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# SOPHOMORE STUDENT SPIRITUALITY

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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

---

by

Miriam E. Gin

May 2009

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

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTERS THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Miriam E. Gin

entitled

Sophomore Student Spirituality

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the  
Master of Arts degree

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## ABSTRACT

The second year of college, with its unique challenges, has been found to present students with issues that could possibly make it more difficult than the first year. Some students experience the sophomore slump, which is defined in a myriad of ways, including reduced motivation and the uncertainty that comes with choosing a major. One major result of the slump is attrition between the sophomore and junior years. This study looks at the spiritual life of sophomores that experienced some aspect of the sophomore slump at a private, Christian liberal arts institution. It specifically looks at how they experienced the slump as well as their spiritual experiences during the sophomore year.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A current trend in higher education is the focus on the first year experience. Institutions have created freshman-specific positions such as “Retention Specialists” and “Directors of New Student Orientation” to ease the transition and foster successful experiences for students as they enter college, with hopes that students will then persist through graduation. Such a monumental focus on the first year has left the second-year experience, which some would argue has challenges equal to those faced in the freshman year (Boivin, Fountain, & Baylis, 2000), to fade into the background, often forcing sophomores to fend for themselves. Sophomores have been termed “the academy’s middle children” (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006, p. 17; Schaller, 2005, p. 17), and have been described as “‘between’ in every respect,” (Boivin et al., p. 2) “stranded in no-man’s land,” (Richmond & Lemons, 1985, p. 176) and “virtually ignored from all sides of the institution” (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000, p. v). Due to the recent explosion of literature on the sophomore year experience, the second year has gained more attention in the research and on campus.

The literature describes a phenomenon called the “sophomore slump” that students may experience during their second year. The slump is expressed in a variety of ways, with attrition between the sophomore and junior year as the principal consequence (Flanagan, 1991; Gardner, Pattengale, & Schreiner, 2000; Pattengale, 2000). Other expressions include: personal (Boivin et al., 2000; Gardner et al.; Lemons & Richmond, 1985) and academic (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Gardner, et al.) development. Concerning



literature on the sophomore year experience, Gardner, et al. claimed, “While the sophomore slump has been satisfactorily identified, there are insufficient data and research describing the phenomenon” (p. 91). The 2007 follow up monograph claimed, “As can be seen throughout this monograph, significant strides have been made in researching the sophomore experience, particularly from a qualitative perspective” (Pattengale & Schreiner, p. v). The conclusion of the 2007 monograph proposes that, “Campuses should begin by gathering data that help illuminate the experiences of second-year students at that institution” (Tobolowsky & Cox, p. 95). The current study attempts to provide just the sort of data for which these investigators are calling. One aspect which has not been researched or discussed is how the sophomore slump relates to spirituality and faith development. Most of the existing studies have looked at the spirituality at the beginning and end of the college experience. However, this study combines these two topics, examining the spiritual lives of sophomores and their experiences with the slump. This is accomplished through the reflections of current senior students who experienced the slump in any of the following ways: “reduced motivation or apathy, declining grade point averages, letdown from their first year” (Pattengale & Schreiner, p.vi), “prolonged indecisiveness about selecting a major...low levels of commitment...[and] frustration with the academic experience” (Gardner et al., p. 90).

Understanding how sophomores experience spiritual development in the midst of the slump opens the door for higher education practitioners to foster and encourage growth in these students. Also, further knowledge about how students experience the

slump should aid in combating it and helping students to successfully navigate the associated challenges of the sophomore year.

### Research Questions

This study intends to supplement the sophomore literature by addressing the following questions: How is the sophomore slump experienced? How is the sophomore spiritual experience impacted by the slump?

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers studying the sophomore year experience have used the term “sophomore slump” to describe the experience of some students. Though this term is widely used, not all sophomores have a tumultuous second year (Gansemer-Topf, Stern, & Benjamin, 2007). Freedman (1956) first termed “sophomore slump” and used it to describe a feeling of “inertia or disorganization” (p. 22). He thought occurrences of a sophomore slump to be uncommon and if it happened, it would occur in the latter half of the freshman year. With the exception of a few studies, the main body of research and literature on the sophomore year was conducted during the last ten years. This research includes two monographs published by the University of South Carolina’s National Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. This research points to the occurrence of a slump, expressed in a plethora of ways.

Though the term sophomore slump is now commonly used, it has not been clearly defined. Unfortunately, it has many different meanings and connotations. As noted before, Gardner et al. (2000) found the primary expression of the slump to be high levels of sophomores dropping out of college. In a study of 23 private liberal arts colleges and universities, Flanagan (1991) found the attrition rate--between the sophomore and junior year--to be almost double than between the freshman and sophomore year (25% as compared to 13%). Similarly, in a study done on 65 of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), the attrition rate up to the sophomore year was 24.1%, while the attrition rate until the junior year was a considerable 40.6% (Pattengale, 2000).

### Definitions of the Sophomore Slump

Lemons and Richmond (1987) defined the sophomore slump as “a period of developmental confusion experienced by college students” (p. 18), and in 1985 wrote that characteristics of the slump include uncertainties about a career decision, relationship and friendship troubles, and more of a sensitivity to the financial cost of a college education. In 1976, Margolis referred to the sophomore slump as an “identity crisis” (p. 134) sophomores go through involving the academic, social and self areas. Furr and Gannaway (1982) described the slump as a difficult time during the sophomore year when students are unsure and confused, while Gahagan and Hunter (2006) saw the slump as a time when sophomores lack desire and interest, do not feel a part of the institution, and struggle with academics. Gardner (2000) observed that sophomores lack deep relationships and reason for being in college, making them uninvolved and uncommitted, bouncing around from activity to activity. Besides attrition, Gardner et al. (2000) saw the slump expressed in poor decisions about courses, majors and minors; prolonged degree completion; decrease in "co-curricular involvement;" "dysfunctional behavior" affecting academic success; not attending class; and a failure to assimilate their academic and social experience (p. 90).

### Definitions of Spirituality

Spirituality has been defined in a myriad of ways. Astin (2004) posits that

Spirituality points to our interiors...our subjective life...what we experience privately...our qualitative or *affective* experiences...the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here...meaning and purpose...connectedness to each other...spirituality can

also...do with the aspects of...intuition, inspiration, the mysterious, and the mystical. (p. 34)

Love and Talbot (1999) propose that spiritual development involves: “Seeking self-knowledge...transcending one’s...locus of centrality, being open to...community, recognizing (a)...pervasive power beyond human existence” (p. 367), as well as the search for meaning and purpose. Dalton (2006) writes that students describe spirituality as a quest that leads them to deep inward reflection. Jones (2005) envisions spirituality in education as transcendence, connection, wholeness, and compassion. Parks (2000) links faith to an aggressive seeking out of meaning in one’s experiences.

Spirituality should not be confused with religiosity or religion, which has a very different definition. Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) define religiousness by what students do including going to church, activity in religious groups or clubs, prayer, meditation, and talking about religion. Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) characterize religiosity using highly structured, objective terms to describe religiosity and more individual and subjective terms for spirituality. Parks (2000) sees faith as dynamic and transforming and when it is paralleled to religiosity it loses this ever-changing characteristic. Love (2000a) defines spirituality as having an internal focus, whereas religion centers more on external action. Though spirituality and religiosity are related, spirituality can exist without any religious orientation (Dalton, 2006; Johnson, Kristeller, & Sheets, 2006; Bryant et al.; Parks), though religious practices can aid in fostering spirituality (Love).

## Identity Development and Spiritual Struggle

### *Identity Development*

Spirituality and faith are closely tied to identity, especially as college students are "increas[ingly]...integrating spirituality into their lives" (Bryant et al., 2003, pp. 736-737). Fowler (1984) argued that identity, the "who am I," is grounded in something bigger, the "who am I in relation to the Creator, Ruler, and Redeemer-Liberator of the universe" (p. 93). This is echoed by Bussema (1999), who stated that "identity status and faith stage are clearly related" (p. 22). Marcia, well-known for his theory of identity development in young adults also saw a connection between identity development and one's beliefs. He defined identity as a "self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, *beliefs*, and individual history" [italics added] (1980, p. 159). Built upon Erikson's theory of identity development across the lifespan, Marcia developed four statuses to capture identity development in young adults: Identity Achievement, Foreclosure, Identity Diffusion, Moratorium. These four statuses are built upon the concepts of crisis: "an adolescent's period of engagement in choosing among meaningful alternatives" and commitment: "the degree of personal investment the individual exhibits" (1966, p. 551). Occupation, political framework and religious beliefs are utilized as measurements of crisis and commitment in order to identify one's identity status (Marcia, 1966).

### *Spiritual Struggle*

Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, and Ano (2005) defined spiritual struggle as "crucial moments in time, when matters of greatest value are at stake....spiritual 'forks in the road' that can lead to despair, hopelessness, and meaninglessness on the one hand, and renewal, growth and transformation on the other" (p. 246). Accordingly, struggles may

possibly act as a "necessary precursor to transformation" (p. 257). Difficult life situations cause spiritual struggles as well as an individual's "orienting system," mental health problems, poor family life, and unique "spiritual orientation" (p. 251). Within a person's spiritual orientation, they identified several factors that increased the odds of a spiritual struggle: an orientation that does not acknowledge evil or pain, poor understanding of one's beliefs, and having an "insecure religious attachment," (pp. 251-252). Ultimately, they saw a struggle as the result when one experiences "critical life experiences that point to the limitations of their orienting systems and push them to consider new ways of thinking, acting, and relating to the world" (p. 253).

### Spirituality in Higher Education

The subject of spirituality has been largely ignored in the field of higher education (Anderson, 1994; Astin, 2004; Adler, 2007; Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Lee, 2002; Love, 2000b; Love & Talbot, 1999). Recently, however, there has been a movement towards reexamining the place of spirituality in higher education (Dalton, 2006; Love; Love & Talbot; Parks, 2000). The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA has led the way with their study of spirituality's role in higher education. In their research regarding spirituality, HERI found that eighty percent of students have an interest in spirituality (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2003). These findings open up the topic of spirituality for discussion, encouraging colleges and universities to help students explore this topic.

### Spiritual Development and the Sophomore Year

As mentioned before, the issue of spirituality is one element of the sophomore slump that has not received any research attention. However, the majority of the research

on the sophomore year experience mentions a period of confusion, crisis, and questioning (Schaller, 2005; Boivin, et al., 2000; Richmond & Lemons, 1985, Lemons & Richmond, 1987; Furr & Gannaway, 1982; Margolis, 1976). This period of questioning, characteristic of the sophomore year is also a major aspect of spiritual development. As mentioned above, Love and Talbot (1999) propose that spiritual development includes the search for “meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life” (p. 366). Though some of the sophomore year experiences appear to be spiritual in nature, little research has been done on the spirituality of *sophomores*. It is mentioned briefly by Margolis when he purports that sophomores “become more introspective and philosophical” (p. 134). There are also two studies that distinguish faith development between the different class levels (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior). Bussema (1999), did a study linking identity and faith development, using Fowler’s (1981, 1984, 1986, 1996) seven stages of faith development that occur across the lifespan and Marcia’s four identity statuses. Bussema looked at the different class levels and for the sophomores found 52.9% in Stage 3 (Synthetic-Conventional) of Fowler’s faith stages and 29.4% in the 3/4 Transition stage, between Synthetic-Conventional and Individuative-Reflective. Johnson et al. (2006) in a more extensive study on alcohol and spirituality, found spiritual well-being, religious distress and search for meaning to be at a nadir during the sophomore year, but increased into the junior year.

### Theories of Faith and Spiritual Development

There have been various models of faith development that address the different stages of life. Some (Parks 1982, 2000; Beers, 2003) focus more on the college years, but none specifically concentrate on the sophomore year. Fowler created a popular theory of



faith development. Much of the faith development work since has been built upon his theory. Drawing from the theories of Piaget and Erikson, he came up with seven stages of faith development occurring across the lifespan. The stages are: Primal, Intuitive-Projective, Mythic-Literal, Synthetic-Conventional, Individuative-Reflective, Conjunctive, and Universalizing (1984). Fowler sees the stages as illustrating how faith is an avenue that individuals use to “construe,” “interpret,” and “respond,” to “contingency, finitude, and ultimacy” (p. 52). Stages 0-2 pertain to the development of faith in childhood, while stages 3-6 range from adolescence to beyond midlife. In studying age and faith stage, Fowler found 50% of 13-20 year olds to be in Stage 3 and about 29% in between stage 3 and 4 (1981). Holcomb and Nonneman (2004), in looking at the spiritual maturation and faith stage of students at several Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) institutions, found the majority of new freshman to be at either stage 2 or 3. By their senior year, half of the students were at stage 3.5 or above. As mentioned above, Bussema found 52.9% of sophomores to be in Stage 3 of Fowler’s faith stages and 29.4% in the 3/4 Transition stage. According to these sources, sophomore students, in their faith development, would generally fall somewhere between Fowler’s stages 2 and 4.

Fowler describes Stage 2, Mythic-Literal faith, as dominated by a concrete-operational (Piaget) way of thinking. In this stage, the world is seen as very predictable and consistent. Feelings and attitudes are not recognized and God is seen as not having personal qualities. Individuals do not engage in reflection and begin to move out of Stage 2 as they begin to realize the universe is not always fair. Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional faith, is characterized by an interior focus on self, as personality and feelings become a

realized concept. At this point, these feelings are largely based on other's beliefs and are tacitly expressed. In Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective faith, the individual moves from tacit to explicit expression of their beliefs and values. They begin to reflect upon their choices and commitments. Instead of relying on others to define who they are, individuals begin to find their own identity as well as take responsibility for themselves. Moving from one stage to another does not require a change in substance of one's faith, but instead how they believe and understand their faith. (Fowler, 1981, 1996). The presence of "crises, novelties, and experiences of disclosure and challenge" can propel the movement from one stage to another (Fowler, 1986, p. 27).

Parks (1982, 2000) builds on Fowler's stages to create a faith stage in between Fowler's third (adolescents) and fourth stages (adults) which she calls "young adulthood" (1982, p. 660). She creates this stage because she saw a large developmental gap between Fowler's faith Stage 3 (implicitly expressed, "depend[ent]") and Stage 4 (clearly expressed, "inner-dependen[ce]") (p. 659). In her experience, she saw students exhibiting characteristics of both Stage 3 and Stage 4. Her "young adult" stage fits these students who were in between Stages 3 and 4. The "young adult" is distinct in having a "fragile--vulnerable yet full of promise" sense of "self-awareness" (1982, p. 666).

Two models that present a specifically evangelical-Christian conception of faith-development are Dykstra and Beers. Dykstra (1986) critiques Fowler's faith stages by suggesting that faith is an "appropriate and intentional participation in the redemptive activity of God" (p. 55). Dykstra concentrates more on God and the "dependence" of human faith on God and his work, rather than humans using faith to understand the world. Growing in faith may not be forward moving, as individuals can also regress

depending on their level of intention and participation in the work of God. Growth would be determined by "patterns of intentionality" that characterize one's way of living (p. 61). Instead of describing faith as a set of stages, Dykstra sees it as more as a "faith biography" or a narrative history of humans' intentional participation in God's redemptive work (p. 61).

Beers (2003) developed a concentric circles model of spiritual formation for Christian colleges. His model begins with the inner circle position which "see(s) the world as it relates to the self" (p. 27). The second circle view seeks the "world beyond self" and recognizes that there is a power outside of self (p. 27). In the third circle, individuals are yearning to make Christ a part of daily life. The fourth and outer circle is the understanding that humans can work alongside of God in "redeeming His creation" (p. 28). For the occurrence of complete spiritual maturation, an individual must move through all four circles. Movement from an inner circle out occurs through the work of the Holy Spirit along with the life experiences that bring about "dissidence within the individual" (p. 27).

#### Research on Spiritual Development of College Students

With regards to student's religious attitudes and values, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), after decades of research, found that student's religious beliefs become more personal during college, and students generally become more accepting of beliefs that are different from their own. More recently, their research shows that in college, students "reexamin[e], and refin[e]" their religious beliefs (p. 285). Though students rate their spirituality lower after one year of college, Bryant et al. (2003), discovered that these

same students possessed an "increased commitment to integrating spirituality into their lives" (pp. 736-737).

The most significant spirituality study has been conducted continually by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA. The College Student Beliefs and Values (CSBV) project is a longitudinal study of the spiritual development of undergraduate students during their college experiences. The pilot study was conducted in the fall of 2000 and followed up in spring of 2003. In the fall of their freshman and spring of their junior years, 3,680 students took the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey. Between 2000 and 2003, student self-rated spirituality as "above average" or "top 10%" dropped from 47% to 39%. They found that 36% of the students rated their spirituality lower their junior year than they did during their freshman year. However, the importance of spirituality to them increased in this same period. The percentage making spirituality a part of their lives rose from 51% in 2000 to 58% in 2003 (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2003).

In a qualitative study, Anderson (1994) looked at the development of faith and spirituality among college women. Anderson used "narrative methodology" with three female seniors to collect data and understand their spiritual and faith experiences (p. 7). Though their three stories are very unique, Anderson observed all three women struggling to discover their identities as "feminist Christian wom[e]n" (p. 16), as well as how they took their external understanding of religion and spirituality and made it internal and personal. All three participants were looking to separate themselves from the traditional beliefs they were raised with, but not to altogether leave religion and spirituality. Each one instead sought to "integrate her emerging faith and identity into her

understanding of traditional Christianity" (p. 17). The college environment provided a place for them to question and grapple with their spirituality. Their faith development process was encouraged by female mentors as well as the community they had developed through the Campus Ministry Center.

#### Sophomore Specific Spiritual Development Research

Johnson et al. (2006) from The Center for the Development of Health, Religion and Spirituality at Indiana State University did a study on the effects of the use of alcohol on religion and spirituality. They examined five different factors (religious involvement, search for meaning, religious distress, quest and spiritual well-being) in a cross-sectional sample of students in the four different class levels. They found that spiritual well-being among students bottoms out during the sophomore year, and then rises through the senior year. Also, they discovered that religious distress and the search for meaning are lowest during the sophomore year, but increase into the junior year.

Bussema (1999) studied the relationship between identity and faith development among students attending a private Christian college. He found their identity stage and faith development to be related and also that these two constructs coincide in their progression, though faith precedes identity maturation. In his study he observed the link between participation in a service project or cross-cultural experienced and a higher identity status.

As previously mentioned, the Faithful Change project, directed by Holcomb and Nonneman (2004) investigated the spiritual maturation and faith development of undergraduates at several CCCU institutions. Collecting data from six CCCU institutions, they found new freshman to be in Fowler's Stage 2, and seniors at 3.5 or higher (as noted

earlier). Additionally, they define crisis as a "prolonged period of active engagement with, and exploration of, competing roles and ideologies...anything that challenges people to examine what they believe and why" (p. 100). They claim that a crisis, followed by reflection, plays a significant role in the faith development of students. They identified three types of crises: "prolonged exposure to diverse ways of thinking, extensive multicultural exposure, and general emotional crisis" (p. 100). They claim that in order for this crisis to lead to growth, it must occur in an environment where there is a blend of "challenge" and "support" (p. 102).

### Summary

The sophomore slump is not a novel phenomenon but has existed in the literature since 1956. Though it is not new to the literature, it has failed to be clearly defined and can mean everything from an academic struggle to an identity crisis. The literature has exploded with studies on the sophomore year experience over the last ten years. Different aspects such as advising, satisfaction, curriculum, and sophomore development have been studied, though there has been very little on the spirituality of sophomore students.

The issue of spirituality on campus has also permeated the literature in the last decade. Spirituality and religion have been defined in a myriad of ways, and the research has looked at the impact of college on students' spirituality. This includes examining students' spirituality when they enter college, and then again sometime during their junior or senior years. As stated previously, there is not much in the literature regarding sophomores and spirituality. For the purpose of this study, the terms of spirituality, faith development, and relationship with God are all used interchangeably to describe the same thing: one's relationship with God. The sophomore slump, for the purpose of this study,

is defined by the experience of any of the following: “reduced motivation or apathy, declining grade point averages, letdown from their first year” (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000, p.vi), “prolonged indecisiveness about selecting a major...low levels of commitment...(and) frustration with the academic experience” (Gardner et al. 2000, p. 90).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Problem Statement

A qualitative phenomenological study is the “‘essence’ of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by the participants in the study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). In this case, the purpose is to examine the experience of a student’s spiritual development in the presence of the sophomore slump phenomenon. This was accomplished by conducting nine interviews of senior students, reflecting on their sophomore year as a whole, including their experiences with the sophomore slump and their spirituality during that time.

#### Participants

The participants for this study were nine seniors currently enrolled at a small, Christian liberal arts institution in central Indiana. This rural, non-denominational campus has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 1,800 students representing 46 states and 24 countries. The average SAT score is 1180 and 33% of students were in the top 10% of their high school class. Female students comprise 55% of the student body and 89% of students are aged 21 or under (Institutional website, 2008). For the purpose of this study, “seniors” are defined by having 95.00 credits or more and by being in their fourth year at the institution. There were five female and four male participants.

Suitable participants were selected by sending out an email (Appendix A) to all seniors (n=445). This email asked for participation from students who, during their sophomore year, experienced any aspect of “reduced motivation or apathy, declining



grade point averages,...letdown from their first year” (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000, p.vi), “prolonged indecisiveness about selecting a major...low levels of commitment...and frustration with the academic experience” (Gardner et al., 2000, p. 90). Incentives in the form of \$5 gift cards were given to all participants.

### Procedure

Once the participants were selected, they received the basic interview questions (see Appendix B) approximately one week prior to the interview. The questions, based in part on faith development theories, are intended to provide an understanding of the spiritual experiences and development that occurred during the sophomore year. The interviews averaged about 45 minutes in length. Before the interview, the informed consent form was explained and the participants signed it. The interview questions were asked as well as relevant follow-up questions, as needed for further clarification. Prior to the interviews, the questions were field-tested for clarity by two seniors (male and female) who completed pilot interviews. One pilot interview data was included in the results of this study as the student qualified for participation.

### Data Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The researcher then coded the data, reading through the entire interview to understand what the participant was saying. Then the interview was broken down line by line, writing the main idea in the margins. The main ideas for each sentence were grouped together to form major themes for each interview. Major themes of each interview were clustered together. This coding process facilitated the identification of major themes among the responses. Then researcher triangulation took place. Triangulation involves looking at

the main theme and then going back to the data sources to ensure the themes are consistent among the data collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

In order to ensure accuracy with the themes developed, after the completion of the data analysis and writing of the results the researcher employed member-checking. This involved the participants reading through the sections of the report that directly applied to them, making sure the themes developed accurately described their experiences. The researcher also had each participant approve every direct quote attributed to them, in order to guarantee fidelity. All of the participants agreed with the researcher's interpretation of their experiences, and no changes to the written report were required. Lastly, the research was peer-debriefed; a third-party read through the interview data, then read through the report, asking questions about the data collection and analysis. Peer-debriefing serves to verify the coding process as well as clarifying the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2003). These two methods of verifying the data analysis and interpretation confirm that the researcher's interpretations of the data accurately represent the participants' sophomore year experiences.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

It is clear that every student in the study had a different story, or unique circumstance that caused their sophomore year to be difficult. However, despite the uniqueness of each one's experience, some common themes arose regarding the sophomore slump phenomenon and how it was experienced. Also seen were similarities in the students' spiritual experiences during their sophomore year, and how their circumstances affected their relationship with God.

#### The Sophomore Slump Experienced

Though it is difficult to assess the reason for the slump, it seems that for a couple of the students, the slump occurred because of an unusual hardship, such as a relationship break-up. For others, the slump appeared to be instigated by confusion with their major, social upheaval or rejection, a negative peer group, increased academic challenge, or health issues. Though there are many different factors that stimulate the slump, there is congruence in these student's experiences with the slump. Almost all of the students struggled during the first part of their sophomore year. Similarities among the manifestation of the slump included: social issues, an increased academic challenge, relational distress, uncertainty with their major, a period of questioning and adjusting to the increased level of responsibility that accompanies the second year. Most importantly, there was not only one factor that made the sophomore year challenging. The piling up of a number of unique circumstances for each student made this year difficult for them.

### *First Semester Slump*

Almost all of the students experienced this "slump" during the first semester of their sophomore year. For some, after their first semester, things changed and students had a much more positive second semester. For others, things did not change and get better until the end of second semester or after the school year ended. Some of these changes were circumstances that the students did not control, and some of them resulted when the student made the decision to change. One student had the chance to study abroad second semester, which was "the best decision ever." Another student began a dating relationship after first semester, which gave her someone with whom she could connect with and talk. A third student switched her major during first semester, and during second semester finally felt at peace with her course of study. Another student was involved in a negative peer group during freshman year, and did not sever ties with it until the end of first semester. During the second semester he was able to make better friends and grow spiritually.

### *No Longer a Freshman*

Many of the participants experienced a "letdown" or disappointment during the first semester of their sophomore year. The participants described the sophomore year as having a new level of academic challenge as well as an overall seriousness and responsibility regarding the college experience. Three of the participants described the freshman year as "fun," "easy," "no worries" and like "summer camp," without much pressure or responsibility. When they came back for the sophomore year some of these students experienced a letdown, as they had high expectations and hopes for the sophomore year. One student felt a change between her freshman and sophomore year in

the way the older students on her wing treated her: "They're still...really nice to you because you're a freshman and you...don't know anybody...Sophomore year...they were just not really concerned with...wing unity."

### *Social Dynamics*

Another way students struggled through their sophomore year was in their social relationships, or lack thereof. For five of the participants, strong friend groups were not firmly established by the beginning of sophomore year. This left them feeling very lonely. One student said: "I felt like I had gotten to know a ton of people and yet had no real friends like true friends...I just didn't really pick up where I left off [going home for the summer]." Another expressed "you come back to your wing [after the summer] and feel like you don't really know anyone very well." Yet another participant added: "I felt like....a lot of people on my wing couldn't really identify with my experiences, so then I kind of withdrew." Another participant felt her goals were different from the rest of her friends, which seemed to alienate and create misunderstanding between them. A separate factor that led to instability in friendships was the constant flow of students coming and departing. With students transferring, studying abroad, and leaving school, it made it hard to establish steady friendships.

Some students commented about how their friends were negative influences, requiring them to participate in deviant behavior in order to feel accepted and liked. A female participant spoke of the changing friendships she experienced during her freshman year due to proximity of residence as well as the emerging importance of other relationships. "All the people who had been my good friends [during freshman year] were on different floors or even in different dorms [during sophomore year]." And, "My

two best friends...started dating....Sophomore year it became more they did everything together.”

Only two students did not experience a challenge or difficulty in friendships during their sophomore year. For them, their friends were positive influences that encouraged them through their challenges.

#### *Relationship Break-ups*

Three of the participants went through relationship break-ups either during the summer before sophomore year or during the first semester. For two of the students, these break-ups seemed to be the main cause of their slump. One student spoke about how all her future plans were dependent upon her relationship, and so after the break-up "all that...went out the window and so then I just really wasn't motivated about anything for awhile." Her grades dropped and this student began to associate with a negative peer group in order to be accepted. The other student commented that the break-up, "left me with a lot of questions...derailed me a little." This student quickly jumped into a rebound relationship, which in the end was a "terrible incident" and caused irreversible damage in his other relationships.

#### *Questioning*

A period of questioning seemed to accompany the sophomore year experience for a majority of the participants.

#### *God and spiritual beliefs.*

Six of the students went through a period of questioning and examining their spiritual beliefs during their sophomore year. For a few of the students, this questioning was born out of a hard circumstance (break-up, death, etc.). One student completely

abandoned her familial beliefs and adopted the beliefs of her peers. For another student, this questioning happened after a tragic event and caused him to "dig deeper" in his faith. Examining beliefs also happened through leaving campus. One student took ownership of her faith through her study abroad experience. This semester abroad, which included extensive times for reflection, as well as encouragement and accountability from the close-knit cohort on the trip, allowed this student to work through some of her issues, deepening her faith. One student had never given thought to his beliefs but through peers on his floor was encouraged to wrestle with and tackle what he believed about different areas of the Christian faith. This questioning caused him to move from adopting his parents' faith to making it his own. One participant questioned what God wanted her to do with her life, and whether she should change her major.

*Humanity.*

Two students went through circumstances that caused them to question their view of other people. One student after some relational distress developed a "really bleak view of humanity." He felt people were "unreliable" and "fickle." He struggled during this time not to transpose his views about humanity onto God, seeing him as untrustworthy. One woman felt that people in her life were letting her down, and she felt that in general, "people were disappointing."

*Identity.*

After great difficulty with connecting socially at the institution, one student questioned her identity and grappled with issues such as "who am I?" and "what am I doing?" She also questioned what she believed about God and began to distinguish her own beliefs from what she perceived were the predominant beliefs at the institution. With

this questioning, she began to rebel, engaging in practices that challenged the institution's community standards. Through this time of testing, her "core values were still there," though she was not actively practicing her faith.

#### *Uncertainty Regarding Major and Vocation*

Five of the participants changed their major during their sophomore year. Two of these five participants experienced great anxiety over trying to figure out a course of study. One participant started college as a Music Education major, but after her freshman year was not satisfied with it. However, she did not know what she wanted to study, which led to a decrease in motivation and an overall attitude of apathy about academics. The other participant's grades were declining, which jeopardized her chance to continue in the Education program. This participant struggled to figure out a plan for her life, in accordance with her religious and spiritual beliefs. This state of unknowing affected her relationship with God; she felt "distant" and not where she should be. After she changed her major, she "felt more secure....that this was what God wanted for me right now."

#### *Academic Difficulty*

Almost all of the participants commented on the academic challenge of their sophomore year. Though their reasons for the challenge vary, a general theme of increased intensity of academics from the freshman year was apparent. For two students, the increased academic challenge was the primary source of their frustration and struggle during their second year. One student, who had always been an A-B student, actually failed a class during the first semester of her sophomore year. She now feels that it was just a "different level of difficulty than I had ever had academically before," to which she just needed to "adjust." One student was able to goof off and slack academically during



his freshman year, with these actions not catching up with him until halfway through his sophomore year when he was put on academic probation. Other participants were taking a high number of credit hours, only adding to the level of challenge.

### Spiritual Experiences of the Sophomore Year

Each participant was in a unique place spiritually during their sophomore year. However, despite the differences, some common themes arose among their individual stories. As described previously, a majority of the participants questioned God or their spiritual beliefs during their sophomore year. Five of the students viewed God as the power responsible for what happened to them. Three students recalled being too busy to invest much time in their spiritual life and several students recounted being at a low point in their spirituality.

#### *Holding God Responsible*

Five of the students described being frustrated or angry with God during their sophomore year, and some of them blamed him for their current troubles. "[It seemed like] one more...circumstance of misfortune that...he [God] had...meaninglessly placed on me....like an added stone in the backpack...it...tore the scab of...already healing wounds." One student felt that God had let her down, leaving her alone with no friends: "I trusted you that you were gonna take care of me and you were like gonna provide for me and I just feel like really alone," she shared. One participant described her relationship with God as steady during her sophomore year, yet she also felt angry towards him, as if he was "the one putting me through all this." Another student seemed to hold God responsible for her struggles, but did not express any anger or blame. She explained that

once she was through her major/vocation crisis, she felt that God "helped me reach a plateau...so we're good now."

### *Time Management*

Three students had reported a glimmer of desire to grow in their relationship with God, but the substantial time commitment of academics and other activities overwhelmed them, leaving them without much energy to pursue a relationship with God. "When I got here [to the university] it was like there's just so many other things going on that...I didn't put any time into it."

### *Spiritual Low Point*

Several students shared how they were at a low point in their spiritual life during their sophomore year. Three students explained that they just went through the motions in their relationship with God, not putting in very much effort. "I know you're [God] good, I just don't feel it right now, so I'm going to praise you anyway but...my heart isn't quite in it" said one, while another reported, "I was still reading my Bible, I was still praying, but it wasn't the same quality." Two of these students also felt somewhat selfish in their approach to God, just approaching God for help and things they needed. One participant elaborated, seeing his spiritual life as "a self-centered approach" with "very little personal time with God." In his ministry that year to junior high boys, he described "coast[ing] through" and "regurgitat[ing]" lessons, teaching the boys things he had previously learned. In addition to reports of going through the motions, a lack of effort, and a selfish approach to God, three students described feeling distant from God during their sophomore year.

### *View of God*

The participants' views of God varied; four of the students were either frustrated, or angry with God, while two students had a hard time answering how they viewed God. Six of the participants saw God as the being in charge of everything, the one "putting me through all this." One student said at the start of the year he viewed God as a "friend...by the end of the year...he was more of an enemy...like [he] had it out for me." One participant saw God as "letting us make all of our own decisions and not really being involved."

Most of the students seemed to portray a book knowledge of the Holy Spirit, describing him as "Comforter," "there," and "constantly with me." However, at the same time, a few of these students also had trouble understanding or relating to the Holy Spirit: "It's kind of an abstract idea," "I've never felt that closeness [with the Holy Spirit]" and "I have a little more trouble with the Holy Spirit." Two of the students had had deeper experiences with the Holy Spirit. One of these students, through his experience at a charismatic church described it by saying, "the Holy Spirit really became...like a friend-like character that I could kind of feel like it was supposed to be."

### *Helps and Hinders to Relationship with God*

The peer group played a significant role in the participant's spiritual relationship. For some their peer group was a major reason they were struggling spiritually. One participant describes, "some people I really looked up to were...rebellious against the traditional Christian beliefs...and I just thought they were so funny and so smart...I looked up to them....and so just their stances on...those issues I kind of just adopted which was like basically abandoning all my beliefs." For others, their friends encouraged them

and held them accountable, not letting them slide in their spirituality. "My friends were definitely there to just help me out when...I'd get down about things...maybe just a Bible verse here or there." Family, in most cases, was a help to the student's relationship with God; however, in three cases, the participants had severed or started to sever themselves from the beliefs with which they had been raised. This resulted in either making their faith their own (two students), or for one student, abandoning her familial beliefs. Three students mentioned hypocrisy and judgmental attitudes present at the institution as hurting their spirituality. Students described being disappointed with other students who would say one thing and then do the opposite. One student experienced frustration with judgment when a student on her floor told her she was "abandoning God" because she disengaged from all activities and "camped on her futon" for two weeks. Another participant spoke of a student on his floor who acted "holier than thou" and "if you're not doing the things I'm doing, then you're not...right with God." This judgmental attitude really hurt the participant's spiritual life.

#### *The Relationship between the Slump and Spirituality*

The struggles these students experienced during their sophomore year did have an effect on their spirituality. The difficult life circumstances (such as major break-ups, academic difficulty, the stress over major and career selection, and social distress) they experienced seemed to in all of the cases be an immediate detriment to their spiritual life. For some of the participants, the experience of the slump negatively impacted their spirituality. For other participants, other circumstances outside of the slump (break-ups) caused the decline in spirituality. Though hard life events and slumping had a negative impact on spirituality, in some cases, the participant's spiritual life simply plateaued; it

did not decline, but it was not growing. However, for every participant, as their circumstances changed or a new year started and life got better, so did their relationship with God. Most of the participants described their relationship with God more positively during their junior year as compared to their sophomore year. When describing the difference in their relationship with God between sophomore and junior years, the participants' remarked: "Junior year was kind of a healing process," and a "moving on from that [trials and testing]...trying to just grow in my faith even stronger," and "I really matured a lot."

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### The Sophomore Slump Experienced

##### *Confusion and Questioning*

One of the major themes in this study was the confusion and questioning the participants experienced during their sophomore year. Seven of the participants experienced some type of questioning during their sophomore year. They questioned themselves (including their major and their future plans), they questioned humanity, and they questioned God. As stated before, searching is a major aspect in spiritual development (Love & Talbot, 1999). This theme is also consistent with the sophomore year body of literature that expounds on the confusion, crisis, and questioning sophomores experience (Anderson, 1994; Boivin et al., 2000, Furr & Gannaway, 1982; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Margolis, 1976; Pattengale, 2000).

##### *Letdown*

Many of the participants experienced a letdown from their freshman year to their sophomore year. They viewed their freshman year as "fun" and "easy," while the sophomore year was "time to get down to business." This supports the findings of Gansemer-Topf, Stern, and Benjamin (2007) who report that stark difference between the freshman and sophomore years. They compare the freshman year to camp and sophomore year to the real-world (p. 34). Other second year literature also notes the letdown sophomores experience as they fail to receive the attention and care they received during their first year (Evenbeck, Boston, DuVivier, & Hallberg, 2000; Flanagan, 2007; Pattengale, 2000; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000).

### *Academic Difficulty*

Many of the participants in this study struggled with academics during their sophomore year. For some, the schoolwork was easy during their freshman year, and they were not adequately prepared for the academic challenge and time commitment of upperlevel courses. This is consistent with the second year literature (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000; Gansemer-Topf et al., 2007; Pattengale, 2000), which also indicates increased academic difficulty as a major component of the sophomore year experience.

### *Uncertainty Regarding Major Choice*

Consistent with the literature, a significant amount of major change occurred during the participants' sophomore years. Five of the participants changed their majors during sophomore year. For two of the students, this change brought anxiety and confusion. According to the literature (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Gansemer-Topf et al., 2007; Gardner, 2000; Schaller, 2005), the turbulence of major selection is a common characteristic of the second year.

### *Social Relationships*

A significant finding in the current research is the focus placed on the loneliness and lack of friendship the majority of the participants experienced during their sophomore year. Five of the students commented on the difficulty they found in maintaining friendships during their sophomore year. These participants either felt lonely and alone or had trouble securing good friendships, or both. Not finding good friends caused two of the participants to get involved with a negative peer group. Unlike the other responses, two participants had strong friendship groups that encouraged them in their faith and through their difficulties.

These findings are consistent with the sophomore year literature which places an emphasis on the changing nature of friendships from the freshman to sophomore year, and continuing through the sophomore year (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2007; Margolis, 1976; Pattengale, 2000). The literature explains that during freshman year, everyone is new and needs to make friends. However, changes occur when come sophomore year when living arrangements are different and friendships are no longer "of convenience" (Gansemer-Topf et al.). Schaller (2005) in her qualitative study on the sophomore year suggests that practitioners should "expect new relationship building" during the sophomore year (p. 9) and should push sophomores to forge new relationships. In their qualitative study on the sophomore year experience, Gansemer-Topf et al. see the social aspect as being a major part of the sophomore year. They described social relationships during this year in four ways: "solidifying friendships," "developing new relationships," "friendships of choice vs. friendships of convenience," and "social relationships compete with other priorities" (p. 38). They also mention that some students "struggled to find a network of supportive peers," which seemed to be the case for over half of the participants in the current study (p. 38).

#### Spirituality during the Sophomore Year

The sophomore year seemed to be a critical time in the participant's spiritual development. During this year, most of the students expressed that they experienced a low point or decline in their faith. It is difficult to identify the reason for the low point or decline in their spirituality, but in most of the cases, it seemed to coincide with difficult life events such as overwhelming academics, break-ups, and negative peer groups. After getting through the challenges of their sophomore year, most of the students described



their relationship with God during their junior year more positively than they did during their sophomore year.

*The Slump and Spiritual Struggles*

It seems that students who experienced the sophomore slump as evidenced by “reduced motivation or apathy, declining grade point averages, letdown from their first year” (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000, p.vi), “prolonged indecisiveness about selecting a major...low levels of commitment...[and] frustration with the academic experience” (Gardner et al., 2000, p. 90) also went through a decline or low point in their spirituality. This is consistent with writing from Pargament et al.(2005) on spiritual struggles. They claim "life stressors" are a major cause of spiritual struggles (p. 251). The conclusions of Pargament et al. (2005) align with this study's current findings about spirituality during the sophomore year; it seems as if critical life events such as a major break-up, academic difficulty, the selection of major and career, and social distress caused some of the participants to experience a spiritual struggle during their sophomore year. All of the participants experienced a difficult life circumstance, some of which could be defined as the slump, which can be classified as a “life stressor” and most of them seemed to either plateau or decline in their spiritual life. Further, Pargament et al. claim that spiritual struggles "can lead to despair, hopelessness, and meaninglessness...[or] renewal, growth, and transformation" (p. 246). In this study, at first a few of the participants experienced "despair," "hopelessness," or "meaninglessness" (some students associated with a negative peer group, while one female decided she did not care anymore and engaged in a detrimental dating relationship), followed by "renewal," "growth," and "transformation” (severed ties with negative influences and formed new relationships). (p. 246).

### *Marcia's Identity Statuses*

Although this study did not intend to categorize the participants using Marcia's scheme, there happened to be many similarities between the results of this study and Marcia's four identity statuses.

Bussema, when examining identity statuses and faith stage in college students, found 74.4% of freshman to be in Marcia's Foreclosed status of their religious identity, while 56.9% of seniors fit into Identity Achieved (1999). However, he found 23.5% of seniors to still be in the Foreclosed status of their religious identity development. Over half of the seniors had reached Identity Achievement, but almost a quarter of them had not progressed past the Foreclosed status in the development of their religious identity.

Participants in the current study were asked: "How did you decide what you believed?" and "How did your spiritual development differ your sophomore year from freshman and junior years?" Their responses strongly resonated with elements of Marcia's four identity statuses. Most of the participants seemed to express ideas related to either Marcia's Foreclosed or Moratorium statuses: committed to beliefs that are designated by their parents, or struggling to figure out what they believe (Marcia, 1980). A few students took a level of ownership of their faith, which demonstrates similarities with Marcia's Identity Achieved status. Throughout the year, these students appeared to regress into questioning their faith in a manner characteristic of Marcia's Moratorium status. By the end of sophomore year, most of the students, in their spirituality, had vacillated between the identity statuses, most of them portraying characteristics that would place them past Marcia's Foreclosed state. When asked about their beliefs, the participants that most closely identified with Marcia's Foreclosed status described their

beliefs as "what I've always known" and "what I've always believed...what my family's always believed." Though this response (family's or parents' beliefs) displays characteristics of Marcia's Foreclosed status, it was apparent that some students had actually wrestled with their beliefs and were not just blindly following their parents' beliefs. Maybe the easiest answer to the question of why they believed what they believed is "because of my parents;" though they had struggled through their beliefs on their own. The participants closest to the Achieved category responded to the question by saying that it was *their* experiences that led them to believe what they believe: "My experiences [along with Bible reading and other learning] helped shape what I believe." One participant that had demonstrated traits closely related to the Moratorium status remarked about his family: "family didn't influence much at all. I really started to break away from that because I didn't want it any more....Growing up...I felt like my folks and my family has always kind of had a heavy hand on what I did and believed previously....I kind of wanted to explore things for myself." One participant described his faith journey during college: "Sophomore year was...the pivotal year where you...are on that bridge walking over to your own point of view...crossing from your parents' point of view which has been your point of view for the good portion of your life...now at this point [senior year] I feel like I've crossed that bridge and now I have my own view that...has some of the things that my parents had but it's deeper and it's my own thoughts and...my own beliefs."

## Unanticipated Results

### *Dating Relationships*

One unexpected finding of this study was the seriousness and importance of dating relationships to the students during their sophomore year. Two of the participants had relationships end unexpectedly the summer before or during their sophomore year. These break-ups were the principle feature of the sophomore slump for these students. Both participants had believed their relationships might lead to marriage, and so the break-ups were unanticipated and devastating. These break-ups caused a lot of questioning as well as anger aimed at God for letting this happen to them, or putting them through this circumstance of misfortune.

This importance of romantic relationships to college students is supported by Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto (1989), who in their study on relationship closeness discovered that college students classified their closest relationship to be a dating or romantic relationship. Kaczmarek, Backlund, and Biemer (1990), found in a study on grief in college students that 42% of their participants viewed their romantic relationship as “closer than any relationship they had experienced” (p. 322). Also supporting the importance placed on romantic relationships is a 1998 study by Bishop, Baer, and Becker, which surveyed the counseling needs of students. This study reported that over 35% of students saw a moderate, high, or very high need for counseling regarding communication within a romantic relationship (ranked 10th out of 34 items). This same research found over 54% of students were concerned with "finding a lifelong partner," ranking it third on the list of future fears, behind "finding a satisfying career," and "death of a family member" (p. 208).

### *First Semester Slump*

Another unexpected finding was the timing of the sophomore slump. Almost all of the participants experienced some aspect of the slump during the first semester of sophomore year. For some it continued through the whole year, but for the majority, things improved during the second semester. This first semester slump suggests that there could be something with the start of a new school year that causes sophomores to begin to spiral downwards. This points to the "letdown" sophomores experience as they might have anticipated being treated the same way they were during their freshman year. Another plausible cause of a first semester slump is the increased academic intensity that comes with the start of the sophomore year.

### Implications for Future Practice

#### *Sophomore Presence*

This study has deepened the knowledge base and understanding of the sophomore year experience, helping practitioners as they work with sophomore students. Student affairs practitioners need to be aware of the sophomore students with whom they work. Sophomore students may need more attention than is currently afforded them. Generally, it is assumed that sophomores do not require much consideration because they are not new to the institution and they are not graduating. However, the sophomore year presents challenges that are arguably as significant than those of the freshman year (Boivin et al., 2000). Based on the present findings, a smooth transition is lacking from the freshman to sophomore year. Students, coming from the relative fun, excitement, and ease of the freshman year felt unprepared and caught off guard by the seriousness and challenge of the sophomore year. Along with the increased academic pressure and seriousness of the

sophomore year, students may be questioning if they are in the right major. Student affairs practitioners should be especially cognizant of sophomores at the start of the school year, as some of them may be expecting their sophomore year to be a continuation of their freshman year. These students could be experiencing the letdown and unfulfilled expectations that may negatively impact their sophomore experience. Starting programs at the beginning of the school year geared towards sophomores is one possible way practitioners can prepare students to successfully navigate the unique challenges of the sophomore year. These programs could look at the issues that are significant to the sophomore year experience: changing social relationships, dating relationships, finding the right major, the increase in academic intensity, faith, spirituality and beliefs, and personal development specifically, issues of “identity,” “autonomy,” “purpose,” “competence” (Boivin et al., pp. 3-5).

#### *Changes in Social Relationships*

Student affairs practitioners should also be attuned to the fact that social relationships change between freshman and sophomore year, and students coming in as sophomores often have not secured friend groups. The nature of the college environment is very transient, adding to the hardship of forming long-term friendships. It is possible that sophomores have failed to make lasting friendships and are experiencing a form of loneliness.

#### *Questioning and Confusion*

This study clearly found that a good deal of questioning takes place during the sophomore year. The participants in this study questioned their spirituality, humanity, and their own identity. The students in this study displayed characteristics of Marcia’s

Foreclosed, Moratorium, and Identity Achieved statuses, with most acting in ways closely related to Marcia's Foreclosed and Moratorium (status where questioning occurs) statuses. Bussema (1999), determined overall identity status in his sample of CCCU students. Using Marcia's Identity Status Interview (ISI), he found the majority of freshman (64.1%) to be Foreclosed, and the largest group of seniors (45.1%) to be Identity Achieved. As noted earlier, he found that 56.9% of seniors were Achieved in their religious identity, while 74.4% of freshman were Foreclosed. Somewhere between freshman and senior year, college students are grappling with their beliefs and identity. Practitioners should keep this in mind as the sophomore year is the crux of this critical period of identity development. All students (not just sophomores) need to be challenged in their beliefs about themselves, the world, and their spirituality. According to Schaller (2005), in her qualitative study on the sophomore year, this challenge can be accomplished through the utilization of reflection and by offering opportunities for sophomores to discover the world around them, outside the confines of the university. Regarding reflection, Schaller suggests making it mandatory and systematized, and comments: "In teaching students how to reflect, we can help them in their process of self-exploration" (p. 8).

### *Romantic Relationships and Break-ups*

As evidenced in this study as well as in the existing romantic relationship literature, dating relationships can be a significant part of students' lives. Some dating couples spend all their free time together, and are planning for their future together. Though adults may diminish the importance of romantic relationships among college students, a break-up can be devastating, invoking major life changes for the partners.

Kaczmarek et al. (1990) report that college students view their relationships as “serious love” and that with a break-up students might have “intense feelings of loss” (p. 323), seeing their break-ups as a “painful and significant life event” (p. 319). Student affairs practitioners need to be aware of the depth some romantic relationships can have and the grief that can be experienced with the conclusion of such a relationship. Along with this, practitioners need to offer a listening ear to the victim of a break-up, being careful not to dismiss their grief as juvenile and momentary.

#### Implications for Future Research

This study examined the spiritual experiences of students within the evangelical Christian faith during the sophomore year. The spiritual experiences during the slump need to be explored among participants from a variety of religious and spiritual beliefs, including those without any established beliefs.

The present study looked at the spiritual experiences of traditional students during their sophomore year: all were full-time students, aged between 18-22 years, and lived on-campus. Research on the spiritual experiences of the non-traditional sophomore student should be pursued.

Another avenue for further research would be to explore the spirituality of sophomores using participants that are sophomores in the middle of or directly after completing their sophomore year. It would be interesting to see how the students perceive their spirituality in the midst of or directly after experiencing the slump. The current study examined nine seniors’ reflections of their sophomore year spirituality, after the experience was over and participants had two years to reflect and process the year as a whole.



## Limitations

This study acknowledges the sophomore slump phenomenon and examines the spirituality of students when in the midst of the slump. It is an exploratory study, done to learn more about the spiritual lives and Christian faith development of sophomores. This study does not attempt to determine any kind of causal relationship between the presence of the slump and spiritual health, but seeks to learn more about the faith development and spiritual life of students during the sophomore slump.

The participants were from one institution; a small, liberal arts, Midwestern Christian university that is “firmly committed to...evangelical Christianity” (Institutional website, 2009). The Christian faith was assumed in this study, as all students at the institution must sign a faith statement, agreeing to live together under the guidelines set forth in the statement.

The data from one of the two pilot interviews was included in the results of this study as the student met the necessary requirements to participate in this study. Unlike the other eight participants, this student was asked if she would pilot the interview questions. The researcher then obtained her permission to include her data with the rest of the study’s results.

This study depended on students to recall events that occurred two years prior. The participants were seniors, who may have had difficulty remembering the specific details and experiences of their sophomore year. There was the potential for them to confuse their sophomore year experiences with their freshman and junior years. The benefit of reflection is that the participants were two years removed from the experience

and had a more complete picture of their experience, however, it is possible that the time lapse allowed them to reinterpret their experience.

### Conclusion

Confusion and questioning, letdown, academic difficulty, uncertainty with major selection, and social relationships were the characteristics that the participants in this study experienced during sophomore slump. The participants' spirituality declined while experiencing the struggles of their sophomore year, and they were able to view their spirituality much more positively during their junior year. This study also uncovered some unexpected results; the significance of dating relationships to the experience, the impact a break-up can have, and the greater intensity of the slump during the first semester. Student development practitioners are encouraged to become more aware of sophomores and the issues with which they are dealing, and also to focus more resources solely on sophomores. Further research is necessary in order to continue to effectively help sophomores succeed through college.

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## APPENDIX A: EMAIL TEXT

**Subject:** Get a FREE gift card!

**What:** A chance to talk about your sophomore year and receive a free gift card!

**Why:** I am working on my thesis and need to interview seniors about their sophomore year experience. This will only take one hour of your time.

**Who:** Anyone who fits these characteristics:

- 95 credits or more
- Fourth year at Taylor University, Upland campus
- Experienced any of the following during the sophomore year:
  - o reduced motivation
  - o declining grade point average or grades
  - o a letdown from your first year
  - o prolonged indecisiveness about choosing a major
  - o general frustration with your academic experience

**When:** If you are at ALL interested, send an email to (the researcher) today! (The interview does not have to be before Christmas break).

**How:** Send an email to [Miriam\\_gin@taylor.edu](mailto:Miriam_gin@taylor.edu) right now!

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please describe your sophomore year. What challenges did you experience?
  - a. Did you study abroad or go on a Lighthouse trip during your sophomore year?
    - i. If yes, please describe.
  - b. Did you encounter any sort of crisis “anything that challenge(d) (you) to examine what (you) believe(d) and why?” (Holcomb and Nonneman, 2004, p. 100).
    - i. If yes, please describe.
2. Please describe where you were on your spiritual journey during your sophomore year.
  - a. What was God teaching you?
  - b. What was your relationship with God like?
  - c. How did you decide what you believed?
  - d. How did you view God?
  - e. How did you view the role of the Holy Spirit?
  - f. How did you view your role in the world?
  - g. How did your spiritual development your sophomore year differ from your freshman and junior years?
3. What factors helped or hindered your spiritual development during your sophomore year?
  - a. Practices or people that supported or discouraged your spiritual growth.
  - b. How did family, friends, and significant others in your life influence what you believed?

- c. How did family, friends and significant others in your life influence how you practiced your faith?
4. What religious practices did you engage in during your sophomore year and how often?
- a. Attend church? One church or many?
  - b. Read Bible?
  - c. Study Bible?
  - d. Pray?
  - e. Go to chapel?
  - f. Small Group involvement?
  - g. Practice any other spiritual disciplines such as fasting, meditation, silence, solitude, worship?

