), a common sentiment held by those who identify as agnostic or atheist. Benjie’s commitment to hold no faith identity fit him well at this point in his life, and he negotiated the related outcomes on his family relationships and friendships as best he could. These moments of realization or change within each student’s story fulfilled the role of the “crisis” (Rambo, 1993) or “shipwreck” (Parks, 2000) moments of conversion, which themselves were the “complicating action[s]” (Labov, 1972) of their stories. Each was followed by a culminating point of new commitment or decision to proceed differently than before. These were the students’ moments of *surrender* (Rambo, 1993).

**Implications for Practice**

With insights gained from this study, I am confident in recommending a few strategies for practice for student affairs educators and others across higher education. These implications
for practice can help inform, improve, and inspire new approaches to service- and support-delivery for our students. As educators, we are a service and a helping profession; this inquiry illuminates particular ways in which we can serve and help students who are experiencing the particular challenges and opportunities of spiritual change on our campuses. “Student affairs staff have perhaps their strongest influence when they are advocating for the welfare and needs of students” (Dalton, 2006, p. 164).

First, the participants felt both welcomed and unwelcomed upon their arrival to campus, particularly those who made the choice to become part of residential communities. For two participants, what they recalled most readily was a feeling of social exclusion; for them, they were not readily part of the “clique” and did not seem to fit in. One became involved with an external organization because “they were my friends when my dorm wouldn’t be.” Residence life professionals are professionally trained to construct active, healthy, vibrant, and inclusive living and learning communities. Aside from keeping a clean and healthy facility, staff must also monitor resident student communities and watch for individual students of concern. Students’ needs for a safe, healthy living environment “must be met if they are to be comfortable and thrive in a learning environment” (Akens & Novak, 2011, p. 334). For students who do not fit comfortably in group-living environments, what can staff do to ease their comfort levels while still challenging them to learn from the experience? If all else fails, what measures must staff take to ensure the physical, mental, and emotional health of the student and of the larger community? Especially during the important first year of college, when the impact of transition experiences can define academic success and personal wellness, how can staff provide the best support possible? Educators must “know [their] students, how they learn, and the conditions that affect their development” (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991, p. 348). Staff must be aware
of students in their communities who have difficulties adapting to the new physical and community environments, so that they may recommend or require interventions for these challenged students if the need should arise.

Second, those who work in academic advising are often the strongest link between each student and the institution. More often than not, students are required to visit their advisors before they register; sometimes students find comfort in this advising relationship and visit more often for advice on matters beyond course selection. If these visits include discussion about greater life events, challenges and obstacles, and exciting opportunities, academic advisors likely are in the best positions to help monitor a student’s safe navigation of such a journey. They can certainly help refer a spiritually-changing student to a ministry staff, or elsewhere if conditions warrant. They can certainly be among the first to listen. Participants mentioned academics throughout the stories they shared about their spiritual identities; at least two of them reported improved academic performance as a result of their new spiritual perspectives. An academic advisor can be an informed (and informing) support for the student throughout the first year. Especially when students speak of moments of personal crisis or exceptional challenge, they may discuss spiritual dimensions of their struggle, and

   student affairs professionals must recognize that emotional crises in a student’s life may have a spiritual element, or, in fact, may be a spiritual emergency or crisis. Failure to recognize this possibility may result in misdirected advice or counseling, or a misdirected referral. (Love & Talbot, 1997, p. 625)

Kocet and Stewart (2011) proposed a twelve-competency model for student affairs professionals who seek to support students on a spiritual quest. Among their recommended competencies, they suggested that
student affairs professionals [should be] prepared to assist students, faculty, and staff during spiritual or existential crises and spiritual identity development milestones by providing appropriate support, resources, and referrals that meet the spiritual, secular, or religious needs of the campus. (p. 7)

A student’s spiritual crisis, change, and even conversion may be marginally or centrally connected to other life challenges, including those of an academic or social nature. As they proceed through such experiences, they strive to make meaning of situations and challenges, and as Parks (2000) suggested,

> the ongoing process of shipwreck, gladness, and amazement shakes us loose from our focus on little loves and puts us in touch with the mystery of the wider force field of our lives. Each time, our souls are stretched and reordered, at least in some small measure.

(p. 31-32)

Third, our students appreciate involvement opportunities when they join us on college and university campuses. College students are busy, often maintaining several external commitments to family, employment, or other responsibilities. However, the campus is meant to be a safe environment for them to practice their approach to leadership, management, and community-building, and they can easily gain those skills through involvement opportunities in student organizations, campus employment, or other roles of leadership. Participants mentioned the desire to belong and a willingness to try new experiences in terms of involvement on campus; all four sought membership and leadership in campus student organizations. Anil and Ezrah quickly rose to top leadership positions in their organizations, and doing so helped to fully integrate them into an involved relationship with one part of campus life. According to Whipple and O’Neill (2011), student involvement “provides its own classroom through the construction
of a comprehensive campus community” (p. 366). Astin (1993) found that “student involvement inside and beyond the classroom yielded greater student satisfaction in the college experience, and a firmer belief in the efficacy of undergraduate education” (Whipple & O’Neill, 2011, p. 366). This community development enhances student engagement and can even support spiritual growth, according to Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011):

leadership training, membership in student organizations, community service, and participation in student governance all have long traditions in the student affairs field as programmatic efforts that supplement traditional academic coursework. Such practices have been expanded over the years because of their demonstrated value in preparing students for work and community life. . . . [Research has demonstrated that] they can also be viewed as ways to facilitate students’ spiritual development. (p. 142)

Further, “staff must be knowledgeable and aware of students’ needs and dimensions of development in order to offer meaningful programs” (Whipple & O’Neill, 2011, p. 365). There should be structured, intentional opportunities to involve students in dialogues around identity issues, which should include spiritual dimensions of identity. Students can learn from staff how to responsibly consider their emotions, values, and beliefs, especially in relation to others. Structured opportunities for reflection and peer dialogue can often reveal other aspects of a student’s life that he or she may be less willing to discuss if asked directly. Ezrah seemed to benefit most directly from these intentional conversations throughout their involvement opportunities. They learned more deeply about the various religious student organizations to which they belonged by having such conversations and learning about the groups’ missions as lived out in daily life. Educators must participate with students in these conversations, as “students are hungry for discussion about what matters to them, yet over half reported that their
faculty never engage them in discussions about religion, spirituality, or the meaning of life” (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. 55). Further,

students want to know how religion fits into their evolving stories of meaning. Theirs is an urgent question: what is there about religion and spirituality that might help them shape their destinies, understand their histories, and develop a moral imagination, and might give them something worth living and dying for? (p. 56)

Involvement opportunities that are intentionally designed to elicit such stories for sharing may be most helpful.

Fourth, there should always be opportunity for additional training for post-secondary educators. Using this as an example, there are a number of individual training topics that could become useful workshops for continuing education for student affairs professionals. With an introduction to spirituality and its intersection with student development, training topics might include crisis counseling, advising strategies, assessment, and creative program design for students who are experiencing spiritual conversion. As students disclose as spiritual or otherwise, aware and well-trained staff can be among the greatest resources for students throughout this process. According to Love and Talbot (1999),

student affairs professionals need information and training related to spirituality and spiritual development. Until spiritual development is incorporated into the canon of student development theory, it may be up to professional organizations to encourage this information dissemination through workshops and conference programs. (p. 625)

Ezrah commented on how their close relationship with their academic advisor became an integral and solid foundation for their success in college. They mentioned how that advisor was able to counsel them on academic course selection, but became so much more—a role model, a
challenging yet supportive mentor, and a close friend, “part of [Ezrah’s] chosen family.” The advisor was willing to have the frank discussions with Ezrah on their evolving spiritual questions, and Ezrah suggested the advisor was fairly knowledgeable and interested in talking about such ideas. Student affairs professionals may recognize that spirituality is a relatively unexplored dimension of our student’s lives (and perhaps of their own); it is likely that educators would want to find out far more than is known about this relatively unknown topic. According to Kocet and Stewart (2011), a suggested competency is for “student affairs professionals [to be] cognizant of how spirituality, religion, and secularism can shape identity development and meaning-making, both individually and collectively” (p. 5), with regard to individual students and educators as well.

Fifth, staff must recognize that spiritual wellness is indeed a dimension of human wellness and should treat it as such, especially at secular universities that likely do not staff ministry professionals. Kocet and Stewart (2011) indicated the importance for student affairs educators to be “knowledgeable regarding world religions, humanistic world-views, and diverse spiritual perspectives and, when lacking information, [should] actively seek out resources and professionals with such expertise” (p. 5). Further, educators should have a sense of their own worldviews and limitations of understanding with regard to spirituality and religion, and should pay attention to the physical spaces, calendars, and other aspects of constructed environments that can help to highlight and celebrate spiritual diversity among members of the campus community (Kocet & Stewart, 2011). For Diana and Benjie, if their disappointing living experiences in residence-hall environments led them to seek social (and later, spiritual) outlets elsewhere, they likely did not have such outlets in their living-learning environments. Such students, who are not fully engaged, likely are not being fully supported across all dimensions of
wellness. Benjie’s story of his obstacles to success reflected this. Diana’s was a story of greater success; her support was found beyond the living environment. Spirituality is increasingly considered as important of a dimension of wellness as physical, mental, and other dimensions (Nelms et al., 2007), and Dalton (2006) described the importance of student welfare by suggesting that “students pay a price in psychological wholeness and wellness when they are required to have separate public and private personas in order to function successfully in the higher education setting” (p. 164).

Finally, and perhaps most basically, educators must simply pay attention to their students. Professors and staff members have regular contact with students, and often are among the first to notice behavioral changes among them. Simply checking-in periodically can show genuine interest in student well-being and create opportunities for students to divulge details of larger issues taking place in their lives. For Ezrah’s advisor, this strategy worked well; for Diana and Benjie’s residence hall staff, checking-in with them was likely not a priority. This is often a forgotten strategy, especially when busy work days often distract professionals from prioritizing students among other tasks to be addressed.

**Opportunities for Future Research**

Understanding the limitations of this study, there are several opportunities to investigate further the various topics that I attempted to explore here. This study touched on a variety of topics while focusing on the experience and contexts of spiritual conversion. These other topics, including first-year student challenges, residence-hall community-building, or academic success, could also serve as the foundational context or springboard for future inquiry.

First, student affairs educators can benefit from any further research into the nature of spiritual development of college students. Causes and effects of conversion, change, spiritual
quest or struggle, vocational awareness, religious practice, or other aspect of a student’s particular faith stance would illustrate more about how students learn (and commit) to believe, what they believe in, and the outcomes of those belief commitments. There is much attention paid to research on other dimensions of a student’s life in order to inform or create best-practice approaches to supporting student success, and if spiritual wellness is to be considered a dimension of student wellness, it must be investigated and supported through programming and advising that is grounded in research. Phenomenological or grounded-theory approaches to understanding a particular conversion experience at college may be especially fruitful for scholars and staff to continue to probe more deeply into their students’ spiritual questions. We know students are asking these questions and developing their own spiritual habits and practices—as seem to be shaped by the influences of college life—and more may be willing to discuss how college affects these conversion experiences.

Second, this inquiry explored a particular experience that took place for the study’s participants during the first year of college. I acknowledge that there is an entire body of research and extant scholarship on the impact, opportunities, and challenges of the first year of college. However, given that very little was available on the intersection of spirituality and the first year, this may be another pathway for inquiry. To seek insight on the specific conditions, processes, or outcomes of students’ faith lives, religiousness, and spiritual growth (in a creating or diminishing direction) would help to comprehend just how powerful this year of transition may be. Alternately, exploring the same questions of this study with a sample of graduating, senior-level students (or even graduate students) may be interesting as they negotiate their own transitions out of the college environment. Their transitions are of a far different nature, with distinct influences that shape their lived daily realities. This “moving out” (Schlossberg et al.,
1995) may spur just as many existential, spiritual questions for these students as may have their transition into campus life.

Third, researchers interested in theological or religious studies may find college students a most interesting subject pool to consider when investigating ways in which busy people include or exclude religion in daily life. If one is reared with religion in one’s family, one learns about faith from those family members. Each person’s initial understandings of religion—and indeed, each person’s initial spiritual identities—are unique, and “home-grown.” Family life may include affiliation with a particular religious community beyond the home, so when one participates in the communal prayer or practice of liturgy, that participation further informs one’s spiritual identity. When one arrives at college for the first time, what happens to those initial religious understandings when they intersect with the vast diversity of ideas presented in the college context, and when family influence is absent? Moreover, as the nature of transition to college is changing, even residence-hall students seem far more connected still to family life through the technology of constant communication and social media. It may be interesting to explore these influences on a first-year student’s process of spiritual questioning, regardless of whether the student lives on campus or still with family. Despite these sustained connections to home life, some students still change. It would be interesting to explore further reasons as to why and how.

Fourth, it would be valuable to research to evaluate training or preparation of student affairs educators who seek to support student success across all college experiences. Although some are, most student affairs professionals likely are not also trained pastors, ministers, or ordained clergy. Nevertheless, many often serve in roles parallel to a comforting pastor, preacher, or priest for students at a moment’s notice. When the spiritual orientations of staff and
students clash, when staff cannot comprehend a student’s spiritual struggle or personal conflict with religious issues, how best can student affairs speak to those challenges and offer the appropriate support? According to Kocet and Stewart (2011),

as professionals dedicated to holistic development, student affairs professionals need to be able to work with students along the paths (both individualized and communal) they use to find purpose and meaning in life. Furthermore, student affairs professionals must become comfortable in fostering dialogue regarding spirituality, religiosity, and secularism in order to help students understand the intersection of these approaches and enable civil conversations about these differences on campus. (p. 4)

It would be interesting to learn about the degree to which educators are prepared (i.e., in graduate-level preparation programs) to have those conversations, and to understand how informed they may or may not be with regard to properly referring such opportunities to colleagues.

**Personal Summary**

As a student affairs educator, I greatly enjoyed what I learned from conducting this study because throughout the entirety of its duration, from initial topic design to final summary, I have reflected on my own experience as both a student and a professional. For at least three reasons, I have gained significant new understanding from leading this inquiry.

First, throughout my own experience in higher education—including my time as an undergraduate—I have considered myself a spiritual, religious, and faith-filled person. I have come to understand that the spiritual dimensions of my life—and, related, the religious dimensions—have helped to complement the variety of identity dimensions that uniquely comprise who I am, what I value, how I learn, and how I help communities form. This
particularly influences the ways in which I practice my professional skills with today’s students. These dimensions are the lenses through which I see myself and others, and how I contextualize my own learning. As an education professional, this is key to how I teach and learn with students and colleagues.

Second, I have traveled a journey similar to the journeys traveled by the students in this study. My own spirituality was fortified because of my undergraduate environment and the opportunities it offered me, and I would suggest my own conversion narrative was a strengthening one. Upon my arrival to college, being immersed in a learning environment that included others from very different life backgrounds, cultures, belief systems, and orientations, I was able to recognize that my own faith values, spiritual thinking, and religious practices were informed by very different perspectives. I was strengthened through these opportunities for ministry, liturgy, and social outreach that oriented me toward a far greater appreciation for human diversity and a preferential option for those who had less than I had. These are tenets of a religion, but they became hallmarks of a learning experience that transformed my worldview, taught me about privilege, and oriented me toward issues of justice and equity that I had not encountered before college. My conversion was one of starting to understand my own identity in the context of faith, faith in the context of my community, and my responsibility to (and because of) my identity as a member of that community.

Third, I have entered a profession that educates college students for success within and beyond the classroom walls. As an individual, I bring my own identity, skills, interests, and abilities to work on campus each day. As a trained professional, I bring knowledge, research, teaching, and the ability to replicate best-practice approaches to student services. Having worked in advising, programmatic, and counseling functions across my various professional
roles, I know that students appreciate when an educator can try to understand the daily realities of challenge and change that students face while earning a degree. To be an educator who cares to delve deeper into the spiritual realms of a student’s life, and to care to listen to their stories of this challenge and change, is a unique calling of its own, and not one that all professionals hear or care to answer. I view this as my commitment to the communities I serve, as a faith-filled professional.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to hear the stories of spiritual conversion as told by those students who were changed by such experiences during their first years of college. Through inviting students to share their stories, four students illustrated ways in which their spiritual lives were created, diminished, strengthened, or transformed during their first college year. They shared insights into the related challenges and opportunities they encountered through feelings of loneliness, community inclusion and exclusion, academic achievements in the midst of personal turmoil, and environmental influences that may have shaped their journeys.

The findings of this inquiry suggest additional opportunities for training of higher education personnel to be more attentive and better able to support students who are searching spiritually and who may experience a spiritual conversion during the first year of college. These findings demonstrated the need for educators to maintain a focus on ways in which the college environment can best support safe and healthy student journeys to, through, and beyond the campus. For many students, college marks a time in their lives of intense personal transformation. Educators must shape the college environment academically, socially, and spiritually to be a place of change that welcomes and challenges students for success.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

Attachment 1: Text for Recruitment E-Mail Message

Audience: Student body at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), via mass e-mail distribution.

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Dear Student,

Have you experienced a change in your religious tradition or spiritual practice since arriving on campus? Are you interested in taking part in a research study? If so, you may be able to help with an important research project!

I am currently a staff member at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and am also a doctoral student enrolled at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio. To complete my degree program, I am conducting an original research project that will help me learn more about the experiences of religious or spiritual conversion of first-year college students. This project was approved and registered with the UIC Institutional Review Board (IRB) as protocol #2013-0909, and by the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University as project #375099.

In this study, we will focus on the following experiences of “conversion” of religious tradition or spiritual practice:

- Created (example: raised without formal religion but in college attended Pentecostal services);
- Diminished (example: brought up Jewish but in college “fell away” or did not observe the faith);
- Strengthened (example: always was a passive Catholic, but in college became active in Catholic ministry);
- Transformed (example: came from a Lutheran home, but in college converted to Islam).

I am interested to learn more from current sophomores, juniors, or senior-level students who had such an experience during their FIRST YEAR of college. If you experienced something like this during your first year, please consider completing this brief online survey that will tell me more about your experience. This survey is voluntary, and will take only 5 to 10 minutes of your time. You must be 18 years old or older to be eligible to participate in the survey:

https://kpsuedbd.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_7WmFuvyf5JMQNZh

All students who complete this survey will be entered into a random drawing with a 1-in-40 chance to receive 1 of 5 gift cards (each valued at $20). Students’ names and e-mail addresses will be collected via this survey for use in the drawing, but will not be linked to the survey data and responses, and will be deleted when the drawing is held when the survey is closed on November 30, 2013. Thank you, in advance, for reading this message and learning more about my research project. Best wishes for a productive semester!

Sincerely,

Keith B. O’Neill, M.Ed.

Associate Director, Office of Student Development Services
University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC)
www.sedvs.uic.edu

and

Doctoral Student, Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs
Bowling Green State University (BGSU)
www.bgsu.edu/hesa

Recruitment Message for “Changing Places” (#2013-0909); Version 2, 10/08/2013; page 1 of 1
APPENDIX B. ELECTRONIC PARTICIPANT SELECTION SURVEY

Initial Consent (to take part in survey)

Dear Student,

THANK YOU for your interest in my research project! I am currently a staff member at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and am also a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio. In order to complete my program, I am conducting an original research study under the guidance of my faculty advisor, Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart (associate professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at BGSU).

I will seek to interview up to 25 participants who identify as having undergone a type of religious or spiritual conversion in the first year of college. We will focus particularly on one of the following experiences of conversion of religious tradition or spiritual practice:

- CREATED (example: raised without formal religion, but in college attended Pentecostal services);
- DIMINISHED (example: brought up Jewish, but in college “fell away” or did not observe the faith);
- STRENGTHENED (example: always a passive Catholic, but in college became active in Catholic ministry); or
- TRANSFORMED (example: came from a Lutheran home, but in college converted to Islam).

If one of the above categories describes your own experiences, you may be a good fit for this study! I will look forward to your responses to the questions in this survey.

ABOUT THE SURVEY:

- This survey will take approximately 5 to 10 minutes of your time. You will be asked about certain aspects of your religious identity, spiritual practices, and demographic and contact information.
- Data collected will be used to illustrate this particular experience through presentation in my final doctoral dissertation. Your participation in this research will offer you the chance to reflect on your experiences. For educators in higher education, it will help to understand more about the experience of spiritual/religion change during the first year of college, as well as how the college environment can best support such an experience.
- Students who complete this survey will be entered into a random drawing with a 1-in-40 chance to receive one of five (5) $20 gift cards as a token of appreciation for their participation. Students’ names and e-mail addresses will be collected via this survey for use in the drawing, but will not be linked to the survey data and responses, and will be deleted when the drawing is held when the survey is closed on November 30, 2013.

ABOUT YOUR PARTICIPATION:

- Your decision to participate or decline participation in this survey is completely voluntary and you have the right to terminate your participation at any time without penalty. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. If you do not wish to complete the survey, just close this browser window and clear your browser’s cache so that others will not know you visited this webpage.
- Your participation in this brief survey will be completely confidential and any information collected will be kept confidential also.
- From the results of the survey, you may be invited to continue your participation in the study, which would consist of at least one in-person interview (lasting about 90 minutes), and the chance for a follow-up interview some days after the first that will last about 30 minutes.
- There are no perceived risks to individuals participating in this survey beyond those that exist in daily life, although there is the risk that a breach of privacy (others may know you are involved in research) and confidentiality (accidental disclosure of identifiable data) may occur.
- Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your current status or future relations with the University of Illinois or any future relationship you may have with Bowling Green State University.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA PROTECTION

- Contact information gathered in this survey will be used only to enter survey participants into the drawing offered to all who complete this survey, and to contact those who (based on survey responses) will be invited to continue participation in the study.
- In all materials and information collected, all personal and institutional identities will be kept in confidence and pseudonyms will be assigned by me for use in selecting participants for interviews.
- Records of this survey and any further e-mail correspondence will be accessed only by me using standard secure and password-protected e-mail and Qualtrics™ survey software. All files will be deleted and destroyed after the submission of my final dissertation text.
- Again, there are no perceived risks to individuals participating in this survey beyond those that exist in daily life, although there is the risk that a breach of privacy (others may know you are involved in research) and confidentiality (accidental disclosure of identifiable data) may occur.

QUESTIONS?

- If there are any questions about this study, or for further information, please contact me at (708) 707-2013, or via e-mail at keithh@bgsu.edu or keithone@uic.edu.
- My faculty advisor at BGSU, Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, is an associate professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs, and can also be reached at (419) 372-4500 or dafina.lazarus@bgsu.edu.
If you have questions about the conduct of this study, or about your rights as a potential research participant, you may contact
the chair of the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at (419) 372-7716 or herbs@bgsu.edu. This study is registered
with the BGSU HSRB as #37399.

Similarly, UIC's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the State of Illinois may monitor this study; if you have questions regarding
the rights of research volunteers, please contact the UIC Office for Protection of Research Subjects at (312) 996-1711. This
research was approved by the UIC IRB as protocol #2913-0909.

** Note: Please print a copy of this page for your records, if you so desire. **

I thank you for your interest and for taking part in this survey.

Sincerely,

Keith O'Neill
Associate Director, UIC Student Development Services,
and Doctoral Candidate, BGSU Higher Education & Student Affairs

Do you agree to participate in this survey for potential selection as an interviewee? Please indicate your consent as a response to the
following statement:

I have read and understand the above consent statement. I understand that there are no perceived risks to individuals participating
in this survey beyond those that exist in daily life. I certify that I am 18 years old or older, and by indicating "Yes" below, I indicate my
willingness to voluntarily take part in the survey and to potentially be contacted to participate in an interview about my survey
responses.

☐ Yes
☐ No

Contact Information

Please provide the following contact information. It will only be used to contact you if you are selected to take part in the study. You
will also be entered in a drawing to win a $20 gift card, and your contact information will be used to inform you in case you are
selected.

Name (Last, First):

E-mail address:

Phone number:

Current age (as of today):

☐ 18-24
2/14/2014

Qualtrics SurveySoftware

☐ 25-40
☐ 41-65
☐ older than 65

Please indicate your current class standing (check all that apply):
☐ First-year student
☐ Sophomore
☐ Junior
☐ Senior+
☐ Transfer student
☐ Graduate student
☐ Not currently enrolled
☐ Alumna / Alumnus
☐ Resident student (living on-campus)
☐ Commuter student (living off-campus)

Religious Traditions & Spiritual Practices

For the following questions, please indicate how would you describe your spiritual/religious practices (tradition, behavior, identity).

Please indicate the religious tradition(s) with which you identified UNTIL you came to college:
☐ Agnostic
☐ Atheist
☐ Buddhist
☐ Christian
☐ Hindu
☐ Jewish
☐ Muslim
☐ No tradition
☐ Secular Humanist
☐ Unitarian Universalist
☐ Other, not listed

Please indicate the religious tradition(s) with which you CURRENTLY identify:
☐ Agnostic
☐ Atheist
☐ Buddhist
Do you consider yourself to be “active” in your spirituality?
- Yes
- No

Have you always identified as you indicated above (as either “active” or not)?
- Yes
- No

Would members of your immediate family identify with the same religious tradition as you CURRENTLY do?
- Yes
- No

How long have you identified with your CURRENT religious tradition?

Have you experienced a change in your spiritual practices or religious tradition since coming to college?
- Yes
- No

If so, when did you experience this change?

If so, how would you describe this change?

Do you consider yourself “spiritually different” now than before you began college?
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

If so, how would you describe this difference?

Closing

Thank you for completing this survey. I will review your responses and follow-up with you soon.

Sincerely,

Keith O’Neill, M.Ed.
Associate Director, UIC Student Development Services (www.silde.uic.edu), and
Doctoral student, Bowling Green State University- Higher Education & Student Affairs (www.bgsum.edu/hesai)
APPENDIX C. PARTICIPANT LETTER OF INVITATION

[DATE]

Dear [NAME]:

Thank you for taking part in the online survey I shared to learn more about your experiences with conversion of religious tradition or spiritual practice. According to the responses you shared, I believe your experiences may richly inform my research, and I invite you to continue your participation! As a reminder, I am a staff member at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and am also a graduate student enrolled at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio. As part of my BGSU degree program, I am conducting an original research study that will help me learn more about the experiences of religious or spiritual conversion of first-year college students.

For the purposes of this study, I define a "conversion experience" to be a change of religious tradition or spiritual practice, and described more fully by one of the following characteristics of conversion:

- **Created** (example: raised without formal religion but in college attended Pentecostal services);
- **Dissolved** (example: brought up Jewish but in college "fell away" or did not observe the faith);
- **Strengthened** (example: always was a passive Catholic, but in college became active in Catholic ministry); or
- **Transformed** (example: came from a Lutheran home, but in college converted to Islam).

My research will focus on conversion experiences that happened during a student’s first year of college. You indicated in the online survey that you are at least 18 years old and that you experienced this during your first year, which is why you have been selected to continue participating in the study.

Your involvement as a participant in this portion of the study will consist of at least one audio-recorded interview of approximately 90 minutes in length, which will take place at your campus in a location that will enable us to talk privately and that will feature low noise levels to allow for such audio-recording to take place. There will be an opportunity for a brief follow-up interview a few days after our first meeting, and you will be able to review the thoughts you shared during the earlier interview. The project will be completed by January 2014, and all project-related data and information, including any paper surveys, consent forms, e-mail messages, and transcripts of recordings, will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Similarly, electronic records will be stored using standard secure and password-protected e-mail and Qualtrics survey software. All records (paper and electronic) will be accessed only by me until the submission of a final dissertation text, at which point all records will be destroyed. Results of the study will be shared in the dissertation text; however, in all materials, all personal and institutional identities will be kept in confidence and pseudonyms will be assigned. Your continued participation is voluntary and you may limit or end your participation at any time; your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your current status or future relations with the University of Illinois or with Bowling Green State University. Finally, participants who complete the interview portion of the study will receive a $25 gift card as a token of appreciation.

While there are no direct benefits of your participation in this study, your participation will offer you the chance to reflect on your experiences in college, and it will also help educators in higher education to understand more about students’ experiences of spiritual or religious change during the first year of college, as well as how the college environment can best support such an experience. Throughout this study, there are no risks to participants anticipated beyond those that exist in daily life.

I hope I can count you among my continuing participants. Please confirm your willingness to continue taking part in this study by e-mailing me at either keithb@bgsu.edu or keithb@uic.edu no later than [DEADLINE DATE]. If there are any questions about this study, or for further information, please e-mail or call me at (312) 707-3613. My faculty advisor at BGSU, Dr. Dahna Lazarus Stewart, is an Associate Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs, and can be reached at (419) 372-7382 or dfstnus@bgsu.edu.

If you have questions about the conduct of this study, or about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the chair of the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at (419) 372-7716 or hsrba@bgsu.edu. This study was approved and registered with the BGSU HSRB as protocol #375099. In addition, UIC’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the State of Illinois may monitor this study; if you have questions regarding the rights of research volunteers, please contact the UIC Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at (312) 996-1711. This study was approved and registered with the UIC IRB as protocol #2013-0899. I thank you in advance, for considering this invitation to continue participating; I look forward to hearing from you before [DEADLINE DATE].

Sincerely,

Keith B. O’Neill, M.Ed.
Doctoral student, HESA, Bowling Green State University, and Associate Director, UIC Student Development Services

Invitation Letter for “Changing Places” (#013-0909); Version 1, 10/08/2013; page 1 of 1

330 Education Building
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403

Phone 419-372-7382
Fax 419-372-9382

www.bgsu.edu/collge/alth/hesa/
hesa@bgsu.edu
APPENDIX D. PARTICIPANT LETTER OF REJECTION

[DATE]

(#37509 - Attachment 4: Rejection letter for participants not selected via the Qualtrics survey)

Dear [NAME],

Thank you for taking part in the online survey I shared to learn more about your experiences with conversion of religious tradition or spiritual practice. According to the responses you shared, it seems that your experiences might not be the best fit for my study, so I will not need to contact you for further information.

However, as long as you provided your name and e-mail address in the survey, you will still be entered into a drawing to possibly receive one of five $20 gift cards as a token of my appreciation for taking the survey. Those who are selected in the drawing will be notified no later than [deadline date], at which point all survey and contact information will be deleted.

Thank you once again for your interest in taking part in my survey. I wish you the best for a successful semester!

Sincerely,

Keith B. O’Neill, M.Ed.

Doctoral Student
Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs
Bowling Green State University (BGSU)

www.bgsu.edu/hesa

and

Associate Director
Office of Student Development Services
University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC)

www.udcs.uchicago.edu

“Thank-you” (Rejection) Letter for “Changing Places” (#2013-0009); Version 1, 10/08/2013; page 1 of 1
APPENDIX E. PARTICIPANT STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

"Changing Places: An Exploration of Spiritual Conversion in First-Year College Students"
PARTICIPANT'S STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

Dear [NAME],

(#375999 - Attachment 5: Informed Consent - REVISED)

Thank you for your interest in my research project! I am currently a staff member at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and am also a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in Ohio. In order to complete my program, I am conducting an original research study under the guidance of my faculty advisor, Dr. Dafina Lazarus Stewart (associate professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at BGSU). The study will help me to understand more about students who experience religious or spiritual conversion during their first year of college. Based on your earlier response to my e-mailed survey, I invite you to continue participating in this study.

The purpose of this project is to explore the experiences of religious and/or spiritual conversion among first-year college students, and to learn about how the college environment may contribute to such experiences. By studying the nature of these experiences, educators can learn more about how the college experience can affect students before, during, and beyond conversion experiences. Your participation in this portion of the study will help to establish a greater understanding for educators and students alike. Also, your continued participation may provide additional opportunities for self-reflection and to assess the learning, development, and growth you have undertaken thus far in college. You will also receive a $25 gift card as a token of appreciation.

You will be one of up to 25 students to be enrolled in this portion of the study, each of whom self-identified (via my e-mailed survey) as having undergone a type of religious or spiritual conversion in the first year of college. We will focus particularly on one of the following experiences of conversion of religious tradition or spiritual practice:

- Created (example: raised without formal religion but in college attended Pentecostal services);
- Diminished (example: brought up Jewish but in college “fell away” or did not observe the faith);
- Strengthened (example: always was a passive Catholic, but in college became active in Catholic ministry); or
- Transformed (example: came from a Lutheran home, but in college converted to Islam).

Your involvement in this portion of the study will consist of at least one audio-recorded interview of approximately 90 minutes in length, which will take place on your campus in a location that will enable us to talk privately and that will feature low noise levels to allow for such audio-recording to take place. There will be an opportunity for a brief follow-up meeting a few days after our initial interview, with a chance for you to review the interview’s transcript and read my summary of main ideas and themes that help to describe your experiences. I will welcome your feedback on the summary's accuracy and how well it represents the facts of your experience. I do not anticipate your entire participation in this portion of the study to take more than three (3) hours of your time. Your participation is voluntary and you may limit or end your participation at any time; your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your current status or future relations with the University of Illinois or with Bowling Green State University.

The project will be completed by January 2014, and all project-related data and information, including paper surveys, consent forms, email messages, and transcripts of recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Similarly, electronic records will be stored using standard secure and password-protected e-mail and Quartrics survey software. All records (paper and electronic) will be accessed only by me until the submission of a final dissertation text, at which point all records will be destroyed. Results of the study will be shared in the dissertation text; however, in all materials, all personal and institutional identifiers will be kept in confidence and pseudonyms will be assigned. The anticipated risks associated with your participation in this study are no greater than those you encounter in daily life, although there is the risk that a breach of privacy (others may know you are involved in research) and confidentiality (accidental disclosure of identifiable data) may occur.

If there are any questions about this study or for further information, please contact me at (708) 707-2013 or via email at ketho@bgsu.edu or kethan@uic.edu. My faculty advisor, Dr. Dafina Lazarus Stewart, can be reached at (419) 372-7382 or dafinas@bgsu.edu. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the chair of the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at (419) 372-7716 or hrsb@bgsu.edu. This study was approved and registered with the BGSU HSRB as protocol #375999. In addition, UIC's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the State of Illinois may monitor this study; if you have questions regarding the rights of research volunteers, please contact the UIC Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at (312) 996-1711. This study was approved and registered with the UIC IRB as protocol #2013-0909. I thank you again for your participation!

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

[Signature]

[Participant's Name (printed)]

[Participant's Signature]

[Date]

330 Education Building
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403
Phone 419-372-7382
Fax 419-372-9382

BGSU HSRB - APPROVED FOR USE
ORIG# 5 # 375999
EFFECTIVE 1/1/2013
EXPIRES 6/30/2014
APPENDIX F. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/GUIDELINE

Attachment 6: Agenda/Protocol for Interview Meeting with Participants

Protocol for Participant Interview

Greetings and Introduction
1. Thank you for your willingness to participate.
2. Review of purpose: I am exploring the experiences of college students who have undergone a process of spiritual conversion.
3. Review of procedures: I will ask several open-ended questions; please feel free to answer them as fully and as completely as you wish. I will digitally record what we say during our meeting; however, if you would prefer something not recorded, please indicate such and I will pause the recorder. All personally-identifiable information will be safeguarded and altered to protect the identity of all participants.
4. Are there any questions? Any need for clarification?
5. Review informed consent form; questions, agreement, signatures.
6. Remind participant that the anticipated risks associated with your participation in this study are not greater than those you encounter in daily life, although there is the risk that a breach of privacy (others may know you are involved in research) and confidentiality (accidental disclosure of identifiable data) may occur.
7. Prepare recorder and begin.

Themes and Questions
1. Current self-characterization, involvement
   • Year in school
   • Activities and interests
2. Faith, religion, and spirituality
   • How do you define “faith”? “Religion”? “Spirituality”?
   • What does it mean to be a spiritual person? A religious person?
   • Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person? A religious person?
   • Do you identify with a particular religious tradition?
   • Have you always identified with that religious tradition?
   • Has your belief system changed to/from/within that religious tradition?
3. College life and spirituality
   • How would you describe your first year of college? Challenges? Opportunities?
   • Has your religious/spiritual identity remained constant throughout your time in college?
   • In what area(s) of your life have you grown throughout college?
   • Have you changed significantly in any aspect throughout college?
   • What is your favorite part of college? Of campus?
   • What aspect of college life has been most influential for you?
4. Spiritual conversion experience
   • Why do you believe you have experienced a religious or spiritual conversion?
   • What might have caused you to experience a religious or spiritual conversion?
• Describe the nature of your religious or spiritual conversion?
• What was the process of conversion like?
• Did your involvement on campus have a role in your conversion?
• What were some implications of your spiritual conversion?
• How [else] are you different now than you were before?
• How do others (family, friends) understand or react to your experience of spiritual conversion?

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 take some time in a week or two to review the content of our conversation?

Closing and Appreciation
1. Thank you for sharing your time and ideas with me. In the coming weeks, I will send a transcript of our visit with some of my thoughts and findings on what you shared, and you will be invited to review your responses and make comments wherever you see fit.
2. Thank you again for joining me today.
APPENDIX G. HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

DATE: November 1, 2013
TO: Keith O’Neill, M.Ed.
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [375009-8] Changing Places: An Exploration of Spiritual Conversion in First-Year College Students
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: October 31, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: August 1, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification 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.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Modifications Approved:
1. Documents now reflect both BGSU HSRB and UIC IRB project numbers [UIC IRB project number was not assigned at the time of BGSU HSRB review/approval], and some documents have small “footers” to help label the documents (per UIC IRB)
2. The "Text for Recruitment E-Mail Message" document now features clarifying text for audience year levels (sophomores, juniors, or seniors), specifies the survey is voluntary and will only take 5-10 minutes to complete, and that participants must be 18 years old or older; it also mentions the incentives offered (gift cards) and odds of being selected (1 in 40 chance), as well as how student names will be used for the drawing and how they will be disposed of when completed.
3. The Qualtrics selection survey features some clarifying text for how many participants will take part, includes text for the odds of being selected for the incentive, and reminds the participant of the risk of breach of privacy via accidental disclosure of data
4. The Participant Invitation Letter features clarifying text about the direct benefits of participation, and reminds the participant that the minimum age of participation is 18 years
5. The Participant Rejection ("Thank you") Letter features a UIC IRB footer (label to distinguish the document)
6. The Participant Statement of Informed Consent features clarifying text about the number of participants to be enrolled in the study, a reminder about the risk of a potential breach of privacy (accidental disclosure of identifiable data), and a UIC IRB footer.

7. The Interview Agenda/Protocol includes a reminder about a potential risk for breach of privacy (accidental disclosure of identifiable data), and the former section about snowball sampling has been removed (it is now irrelevant).

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 August 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 419-372-7710 or hsrb@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.