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# The Impact of a Ministry Experience on the Personal and Academic Development of College Students

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THE IMPACT OF A MINISTRY EXPERIENCE ON THE PERSONAL AND  
ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Benjamin Goller

May 2012

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS  
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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Student Full Name

entitled

The Impact of a Ministry Experience on the Personal and  
Academic Development of College Students

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to seek out how a ministry experience can be a developmental tool for academic and student development professionals to cultivate growth in the personal and academic areas of students' lives. Rooted in the academic literature on service-learning and college student spirituality, this study asks how a ministry experience affects students, what part of the experience has the effect, and how students view and understand this development. By interviewing students in a ministry practicum at a small, Christian liberal arts university in the Midwest, themes were drawn out that identified core processes of the ministry experience that caused growth in the students. Through this, a grounded theory was established, proposing that spirituality acts as a moderator to the service-learning experience to impact both the personal and academic development of the participants. The implications are that spirituality (as a common passion among students) can be used to enhance their educational experiences by connecting their learning to something in which they are already investing their energy.

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## Chapter 1

### **Problem Statement**

The intended outcomes of the college experience are divided mainly into educational and personal growth, each with differing vehicles of accomplishment. The classroom has long been the more traditional vehicle for the conveyance of knowledge as well as an environment of learning. However, the idea of whole-person learning has brought along with it new ideas about the most effective methods for instilling knowledge and encouraging positive student development. This whole-person model has synthesized the academic and personal growth outcomes of the university experience and brought into question the methods by which educators guide their students. Academic development can refer to educational growth like leadership development, intellectual self esteem, and a desire to pursue further education. Personal development on the other hand is about psychological well-being, the development of identity, and growth in positive character.

In the academic realm, experiential learning and service-learning are among the most highly acclaimed learning methods, and research suggests that this non-traditional learning is effective in melding personal growth with academic excellence (Kolb, 1984; Standish, 1995). According to A. W. Astin's (1999) involvement theory, students will get more out of their education when they put more effort into it. By engaging in such a heavily involved style of learning, students are encouraged to invest in their education.

Investing in their own learning is done through major components of these holistic learning strategies like community service and civic engagement as a part of service-learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Rhoads, 1997; Strage, 2004). It is also evident that such experiential learning can be essential to igniting the passion that leads to habits of lifelong learning, which is affected by the personal development of students while also possessing academic outcomes (Kolb, 1984).

### **Religiously-Based Experiential Learning**

Many Christian colleges stress the importance of ministry and religious involvement as a partner or replacement to the traditional co-curricular experiences of service and experiential learning. Christian ministry is defined as work or experience that is undertaken in a focused effort to comply with the biblical commands to make disciples and to show the love of Christ. Ministry can include anything from a weekly one-hour commitment to a full semester study-abroad/missions trip and is often expected to produce results that carry on into post-graduate life and work (Astin, 2004; Hugen, Wolfer, & Renkema, 2006; Schaffer, 2004). The more than one hundred schools in the United States that comprise the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) are representatives in higher education that have an interest in understanding the role of ministry in education. As members of the CCCC, these institutions adhere to the organization's mission statement that calls schools to "transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth" (CCCCU.org). The integration of service and scholarship seen in this mission statement is solidly built upon religious beliefs in biblical truth and has the long-reaching aim of transforming lives. In a recent book, *Cultivating the Spirit*, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) make the case that engagement

in one's spiritual search for truth and subjective understanding of life aids personal development. Biblical service has an effect on lifelong learning and engagement and is an important tool for the accomplishing of the mission of over one hundred institutions of higher learning.

### **Whole-Person Learning Strategies**

A major indicator of positive academic and personal development is the interest in continuing one's informal education. The goal of developing a passion for lifelong learning is an aim that reflects a desire of many institutions to affect more than just the few academic years (Astin, 1999; Edwards & Usher, 2001; Field, 2001). The idea of lifelong learning is grounded by philosophical underpinnings of educational theory claiming that an education should be used to shape how one thinks and interacts with the world during the academic years and into the future (Standish, 1995). An education is popularly seen as an investment in one's future, and so it is implied that an education should promote lifelong practices that continue exposure to new ideas and ways of thinking. Consequently, higher education has made great efforts to ensure that its students are not only learning new things but are developing a passion for learning more. It is this passion that marks a holistically educated person: not a student who learns by rote, but a person who has invested in and internalized the subject matter and effects of the academic material.

Therefore, determining the ability of a university to fully educate a student must include a reflection upon the effects of co-curricular experiences to influence both academic and personal development. The unique area of co-curricular experiences that includes religious-based ministry experiences that Christian colleges expect must also be

assessed. If Astin's (1999) involvement theory proposes that engaging more heavily in education will produce better results, then educators would be wise to integrate a passion-area of their students into their curriculum by incorporating spirituality and its practical applications.

### **The Impact of Spirituality on Whole-Person Education**

In their landmark study, *Cultivating the Spirit*, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) suggest that one of the greatest positive spiritual contributors to personal development is the engagement in a "spiritual quest." This term is used to describe a student's effort to discover the meaning or purpose of life, attain inner harmony, and develop a meaningful philosophy of life. The spiritual quest is therefore an important part of a student's personal development. This study proposes to look at ministry through service-learning experiences and assess how the ministry experience impacts the academic and personal development of students through these research questions.

1. How do students perceive those experiences affecting their academic and personal development?
2. Is the impact made by the service-learning itself, the modifying spiritual component, or a combination of the two?
3. How do students see the spiritual realm enhancing their service-learning experience?

In seeking answers to these research questions, this study discusses how ministry experiences impact the personal and academic development of college students.

## Chapter 2

### **Literature Review**

To gain a better understanding of the influence that ministry experiences have on learning outcomes and positive student development, one must look at related areas and their effects. Christian ministry is often centered in service, which necessitates assessing the literature on the impact of service-learning. To comprehend how ministry differs from the realm of non-religious service, one must garner knowledge of how important spirituality is to students and how it may hold the key to their passions and involvement. Finally, these two areas need to be compared and synthesized in order to realize how they work together to make ministry a feasible vehicle for a holistic education.

### **Service-Learning as a Developmental Tool**

Educators have long sought to instill in their students the internalization of what they are learning and to develop the motivation to learn and do more based on their own desires. In this quest, the practice of integrating service-learning components into the curriculum has been gaining momentum (Eyler & Giles, 1999). One study shows that “service-learning provides students with a particularly firm foundation upon which to build as they progress through their academic major” (Strage, 2004, p. 260). Previous literature (such as Astin, et al. 1999) holds the idea that the benefits of service-learning extend beyond the academic realm of influence and positively interact with and change other aspects of life such as values and belief. Astin, Sax, and Avalos (1999)

demonstrate this specifically in their study of the long-range effects of volunteer behavior. They found that service benefits the behavioral realm in encouraging things such as furthering one's education or donating to one's alma mater as well as future participation in service work. In association with values, these researchers also found that service contributed to the tendency to engage in helping people undergoing difficulty, promoting racial understanding, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life (Astin, et al. 1999). These outcomes, expected of those involved in service, are similar to the desired outcomes of a holistic education. Other literature suggests a connection between service-learning and growth in self-concept, linking the emotions and feelings rather than rational thought to the personal growth of the participants (Berger & Milem, 2002; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). This intensive interaction with the emotions and passions of students has a more powerful effect on their involvement than does learning by rote. Clearly, service-learning contributes to the academic and personal growth of students.

The concept of service-learning is related to the central ideas in Kolb's (1984) *Experiential Learning*, which postulates that learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This theory holds that being more involved with a subject (through service or action) will cause greater correlation between the mind and the subject, resulting in more effective learning. Service is a component of this which integrates both the mind and the heart as service is an action that helps other people. Yorks and Kasl (2002) espouse this idea by recognizing the strengths of "empathic knowing" that allows the emotions to affect the mind and create space on to which knowledge can latch. In turn, this "role of affect" is in agreement with Astin's

(1999) involvement theory, which shows that the level of education a student receives is predicated upon his or her level of involvement, effort, and investment of energy in his or her education. Astin acknowledges that students have limited amounts of time and energy and that educators are competing with other major parts of student's lives for attention and involvement. He recognizes that the competition often results in a loss of engagement with academic materials because much of student's energy is expended upon personal matters and recreational activities. The question facing educators is how to gain an advantage in the contest for student involvement.

### **The Definition and Role of Student Spirituality in Development**

In the competition for the time and involvement of students, one of those outside activities which attracts great amounts of student investments of energy is their own spirituality (Astin, 2004; Bryant, 2007; Ma, 2003). Spirituality among college students can be very broadly defined as seen in a Pew Research Center Forum survey completed in 2008, showing that the majority of all major religions in America are leaning toward pluralism that is an individual believing that his or her own faith is not the only true faith. Speaking to this wide range, Astin (2004) claims that the spiritual realm has to do with the subjective side of human consciousness and that it includes both qualitative experiences and logic. Continuing in a broad definition of spirituality, Dalton, Eberhart, Bracken, and Echols (2006) also steer away from aligning with any religious tradition by including all forms of introspection in which a person seeks to explore his or her relationship to the transcendent in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of personal meaning, purpose, authenticity, and wholeness. These broadly defined understandings of spirituality are high priorities in the lives of college students.

A study by the *Higher Education Research Institute* (HERI) revealed that “today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and are exploring the meaning and purpose of life. They also display high levels of religious commitment and involvement” (Astin, et. al., 2003, p. 3). Specific findings of that study show through qualitative measures the increasing ubiquity of spirituality:

Today’s entering college students report high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Four in five indicate “having an interest in spirituality” and “believing in the sacredness of life,” and nearly two-thirds say that “my spirituality is a source of joy.” Many are also actively engaged in a spiritual quest, with nearly half reporting that they consider it “essential” or “very important” to seek opportunities to help them grow spiritually. (p. 4)

The *HERI* study also recognized that students pour themselves into cultivating their spiritual lives because they expect returns in their physical and psychological well-being. This cultivation of the spiritual life is also affected positively by participation in service-learning (Astin, et al., 2011). The question remains whether or not these returns influence the quality of their academic learning.

In a study on the spiritual dimensions of learning, English (2000) found that authentic spiritual development can foster a strong sense of self; care, concern, and outreach to others; and the continuous construction of meaning and knowledge. These in turn often lead to self-directed learning which encourages engaging in dialogue and taking initiative to explore new concepts—all dimensions that lead to greater student involvement in their education through their spirituality. The findings of a special report



done by the *National Survey for Student Engagement* (NSSE) corroborates this thought. When students engage in activities that enhance their spirituality, there is a slight boost in their involvement in activities that are structured to produce educational outcomes, such as interacting with students of different beliefs and values (Kuh & Gonyea, 2005). Therefore, a strong involvement in spirituality is seen to direct energy toward self-education and internalization of ideas. Though the effects found in this study were small, it is evident that spiritual energies can be focused toward educational outcomes. In fact, Tisdell and Tolliver (2001) suggest that truly transformational learning cannot take place without engagement with the cognitive, affective, and symbolic or spiritual levels of individual being. Because spirituality is so tied to meaning-making, interacting with the symbolic level is essential to cultivating knowledge. The strategies of cultivating that symbolic or spiritual level are found in lesser-known areas of service-learning, such as ministry.

### **Links Between Service-Learning and Ministry**

Research has long shown that service-learning is an effective tool for involving the passions and intellects of students for more holistic learning (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kuh, 1995; Rhoads, 1997) based on Astin's (1999) involvement theory which posits that students will get more out of their education as they put more effort into it. But as there are many variations of service-learning, the ones that attract this extra effort must be explored. One of these unexplored areas is service within a religious context. It has become evident that spirituality is a driving force in the development of students, and this factor must be considered as a relevant source of impact on education (Astin, 2004). Spirituality has already been used within Christian

higher education, where the practice of involving students in ministry has long been a part of the extra-curriculum (Schaffer, 2004). Research exposes how involvement in ministry can impact a student's faith, but the direct consequences of faith as an element of service on educational outcomes is often left untouched (Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Hugen, Wolfer, & Renkema, 2006; Wilson & Janoski, 1995). Astin, Astin and Lindholm, (2011) recognize a possible link in that charitable involvement, such as community service or involvement in ministry, enhances equanimity. Equanimity, which is the ability to see the good in difficult situations, is later linked in their study to better grades—a possible indicator of academic development—and higher levels of psychological well-being, an important aspect of personal development (Astin, et al., 2011).

### **Tying Spirituality to Development Through Religious Service**

Until now, spirituality has been loosely defined to refer simply to the inner, subjective life and forms of reflection that follow the inner life. In the context of this study, however, the view will be considerably narrowed to the spirituality that is widely represented by Christianity, specifically as it pertains to American Christian higher education. Christian spirituality is characterized by an adherence and commitment to the teachings of the Bible and the Christian church, specifically that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of all people and rose again from the dead to redeem humanity and all of creation. Inherent in this tradition are consistent readings of sacred texts, exhibiting love and service to others, and prayer.

A major group of representatives of this spiritual tradition in American higher education is the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). CCCU

member institutions purposefully develop whole persons including their spiritual and moral reasoning beyond the intellectual capabilities that universities typically cultivate (CCCU.org). They are constantly working on improving these areas and are discovering that the classroom may not be the only mode of education for spiritual development. Spiritual formation is a positive experience in Christian colleges, according to Ma (2003), which can often take place outside of the classroom in the form of peer relationships and extra-curricular programs, including service-learning. Additionally, Christian colleges adhere to principles that expect students to express their faith by serving others, making these institutions ideal for testing theories of service-learning.

Research has been done to determine the role of service-learning in Christian higher education, but few studies have noted how engaging with the spiritual realm modifies the service-learning component. Schaffer (2004) recognizes that “service-learning challenges students to consider what they believe as they confront situations and people who may question their motives or beliefs” (p. 135-136) and therefore remains a crucial method of challenge and support. She also notes that reflection, as a fundamental cog in the educational underpinnings of service-learning, provides a faith element as well by “allow[ing] for dialogue not only about the course content and service activity, but also about topics that engage those involved in developing a worldview and faith perspective” (Schaffer, 2004, p. 136). Other experts agree that reflection is key, and while they place it more firmly in the realm of spiritual development, they certainly acknowledge the educational benefits. Smith (1996) advocates that in order for spiritual formation within the academic setting to be most effective, the classroom must be complemented, not replaced, by spiritual engagement. As the classroom supports and

upholds the ministry service, so does the outside experience reinforce principles learned in the classroom. The two are inseparable and add considerably to one another's potential impact (Smith, 1996). There remains a strong emphasis in the literature on the impact of service on faith (Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Hugen, Wolfer, & Renkema, 2006; Wilson & Janoski, 1995), and while that relationship's reflection is implied to have impact, the literature seems to underestimate the influence that faith-based service-learning has on academic and personal development. Some researchers are just beginning to examine this relationship.

In Hillman (2006), current ministry practices were seen to have a significant impact on nascent leadership principles among theological students at the graduate level. Within the seminary context, it was seen that engaging outside of the classroom in a religiously-based service experience resulted in higher leadership scores. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) dedicated an entire chapter of their book to understanding how spiritual growth affects educational and personal development. In their chapter, they find that high scores in the measures of equanimity and spiritual quest relate to positive academic development. However, religious engagement seems to be connected to a slight decline in academic development between the freshman and junior years. This decline may be reflective of the researchers' narrow definition of religious engagement, which encompasses only prayer, meditation/reflection, reading sacred texts, and attending religious services. Recognition that volunteer work has benefits on intellectual self-esteem arises as a potential spiritual work, but direct involvement in ministry is not considered.

## Summary

In conclusion, the research surrounding the impact of ministry on development illustrates a gap that must be filled. It has become evident that service-learning is an important method of engaging and involving the student for maximum educational potential as well as cultivating a psychologically well-balanced student. This method employs both Astin's (1999) involvement theory and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory in that it allows students to engage their passions and learn via experience. Eyler and Giles (1999) show that there are different versions and variations of service-learning, and they must all be rooted out to discover their full potential. Berger and Milem (2002) are a part of the swath of research that points toward the ability of service-learning to engage more than just the mind. This addition of the emotive and spiritual elements allows for whole-person development to take place. The recent book, *Cultivating the Spirit* by Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) suggests that an enhanced ethic of caring, illustrated by engagement in community service, often leads to the development of the spiritual quest. In turn, the spiritual quest has positive effects on academic and personal development through greater equanimity. Student involvement in spirituality is such a large issue that to ignore the opportunity to harness such passion would be folly. The vitality and effectiveness of this dimension has led us to examine the marriage of these two popular principles in religiously-based service-learning. The impact of service-learning on spirituality has been well established through the literature, but the inverse—the impact of spirituality as a modifier of service-learning—needs further investigation.

## Chapter 3

### **Methodology**

In an effort to understand the role of ministry experience in learning and student development, this study focused on students at a Christian university who were enrolled in classes that required them to participate in ministry as a path to accomplishing the course learning objectives. This group comprised the selection of participants in the study, and they were contacted to be interviewed about their specific experiences. The study used a grounded theory approach to determine how the process of engaging in ministry affects the academic and personal development of the participants. The grounded theory method was developed to understand processes and to identify core categories within those processes that cause the changes under investigation (Creswell, 2008). This method is relevant to the study as it unravels the nuances involved in ministry and, through qualitative interviews with participants, has the potential to illuminate the causal elements of the process.

### **Environment of the Study**

The studied institution is a small, Christian liberal arts university in the Midwest, where a substantial portion of students take part in ministry-oriented courses. There are approximately 1900 students at this institution, with most of them living in on-campus residence halls. All students are required to sign a statement of faith before enrolling in the school. Those in the Christian Educational Ministries major or Youth Ministries

minor are required to complete a practicum during a summer term through which they put into practice what they have been learning about ministry in their courses over the previous years. These courses are based on students' involvement in ministry as an effort to reach learning objectives, making this group an ideal sample for the study. The students' practicums often takes place at a church or a Christian organization and requires them to be in a role of leadership in which they will be challenged. Before beginning the summer experience, students are required to turn in a list of personal and ministry objectives and goals that they report on periodically throughout the summer. They have an on-site supervisor, the person for whom they are working, who meets with them weekly to discuss progress made on learning objectives and to assess their personal growth. Their faculty supervisor, a university professor, visits once to see how they are doing and to meet with the on-site supervisor to discuss and assess the performance of the student. Through daily journals and weekly reports sent to the faculty supervisor, the student maintains an accurate reflection of their experience which is summed up in a final paper on the whole experience. Additionally, the students select a textbook that is relevant to their area of ministry and reflect on reading it throughout their ministry experience.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study are upperclassmen in a ministry major and so seemed to attract students of higher maturity and habits of engagement. Students doing the practicum are often between their junior and senior year and have been studying ministry in several courses. It was hoped that their intensive focus on ministry would bring light to the experience's actual impact. As upperclassmen, they often see this

practicum as a gateway to their future careers and use the time to assess whether or not this is something into which they want to pour their passion. This results in high levels of involvement because the course represents more than just a grade or another credit hour.

The primary researcher contacted the thirteen students completing their Christian Education major practicum during the summer of 2011 for interviews at the beginning of the 2011 fall semester, immediately following their summer practicum experience. Six students were willing to participate in the interviews. The interviews assessed what each person learned and what strategies, experiences, and involvements contributed to their ability to digest and retain the new information. The students were also questioned on how the experience contributed to their spiritual quest. The interview questions are included in the Appendix.

By participating in the study, students risked their privacy but only with the primary researcher. Before interviewing, participants reviewed and signed an informed consent form. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to participants and recorded their responses accordingly. Specific details in their responses were obscured with generic terms so as to protect their identity, as well. To minimize the risks to participants, the proposal was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board on July 31, 2011.

### **Data Collection**

Six of the thirteen students involved in the ministry experience were interviewed in a private location by the primary researcher. The interviews took place soon after the summer ministry experience: between September 7 and October 14. Interviews were conducted at this time to enhance the validity of the data gathered. One participant (Tim)



was spending his fall semester studying abroad in a rural part of the developing world making in-person and phone interviews impossible. Therefore, his interview consisted of his writing out and emailing answers to the questions in the interview protocol (see the Appendix). The other five participants' interviews were in-person and took place in a private location. After reviewing the informed consent, a semi-structured interview was recorded in which participants relayed information based upon the questions in the Appendix. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes depending on what clarifying questions were asked or what kinds of anecdotes were related to underscore a point.

After gathering the data, the primary researcher spent the following months transcribing the interviews. By personally transcribing what was said, the researcher also began achieving saturation in the data through repeated interaction with the material. Once transcription and saturation of the data were finished, analysis began.

### **Analysis**

To analyze the data, the researcher focused on the ways in which the participants ascribed their academic and personal growth to aspects of their experiences specific to ministry. The analysis took into account creative and leadership elements of ministry as well as the impact of interaction with the spiritual realm. This grounded theory approach sought to explain how the ministry experience impacted the participants' learning and their development of a meaningful philosophy of life as a part of the spiritual quest. By pulling out major themes from the data, the researcher identified causal elements that had impact on the development of the students and proposed a theory based upon those findings. To this end, participants were asked to evaluate the effects of the experience on

specific factors of educational growth, such as leadership skills, intellectual self-esteem, and desire to pursue further education. They were also asked to consider the effect of the experience on personal growth factors such as psychological well-being, development of their identity, and their closeness with God. The instances in which teaching and areas of service were responsible for learning were noted, but special attention was given to learning that came from spiritual activities such as prayer, evangelism, or spiritual-quest style motivations such as working for the glory of God. Participant responses were categorized through axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) into areas that reflect the influence of ministry on development, which came from other sources. This process included identifying core categories that the participants noted as important and typing them into defined areas that could be set apart as themes. The themes were sent back to and verified by the participants. Through this coding, the study began to produce a pattern that shows the influence of ministry on the academic and personal development of students.

## Chapter 4

### Results

#### Themes

Several themes developed from the gathered data that speak to the research questions of this study. All six interviewees were largely in agreement that the ministry experience was an intense time of hard work that precipitated great growth in different areas of their lives. While some participants worked at churches, others were at camps or missions organizations providing a variety of experiences. Despite the diversity, all of them felt that the summer was full of academic and personal development because of the nature of the service and their relationship with God, which intensified the experience.

#### Student Perceptions of Ministry Impact

The first research question asked how the students perceived the ministry experience affecting their academic and personal growth. Their answers about their motivations for being in ministry were telling in this area because it showed their projected expectations about what they believed would affect them. All six participants claimed to have a sense of being called or led by God into ministry. One participant, Esther, said, “I feel like the Lord has equipped me and called me to be a minister for Him.” Ashley and Mary both voiced the idea that they were “built to do ministry” and that they were finally connecting with their passions. With these kinds of expectations in

place, it became clear that students set themselves up to perceive God at work in their experience because they saw Him as the leader in what they were doing.

Additionally, the participants perceived that the spiritual component of ministry made their service more meaningful than if it had been any other type of service that was not specifically done in the name of God. Following their perceived calling allowed the participants to engage more deeply in the service and the learning because they felt that they were engaged for reasons larger than themselves. Engagement with God is seen clearly when Holly described how her interaction with God played into her daily work in ministry:

Time in the Word and in prayer is absolutely essential because it's a hard job ... and it can be easy to get caught up in the tasks ... that we have to do every day. But if you're doing just that, it is empty ministry.

Four other participants besides Holly also expressed this view through anecdotes in which they felt that their service was more meaningful because of the eternal impact they believed it would have on those to whom they were ministering. Fred recalled a time in which he was preparing to teach a lesson to students and the thought struck him that he was responsible for serious spiritual formation in young and impressionable children. The weight of that responsibility seemed to give him a stronger resolve to do his best and to continue to improve in his Bible teaching.

The increase in meaning seemed to lead to the experience having a greater effect on the positive academic and personal development among the participants. Because they connected their work with a lifelong following of their Lord and to the eternal

salvation of others, these students invested themselves more deeply and were positively affected by that investment.

### **Origin of Change**

Determining the origin of the developmental change was the focus of the second research question. In order to decide whether it was service, the relationship with God, or a combination of the two that has the greatest impact, one must look at how the participants reported growth in both personal and academic areas and consider to what they attribute that growth.

**Personal development.** In the interviews, half of the participants mentioned that they expected to grow personally through the experience. In the end, all of the students reported experiencing personal growth. When asked to what they attributed that development, only one third identified the service aspect of the experience, whereas all six participants gave credit to their relationship with God. Ashley reported that she felt the Lord had really stretched her during the summer and that it benefited her in understanding her life's potential path. She focused often on how the Lord was teaching her in small steps how her passions were aligned with His. Holly noted that healing came from the experience and attributed that largely to time spent engaging with the Scripture. Though a previous ministry experience had hurt her, she claimed that this most recent experience was a tool that God used to show her His strength in helping her grow. Fred felt a stronger sense of identity as he ministered, because he knew that his ministry was a reflection of his own relationship with God. As he cultivated his inner life, he knew it would pour out into his work.

**Academic development.** As the experience was a practicum for academic credit, it is not surprising that five out of six participants expected to improve academically. As it turned out, all six reported that they did see growth in the academic realm, and all six of them attributed it both to the service and their relationship with God. One of the most telling quotes came from Mary:

My relationship with God is basically the catalyst for all (my development). And the reality is that without a personal relationship with God, I wouldn't have been able to write good lessons, I wouldn't have been able to teach well and so those connections between the classroom and the field wouldn't have been made because it is through Christ we do these things.

Mary felt that God was clearly an actor in the change and growth in her life. The final phrase she uses, which quotes from the biblical book of Philippians, claims that we can do all things through Christ. This claim is a part of the belief that Christians are new creations in Christ who, as the Son of God, empowers them to do greater things than they themselves could have done without Him. The spiritual component as a strong influence in Mary's experience is apparent in this view.

Esther tied the importance of her academic growth to her relationship with God when she stated that her desire to grow academically came almost entirely from a desire to serve God better. She continually brought all of her perceptions of her academic development back to the fact that it would help her be a better minister for the Lord. Here, the motivation to grow is rooted in something greater than herself, and she used that to spur herself on to greater development in the academic realm.

Fred felt a deeper reason for his educational growth: not only were his motivations spiritually-based, but he claimed to have felt a sort of partnership and a sense of guidance from God as he ministered. He claimed that feeling that partnership gave him more confidence to excel in his academic work. Often, service-learning can stretch an individual by bringing them to something unfamiliar, but when Fred felt that he was working alongside God, there was a deep sense of empowerment, responsibility, and confidence that helped him achieve more in his ability to teach lessons than another service experience might have been able to offer him.

### **The Impact of Spirituality**

Finally, the third research question called for a broader view of the experience asking how the spiritual realm modified the service-learning experience. Aside from the noted benefits in personal and academic development above, the participants saw their relationship with God affect their ability to make meaning and grow from the experience as a whole.

Half of the participants mentioned somehow that elements of reflection, prayer, and Bible reading affected their personal and academic growth positively. All students interviewed believed and demonstrated that trusting and following God or being in His will also positively affected their development. Numerous anecdotes began with some sort of clarifying statement that things could not have been accomplished so well if God's will had not been considered and followed. The participants noted a feeling of freedom that came in trusting His leading, leading them toward the perspective that God is entirely worth trusting.

Finally, half of the participants had a sense that all things were tied into faith or that their relationships with God brought meaning to everything. This last sentiment is important because of the way it ties every aspect of life into the relationship with God, as seen in a thought from Ashley who claimed that everything she did “had to be consumed by God or else it was unfruitful.” Tim carried this idea further to his own identity when he said, “My relationship to God is central to who I am, what I do, and why I do it. Therefore this relationship informs much if not all of my development as a student.” Mary continued this idea when she mentioned that her “relationship with God is almost more of a priority than any other (aspect) of my job description because it’s really what people learn from.” These thoughts lend credence to the notion that the spiritual component of the service experience was a dominant factor of growth in their experience.

The reflective portion of the experience could be construed as simply a normal part of service-learning, but the participants made it clear that engaging with sacred texts and praying was what made a greater difference in helping them stretch their own boundaries in growing personally and in their academics. Fred said that he prayed each time he taught, and Esther recognized how God was speaking to her during different points of the experience. Reflection on its own, of course, had a strong affect, but Esther mentioned specifically that time spent reading the Bible was “pivotal” to her experience. The Scripture was instrumental for Holly in healing from past ministry experiences and for Ashley in guiding her future life decisions. Holly claimed that without reflection in God’s Word, service was “empty.”

### **Summary**



In all, the data from the participants points to a strong influence from both service-learning and an interaction with the spiritual realm as the driving forces behind positive student development. Every single participant reported experiencing growth in personal and academic areas. In addition, every single one of them attributed growth in both areas to their relationship with God, whereas only two out of six attributed their personal growth to the effects of service-learning. Most of the students, five out of six, expected the ministry experience to help them mature, and a majority found that the ministry-specific aspects of this certain service were instrumental in their development.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

It is clear that the spiritual component of the ministry experience moderated the service-learning factor to produce a greater personal and academic development in these students than would have been possible in an unmodified service-learning experience. The processes that were responsible are rooted in an established understanding of service-learning and the spirituality of college students. The core categories of these processes come from the joining of spirituality and service in the form of a ministry experience, which allowed the students to interact more deeply with their inner, subjective selves through a relationship with God, interaction with Scripture, and spiritual reflection.

#### Processes of Change

One of the key processes in this study was the service-learning element with which the students engaged during their practicum. The results of the study are congruent with the literature on service-learning, suggesting that as the participants engaged in service, they allowed themselves to become personally invested in the work which in turn affected their learning. Concepts from Kolb's (1984) *Experiential Learning* were seen in the way that new insights were garnered when the students saw the practical application of principles they had studied in class. The experience of the principles had made them real and linked the learning to participants' emotions and

feelings rather than simply to their rational thought (Berger & Milem, 2002; Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

Thus, it was on the participants' academic development that service had the greatest impact. An example is seen in how many of them were able to write Bible studies more clearly as a result of experiencing the reality of teaching. The participants had all taken courses that taught them how properly study for and assemble a teaching and learning experience based on a passage of the Bible, but it was not until they actually realized that actual people would be learning from it that they felt they truly had a grasp on how to convey spiritual ideas to others. With the integration of service, the more sterile feel of the classroom was gone and the passion that originally drew these students into ministry rose to the surface.

It is also easy to see how Astin's (1999) involvement theory coincides with the greater learning experienced by the participants. Their attachment to the learning that came about by experience with people in the real world awoke their emotions and connected what they were doing in such a way that they were able to invest more energy into their work. According to Astin (1999) this deep involvement is a key element in engaging the mind more wholly and aiding in academic development. The involvement theory claims that as one invests more psychological energy, there will be a reciprocal effect on the impact of the experience.

In order to explain why the investment of energy was so great, one must now look at the spiritual component that moderated the service-learning experience. In this study, the spirituality component of the experience is seen as a moderator of the independent variable of the service-learning experience. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), a

moderator is “a variable that affects the direction and/or strength of the relations between an independent or predictor variable and a dependent or criterion variable.” Thus, spirituality affects the direction and strength of the relationship between a service-learning experience and positive development in personal and academic area.

Many college students take their spirituality very seriously and, in fact, devote enormous amounts of their limited physical and psychological energy to it (Astin, 2004; Bryant, 2007; Ma, 2003). The participants in this study are no exception. They all attend a Christian undergraduate institution, they are all majoring in a ministry-related area, and they all expressed during their interviews a passionate devotion to their relationship with God. There could be very few stronger moderators to add to a service-learning experience for such students if one wanted them to invest huge amounts of energy, be deeply involved, and get as much out of it as they could.

With spirituality as a strong moderator in play, it might be assumed that it could overwhelm the service-learning factor it was enhancing. However in this study, the robust structure of the service-learning class seemed to ensure that the academic and personal development through this ministry experience was well focused. The participants’ spirituality certainly played a part in their academics. They felt a sense of guidance as they worked, they used their passion to overcome fears in leadership and public speaking, and they exhibited a desire to grow more in academic areas so that they could minister more effectively in the future. As also might be expected, spirituality was a driving force behind the personal development of the participants. The participants felt a sense of understanding in their lives’ directions, they were healed of past hurts, and they became surer of their own identities.

The pursuit of a spiritual quest is a student's effort to discover the meaning or purpose of life, attain inner harmony, and develop a meaningful philosophy of life (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). The spiritual outcomes that the participants of this study noted are ones that show that these students were involved in developing their own spiritual quest. As seen in the literature noted above, the development of a spiritual quest can affect both personal and academic outcomes in students.

### **Core Causal Categories**

In order to understand how spirituality moderates the service-learning experience to impact both the personal and academic development of the participants, the core categories of that spiritual quest development must be explored. In the interviews, some major themes emerged that pointed toward areas that appeared to have an impact. These were an engagement in reflection, prayer, or Scripture; trusting and following God or being in His will; and having a sense that all things are tied into one's faith or that one's relationship with God brings meaning.

By far the most prevalent of these three causal categories—the practice of reflection, prayer, and Bible reading—was both ubiquitous and powerful. Many of the participants claimed that reading sacred texts was pivotal to their experience as the main factor in their growth. Of course, many of them read the Bible in an academic sense in order to prepare for their teaching that day, but they asserted that there was a difference between reading the Bible for work and reading it for their own personal, spiritual growth. All of them saw prayer as integral to their work as it focused the beginnings of each of their days and was formational in how they viewed both their roles and the roles of the people around them. Praying helped the students to empathize with others,

therefore becoming more connected and engaging more deeply because of that connection. Reflection was also a key part in the participants' personal and spiritual growth for many of the same reasons that it is a major part of service-learning as seen in the literature. Schaffer (2004) speaks to the ability of reflection to aid development by showing that reflecting allows the participant to question his or her actions and place them within a context of both self and worldview. The deep understanding of the relationship between actions and beliefs that results helps those who reflect to grow in understanding in many realms, whether spiritual, personal, or academic. As the participants in this study reflected, they had a pattern of using the reflection time to understand how the ministry work they were currently doing was only a part of their longer-term relationship with God. This contextualization aided many of them as they saw it as a sign that they should continue in ministry. Others saw their work in ministry as another part of the relationship in which God was showing them His love and support.

Contextualization brought about by reflection links directly into the next main category that appeared to have a causal effect on the personal and academic development of the students. The students were affected by a sense that they were trusting God by doing this ministry or that they were following a larger plan for their lives and were therefore in the center of His will. The belief that one is in the right place and doing the right thing is a strong motivator for success, whatever the situation. This was not just the approval of parents or teachers, but in the minds of these students, they experienced the approval of their God. Compounded by this intense sense of trust and approval, they were able to throw themselves whole-heartedly into their work. The trust they had that they were in the right place and doing the right thing allowed them to invest more

physical and psychological energy (Astin, 1999) than normal and so were more involved in their ministry work. The experience helped them to feel that God was guiding their career and life plans and thus they were able to work without holding back due to a fear that they were wasting time here when they were destined for something else. Instead, the knowledge that they were preparing for a future career emboldened them to step outside of their comfort zones and stretch themselves to learn and do more than would have normally been possible.

Finally, the sense that their faith brought meaning to all things was another powerful causal category for change in personal and academic realms of the participants' development. In the personal areas, it was tied closely with their sense of trust and approval in that they felt that God was an important factor in their own growth. But what links it to academics, and is the crux of the moderating effect that spirituality has on service-learning, is the claim that the relationship with God affects *all* things. The participants who mentioned this phenomenon were adamant that their spirituality and their relationship with God was vital to their personal, academic, spiritual, physical (and any other) areas of growth. It was best stated by Tim, who asserted that "My relationship to God is central to who I am, what I do, and why I do it. Therefore this relationship informs much if not all of my development as a student." Ashley claimed that everything she did "had to be consumed by God or else it was unfruitful." These broadly inclusive statements leave no room for doubt that it was evident to the participants that their spirituality had a deep and strong effect on all areas of their development.

### **Grounded Theory**

Through these three causal areas—engagement in prayer, Scripture, and reflection; a sense of trust and approval; and a sense that God affects all things—it becomes clear how spirituality moderates the service-learning experience to impact both the personal and academic development of students. As the students pour themselves into spiritual practices, they identify more strongly with the work they are doing, exciting their passions, emotions, and getting more involved. As the students feel that they are in the right place and doing the right thing, they cast aside doubts and inhibitions to do their work more fully and to engage more deeply. As the students connect all of their growth to their relationship with God, they recognize the strongest factor in their development and point independently to how their spirituality enhances their service-learning experience.

Student development, both personal and academic, is aided by engagement in service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Strage, 2004). Service-learning is predicated upon involvement in an experience (Astin, 1999; Kolb, 1984) and the three causal areas dealt with above show that spirituality is a strong factor to increase the students' intrinsic desire to be fully involved and engaged in the service. While the literature has shown spirituality to be a passion among many students (Astin, 2004; Bryant, 2007; Ma, 2003), in this study, it is also a strong factor that enhances the service-learning experience. Therefore, a theory may be proposed that when spirituality is integrated with service-learning in the form of a ministry experience, the already documented benefits of service-learning may be enhanced in both personal and academic realms.



## **Limitations**

This study is bound by limitations due to the nature of the study, the environment, and the scope of areas studied. Participants were examined at only one evangelical Christian college in the Midwest, and the study was restricted to one ministry class. Within this class was a small pool of thirteen candidates of whom only six participated in the study. Due to time constraints on the principle researcher, other ministry participants could not be studied because their experiences came too late in the year to be included in this research. Thus, the study was restricted to those who had a service-learning ministry experience during the summer, and the possible number of candidates was limited.

This study focused on only Christian spirituality as the moderator of a service-learning experience. Other faith traditions were not considered due to the Christian environment in which the study took place, and therefore this project cannot speak to the impact of the spirituality of other faiths.

Finally, though the ministry experiences studied were varied, there could have been a broader scope of ministry including mission trips, pastoral ministry, community ministry, discipleship, or evangelism. While some of the principles may persevere into these areas, it cannot be determined by this study because it looked primarily at youth, children's, and camp ministries.

Despite these limitations, the participants and their varied experiences provided a comprehensive enough picture to propose a grounded theory that can be studied further to determine the impact on service-learning within the student development efforts of a Christian institution. The limitations along with the findings can also lead to implications

for research so that future studies may be broader and encompass all spirituality on all types of service-learning.

### **Implications for Research**

The somewhat narrow scope of this study opens up the arena for similar ideas to be pursued in the broader context of ministry. Providing that the definition of ministry remains a service-based and altruistic activity that is founded in spiritual or religious ideals, future researchers might look into regular community ministry, cross-cultural and international evangelism, and other ministry areas in which students could potentially be involved. These studies could be longitudinal, looking at the habits of involvement of students throughout their traditional college years and correlating those habits with wellness measures and student development outcomes. In order to parse out the meaning of ministry even further, future studies could look at ministry that takes place outside of a service-learning class and assess whether or not the academic structure has an impact on the quality and intensity of ministry. These studies could provide a clearer and broader picture of the impact of a ministry experience on student development.

In the area of service-learning, this study has opened up the notion of better capturing the passions of students to get them more involved. Scholars of service can spend their time looking into other passion-areas that, like spirituality, will draw students to give themselves deeply to service. If and when similar moderators are identified, they could then be compared with spirituality to see which has the greater moderating effect on the benefits of service-learning. Through this knowledge, student development and academic professionals can better educate and cultivate students through service.

Finally, there may be a chance for research outside of higher education to build from the findings presented here. Professional development in the corporate world has learned to take cues from higher education to produce better employees, managers, and chief officers. The idea of tapping into passion areas of individuals to help them grow could be explored in order to help businesses cultivate more efficient human resources.

### **Implications for Practice in Higher Education**

One of the key findings to come out of this study is that including spirituality as a component of service-learning can affect the learning outcomes because of spirituality's widespread role in students' lives. Practitioners in higher education can use this to create stronger service-learning programs through the integration of students' passions into what they are learning and experiencing. This can range widely from patriotism to social issues and well beyond to anything that students may be individually passionate about. But specifically, this study has shown that spirituality is an issue in which most students are interested and may be applied in order to help them take ownership in both their learning and development.

Furthermore, practitioners can look into the possible uses of spirituality in developing students. Spirituality was once commonly held as a private matter, and while that idea may persist, it can be used as one of the tools that student development professionals use in their work. This is not to say that spirituality exists for utilitarian purposes only, but that its importance to students and the weight it carries can be a touch point for practitioners as they seek to connect and identify with students.

Christian institutions of higher learning can be a leader in this transformation of service-learning because of their unique ability to interact with their students' spirituality,

allowing them to prescribe an integration of spirituality and service. These religiously affiliated schools may already offer ministry opportunities and, with a more complete understanding of the academic and personal outcomes, such experiences can be given more academic credit as well as credence in the student development and academic community.

### **Summary**

The key points of this study are that there is evidence for service-learning as a wonderful tool in developing students, but it can be enhanced by combining these opportunities with something students are already investing their energy in: their own spirituality. In a ministry experience, service-learning and spirituality combine to create a learning experience that is beneficial to both personal and academic growth. This is largely because of the deep personal investment students make in their spirituality as seen in their engagement with sacred texts, their sense of being in God's will, and their understanding that their relationship with God brings meaning to what they do. The benefits of service-learning are added to the benefits of the pursuit of a spiritual quest, and the resulting combination is a powerful experience for student development. Therefore, when spirituality is applied to a service-learning opportunity in the form of a ministry experience, there may be expected benefits to student development in personal and academic areas.

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Appendix  
**Interview Protocol**

Interview Questions for Undergraduates Involved in Academic Ministry

1. Describe in detail the nature of your internship, your duties, and how you related to those around you.
2. What was your motivation for being involved in this ministry (or seeking out the class/major that required it)?
3. What learning objectives did you hope to accomplish?
  - a. What about your experience helped you achieve those objectives?
  - b. If not from your experience, how did you achieve them?
4. Describe the effect this experience had on you personally.
5. Describe the effect this experience had on your leadership skills, intellectual self-esteem, or further educational aspirations.
6. In what ways did this ministry experience affect your relationship with God?
7. How does your relationship with God affect your personal development as a student?

