STUDYING ABROAD: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH IN SPIRITUALITY

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this collective case study was to explore how six college students described the influence of their study abroad experience on their spirituality. I situated this study in a constructivist research paradigm because the inquiry focused on how the participants constructed meaning about and understood the influence of study abroad on their spirituality. I utilized a staged, semi-structured interview protocol consisting of up to three separate interviews. Interviews took place before participants departed for their study abroad experience, while they were abroad, and after returning home from studying abroad. Students studied abroad for at least eight weeks during the summer of 2012.

Through a better understanding of their described experience, I gained insight into the impact of study abroad, how study abroad affected specific spiritual practices, and which specific elements of study abroad ignited spiritual development. From the data, six major themes emerged to indicate how students described the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality. Students became more aware of their own and others’ spirituality. Spiritual coping was utilized by many participants in reaction to feeling isolated, uncomfortable, and homesick. Participants enacted spiritual and religious practices while abroad to help cope with being abroad or to enact their spirituality. Participants engaged in dialogue about spirituality and spiritual questions. Finally, participants expressed that, after studying abroad, their spiritual identity was strengthened.
Dedicated to my parents, Richard and Theresa Clemens, who dedicated themselves to instilling the importance of education and faith throughout my entire life.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the influence of study abroad on a student’s spirituality. Spirituality, for this study, is understood as meaning-making. Meaning-making is described 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). The purpose of this collective case study was to explore how a sample of college students described the influence of their study abroad experience on their spirituality. Through a better understanding of their described experience, I gained insight into the impact of study abroad, how study abroad affected specific spiritual practices, and which specific elements of study abroad ignited spiritual development. Spiritual development involves “the nature of spiritual change, transformation, growth, or maturation as well as life phases and stages,” and also involves “an increase in the depth of a person’s awareness of, and search for, spiritual meaning overtime” (Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006, p. 9). This research study utilized a collective case study methodology to investigate how a sample of purposefully selected participants described the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality.

Character Development

Higher education has been the target of consistent budget reductions by state governments and, as a result of this and other factors, the cost of higher education has been dramatically increasing (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011). With scarce resources, many administrators have focused much attention to promote universities as places to develop marketable career skills in order to secure successful employment upon graduation. Furthermore, with the increased focus on globalization, the emphasis of higher education in the United States has been preoccupied with equipping college students with technical and
professional skills to find gainful employment in a global marketplace. Higher education, however, also has a social responsibility to graduate individuals equipped with more than just marketable job skills for a global economy. What lacks in this current model is emphasis on character development (Gumport, 2001).

Character development, once a major purpose of the university, has now been deemphasized by a heightened focus on developing marketable job skills. According to Gumport (2001), universities must cultivate citizenship and develop students’ character. Character includes the ability to discern right from wrong, ethical decisions from unethical decisions, and moral action from immoral action. Although character development has been deemphasized, new initiatives have arisen to strengthen the call for greater character development in the university curriculum. For example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) campaign identified, what they referred to as “essential learning outcomes” (2012). Included in these essential learning outcomes were “personal and social responsibility, including civic knowledge and engagement - local and global, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning...anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges” (p. 1). This outcome supports the assertion that a just society needs to be developed, maintained, and advanced by ethical and morally sound individuals. In addition to the essential learning outcomes, the LEAP campaign also identified seven principles of excellence. In regards to addressing character development, the sixth principle focused on fostering civic, intercultural, and ethical learning by emphasizing personal and social responsibility. Higher education has the responsibility to incorporate character
development into the curriculum. Character development encompasses the moral and civic learning and behavior of college students.

According to Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011), a significant aspect of character development is addressing issues of spirituality. Along with Astin et al., I believe spirituality is important aspect of character development. In this study, spirituality is used to describe how students make meaning, their sense of interconnectedness with the world around them, and their ecumenical worldview. Making meaning, reflecting on the world around them, finding connections with the world around them, and becoming more open and understanding of other cultures are all aspects of spirituality that connect directly with character development. Although spirituality is a valuable and important aspect of character development, public institutions of higher education in the United States, typically and intentionally, distance themselves from actively facilitating the spiritual development of college students, compared with other aspects of student development and identity (Astin et al., 2011). As Love and Talbot (1999) stated, in regard to spirituality and spiritual development, “A void has existed on campus and in academe … .There are few places to talk about these topics other than religious studies programs and campus ministry offices, which can be narrow avenues for discussing issues of spirituality” (p. 361). Although spirituality and student spiritual development were explored extensively in the last twenty years (Astin et al., 2011; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005; Love & Talbot, 1999; Parks, 2000; Speck, 2005; Strange, 2001), public institutions, for a variety of reasons, have tended to shy away from directly engaging in activities that are connected with spirituality on the public university campus.
**Study Abroad**

Higher education affords many opportunities for growth and development through the academic curriculum, experiential learning opportunities, and life within the campus community outside of the classroom. The undergraduate experience was studied, examined, and researched to determine how students can best learn, develop, and grow. In addition to the traditional pedagogical methods, universities have expanded learning in the classroom with opportunities to develop and learn outside the class through countless offerings. A student’s dedication to active participation in educationally purposeful activities is a significant predictor of learning and personal development (Kuh & Gonyea, 2005). One such activity that is very purposeful and has almost always shown increases in learning and personal development is studying abroad (Doyle, 2009). As described by Astin et al. (2011), studying abroad is a “curricular experience that positively affects the student’s academic performance” (p. 128). The benefits of study abroad have been documented in numerous publications. In their book examining how college affects students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reviewed several research studies that found studying abroad promotes positive attitudes toward cultural pluralism, greater tolerance and acceptance of others, increased interest in cross-cultural issues, and decreased use of stereotypes (p. 316). Study abroad programs offer many different benefits to students who engage in these sorts of experiential learning activities. Students engaged in studying abroad experience a new culture, travel outside of the United States, and sometimes are faced with communicating in a language other than English for the first time in their lives.

Higher education systems around the world have identified study abroad as an important and impactful learning opportunity. One of the goals of the Bologna Process, the European initiative to create a European Area of Higher Education (EAHE), was to attract more non-
European students to study in European countries. This initiative was also designed to make the process for European students to study in a different European country easier and more accessible. As described on the Bologna Process website (2010), the reforms made it easier for European students to study abroad in EAHE-member countries and to transfer credits earned from studies outside Europe. Additionally, the EAHE makes it easier for students from non-European countries to study abroad in Europe for their university studies. As a result of the increased emphasis on students to participate in study abroad, the importance of investigating the effects and experiences of studying abroad has become more apparent.

In an age of ever-increasing accountability, universities need to be able to provide evidence to support the programs they offer in a variety of different ways. My review of the findings from existing research shows that study abroad positively influences students’ attitudes toward different cultures, an increased openness to diversity, and a reduction in levels of prejudice. Although these gains have been replicated in several studies, very little research has been conducted to explore the influence of study abroad on students’ spiritual development. “While higher education continues to put a lot of emphasis on test scores, grades, credits, and degrees, it has increasingly come to neglect its students’ ‘inner’ development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and of self-understanding” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 2). Inner development, or character development, is an important aspect of the purpose of higher education.

**Statement of Problem**

Much of the recent focus on the purpose of higher education has been directed toward the development of professional skills in order for college graduates to become more marketable and secure a job. Although attainment of technical and professional skills has been a part of higher
education for quite some time, developing students’ character has been an essential part of higher education for far longer. It is essential that universities retain the important purpose of developing character along with developing professional and technical skills. Although attainment of professional and technical skills is becoming increasingly central to the curriculum, universities have lost focus on developing students’ character. One aspect of character development that should be nurtured by higher education is student spiritual and meaning-making development.

With the rise of the internet and other technological advances, as well as the rise of multinational corporations, globalization has influenced the focus of higher education. Many higher education institutions in the United States claim to educate students for a global world; however, little reform has actually taken place in the United States to prepare students for an ever-increasing globalized society (Sidhu, 2006). Elaborating on this point, Sidhu (2006) noted that despite claims by various institutions in the United States about the progress in educating students for a global world, “the internationalization of curricula remains a poorly conceptualized and insufficiently funded area” (p. 78). Higher education in the United States could do more to respond to globalization.

Study abroad, according to Astin et al. (2011), is designed to assist “students [to] develop an understanding of and appreciation for other cultures and peoples, broaden their horizons, and recognize the importance of thinking globally and of becoming more world-centric in their outlook by challenging the limited perspective of nationalism and ethnocentrism” (p. 145). Furthermore, in their study examining spirituality and religiousness of students, Astin et al. indicated that studying abroad promoted students’ spiritual development by enhancing students’ ecumenical worldview. Despite the significant findings from the study by Astin et al., it remains
the sole study exploring the influence of study abroad on student spirituality. Questions remain about how study abroad might influence student spirituality and what practices could be implemented before, during, or after the study abroad experience to enhance this influence on spirituality. The research in this area is almost nonexistent. In addition to gaining insight into how and why an experience studying abroad might influence students’ spirituality, research in this area could provide valuable insight to better prepare students studying abroad in order to make the most of their experience.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore how a sample of college students described the influence of their study abroad experience on their spirituality. It was expected that, through a better understanding of how these students described the influence of study abroad on their spirituality, insight would be gained into how an experience studying abroad might influence students’ spirituality. Specifically, this collective case study investigated what types of spiritually-related activities, if any, these students sought while abroad, and what influence these activities had on their spiritual and meaning-making development. Additionally, this study investigated differences in how these students enacted their spirituality after returning to the United States, and what types of university-administered activities occurred before, during, or after the study abroad experience that influenced students’ spirituality.

**Research Questions**

This study investigated the following main research question: How do students describe the influence of study abroad on their spirituality?

Additionally, the following research sub-questions helped to guide the design of the study:
a) What experiences while studying abroad do students describe as influential on their spirituality?

b) How do students describe the influence of participating in spiritually-related experiences while abroad on their spirituality?

c) What sorts of university-sanctioned study abroad-related activities do students describe as influencing their spirituality?

d) How do students enact their spirituality after returning to the United States from their study abroad experience?

e) What differences in how these students enacted their spirituality occurred after returning to the United States?

Research Design Overview

This study’s research design utilized qualitative methods to attempt to answer research questions related to how students describe the influence of study abroad on their spirituality. I elected to design this research study as a collective case study as described by Stake (1995). According to Stake (1995), a collective case study is designed so cross-analysis between cases can be made. Each case was designed to investigate a single participant. Individual semi-structured interviews with each participant were utilized to investigate the experiences of students participating in study abroad programs. Prolonged exposure to each participant was achieved through a series of interviews. Individual interviews took place before departure, during the study abroad experience, and after each participant returned to the United States. In total, I investigated six cases for unique characteristics within each case and common themes between cases.
This study was situated in a constructivist research paradigm because the focal point of the inquiry was on how the participants constructed meaning and understanding about the influence of study abroad on their spirituality (Creswell, 2003; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Furthermore, this research study focused on the emic account of reality, in other words the participant’s account of reality. The goal of research that utilizes a constructivist paradigm, as described by Creswell (2003), is to “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” and “focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (p. 8).

**Delimitations**

Only students who participated in a short-term study abroad experience were included in this study. The length of study abroad experiences can lead to different development gains (McKeown, 2009). Focusing only on short-term experiences gave each participant a comparable experience with regard to length of study abroad experience. Additionally, only those who were BGSU students were permitted to participate in this study. As another way to bound this study, I wanted participants to come from a similar educational context.

**Significance of the Study**

The rationale for this study was to understand new ways to develop students’ character. This research study derived from my personal experiences studying abroad and the influence studying abroad had on my spirituality. This study sought to gain new knowledge of how studying abroad can be influential in spiritual development by exploring other students’ experiences studying abroad. Ultimately, this study sought to understand new ways to develop the character of students through identifying possible influences of studying abroad on student spirituality.
Exploring the spiritual experiences of students who have participated in a study abroad program shed light on a relatively unexplored area of student spiritual development. In searching for college activities that lead to positive spiritual growth, Astin et al. (2011) identified study abroad to be one such activity. This study explored the topic further, examining the experiences of students before, during, and after their study abroad trip. Understanding how a student has been impacted by a study abroad experience in a spiritual manner may aid practitioners to better prepare and support students traveling abroad. This study uncovered new ways universities can better utilize study abroad programs to enhance the character development of their students.

**Researcher**

At the time of completing this dissertation, I am in my fifth year in a doctoral program in Higher Education Administration. Furthermore, I have eight years of experience working directly with students in various student affairs functional areas. Raised as a Roman Catholic, I am still an active participant in the church and I believe spirituality is an important aspect to investigate. During my doctoral program, I focused several course projects, one class, and one ongoing research project on the topic of religion and spirituality. Furthermore, my cognate while in the doctoral program was International Higher Education, exploring other countries’ systems of higher education.

During my time as a doctoral student, I studied abroad for two months during the summer between my first and second year in the doctoral program. I spent one month in Tours, France studying at a French language institute and living in a residence hall with American and International students. Following the month in France, I spent my second month abroad studying culture and media in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. While in Burkina, I lived with a host family
and attended class with fellow American students. I recognize that my study abroad experience was significantly influential on my spirituality. Moreover, I acknowledge that my experiences influenced the design of this study.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

Spirituality and religion are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes distinguished as two very different ideas altogether. Religion, as described by Love (2001), “is a shared system of beliefs, principles, or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of supernatural power or powers regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe” (p. 8). Spirituality, as explained by Parks (2000) is a way to describe the human longing to talk about meaning, moral purpose, transcendence, wholeness, and the capacity to love. As described by many theorists and authors, spirituality is about how we make meaning and purpose in our lives (Tisdell, 2003). Spirituality, for this study, is understood as meaning-making. Meaning-making is described 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).

For this dissertation, study abroad will be defined as a credit-bearing study program that takes place in at least one country other than the United States. McKeown (2009) defined studying abroad as “an academic experience, whether short term (as short as 1 week) or longer (up to a full academic year), during which students physically leave the United States to engage in college study, cultural interaction, and more in the host country” (p. 11). Similarly, Hoffa and Pearson (1997) defined study abroad as an overseas study program for undergraduate that is credit-bearing.

There are several instances in this dissertation that I refer to a supreme deity or god. The participants also referred to “God” in our conversations and some of those instances are reflected
in the final manuscript. The “G” is capitalized when a participant or I refer to a specific God. For example, “I went to the cathedral and asked God to help me get through this.” The “g” is not capitalized when a participant or I refer to a higher power or deity in a more general sense. For example, “I think that there may be a god but also that there might not be and I can’t know.”
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore how a sample of college students described the influence of their study abroad experience on their spirituality. To better inform this study, this chapter begins with a review of the literature on character development in the college setting. Next, a review of literature is offered on spirituality in higher education. Additionally, the current literature is reviewed regarding the factors that influence spirituality, spiritual development, and spiritual practices. Because this study explored the influence of study abroad on spirituality, a review of literature on study abroad is offered to present information on the constructs, definition, and educational outcomes of study abroad. Narrowing the focus of the study, a review of the literature on the influence of study abroad on spirituality is given to explore the intersection of globalization and spirituality. Finally, this chapter explores where this study fits within the current research and what knowledge this study potentially contributes.

Character Development

Character development has been a part of higher education since its inception. According to Dalton and Henck (2004), “American higher education has always been deeply invested in the development of character as an outcome of the college experience” (p. 4). Gumport (2001) posited that a university must cultivate citizenship and develop students’ character. A student’s character involves an ability to discern right from wrong, ethical from unethical, and moral from immoral. Regardless of field of study, all institutions should commit to a curriculum that develops professional and personal ethics. A society needs to be developed, maintained, and advanced by ethical and morally-sound individuals. This claim is supported by Earnest Boyer’s (1987) own declaration when he stated, the world needs “well-informed, inquisitive, open-minded young people who are both productive and reflective, seeking answers to life’s most
important questions…who not only pursue their own personal interests but are also prepared to fulfill their social and civic obligations” (p 7). Furthermore, Boyer (1987) argued that “it is during the undergraduate experience, perhaps more than at any other time, that these essential qualities of mind and character are refined” (p. 7). With regard to the focus of higher education, in addition to equipping students with career skills and knowledge, many have argued that higher education should also focus on the character development of students to be active citizens and ethical and moral leaders (Boyer, 1987; Dalton & Henck, 2004; Newman, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). For example, Kuh and Umbach (2004) stated that “the collegiate experience was intended to shape students’ attitudes and values as much as to stretch their intellect and expand their knowledge of the world (p. 37). To better understand the idea of developing character as a major focus of higher education, the literature related to character will be reviewed to offer a better understanding of the term, current research on the topic, and the role of character in higher education.

**Defining Character**

A review of the current literature revealed several different but related definitions of character and character development. This assertion is highlighted by Strange’s (2004) evaluation of the complexity of narrowing the definition of character development. Strange noted that “the construct of character has been defined variously in the literature, sometimes focusing on the components of structures of moral reasoning and functioning, sometimes measuring the character-related behavioral outcomes of various educational interventions, and other times identifying those admirable traits and virtues marking persons of good repute” (p. 29). An example of measuring the character-related behavioral outcomes of various educational interventions is highlighted in the work of Astin and antonio (2000). In their work on character,
Astin and Antonio defined character as “the values and behavior as reflected in the ways we interact with each other and in the moral choices we make on a daily basis” (p. 56). Using this definition, Astin and Antonio developed six outcome measures to determine if character development occurred in students. These six outcomes included civic responsibility, cultural awareness and sensitivity, volunteerism, importance of raising a family, religious beliefs and convictions, and understanding of others (p. 4). The outcomes determining character development touch on many important aspects. Incorporated in these outcomes is a connection to the community, an aspect of respecting diversity, service, family, religion/spirituality, and understanding. Upon the review of literature on character development, religion/spirituality seem to continually emerge as a common theme. Focusing on the components of moral reasoning, Berkowitz and Fekula (1999) defined character development “as the growth of those aspects of the individual that represent his or her ethical worth, including behavior, cognition, affect, values, personality, identity, and skills that are not moral themselves but support moral functioning” (p. 18). This definition focuses attention on the behaviors that lead to moral and ethical actions.

Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) described character development in terms of moral and civic competencies. In their study of universities’ practices to develop moral and civic responsibilities, they identified five common competencies that the universities utilized to develop character (p. 53):

1. Self Awareness or self-knowledge; understanding of the relationship between the self and the community

2. Awareness of and willingness to take responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions for others and society
(3) Informed and responsible involvement with relevant communities

(4) Pluralism; cultural awareness and respect; ability to understand the values of one’s own and other cultures

(5) Appreciation of the global dimensions of many issues

This study from Colby et al. (2003) did not identify spirituality or religiousness as a trait of character development at the universities they studied. However, as discussed later, spirituality involves a sense of interconnectedness between oneself and the community. Several of the common competencies that Colby et al., identified seemingly contributed to the creation of a sense of interconnectedness.

In his own review of literature on character development, Strange (2004) offered his evaluation of the various list of qualities that describe character by noting that character can be framed “as a function of personal identity, including one’s attitudes, values, beliefs, and abilities; how it relates to others; and toward what ends one is committed and one acts” (p. 31). Similarly, these various descriptions of character provided offer slightly different perspectives on the term, yet lead to an understanding that character tends to be a positive and worthy trait to develop.

**Developing Character**

Research has demonstrated that there are a number of different ways that higher education might develop a student’s character. After a review of current research on influences of character development, Kuh and Umbach (2004) asserted that “character development is enhanced by taking part in a variety of educationally purposeful activities” (p. 38). Astin and antonio (2004) noted that “what students do while in college and the kind of curricular and co-curricular experience they have is what makes the greatest difference in students’ character development (p. 61).
In their study examining the activities and experiences that contributed to character development, Kuh and Umbach (2004) utilized the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data to investigate possible influences of character development. Among the activities that were closely linked with developing character, Kuh and Umbach found that community service related to a course, volunteerism, the frequency with which students are exposed to diversity in the classroom, or talking with students who are different than them, were all likely to contribute to character development.

In another similar study, Astin and antonio (2004) assessed what sorts of college experiences develop students’ character. Their study utilized longitudinal data provided by the Higher Education Research Institute. To assess the impact of college on the development of character, Astin and antonio utilized the six outcome measures of character development to use as dependent variables. These measures included civic and social values, cultural awareness, volunteerism, importance of family, religious beliefs and convictions, and understanding of others. The results of the study indicated a number of different college experiences were critical and significant in the development of character. Astin and antonio found that the following college experiences led to character development: “exposure to interdisciplinary courses, ethnic studies, and women’s studies; participation in religious services and activities; socializing with students from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds; and participation in leadership education or training” (p. 61).

**Spirituality in Higher Education**

In most of the literature defining character, spirituality had a prominent place as a component. As a significant aspect of character, spirituality has been a fixture in American higher education since its inception. As illustrated by Earnest Boyer (1987), “The early
American college did not doubt its responsibility to educating the whole person—body, mind, and spirit” (p. 177). Developing, or as Boyer stated, educating the spirit, was and should remain a responsibility of higher education in the United States. Astin et al. (2011) argued that universities “should attend more to students’ spiritual development. Assisting more students to grow spiritually will help to create a new generation of young adults who are more caring, more globally aware, and more committed to social justice than previous generations” (p. 157). Moreover, assisting more students to grow their spirituality will prepare students to be “able to employ greater equanimity in responding to the many stresses and tensions of our rapidly changing technological society” (p. 157). Developing spirituality continues to be linked to developing character.

Although this section will focus on spirituality, it is important to understand the relationship between religion and spirituality. These two terms are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes distinguished as two very different ideas altogether. Up until the mid-1960s, religion played a pivotal role in the student experience at many institutions. With the expansion of higher education and the societal changes that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, many universities distanced themselves from any religious identity. Although most students acknowledge membership in a religion, most public institutions dissociate themselves from this aspect of students’ identity (Astin et al., 2011).

Many scholars have offered varying descriptions and definitions of both religion and spirituality. This section of the literature review will offer various descriptions of spirituality to ground this study in the current literature. This section includes a comparative examination between spirituality and other related terms, such as religion and faith. Included in this review will be an overview of Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development to help understand one perspective
of development along the lines of spirituality. Finally, current research will be reviewed that identified possible influences on spiritually.

**Understanding Spirituality, Religion, and Faith**

There are many different ways to understand spirituality. Tisdell (2003) stated that spirituality is an elusive topic with differing definitions across individuals. Many authors have distinguished spirituality from religion, as two different, yet sometimes interrelated terms. Although most Americans consider religion as their primary vehicle to practice spirituality, not all adhere to religious beliefs or practices. As Love (2001) stated, “Spirituality and spiritual development are inherent in all people, and not just ‘religious’ people” (p. 14). Belief in God is not necessary for an individual to seek meaning and purpose in life. Pargament (1997), who has extensively explored the psychology of religion and spirituality, noted that spirituality and religion develop across the lifespan, are inherently social-psychological, and many of the norms of any culture are rooted in religious perspectives. In their review of psychological literature defining religion and spirituality, Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) found that modern understandings of religion have changed in recent years. Regarding the literature on religion and spirituality, Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott noted that “Traditionally broad and balanced characterizations of religiousness and spirituality are giving way to narrower and more polarized depictions” (p. 897). Moreover, religion has been characterized as negative, described using a narrowly defined construct, and depicted as external and institutionalized, whereas spirituality is represented as positive, personal, relational, and functional (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). This distinction is prevalent in much of the recent literature on spirituality and religion.

Religion, as described by Love (2001), “is a shared system of beliefs, principles, or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of supernatural power or powers regarded as
creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe” (p. 8). Similarly, Astin et al. (2011) noted that religion “involves devotion to, and practice of, some kind of faith tradition” and usually includes “membership in the community of fellow believers and participation in the rituals of the faith” (p. 83). In a slightly different take on defining religion, Fromm (1950) was careful to differentiate what he described as the narrow western perspective of religion and other religions that do not worship only one god or any god at all. In *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Fromm defined religion as “any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion” (p. 29). Moreover, Fromm contended that all people have a religion, perhaps not a religion aimed at a mystical being, but at least a religion aimed to ‘worship’ something greater than themselves (e.g., money, sex, fame).

Fromm identified two types of religion, authoritarian and humanistic. According to Fromm, the authoritarian types of religion and religious experience can be described as “the surrender to a power transcending man” (p. 43). In this distinction, Fromm noted that an individual’s obedience to a higher power is an essential element of authoritarian types of religion. Additionally, according to Fromm, God is considered to be an all knowing and an all-powerful being. Another element of authoritarian types of religion is the acknowledgement that the god-figure has supreme power and is a symbol of power and force. Alternatively, Fromm considered humanistic religion to be “centered around man and his strength. Man must develop his power of reason in order to understand himself, his relationships to his fellow men and his position in the universe” (p. 44). The prevailing mood in humanistic religions, as Fromm described, is that of joy, whereas the authoritarian religious mood is sorrow and guilt.

Pargament (1999) defined spirituality as the “search for the sacred” (p. 12). Elaborating on this definition, Hill, et al. (2000) described spirituality as the “feelings, thoughts, experiences,
and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred” (p. 66). In this definition, “the term ‘search’ refers to attempts to identify, articulate, maintain, or transform. Whereas the term ‘sacred’ refers to a divine being, divine object, Ultimate reality, or Ultimate Truth as perceived by the individual” (p. 66). Regarding religion, Hill et al. defined religion as a search for the sacred and “the means and methods (e.g., rituals or prescribed behaviors) of the search that receive validation and support from within an identifiable group of people” (p. 66). Comparing these two definitions, Hill et al. claimed that both religion and spirituality are understood as a search for the sacred, with religion having an additional caveat. The added qualification, as explained by Hill et al., is that the behaviors or rituals associated with the search require validation and support from an identifiable group. Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) noted that these two definitions are broad enough to avoid a polarizing view of religion and “broad enough to include the good and the bad of religious life. Religious paths and goals include the noble as well as the nefarious” (p. 20).

Within the literature on religion and spirituality, the use of the term faith is sometimes utilized and related to both religion and spirituality. Fowler (1981), one of the first theorists to provide insight into the spiritual development of students, and whose theory has been utilized by college student personnel, used the term faith instead of religion or spirituality. Although many different terms might be used in various sources, an understanding of how spirituality is defined in this study is necessary. Fowler’s (1981) theory of faith development characterizes the phenomenon of faith as something that is very similar to how spirituality has been defined by other theorists. Faith, as explained by Fowler, “is not always religious in its content or context,” but it is a way to find meaning, and a way for a person to see “him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (p. 4). Moreover, Parks (2000),
building on the work of Fowler and others, also distinguished faith from religion, noting that faith goes further than religious belief. “Faith is more adequately recognized as the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience” (Parks, 2000, p. 7). Ultimately, faith has to do with finding meaning and purpose in life. The use of faith by Fowler and Parks helps to inform how faith is similar to spirituality because spirituality, as defined by many others in this review, involves seeking meaning and purpose in life.

Spirituality, as explained by Parks (2000), is an experience to satisfy the human longing for ways to talk about meaning, moral purpose, transcendence, wholeness, the capacity to love, and the spirit (or Spirit). This definition is somewhat similar to Pargament’s (1999) understanding of spirituality. Pargament described spirituality as the search for the sacred, or in other words, the desire to identify, articulate, maintain, seek out, or transform a divine being, divine object, ultimate truth, or ultimate reality. In his work on spiritually integrated psychotherapy, Pargament (2007) suggested utilizing spirituality in therapy to help clients make meaning of the disparate elements in their lives. As described by many theorists and authors, spirituality is about how we make meaning and purpose in our life (Tisdell, 2003). Illustrating this point, Parks (2000) explained that meaning-making is the Activity of composing a sense of connections among things: a sense of pattern, order, form, and significance. To be human is to seek coherence and correspondence…to want to be oriented to one’s surroundings…to desire relationship among the disparate elements of existence. (p. 19)
The connections or patterns that are formed between things create a sense of meaning that can be very significant. As Parks (2000) stated, it is in our human nature to seek out these patterns. For this study, spirituality will be understood as meaning-making.

**Spiritual Development**

Public institutions of higher education in the United States generally distance themselves from meddling in the spiritual development of college students, compared with other aspects of character development. Although spiritual development has been explored extensively in the last twenty years (Astin, et al., 2011; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005; Love & Talbot, 1999; Parks, 2000; Small, 2011; Speck, 2005; Strange, 2001), universities, for a variety of reasons, have tended to shy away from directly engaging in activities that would intentionally enhance students’ spiritual development. As Love and Talbot (1999) stated, in regards to spiritual development, “A void has existed on campus and in academe…There are few places to talk about these topics other than religious studies programs and campus ministry offices, which can be narrow avenues for discussing issues of spirituality” (p. 361).

Spiritual development is not often discussed by administrators on the public campus compared with other issues of development. “While higher education continues to put a lot of emphasis on test scores, grades, credits, and degrees, it has increasingly come to neglect its students’ ‘inner’ development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and of self-understanding” (Astin, et al., 2011, p. 2). Especially at universities with a liberal education curriculum, the institutional mission to produce well-rounded graduates would likely warrant the university to do more to develop a student’s spirituality. Although higher education once “honored the relationship between the intellectual and the spiritual,… in the ensuing period postsecondary has witnessed a distinct dividing of the
waters, with things of the spirit receding to one bank and those of the intellect to the other” (Strange, 2001, p. 60).

Similar to other forms of development, the spiritual development of college students and young adults has been explored and explained by various theorists. Small (2011) noted that “religion, faith, and spirituality matter significantly during the college years, and higher education institutions could do much to facilitate students’ development in these areas (p. 95).

Spiritual development has been studied and explained several ways. There have been several researchers who have established religious and spiritual measures to capture the spiritual growth of participants. For example, Astin et al. (2011) utilized spiritual and religious measures to determine the change of spiritual growth throughout college. Employing a different approach, Fowler (1981) and Parks (1986) utilized stage theories to explain the faith development of college students.

In *Cultivating the Spirit*, Astin et al. (2011) offered their findings on “a seven-year study of how students change during the college years and the role college plays in facilitating the development of their spirituality qualities (p. 1). The purpose of their longitudinal study, according to Astin et al., was to document how students change religiously and spiritually during the four years of college. The study included five measures of spiritual development and five measures of religious development. The five measures of spiritual development included spiritual quest, equanimity, ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview. Spiritual quest describes “student’s interest in searching for meaning and purpose” (p. 20). Equanimity describes “the extent to which the student feels at peace or is centered, is able to find meaning in times of hardship, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of his/her life” (p. 20). Ethic of caring involves a student’s willingness to help others, and
charitable involvement includes participation in community service and helping others with problems. Ecumenical worldview involves measuring an interest in different religions, seeking to understand cultures, and belief that all life is interconnected (p. 21). The five measures of religious qualities are religious commitment, religious engagement, religious/social conservatism, religious skepticism, and religious struggle.

James Fowler published his *Stages of Faith* in 1981, building on the work of Kohlberg, Erikson, and Piaget. Fowler presented a six-stage approach to explaining how individuals develop in faith maturity and how faith develops over a lifetime. Although stage theories typically cannot be applied to everyone, they do serve to help illuminate how most people develop in a given area. Stage development theories are usually arranged in a hierarchical order and stages cannot be skipped or completed out of order. Fowler’s model is no different and he begins the model at Stage zero, ages zero to two years. Because traditional college-age individuals are usually 17 through 23 years old, focused attention will be given to Fowler’s stages three and four.

Like many other stage theories, a major shift occurs when an individual starts to think critically and question existing thoughts, values, and orientations. Fowler’s stage theory is similar because critical analysis of faith and beliefs starts to transition the individual from stage three to stage four. In stage three, “a person has an ‘ideology,’ a more or less consistent clustering of values and beliefs, but he or she has not objectified it for examination and in a sense is unaware of having it” (p. 173). People in stage three acknowledge the values and beliefs in their lives and apply them often to their actions and in their conversations. Many college students find themselves in stage three when they come to college already having a set of values and faith derived from authority figures in their lives, usually parents, clergy, or friends. Some
people never move past stage three because of circumstances that never motivate transition, individual ability that limits the capability to think complexly about their faith, or unwillingness to critically contemplate their faith. Although some students will never move beyond this stage of Fowler’s model, some students will progress to stage four.

Individuals whose development is characterized by stage four in Fowler’s (1981) model often experience discomfort with their new situation. Fowler explained that they are faced with certain unavoidable tensions:

- Individuality versus being defined by a group or group membership;
- Subjectivity and the power of one’s strongly felt but unexamined feelings versus objectivity and the requirement of critical reflection;
- Self-fulfillment or self-actualization as a primary concern versus services to and being for others;
- The question of being committed to the relative versus struggle with the possibility of an absolute. (p. 182)

Students experiencing this shift are also experiencing many other new realities in various aspects of their lives, not just in their faith development. Because students are eager to claim critical reflection regarding their faith, they often do not realize that their critical analysis of faith was actually only a shift to conform to their new social group. As stated previously, Fowler’s model only predicts stages that a typical individual might progress through on their journey of faith development. Understanding how students might develop in their faith or spirituality, helps to understand possible ways to encourage spiritual growth and reflection.

Parks (1986, 2000, 2011) explored the role higher education plays in the development of faith in young adults and presented four periods of faith development. Building on the work of Fowler (1981), Parks focused attention toward the faith development that occurs during young adulthood and the role higher education plays in the development of faith for students. Although
similar to Fowler’s model, Parks suggested that her model differed because she did not consider faith development to be linear. Rather she thought faith was more accurately described as a spiral model that is more fluid than Fowler’s linear model which does not allow for backward movement between stages. Parks posited that her model accounts for students to transition between stages by first moving backward and then progressing forward. Parks’ model of faith development accounts includes several increasingly complex stages. Within her model, she also identifies three forms of development that help describe how an individual is developing in different areas throughout each stage. The developmental forms included in this model are knowing, dependence, and community.

Parks (2011) described knowing as the relationship of the self to authority. Utilizing Perry’s (1968) nine shifts in students’ relationship to knowledge, Parks consolidated them to create five forms of knowing that are useful in “interpreting the potential and vulnerability of emerging adults” (p. 71). These five forms of knowing included authority-bound/dualistic, unqualified relativism, probing commitment, tested commitment, and convictional commitment. Parks noted that “this shift in thinking affects not only cognition but also our feelings and relationships” (p. 95). Feelings cannot be “ignored in the life of meaning-making and faith (Parks, 2011, p. 97). Therefore, Parks argued, “Tracing transformations in our ways of depending is one means of observing and describing especially salient features of emerging adulthood and the affective dimensions of the development of faith” (p. 97). The second form of development included in her model is forms of dependence. The five forms of dependence include dependent, counter-dependent, fragile inner-dependence, confident inner-dependence, and inner-dependence. The final form of development involves community. Parks noted that “our location and social milieu (including cyberspace) play a central role in the formation of
meaning, purpose, and faith (p. 115). Additionally, Parks suggested that faith is a relational activity that is “embodied and shaped not within the individual alone but in the comfort and challenges of the company we keep” (p. 116). Included in forms of community development are conventional, diffuse, mentoring community, self-selected class/group, and openness to others.

Parks (2000) discussed student experiences that promoted spiritual development. “Our location, social context, and general surroundings play a central role the formation of meaning and faith” (Parks, 2000, p. 88). Parks stressed the importance of membership in a community to facilitate spiritual development. Membership in a community usually involves relationships with others. As students enter new communities (i.e., college), they meet others who begin to challenge previously held beliefs. “Experiencing an other (someone who was previously ‘them’) who contradicts assumptions about who we are and who they are may be a first step in questioning familiar social arrangements” (Parks, 2000, p. 92). Parks indicated that as students face multiple, conflicting perspectives, they begin to sort through different realities to make meaning.

A person begins to seek an adequate pattern of meaning, a place of commitment within a relativized world. It is here that a new network of belonging plays a key role, as it serves to confirm the self in composing a new (and sometimes hard won) faith. (p. 93)

There are many new communities offered to college students—within the classroom, in the residence hall, in a student organization, or through an off-campus experience (e.g., community service trip, or study abroad experience).

Although Fowler and Parks’ stages of faith development offer insight into the spiritual development of college students, there are some limitations to their models. Tisdell (2003) suggested that although there are many people who fit into one of Fowler’s stages, human
development is perhaps not as linear as Fowler suggested. Some people feel a “need to spiral back for a time, and revisit elements of our lives at earlier stages” (p. 99). Fowler’s stage development theory also has been criticized because his model holds a Western, Christian bias (Small, 2008). In her review of Fowler’s model, Small (2008) noted that “Fowler does not consistently maintain the separation between his own religious affiliation, liberal Protestantism, and universality” (p. 40). Furthermore, Small (2008) suggested that several stages within Fowler’s model have an “inherent Western cultural biases within them” (p.41). Although Fowler’s model has been criticized by others, it continues to be the prominent work in the area of faith development. Other scholars, such as Parks (1986) and Small (2008), have acknowledged that Fowler’s work was useful and adapted it into their own models of faith development. Regarding Parks’ model, many scholars found the integration of affective, social, and cognitive processes in her discussion of faith development to be useful (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). However, regarding Fowler’s and Parks’ theories, Watt (2003) argued “there is little reference in those theories to how ethnic culture might influence faith development” (p. 34). Watt also suggested that spiritual traditions in the African American community, including embracing spirits of ancestors and speaking in tongues, “are not dependent on cognition. In fact, cognition might prevent one from receiving the knowledge that comes through feeling” (pp. 33-34). Reflecting on the critiques of both Fowler and Parks, it is important to consider the role of culture within the realm of spirituality.

**Spirituality and Culture**

Spirituality does not exist in a vacuum. It is important to acknowledge the cultural context in which an individual lives and the cultural norms that the individual follows. Smith and Snell (2009) posited that it is essential to understand the religious and spiritual lives of
individuals “within the broader context of the larger cultural worlds in which they live and which
they use to construct their own lives” (p. 33). Several researchers have suggested that culture
influences how spirituality is practiced, lived, and understood (Tisdell, 2003; Stewart & Lozano,
2009). In order to better understand the spiritual lives of college students, it is critical to
recognize that college students’ religious and spiritual “assumptions, experiences, outlooks,
beliefs, and practices do not exist in compartmentalized isolation from the larger cultural
worldviews and lived experiences but are often related to and powerfully shaped by them”
(Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 33).

Tisdell (2003) suggested that culture and spirituality are interconnected and
interdependent. Through increased global mobility, Tisdell suggested that “we are increasingly
affected by different cultures and ways of being in the world, thus continually changing the
cultural fabric of North America, as well as our understanding of our own culture” (p.163).
Further, Tisdell posited that as a result of global mobility, there is also increased contact with
different spiritual and religious traditions. The increased exposure and interaction with others
who are culturally, religiously, and spiritually different provides more opportunities to have
cross-cultural learning opportunities (Tisdell, 2003). The opportunities of “‘crossing-culture’
can come in a variety of forms that can affect both our spirituality in the way we ‘claim a sacred
face’ and our cultural understanding” (p. 164). This acknowledgment by Tisdell that culture has
a profound influence on spirituality is particularly relevant for this current study.

Stewart and Lozano (2009) explored the intersection of race, culture, and religion.
Religion and spirituality, as suggested by Stewart and Lozano, are influenced by the race and
ethnicity of the individual. They posited that “there is an inextricable link among race, culture,
and religion in various cultural traditions” (p. 24). Depending on race and culture, being
Christian, can mean different things to the individual. For example, Stewart and Lozano provided an example that illustrated this point:

Race/culture and religion are deeply interconnected and intersected, such that from a cultural standpoint, being a Christian is not solely a matter of fellowship with others who share spiritual or theological perspectives. Rather, the fellowship of Christians includes, perhaps more important for some people of color, the sharing of racial, ethnic, and cultural perspectives as well. (p. 26)

Based on the work of Stewart and Lozano, only focusing on the spiritual and religious aspects of an individual’s identity ignores important facets of the identity that influences and intersects with the meaning-making processes. Stewart and Lozano noted that culture and race may influence how an individual practices and understands his or her faith.

Influences of Spirituality

Astin et al. (2011) found that their data revealed several types of student experiences that promoted students’ spiritual development (p. 145). According to Astin et al., service learning, or community service performed as part of a course, was found to be a “powerful means of enhancing students’ spiritual questing, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview” (p. 146). Service learning provides students an opportunity to literally transform theory into practice. Moreover, service learning has been seen as a powerful learning tool because it helps students translate their goals into action (Astin et al., 2011). Similar to service learning, community service was found to have even greater effects on levels of equanimity, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview. Community service not associated with a course also had positive implications for other aspects of student development. Another positive influence of spirituality was found to be charitable giving. This was found to enhance every measure of spiritual
development. Astin et al. noted that “one of the surest ways to enhance the spiritual development of undergraduate students is to encourage them to engage in almost any form of charitable or altruistic activity” (p. 147).

Leadership training was also identified by Astin et al. (2011) as a powerful tool to enhance spirituality. Leadership training usually encourages participants to engage in self-reflection (Komives & Wagner, 2006). This contemplative activity involves asking students to think about their values, beliefs, and place in the community. Leadership training also involves encouraging collaboration between students to accomplish positive ends (Komives & Wagner, 2006). The reflective nature of leadership training, particularly as it relates to reflecting on values, purpose, and community, is tied very closely with many aspects of spirituality. Finally, Astin et al. (2011) indicated that their data revealed that study abroad enhanced students’ levels of equanimity, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview. Astin et al. suggested that study abroad would “inevitably expose students to people who are different from themselves” and “may well encourage them to engage in self-reflection” (p. 59).

**Study Abroad**

This study will explore the influence of study abroad on spirituality. This section of the literature review will examine the current literature on study abroad. Although a fairly common term, study abroad can have a different meanings and understandings. Usually, the term describes a student traveling to a different country for some sort of academic pursuit (McKeown, 2009). This section will also provide a review of literature of what constitutes studying abroad and the educational outcomes of studying abroad.
Defining Study Abroad

The term study abroad, or education abroad, is usually understood to mean a sort of international experience that is in some way academically related (Lewin, 2009). To ground this study in the research on study abroad, the term will clearly be defined after reviewing various perspectives. McKeown (2009) defined studying abroad as “an academic experience, whether short term (as short as 1 week) or longer (up to a full academic year), during which students physically leave the United States to engage in college study, cultural interaction, and more in the host country” (p. 11). Similarly, Hoffa and Pearson (1997) defined study abroad as an international study program for undergraduates that is credit-bearing. Moreover, McKeown adds that “regardless of the structure of the study abroad experience, its duration, or its quality, a U.S. student placed in a foreign environment must navigate through new customs and practices to accomplish everyday tasks, both basic and complex (p. 16). Norris and Steinberg (2008) described study abroad as “a holistic educational experience” that creates “opportunities to develop new academic interests, participate in academic internships, establish friendships with host country nationals, explore a new culture, expand their worldview and sense of self, as well as improve their target language skills” (p. 108). For this research, study abroad will be defined as a credit-bearing study program that takes place in a country other than the United States.

Educational Outcomes of Study Abroad

There are a variety of reasons why students choose to study abroad. Norris and Steinberg (2008) found that students are motivated to study abroad for reasons that include improving competency in a foreign language, acquiring cultural knowledge, and the opportunity to travel. In their own review of literature, Norris and Steinberg found that language acquisition was not a major motivation of students to choose to study abroad. Peterson (2003) found that the most
important reasons, as described by students, to study abroad was that it would open their eyes to
the world.

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), “most research on study abroad finds
increases in students’ intercultural awareness and tolerance despite wide programmatic variations
in kind, duration, and location (p. 316). Developing intercultural competence is an important
outcome of study abroad (Hammer, 2012). Intercultural competence, as defined by Deardorff
(2008) is the “ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations
based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 33). Deardorff conducted a
study to determine specific components of intercultural competence by surveying a panel of 23
intercultural scholars. From this study, Deardorff identified 22 unique elements of intercultural
competence that were identified by at least 80 percent of the panel. This list of compiled
elements included understanding others’ worldview, cultural self-awareness and capacity for
self-assessment, adaptability—adjustment to new cultural environment, skills to listen and
observe, and general openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures.

Study abroad was investigated by McKeown (2009) to determine what extent studying
abroad influences students’ intellectual development. McKeown described intellectual
development, or cognitive development, “as the process during which the individual actively
attempts to make sense out of her or his experience” (p. 19). Based on the results of his study,
McKeown found that “students without meaningful previous international travel experience
started off at lower intellectual development levels, but that after one semester of studying
abroad that gap had become insignificant” (p. 93). McKeown noted that those students who
have never traveled abroad might find the study abroad experience more challenging. This
challenge, according to McKeown, may result a “first time effect” or “pattern of intellectual
development that shows greater gains than those who have had considerable prior international travel” (p. 93). The first time effect has been documented as a common theme in other literature involving study abroad (McKeown, 2009).

Sutton and Rubin (2010) attempted to document the learning outcomes accrued from participation in study abroad. In their study, Sutton and Rubin compared several outcomes between study abroad participants and non-participants from 16 different public universities within a single state system. Sutton and Rubin found that students who studied abroad significantly exceeded non-participants in the following learning outcomes: functional knowledge, knowledge of world geography, knowledge of cultural relativism, and knowledge of global interdependence. Functional knowledge includes a student’s ability to confidently navigate daily routines in the host country. This includes the student’s ability to be attuned to cultural norms, customs, and traditions, and their ability to appropriately interact with locals from the host country. Regarding global interdependence, Sutton and Rubin found that students who studied abroad tended to be more globally interdependent prior to their study abroad experience. Accounting for this predisposition, studying abroad still positively influenced a student’s knowledge of global interdependence. Knowledge of cultural relativism, according to Sutton and Rubin, “is the cognitive realization that one ought not judge other cultures or respond to individuals from those cultures based on one’s own ethnocentric values and practices” (p. 78). Supported by their findings evaluating the various learning outcomes of study abroad, Sutton and Rubin concluded that “studying abroad does add value to a student’s academic achievements” (p. 77).
Influence of Study Abroad on Spirituality

The intersection of spiritual development and globalization has been examined from several perspectives across academic disciplines. The topic of religious pluralism has been elaborated on extensively by a number of different researchers. Nash (2001) explored this topic in depth and indicated that creating dialogue between students of different religions has led to increasing religious pluralism. Preparing students to meet the needs of an ever-changing world in a time of intense globalization requires more than teaching only technical skills. It requires preparing students to interact with people around the world. Religious pluralism and religious literacy will go far in creating collaborative and inclusive working relationships with coworkers, clients, employers, and customers around the world. Although Nash (2003) and Astin et al. (2011) provided several ways to increase religious pluralism or ecumenical worldview, research is limited on the influence of study abroad on religious pluralism.

Study abroad has been listed as a powerful learning tool by several scholars (Carlson, Useem, & Yachimouwicz, 1990; Hser, 2005). The research conducted on different aspects of study abroad has been shown to increase a number of characteristics regarding students’ attitudes toward different cultures, openness to diversity, and reduced levels of prejudice. Although these gains have been replicated in several studies, very little research has been conducted to explore gains in student spiritual development. The influence of study abroad on student spirituality is almost absent from both the spirituality literature and the study abroad literature. As noted previously, Astin et al. (2011) found that study abroad led to some gains in spiritual and religious development. Aside from the brief mention in their report of findings, study abroad has yet to be truly investigated to determine how a studying abroad experience might encourage students to reflect about their sense of interconnectedness, meaning-making, faith, and religious practices.
Furthermore, no research has been found to indicate if and how students practiced their faith while abroad in a new cultural environment.

**Contributing to the Literature**

This dissertation study focused on the influence of study abroad on students’ spirituality. Exploring the spiritual experiences of students who have participated in a study abroad program will shed light on a relatively unexplored area of student spiritual development. Regarding college activities that lead to positive spiritual growth, Astin et al. (2011) found that study abroad led to positive spiritual development gains. This study explored the topic further, examining the experiences of students before, during, and after their study abroad trip. Understanding how a student has been influenced by a study abroad experience in either a spiritual or religious manner will aid practitioners to better prepare and support students traveling abroad. Furthermore, the study also investigated what, if any, influence encountering religious services and practices in other countries has on students’ spirituality. The desire to practice religion and spirituality abroad might lead study abroad organizers to incorporate spirituality into the pre-departure preparation. Moreover, excursions to religious sites might be increased depending on findings and accommodations of religious practices might be attended to more readily if students are shown to need and desire to worship while abroad.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

The third chapter provides an explanation of the methodology used in this research study. My epistemological perspective is provided and explained. In the next portion of the chapter, the method used to identify the sample and collect data is supplied. The data analysis procedure is also outlined. Finally, my background is provided.

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore with a sample of college students describe the influence of their study abroad experience on their spirituality. Informed by the review of literature in chapter 2, the design of the research study was established to investigate the following main research question: How do students describe the influence of study abroad on their spirituality?

Additionally, the following research sub-questions helped to guide design of the study:

a. What experiences while studying abroad do students describe as influential on their spirituality?

b. How do students describe the influence of participating in spiritually-related experiences while abroad on their spirituality?

c. What sorts of university-sanctioned study abroad-related activities do students describe as influencing their spirituality?

d. How do students enact their spirituality after returning to the United States from their study abroad experience?

e. What differences in how these students enacted their spirituality occurred after returning to the United States?
Research Paradigm

I situated this study in a constructivist research paradigm because the inquiry focused on how the participants constructed meaning about and understood the influence of study abroad on their spirituality. Furthermore, this research study focused on the emic perspective, in other words the participants’ account of reality. The goal of research that utilizes a constructivist paradigm, as described by Creswell (2003), is to “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” and “focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (p. 8).

In a constructivist study the epistemology, as explained by Creswell (2007), is a philosophical assumption that addresses the “relationship between the researcher and that being studied as interrelated, not independent” (p. 247). This study utilized a constructivist research paradigm with the researcher serving as an interpreter of the data. Epistemology “conveys philosophical assumptions about what constitutes knowledge” (Jones, et al., 2006, p. 38). All people, including the participants and me, are influenced by their own worldview and continued to impact each other throughout the data collection and distribution of findings (Jones, et al., 2006). Creswell noted that “conducting a qualitative study means that researchers try to get as close as possible to the participants being studied” (p. 18).

In this research study, the ontological assumption was that participants’ experiences shaped the nature of the study. Ontology, as defined by Jones et al. (2006), is a “set of related assumptions” that are “associated with explanations or questions about the nature or structure of reality or existence” (p. 9). Within the constructivist paradigm, Creswell (2007) described reality as subjective and constructed by the participants in the study. There is not a single reality, but rather, reality is viewed differently depending on a participant’s past experiences, values, and
Creswell (2007) also noted that constructivist researchers conduct studies with the intent of reporting the multiple realities of participants, consumers of the research, and the researcher’s own reality. These multiple realities, as Creswell (2007) described, can be seen in the multiple quotes used to support findings that represent multiple different participants in the study. For this research study, it was important to investigate and report how participants described their perspectives and experiences. Finally, Jones, et al. (2006), noted that in constructivist qualitative methods, the nature of truth is individual, rather than universal.

**Methodology**

A constructivist case study was utilized for the research design of this study. “A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case…Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). Specifically, I designed this research study as a collective case study. As described by Stake (1995), a collective case study is designed so cross-analysis between cases can be made. The collective case study approach investigates several individual cases independently to draw conclusions about each case. Our first obligation, according to Stake, is to understand each case independent of the other cases. After careful analysis of each case independent of the others, then analysis is made between cases, looking for similar themes and identifying unique characteristics of each case. A collective study requires the researcher to compare several cases within a unit of analysis (Jones, et al., 2006). The units of analysis for this research study are considered individuals who participated in a two-month study abroad experience.

The case study was an appropriate approach for this research study because the research questions posed require an investigation of how individual students describe the influence of an
experience. The influences of studying abroad on each individual’s spirituality need to be first investigated independently because each student, already individual and distinct, also has unique experiences and encounters abroad. Therefore each case was populated by a single student participating in this research study. As explained by Glesne (2006), when “several cases are studied, each is written up into a context-situated case study and then a cross-case analysis is carried out to look for patterns across” cases (p. 13).

**Methods**

This study utilized individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews to investigate the experiences of students participating in study abroad programs and how these experiences influenced their spirituality. As explained by Seidman (2006), at the root of in-depth interviewing “is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Furthermore, Seidman noted that “interviewing provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior” (p.10). In-depth interviewing was an appropriate method of data collection for this study as the essence of this study sought to gather how students described the influence of the individual study abroad experience on their spirituality. Moreover, the understanding the students’ experience and how they made meaning of the experience was especially important to this study.

**Sampling**

Sampling is “used to identify, choose, and gain access to relevant data sources from which you will generate data using your chosen methods” (Mason, 2002, p. 120). Moreover Mason (2002) noted that sampling is a very important strategic element of qualitative research which has direct implications for the findings of the study.
Regarding the size of the sample, Mason (2002) indicated that it should be established by reaching the saturation point or until the researcher has a picture of what is going on and can generate an appropriate explanation for it. Mason noted that this point is reached when the data from the interviews does not produce anything new about what is being investigated. Although reaching the saturation point one method in establishing the number of participants in a study, most researchers are faced with constraints that do not permit the time or resources to engage in this process (Mason, 2002). Among case study researchers, there is not agreement on an ideal for number of cases in a study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1994). For case study research, Creswell (2007) advised that he “would not include more than 4 or 5 case studies in a single study. This number should provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis” (p. 129). Additionally, Yin (1994) noted that if one wants a high degree of certainty when one is conducting a study involving multiple cases, the researcher should seek to have “five, six, or more replications” (p. 50).

The nature of this study required a prolonged commitment from participants. Each participant was asked to conduct an initial interview, participation while abroad, and then a follow-up interview after their study abroad experience. There were many factors that could have inhibited some participants from seeing the project to completion. To ensure adequate data is secured to reach a saturation level, I set a tentative goal of securing about 10 to 12 participants to begin the study and conduct an initial interview. My initial prediction was that about half of the participants would remain due to the eight-week commitment and international travel involved. According to Creswell (2007), five cases should be sufficient for proper cross-case analysis. Seven students initially completed the questionnaire to participate in the study.
This research study employed purposeful maximum variation as a sampling strategy. According to Creswell (2007), utilizing maximum variation sampling allows the researcher to represent diverse cases to describe multiple perspectives about the cases. This approach is not meant to increase generalizability; rather, this approach is designed to maximize cross-case variation. Typically in maximum variation sampling, researchers often seek to maximize the variation of the different aspects of each participant’s identity (e.g., race, gender, and sexual orientation). The primary aspect of identity that were the focus of variation in this study was how each participant identified their spirituality, religion, or other convictional belief system. The purpose of this research study was focused on the influence of study abroad on spirituality and not on other aspects of a student’s identity. Given the population of possible participants, representation from every major religious or convictional belief was not achievable. My initial goal was to have some variation among religious beliefs.

Secondary to religious affiliation was to maximize the study abroad destinations. Although not necessary, recruiting students studying in different global regions was preferable. According to Norris and Steinberg (2008), the language of instruction and host-country language influences the outcomes of study abroad. In their study examining the benefits of study abroad language environments, Norris and Stenberg found that, in general, studying abroad positively affects students in a number of different developmental areas. Furthermore, Norris and Steinberg found that study abroad, regardless of country destination and language of instruction, benefited students “equally well in most areas of intercultural awareness, personal growth, academic choices, and career development” (p. 126). However, they found that students who studied abroad in a non-English speaking country, yet were instructed in a mixed language classroom setting that included English and the native language, experienced greater and more
sustainable gains in cultural, personal, and career development (Norris & Steinberg, 2008). They also found that students who were studying abroad through English language-only programs were more likely to develop lasting relationships with host-country nationals with whom they live because the common language provides the student more “opportunities to engage more deeply in the other culture” (p. 126).

All participants were enrolled at Bowling Green State University and completed their study abroad in one of several different study abroad programs offered or supported by this institution. At the time of this study, BGSU offered study abroad programs in the following destinations include: Salzburg, Austria; Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; London, England; Nantes, France; Tours, France; Florence, Italy; Rome, Italy; St. Petersburg, Russia; and Alcala de Henares, Spain. BGSU also accepts transfer credits from a number of third-party study abroad programs as well as programs organized by other universities. Additionally, only students returning back to the United States within two weeks after their study abroad experience has officially ended were eligible to participate in the study. Prolonged stay in the host country beyond the official study abroad program negated qualification for the study, as it may have exposed students to other non-study abroad related experiences that might influence their spirituality. The focus of this study was on the influence of the study abroad experience. International travel is a component of the study abroad experience and should be investigated in connection with the study abroad experience, not independent of it. It is typical for students who are studying abroad to spend one to two weeks after their program has ended to engage in tourist activities within the host country and in neighboring countries. Much more than two weeks after the study abroad experience has ended, however, starts to create a substantially new international experience.
A gatekeeper from BGSU was utilized to help identify participants. The gatekeeper was a staff member from the study abroad office who assisted with the planning and coordination of each of the BGSU study abroad programs. The gatekeeper was asked to identify and recommend students who were studying abroad for at least two months during the 2012 summer term. Every individual who met this criterion at the university was invited to participate using a request for participation letter (Appendix B). Students were asked to participate by completing the initial questionnaire (Appendix D). The questionnaire was distributed to all individuals who were identified by the gatekeeper. The questionnaire included questions about religious identification, study abroad destination, and willingness to complete the research study. Included with this questionnaire was an informed consent form in compliance with the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board’s requirements for informed consent (Appendix C). Each individual completing and returning the questionnaire was asked to read and sign the informed consent form.

The initial goal was to select about 10 to 12 participants to maximize religious affiliation, represent as many different destination countries as possible, and to anticipate study attrition. However, only seven students completed the initial questionnaire and informed consent. All seven students were initially enrolled in the study. The rationale for all sampling decisions was carefully evaluated and documented in my research journal. After each participant was selected, she or he were notified and a pre-departure interview will be scheduled. Seven students completed their first pre-departure interview. One participant stopped replying to my communication shortly after our first interview and after several attempts to contact her, I removed her from the study. The other six students were enrolled for the duration of the study.
Data Collection

Six cases were utilized for this study. Each case was populated by a single participant. Prior to my initial interview with each participant, a detailed description of the study was provided to them for their review. Participants were also provided ethical guidelines that were adhered to throughout the study and an explanation of how I would protect the confidentiality of the participants. Additionally, participants were provided and asked to sign a statement of informed consent. Prior to the first interview, each participant was asked to complete an academic and demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). Students were asked to identify demographic information (i.e., gender, age, race, ethnicity, and faith background), academic information (i.e., academic status and major), and information about their study abroad experience (i.e., destination, purpose for going, prior international experiences, and length of experience).

This study utilized a staged, semi-structured interview protocol consisting of up to three separate interviews. The three-interview series, as described by Seidman (2006), “allows the interviewer and participant to plumb the experience and to place it in context” (p. 17). Seidman noted that “the first interview establishes the context of the participant’s experience,” the second “allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs,” and the “third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them” (p. 17). For this study, the first interview took place before the student traveled abroad or just after they arrived at the study abroad destination. All six participants completed a first interview. The second interview took place while the students were studying abroad. Only four participants completed the second interview. Due to extenuating circumstances an interview while two of the students were abroad was not possible. The third interview took place
shortly after the student returned from the study abroad experience. All six participants completed a final interview after their study abroad experience.

For the first interview, participants were asked to participate in a one- to two-hour, face-to-face, semi-structured interview before they departed on their study abroad experience. Semi-structured interviews are organized around a set of predetermined questions and other questions emerge from the conversation (Whiting, 2008). Each of the interviews was recorded using a digital tape recorder, and I took notes throughout each interview. During their study abroad experience, each participant was asked to participate in an online video, one- to two-hour, virtual, semi-structured interview. The questions for this interview were developed based on the data collected from the pre-departure interview. It was my hope that the second interview would encourage students to reflect on their experience while abroad and make notations of meaningful encounters. All data collected before departure and while participants were abroad from the interviews was utilized to formulate additional structured questions for the final interview that took place after students returned from their study abroad experience. After their study abroad experience was over, and the students returned to the United States, a final one- to two-hour, face-to-face, semi-structured interview was conducted.

An interview protocol was developed with three standard structured questions asked to each participant during an interview before their departure, and a set of different structured questions asked during the post-study abroad experience interview (Appendix E). The three pre-departure structured questions are:

1. How do you describe your spirituality?

2. What sorts, if any, spiritual practices have you engaged in or sought out while at college?
3. What influences your spirituality?

Three structured questions were asked during the interview that took place during the study abroad experience. The follow-up questions to the structured questions were informed, in part by, each student’s answers provided during the pre-departure interview. The structured questions that were asked to each participant while they are studying abroad are:

1. How do you describe the influence of your study abroad experience on your spirituality so far?
2. What sorts of, if any, spiritual practices have you engaged in or sought out during your studying abroad so far?
3. What sorts of university-sanctioned study abroad-related activities have you participated in?

Three structured questions were asked during the interview taking place after the study abroad experience. Similar to the previous interview, the follow-up questions to the structured questions were informed, in part by, the answers that each student provided during the previous two interviews. The structured questions that were asked to each participant after they completed their study abroad experience are:

1. How do you describe the influence of your study abroad experience on your spirituality?
2. What sorts, if any, spiritual practices did you engage in or seek out while you were studying abroad?
3. How did your study abroad experience influence your spiritual practices once you returned?
After each structured question was asked, I then asked follow-up questions to clarify what the students were saying and to seek more information about their experiences. Based on data collected from the pre-departure interview and during the interview conducted while the student was studying abroad, additional questions were developed for the post-study abroad semi-structured interview.

The approach of this study was a constructivist case study. This theoretical framework was well suited for this study because the focus of the inquiry was on participants’ construction of meaning and understanding about the influence of their study abroad experience on their spirituality. Through two face-to-face interviews and an online interview during each participant’s experience abroad, it was my hope to reduce the distance between myself and the participants. Through these interactions, the assumption that the participants and I were interrelated and not independent was reinforced. Furthermore, participants of multiple identities studying in multiple locations outside of the United States provided different perspectives of the influence of study abroad. Therefore the methods used in data collection for this study acknowledge that reality is “subjective and multiple, as seen by participants in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 17).

Confidentiality

It was my goal to ensure that confidentiality was maintained for each participant. Confidentiality, as described by Jones et al. (2006), “refers to the treatment of information that an individual has knowingly disclosed in a research relationship, with an expectation that this information will not be disclosed to unauthorized parties without consent” (p. 155). The informed consent form signed by the participants when they submitted their questionnaires was reviewed and reread during the first interview to ensure the participant understood the purpose of
the study and understood what will be done to ensure confidentiality. Each participant was provided an option to select a pseudonym in lieu of the participant’s actual name. Handling of identifiable information in the research report that was shared by the participant will be negotiated between the participant and me.

Data Analysis

All of the interviews were transcribed. Transcriptions were then coded using the open coding data analysis process. Open coding, as described by Jones et al. (2006) usually occurs as the first step of the data analysis process. It involves segmenting transcriptions into related categories of information. Jones et al., suggested that a researcher slowly reduces the number of categories by finding similarities between different categories until approximately five or six major themes appear. Because I worked with several individual cases, I initially coded each case independently. This involved constructing individual case profiles for each participant. These full case profiles are in Appendix A. Abbreviated case profiles are located in the first part of the following chapter. After the six case profiles were constructed using within-case analysis, I followed the protocol outlined by Stake (1995) for between case analyses. Utilizing Stake’s protocol, I identified themes that were common in every case, themes common between at least two cases, and themes that are unique to each case.

The constructivist ontological assumptions influenced data analysis procedures for this study through the use of “quotes and themes in words of participants and provides evidence of different perspectives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 17). The data analysis process depended greatly on the use of many quotes from each participant as the data for the research study. From these data, six themes emerged that provided insight into the influence of study abroad on students’ spirituality.
Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, Jones et al. (2006) noted that “the procedures themselves are not the criteria on which a study is deemed sound, but rather it is congruency of the theoretical perspectives, methodology, and method” (p.124). Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that trustworthiness of a qualitative research study is important to evaluate its worth. They noted that trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and provided suggestions how to establish each.

Credibility

Credibility, or the confidence in the findings, will be addressed through a number of different methods. Utilizing suggested methods of addressing credibility as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1989), I employed the following techniques to ensure credibility: member checks, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and progressive subjectivity.

Member checks. Member checks ensure transcripts and themes are accurate and capture the meaning the participant was communicating (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggested that conducting member checks “is the single most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 239). According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), member checks occur when “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those groups from whom the data were originally obtained” (p. 3696). Member checks were conducted in this research study with all six participants. I sent the completed transcripts to each participant. The participant informed me of any changes that ought to be made. Every participant received a copy of their case profile and the entire fourth chapter. The fourth chapter contains themes and conclusions. Participants offered feedback on these drafts. I also met with every participant, either face to face or via a phone conversation to discuss the findings. All
participants confirmed that my findings and conclusion reflected an accurate interpretation of how their study abroad experience influenced their spirituality.

**Peer debriefing.** Peer debriefing was also utilized to ensure credibility of the findings. Similar to member checking, peer debriefing involves working with one or two individuals not acquainted with the research project. These individuals read the transcripts, codes, themes and recommendations to ensure the data accurately informs the themes and recommendations (Creswell, 2007). Two different individuals served as peer debriefers. The first offered feedback and review throughout the entire data analysis process. The second debriefer read every transcript, themes, and recommendations to ensure the data accurately informed the findings.

**Prolonged engagement.** Prolonged engagement involves developing rapport and trust with participants through extended interaction (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). As a result of the development of rapport and trust, Cohen and Crabtree (2006) indicated that a relationship is established facilitating “understanding and co-construction of meaning” between researcher and participant (p. 369). The final interview occurred about three to four months after the initial contact with the participant. Prolonged engagement was achieved by establishing a three-month long relationship with each participant and with multiple points of contact with each participant.

**Progressive subjectivity.** Progressive subjectivity “is the process of monitoring the evaluator’s own developing constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 238). Guba and Lincoln (1989) outline the process for monitoring the researcher’s bias, specifically how it impacts the study. Prior to engaging in any activity, I recorded what I expected to find throughout the study and then continued to record my construction throughout the study. This documentation was recorded in my research journal.
Transferability and Dependability

Transferability involves “showing the findings have applicability in other context” and dependability involves “showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, p. 3684). Transferability and dependability of findings was established by providing thick descriptions from every participant to support themes, conclusions, and recommendations.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which the findings of the study are shaped by the data and not by researcher bias or motivation to find significant results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability can be established through peer debriefing and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell (2003) stated that “researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (p. 8).

Reflexivity. Reflexivity was established by keeping a research journal to regularly document methodological decisions and a place to document rationale for making decisions, reflections on the process, how I was being affected by the research process, and documenting my perspectives, values, and beliefs (Jones, et al., 2006). As this research study unfolded, I fully expected and intended to be affected by the experience and acknowledged that this process also influenced and affected students participating in the study as well.

Authenticity

An important measure of quality for qualitative research is that of authenticity. “In establishing authenticity, researchers seek reassurance that both the conduct and evaluation of research are genuine and credible not only in the participants’ lived experiences but also with
respect to the wider political and social implications of research” (Given, 2008, p. 44).

Moreover Guba and Lincoln (1989) stated, “Those authenticity criteria—so called because we believed them to be hallmarks of authentic, trustworthy, rigorous, or ‘valid’ constructivist or phenomenological inquiry—were fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity” (pp. 245–251). Fairness is “The extent to which different constructions and their underlying value structures are solicited and honored within the process” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, pp. 245-246). Within this study, fairness and ontological authenticity were addressed directly. Fairness was maintained in this study through member checks. Ontological authenticity is the idea that the research process increases the understanding of all parties involved, including participants. Ontological authenticity was maintained in this study by keeping an audit trail in my researcher journal and by conducting member checks with the participants. Member checks were conducted by having conversations with each participant. I asked participants to evaluate the accuracy of fact and of interpretation. I confirmed that the transcripts and quotes were accurate representations of their original words and meaning. After confirming the factual accuracy, I asked participants to assess my interpretation of their experiences. I confirmed the accuracy of fact and interpretation with every participant. Some participants offered feedback and or clarifying remarks during these conversations. This feedback was incorporated.

**Researcher’s Background**

Autobiographical rendering should be utilized for constructivist research designs because it is “imperative for the user of the research to understand its context and to make good judgments about whether the study meets the criteria of goodness” (Jones, et al., 2006, p. 125). According to Arminio and Hultgren (2002), autobiographical rendering includes sharing why the
researcher is interested in the questions being posed, how the researcher is qualified to explore
the posed questions, and in what ways the researcher may influence the results of the study.
There are several aspects of my past experience, education, values, and faith that will influence
the progression of this study. My education and experiences will aid me and also create a bias
throughout this research study.

At the time of completing this dissertation proposal, I was in my third year in a doctoral
program in Higher Education Administration. Furthermore, I have six years of experience
working in various student affairs functional areas. Raised as a Roman Catholic, I am still an
active participant in the church and believe spirituality is important to investigate. During my
doctoral program, I focused several course projects, an entire class, and one ongoing research
project on the topic of religion and spirituality. Furthermore, my cognate while I was in the
doctoral program was International Higher Education, exploring other countries’ systems of
higher education. To fulfill this cognate, I enrolled in two political science courses focusing on
international organizations and one course focusing on issues related to comparative higher
education.

During my time as a doctoral student, I studied abroad for two months during the summer
between my first and second year in the doctoral program. I spent one month in Tours, France
studying at a French language institute and living in a residence hall with U.S. and international
students. Following the month in France, my second month abroad was spent studying culture
and media in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. While in Burkina, I lived with a host family and
attended class with fellow students from the United States. Upon returning to the United States,
I found that my study abroad experience influenced my spirituality.
From my time in France and Burkina Faso, there were many experiences that I believe influenced my spirituality. I had the opportunity to attend Catholic Mass in both Burkina and France. The church service was conducted in French in both countries. Growing up Catholic, I am very familiar with the sequence of the rituals conducted during the Catholic Mass and can easily recite the prayers that are typically said throughout the Mass. Although these church services in Burkina and France were being conducted in a language I could not understand, I was still able to follow along and feel a connection with God. In fact, I felt a stronger sense of connectedness to those around me and a stronger connection to God. I found the language barrier was not actually a barrier at all, but rather, it provided an opportunity to focus on the meaning of the words that were said and be intentional about my reflection on the rituals being practiced. This intentionality helped to make my connection with those around me to be stronger and more meaningful. I found myself becoming more aware during my time in church, specifically feeling a desire to pray for those around me. I recall feeling a strong sense to want to make a personal connection with those around me. My heightened awareness during the Mass led me to have a sense of interconnectedness with those around me.

After returning home from my study abroad experience, I find myself to be a far more conscientious church-attendee than I was before my study abroad experience. My spiritual life has evolved from primarily focusing on my relationship with God, to focusing on a relationship with God and people in the world, especially thinking of those people whom I met while in Burkina.

These experiences attending Mass also helped me to be more conscious of the ritual and practices of my faith. After returning home, I find myself to be far more conscientious of the rituals and prayers throughout the Mass. I was exposed to my faith in several different contexts
while I was abroad and came away with a new perspective of how I practice it upon my return. After returning home, while I attend Mass at my home parish, I have found myself reflecting on the Mass and how there are similar masses being experienced in the St. Martin Basilica in Tours and the large pavilion-church in Burkina, praying to the same God, practicing the same rituals, and saying the same prayers. My spirituality, as a result of my study abroad experience, has come to include a strong sense of interconnectedness with people from around the world and a deeper connection to the rituals of my faith.

With my experience studying abroad and my personal and academic commitment to spirituality, I acknowledge that my experiences have shaped this study from the initial idea. I am still very aware of the moment when I made the connection that my study abroad experience has had significant impact on my spirituality. Moreover, I acknowledge that my experiences have influenced the current design of this study and will continue to affect how the study is carried out.

**Limitations**

There are limitations for this research design given the time constraints, budget limitations, and nature of the project that limit the transferability of these findings. The first limitation was the use of video conferencing at some points during the study instead of face-to-face conversations. Particularly while the participants were abroad, I utilized video conferencing because of the cost that would be involved in personally traveling to the various countries to interview participants in person. Video conferencing provides limitations to the sort of contact in which the participants and I can engage. On several occasions, the video conferencing would stop working and I would need to reconnect. There were instances with participants when the video conferencing stopped altogether and we needed to reschedule the interview. Video
conferencing limited my ability to connect with the participants and inhibited where we could hold our conversation. For example, Rachel and I video conferenced when she was in a classroom with other students. It was very loud and I do not think she was as open talking with me compared to if we were alone. Several students interrupted her during our conversation and the Wi-Fi in room was very weak. This all led to a less than ideal situation for conducting an interview.

Another limitation of the study was that not every participant completed a second interview. Both TJ and Drake did not complete interviews while abroad because of scheduling issues. In addition, the audio recording from Megan’s second interview was unusable because the audio file was corrupted. Although I had notes from our conversation, I was not able to transcribe our second conversation. The proposed design of this study included three full interviews with each participant and unfortunately, due to extenuating circumstances, not all of these interviews took place.

Initial contact with participants took place just over two years from the completion of the study. The extended time between the interviews, transcriptions, constructing profiles, and ultimately writing the remaining sections for the study led to some problematic issues. I lost contact with several of the participants and was not able to complete member checks in a timely manner. All participants were able to give feedback on the accuracy of their transcripts and my interpretations, however those meetings typically took place two years after data collection began. The extended time between interviews, transcriptions, analysis, and member checking may reduce the reliability of the participants’ constructions as reflections of their experiences in the moment.
The length of the study abroad program could have contributed to how the experience influenced the participants. Focusing only on a specific length of study abroad experience limits the transferability of the study. A longer study abroad experience (e.g., six months to a year) may offer different insights about the aspects of the experience that were most influential.

Five participants identified as Christian and one identified as agnostic. The lack of religious diversity of participants was another limitation of this study. Being from a non-Christian faith tradition may influence the outcome of this study. Christianity is the privileged faith tradition in the U.S. Some of the influence of studying abroad was due to participants encountering non-Christian faiths abroad. A non-Christian student studying abroad may describe an altogether different influence on his or her spirituality.

Every participant spent part of her or his study abroad experience in Europe. Consequently, diversity of study abroad location was another limitation of this study. Different parts of the world, such as countries in Africa, Asia, and South America could offer a significantly different study abroad experience. Study abroad destination may be a major contributing factor in how students describe the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality.
CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key findings from the interviews conducted with six students who studied abroad in the summer of 2012. Within this chapter, I also present an overview of each participant in the study detailing how each described his or her spirituality, where and why each participant studied abroad, and a summary of how each of them described the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality. Following these abbreviated case summaries, I present an interpretation of the data across all six cases by reviewing the six primary themes that emerged from the data. These six major themes emerged:

1. Awareness of own and others’ religious practices.
2. Spiritual coping.
3. Enacting spiritual and religious practices while abroad.
4. Connecting with others through spiritual dialogue.
5. Strengthening spiritual identity.
6. Effect on dialogue with others.

Participants

Six participants were interviewed for this research study. Participants were all undergraduate students at BGSU who studied abroad for the summer of 2011 for at least six weeks. The six students, Drake, James, Megan, Pepper, Rachel, and TJ all participated in different study abroad programs in various countries. Abbreviated participant profiles are included in this chapter. These profiles contain an overview how each participant described his or her spirituality prior to studying abroad, where and why each participant studied abroad, and how each participant described the influence of studying abroad on his or her spirituality. Full participant profiles can be found in Appendix A. Participant demographics (Table 1) and
information about the participants’ study abroad destination and education (Table 2) are found below. In addition to the demographics presented in Table 1, Megan offered during our conversations that she identified as a lesbian. Pepper informed me that she was married and was not a traditional-aged college student. No participant indicated any information about socio-economic status. I did not ask participants to identify sexual orientation, relationship status, or socio-economic status on the initial questionnaire.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Spiritual Belief</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drake</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepper</td>
<td>Mosaic Christian</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Seventh Day Adventist</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TJ</td>
<td>Nazarenes</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
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</table>
**Table 2**  

*Study Abroad & Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drake</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Internship &amp; cultural course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Telecommunications</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Language course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>Mediterranean Region</td>
<td>Semester at Sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepper</td>
<td>History and Early Childhood</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Language course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>France &amp; Burkina</td>
<td>Language &amp; cultural courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TJ</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Tours, France</td>
<td>Language course</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Drake**

Drake identified prior to his study abroad experience as agnostic because he was unsure if God existed or if there was something else after death. Drake described the uncertainty he felt and where he is spiritually.

Where I am at now I think that there may be a god but also that there might not be and I can’t know. And I can’t know for a number of reasons and I am interested in what I don’t know. I guess that is my thing. I am going to throw out things that I don’t know and not sure about. If I pass away tomorrow, I am not sure if I will cease to exist.

Drake’s experience in college had a profound influence on his spirituality. His spirituality was affected by having relationships with college friends who challenged his thinking.
I want to clarify to you a lot of my spiritual searching didn’t happen until college. A lot of it stems from my relationship my sophomore year, and kind of reevaluating myself from that and after that, as well as experience with spiritual friends that I have met who impacted me and shared with me a global perspective, as well as their belief system with god or a higher power, and meaning making—that sort of thing.

Discussing spirituality with others was an important aspect of how Drake enacts his spirituality.

**Study abroad.** Drake studied abroad in London, England during the summer between his junior and senior year for two months. He stayed in London after the program ended because the 2012 Summer Olympics took place while he was there and he wanted to attend some of the events. Drake participated in a program that required completion of an internship related to his major and required him to take a course. He earned six credits; three credits for a class about diversity in the international workplace and three credits for an internship. Drake interned at a community mental health center working with people with severe mental disabilities. Drake chose to study abroad because he wanted to experience something in addition to coursework. “I realized that I didn’t just want to take classes in a study abroad context—I was kind of classed out. I thought that I would value an internship better.”

Drake’s internship was at the Center for Recovery and Social Inclusion. This agency, located in a diverse area of London, gives additional support to and advocates for clients who are receiving mental services from local hospitals or community mental health centers. Drake described the agency as “trying to re-engage the disengaged. They were assisting the marginalized in the community.” Drake shared many stories about when he was working at the internship.
Influence of study abroad on student spirituality. Drake’s experience studying abroad in London proved to be influential on his spirituality. Through several notable experiences that he described and being away from friends and family in the United States, Drake said that he is now more confident and comfortable in his belief in God. Upon reflecting on his study abroad experience, Drake stated, “I think more confidently now than before. I can say that I believe in God. I feel more comfortable in believing in something.”

James

James is a member of the Baptist church and his spiritual practice is directly linked to his family. “My family members have been Christian or baptized and have been going to Christian church so it was sort of like I was like born into that religion.” James has maintained his membership in the Baptist church despite sampling other Christian faiths. “I've been introduced to other churches of different beliefs such as an Apostolic Christian church.” James practices his spirituality by “praying and going to church.” James stated he does attend church services regularly when he is back home but does not attend services while he is at college. It appears that James does not seek out a church while at school because his home church is safe and comfortable. “I really haven't looked for a church home at school because I stick with my church-home back at home…I’m just more comfortable with my church-home back at home.”

James practices his spirituality through prayer: “I pray alone and I pray about situations that I'm going through. I pray about keeping the faith in God.” James also indicated that he prays to stay connected to God when he is at school and not attending church services. “I keep praying, even though I'm apart from going to church, He still helps me believing in Him.” Another aspect of James’ spirituality is that he often prays “that people start to have faith in the Lord who do not have faith in the Lord.”
Study abroad. James studied abroad in Madrid, Spain for two months at a Spanish language institute. James also lived with a host family in Spain as a requirement of the study abroad program. His host family did not speak any English. Speaking Spanish with his host family contributed to his overall grade for the institute.

Influence of study abroad on student spirituality. A major influence on James’ spirituality while abroad was how uncomfortable he felt throughout his time in Spain. James used his faith, both praying and listing to Gospel music to cope with the discomfort and isolation he felt while abroad. “Talking to God…I feel like [God] and I have a connection…just talking to him. Also…Gospel songs.” James also indicated that he has more initiative to practice his faith after his study abroad experience. “I feel like the study abroad experience it gave me more initiative just to practice my faith more and get stronger in my faith.”

Megan

Megan was raised in a German Lutheran home and attended a Catholic high school; “Religion was very much a part of my childhood.” The overarching aspect of Megan’s spirituality is engaging in a community that accepts her and makes her feel good. Since coming to college, Megan does not feel as close with the church as she did growing up. “Since coming to college … I have kind of veered away from the church a little bit.” Megan continued to identify as a Christian but acknowledged but her faith has changed since attending college. “I definitely still define myself as a Christian…my growth and development in college has led me to not identify with the church as much as I did when I was younger.” Megan attributed her initial shift away from the church to the events following her mother’s death during her first year in college. Megan encountered people from her church who, she believed, behaved
disingenuously about their concern for her mother. According to Megan, these people called
themselves Christians, but did not act in a Christian manner:

I believe in integrity and I think that many Christians pride themselves on being whole
people who care for everyone and wanted to do the best that they can for people. But I
don’t believe that the church that I grew up in—half of the people there are not like that.

This situation with the people from Megan’s church left her very frustrated and disillusioned
about what it meant to be a Christian.

Megan’s church is opposed to her being in a relationship with another woman. She
indicated that her church’s position on same-sex relationships also contributed to why she veered
from her Christian faith tradition.

Since coming to college, I have come out as a lesbian. I have been with my partner for
two and a half years. The church I grew up in, the Christian church that I am from and
the Catholic high school that I went to, that is absolutely not ok. I know the legitimacy of
my two year relationship is questioned and frowned upon and other relationships are not.
That is also another reason why I have veered away from the church and don’t go unless I
am with my dad or Christmas or Easter or that kind of thing.

In addition to her church disapproval, her father also disapproves of Megan’s sexual orientation.
Megan said her father “is not happy” that she is a lesbian because “he believes that in order to be
good [person]…you have to be a holy [person] of God. So he wishes that I was like that.”

Although her father is not supportive of her sexual orientation, Megan referred to him as a “great
man.”

Megan believes “in living a whole life.” She indicated that she has core values that guide
her thoughts, actions, and relationships. “I try really hard to [choose] the things that I am doing
Megan indicated that she initially thought she was at a disadvantage because she was from a Christian background. However, she later noted that values and meaning could be found in places beyond God. “I think a lot of times that I have thought of myself as doomed by the Christian upbringing that I have...but I think that there is so many more things beyond God that can give those things to you.” Megan asserted that she finds meaning in relationships and experiences. “Strength comes from your relationships with the people and the things that you learn about yourself through interacting with others.” Megan shared that she found meaning in her college experience because she was afforded the opportunity to try new things and develop new relationships. “I really value my experience here at college...the things that I have done and the people that I have met and being able to explore my values give me meaning.”

Megan did not identify many activities that she had engaged in or sought out while at college that helped her practice her spirituality. Megan highlighted one activity as a particularly impactful experience. Megan was a Safe Zone trainer and conducted trainings for students and staff. Some of these trainings led to particularly emotional moments that gave Megan a very positive feeling. The trainings were a way for Megan to connect with others and make a difference in their lives. “I think that [being a safe zone trainer] has a lot to do with wholeness, meaning, what my beliefs are about equality, and it is something that I really like to do.” It also left her with a very positive feeling because she was able to serve as a resource for others and provide an outlet for dialogue. “[People becoming emotional at trainings] doesn’t happen every
time but it happens sometimes and it helps me to feel really good about diversity, education, and teaching others about inclusion and equality and that kind of stuff. That is one thing that makes me feel really good.” This training in particular was important for Megan because it enacts her core values of equality and inclusion.

**Study abroad.** Megan participated in a 9-week Semester at Sea program during the summer. She chose to participate in the Semester at Sea program because she wanted to gain a “global perspective.” She intentionally made the decision to study abroad in the Semester at Sea program because she wanted to grow from the new experience. She explained the reason she participated in the Semester at Sea program in the following passage:

[I participated in the Semester at Sea program because] the growing that I need to do in order to be comfortable with myself and to learn more about my values, what I want to do with my life, and the person that I want to be for my family and for work. I needed to do some things different…like get out of this environment before I leave for graduate school.

Studying abroad was also an opportunity that Megan felt that she might regret if she did not participate.

**Influence of study abroad on student spirituality.** Megan shared that her religious practices were not particularly influenced by her study abroad experience; however, Megan articulated several instances that were influential on her spirituality. Megan defined spirituality as value in relationships, interconnectedness, and inclusivity. The relationships Megan developed abroad were particularly meaningful. Additionally, Megan was able to learn about and witness people practicing other non-Christian religions. “[Visiting mosques in Turkey] just feels more spiritual because the people there are way more connected to their faith than Catholics.
will ever be.” Megan described how meaningful it was to witness Muslims practicing their faith in a far more committed and genuine way than she was accustomed to in the U.S. Christian context.

**Pepper**

Pepper was baptized in the Catholic faith. Soon after her baptism, Pepper’s parents left the Catholic Church. Pepper recalled, “My parents were both raised in the Catholic Church and they both decided ‘No’ that was not going to work for us. And so they left [the Catholic Church].” Although Pepper’s immediate family no longer practiced Catholicism, some of Pepper’s extended family still practiced Catholicism. As a result, Pepper still attended some services for weddings and some other occasions. After her family left the church, Pepper’s father studied the Bible, both the New and Old Testament, and started to adopt aspects of both Christianity and Judaism into their faith practice. For example, Pepper said that her family observes both Christmas and Passover. Regarding religion, Pepper described herself as practicing Mosaic Christianity. This faith is rooted in blending of the Christian and Jewish faiths.

Mosaic meant of Moses. In it, you accept that Jesus or Yahweh was the Christ. However, you still follow the Leviticus and Deuteronomy Laws or the kosher laws. You also keep the Jewish holidays. You find a lot of that in Messianic Judaism as well, but the emphasis is a little bit different.

Pepper referenced the Bible, both the New Testament and Hebrew scriptures many times throughout our conversations.

**Study abroad.** Pepper studied abroad in Krakow, Poland for six weeks. She indicated that she was going to study abroad in Poland for a number of reasons. “The main reason is to
learn Polish because I am a history major and I would like to go to grad school for history…one of the requirements is history is being able to read and speak the language…that is my main point for being in Poland.” Pepper is also married and her husband did not go abroad with her. Although she was not initially concerned about being away from him for six weeks, the time apart and isolation she felt caused her to miss him very much.

Pepper also wanted to go to Krakow because of the historical relevance the city has, particularly with regard to the events leading up to and around World War II. She also looked forward to going to Poland because it is a very Catholic country.

My grandparents were first generation Americans. They spoke Polish at home but didn’t teach it to their children probably because they didn’t want them to know what they were saying. Everything was religion with them. It is something I grew up with and miss since they have died.

Influence of study abroad on student spirituality. Living in Poland for the summer was influential on her spirituality. One major influence on her spirituality was the isolation she felt during the first several weeks in Poland. Pepper missed seeing and talking with her husband who did not travel with her. Pepper also felt isolated because she did not speak Polish and almost all of the other students in her program were several years younger. She utilized her spirituality to cope with these feelings of isolation. She also sought out the friendship of an older student on the trip, Victor, with whom she shared many conversations about spiritual questions.

As part of the study abroad program in Poland, Pepper participated in an excursion to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in southern Poland. Pepper shared that she thought the visit to the camp would move her spiritually and clarify her spirituality: “I thought I would have some kind of spiritual revelation.” Pepper’s visit to a concentration camp proved to be a particularly
impactful spiritual experience and left her feeling moved and also conflicted. “It was very challenging to not feel moved spiritually because of the horrors that went on there.” She went onto explain that the experience left her asking questions of a spiritual nature that left her feeling spiritually conflicted.

There was just this sense of, if you had been there while it was open and running, you can't really see a way. Either your faith becomes stronger—that you're going to be ok in the end. Or it just disappears because how the hell does this happen?

These vexing questions spurred by her visit to the camp created a spiritual tension for Pepper. In addition to her own spiritual questioning, Pepper witnessed other visitors on the tour of the camp struggle with making sense of the horrors that went on.

It was really an odd mix because you have the pilgrimages and you could see the different groups. You could tell that it was faith affirming for them and you could see that there were other groups going through and asking “how can people believe there is a God?” Then you start to think that this is what people were thinking while they were there as prisoners.

Pepper experienced a spiritual paradox while visiting the camp. Part of her felt that her trip was faith-affirming, while another part of her felt that if God existed then He would not let this tragedy happen. Ultimately, she described the experience to be spiritually moving and left her with more uncertainty. “It's really difficult not to be moved spiritually and really makes you stand back and think about what spirituality and faith and everything means.”

Pepper felt that Poland was a very spiritual country and different from the U.S. Pepper sought out spiritual experiences while in Poland. For example, when she visited the Auschwitz concentration camp, Pepper indicated that she wanted to have the experience deepen her faith.
Pepper indicated that her study abroad experience gave her a different perspective on her faith and left her with more questions.

It gave me a different perspective on things because there's only so much I can learn about spirituality and faith in America with the culture that's grown up around it on both sides. There's only so much that you can get from [the U.S.], you have to go abroad to try to find something different. Going abroad gave me a different perspective on just how to approach spirituality. Different perspectives on how to view it. Different sense of experience with different people. And so studying abroad really gave me a lot to think about.

Pepper’s experience left her asking spiritual questions and thinking more about her own beliefs, perspectives, and approaches to her faith.

**Rachel**

Rachel was initially raised by her parents to be a non-denominational Christian. Throughout her teen years, she moved away from her parents in the Midwest to the East Coast and became a member of the Baptist church. Once she returned home after a couple years, her mother had converted to be a Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) and so Rachel also converted. Rachel noted, “I just began identifying with the SDA church” and “I go when I’m home for breaks, holidays, or just to come home for the weekend.” Rachel is not aware of any nearby SDA services near her college so she does not attend SDA services in college. Rachel periodically goes to a multicultural Christian based organization that holds regular church services. Rachel described it as “an all-Black church, but college students…and the preaching is always focused on the youth and a lot of the songs and the technology is relatable to people my
Rachel noted that “if there was a SDA group at BG, I would definitely participate or try as much as I can.”

Rachel preferred the SDA church to other faiths because “everybody was a unit and when [she] was a Baptist, there wasn’t much collectivity amongst the group.” The idea of worshiping as a collective group emerged as an important aspect of Rachel’s faith. While describing her preference to attend the SDA services, Rachel said “the togetherness of the church really attracted me…I felt like that’s how Christianity should be…everybody should be on the same page.”

Rachel prefers to enact her spirituality through listening to songs rather than reciting formal prayers. Specifically, “they're definitely Gospel songs, like Black Gospel songs. They're more so songs that thank God…Gospel songs that just speak to me…they’re not depressing, they’re never depressing.” While at college, Rachel also enjoys attending the Gospel Choir concerts.

Part of enacting Rachel’s spirituality involves interaction with others, including prayer with others.

Before I go to sleep at night, my boyfriend and I pray. I would say that is the most consistent thing that we do. The prayer is based off of our day or depending on what's going on in the world. It always varies. But that’s the most consistent thing that I do. Rachel also enjoyed discussing God and religion. “[My friend and I] often have conversations about God, religion, and things like that. This is awesome because it is good to hear somebody else’s view on something or hear a similar view. So I often have a lot of conversations about [God and religion].”
Rachel indicated that coming to college influenced her spirituality and stated that “college has made my spirituality multiply times a billion.” Rachel has become more self-aware and more aware of those around her. “College has made me more aware of my meaning, other peoples’ meanings, or what they feel their meanings or purposes are, what they think something means, and in contrast to what I think, what I feel, or what I believe.”

Being at college has also encouraged Rachel to become more aware of other faiths. “I'm just more conscious and aware of how religion and spirituality bring meaning to different people and make them do things. All of that is because of college.” Rachel attributed her new awareness developed during college to being on her own. “In high school you're aware but you're really not aware. College is really the first time where everything you've ever learned and have known in prior life is being challenged…it forces you to actually act on things instead of hypothetical situations.” Additionally, Rachel noted that “without the safeguard of your parents or the people you've known all your life, you're more exposed to different things.”

**Study abroad.** Between her sophomore and junior year, Rachel participated in a 8-week study abroad experience in Tours, France and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Rachel spent the first four weeks learning French at a French language institute in Tour. She then traveled to Ouagadougou where she enrolled in two courses that covered Burkina culture, media, and film. Burkina Faso is a religiously diverse country. Most Burkinabe practice Christianity or Islam interspersed with indigenous religious beliefs. Rachel lived with host families in both Tours and Ouagadougou.

**Influence of study abroad on student spirituality.** Rachel utilized religious practices to cope with feelings of homesickness and loneliness. Prior to arriving in Burkina, Rachel anticipated her need to utilize prayer to cope with the unfamiliar environment that she would
soon find herself. The SDA church was not present in France or Burkina. Therefore, Rachel was not able to attend any SDA services while studying abroad. Rachel did not miss most aspects of attending SDA services but did indicate she missed being with other members of the congregation. Overall, Rachel’s study abroad experience provided her an opportunity to understand God differently and made her more aware. “Just knowing that God puts different people in different places to understand different things definitely clarified my beliefs, the Bible, and Christianity.”

TJ

Growing up, TJ and his family switched from the Church of Nazarene to the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran church because the new church was closer to his home and because TJ’s father was personal friends with the new pastor. TJ was raised Christian and regularly attended church services with his family. In his first year of college, TJ was on a trip and a friend introduced him to the concept of “Buddhist Christian.” Upon questioning his friend about his faith, his friend gave TJ several books on Buddhism. TJ described his experience studying Buddhism: “He gave me all these books, so I read about like meditation…so it’s sort of nice, though. It's not really any religious thing, it’s like, you just reflect on what would happen…Sort of like a WWJD, except with Buddha.” TJ’s spirituality is deeply rooted in a Christian context with a great emphasis on reflection and meditation.

Although TJ sought out formal services while at college, meditation and reflection tied with spirituality is prevalent in TJ’s description of enacting his spirituality. TJ shifted the enactment of his spirituality from high school to college. TJ acknowledged that his spirituality in college has “been much more, much more of a personal reflection…like [his] own personal relationship, so…a lot less public and a lot less going out there.” According to TJ, his
spirituality does not necessarily need to be rooted in a church or sacred space. TJ noted that “You don't have to go anywhere as long as you know and you're comfortable with what you believe in… it is like you're carrying your own place to worship inside.” Although TJ acknowledged that being in a church is not necessary for him to enact his spirituality, he indicated that there are places and experiences that invite reflection and meditation. For example, TJ noted on several occasions that being in nature was very important to him and being in the wilderness usually provided an opportunity to reflect. TJ discussed the connection between his spirituality and nature throughout both of TJ’s interviews. TJ described his spirituality as very personal; specifically he stated that his spirituality is “like in a single personal relationship with my views, with a higher power, with me, for God.”

**Study abroad.** Between his junior and senior year, TJ participated in the 8-week study abroad experience in Tours, France at a French language institute. He lived at the home of a local woman who also hosted six to seven additional students. Four to five of the students were international students taking classes at the language institute and the rest were French students who were enrolled at the local university. Prior to the summer term, TJ spent the spring semester traveling throughout Europe, visiting relatives, and taking class at the language institute.

**Influence of study abroad on student spirituality.** TJ described the influence of studying abroad as having a positive influence on his spirituality. He said he now has a more “positive outlook” and he approaches his spirituality “more so in a personal manner.” TJ noted that he “is more open to talking about faith with people, to saying yes, I am a Christian and this is what I believe in.” Another aspect of TJ’s spirituality that he described as being influenced by his study abroad experience was his understanding and confidence with his own faith. After studying abroad, TJ noted that “I really understand my faith and where I'm at… I believe in my
strength to not change where I am and with that makes it more opening to share with others when they ask me because I'm more confident in what I believe.”

The six participants of this study, Drake, James, Megan, Pepper, Rachel, and TJ, all described their spirituality and where and why they were studying abroad. A brief summary was also shared regarding how participant described the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality. Participants’ full profile can be found in appendix A. In the following sections, I present an interpretation of the data across all six cases by reviewing the six primary themes. These six major themes emerged:

1. Awareness of own and others’ religious practices.
2. Spiritual coping.
3. Enacting spiritual and religious practices while abroad.
4. Connecting with others through spiritual dialogue.
5. Strengthening spiritual identity.
6. Effect on dialogue with others.

**Awareness of Own and Others’ Religious Practices**

Many of the participants reflected on their own spirituality in comparison with the faith practiced in their host country. There were two main ways that participants expressed an increased awareness of their own and others’ religious practices: (1) learning more about religious practices in the context of a different country, and (2) comparing religious practices in a host country with those in the U.S. Several instances that were shared demonstrated a participant’s awareness of the faith being practiced and how it compared with practices in the U.S.
An aspect of several participants’ study abroad experience that was particularly notable was learning about faiths in context. Megan learned in context more about why people believe different tenets of their faith.

We studied the Mediterranean as we went to these places. I learned about the conflict between Christian people and Muslim people for thousands of years and I learned about the history and the fundamentals of where this stuff comes from. It’s more than just words and the places that you were and where it comes from…it is the significance of why people believe this kind of stuff…that gets lost thousands of years later.

This experience taught Megan “how much [she] didn’t know.” Megan noted that learning how much she did not know was important for her own belief structure. “Learning what you don’t know is something that needs to be done if you are going to practice anything and believe anything fully. I think that I never really believed what I was taught in Catholic girls’ school fully because you don’t understand where it comes from.” Learning about Islam while visiting places that are mentioned in Islamic texts helped Megan realize why she had difficulty connecting with what she was taught about her faith in school.

As part of Rachel’s classes in Burkina, students participated in a number of excursions to experience daily life in Burkina. One particular excursion provided an experience to witness a local chief performing a religious ceremony. The chief belonged to the Mossi region of Burkina and practiced traditional indigenous beliefs centered on animism.

It has a lot to do with respect to the authorities or respect to the gods. Like if the chief would walk, everybody would move out of the way and they would bow and whatever religious thing they would do. It’s all respect…it’s everything you see on TV but at the
same time that respect aspect you wouldn't even see that on television. So seeing that
you would think this is a serious religion or spirituality.

Rachel’s class only observed the ceremony and did not participate. Being an outsider observing
this sacred act caused Rachel to feel a bit uncomfortable. “I felt uncomfortable because my
group stood out. So not only were we not bowing or anything but I felt awkward being in there
because I didn't know what to do…this wasn't something I know about.”

Rachel also participated in a number of excursions during her time in France. Some of
the excursions included visits to nearby Catholic churches. Rachel emphasized that she did not
find personal spiritual significance in her visits to the churches. “It was more art and less
religion.” However, Rachel offered that she found her experience visiting Notre Dame in Paris
to be more religious. “In Paris, I went to go see Notre Dame, which was amazing, but I would
say that one was more religious because you couldn't speak. People were in Mass while people
were visiting. But at the same time it was still about art.” This distinction illustrated that
Rachel’s spirituality was influenced by witnessing other people enacting their spirituality and not
influenced by visiting a sacred space.

Living in Poland for the summer was influential on Pepper’s spirituality. Pepper
expressed that Poland was a very spiritual country and unlike what she was accustomed to.

Over in Poland, there is a completely different attitude and it is almost like you can feel
[the spirituality]. It's almost electric in the air. However, you can actually feel that there
is this faith about the country and they're very Catholic. It’s a little bit different from
what I'm used to.

Poland, according to Pepper, was very Catholic and it was apparent that the Polish were much
more devoted to their faith. “I've never seen so many people walking around with rosary beads
hanging out of their pockets, and nuns and priests were just everywhere. She also discussed the importance of adhering to some of the cultural customs rooted in the Catholic faith. For example, she discussed how everyone would dress up on Sundays. “God help you, if you were not dressed nice on a Sunday. It didn't matter if you were not in church. You should not be wearing crappy clothes on a Sunday because you will get looked at very strangely.” Pepper indicated that being in Poland felt very different from being in the U.S. in part because the Catholic faith was so prominent in many aspects of the Polish culture. “There were rosaries and crucifixes and shrines along the road, and churches everywhere that are always full and people waiting outside the door.” Pepper described this Catholic presence as “different and really odd at first.” Pepper indicated that she “got used to it and expected it” and described the presence of the Catholic faith as “kind of cool.”

Every participant compared the faith practices in her or his host countries with those in the United States. For some, the comparison was more about contrasting the same faith being enacted differently, while others compared a different faith that was practiced in their host country to familiar faith practices in the U.S.

During Megan’s Semester at Sea experience, she traveled to Morocco, where a majority of the people practiced Islam. “In Morocco, you display your faith and your beliefs all day every day. Where here, [in the United States], we don’t do that as much.” Although Megan does not actively practice a faith tradition, witnessing people practice their faith in a way that aligned with her values of congruency and integrity helped her see more value in religious practice. People take the time to live meaningful lifestyles other places that I don’t think that we do as much here. No matter if, it is religious or cultural, I think societies that care more about their faith are happier or seem to be.
Megan acknowledged that wholly practicing a faith could bring great meaning and purpose to some people. From her observations abroad, Megan understood why some people relinquished rights or acquiesced to oppressive practices because their traditions, either religious or cultural, hold great meaning in their lives. “Even if we see that their religion is oppressive…it is ok with them because they care so much about it. They are willing to give up certain things so they can have a thing that means so much and makes them feel so good about their lives. That was cool.” These observations led Megan to reflect about her own beliefs: “I think that there are a lot of negative connotations with Christianity and Catholicism right now and I think that is why I struggle with [what I believe]. But being in a place where people are open about their religion definitely caused me to think that maybe I would want to start practicing again.”

As part of his study abroad experience, James participated in a number of required excursions to local religious sites. “We've been going on trips in different cities to cathedrals.” James indicated he did not pray in the cathedrals, but used the opportunities to observe. “[While in the cathedrals,] I wasn't in a spiritual moment to pray. I was just observing.” James also stated, “[visiting the cathedrals] didn't change my aspect religiously but it just broadened my knowledge on different beliefs and how they go about their beliefs.” The visits to cathedrals encouraged James to reflect on other faith traditions.

I've wanted to know more about their way of beliefs and how they view things…I feel that I have the same faith that I had before; it's just more of a working to know how other religions believe in the same God but in a different way.

James was able to describe specific examples of how different Christian faiths were similar and how they were different based on his observations in the cathedrals. “Some of the stories that are in the Bible are the same. Things that are different are the way that they pray or how they pray
and that is different from what I'm used to or the things that I do.” James also observed that people praying in the cathedrals were committed to their faith.

People were so adamant… more adamant than how people back in the States are about their religions. [They were] more adamant about prayer and praising what they believed in. Going to the cathedrals and to church…is what they're more adamant about. I feel like people [in the United States] just say it more and things like that and not act more or go out more.

These observations led James to be more aware of the faith practices in Spain and more aware of how he practiced his religion.

When Rachel was in Burkina, she observed Muslims and Christians enacting their faith. Rachel noted surprise that the Muslim-Burkinabe were actively practicing Islam every day in public. “In Burkina, the Muslim people prayed constantly. I did not think that the Islamic faith was as spiritual as they were and consistently spiritual.” These experiences of observing Muslims practicing their faith had a lasting impression.

It was very eye opening because in America you don't really see that. People stopped eating and the men washed their heads, their hands, and their feet. The women have to pray behind the men. They're outside. They shut the TV off. It’s legitimately serious.

Unlike Muslims in Burkina, Rachel did not observe many Christians practicing their faith and came to assume the Christians in Burkina were not active in their faith. “You didn’t see the Christians doing the same thing [as the Muslims].” This assumption was challenged when Rachel discovered that her host family was Christian and attended church services. “I was honestly surprised that they were Christian and they went to church because you don't [see
Christians practicing their faith] in comparison to the Muslims.” Rachel took an opportunity to visit her host family’s church when offered the opportunity.

On one occasion, Pepper accompanied her friend Victor when he attended a Catholic Church service. Attending a Catholic Mass in Poland was particularly noteworthy for Pepper because of her previous experiences with the Catholic faith. “I'd been to Catholic services [in the United States] and it was, in a lot of ways, very similar. It was just in Polish and it was very nice.” Pepper recalled her previous experiences attending Catholic services and indicated her favorite part of the Mass is when the congregation uses one voice to reply or sing a response or hymn.

[The Mass] was just, more or less, the same as in the U.S. You would hear the reading, then they'd sing the hymns, and they had their responses. That's always been my favorite part of the whole service…when the priest says something and then the congregation says “and also with you.” I really like that. It was very similar. You could hear the responses, the readings, and the hymns, and they were walking around doing the frankincense.

It was also noteworthy because Pepper described feeling a sense of connection with the other people attending Mass. Especially the times when she would hear the congregation speak or sing in unison.

I don't know how to put it in words. It's just hearing it and hearing the whole crowd at once. It's kind of like being at a concert when everyone knows all the words to the song…like everyone is bonding with you because they know exactly what is going on and you're all together and that is just what you do and that's what’s expected and you just do it. Then it sounds really cool with the acoustics of the old churches and it's just
part of the whole experience. That’s really the only church I've ever seen that does the
responses the same way and they get really enthusiastic about it.

Pepper distinguished this experience attending a Catholic Mass in Poland from attending Mass or
Protestant church services in the United States. Pepper indicated that she felt that she was
welcomed more in the Polish church compared with her previous experiences in the U.S.

I was so focused on how awesome I felt from being able to understand because when I'm
at church in the US, I always feel like an outsider because I'm not actively Catholic. I
kind of always feel a little awkward about being there because most of the people who
are in a parish [in the U.S.] know who else is in the parish and if they see someone they
don't know then they're like what the hell are you doing here. In Poland, especially in
Krakow, they're so used to it being a tourist city that they see different people all the time
and they're like ‘oh you're coming to church with us,’ and they're much more welcoming,

at least from my perspective. It was a lot different in that regard. I didn't feel like an
outsider.

Throughout each of their study abroad experiences, students observed the faiths being practiced
in their host countries. These observations led participants to draw comparisons to practices in
the U.S. Comparing religious practices, combined with participants learning more about religious
practices in the host country, contributed to participants increased awareness of their own and
others’ religious practices.

**Spiritual Coping**

Every participant indicated that studying abroad was isolating and caused stress in
various ways. Some stress was caused by specific situations and some stress was caused by
being away from home for an extended period of time. Five of the six participants indicated that
they utilized spiritual coping techniques to manage feelings of isolation, discomfort, frustrations, and homesickness. Several participants indicated they intentionally started to enact their spirituality in different ways to cope with being abroad. It was also evident that the spiritual practices that they employed to cope with being abroad subsided once they returned home.

Many participants used spirituality to cope with difficulties they faced studying abroad. Drake experienced many hardships studying abroad that incited reflection around his spirituality. Drake experienced feelings of anxiety before and during his trip. “I think being away from friends, family, and home for an extended period of time, working in a different culture, being the only student from BG, it was certainly anxiety provoking.” Drake expressed nervousness about being away from family and friends many times before leaving for the summer. This fear of being cut off from those closest to him was particularly noteworthy because of the importance he placed on relationships. In addition to the typical anxiety-provoking experiences that students have while studying abroad, Drake also found working at his internship somewhat overwhelming and difficult at times.

There were some days I would leave and feel like it was just really overwhelming. I would feel like what I did wasn’t meaningful or that the tasks that I did were insignificant, or that I didn’t do as well as I could have. So that would sometimes result in a rough experience.

Drake referenced many of these difficult experiences as influential on his spirituality after returning to the United States. While abroad, he turned to prayer as a way to cope when he reached a particularly low point in his experience.

While I was abroad, the first two weeks I didn’t pray at all. Then I got sick. I had an awful sinus infection and had a really rough week with classes and the internship and felt
overwhelmed… I guess it may not have been realistic, but during that time, I prayed for a week straight. Every night I just said, “Dear God, I hope that I make it through this experience, that I get better and my health improves, and that I find meaning and value in my internship.”

Drake noted that he uses prayer to cope when he is feeling downtrodden but wants to turn things around.

I think [prayer] is something that I do when I am lost a little, or feel generally down, as a way to refocus… it’s a way to communicate with God what it is that’s going on. It’s not asking for anything in particular. It’s just getting my thoughts and concerns out there, and refocusing on what’s important.

Drake noted that when he is feeling down he could find strength within himself by praying to God. “When I feel a little weaker that becomes more a realization and a reality that I can find strength within myself through communication with God.” Overall, the difficult situations that Drake experienced were triggers for enacting his spirituality.

James noted that his spirituality was influenced by feeling uncomfortable, isolated, and homesick. There were several instances that contributed to an overall state of anxiety and worry for James.

I was kind of worried about a lot of things. Like I got sick a couple of times while I was there, so I was worried about that. I hurt my foot a couple of times and I was just worried about what if something went wrong or what if I got lost or just any little thing was just like on my mind.

The amount of homework assigned while in Spain contributed to James’ feeling of discomfort. There were several instances when James discussed the amount of assigned homework. James
also noted that he was overwhelmed by the amount of homework he was assigned. “Homework is just getting a little bit overwhelming.” James also indicated that his study abroad experience was a “life-shock” for him and provided James with an opportunity to see how the power of his own faith helped him through a difficult time. “The more faith I have, the better off I can be.” James determined that his faith in God was a way for him to cope with the difficult situations he in which found himself. This is illustrated in these statements: “[My faith in God] gave me a sense of security” and “God has me and I’ll be okay.”

During her time in France, Rachel felt significant homesickness and loneliness. “You literally have a wall between you and the world. And I promise you during my first two days here I cried nonstop because it was just so difficult.” The isolation felt by Rachel while studying abroad influenced how she enacted her spirituality. “Honestly, I don't think I've ever prayed so much in my life than being here…this is the hardest thing I've ever done in my life.” Rachel used prayer as a coping mechanism to ease her feeling of isolation. “I was just asking and praying to help this go along better and things have definitely gotten a lot better.” Rachel attributed feeling isolated to the lack of communication with her family and friends in the United States. While in France, but before she traveled to Burkina, Rachel was very nervous how about traveling to a far less familiar location but anticipated using prayer to help her cope.

My communication is going to be extremely limited in Burkina so I'm wondering if I'll have just as much of a difficult time, or maybe even harder, because I can't call on my normal comfort. But I think the praying I do now will just multiply by five to help me get through the situation.” Rachel anticipated her experience in Burkina was going to be life changing. “I think this is going to be another one of my life changing events.
After her study abroad experience in Burkina, Rachel noted that she relied on prayer as a way to cope with the difficulties being in a developing country.

[Being in Burkina] made me realize that I have a lot and in France, they have a lot, and in the US, we have a lot more. But going to Burkina just took it to another level. And not being able to be comforted by my family or friends or my significant other, I really had to rely on myself and pray to get through it. And I got through it, thank God.

Rachel utilized prayer to help cope with her difficulties studying abroad in a developing country.

TJ acknowledged that the physical distance from his family and friends back home led him to feel isolated and alone while studying abroad. Although feeling isolated was difficult, it also gave TJ an opportunity to engage in significant reflection and meditation as a way to cope.

It’s that personal time abroad in an uncomfortable space, or it could even be in a comfy place, but you aren't able to call up your buddies and talk on the phone… so it’s definitely an intense portion that gives you lots of time to do self-meditation or prayer and after that it’s just sort of fuels the progression of seeking inner peace to cope with surroundings and to make yourself stronger and more confident and do what you have to accomplish, either get back home safely, to learn a new language, or to just survive and have a good time.

Being abroad served as a motive and opportunity to engage in spiritual coping that involved meditation, reflection, and prayer.

An aspect of Pepper’s study abroad experience that was influential on her spirituality was the isolation she felt and how she coped with these lonely feelings. “The first couple of nights in Krakow were atrociously bad, like buckets of tears, snot all over everything, it was disgusting, and I was very upset. I don't want to be here. I want to go home.” This feeling of isolation also
caused her to feel more connected to God.” I feel like I’m more connected [to God] because there’s not much else for me to be connected with other than that… I usually don’t just open up to people and start talking to them. I don’t make friends quickly.” In addition to being in a different country and feeling isolated, Pepper missed being around her husband and talking to him on a regular basis. “I missed [my husband] really badly and I was just trying to keep myself busy, to make the days go faster. It was really difficult with a six hour time difference to spend any significant amount of time talking together.” Feelings of isolation in Poland provided Pepper an opportunity to reflect about life. “I realized [after about two weeks], that being isolated in the room wasn’t necessarily a bad thing because it did give me time to stop and think about a lot of stuff in life.” Pepper also stated, “[being alone] gives me time to think and the more I think and ponder the more I start going over the mysteries of life.”

The feelings of isolation, homesickness, and discomfort led participants to engage in spiritual coping techniques. This was a meaningful finding because through the utilization of these coping practices, participants engaged in reflection and meaning-making about their experience. Their spiritual development occurred through expressing their spirituality through coping.

**Enacting Spiritual and Religious Practices While Abroad**

As a result of different aspects of their study abroad experience, five of the six participants engaged in spiritual and religious practices while abroad. Many of these practices were as a direct result from the need to cope with the difficulties studying abroad. Rachael prayed for various reasons throughout her study abroad experience. She noted that she predominately offered gratitude but some situations caused her to ask for help for herself or others.
I remember one prayer. My host dad in Burkina beat one of the dogs. Oh my goodness I could not take it and I cried, and I cried, and I prayed. I said, “Please forgive him,” because it was horrible watching that dog get whooped...I said “thank you for not letting me treat an animal or person like that.”

On different occasions, Rachel recalled praying about the food while in France and Burkina. “The food wasn't disgusting but I would just ask God, ‘could you just please fill my stomach up...I'm hungry?’” Rachel’s prayers contained both requests and gratitude to God. “A lot of [my prayers] were just thank you for giving me everything I have now. Because I just couldn't adjust to what I was in, both in France and Burkina.”

James periodically listened to gospel music. James elaborated on his use of gospel music to enact his spirituality. “Sometimes when something's on my mind, I play a song that helps me keep my faith in the Lord...just to think about how things will be better.” James also indicated that listening to gospel music is a way to practice his faith. “It would just be something to practice when I'm practicing my faith.” James’s enactment of his spirituality through prayer and listening to gospel music while abroad helped him stay connected to the comfort of home.

It was different because at home I would have been going to church. So that’s where I would fulfill the experience of my faith by going to church. I wouldn't be as stressed or as worried at home on a day-to-day basis. I feel some type of comfort while I'm at home. That’s why the gospel music helped me with the comfortability [sic]. So [the frequency of listening to gospel music] wouldn't have been as much when I was at home unless a problem came up or I was feeling some type of way about something.
James utilized listening to music to enact his spirituality since he was away from his home church. James also expressed that he listened to the music because he wanted to feel comforted from the stress of studying abroad.

TJ preferred being in nature away from the city. However, his host family and school were in the city. TJ said that his time living in the city made him feel “trapped” and described the city as a “concrete jungle because there’s not a lot of green space.” To escape this trapped feeling, TJ went to the cathedral when it was empty.

Going to those cathedrals would be like going to, well it would be like stepping outside cause there's not a lot of people and it’s quiet and peaceful. You can't hear the traffic noise outside and if you're lucky the organ's playing and it’s just that combination of music, peace, tranquility and colors, the windows. It’s like being up on the, on the mountainside. So it was like, the closest thing I could get to feeling that inner hush, like inner reflection you get when you're being outside and away from it all. So it’s like being away from it all when you're inside.

Throughout his travels in Tours and other European locations, TJ visited local Catholic cathedrals on his own time because it provided him with a quiet environment and an opportunity for him to pray. “I traveled all around and I did say little prayers at each [cathedral]…and it just felt really cool to be in a space that was nearly a thousand years old and it was a little quiet.” TJ visited the cathedrals when the church was nearly empty, except for a few others who were also praying. He preferred the emptier churches. This sentiment is illustrated in this passage from TJ: “my favorite is honestly the one in Tours, France because you go there and compared it to Notre Dame in Paris where it is jam packed and you have to wait in line. You could go [to the
cathedral in Tours] whenever I want and there would be one to four people there.” For TJ, there was something spiritual about being in the older churches that were empty.

Just to go in, take your time, look at all the frescos, look at the windows, look at the meaning behind them, and look at all the work it would have taken to build this place. That's a lot of power, like money-wise, spiritual-wise, and then a lot of solid leaps that people had to construct something so incredible. So it was really cool to just go in, stand there, and just meditate. Think about the day, or reflect on the day, say a little prayer for the next day. So, that's what I really liked. I think that was really stress relieving too because if I had an exam coming up, or if I was getting tired of speaking French or something like that...I would just go in there and I didn't have to speak to anyone. I could just think to myself and relax.

Connecting with Others through Spiritual Dialogue

Many of the participants engaged in conversations about spirituality while abroad. These conversations ranged from sharing their own personal beliefs, comparing each other's beliefs, and discussing the religion being practiced in the host country. Some of these conversations occurred with other students studying abroad and some with locals. For one participant, Drake, a conversation about spirituality was a catalyst for him to significantly shift his spiritual beliefs.

One of the most notable experiences that influenced Drake’s spirituality was conversations he had with Nelson, his Resident Advisor (RA) in his residence hall. Drake noted that, “specifically speaking of spirituality, the Resident Advisor in my house had an impact.” Nelson was someone who Drake admired for his intelligence, personality, and passion for life. “My RA was from Ghana and was a biomedical engineering graduate student. Nelson was a
really bright guy, someone who had an incredible passion and enthusiasm for life—always smiling.” Drake described one conversation with Nelson that was particularly impactful:

[Nelson] was very Christian and I had conversations with him—first informally and then very structured. One night everyone in the house for the most part went out on a Saturday night. It was 10pm, I was in the house with Nelson in the basement, and we just started talking. He was kind of talking about his beliefs and his communication with God.

Prior to studying abroad, Drake indicated that he really enjoyed discussing spirituality with others. Nelson shared with Drake that his faith in God allowed Nelson to do things that he would have never felt possible to do.

I don’t remember exactly, but I started talking about some of the things I believe in and some of the experiences that shaped me. He said something that was really unique. I took that with me and I have integrated it in my spirituality. [Nelson] said, “I don’t know why sometimes things happen but I believe that when you are confronted with a challenge, when you are confronted with an obstacle, something that you can’t really make sense or deal with...maybe it presents you with some confusion, maybe it’s something you have never negotiated before, or something happens that gives you a lot of pain. I believe that those things—anything that you might dismiss otherwise—happen for a reason. Everything that happens, every challenge that you are confronted with, is something that you are supposed to learn from it.” That sadness or that pain happens to you and that you are supposed learn from it and grow from it and that obviously was coming from a very spiritual place and that’s a huge distinction in my mind.
Drake elaborated that he found this conversation to be very profound for him because it shifted his spiritual thinking about divine purpose. Moreover, Drake noted that this conversation with Nelson shifted his spiritual perspective.

Maybe I used to conceptualize challenges as something that I could learn from, or should learn from—not something I’m supposed to learn from. So that is something that I took away from the conversation. I think I told you before I believed in God but I’m aware that belief is something internal and that not everyone shares the same belief. People have a willingness to put their faith in something that maybe they don’t completely know or understand. That experience was actually really profound.

This conversation with Nelson surfaced several times throughout the interview as a pivotal moment during his study abroad experience. As explained by Drake, this conversation started a shift in the ways in which Drake understood his relationship with God and the influence God had in his life.

Rachel’s host family in France was Catholic and sometimes her host-father discussed religion with her. Rachel found these discussions with her host-father to be a bit uncomfortable and controversial. Rachel described her host-father to be “very closed to anything that’s not a part of the Bible or what [Catholics] practice.” Throughout her stay, Rachel and her host-father engaged in several discussions about religion. “We talked about Catholicism and he personally does not like Muslims…does not agree with the LGBTQ community. He’s not overly religious but he definitely said that Catholicism and [he] does not accept it and says that with an iron fist.” Rachel and her host-father briefly discussed SDA but most conversations about religion reverted back to “anything homosexual or Muslim…that was the majority of our conversation.” These conversations stirred conflict with Rachel’s views on Christianity.
It made me not like Christianity, because Catholicism isn't the only denomination that thinks like that. Especially cause we're going through what we're going through now with women's rights and gay rights, Christians of all denominations are saying no to sticking their hand out to them. So in a way it made me dislike Christianity.

Regarding her host-father’s religious views, Rachel “didn’t like it” and said, “I feel like even as a Christian…you don’t have to agree with [views that do not align with your own] but…you should just accept [these views].”

As part of the study abroad experience, TJ lived with a host family who were also hosting six or seven other students. “I lived with a combination of students, there were about 6 or 7 of us, and we rotated all the time, some people stayed for months, other people just for weeks. And they were Americans, Middle Easterners, other Europeans, and South Americans. So along with that came the Catholics, the Protestants, the Muslims, and we lived with a Hindu, and of course, the Korean religion, and Buddhism.” The students living with TJ’s host family would have many conversations during mealtimes. TJ described in detail several of the mealtime discussions.

When we all sat at the dinner table, of course, inevitably someone would ask someone about religion, like “what are you?” So, we'd all share, and of course, someone would say, “Well, why are you this?” There would be disagreements and a mini bomb would drop on the table. To me, that’s when the importance of this cross cultural experience and dinner table experience, is that the understanding for tolerance…teaching tolerance and, and living through tolerance is really important.

These conversations about religion, as TJ described, helped him to “see different world faiths from a different, more personal perspective,” The dinner table conversations about religion
provided an opportunity for TJ to explore his own faith. TJ was asked about his own faith by the other students in the house. He noted that it was difficult for him to explain what he believed.

It’s hard to explain and when people ask you what you are, it’s like, it’s like a personal combination of a bunch of things… maybe I can't specifically say I'm a Methodist follower, or Nazarene, but I can say that I do believe in Jesus and his father as in Jesus the Messiah.

Although TJ grappled with the dilemma of explaining what he believed, TJ was able to find comfort in relating to of one of his housemates. Both TJ and his housemate found the semantics of their faiths difficult to reconcile. However, they were able to find some common ground in how they approached their faiths.

I can't explain why other things do happen, why some areas of the world are characterized by different attributes than others of the world. But that’s when it comes down to the personal belief of what it is. And that became even stronger when I was talking to my friend Muhammad. And he was in the same position as I am. So that’s just the matter of the faith in both of us.

TJ and his friend were able to connect through how they both approached their individual faiths. Although both practiced very different faith traditions, both approached faith from a personal belief of the faith. They both believed in the major facets of their faith (e.g., “I do believe in Jesus and his father as in Jesus the Messiah”), but did not understand and believe in other aspects (e.g., “I can't explain that miracle path, I can't explain why other things do happen, why some areas of the world are characterized by different attributes than others of the world”).

TJ was surrounded by students of different faiths discussing and questioning each other about their own beliefs, TJ found himself spending time reflecting and contemplating his own
beliefs. “[Talking and reflecting about my own faith] helped me dig deeper…and left me feeling a little bit more confused.” Although initially confused about his faith, TJ noted that this time spent digging deeper in his faith led him to feel that his faith was strengthened by the process. “It’s just more of strength in that faith…I do have a faith…and that’s what makes me comfortable to go into strange places because I know that I won't be alone…even if I am alone.”

Most of the other U.S. students who were studying abroad in Pepper’s program “were excited to be in Poland because the legal drinking age was 18 so they would go out every night.” Being around these students frustrated Pepper. She struggled relating to the students who had different motives for studying in Poland. Pepper befriended Victor, a U.S. citizen who was also studying in Poland, who shared Pepper’s frustration with the younger students who partied. Pepper described Victor as “quite a bit older…he is about 70…and lives in New York City. Pepper stated “[Victor] kind of felt the same way [about the students]; it made me feel a little bit better just to know that I wasn't completely alone in that viewpoint.” Victor and Pepper discussed spirituality and faith during their time together in Poland. In particular, Victor, who regularly attends Catholic services and identifies as a gay man, discussed his conflicted feelings of practicing a faith that does not fully accept him. Pepper related to these feelings because she often discusses her strong distain for people who judge her. Pepper’s friendship with Victor was meaningful because, as Pepper shared, “he was basically one of the only people that I hung out with.” Pepper and Victor spent quite a bit of time together discussing their experiences in Poland, visiting different sites together, and attending a church service. When asked what meaning Victor had in her life, Pepper replied:

I put it in perspective of not necessarily trips but in terms of my life. I think [Victor] was there to give me guidance and to show me, “hey, it's ok, I've survived this long, you can
keep it up, and you might not find all the answers you want, but don't stop looking for them.” Kind of like a road sign on the way to the end, wherever it is I'm going to get. That's kind of how I view him in terms of my whole life.

Connecting with Victor during her study abroad experience was very meaningful for Pepper. She saw Victor as a guide for her study abroad trip and for her life.

**Strengthening Spiritual Identity**

Strengthening spiritual identity means that a participant indicated in some way that their spirituality or how they understood their spirituality was influenced by their study abroad experience after returning home. Studying abroad left five of the participants with a strengthened spiritual identity in some way. Three of the participants were more confident in their faith, two of the participants felt more awareness and understanding of God, another felt more initiative to practice his spirituality after returning home, and another felt his spirituality was more personal and private.

There were several differences in how Drake manifested his spirituality after his study abroad experience. One of the most notable differences is how he views God. Prior to his study abroad experience, Drake described himself as agnostic and he stated that “I think that there may be a God but also that there might not be and I can’t know…If I pass away tomorrow I am not sure if I will cease to exist.” After his study abroad experience, Drake described his belief in God differently—with more confidence and comfort. “I think more confidently now, than before, I can say that I believe in God. I feel more comfortable in believing in something.”

James noted that he has more initiative to practice his faith. “I feel like the study abroad experience gave me more initiative to practice my faith more and get stronger in my faith.” He attributed this new initiative to observing Spaniards practicing their faith and the culture shock
he felt during his time abroad. “Because some of the things, some of the ways that [Spaniards] were going about their beliefs I didn't quite agree on.” There were some customs James did not understand and the people he asked refused to provide explanations. “[The people in the cathedrals] wouldn't even greet you if they were in there praying or even in the pulpit. They wouldn't even speak with you or anything like that so I felt like that was kind of rude.” James also indicated that the clothes they wore were different from what he had observed prior to studying abroad. “The men have on maybe a suit or pants and a slacks or something. But then they would have something on their head to cover from everybody…only when they were praying though.” James attempted to ask what the purpose of the head covering was but he was not provided an explanation. “I was confused as to why [they wore a head covering] and then when I tried to ask they were like no.”

James indicated that his study abroad experience was a “life-shock” for him and gave him a new perspective. “[Studying abroad] gave me …life-shock. To just get out…look at things in a bigger aspect because [there is] more to everything than just the United States.” Before his study abroad experience James never examined his own faith or thought about how he practiced his faith. Being in a new culture exposed James to how other people practiced their faith. Although this caused James to feel disagreement and discomfort, these observations seem to empower James to grow stronger in his own faith.

As a result of her study abroad experience, Rachel indicated some difference in how she understands and practices her spirituality. “I feel like after I did travel, I don't necessarily feel I'm more connected to God, but I understand the message more.” She compared her experience abroad as a trial that tested her and made her a better person as a result of it.
You go through things or you go through a trial in order to get peace or to get to heaven. I realize that not like the normal test where I could be broke and I'm losing all my family members—nothing serious of that nature. But going through that language barrier where I felt isolated, I cried a lot, and I didn't have my own alone time, just made me realize that you go through things in order to get something out of it. That’s what is preached in my church…you have to go through something to get something.

Studying abroad was difficult for Rachel. She saw studying abroad as a challenge that she faced and overcame. Studying abroad also helped clarify how Rachel understands herself and her relationship with God.

[Studying abroad] helped me understand where I stand within myself, how important [spirituality] is to me. How important God plays in my life because I could have been that person sleeping outside, I could have been…just so many bad things…things I wouldn't subject a person to. I could have been that person.

Rachel’s study abroad experience provided her an opportunity to understand God differently and made her more aware. “Just knowing that God puts different people in different places to understand different things definitely clarified my beliefs, the Bible, and Christianity.”

TJ described the influence of studying abroad as having a positive influence on this spirituality. He said he now has a more “positive outlook” and he approaches his spirituality “more so in a personal manner.” This positive outlook did not lead TJ to become more involved in a formal church. TJ elaborated, “Even though I don't belong to any specific church here in Bowling Green…[my spirituality] is more personal and private rather than going out and becoming a member of an institution.”
Effect on Dialogue with Others

With their increased confidence in their spirituality, three of the participants felt confident in their ability to discuss spirituality with others after studying abroad. This is an indication that their study abroad experience had such a profound effect on their spirituality that they felt empowered to act in a way they previously did not. One of the ways that Drake enacted his spirituality after returning from London is through conversations with others around spiritual questions. After studying abroad, Drake claimed that he had more confidence to have these conversations, particularly with people who have strong faith convictions.

In terms of spirituality, I guess my talk with Nelson was really powerful in that it encouraged me to have more conversations with Christians or people who have very strong organized spiritual beliefs. I feel better about doing that because it went well and I learned something from it that I was able to integrate.

Drake developed confidence to discuss faith with those who have strong convictions, particularly devout Christians. As a result of this confidence, Drake engaged in a conversation with one of his friends who Drake described as “judgmental” about Drake’s lack of Christian faith. “I felt that it was okay for me to talk about spirituality with her, which was something that I was really hesitant about doing before … . We ended up talking and having a pretty powerful discussion about spirituality.” This was a particularly noteworthy conversation because prior to this discussion, Drake and his friend had never discussed spirituality. Drake often felt judged by his friend and did not want to bring up spirituality for fear of being judged. In his discussion with his friend, he shared what he believed:

I told her that I believed people would be judged individually based on the challenges in their lives and how they have tackled [them] and worked to improve. Everyone’s
circumstances are different and everyone is different, and that no one can possibly know all of the things that are affecting someone.

Drake was not able to be as candid or open with his friend prior to studying abroad. It was only after studying abroad and having the conversation with Nelson that Drake felt comfortable with this conversation. Drake’s conversation with Nelson had a lasting impact on how Drake approaches his spiritual perspective after studying abroad.

In spending time with Nelson, I think that, information, challenges, obstacles, when looking at them from the perspective that they happen for a reason, and there is something you’re supposed to learn from it, can be really powerful. It is reassuring that there is growth and that you can grow, and that there are things that happen to you that allow you to grow. Growth is not something that you actively seek. Certainly, I could go to the library, go to classes and study, but I’m talking about challenges like when you are confronted with a perspective that isn’t necessarily your own, or when a close friend dies, or you have a loss in the family, divorce, have to console a friend who has been abused. Those challenges, and relationships, those kinds of experiences that have to do with people are supposed to happen. I would say I believe that and that I am significantly more grateful and more appreciative of where I am today on a regular basis than I was before I left. So more appreciative and grateful and I certainly would say I’m more comfortable saying I believe in God more than when I left.

Drake’s study abroad experience, particularly his conversations with Nelson, proved to be very transformative in Drake’s spiritual development.

An aspect of TJ’s spirituality that was influenced by his study abroad experience was his understanding and confidence in his own faith. After studying abroad, TJ noted, “I really
understand my faith and where I'm at. I believe in my strength to not change where I'm at and with that makes [my faith] more open to share with others when they ask me because I'm more confident in what I believe.” TJ noted that he “is more open to talking about faith with people, to saying yes, I am a Christian, and this is what I believe in.”

Rachel indicated that her study abroad experience qualified her to give a testimony to the congregation.

Your parents can tell you, “You don't need to drink because these consequences will happen.” But sometimes you have to touch the fire in order to understand why you shouldn't touch the fire. And in church, they tell you if you haven't gone through anything, you can't give a testimony, and now that I've been through a trial, I can testify and say this is what happened to me…I learned this in return. And I now I understand why the pastor says this all the time.

Rachel’s study abroad experience was a trying experience that helped give her the confidence to be able to give a testimony at church. Rachel was able to elaborate about the subject of her testimony.

My testimony would be…you can do anything you put your mind to. You literally have to go through the dirt in order to come out on top. Not having communication, that’s difficult. Not having the access you had before, that’s very difficult. Through all of that, you learn and you pick up things and you apply it to yourself. Then afterwards you can spread what you gain.

Rachel said her testimony would be relevant for her congregation because it relates back to church teaching. “One of the many things they teach you in church…once you have something, you’re supposed to share, give to the poor, and help God’s people out.” Rachel indicated that
she can “give back” by sharing her experience with other students who are considering embarking on a similar experience. Rachel also stated that her testimony would also serve as a way to share her struggles. “That’s important in Christianity, I think in all denominations, giving back, testifying, you have to speak up because people won't know your struggle.”

This increased confidence to have spiritually-related conversations after study abroad is a direct reflection of the strengthened spiritual identity of the participants. This is meaningful because this increased confidence in spirituality led participants to confirm that they were willing to take tangible steps after studying abroad to enact their spirituality and connect in a meaningful way with others.

**Connection to Research Questions**

This study investigated the following main research question: How do students describe the influence of study abroad on their spirituality?

Additionally, the following research sub-questions helped to guide design of the study:

a) What experiences while studying abroad do students describe as influential on their spirituality?

b) How do students describe the influence of participating in spiritually-related experiences while abroad on their spirituality?

c) What sorts of university-sanctioned study abroad-related activities do students describe as influencing their spirituality?

d) How do students enact their spirituality after returning to the United States from their study abroad experience?

e) What differences in how these students enacted their spirituality occurred after returning to the United States?
In the following sections, each of these research questions is addressed and connected with relevant findings.

**Influence of Study Abroad on Student Spirituality**

This study sought to explore how students described the influence of studying abroad on students’ spirituality. From the data, six major themes emerged to indicate how students described the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality. Students became more aware of their own and others’ spirituality. Specifically, as participants experienced other countries’ religious and spiritual practices in context and participants compared the religious practices of the host country to those in the U.S. Spiritual coping was utilized by many participants in reaction to the stress, homesickness, isolation, and loneliness they felt while abroad. Spiritual coping took many forms for participants. Participants enacted spiritual and religious practices while abroad to help cope with being abroad or to enact their spirituality. Participants enacted their spirituality in a variety of ways. Five participants prayed, two participants listened to gospel music, and three students sought quiet places to reflect. All participants also connected with other students, host families, and friends through spiritual dialogue. Every participant indicated having conversations abroad around spiritual questions. These conversations were very significant for some participants and less so for others. Participants were motivated to have these conversations for a variety of reasons. There was a variety of reasons why students engaged in spiritual dialogue. Talking about spirituality was a way for them to connect with others. Additionally, discussing spiritual questions was a direct result of experiencing spiritual practices in a different country. Finally, five participants expressed their spiritual identity was strengthened after studying abroad. Students indicated a strengthening of spirituality in a variety
of ways. One student felt more confident in his spiritual belief, another felt his spirituality was more private and personal, and two others felt more confident that God existed.

**Specific experiences that influenced student spirituality.** The two most noteworthy study abroad experiences that influenced student spirituality were conversations about spiritual questions and the isolating feeling of being out of the U.S. away from family and friends. Every participant engaged in spiritual dialogue with other students or members of the host family. These conversations ranged in sharing of different spiritual practices, debating the tenants of different faiths, questioned about their spiritual practices, or sharing personal stories around their spiritual journey. Megan discussed religious beliefs with a fellow Muslim student. James’ conversations with other students involved comparing and contrasting spiritual practices in Spain versus those in the U.S. David and Pepper had conversations about spiritual journeys. TJ and Rachel discussed spirituality and religion within the context of their host families’ home. Spiritual conversations were present in every student’s experience. It was a way for them to connect with and deepen their understanding of others.

Studying abroad can be a very isolating experience. Every student expressed some feelings of loneliness, culture shock, and homesickness. These feelings of isolation moved them to cope with these feelings through their spirituality. Pepper indicated that she connected with God because there were no familiar human connections to be made. Spiritual coping took many forms including prayer, listening to gospel music, and visiting quiet spaces for reflection.

**Influence of spiritually-related experiences on spirituality.** Five participants expressed that there were some spiritually-related experiences that influenced their spirituality. Moreover, these participants expressed that the influence of spiritually-related experiences increased their awareness of their own and others’ spirituality. Learning about and observing a
specific faith in context, and comparing faith practices in the host country with the U.S. offered opportunities for comparison, learning, and self-reflection. For example, Megan observed people practicing Islam in a predominantly Muslim practicing country. This experience caused her to compare these practices to those in the U.S. and encouraged her to reflect on her own experiences with Christianity in the U.S. Some participants, Rachel for example, were influenced by observing other people enacting their own spirituality in cathedrals or in animist ceremonies. Participants observed people practicing their faith in a different way, usually in a more devout custom, than what she was accustomed, causing her to reflect on her own faith practices.

Spiritual environments, such as cathedrals and church services, offered participants opportunities to cope with the feelings brought on by being away from family and friends. Being in a country that practiced a religion familiar to Pepper helped her feel more comfortable and accepted. Pepper did not typically experience this with most of the other U.S. students. TJ sought out time alone in Cathedrals because it gave him a peaceful escape and reminded him of being in nature.

Influence of university-sanctioned activities. There were a number of different activities organized by the university that influenced student spirituality. In addition, this research question was broadened to include the structure and organization of the various study abroad programs. Every student participated in organized excursions to nearby sites. For example, Rachel traveled to a neighboring village and observed the village chief performing a religious ritual. Pepper visited the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Megan toured a mosque and was able to ask questions from a member of the staff, and several participants visited Catholic cathedrals. Although these excursions did not incite most participants to engage
in spiritual practices while visiting the site, most students indicated that these trips allowed them an opportunity to observe other religious practices and to compare what they were experiencing with practices in the U.S. For example, Megan was impressed with the devout faithfulness of the Muslim people in Morocco. She felt they were very genuine and authentic with their spirituality, something she believed was lacking in her observations of Christians practicing in the U.S. These comparisons led some participants to begin reflecting on and understanding their own spirituality.

The experience living with a host family was another meaningful university-organized activity that was influential for some participants. Three participants, TJ, James, and Rachel, lived with host families while abroad. Both TJ and Rachel engaged in conversations around spirituality with their host families. They also all made note of the religious practices that the family engaged in or discussed. Although James and Rachel lived with host families, they still felt isolated and alone. The other three participants, Megan, Pepper, and David, lived in residence halls with other students. All three of them engaged in spiritual conversations with other students living nearby. All three also expressed some sort of annoyance and disengagement from some of the other students studying abroad. Living in a single room and not connecting with most of the other students exacerbated their need for spiritual coping. All three of these students living in residence halls engaged in spiritual dialogue with students living nearby. For David, a conversation with Nelson, his resident assistant, proved to be one of the most spiritually influential aspects of this study abroad experience.

**Manifesting spirituality after studying abroad.** Participants indicated that they enacted their spirituality less after returning home compared with when they were abroad. Most attributed this decrease in spiritual enactment to having less need to cope with the feelings of
homesickness and isolation. Prior to his study abroad experience, discussing spirituality with others was an important aspect of how Drake enacted his spirituality. One of the ways that Drake has enacted his spirituality since returning from London is through conversations with others around spiritual questions. After studying abroad, Drake claimed that he had more confidence to have these conversations, particularly with people who have strong faith convictions. James practices his spirituality through prayer as a way to enact his spirituality. After James’ study abroad experience, he attended church services while he was at home and continued his daily prayers. After returning from his study abroad experience, James indicated that he prays about the same but listens to gospel music less often. The overarching aspect of Megan’s spirituality is engaging in a community that accepts her and makes her feel good. After her study abroad experience, Megan was more committed to learning about and advocating for people of the Muslim faith. Megan’s growth in this area then helped her to enact her values of connectedness and inclusivity better when she returned, as she gave examples of entering into meaningful dialogue with others who express prejudice against Muslims. Rachel preferred to enact her spirituality through listening to songs rather than reciting formal prayers. Part of enacting Rachel’s spirituality involved interaction with others, including praying with others. After her study abroad experience in France and Burkina Faso, Rachel indicated that she does not rely as much on formal prayer or religious services to enact her spirituality. Rachel expressed some desire to put forth more effort to pray and seek out services but indicated some reluctance. Although TJ sought out formal services while at college, meditation and reflection tied with spirituality was prevalent in TJ’s description of enacting his spirituality. After returning to the United States, TJ indicated that he attended church services about as frequently
as he did prior to studying abroad. TJ also indicated that he has continued to seek out quiet spaces to reflect and think about life.

**Differences in manifestations of spirituality after studying abroad.** A major difference in how students manifested their spirituality after studying abroad was strengthening of spiritual identity. The strengthening of spiritual identity emerged as a major theme of this study. Spiritual identity is used as a descriptor for how students understood their spirituality. After studying abroad, Drake and Megan indicated more confidence and comfort with their belief in God. The increased confidence empowered Drake to talk about his spirituality and beliefs with others. Prior to studying abroad, Drake avoided discussing his spirituality with devout Christians for fear of being judged. However, after his study abroad experience, Drake felt empowered to engage in a spiritual conversation with one of his most devoutly Christian friends. Rachel’s experience abroad increased her understanding and awareness of God. This newfound awareness also gave Rachel confidence to give a testimony at her church. TJ described his spirituality as being more personal and private after returning from France. Instead of seeking out public venues to enact his spirituality, he was now more apt to enact his spirituality in private and away from formal church services. Finally, James indicated that he had more initiative to practice his faith. The participants all indicated that some aspect of their spirituality was strengthened because of their study abroad experience.

**Overview of Participants and Themes**

Another way to communicate the results of this study is to connect the major themes with each participant. This perspective enabled me to identify patterns among themes and participants. The following table (Table 3) illustrates an overview of what themes were present for each participant.
The two themes present for every participant were (a) awareness of own and others’ religious practices and (b) connecting with others through spiritual dialogue. These two themes are connected in that they both involve participants connecting with people around them, either through observation or through conversation. Both themes can be present for participants without them enacting or reflecting on their own spirituality. Moreover, both of these were the only two themes present for Megan. While confirming the findings of this study with Megan, she noted that she was the “outlier” in this study because only two of the themes applied to her. She concluded that most of the themes did not apply to her because, “I think it is just because I am not a very spiritual person.” In our initial conversation, Megan communicated that she was frustrated with her church for a variety of reasons. Megan was disillusioned with the church because she did not appreciate how her congregation supported her family when her mother died. She also was disillusioned with the church for not accepting her because of her sexual orientation. Megan was more interested in the intellectual and philosophical aspects of
spirituality—without incorporating the personal and internal aspects of spirituality. Alternatively, the other five participants described themselves as spiritual or religious prior to studying abroad. These participants also had a more spiritually impactful experience while studying abroad, in part, because they identified as religious or spiritual prior to studying abroad. The only other theme not present for at least five participants was “effect on dialogue with others.” In addition to Megan, Pepper and James also did not express an increased desire, confidence, or qualification to speak about their spirituality after studying abroad. I suspect Pepper experienced no change because she was actively speaking about spirituality prior to studying abroad. Megan’s conversations with her friend Victor were not very different from conversations she engaged in while in the U.S. Of all the participants, James’ spiritual dialogue was minimal while abroad. James only briefly mentioned conversations he engaged in while abroad and he expressed that they were not very profound or meaningful for him.

**Conclusion**

All six participants in this study shared many experiences related to how their study abroad experience influenced their spirituality. This chapter presented the six key themes: awareness of own and others’ religious practices, spiritual coping, enacting spiritual and religious practices while abroad, connecting with others through spiritual dialogue, strengthening spiritual identity, and effect on dialogue with others. These findings were all supported by various subcategories containing thick descriptions.

Awareness of own and others’ religious practices involved participants experiencing faiths in a different context and comparing religious practices to those in the U.S. These comparisons encouraged participants to become more self-aware of their own religious practices. Many students felt isolated, homesick, and uncomfortable while studying abroad. Five
participants utilized spiritual coping techniques to deal with the feelings associated with being in a different country, away from the familiarity of the U.S., and away from family and friends. In part because of spiritual coping, participants engaged in various spiritual and religious practices while abroad. These practices included praying, listening to gospel music, and seeking out quiet places to reflect. Some of these practices were techniques to cope with being abroad. Others were practices that participants continued while they were abroad. All participants engaged in spiritual dialogue while they were abroad. These conversations were an important activity to help students connect and learn with others. These discussions were with fellow students, host families, people from the host country, and students living in the same community. All but one student indicated that their spiritual identity was strengthened because of studying abroad. Students indicated they became more comfortable and confident with their spirituality. One student indicated his spirituality was more personal and private. Three students indicated they felt more confident discussing their spirituality with others because of their strengthened spiritual identity. This confidence was a direct result of their study abroad experience. Overall, these findings are important to gaining a better understanding of how these students described in the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore how six college students described the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality. This concluding chapter provides a discussion of the findings of this study through connections with extant literature, implications for practice, implications for future research, and finally a reflection of the process of constructing this study.

Connections to Extant Literature

This study was grounded in the idea that spirituality was an important aspect of character development. Astin and Antonio (2004) defined character as “the values and behavior as reflected in the ways we interact with each other and in the moral choices we make on a daily basis” (p. 56). Astin and Antonio utilized this definition to develop six outcome measures to evaluate the character development of students. These six outcomes included civic responsibility, cultural awareness and sensitivity, volunteerism, importance of raising a family, religious beliefs and convictions, and understanding of others (p. 4). Several of these outcomes of character development were present in this study. A major theme of this study was awareness of own and others’ religious practices. Religious practices can be an important aspect of understanding different cultures. Religious beliefs and convictions were also an aspect of character development outlined by Astin and Antonio. In this study, students employed spiritual and religious practices to cope with being abroad. Participants also connected with others through spiritual dialogue. Character development outcomes, as described by Astin and Antonio, were evident in the findings of this study.

This study found that participants engaged in conversations around spirituality and spiritual questions when they were abroad. Suggested by these findings, studying abroad
provides more opportunities for these conversations. Astin et al. (2011) found that “one of the
greatest—if not the greatest—impediments to students’ thoughtful exploration of life’s so-called
big questions are time pressures” (p. 44). Studying abroad gives students the opportunity to
leave typical time pressures and normal schedules. Conversations about spirituality were
commonplace with many of the participants. Talking about spiritual beliefs and perspectives,
and asking spiritually related questions were elements of these conversations.

Half of the participants indicated that their study abroad experience influenced their
spiritual dialogue with others. Drake and TJ felt more confidence discussing their spirituality
with others after returning home from studying abroad. Rachel felt that she was qualified to give
a testimony after her experience abroad. Similar to connecting with others through spiritual
dialogue, Drake and TJ spent time having conversations about spiritual questions. These
conversations eventually led to both men feeling more confident about having similar
conversations in the future. Parks (2000) stated that dialogue “involves a good deal of listening,
desire to understand, and willingness to be affected—to be moved and informed, and to change
one’s mind” (p 142). Through the process of dialogue, TJ and Drake indicated that the dialogue
they engaged in while abroad affected them. Parks indicated that “how one makes meaning is
composed and recomposed in this process [of dialogue]” (p. 142). Moreover, Parks stated,
“Genuine dialogue affects us and alters the trajectory of our becoming” (p. 204).

Students who studied abroad increased their awareness of their own and others’
spirituality. Astin et al. (2011) posited that studying abroad typically exposes students to people
who are different from themselves and this may encourage them to engage in self-reflection.
Moreover, Tisdell (2003) suggested that “increased contact with those culturally, religiously, and
spiritually different from ourselves means that we are likely to have more opportunity to have
cross-cultural learning experiences” (p. 164). Additionally, Tisdell noted that these cross-cultural experiences “can affect both our spirituality in the ways we ‘claim a sacred face’ and our cultural understanding” (p. 164). This is consistent with the findings of the present study. Five of the participants indicated that they engaged in reflection about their own spirituality after being exposed to people with different cultural backgrounds practicing different beliefs.

Moreover, in their study of religious and spiritual growth of college students, Astin et al. (2011) affirmed that studying abroad increases students’ religious struggle. This struggle is attributed to studying abroad and encountering cultural diversity. These experiences “raise students’ consciousness about differences and inequalities but also encourage them to think globally and to appreciate how interconnected we all are. Under such conditions it is perhaps to be expected that some students will begin to question traditional beliefs” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 107). This questioning can “lead to deeper self-exploration and, at the same time, become more aware and more accepting, of the diversity of religious traditions” (p.107). These findings found by Astin et al. are consistent with the findings of this research study. Participants engaged in self-reflection as a result of experiencing cultural and religious diversity. All of the participants also indicated an increased appreciation and admiration of other faiths and spiritual traditions.

Astin et al. (2011) found that studying abroad enhanced equanimity, or the “the extent to which a person “feels at peace or is centered, is able to find meaning in times of hardship, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of her/his life” (p. 20). This also is consistent with findings of the present study. At one point in their study abroad experience, participants expressed feeling homesick or isolated as a result of studying abroad. Participants utilized spiritual coping as a way through work through the hardship of being away from familiarity. Five of the participants found meaning through their hardships.
A significant outcome of studying abroad, according to Astin et al. (2011), is that studying abroad led to gains in ecumenical worldview.

[Ecumenical worldview is] the extent to which the student is interested in different religious traditions, seeks to understand other counties and cultures, feels a strong connection to all humanity, believes in the goodness of all people, accepts others as they are, believes that all life is interconnected, and that love is the root of all the great religions. (Astin et al., 2011, p. 21)

The findings of the present study are consistent with Astin et al.’s previous study. One of the most consistent themes across all six cases was the increased awareness of others’ spirituality. Students engaged in conversations with people of different faiths to learn more about their traditions. In turn, the participants engaged in reflection about their own spirituality as a result of this comparison.

Five of the six participants indicated that studying abroad strengthened their spiritual identity. Being in a new place, talking with new people, and gaining membership in new communities, contributed to much of this growth. These findings are consistent with what Parks (2000) stated were experiences that promoted spiritual development. “Our location, social context, and general surroundings play a central role the formation of meaning and faith” (Parks, 2000, p. 88). Parks stressed the importance of membership in a community in promoting spiritual development. Community membership usually involves establishing and maintaining relationships with others. Students who enter new countries face new cultures, people, and cultural contexts. As students encounter new communities, Parks asserted that students encounter others who begin to challenge previously held assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives. In the context of this study, students reconciled what they previously thought and believed with
the new realities and perspectives they encountered while abroad. There are many new communities offered to the participants who studied abroad. They engaged with other students, members of their host families, and other people from the host country on various topics. Participants also encountered different spiritual experiences (e.g., attending a tribal ceremony in Burkina). The students were faced with multiple opportunities to encounter others who contradicted their assumptions about who they were and what they believed. As Parks described, as these students sorted through these new experiences abroad, they began to make meaning of their study abroad experience.

According to Astin et al., service learning performed as part of a course, was found to be a “powerful means of enhancing students’ spiritual questing, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview” (p. 146). Service learning provides students an opportunity to transform theory into practice. During his study abroad experience in London, Drake took classes and held an internship at an agency that served people with mental disabilities. Although not an official service learning course, Drake’s internship was similar to a service learning experience because his courses corresponded to the work he was doing at the agency. The nature of the agency and the work Drake conducted could be viewed as a type of community service—particularly because the internship was unpaid. Drake did not directly indicate that his internship experience was influential on his spirituality. However, Drake described gains in the three aspects of spirituality found by Astin et al. to influence service learning (i.e., spiritual questing, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview). Drake shared that, as a result of studying abroad, he developed a new philosophy of life. Spiritual quest is defined as “attaining inner harmony, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20). Astin et al. described ethic of caring as the “commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, reducing pain
and suffering in the world…and making the world a better place” (p. 20). Drake indicated during our conversations that he enjoyed working at the agency in London because he was “trying to re-engage the disengaged…assisting the marginalized in the community.” Although Drake did not directly indicate that his internship was influential on his spirituality, aspects of his internship contributed to his experience and feelings abroad.

Students in this study utilized spiritual coping techniques to manage their feelings of isolation and homesickness. All participants felt overwhelmed, isolated, or homesick while they were studying abroad. These feelings of isolation and homesickness while abroad were not surprising based on current research on study abroad that found similar findings (Carlson et al., 1990; Hofta, & Pearson, 1997; McKeown, 2009). Although not entirely surprising that participants felt additional stress while abroad, for all but one of the participants, these feelings of isolation and homesickness served as a catalyst to employ spiritual coping techniques. This has not been found in previous literature.

Participants’ use of coping mechanisms in this study are consistent with this description of spiritual coping. Pargament found that people enacted their spirituality in different ways to cope with stressful situations. Spiritual coping is “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” as a response to stress (Pargament, 1997, p. 32). According to Pargament (1997), people utilized spiritual coping when they are faced with stressful situations and sought to make meaning of these experiences. Spiritual coping can take many forms, including prayer, meditation, and attending religious services. In his review of empirical research studies on many different groups of people struggling with different stressful life situations, Pargament affirmed that religion and spirituality are useful in helping people cope. He also offered that there are many different forms of religious and spiritual coping and clarified that some are more helpful
than others. However, Pargament found that every religious and spiritual “coping effort has a common end, the enhancement of significance” (p. 198). According to Pargament, this is accomplished by conserving or transforming significance. In other words, spirituality is both protected and maintained, or spirituality is changed. Five of the participants in this study utilized spiritual coping as a result of feeling homesick, isolated, and uncomfortable. These participants expressed that their spiritual coping affirmed their spiritual beliefs. For example, James prayed and listened to gospel music as a way for him to cope. James expressed that these practices were faith affirming and his belief in God was strengthened.

The findings of this study contributed to understanding about the connection between study abroad and spirituality. Students utilized spiritual coping techniques to manage isolation and homesickness while abroad. Although the extant literature covers spiritual coping extensively, this is the first study to situate spiritual coping techniques in the study abroad context. Gaining confidence to engage in spiritual dialogue as an outcome of spiritual coping while abroad is a unique finding. As a result of their experience abroad, these students demonstrated increasing confidence to engage in spiritual dialogue after returning to the U.S.

Implications for Practice

This study affirms the power of studying abroad as a meaningful and transformative experience. As described by the participants of this study, studying abroad led in several outcomes, such as strengthening spiritual identity and broadening awareness of own and others’ spirituality. This study also found that studying abroad provided opportunities for students to engage in conversations around spiritual questions and topics. These conversations, for some participants, proved to be quite meaningful and consequential. Spiritual coping aided students in dealing with their homesickness and feelings of isolation in a foreign place. Studying abroad
should be encouraged for a variety of reasons and the findings of this study support a new rationale for studying abroad that has previously not been explored. The outcomes of studying abroad were discussed in the review of literature. These outcomes included improving competency in a foreign language, developing intercultural competence, and increasing cognitive ability. Within the literature, little support was offered to support studying abroad as a catalyst for influencing student spirituality. Practitioners can utilize the findings of this study as new support for encouraging students to study abroad.

The construction of a meaningful study abroad experience may include intentional opportunities to engage in spiritual dialogue. As many participants explained, discussing study abroad experiences while they occur can be a very powerful tool for reflection and growth. These conversations also led students to learn more about cultural aspects of the host country. In addition to gains in spiritual identity, these conversations can also lead to increases in self-awareness and cultural competency. Study abroad coordinators could design programmatic elements that foster dialogue between students and between students and people from the host country. These elements may tie to requirements in the course or encouraged as part of the pre-departure orientation.

Universities may encourage host families to have ongoing conversations with the students about various topical areas that delve deep into the student’s experience. Host families could be educated that their role in the student’s life is more than just a place to sleep. These students’ host families have the opportunity to engage their student in a multitude of ways, including ways to support, educate, counsel, or engage in dialogue. Regarding ways host families can offer support, Love and Talbot (1999) argued, “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 counsel, or a misdirected referral” (p. 372).

Host families, instructors abroad, and trip coordinators could also help educate students on their cultural and spiritual understanding of the host country. Every participant in the study discussed their experiences observing the people in the host country practicing their faith. Some of these observations led to inaccurate cultural and religious assumptions. It would be to the students’ advantage if they were prepared and educated to have a better understanding of the cultural and religious practices and traditions of the host country.

Instructors in the host country could be encouraged to incorporate group or partner conversations at the start of each day to reflect on the meaningful experiences from the day prior. This could be connected to cultural courses the student is taking abroad as a way to connect their experience to the course content. Instructors in language courses could incorporate conversations about meaning-making as a way to practice the language being taught.

None of the students indicated their experiences in the classroom while abroad were influential on their spirituality. The experiences inside the classroom could be a contributing factor to influencing their spirituality but none of the students mentioned any significant experiences that occurred in the confines of their coursework. Some courses students take while abroad, such as a language course, may not naturally encourage reflection or contemplation. However, some courses, such as cultural courses, could incorporate more opportunities for reflection and opportunities to learn more about the religious and spiritual practices of the host country. It is important to realize that some of the courses students take while studying abroad might be offered to students from various universities. Some students studying abroad might
take courses from a university in the host country with other students from the host country. These courses are not likely to incorporate these added reflection opportunities.

Most students also described their peers as being very preoccupied with the social aspects of being abroad (i.e., drinking and partying). Although this autonomy can provide valuable learning experiences, it also puts pressure on the student to be motivated to engage in meaningful experiences. Most of the participants chose to seek out experiences that other students were not engaging in. For example, Pepper intentionally sought out different experiences, such as visiting local markets and exploring historical parts of Krakow, while her fellow classmates spent much of the week partying. A suggestion for future practice is to assign some class points or credit to experiences outside the classroom as a way of encouraging students to engage in the extracurricular impactful experiences. These experiences could be visits to places of cultural importance, such as local places of worship, or meaningful activities, such as spiritual rituals. For relevant courses, instructors could assign reflective essays to encourage students to connect these experiences with the content in the course. This added requirement could help motivate students to take advantage of the cultural experiences that they might otherwise miss.

During a study abroad experience, practitioners could emphasize the importance of engaging in the daily life of the people in the country. This probably will include engaging in or at least observing the spiritual practices of the host family. In a country with diverse spiritual identities represented, opportunities should be given to students participate or observe various spiritual practices. Pepper indicated that they had so many excursions that she spent little time with the host family on the weekends. Perhaps host families could be given some more time to involve their student in the family’s daily life.
This study also affirms the power of cross-cultural learning that takes place while studying abroad. The increased awareness of own and others’ spirituality supports this claim. Within this study, several students offered examples when they engaged in activities of a spiritual nature that broadened their cultural understanding. Many students compared their experiences in the host country to the U.S. My conversations with them focused on instances related to spirituality but nonetheless the comparisons led to powerful observations how the U.S. is similar or different from the host country. These observations often led participants to reflect on how these comparisons reflected the values and culture of the U.S. and the host country. Additionally these participants engaged in self-reflection about their own beliefs and practices. For example, Pepper noted that people in Poland were more congruent and authentic with their faith practices compared with people in the U.S. This led Pepper to reflect on her own spiritual practices and the extent to which her own spirituality was congruent with her faith practices. Additionally, some of the development that took place was a direct result from conversations with people in the host country. This cross-cultural dialogue provided students opportunities to ask questions, gain a deeper understanding of daily spiritual life and an appreciation for previously misunderstood aspects of the culture. Several students were surprised to find the people in their host family tended to practice their spirituality in a more genuine and authentic way than they were accustomed to in the U.S.

Excursions were catalysts for several participants to engage in and learn about different spiritual beliefs. Moreover, these excursions offered opportunities for students to engage in reflection on their own personal beliefs. Trip coordinators should spend time developing and organizing intentional excursions to various religious and spiritual destinations. Sometimes students saw the religious destinations (e.g., Catholic cathedral) as merely a historical site and...
appreciated the beauty of the art. They did not find these places to be inherently spiritual for them. However, some participants noted that observing other people enacting their faith in these locations was particularly impactful. Excursions can offer opportunities for more than sight-seeing and visiting historical locations. Excursions can be meaningful experiences that lead to growth in a variety of different ways, including by not limited to spirituality. Visiting new spiritually-related locations while abroad offered some participants a unique opportunity to engage in a new cultural and spiritual experience.

Excursion destinations do not need to be inherently spiritual, but may offer opportunities to explore spirituality. For example, visiting a concentration camp might not be considered a spiritual destination like a church, mosque, or synagogue, but one participant framed her visit to Auschwitz as a powerful spiritual experience. Places that hold significant historical meaning or significance—especially those that elicit strong emotions should be considered as possible excursion destinations. These may include battlefields, memorials, or sites of tragic events to name a few.

Another practice to include in preparing students to study abroad is a list or guide of places to explore or activities to engage in when abroad. This may include sitting alone in a cathedral, attending religious services with the host family, or engaging in conversations with someone of a different faith or perhaps of someone with the same faith practiced in a different cultural context. There are many practices that participants in this study described as being particularly meaningful. Many of these places and activities were experienced outside the confines of their structured study abroad program. Assuming that the voluntary nature of these experiences does not factor into the meaning-making nature of these opportunities, these experiences could be particularly meaningful.
Finally, students could be prepared to consider the effect of studying abroad on their spiritual health. This could take many forms. Along with methods to remain physically and emotionally healthy, spiritual coping strategies to maintain spiritual health while abroad could be offered. Pre-departure meetings could include techniques for spiritual coping. Perhaps in the packing list given to participants, program administrators should include music for reflection, religious texts, or other items that students might utilize to practice their spirituality. Every participant experienced some sort of homesickness and isolation. Giving students preliminary information on ways they might cope with these feelings could enhance the student experience.

This recommendation is similar to a program developed for the U.S. Army. Pargament and Sweeney (2011) developed a spiritual fitness component to the U.S. Army’s Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program (CSF). Spiritual fitness was included as one of four vital components to a soldier’s health. The U.S. Department of the Army (2006) described the rationale of including a spiritual dimension to the CSF program: “To assist in accomplishing its premier task of instilling an indomitable spirit and resilience in members of the organization as they face the challenges of carrying out their duties and living day to day” (p. 5). Pargament and Sweeney argued that the research on spirituality emphasized “the importance of the spiritual dimension to any program designed to facilitate resilience, health, and well-being” (p. 63). The appropriateness of utilizing spirituality to help students cope while abroad might be similarly argued.

Although spirituality can include secular perspectives, people often only associate spirituality with divinity or religion. In response to this issue, Stewart, Kocet, and Lobdell (2011) argued:
Throughout its history, higher education in the United States has shifted from one rooted in religion to one that is charged with educating a diverse population with multiple beliefs, practices, and philosophies. Therefore, institutions must reintegrate meaning and purpose into a holistic picture of student development. Yet this reintegration must acknowledge and honor the diverse and multiple ways that faculty, staff, and students follow their paths toward meaning and purpose. (p. 17)

Educating participants about spiritual coping techniques can be appropriate if it is presented in a way that is inclusive of the various ways students enact their spirituality. In addition to spiritual coping techniques, institutions may offer additional non-spiritual coping techniques to ensure all students are included and prepared for the experience.

In addition to spiritual coping techniques, students preparing to study abroad could be equipped with other coping techniques that are not inherently spiritual. For example, students could be encouraged to keep a journal to capture what they did and how they felt. Like TJ, many students enjoy being active outdoors to relieve stress. Students could be encouraged to engage in exercise while abroad or perhaps walking or hiking in nearby parks. Students could also be encouraged to establish plans in advance for free time while abroad in an attempt to prepare students for feeling isolated. Pepper felt less isolated when she had established plans with her friend and scheduled trips on the weekends. This study highlighted the strong emotions students experienced abroad feeling overwhelmed, isolated, and homesick. Although spiritual coping techniques offered comfort to most of the participants, Megan, who described herself as “not very spiritual,” did not utilize spiritual coping techniques while abroad. To be inclusive of all students, universities should offer a multitude of techniques to help students appropriately cope while abroad.
As stated previously, several participants mentioned that their peers frequently engaged in problematic alcohol use. There are varieties of reasons why these students frequently drank and partied in excess. In most countries where these students studied abroad, the legal drinking age was lower than in the United States. This experience abroad offered many students the opportunity to drink legally for the first time. According to Ham and Hope (2000), for college students, “high levels of stress were related to higher levels of drinking problems” (p. 740). Every participant described studying abroad as a stressful experience. Ham and Hope concluded that, “One’s ability to cope…may mediate the relationship between stress and drinking. If one has deficiencies in coping skills, then the individual may be more likely to use alcohol as a coping device” (p. 740). This further supports the practice of offering alternative coping mechanisms for students who are studying abroad.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study investigated how six undergraduate students described the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality. To qualify for this study, students were expected to study abroad for at least eight weeks and earn college credit. Eight weeks is considered a short-term study abroad experience. The duration of the study abroad experience could have contributed to the influence of the experience on the participants. A longer study abroad experience (e.g., six months to a year) may offer different insights about the aspects of the experience that were most influential. Perhaps the spiritual coping that most participants utilized would subside the longer and more acclimated the students became. Additionally, a longer study abroad experience would give greater opportunity for the students to explore spiritual outlets that might be more comfortable for them. For example, six weeks may not be long enough to identify a place of
worship and start to regularly attend. I suggest future research explore the influence of a long-term study abroad experience on student spirituality.

An intentional aspect of this study was a focus on the faith background of each participant. Purposeful sampling was employed to maximize the variation of religious backgrounds of each participant. Although there was an effort to have diverse participants with regard to faith, there was still a lack of students from underrepresented traditions (e.g., Islam, Judaism, Eastern religions traditions, and atheism). Five participants identified as Christian and one identified as agnostic. Being from a non-Christian faith tradition may influence the outcome of this study. Christianity is the privileged faith background in the U.S. Some of the influence of study abroad was due to participants encountering non-Christian faiths abroad. A non-Christian student studying abroad may describe an altogether different influence on their spirituality. Future research could explore students from a wider variety of faith backgrounds. Alternatively, another study could investigate how students of the same faith tradition describe the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality. A researcher could explore what faith practices do students of the same faith enact while studying abroad. It could be interesting to investigate how students of the same faith background enact their spirituality abroad. This future study could be applicable to religiously-affiliated institutions and how these universities might encourage and prepare their students to study abroad.

Throughout this study, students indicated that the host country contributed to how their study abroad experience influenced their spirituality. Most of the countries that participants visited were located in Europe. Different parts of the world, such as countries in Africa, Asia, and South America could offer a significantly different study abroad experience. Study abroad destination may be a major contributing factor in how students describe the influence of studying
abroad on their spirituality. Most Asian and northern African countries practice non-Christian religions. Experiencing these different faith traditions could lead to even greater reflection and awareness for participants. Another aspect of the study abroad destination that could influence spirituality is how different the country is compared with the U.S. One of the participants remarked that France felt somewhat different from the U.S. but Burkina Faso was very different from the U.S. Students traveling in less economically developed countries could be exposed to much different experiences compared with the experience of studying in a country with similar living conditions to the U.S. A future research project could focus on the study abroad destination as a major contributing factor of influence.

Spirituality usually involves students engaging in self-reflection and contemplation about the world around them. Students who participated in this study all self-selected to participate and discussed their experiences before, during, and after their study abroad programs. I never asked and none of the students directly indicated that participating in this study influenced how they thought about or engaged their study abroad experience. However, the nature of my questions and the study required participants to engage in reflection about their spirituality while they were abroad. Because of the reflective nature of spirituality, I recommend that research studies inquire to what extent, if any, participating in research studies around issues of spirituality contributes to their experience or understanding of spirituality. These added questions may offer insight into the importance or influence of researchers prompting participants to reflect on an experience through a spiritual lens.

This study employed qualitative research methods to collect and analyze data from a sample of six students. From these findings, future research could investigate the generalizability of these findings utilizing quantitative research methods. A survey instrument
could be created to measure the frequency of spiritual coping, the frequency and nature of
spiritual conversations, perceived awareness of own, and others’ spirituality, and strength of
spiritual identity. This instrument could be administered before during, and immediately after
the study abroad experience. This methodology could be useful in controlling a number of
variables (e.g., study abroad location, duration, faith tradition, and demographic identifiers). A
future study could also utilize quantitative methods to investigate the role demographic
characteristics (e.g., race, SES, gender, university classification) mediated the effect of students’
study abroad experiences on their spirituality.

Two years after my first conversation with participants, I conducted my final round of
member checking through conversations with each participant. All of the participants shared
what they remembered to be meaningful experiences studying abroad, how they described their
spirituality after two years, the continued influence of their studying abroad experience, and
other reflections about the study. Drake, who initially identified as agnostic but after studying
abroad felt confident in his belief in God, said that he is regularly attending a Christian church.
Drake is not sure if he is Christian but definitely finds meaning being in a church community and
believing in God. Drake also indicated that he still communicates with Nelson, his RA from
London, and regularly updates Nelson where Drake is on his spiritual journey. James said that
he found it meaningful to reread his profile and he remembered how isolated he felt abroad.
James is still an active member in his church. Megan appreciated reading her profile and
remembering her study abroad experience. Megan joked that she was the “outlier” in this study
because several of the themes did not apply to her. Megan said, “I think it is just because I am
not a very spiritual person.” Megan still keeps in contact with several of the people from her
Semester at Sea experience and hopes to serve as a staff member for Semester at Sea near future.
She considers it one of the most impactful experiences of her college career. Pepper “loved” reading her profile and remembering her experience abroad. Pepper indicated that she has matured since studying abroad. Pepper also said was “less judgmental” now than when she was studying abroad. In our conversation two years after studying abroad, Pepper still vividly remembered how isolated she felt in Poland, especially during the first couple of weeks. She indicated that she forgot how she used prayer to cope but remembered after reading her profile. Rachel indicated that she is no longer as active in her faith as she was when she studied abroad. She indicated this was due to being busy in college and not anything related to studying abroad. She also indicated that she “never got around to giving a testimonial” at church. Rachel stated that she felt confidence in her qualification to give a testimonial but because she was not as active in her church she did not have an opportunity. Rachel also said she was far more grateful for her studying abroad experience, particularly to Burkina Faso, compared with how she felt when she just returned. Rachel gained a greater appreciation for her host family being two years removed from the experience. Finally, TJ said that his spirituality continued to be “more personal and private.” TJ indicated that he still continues to seek out quiet places in nature to reflect. They all agreed with the interpretation of the data and the findings but noted that some things changed and some things stayed the same after two years. A longitudinal study could investigate the long-term effects of students’ study abroad experience on their spirituality and development.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study support the claim that studying abroad is influential on students’ spirituality. Current literature on study abroad and spirituality substantiates many of these findings. These findings also support implications for practice and for future research.
I learned many things throughout the process of completing this dissertation and perhaps at times, the process seemed to be more important than findings and implications, for both participants and me. During the process, it became clear the importance of letting the students’ voice inform the construction of their experience. Moreover, it was only after countless hours poring over the transcripts of each participant that the themes slowly emerged. This process took time and patience and without either, I doubt the quality of this study would be maintained. Finally, trusting the process was a vital factor in this experience that should not be undervalued. Part of trusting the process was letting go of what I wanted to find, being okay with participants who did not always say and do everything I wanted them to, and working through the ambiguity of a qualitative research study.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Drake

Drake, a White man, never went with his family to church growing up. Both of his parents were raised Catholic but no longer identify as Catholic. “My dad is Hindu, Buddhist, very ‘nature-y’, focuses on energy in nature…in the universe. He never really imparted his beliefs on me until I got older and started asking questions. My mom, while Christian, never went to church, but believed in God.” Growing up, Drake’s family prayed at meals and this led Drake to assume that God was real. Drake observed, “We said prayers at meals. I guess as I was growing up I always assumed there was a god I guess because of that.” Drake indicated that he did not really care about his spirituality growing up. He attributed this to not having any profound event in his life to spark spiritual questioning. “I believed that there needs to be an event in a person’s life that focuses them on a spiritual question. In order to want them to develop spirituality more and that never really happened for me.”

Describing Drake’s Spirituality

Drake identified prior to his study abroad experience as agnostic because he was unsure if God existed or if there was something else after death. Drake described his uncertainty and where he is spiritually.

Where I am at now I think that there may be a god but also that there might not be and I can’t know. And I can’t know for a number of reasons and I am about what I don’t know. I guess that is my thing. I am going to throw out things that I don’t know and not sure about. If I pass away tomorrow, I am not sure if I will cease to exist.

Drake’s experience in college had a profound influence on his spirituality. His spirituality was affected by having relationships with college friends who challenged his thinking.
I want to clarify to you a lot of my spiritual searching didn’t happen until college. A lot of it stems from my relationship my sophomore year, and kind of reevaluating myself from that and after that, as well as experience with spiritual friends that I have met who impacted me and shared with me a global perspective, as well as their belief system with god or a higher power, and meaning making—that sort of thing.

Discussing spirituality with others was an important aspect of how Drake enacts his spirituality. Drake found these conversations as a way to enact his spirituality and a way for him to connect with others.

**Study Abroad**

Drake studied abroad in London, England during the summer between his junior and senior year for two months. He stayed in London after the program ended because the 2012 Summer Olympics took place while he was there and he wanted to attend some of the events. Drake participated in a program that required completion of an internship related to his major and required him to take a course. He earned six credits; three credits for a class about diversity in the international workplace and three credits for an internship. Drake interned at a community mental health center working with people with severe mental disabilities. Drake chose to study abroad because he wanted to experience something in addition to coursework. “I realized that I didn’t just want to take classes in a study abroad context—I was kind of classed out. I thought that I would value an internship better.”

While abroad, Drake lived in a residence hall with other students who were studying abroad—many of whom were students from the U.S. Drake was able to get to know his resident advisor, Nelson, who oversaw the hall. Nelson also developed a positive community in the residence hall where David lived while he was in London. “Nelson was all about bringing the
people in the house together. We had a community that other study abroad programs in other residence halls didn’t have as far as we were concerned.”

Drake’s internship was at the Area of Light Center for Recovery and Social Inclusion. This agency, located in a diverse area of London, gives additional support to and advocates for clients who are receiving mental services from local hospitals or community mental health centers. Drake described the agency as “trying to re-engage the disengaged. They were assisting the marginalized in the community.” Drake shared many stories about when he was working at the internship.

Drake said he primarily worked in the front office and was able to meet many of the clients. “We saw a lot of severe cases. I was sorting information through the databases, updating information, requesting information from the client’s care coordinators. I did a lot of structured things, but was still able to practice and gain experiences in developing rapport and showing empathy to the clients.”

Influence of Study Abroad on Student Spirituality

Drake’s experience studying abroad in London proved to be influential on his spirituality. Through several notable experiences that he described and being away from friends and family in the United States, Drake said that he is now more confident and comfortable in his belief in God. Upon reflecting on his study abroad experience, Drake stated, “I think more confidently now than before. I can say that I believe in God. I feel more comfortable in believing in something.” Another aspect of Drake’s spirituality that was influenced by his study abroad experience was his awareness of his belief in God. “I think I am more actively aware of my belief in God. It’s not like I believe in God any more so, but I am actively aware of it.”

Specific Study Abroad Experiences that Influenced Student Spirituality
One of the most notable experiences that influenced Drake’s spirituality was conversations he had with Nelson, his Resident Advisor (RA) in his residence hall. Drake noted that, “specifically speaking of spirituality, the Resident Advisor in my house had an impact.” Nelson was someone who Drake admired for his intelligence, personality, and passion for life. “My RA was from Ghana and was a biomedical engineering graduate student. Nelson was a really bright guy, someone who had an incredible passion and enthusiasm for life—always smiling.” Drake described one conversation with Nelson that was particularly impactful:

[Nelson] was very Christian and I had conversations with him—first informally and then very structured. One night everyone in the house for the most part went out on a Saturday night. It was 10pm, I was in the house with Nelson in the basement, and we just started talking. He was kind of talking about his beliefs and his communication with God. He asserted that it allowed him to do things that he would have never felt possible to do. I don’t remember exactly, but I started talking about some of the things I believe in and some of the experiences that shaped me. He said something that was really unique. I took that with me and I have integrated it in my spirituality. [Nelson] said, “I don’t know why sometimes things happen but I believe that when you are confronted with a challenge, when you are confronted with an obstacle, something that you can’t really make sense or deal with...maybe it presents you with some confusion, maybe it’s something you have never negotiated before, or something happens that gives you a lot of pain. I believe that those things—anything that you might dismiss otherwise—happen for a reason. Everything that happens, every challenge that you are confronted with, is something that you are supposed to learn from it.” That sadness or that pain happens to
you and that you are supposed learn from it and grow from it and that obviously was coming from a very spiritual place and that’s a huge distinction in my mind.

This conversation helped Drake conceptualize a different way of viewing divine predestination. Drake elaborated that he found this conversation to be very profound for him because it shifted his spiritual thinking about divine purpose.

Maybe I used to conceptualize challenges as something that I could learn from, or should learn from—not something I’m supposed to learn from. So that is something that I took away from the conversation. I think I told you before I believed in God but I’m aware that belief is something internal and that not everyone shares the same belief. People have a willingness to put their faith in something that maybe they don’t completely know or understand. That experience was actually really profound.

This conversation with Nelson surfaced several times throughout the interview as a pivotal moment during his study abroad experience. As explained by Drake, this conversation started a shift in the ways in which Drake understood his relationship with God and the influence God had in his life.

Drake experienced many hardships studying abroad that incited reflection around his spirituality. Drake experienced feelings of anxiety before and during his trip. “I think being away from friends, family, and home for an extended period of time, working in a different culture, being the only student from BG, it was certainly anxiety provoking.” Drake expressed nervousness about being away from family and friends many times before leaving for the summer. This fear of being cut off from those closest to him was particularly noteworthy because of the importance he placed on relationships. This fear led him to seek out friendships in his residence hall and connections at this internship.
In some of my closer friendships I developed [in London], we talked about spirituality and shared beliefs, but nothing that fundamentally changed my thoughts. It was cool to be able to have talks with people I had never met before. It reaffirms my ability to make close friendships because I think that discussing spirituality with people is really powerful and when people are comfortable talking openly about those types of things it allows for stronger friendships.

Discussing spirituality with others was vital for Drake in developing strong friendships with them. This was the case prior to Drake studying abroad and also was the case while studying abroad. Particularly noteworthy was how Drake utilized conversations around spirituality as a vehicle to get to know new people he meets to deepen their relationship.

In addition to the typical anxiety-provoking experiences that students have while studying abroad, Drake also found working at his internship somewhat overwhelming and difficult at times.

There were some days I would leave and feel like it was just really overwhelming. I would feel like what I did wasn’t meaningful or that the tasks that I did were insignificant, or that I didn’t do as well as I could have. So that would sometimes result in a rough experience.

Drake referenced many of these difficult experiences as influential on his spirituality after returning to the United States. While abroad, he turned to prayer as a way to cope when he reached a particularly low point in his experience.

While I was abroad, the first two weeks I didn’t pray at all. Then I got sick. I had an awful sinus infection and had a really rough week with classes and the internship and felt overwhelmed…I guess it may not have been realistic, but during that time, I prayed for a
week straight. Every night I just said, “Dear God, I hope that I make it through this experience, that I get better and my health improves, and that I find meaning and value in my internship.”

Drake noted that he uses prayer to cope when he is feeling downtrodden but wants to turn things around. “I think [prayer] is something that I do when I am lost a little, or feel generally down, as a way to refocus… it’s a way to communicate with God what it is that’s going on. It’s not asking for anything in particular. It’s just getting my thoughts and concerns out there, and refocusing on what’s important.” Drake noted that when he is feeling down he could find strength within himself by praying to God. “When I feel a little weaker that becomes more a realization and a reality that I can find strength within myself through communication with God.” Overall, the difficult situations that Drake experienced were triggers for enacting his spirituality.

**Manifesting Spirituality after Studying Abroad**

One of the ways that Drake enacts his spirituality since returning from London is through conversations with others around spiritual questions. After studying abroad, Drake claimed that he had more confidence to have these conversations, particularly with people who have strong faith convictions.

In terms of spirituality, I guess my talk with Nelson was really powerful in that it encouraged me to have more conversations with Christians or people who have very strong organized spiritual beliefs. I feel better about doing that because it went well and I learned something from it that I was able to integrate.

Drake developed confidence to discuss faith with those who have strong convictions, particularly devout Christians. As a result of this confidence, Drake engaged in a conversation with one of
his friends who Drake described as “judgmental” about Drake’s lack of Christian faith. “I felt that it was okay for me to talk about spirituality with her, which was something that I was really hesitant about doing before…We ended up talking and having a pretty powerful discussion about spirituality.” This was a particularly noteworthy conversation because prior to this discussion, Drake and his friend had never discussed spirituality. Drake often felt judged by his friend and did not want to bring up spirituality for fear of being judged. In his discussion with his friend, he shared what he believed:

I told her that I believed people would be judged individually based on the challenges in their lives and how they have tackled and worked to improve. Everyone’s circumstances are different and everyone is different, and that no one can possibly know all of the things that are affecting someone. Prodding them to make a certain decision, behave a certain way, or say a certain thing—I can’t judge. Then like we talked and I said “That’s it. I’m done talking about it.” But that was something we needed to talk about because we had not discussed spirituality prior to that. That was the only time we had talked about spirituality at all.

Drake’s conversation with his friend demonstrated his increased confidence in his ability to discuss spirituality.

**Differences in Manifestations of Spirituality after Studying Abroad**

There were several differences in how Drake manifested his spirituality after his study abroad experience. One of the most notable differences is how he views God. Prior to his study abroad experience, Drake described himself as agnostic and he stated that “I think that there may be a god but also that there might not be and I can’t know…If I pass away tomorrow I am not sure if I will cease to exist.” After his study abroad experience, Drake now describes his belief
in God differently—with more confidence and comfort. “I think more confidently now, than before, I can say that I believe in God. I feel more comfortable in believing in something.”

Another difference in how Drake manifested his spirituality after studying abroad was his increased confidence in speaking about spiritual questions with others—particularly those “who have strong organized beliefs.” His discussion with Nelson went very well and it helped him integrate a new spiritual philosophy into his life.

In terms of spirituality, I guess my talk with Nelson was really powerful in that it encouraged me to have more conversations with Christians or people who have very strong organized spiritual beliefs. I feel better about doing that because it went well and I learned something from it that I was able to integrate.

Drake’s comfort and confidence in discussing spirituality with others was demonstrated when he had a conversation with a close friend about spiritual beliefs. Prior to studying abroad, Drake avoided this topic for fear of being judged in the past but felt increased confidence to discuss his own beliefs. “I felt that it was okay for me to talk about spirituality with my friend which was something that I was really hesitant about doing before.” In his discussion with his friend, he shared what he believed:

I told her that I believed people would be judged individually based on the challenges in their lives and how they have tackled [them] and worked to improve. Everyone’s circumstances are different and everyone is different, and that no one can possibly know all of the things that are affecting someone.

Drake was not able to be as candid or open with his friend prior to studying abroad. It was only after studying abroad and having the conversation with Nelson that Drake felt comfortable with
this conversation. Drake’s conversation with Nelson had a lasting impact on how Drake approaches his spiritual perspective after studying abroad.

In spending time with Nelson, I think that, information, challenges, obstacles, when looking at them from the perspective that they happen for a reason, and there is something you’re supposed to learn from it, can be really powerful. It is reassuring that there is growth and that you can grow, and that there are things that happen to you that allow you to grow. Growth is not something that you actively seek. Certainly, I could go to the library, go to classes and study, but I’m talking about challenges like when you are confronted with a perspective that isn’t necessarily your own, or when a close friend dies, or you have a loss in the family, divorce, have to console a friend who has been abused. Those challenges, and relationships, those kinds of experiences that have to do with people are supposed to happen. I would say I believe that and that I am significantly more grateful and more appreciative of where I am today on a regular basis than I was before I left. So more appreciative and grateful and I certainly would say I’m more comfortable saying I believe in God more than when I left.

Drake’s study abroad experience influenced his spirituality in a number of different ways. During his study abroad experience, Drake utilized prayer and engaging in spiritual conversations as a way to cope with being away from family and friends. Having spiritual conversations with others, particularly Nelson, was very impactful. Overall, Drake’s study abroad experience caused Drake to become more aware of his spirituality. Although Drake initially identified as an agnostic, after his study abroad experience he indicated that he was confident in his belief in God.
James

James is a member of the Baptist church and his spiritual practice is directly linked to his family. “My family members have been Christian or baptized and have been going to Christian church so it was sort of like I was like born into that religion.” James has maintained his membership in the Baptist church despite sampling other Christian faiths. “I've been introduced to other churches of different beliefs such as an Apostolic Christian church.” James practices his spirituality by “praying and going to church.” James stated he does attend church services regularly when he is back home but does not attend services while he is at college. It appears that James does not seek out a church while at school because his home church is safe and comfortable. “I really haven't looked for a church home at school because I stick with my church-home back at home…I’m just more comfortable with my church-home back at home.”

James indicated that his faith is rooted in God’s plan. “The faith that I have and things that I do, how things should be done, and the reasons why things happen—it’s all in the plan that God has for us.” Although he indicated that God has a plan for him, he expressed that he has the free will to make the right choices. “My own free will comes in when I seek the opportunities that are available for me…it’s my free will to take on the right option or the right opportunity or to do the right thing or what I think is right.”

James practices his spirituality through prayer: “I pray alone and I pray about situations that I'm going through. I pray about keeping the faith in God.” James also indicated that he prays to stay connected to God when he is at school and not attending church services. “I keep praying, even though I'm apart from going to church, he still helps me believing in him.” Another aspect of James’ spirituality is that he often prays “that people start to have faith in the Lord who do not have faith in the Lord.”
Study Abroad

James studied abroad in Madrid, Spain for two months studying at a Spanish language institute. James also lived with a host family in Spain as a requirement of the study abroad program. His host family did not speak any English. Speaking Spanish with his host family contributed to his overall grade for the institute. James described a typical weekday while in Spain:

I wake up at about 7:30 in the morning to get ready. Then I walk to school…if I'm running late I'll catch the bus, if not I'll walk about a 30 minute walk to school. I'm at school from 9 all the way until 2:30. Then we come home from school at 2:30, we have a lunch with our host family and then we have a thing called a siesta, where you talk a nap, a good nap…I take a siesta till about 5, then I go meet my other classmates in the plaza…we just walk around, sightsee…then we come back home for dinner, which is at 9. Then we eat dinner and after dinner I shower and do homework, Skype people back home, get on a couple of social networks, check my email and things like that, do homework, and then do it all over again the next day.

On weekends, the students in the program go on excursions throughout Spain for the entire weekend with university staff members.

Influence of Study Abroad on Student Spirituality

A major influence on James’ spirituality while abroad was how uncomfortable he felt throughout his time in Spain. James used his faith, both praying and listing to Gospel music to cope with the discomfort and isolation he felt while abroad. “Talking to God…I feel like [God] and I have a connection…just talking to him. Also…Gospel songs.” James also indicated that he has more initiative to practice his faith after his study abroad experience. “I feel like the study
abroad experience it gave me more initiative just to practice my faith more and get stronger in my faith.”

James enactment of his spirituality through prayer and listening to gospel music while abroad helped him stay connected to the comfort of home. “Because of how I was feeling when I was there. I wasn't as comfortable for the most part, so that gave me some comfortability [sic]. It gave me something to calm my nerves.” James attributed this to being away from his home church.

It was different because at home I would have been going to church. So that’s where I would fulfill the experience of my faith by going to church. I wouldn't be as stressed or as worried at home on a day-to-day basis. I feel some type of comfort while I'm at home. That’s why the gospel music helped me with the comfortability [sic]. So [the frequency of listening to gospel music] wouldn't have been as much when I was at home unless a problem came up or I was feeling some type of way about something.

Studying abroad caused James to feel uncomfortable and isolated. James utilized various forms spiritual practices to cope with these negative feelings.

**Specific Study Abroad Experiences that Influenced Student Spirituality**

James noted that his spirituality was influenced by feeling uncomfortable, isolated, and homesick. There were several instances that contributed to an overall state of anxiety and worry for James.

I was kind of worried about a lot of things. Like I got sick a couple of times while I was there so I was worried about that. I hurt my foot a couple of times and I was just worried about what if something went wrong or what if I got lost or just any little thing was just like on my mind.
The amount of homework assigned while in Spain contributed to James’ feeling of discomfort. There were several instances when James discussed the amount of assigned homework. James also noted that he was overwhelmed by the amount of homework he was assigned. “Homework is just getting a little bit overwhelming.”

**Influence of Spiritually-Related Experiences on Student Spirituality While Abroad**

James indicated that he did not intentionally seek out spiritually-related experiences while abroad.

I wanted everything to be different while I was [in Spain]. I still have my beliefs and my faith that weren't changed, but as long as I experienced new things and saw different things, then why would I want to go somewhere where I know I can go back to when I'm home [in the United States]? When I'm [at home in the United States], I can't go [to new places in Spain].

James did not seek out spiritually-related experience, like going to church, because he did not want to spend his time in Spain on experiences that he could have in the United States. James’ faith, according to him, would not change regardless of his experiences in Spain. He prioritized new experiences over enacting his faith through church services.

**Influence of University-Sanctioned Study Abroad Activities on Student Spirituality**

As part of his study abroad experience, James participated in a number of required excursions to local religious sites. “We've been going on trips in different cities to cathedrals.” James indicated he did not pray in the cathedrals, but used the opportunities to observe. “[While in the cathedrals,] I wasn't in a spiritual moment to pray. I was just observing.” James also stated “[visiting the cathedrals] didn't change my aspect religiously but it just broadened my
knowledge on different beliefs and how they go about their beliefs.” The visits to cathedrals encouraged James to reflect on other faith traditions.

I've wanted to know more about their way of beliefs and how they view things…I feel that I have the same faith that I had before; it's just more of a working to know how other religions believe in the same God but in a different way.

James was able to describe specific examples of how different Christian faiths were similar and how they were different based on his observations in the cathedrals. “Some of the stories that are in the Bible are the same. Things that are different are the way that they pray or how they pray and that is different from what I'm used to or the things that I do.” James also observed that people praying in the cathedrals were committed to their faith.

People were so adamant… more adamant than how people back in the States are about their religions. [They were] more adamant about prayer and praising what they believed in. Going to the cathedrals and to church…is what they're more adamant about. I feel like people [in the United States] just say it more and things like that and not act more or go out more.

These observations led James to be more aware of the faith practices in Spain and more aware of how he practiced his religion.

**Manifesting Spirituality After Studying Abroad**

After James’ study abroad experience, he attended church services while he was at home and continued his daily prayers. “I go to church when I go home, not when I'm here at school. And then I just pray on a daily basis.” After returning from his study abroad experience, James indicated that he prays about the same but listens to gospel music less often. “It’s just been the
same as far as praying, but gospel music…I haven't really been listening to as much since I've been back.”

**Differences in Manifestations of Spirituality after Studying Abroad**

James noted that he has more initiative to practice his faith. “I feel like the study abroad experience gave me more initiative to practice my faith more and get stronger in my faith.” He attributed this new initiative to observing Spaniards practicing their faith and the culture shock he felt during his time abroad. “Because some of the things, some of the ways that [Spaniards] were going about their beliefs I didn't quite agree on.” There were some customs James did not understand and the people he asked refused to provide explanations. “[The people in the cathedrals] wouldn't even greet you if they were in there praying or even in the pulpit. They wouldn't even speak with you or anything like that so I felt like that was kind of rude.” James also indicated that the clothes they wore were different from what he had observed prior to studying abroad. “The men have on maybe a suit or pants and a slacks or something. But then they would have something on their head to cover from everybody…only when they were praying though.” James attempted to ask what the purpose of the head covering was but he was not provided an explanation. “I was confused as to why [they wore a head covering] and then when I tried to ask they were like ‘no’.” James indicated that his study abroad experience was a “life-shock” for him and gave him a new perspective. “[Studying abroad] gave me …life-shock. To just get out…look at things in a bigger aspect because [there is] more to everything than just the United States.” Before his study abroad experience James never examined his own faith or thought about how he practiced his faith. Being in a new culture exposed James to how other people practiced their faith. Although this caused James to feel disagreement and discomfort, these observations seem to empower James to grow stronger in his own faith.
This experience studying abroad provided James with an opportunity to see how the power of his own faith helped him through a difficult time. “The more faith I have, the better off I can be.” James determined that his faith in God was a way for him to cope with the difficult situations in which he found himself. This is illustrated in these statements: “[My faith in God] gave me a sense of security” and “God has me and I’ll be okay.” James also became more aware of his spiritual practices.

**Megan**

Megan, a White woman, was raised in a German Lutheran home and attended a Catholic high school. “My family is German and my dad is very into our church and I actually went to Catholic High school. Religion was very much a part of my childhood.” The overarching aspect of Megan’s spirituality is engaging in a community that accepts her and makes her feel good.

Since coming to college, Megan does not feel as close with the church as she did growing up. “Since coming to college … I have kind of veered away from the church a little bit.” Megan continued to identify as a Christian but acknowledged but her faith has changed since attending college. “I definitely still define myself as a Christian…my growth and development in college has led me to not identify with the church as much as I did when I was younger.” Megan attributed her initial shift away from the church to the events following her mother’s death during her first year in college. Megan encountered people from her church who, she believed, behaved disingenuously about their concern for her mother. According to Megan, these people called themselves Christians, but did not act in a Christian manner.

When my mom died, there was outpouring from people from the church who are like so sad and care so much about you and they are praying for you…I don’t really see that as being what Christianity is about. All of these people that I don’t even know are like “I
knew your mom so well and have prayed for her and all of the surgeries that she had when she was sick.” I was like “no you weren’t.” I was at home when all of this was going on. My mom had amputations when I was in high school. People from the church weren’t around. People didn’t care. I believe in integrity and I think that a lot of Christians pride themselves on being whole people who care for everyone and wanted to do the best that they can for people. But I don’t believe that the church that I grew up in—half of the people there are not like that.

This situation with the people from Megan’s church left her very frustrated and disillusioned about what it meant to be a Christian.

Megan’s church is opposed to her being in a relationship with another woman. She indicated that her church’s position on same-sex relationships also contributed to why she veered from her Christian faith tradition.

Since coming to college, I have come out as a lesbian. I have been with my partner for two and a half years. The church I grew up in, the Christian church that I am from and the Catholic high school that I went to, that is absolutely not ok. I know the legitimacy of my two year relationship is questioned and frowned upon and other relationships are not. That is also another reason why I have veered away from the church and don’t go unless I am with my dad or Christmas or Easter or that kind of thing.

In addition to her church disapproval, her father also disapproves of Megan’s sexual orientation. Megan said her father “is not happy” that she is a lesbian because “he believes that in order to be good [person]…you have to be a holy [person] of God. So he wishes that I was like that.”

Although her father is not supportive of her sexual orientation, Megan referred to him as a “great man”, and she only attends church services if she goes with him.
Megan believes “in living a whole life.” She indicated that she has core values that guide her thoughts, actions, and relationships. “I try really hard to [choose] the things that I am doing and the people who I hang out with based on what I believe, what I want for my life, and the things that I value.” She elected to participate in the Semester at Sea program because she wanted to have a “whole college experience.” She values “global understanding” and feels like she was not receiving a “global education” in Northwest Ohio.

Megan indicated that she initially thought she was at a disadvantage because she was from a Christian background. However, she later noted that values and meaning could be found in places beyond God. “I think a lot of times that I have thought of myself as doomed by the Christian upbringing that I have…but I think that there is so many more things beyond God that can give those things to you. Megan asserted that she finds meaning in relationships and experiences. “Strength comes from your relationships with the people and the things that you learn about yourself through interacting with others.” Megan shared that she found meaning in her college experience because she was afforded the opportunity to try new things and develop new relationships. “I really value my experience here at college…the things that I have done and the people that I have met and being able to explore my values give me meaning.”

Megan did not identify many activities that she has engaged in or sought out while at college that helped her practice her spirituality. There was one activity that Megan highlighted as a particularly impactful experience. Megan is a Safe Zone trainer and conducts trainings for students and staff. Some of these trainings lead to particularly emotional moments that give Megan a very positive feeling.

I am a safe zone trainer and I think that it has a lot to do with wholeness, meaning, and my beliefs about equality. It is something that I really like to do. I am always surprised
what people say and there is always someone who always comes out and says something that is gut wrenching or interesting or like a really good example of something. We talk about their religion and something like that. Someone always comes up with a good example of oppression in our society or someone says something about death and they talk about suicide or whatever. People cry during that workshop. It doesn’t happen every time but it happens sometimes and it just helps to feel really good about diversity, education, and teaching others about inclusion and equality and that kind of stuff. That is one thing that makes me feel really good.

The trainings are a way for Megan to connect with others and make a difference in their lives. It also leaves her with a very positive feeling because she was able to serve as a resource for others and provide an outlet for dialogue. This training in particular is important for Megan because it enacts her core values of equality and inclusion.

Study Abroad

Megan participated in a 9-week Semester at Sea program during the summer. She chose to participate in the Semester at Sea program because she wanted to gain a “global perspective.” She intentionally made the decision to study abroad in the Semester at Sea program because she wanted to grow from the new experience. She explained the reason she participated in the Semester at Sea program in the following passage:

The growing that I need to do in order to be comfortable with myself and to learn more about my values, what I want to do with my life, and the person that I want to be for my family and for work. I needed to do some things different…like get out of this environment before I leave for graduate school.
Studying abroad was also an opportunity that Megan felt that she might regret if she did not participate.

**Influence of Study Abroad on Student Spirituality**

Megan shared that her religious practices were not particularly influenced by her study abroad experience; however, Megan articulated several instances that were influential on her spirituality. Megan defined spirituality as value in relationships, interconnectedness, and inclusivity. The relationships Megan developed abroad were particularly meaningful. Additionally, Megan was able to learn about and witness people practicing other non-Christian religions. “[Visiting mosques in Turkey] just feels more spiritual because the people there are way more connected to their faith than Catholics will ever be.” Megan described how meaningful it was to witness Muslims practicing their faith in a far more committed and genuine way than she was accustomed to in the U.S. Christian context.

During Megan’s Semester at Sea experience, she traveled to Morocco, where a majority of the people practiced Islam. “In Morocco, you display your faith and your beliefs all day every day. Where here, [in the United States], we don’t do that as much.” Although Megan does not actively practice a faith tradition, witnessing people practice their faith in a way that aligned with her values of congruency and integrity helped her see more value in religious practice.

People take the time to live meaningful lifestyles other places that I don’t think that we do as much here. No matter if, it is religious or cultural, I think societies that care more about their faith are happier or seem to be.

Megan acknowledged that wholly practicing a faith could bring great meaning and purpose to some people. From her observations abroad, Megan understood why some people relinquished rights or acquiesced to oppressive practices because their traditions, either religious or cultural,
hold great meaning in their lives. “Even if we see that their religion is oppressive…it is ok with them because they care so much about it. They are willing to give up certain things so they can have this thing that means so much and makes them feel so good about their lives. That was cool.” These observations led Megan to reflect about her own beliefs: “I think that there are a lot of negative connotations with Christianity and Catholicism right now and I think that is why I struggle with [what I believe]. But being in a place where people are open about their religion definitely caused me to think that maybe I would want to start practicing again.”

Another aspect of Megan’s study abroad experience that was particularly notable was learning about faiths in context. Megan learned in context more about why people believe different tenants of their faith.

We studied the Mediterranean as we went to these places. I learned about the conflict between Christian people and Muslim people for thousands of years and I learned about the history and the fundamentals of where this stuff comes from. It’s more than just words and the places that you were and where it comes from…it is the significance of why people believe this kind of stuff…which gets lost thousands of years later.

This experience taught Megan “how much [she] didn’t know.” Megan noted that learning how much she did not know was important for her own belief structure. “Learning what you don’t know is something that needs to be done if you are going to practice anything and believe anything fully. I think that I never really believed what I was taught in Catholic girls’ school fully because you don’t understand where it comes from.” Learning about Islam while visiting places that are mentioned in Islamic texts helped Megan realize why she had difficulty connecting with what she was taught about her faith in school.
The experience traveling and studying abroad provided Megan an opportunity to reflect about where she is from and what she believes.

If you are ever going to understand where you are from then you need to see it from a different lens. I think that is what traveling has done and why I have thought more about faith and spirituality and religion. The context that I live my life…I don’t know…you just get a second to think when you aren’t doing the things that you normally do and to just observe and see.

Megan was able to reflect on her life and think about spirituality as a result of her participation in the Semester at Sea program. Megan describes her own spirituality as being more about connectedness and her passion for inclusivity than about religious tradition. Her intention with going abroad was to better understand others and their beliefs, thus growing in her own spiritual values of being able to connect and be inclusive of others. It seems that she accomplished this goal very well in how interested and open she became regarding Muslim culture and religious practices, even setting aside her own personal values about women’s rights and sexuality, to understand how important this culture’s practices were to them. Her growth in this area then helped her to enact her values of connectedness and inclusivity better when she returned, as she gave examples of entering into meaningful dialogue with others who express prejudice against Muslims.

As a result of her study abroad experience, Megan indicated that she became more aware of others’ religious and spiritual practices. This increased awareness of other religious practices, particularly those of the Muslim faith, were gained through observations and conversations. Megan engaged in conversations about religion and spirituality with other students participating
in the Semester at Sea program. Megan also became more confident to confront people who made ignorant or discriminatory comments about the Muslim faith.

**Pepper**

Pepper was baptized in the Catholic faith. Soon after her baptism, Pepper’s parents left the Catholic Church. Pepper recalled that “my parents were both raised in the Catholic Church and they both decided ‘No’ that was not going to work for us. And so they left [the Catholic Church].” Although Pepper’s immediate family no longer practiced Catholicism, some of Pepper’s extended family still practiced Catholicism. As a result, Pepper still attended some services for weddings and some other occasions. After her family left the church, Pepper’s father studied the Bible, both the New and Old Testament, and started to adopt aspects of both Christianity and Judaism into their faith practice. For example, Pepper said that her family observes both Christmas and Passover. Regarding religion, Pepper described herself as practicing Mosaic Christianity. This faith is rooted in blending of the Christian and Jewish faiths.

Mosaic meant of Moses. In it, you accept that Jesus or Yahweh was the Christ. But you still follow the Leviticus and Deuteronomy Laws or the kosher laws. You also keep the Jewish holidays. You find a lot of that in Messianic Judaism as well, but the emphasis is a little bit different.

Pepper referenced the Bible, both the New Testament and Hebrew scriptures many times throughout our conversations.

**Study Abroad**

Pepper studied abroad in Krakow, Poland for six weeks. She indicated that she was going to study abroad in Poland for a number of reasons. “The main reason is to learn Polish
because I am a history major and I would like to go to grad school for history…one of the requirements is history is being able to read and speak the language…that is my main point for being in Poland.” Pepper is also married and her husband is not going abroad with her. Although she was not initially concerned about being away from him for six weeks, the time apart and isolation she felt caused her to miss him very much.

Pepper also wanted to go to Krakow because of the historical relevance the city has, particularly with regard to the events leading up to and around World War II. She also looked forward to going to Poland because it is a very Catholic country.

My grandparents were first generation Americans. They spoke Polish at home but didn’t teach it to their children probably because they didn’t want them to know what they were saying. Everything was religion with them. It is something I grew up with and miss since they have died.

The connection between Poland and Pepper’s grandparents was very meaningful for Pepper. She discussed several instances how Poland reminder Pepper of her grandparents.

**Influence of Study Abroad on Student Spirituality**

Living in Poland for the summer was influential on her spirituality. One major influence on her spirituality was the isolation she felt during the first several weeks in Poland. Pepper missed seeing and talking with her husband who did not travel with her. Pepper also felt isolated because she did not speak Polish and almost all of the other students in her program were several years younger. She utilized her spirituality to cope with these feelings of isolation. She also sought out the friendship of an older student on the trip, Victor, with whom she shared many conversations about spiritual questions.
As part of the study abroad program in Poland, Pepper participated in an excursion to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in southern Poland. Pepper stated that she thought the visit to the camp would move her spiritually and clarify her spirituality. “I thought I would have some kind of spiritual revelation.” Pepper’s visit to a concentration camp proved to be a particularly impactful spiritual experience and left her feeling spiritually moved and also spiritually conflicted. “It was very challenging to not feel moved spiritually because of the horrors that went on there.” She went onto explain that the experience left her asking questions of a spiritual nature that left her feeling spiritually conflicted:

There was just this sense of, if you had been there while it was open and running, you can't really see a way. Either your faith becomes stronger—that you're going to be ok in the end. Or it just disappears because how the hell does this happen?

These vexing questions spurred by her visit to the camp created a spiritual tension for Pepper. In addition to her own spiritual questioning, Pepper witnessed other visitors on the tour of the camp struggle with making sense of the horrors that went on.

It was really an odd mix because you have the pilgrimages and you could see the different groups. You could tell that it was faith affirming for them and you could see that there were other groups going through and asking “how can people believe there is a God?” Then you start to think that this is what people were thinking while they were there as prisoners.

Pepper experienced a spiritual back-and-forth while visiting the camp. Part of her felt that her trip was faith-affirming, while another part of her felt that if God existed then he would not let this tragedy happen. Ultimately, she described the experience to be spiritually moving and left
her with more uncertainty. “It's really difficult not to be moved spiritually and really makes you stand back and think about what spirituality and faith and everything means.”

Pepper felt that Poland was a very spiritual country and different from the U.S. Pepper sought out spiritual experiences while in Poland. For example, when she visited the Auschwitz concentration camp, Pepper indicated that she wanted to have the experience deepen her faith. Pepper indicated that her study abroad experience gave her a different perspective on her faith and left her with more questions.

It gave me a different perspective on things because there's only so much I can learn about spirituality and faith in America with the culture that's grown up around it on both sides. There's only so much that you can get from [the U.S.], you have to go abroad to try to find something different. Going abroad gave me a different perspective on just how to approach spirituality. Different perspectives on how to view it. Different sense of experience with different people. And so studying abroad really gave me a lot to think about.

Pepper’s experience left her asking spiritual questions and thinking more about her own beliefs, perspectives, and approaches to her faith.

**Specific Study Abroad Experiences that Influenced Student Spirituality**

Living in Poland for the summer was influential on Pepper’s spirituality. Pepper expressed that Poland was a very spiritual country and unlike what she was accustomed.

Over in Poland, there is a completely different attitude and it is almost like you can feel [the spirituality]. It's almost electric in the air. But you can actually feel that there is this faith about the country and they're very Catholic. It’s a little bit different from what I'm used to.
Poland, according to Pepper, was very Catholic and it was apparent that the Polish were much more devoted to their faith. “I've never seen so many people walking around with rosary beads hanging out of their pockets, and nuns and priests were just everywhere. She also discussed the importance of adhering to some of the cultural customs rooted in the Catholic faith. For example, she discussed how everyone would dress up on Sundays. “God help you, if you were not dressed nice on a Sunday. It didn't matter if you were not in church. You should not be wearing crappy clothes on a Sunday because you will get looked at very strangely.” Pepper indicated that being in Poland felt very different from being in the U.S. in part because the Catholic faith was so prominent in many aspects of the Polish culture. “There were rosaries and crucifixes and shrines along the road, and churches everywhere that are always full and people waiting outside the door.” Pepper described this Catholic presence as “different and really odd at first.” Pepper indicated that she “got used to it and expected it” and described the presence of the Catholic faith as “kind of cool.”

The presence of the Catholic faith in Poland was noteworthy for Pepper because it reminded her of her grandparents, both of whom have passed. “It reminded me a lot of my grandparents because they were kind of like that. They always had their religious symbols up in their house and [being in Poland with these religious symbols] brought back memories of that.”

Several times throughout the interview, Pepper indicated that being in Poland brought back memories of her grandparents. Pepper shared one particular occasion that proved to be an exceptionally meaningful reminder of her grandmother.

There was one time I was walking in the Old Town section of Krakow and there was a lady who had a stand and she was selling shawls. [The shawls were] just like my grandmother used to wear and then I walked by and then I could smell her gardenia
perfume and that was the same thing that my grandmother wore. It’s like I could just take this as a reminder of my grandmother. But literally, when I say the same shawls my grandmother wore, I mean down to the color, the knit, and the fabric that she used to wear. It was the only time I was in Poland that I saw anyone with these shawls and the gardenia perfume.

Upon reflection of this encounter, Pepper said, “it was like a little sign that, ‘yeah, I'm here’, and that's how I took it. Like little pennies from heaven… little signs that you know there's stuff going on and you should be a little more aware of it.” Pepper indicated that theses pennies from heaven have meaning for her. “It's a sign for me that death isn't the end. We can still be around people that have passed…they can still be around.”

Another aspect of Pepper’s study abroad experience was that Pepper felt more accepted in Poland compared with how she feels in in the United States. “I’m used to dealing with people who are like ‘there's no God and if you think there's a God you're just really stupid and you shouldn't breed!’” Pepper indicated that she has experienced similar conversations since returning to the U.S. “I've had that conversation actually in the last two weeks with a couple of people.” However, in Poland, Pepper indicated that she felt that the Polish were more accepting of her beliefs.

A lot of it just comes from a non-judgmental point of view because if you're in Poland and you don't believe in God they'll look at you funny but they're not going to go what the hell is wrong with you? They'd probably just understand. Well…it is communism and if you live through communism, you tend to not have religious beliefs. But they don't get really judgmental about it and they don't get snotty…So that was a shift.
There’s a politeness. Most people in Poland will say that they are Catholic even if they aren't practicing, but they don't get really judgmental about it.

Pepper indicated that she appreciate how accepted she felt in Poland compared with her experiences in the U.S.

An aspect of Pepper’s study abroad experience that was influential on her spirituality was the isolation she felt and how she coped with these lonely feelings. “The first couple of nights in Krakow were atrociously bad, like buckets of tears, snot all over everything, it was disgusting, and I was very upset. I don't want to be here. I want to go home.” This feeling of isolation also caused her to feel more connected to God. “I feel like I’m more connected [to God] because there’s not much else for me to be connected with other than that…I usually don’t just open up to people and start talking to them. I don’t make friends quickly.” In addition to being in a different country and feeling isolated, Pepper missed being around her husband and talking to him on a regular basis. “I missed [my husband] really badly and I was just trying to keep myself busy, to make the days go faster. It was really difficult with a six hour time difference to spend any significant amount of time talking together.” Feelings of isolation in Poland provided Pepper an opportunity to reflect about life. “I realized [after about two weeks], that being isolated in the room wasn't necessarily a bad thing because it did give me time to stop and think about a lot of stuff in life.” Pepper also stated, “[being alone] gives me time to think and the more I think and ponder the more I start going over the mysteries of life.”

Most of the other U.S. students who were studying abroad in Pepper’s program “were excited to be in Poland because the legal drinking age was 18 so they would go out every night.” Being around these students frustrated Pepper. She struggled relating to these students who had different motives for studying in Poland. Pepper befriended Victor, a U.S. citizen who was also
studying in Poland, who shared Pepper’s frustration with the younger students who partied. Pepper described Victor as “quite a bit older…he is about 70…and lives in New York City. Pepper stated “[Victor] kind of felt the same way [about the students], it made me feel a little bit better just to know that I wasn't completely alone in that viewpoint.” Victor and Pepper discussed spirituality and faith during their time together in Poland. In particular, Victor, who regularly attends Catholic services and identifies as a gay man, discussed his conflicted feelings of practicing a faith that does not fully accept him. Pepper related to these feelings because she often discusses her strong distain for people who judge her. Pepper’s friendship with Victor was meaningful because, as Pepper shared, “he was basically one of the only people that I hung out with.” Pepper and Victor spent quite a bit of time together discussing their experiences in Poland, visiting different sites together, and attending a church service. When asked what meaning Victor had in her life, Pepper replied:

I put it in perspective of not necessarily trips but in terms of my life. I think [Victor] was there to give me guidance and to show me, “hey, it's ok, I've survived this long, you can keep it up, and you might not find all the answers you want, but don't stop looking for them.” Kind of like a road sign on the way to the end, wherever it is I'm going to get. That's kind of how I view him in terms of my whole life.

Pepper’s relationship with Victor was significant for her and influenced her spirituality. She shared several meaningful experiences with Victor and engaged in spiritually-related conversations with him.

Influence of Spiritually-Related Experiences on Student Spirituality While Abroad

On one occasion, Pepper accompanied her friend Victor when he attended a Catholic Church service. Attending a Catholic Mass in Poland was particularly noteworthy for Pepper
because of her previous experiences with the Catholic faith. “I'd been to Catholic services [in the
United States] and it was, in a lot of ways, very similar. It was just in Polish and it was very
nice.” Pepper recalled her previous experiences attending Catholic services and indicated her
favorite part of the Mass is when the congregation uses one voice to reply or sing a response or
hymn.

[The Mass] was just, more or less, the same as in the U.S. You would hear the reading,
then they'd sing the hymns, and they had their responses. That's always been my favorite
part of the whole service…when the priest says something and then the congregation says
“and also with you.” I really like that. It was very similar. You could hear the
responses, the readings, and the hymns, and they were walking around doing the
frankincense.

It was also noteworthy because Pepper described feeling a sense of connection with the other
people attending Mass. Especially the times when she would hear the congregation speak or sing
in unison.

I don't know how to put it in words. It's just hearing it and hearing the whole crowd at
once. It's kind of like being at a concert when everyone knows all the words to the
song…like everyone is bonding with you because they know exactly what is going on
and you're all together and that is just what you do and that's what’s expected and you
just do it. Then it sounds really cool with the acoustics of the old churches and it's just
part of the whole experience. That’s really the only church I've ever seen that does the
responses the same way and they get really enthusiastic about it.
Pepper distinguished this experience attending a Catholic Mass in Poland from attending Mass or Protestant church services in the United States. Pepper indicated that she felt that she was welcomed more in the Polish church compared with her previous experiences in the U.S.

I was so focused on how awesome I felt from being able to understand because when I'm at church in the US, I always feel like an outsider because I'm not actively Catholic. I kind of always feel a little awkward about being there because most of the people who are in a parish [in the U.S.] know who else is in the parish and if they see someone they don't know then they're like what the hell are you doing here. In Poland, especially in Krakow, they're so used to it being a tourist city that they see different people all the time and they're like ‘oh you're coming to church with us,’ and they're much more welcoming, at least from my perspective. It was a lot different in that regard. I didn't feel like an outsider.

Pepper felt very welcomed at the Catholic church in Poland. This reinforced Pepper’s feeling that she is more accepted in Poland than in the U.S.

**Influence of University-Sanctioned Study Abroad Activities on Student Spirituality**

As part of the study abroad program in Poland, Pepper participated in an excursion to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in southern Poland. Pepper stated that she thought the visit to the camp would move her spiritually and clarify her spirituality. “I thought I would have some kind of spiritual revelation.” Pepper’s visit to a concentration camp proved to be a particularly impactful spiritual experience.

Pepper’s visit to the concentration camp left her feeling spiritually moved and also spiritually conflicted. “It was very challenging to not feel moved spiritually because of the
horrors that went on there.” She went onto explain that the experience left her asking questions of a spiritual nature that left her feeling spiritually conflicted:

There was just this sense of, if you had been there while it was open and running, you can't really see a way. Either your faith becomes stronger—that you're going to be ok in the end. Or it just disappears because how the hell does this happen?

These vexing questions spurred by her visit to the camp created a spiritual tension for Pepper. In addition to her own spiritual questioning, she witnessed other visitors on the tour of the camp struggle with making sense of the horrors that went on.

It was really an odd mix because you have the pilgrimages and you could see the different groups. You could tell that it was faith affirming for them and you could see that there were other groups going through and asking how can people believe there is a God? Then you start to think that this is what people were thinking while they were there as prisoners.

Pepper experienced a spiritual back-and-forth while visiting the camp. Part of her felt that her trip was faith-affirming, while another part of her felt that if God existed then he would not let this tragedy happen. Ultimately, she described the experience to be spiritually moving and left her with more uncertainty. “It's really difficult not to be moved spiritually and really makes you stand back and think about what spirituality and faith and everything means.”

Pepper described her study abroad experience to be very influential on her spirituality. Pepper become more aware of her own and others’ spiritual and religious practices. Particularly those who practiced Catholicism in Poland. She found them to be very genuine and welcoming. Pepper felt very alone and isolated in Poland. She utilized prayer to cope with these negative feelings. Pepper’s experiences with Victor were significant to her experience as well. She found
a confident in Victor and discussed many spiritual topics with him. Finally, Pepper described several experiences, (e.g., visit to concentration camp), that were particularly impactful on her spirituality.

Rachel

Rachel was initially raised by her parents to be a non-denominational Christian. Throughout her teen years, she moved away from her parents in the Midwest to the East Coast and became a member of the Baptist church. Once she returned home after a couple years, her mother had converted to be a Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) and so Rachel also converted. Rachel noted “I just began identifying with the SDA church” and “I go when I’m home for breaks, holidays, or just to come home for the weekend.” Rachel is not aware of any nearby SDA services near her college so she does not attend SDA services in college. Rachel periodically goes to a multicultural Christian based organization that holds regular church services. Rachel described it as “an all-Black church, but college students…and the preaching is always focused on the youth and a lot of the songs and the technology is relatable to people my age.” Rachel noted that “if there was a SDA group at BG, I would definitely participate or try as much as I can.”

Rachel preferred the SDA church over other faiths because “everybody was a unit and when [she] was a Baptist, there wasn’t much collectivity amongst the group.” The idea of worshiping as a collective group emerged as an important aspect of Rachel’s faith. While describing her preference to attend the SDA services, Rachel said “the togetherness of the church really attracted me…I felt like that’s how Christianity should be...everybody should be on the same page.”
Rachel finds her meaning in seeking to do things that “God would appreciate” and “trying your best” while doing these things. Instead of using concrete rules found in the bible to distinguish whether she is making God happy, Rachel said “I don't necessarily think it’s like that, it’s not as concrete. If you just have that gut feeling that it’s wrong, then don't do it. If you feel like you did a good thing, then I think you did something right.”

Rachel preferred to enact her spirituality through listening to songs rather than reciting formal prayers. Specifically, “they're definitely Gospel songs, like Black Gospel songs. They're more so songs that thank God…Gospel songs that just speak to me…they’re not depressing, they’re never depressing.” While at college Rachel also enjoys attending the Gospel Choir concerts.

Part of enacting Rachel’s spirituality involves interaction with others, including prayer with others.

Before I go to sleep at night, my boyfriend and I pray. I would say that is the most consistent thing that we do. The prayer is based off of our day or depending on what's going on in the world. It always varies. But that’s the most consistent thing that I do. Rachel also enjoyed discussing God and religion. “[My friend and I] often have conversations about God, religion, and things like that. This is awesome because it is good to hear somebody else’s view on something or hear a similar view. So I often have a lot of conversations about [God and religion].”

Rachel indicated that coming to college influenced her spirituality and stated that “college has made my spirituality multiply times a billion.” Rachel has become more self-aware and more aware of those around her. “College has made me more aware of my meaning, other
peoples’ meanings, or what they feel their meanings or purposes are, what they think something means, and in contrast to what I think, what I feel, or what I believe.”

Being at college has also encouraged Rachel to become more aware of other faiths. “I'm just more conscious and aware of how religion and spirituality bring meaning to different people and make them do things. All of that is because of college.” Rachel attributed her new awareness developed during college to being on her own. “In high school you're aware but you're really not aware. College is really the first time where everything you've ever learned and have known in prior life is being challenged…it forces you to actually act on things instead of hypothetical situations.” Additionally, Rachel noted that “without the safeguard of your parents or the people you've known all your life, you're more exposed to different things.”

Study Abroad

Between her sophomore and junior year, Rachel participated in an 8-week study abroad experience in Tours, France and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Rachel spent the first four weeks learning French at a French language institute in Tour. She then traveled to Ouagadougou where she enrolled in two courses that covered Burkina culture, media, and film.

Burkina Faso is a religiously diverse country. Most Burkinabe practice Christianity or Islam interspersed with indigenous religious beliefs. Rachel lived with host families in both Tours and Ouagadougou.

Influence of Study Abroad on Student Spirituality

During her time in France, Rachel felt significant homesickness and loneliness. “You literally have a wall between you and the world. And I promise you during my first two days here I cried nonstop because it was just so difficult.” The isolation felt by Rachel while studying abroad influenced how she enacted her spirituality. “Honestly, I don't think I've ever prayed so
much in my life than being here…this is the hardest thing I've ever done in my life.” Rachel
used prayer as a coping mechanism to ease her feeling of isolation. “I was just asking and
praying to help this go along better and things have definitely gotten a lot better.” Rachel
attributed feeling isolated to the lack of communication with her family and friends in the United
States. While in France, but before she traveled to Burkina, Rachel was very nervous how about
traveling to a far less familiar location but anticipated using prayer to help her cope.

My communication is going to be extremely limited in Burkina so I'm wondering if I'll
have just as much of a difficult time, or maybe even harder, because I can't call on my
normal comfort. But I think the praying I do now will just multiply by five to help me
get through the situation.

Rachel anticipated her experience in Burkina was going to be life changing: “I think this is going
to be another one of my life changing events.”

After her study abroad experience in Burkina, Rachel noted that she relied on prayer as a way to
cope with the difficulties being in a developing country.

[Being in Burkina] made me realize that I have a lot and in France, they have a lot, and in
the US, we have a lot more. But going to Burkina just took it to another level. And not
being able to be comforted by my family or friends or my significant other, I really had to
rely on myself and pray to get through it. And I got through it, thank God.

In addition to praying, Rachel reflected in a blog during her two month study abroad experience.
“I kept a blog and I would just reflect on every day while in France and Burkina. This was the
hardest thing I've ever had to do because my French was not very great.”

The SDA church was not present in France or Burkina. Therefore, Rachel was not able
to attend any SDA services while studying abroad. Rachel did not miss most aspects of
attending SDA services but did indicate she missed being with other members of the congregation. “I really didn't miss [attending SDA services] but I did miss being involved in my community.”

**Specific Study Abroad Experiences that Influenced Student Spirituality**

Rachel prayed for various reasons throughout her study abroad experience. She noted that she predominately offered gratitude but some situations caused her to ask for help for herself or others.

I remember one prayer. My host dad in Burkina beat one of the dogs. Oh my goodness I could not take it and I cried, and I cried, and I prayed. I said “please forgive him,” because it was horrible watching that dog get whooped…I said “thank you for not letting me treat an animal or person like that.”

On different occasions, Rachel recalled praying about the food while in France and Burkina. “The food wasn't disgusting but I would just ask God, ‘could you just please fill my stomach up…I'm hungry?’.” Rachel’s prayers contained both requests and gratitude to God. “A lot of [my prayers] were just thank you for giving me everything I have now. Because I just couldn't adjust to what I was in, both in France and Burkina.”

**Influence of Spiritually-Related Experiences on Student Spirituality While Abroad**

Rachel’s host family in France was Catholic and sometimes her host-father discussed religion with her. Rachel found these discussions with her host-father to be a bit uncomfortable and controversial. Rachel described her host-father to be “much closed to anything that’s not a part of the Bible or what [Catholics] practice.” Throughout her stay, Rachel and her host-father engaged in several discussions about religion. “We talked about Catholicism and he personally does not like Muslims…does not agree with the LGBTQ community. He’s not overly religious
but he definitely said that Catholicism and [he] does not accept it and says that with an iron fist.”

Rachel and her host-father briefly discussed SDA but most conversations about religion reverted back to “anything homosexual or Muslim…that was the majority of our conversation.” These conversations stirred conflict with Rachel’s views on Christianity.

It made me not like Christianity, because Catholicism isn't the only denomination that thinks like that. Especially cause we're going through what we're going through now with women's rights and gay rights, Christians of all denominations are saying no to sticking their hand out to them. So in a way it made me dislike Christianity.

Regarding her host-father’s religious views, Rachel “didn’t like it” and said, “I feel like even as a Christian…you don’t have to agree with [views that do not align with your own] but…you should just accept [these views].”

When Rachel was in Burkina, she observed Muslims and Christians enacting their faith. Rachel noted surprise that the Muslim-Burkinabe were actively practicing Islam every day in public. “In Burkina, the Muslim people prayed constantly. I did not think that the Islamic faith was as spiritual as they were and consistently spiritual.” These experiences of observing Muslims practicing their faith had a lasting impression.

It was very eye opening because in America you don't really see that. People stopped eating and the men washed their heads, their hands, and their feet. The women have to pray behind the men. They're outside. They shut the TV off. It’s legitimately serious.

Unlike Muslims in Burkina, Rachel did not observe many Christians practicing their faith and came to assume the Christians in Burkina were not active in their faith. “You didn’t see the Christians doing the same thing [as the Muslims].” This assumption was challenged when Rachel discovered that her host family was Christian and attended church services. “I was
honestly surprised that they were Christian and they went to church because you don't [see Christians practicing their faith] in comparison to the Muslims.” Rachel took an opportunity to visit her host family’s church when offered the opportunity.

**Influence of University-Sanctioned Study Abroad Activities on Student Spirituality**

As part of Rachel’s classes in Burkina, students participated in a number of excursions to experience daily life in Burkina. One particular excursion provided an experience to witness a local chief performing a religious ceremony. The chief belonged to the Mossi region of Burkina and practiced traditional indigenous beliefs centered on animism.

It has a lot to do with respect to the authorities or respect to the gods. Like if the chief would walk, everybody would move out of the way and they would bow and whatever religious thing they would do. It’s all respect…it’s everything you see on TV but at the same time that respect aspect you wouldn't even see that on television. So seeing that you would think this is a serious religion or spirituality.

Rachel’s class only observed the ceremony and did not participate. Being an outsider observing this sacred act caused Rachel to feel a bit uncomfortable. “I felt uncomfortable because my group stood out. So not only were we not bowing or anything but I felt awkward being in there because I didn't know what to do…this wasn't something I know about.”

Rachel also participated in a number of excursions during her time in France. Some of the excursions included visits to nearby Catholic churches. Rachel emphasized that she did not find personal spiritual significance in her visits to the churches. “It was more art and less religion.” However, Rachel offered that she found her experience visiting Notre Dame in Paris to be more religious. “In Paris, I went to go see Notre Dame, which was amazing, but I would say that one was more religious because you couldn't speak. People were in Mass while people
were visiting. But at the same time it was still about art.” This distinction illustrated that Rachel’s spirituality was influenced by witnessing other people enacting their spirituality and not influenced by visiting a sacred space.

**Manifesting Spirituality After Student Abroad**

After her study abroad experience in France and Burkina Faso, Rachel indicated that she does not rely as much on formal prayer or religious services to enact her spirituality. “I don't pray as much as I did, but I feel that I'm a better person.” Rachel expressed some desire to put forth more effort to pray and seek out services but indicated some reluctance.

> I can try to do better in praying or trying to get to church while I'm [in the United States].

> But at the same time, I know myself well enough to know that I think that my religious foundation is pretty strong. I don't need to do the ‘you have to pray, you have to go to church, and you have to take communion’.

Rachel practiced her spirituality about the same as before she left for studying abroad.

**Differences in Manifestations of Spirituality After Study Abroad**

As a result of her study abroad experience, Rachel indicated some difference in how she understands and practices her spirituality. “I feel like after I did travel, I don't necessarily feel I'm more connected to God, but I understand the message more.” She compared her experience abroad as a trial that tested her and made her a better person as a result of it.

> You go through things in order to, you go through trial to get to peace or heaven or. And I realize that not like the normal test where I could be broke and I'm losing all my family members. Nothing serious of that nature. But going through that language barrier where I felt isolated, I cried a lot, and I didn't have my own alone time, just made me realize that...
you go through things in order to get something out of it. That’s what is preached in my church…you have to go through something to get something.

Rachel indicated that her study abroad experience qualified her to give a testimony to the congregation.

Your parents can tell you, “You don't need to drink because these consequences will happen.” But sometimes you have to touch the fire in order to understand why you shouldn't touch the fire. And in church, they tell you if you haven't gone through anything, you can't give a testimony, and now that I've been through a trial, I can testify and say this is what happened to me…I learned this in return. And I now I understand why the pastor says this all the time.

Rachel’s study abroad experience was a trying experience that helped give her the confidence to be able to give a testimony at church. Rachel was able to elaborate about the subject of her testimony.

My testimony would be…you can do anything you put your mind to. You literally have to go through the dirt in order to come out on top. Not having communication, that’s difficult. Not having the access you had before, that’s very difficult. Through all of that, you learn and you pick up things and you apply it to yourself. Then afterwards you can spread what you gain.

Rachel said her testimony would be relevant for her congregation because it relates back to church teaching. “One of the many things they teach you in church…once you have something, you’re supposed to share, give to the poor, and help God’s people out.” Rachel indicated that she can “give back” by sharing her experience with other students who are considering embarking on a similar experience. Rachel also stated that her testimony would also serve as a way to share
her struggles. “That’s important in Christianity, I think in all denominations, giving back, testifying, you have to speak up because people won't know your struggle.”

Studying abroad helped clarify how Rachel understands herself and her relationship with God.

[Studying abroad] helped me understand where I stand within myself, how important [spirituality] is to me. How important God plays in my life because I could have been that person sleeping outside, I could have been…just so many bad things…things I wouldn't subject a person to. I could have been that person.

Rachel’s study abroad experience provided her an opportunity to understand God differently and made her more aware. “Just knowing that God puts different people in different places to understand different things definitely clarified my beliefs, the Bible, and Christianity.”

Rachel’s study abroad experience helped her to become more aware of others’ spiritual and religious practices. Rachel felt very isolated and uncomfortable in both France and especially in Burkina Faso. Rachel coped with these negative feelings primarily through prayer. Rachel said that she prayed often for strength and thankfulness. Rachel’s study abroad experienced helped to strengthen her spiritual identity. Rachel indicated that she had a better understanding of her spirituality.

**TJ**

Growing up, TJ and his family switched from the Church of Nazarene to the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran church because the new church was closer to his home and because TJ’s father was personal friends with the new pastor. TJ and his family attended church services regularly throughout high school. TJ described himself as a “Protestant, Christian, Methodist, Nazarene, I don't know. With a hint of a Buddhist philosophy.” TJ was raised Christian and
regularly attended church services with his family. In his first year of college, TJ was on a trip and a friend introduced him to the concept of “Buddhist Christian.” Upon questioning his friend about his faith, his friend gave TJ several books on Buddhism. TJ described his experience studying Buddhism: “He gave me all these books, so I read about like meditation…so it’s sort of nice, though. It's not really any religious thing, it’s like, you just reflect on what would happen… Sort of like a WWJD, except, with Buddha. TJ’s spirituality is deeply rooted in a Christian context with a great emphasis on reflection and meditation.

Although TJ sought out formal services while at college, meditation and reflection tied with spirituality is prevalent in TJ’s description of enacting his spirituality. TJ shifted the enactment of his spirituality from high school to college. TJ acknowledged that his spirituality in college has “been much more, much more of a personal reflection…like [his] own personal relationship, so…a lot less public and a lot less going out there.” According to TJ, his spirituality does not necessarily need to be rooted in a church or sacred space. TJ noted that “You don't have to go anywhere as long as you know and you're comfortable with what you believe in. So, its own, like, you're carrying your own place to worship inside, inside your own body.” Although TJ acknowledged that being in a church is not necessary for him to enact his spirituality, he did note that there are places and experiences that invite reflection and meditation. For example, TJ noted on several occasions that being in nature was very important to him and being in the wilderness usually provided an opportunity to reflect. TJ discussed the connection between his spirituality and nature throughout both of TJ’s interviews. Regarding being out in nature, TJ noted:

Being outside in the wilderness…really makes you think about what your core values are, what you want to do, what you could, what you believe in, and you know changes from
what you believe in, but I believe that, you know, Jesus was the Messiah, and that we're going to share, do some good works and so it really just sort of enlightens and intensifies that belief...being out there...plus you get a lot of time to think.

TJ described his spirituality as very personal, specifically he stated that his spirituality is “like in a single personal relationship with my views, with a higher power, with me, for God.” Another notable aspect of TJ’s spirituality is his description of Jesus as a mentor. TJ described his relationship with Jesus in the following passage: “it’s sort of like having a mentor…the ultimate man that you should want to be. Sort of like the ultimate man-man, manly-man.”

While at college, TJ did not attend regular church services. Rather, he tried several different services. TJ stated, while at college, “I’ve attended H2O a few times. I've been to the church in the mall a few times...but then I'll just go when I am at home for the weekend, if I'm at home for the weekend, I'll just go with my family.” H20 is a Christian student organization that holds weekly services. The church in the mall that TJ referenced is called Broken Chains, a non-denominational Christian church located in the local mall. On Broken Chains’ Facebook page, the church advertised “Church in the Mall! Are you goth, a freak, weird, ugly, pierced, tattooed, emo, hard core, or anyone for that matter you are welcome at Broken Chains!...[Broken Chains’ services] bring a high-energy rock music style of praise to God and focus on the love of Christ. It is not about an image. ‘Come as you are’” (Broken Chains Facebook Page). During his time abroad, TJ noted that he was unable to find this sort of modern church in Europe and missed the upbeat vibe. While TJ was in Europe, he described one experience attending a Methodist service and described his experience: “I found a Methodist church, a little tiny one. That was ok, it wasn't anything like here. It wasn't like, our Evangelical rock band style church...it was Protestant, but it was a little stricter...a little more conservative Protestant style.”
Study Abroad

Between his junior and senior year, TJ participated in the 8-week study abroad experience in Tours, France at a French language institute. He lived at the home of a local woman who also hosted six to seven additional students. Four to five of the students were international students taking classes at the language institute and the rest were French students who were enrolled at the local university. Prior to the summer term, TJ spent the spring semester traveling throughout Europe, visiting relatives, and taking class at the language institute.

Influence of Study Abroad on Student Spirituality

TJ described the influence of studying abroad as having a positive influence on his spirituality. He said he now has a more “positive outlook” and he approaches his spirituality “more so in a personal manner.” This positive outlook did not lead TJ to become more involved in a formal church. TJ elaborated that “Even though I don't belong to any specific church here in Bowling Green…[my spirituality] is more personal and private rather than going out and becoming a member of an institution.”

An aspect of TJ’s spirituality that was influenced by his study abroad experience was his understanding and confidence in his own faith. After studying abroad, TJ noted that “I really understand my faith and where I'm at. I believe in my strength to not change where I'm at and with that makes [my faith] more open to share with others when they ask me because I'm more confident in what I believe.” TJ noted that he “is more open to talking about faith with people, to saying yes, I am a Christian, and this is what I believe.”

Specific Study Abroad Experiences that Influenced Student Spirituality

TJ attended formal church services three times during his study abroad experience. He noted that it was difficult finding services because “it was tough in France cause all the big
churches were like, Catholic Cathedrals.” Because TJ was not Catholic, he was less inclined to participate in Catholic services.

TJ joined a rock climbing group with other students from the institute where he was studying. TJ noted that he “climbed a lot with those guys” because he enjoyed being around others who were “aware of their natural surroundings.” He also described the group as having a “process of meditation for the self, and a relationship between us, as people and like being outside.” This example of being in nature with others who also value nature was a prevalent idea during my conversation with TJ.

TJ acknowledged that the physical distance from his family and friends back home led him to feel isolated and alone while studying abroad. Although feeling isolated was difficult, it also gave TJ an opportunity to engage in significant reflection and meditation as a way to cope.

It’s that personal time abroad in an uncomfortable space, or it could even be in a comfy place, but you aren't able to call up your buddies and talk on the phone… so it’s definitely an intense portion that gives you lots of time to do self-meditation or prayer and after that it’s just sort of fuels the progression of seeking inner peace to cope with surroundings and to make yourself stronger and more confident and do what you have to accomplish, either get back home safely, to learn a new language, or to just survive and have a good time.

TJ’s study abroad experience offered him opportunities to reflect and meditated. These opportunities were a result of the isolation and distance from family and friends.

**Influence of Spiritually-Related Experiences on Student Spirituality While Abroad**

Throughout his travels in Tours and other European locations, TJ visited local Catholic cathedrals on his own time because it provided him with a quiet environment and an opportunity
for him to pray. Regarding visiting these cathedrals, TJ noted “I traveled all around and I did say little prayers at each one actually…and it just felt really cool to be in a space that was nearly a thousand years old and it was a little quiet, things like that.” TJ visited the cathedrals when the church was nearly empty, except for a few others who were also praying. He preferred the emptier churches. This sentiment is illustrated in this passage from TJ: “my favorite is honestly the one in Tours, France because you go there and compared it to Notre Dame in Paris where it is jam packed and you have to wait in line. You could go there whenever I want and there would be like, maybe one to four people there.” For TJ, there was something spiritual about being in the older churches that were empty. He described with great enthusiasm during our conversation about his visits to the cathedrals, particularly the cathedral in Tours that was near the school where he was studying. Not only did the quiet space provide TJ with an escape, it provided him an environment to explore, to let his mind wander, distress, and relax. TJ described his experiences visiting the cathedral in this passage: “And just to go in, take your time, look at all the frescos, look at the windows, look at the meaning behind them, and look at all the work it would have taken to build this place. And, that’s a lot of power, like money-wise, spiritual-wise, and then a lot of solid leaps that people had to like construct something so incredible. So it was really cool to just go in and stand there and just like, you know, sort of like meditate I guess. Think about the day, or reflect on the day, say a little prayer for the next day. So, that’s what I really liked. And I think that was really stress relieving too because I would go in there and just, I was like, oh man. You know, even if I had an exam coming up, or if I was getting tired of speaking French or something like that. I would just go in there and I didn't have to speak to anyone. I could just think to myself and relax.”
TJ preferred being in nature away from the city. However, his host family and school were in the city. TJ said that his time living in the city made him feel “trapped” and described the city as a “concrete jungle because there’s not a lot of green space.” To escape this trapped feeling, TJ went to the cathedral when it was empty.

Going to those cathedrals would be like going to, well it would be like stepping outside cause there's not a lot of people and it’s quiet and peaceful. You can't hear the traffic noise outside and if you're lucky the organ's playing and it’s just that combination of music, peace, tranquility and colors, the windows. It’s like being up on the, on the mountainside. So it was like, the closest thing I could get to feeling that inner hush, like inner reflection you get when you're being outside and away from it all. So it’s like being away from it all when you're inside.

Although TJ enjoyed studying abroad, there were times when he felt exhausted from constantly speaking French, and being away from family and friends. TJ used the visits to the cathedrals as a reminder of people back home in the United States. He would say prayers from his childhood to help him remember the feeling of being back with family and friends because it was familiar. TJ stated: While abroad, “You meet new friends, you meet new family, but it’s still not the same. You're still the foreigner; you're not in your own scene. So, going there was like going back in my scene cause it was like the closest thing I could get to…I would say old, old prayers I guess that I learned when I was a little kid.” TJ went so far as to compare being in the cathedral reflecting as “the home away from home, like, the home inside my mind.”

Influence of University-Sanctioned Study Abroad Activities on Student Spirituality

As part of the study abroad experience, TJ lived with a host family who were also hosting six or seven other students. “I lived with a combination of students, there were about 6 or 7 of
us, and we rotated all the time, some people stayed for months, other people just for weeks. And they were Americans, Middle Easterners, other Europeans, and South Americans. So along with that came the Catholics, the Protestants, the Muslims, and we lived with a Hindu, and of course, the Korean religion, and Buddhism.” The students living with TJ’s host family would have many conversations during mealtimes. TJ described in detail several of the mealtime discussions.

When we all sat at the dinner table, of course, inevitably someone would ask someone about religion, like “what are you?” So, we'd all share, and of course, someone would say, “Well, why are you this?” There would be disagreements and a mini bomb would drop on the table. To me, that’s when the importance of this cross cultural experience and dinner table experience, is that the understanding for tolerance…teaching tolerance and, and living through tolerance is really important.

These conversations about religion, as TJ described, helped him to “see different world faiths from a different, more personal perspective.” The dinner table conversations about religion provided an opportunity for TJ to explore his own faith. TJ was asked about his own faith by the other students in the house. He noted that it was difficult for him to explain what he believed.

It’s hard to explain and when people ask you what you are, it’s like, it’s like a personal combination of a bunch of things… maybe I can't specifically say I'm a Methodist follower, or Nazarene, but I can say that I do believe in Jesus and his father as in Jesus the Messiah.

Although TJ grappled with the dilemma of explaining what he believed, TJ was able to find comfort in relating to of one of his housemates. Both TJ and his housemate found the semantics
of their faiths difficult to reconcile. However, they were able to find some common ground in how they approached their faiths.

I can't explain why other things do happen, why some areas of the world are characterized by different attributes than others of the world. But that’s when it comes down to the personal belief of what it is. And that became even stronger when I was talking to my friend Muhammad. And he was in the same position as I am. So that’s just the matter of the faith in both of us.

TJ and his friend were able to connect through how they both approached their individual faiths. Although both practiced very different faith traditions, both approached faith from a personal belief of the faith. They both believed in the major facets of their faith (e.g., “I do believe in Jesus and his father as in Jesus the Messiah”), but did not understand and believe in other aspects (e.g., “I can't explain that miracle path, I can't explain why other things do happen, why some areas of the world are characterized by different attributes than others of the world”).

TJ was surrounded by students of different faiths discussing and questioning each other about their own beliefs, TJ found himself spending time reflecting and contemplating his own beliefs. “[Talking and reflecting about my own faith] helped me dig deeper…and left me feeling a little bit more confused.” Although initially confused about his faith, TJ noted that this time spent digging deeper in his faith led him to feel that his faith was strengthened by the process. “It’s just more of strength in that faith…I do have a faith…and that’s what makes me comfortable to go into strange places because I know that I won't be alone…even if I am alone.”

**Manifesting Spirituality After Student Abroad**

After returning to the United States, TJ indicated that he attends church services about as frequently as he did prior to studying abroad. TJ also indicated that he has continued to seek out
quiet spaces to reflect and think about life. TJ noted “I do pray sort of on a like, I don't want to say regular once a night, but probably once a week basis, so like a reflection on the past days, the future days.” Being home, TJ is able to more easily access nature and green spaces to reflect instead of being “trapped in a concrete jungle” like he was while studying abroad. TJ described being able to reflect in nature after returning from France: “so now I can go outside, or go to the parks a lot…been down to Kentucky a few times already, so I was down there climbing just two weeks ago. It was just me and like three other people, and then when we're up on the rock wall, again, you're the only one at the top once you get to the top. So, I just take that couple of minutes and just sort of, like relax.”

**Differences in Manifestations of Spirituality After Study Abroad**

TJ described a notable difference in how he enacts his spirituality after returning to the United States with regard to his approach to his belief system. TJ noted that he has “a much more, interest in pushing, not necessarily pushing my beliefs on other people, but living my beliefs in a positive outlook… sharing them with the broader community base.” Making a positive impact in the community is more important to TJ after his study abroad experience. TJ is not interested in direct evangelizing, rather TJ indicated that he is more focused on being a positive role model to others and giving back to the greater community. TJ described his newfound commitment in the following passage: “it’s still its own structure…just by living in a healthy, positive outlook, and good moral standards then you can help other people out besides the student community. And that’s where, to me, it’s really important.”

TJ spoke more in depth about giving back to the greater community providing specific examples how he wanted to give back. Interestingly, TJ referenced the importance of giving back to the greater community rather than only focusing the university community. TJ noted
“you're really like reaching out, spreading your branches from the affluent to the not affluent…sort of stepping back from the university circle and getting at the bigger matters of the community, the county wide or city wide, state wide, things like that.” TJ directly attributed his new emphasis on serving the “greater community” to his study abroad experience. “Now I have a greater interest in spreading the love for understanding of other cultures.”

TJ’s study abroad experience influenced his spirituality by increasing his awareness of his own and others’ spiritual practices. Moreover, TJ reflected and meditated in quiet places because he felt isolated and he was away from friends and family. TJ also engaged in spiritual dialogue with his roommates in France. TJ increased understanding of his own spirituality through these conversations. Overall, TJ described his spirituality was more personal and private as a result of his experience abroad.
Dear Student,

My name is Jacob Clemens and I am currently a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Bowling Green State University. In order to fulfill the requirements of my degree program, I am conducting an original research study to investigate how undergraduate students describe the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality or meaning-making. I am contacting you because you will be studying abroad during the summer of 2012.

As part of this project, I plan to conduct a series of one-on-one interviews with students studying abroad this summer. You can participate in this study regardless of your religious, spiritual, or secular beliefs. I am mostly interested in hearing how you think about questions of purpose, meaning, mystery, the core of oneself, and wholeness, as well as how whatever religious, spiritual, or secular beliefs you have may inform how you answer those questions. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in the study.

Exploring students’ perspectives about the influence of study abroad experiences on their spirituality may provide a better understanding of how study abroad can promote spiritual development among students. Also, this study may aid practitioners to better prepare and support students traveling abroad. This study may uncover new ways universities can better utilize study abroad programs to enhance the character development of their students. Individual participants may benefit from participation in this study because they may have the opportunity to have structured time to reflect on their study abroad experience.

If you choose to participate in this study, your involvement will consist of three recorded hour-long interviews. The first interview will take place before you depart on your study abroad trip. The second interview will take place while you are studying abroad through an online video format (e.g., Skype, Google chat) or through an international phone call (I will assume all costs for calling). The third and final interview will take place after you return to the United States from your study abroad experience. Throughout the process, you will be provided and asked to verify transcriptions of our conversations, data analysis reports, and conclusions drawn from the research. The total time expected on your part for your participation in this study will be approximately five hours. This includes the three interviews, your review of the transcripts and reports, and any email exchanges.

During our interviews, I will be asking you questions that explore your personal beliefs about spirituality and religion and your experiences while you are abroad. Risks of participating in this study are no more than would be expected in daily life. As a participant, you have the right to limit or end your participation at any time without penalty. All project-related data and information will be protected, and your personal identity will be kept strictly confidential. You will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym for the study to help protect your identity. The pseudonym you select will be used to identify your interview responses, files of your interview transcript, and any other study-related documents. The audio files and transcription files of the actual interviews will be kept in a password-protected computer until the completion of the study at which point these files will be destroyed.

I hope you will be able and willing to assist me in this study. If you are studying abroad this summer for at least six weeks and would be willing to talk about questions of purpose, meaning, mystery, the core of oneself, and wholeness, then it is quite likely that you would be an ideal candidate for participation. If you are interested in being considered as a potential participant, please let me know via e-mail or telephone.

Please contact me or my advisor if you have any questions about the research or your participation in the research. You may contact me at 419-372-9623 or clemjen@bgsu.edu. You may also contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Dafina Lazarus Stewart at 419-372-6876 or dafinas@bgsu.edu. Please let me know if you might be interested in being a participant in this study. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jacob E. Clemens, Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education Administration, BGSU

330 Education Building  Phone: 419-372-7382  E-mail: hesa@bgsu.edu
Bowling Green, OH 43403-0284  fax 419-372-9302  Web: http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/education/hsa
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Dear Student,

My name is Jacob Clemens and I am currently a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Bowling Green State University. My dissertation advisor is Dr. Dafina Lazarus Stewart, an Associate Professor in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs in the College of Education and Human Development at Bowling Green State University. In order to fulfill the requirements of my degree program, I am conducting an original research study to investigate how undergraduate students describe the influence of studying abroad on their spirituality or meaning-making. I am contacting you because you will be studying abroad during the summer of 2012.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of my research is to explore the influence of study abroad experience on college students’ spirituality, defined as how students think about questions of purpose, meaning, mystery, the core of oneself, and wholeness, as well as how whatever religious, spiritual, or secular beliefs may inform how students answer those questions. Exploring students’ perspectives about the influence of study abroad experiences on their spirituality will provide a better understanding of how study abroad can promote spiritual development among students. Also, this study may aid practitioners to better prepare and support students traveling abroad. Individual participants may benefit from participation in this study because they will have the opportunity to have structured time to reflect on their study abroad experience.

Procedure
As a participant in this study, your involvement will consist of three recorded hour-long interviews. The first interview will take place before you depart on your study abroad trip. The second interview will take place while you are studying abroad through an online video format (e.g., Skype, Google chat) or through an international phone call. I will assume any international calling costs. The third and final interview will take place after you return to the United States from your study abroad experience. Throughout the process, you will be provided and asked to verify transcriptions of our conversations and to review data analysis reports and conclusions drawn from the research. The total time expected on your part for your participation in this study will be approximately 5 hours. This includes the three interviews, your review of the transcripts, reports, and any email exchanges. You will also be provided with a copy of the informed consent document, including, if you wish, the signed consent form.

Voluntary nature
Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. During any interview, you may decide to skip a question, not do a particular task, or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your grades/class standing or your relationship with Bowling Green State University, your teacher, or your involvement with studying abroad.

Confidentiality Protection
All project-related data and information will be protected, and your personal identity will be kept strictly confidential. You will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym for the study to help protect your identity. The pseudonym you select will be used to identify your interview responses, files of your interview transcripts, and any other study related documents. The audio files and transcription files of the actual interviews will be kept in a password protected computer until the completion of the study at which point these files will be destroyed.

330 Education Building
Bowling Green, OH 43403-0244
Phone: 419-372-7382
Fax: 419-372-9382
E-mail: hesa@bgSU.edu
Web: http://www.bgSU.edu
APPENDIX D. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD

Please complete this questionnaire. All questions are optional.

Student Demographics

1) Gender
   ___ Man
   ___ Woman
   ___ Transgender

2) Class Standing
   ___ First-Year
   ___ Sophomore
   ___ Junior
   ___ Senior
   ___ Graduate Student

3) How would you identify yourself in terms of your race and/or ethnicity?
   _______________________________________

4) What religion, if any, were you raised in?
   ___ Protestant (Please Specify) ________________________________
   ___ Catholic
   ___ Jewish
   ___ Orthodox (such as Greek or Russian Orthodox)
   ___ Muslim
   ___ Other (Please Specify) ________________________________
   ___ No religion
   ___ Do not know

5) What religion, if any, do you currently practice?
   ___ Protestant (Please Specify) ________________________________
   ___ Catholic
   ___ Jewish
   ___ Orthodox (such as Greek or Russian Orthodox)
   ___ Muslim
   ___ Other (Please Specify) ________________________________
   ___ No religion
   ___ Do not know

6) How long have you identified as a member of this tradition? _________
7) How often do you attend religious services?
   ____ Never
   ____ Less than once a year
   ____ About once or twice a year
   ____ Several times a year
   ____ About once a month
   ____ 2-3 times a month
   ____ Nearly every week
   ____ Every week
   ____ Several times a week
   ____ Can't say/Can't remember

8) What is your current cumulative GPA ____________

9) What is your current major (s) _________________________________________

10) What your current minor(s) ____________________________________________

11) What is the primary purpose for studying abroad?
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________

12) How many different times have you traveled outside of the United States?
    __________

13) If you have traveled outside of the United States, please list the countries you
    have traveled to and the number of times you have traveled to each:
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________
    ___________________________________________________________________

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Please return to:
Jacob Clemens  105 Moseley Hall, BGSU
APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following questions will be used to guide interviews with the participants selected for this study:

The three pre-departure structured questions are:

- How do you describe your spirituality?
- What sorts, if any, spiritual practices have you engaged in or sought out while at college?
- What influences your spirituality?

The structured questions that will be asked to participants while they are studying abroad are:

- How do you describe the influence of your study abroad experience on your spirituality so far?
- What sorts of, if any, spiritual practices have you engaged in or sought out during your studying abroad so far?
- What sorts of university-sanctioned study abroad-related activities have you participated in?

The structured questions that will be asked to each participant after they complete their study abroad experience are:

- How do you describe the influence of your study abroad experience on your spirituality
- What sorts, if any, spiritual practices did you engage in or seek out while you were studying abroad
- How did your study abroad experience influence your spiritual practices once you returned?
APPENDIX F. HSRB APPROVAL

DATE: March 19, 2014
TO: Jacob Clemens
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: March 19, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE: March 18, 2015
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

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

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

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

This approval expires on March 18, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hrsb@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.