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NATIONAL-LOUIS UNIVERSITY

EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND PERSISTENCE
OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE GRADUATES WHO MATRICULATE TO THE
BACCALAUREATE DEGREE GRANTING INSTITUTION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

IN

COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

BY

SHAWN L. GOVAN

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

FEBRUARY 2012

Dissertation Notification of Completion

Doctoral Candidate Shawn L. Govan

Title of Dissertation Examining the Relationship Between Spirituality and Persistence
of Community College Graduates Who Matriculate to the
Baccalaureate Degree Granting Institution

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Date of Final Approval Meeting February 16, 2012

We certify this dissertation, submitted by the above named candidate, is fully adequate in scope and quality to satisfactorily meet the dissertation requirement for attaining the Doctor of Education degree in the Community College Leadership Doctoral Program.

Signature

Date

Dennis K. Haynes
Rebecca S. Lake
Sherilyn W. Poole

February 16, 2012
February 16, 2012
February 16, 2012

Dedication

The Students Are...

...The most important persons on the campus.

Without them there would be no need for the institution.

...Not cold enrollment statistics,

but flesh and blood human beings with feelings and emotions like our own.

...Not persons to be tolerated so that we can do our thing.

They are our thing.

...Not an interruption of our work, but the purpose of it.

...Not dependent on us.

...Rather, we are dependent on them.

We are not doing them a favor by serving them.

They are doing us a favor by giving us the opportunity to do so.

- Author Unknown

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In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct thy paths (Proverbs 3:6). Giving all honor, glory, and praise to my Lord and savior, Jesus Christ who has allowed me to fulfill His purpose for my life. To God be the glory for the things that He has done.

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Abstract

Community college students, more often than not, face challenges not typical to those of traditional-aged students. They are more likely to attend part-time, tend to be the least academically prepared, more financially challenged, often working, and have a greater likelihood of being single parents. What drives these students to not only graduate from the community college, but go on to continue at four-year institutions? Also, how do these students define, or come to “make meaning” of the force that drives their persistence in higher education?

The purpose of this study examines the relationship between spirituality and persistence of Illinois community college students who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree granting institution. The research questions ask the following: (1) *How is spirituality defined by community college students who persist?*, (2) *For community college students who persist, how do they come to “make meaning” of their educational journey?*, and (3) *What is the relationship between spirituality and community college student persistence?*

The study utilized qualitative case study methodology employing three separate phases: (1) Survey Questionnaire, (2) Guided Focus Group Discussion, and (3), Face-to-Face Interviews. Responses from the survey questionnaire were coded, further segmented and used to determine those survey participants who would receive invitations for the guided focus group discussion. The guided focus group discussion was recorded and conversation transcribed so that the researcher might establish recurring patterns and emerging themes. From those focus group discussion participants, three participants were selected to take part in the face-to-face interview portion of the study. Through the course of these three phases of data collection, the researcher was able to establish valid conclusions about the relationship between spirituality and community college student persistence.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey.
Pierre Teilhard De Chardin

As evidenced by the current body of available research, theorists, scholars, and practitioners have focused heavily on engaging and retaining students in America's colleges and universities (Astin, 1984, 1991, 1993; Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Tinto, 1975, 1981, 1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005). Currently, retention is of paramount interest to institutions of higher education (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005, p. 9) and as told by Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, approximately 45 percent of students enrolled in two-year colleges depart during their first year (2004). However, literature regarding this phenomenon is not as readily available or abundant in the field of community college research. This void in research leads to questions regarding the extent to which the literature has addressed psychosocial development concerns facing community college students, particularly, those issues specific to their persistence.

Cohen and Brawer (2003), in *The American Community College*, ask the question, “*Which students persist?*” suggesting that students are tracked, transcripts are analyzed, the dropouts are surveyed...all in an attempt to learn how and why students leave” (p. 61). Despite these daunting efforts on the part of the academy, Tinto (1993) maintains that more students will leave colleges and universities than stay without ever having completed either a two- or four-year degree. Tinto (1998) further opines that “what matters is not merely whether individuals are able to begin college, but whether they are able to finish” (p. 1).

Background

Spirituality, for many, is a nebulous term lacking universal meaning. It is unique and personal while at the very same time, indistinguishable, lacking clear demarcation, particularly from that of religion. The attempts to construct theories and definitions of spirituality are complicated by the lack of concrete and conclusive definitions of the word itself. As a result, in order to fathom the role of spirituality in community college student persistence, it must first be clearly defined.

In more recent years scholars have challenged student affairs professionals to examine the role of spirituality as it relates to student persistence. Chickering, Dalton and Stamm (2006) acknowledge that college is an intellectual journey but also remind us that it is a time of inward spiritual journey in which students expect a personal transformation into something new and more complete (p. 154). Unfortunately for many community college students, their spiritual and intellectual journey is halted and the transformation into something new and different will not happen. The vast majority of community college students depart from the institution without having earned an Associate's degree and this lack of educational attainment has the potential to have long-lasting adverse affects on these individuals personally. Moreover, there are societal implications which cannot be ignored as community colleges graduate approximately 50% of America's workforce, thus allowing us to remain competitive globally.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to examine the relationship between spirituality and the educational persistence of Illinois community college graduates who matriculated to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. This research study examined spirituality and the extent to which it provides personal capital, serves as a buffer to life's happenings, and aids in

the development of coping mechanisms necessary for overall well being. The research also studied the persistence of community college students and the enormous level of challenge faced by this population in their quest towards completion of the Associate's and baccalaureate degree. Over the course of the study, the researcher was able to identify the relationship between spirituality and how community college graduates define this phenomenon, persist in higher education, prioritize numerous life responsibilities, sustain themselves, and find their purpose.

Research Questions

The overarching question addressed by the research conducted was as follows: What is the relationship between spirituality and college persistence among Illinois community college students who not only graduate, but matriculate to four-year institutions? The following three questions served as sub-questions and provided relevant focus to the nature of the study:

1. How is spirituality defined by community college graduates who continue their education at the baccalaureate degree-granting institution?
2. For community college students who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution, how do they come to "make meaning" of their educational journey?
3. What is the relationship between spirituality and community college graduates' ability to matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution?

Through the course of this study the researcher was able to answer the overarching question addressed by the research through the identification of emerging themes that surfaced throughout the data collection process.

Significance of the Study

There is a biased opinion against community college students and the quality of the community college education which tends to be pervasive throughout higher education literature. This study offers a contribution to the field of community college research in three significant ways, by (1) adding to the current but very limited body of scholarly research devoted solely to community colleges, and (2) providing an additional dimension by which student affairs practitioners can best assist in the development and retention of community college students vis-à-vis their spirituality and spiritual development. Lastly, (3), this research also furnishes examples of the numerous definitions of spirituality, not only in higher education literature, but also spirituality as defined by the research participants and its' relationship to their educational persistence.

Assumptions of the Study

There were certain assumptions made on the part of the researcher as they related to the nature of the study conducted and they are as follows:

- It was assumed that the sample site and participants represented the population selected.
- It was assumed that the responses given by the students via survey, research questions, and personal face-to-face interviews were honest and for the sole purpose of gathering data for the sake of the research conducted.
- It was assumed that this body of research would provide an additional lens by which student affairs practitioners could aid in the development of community college students.

Definitions of Terms

In an effort to provide optimal understanding of the research being conducted, the following definitions are furnished:

- Spirituality - our way of making meaning of the multiple forces, shared connectedness, Higher Power, and relations that make up our lives giving us purpose (Fowler, 1981, 1996, 2000).
- Persistence – to be retained in college towards a completion of the Associate’s degree at the community college-level and the Bachelor’s degree at the four-year college and/or university (Tinto, 1975, 1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005).
- Matriculate – to enroll in a college or university as a degree-seeking candidate (Tinto, 1975, 1981, 1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005).
- Religion – belief in, worship of, or obedience to a supernatural power or powers considered to be divine or to have an influence on human destiny.
- HERI – Higher Education Research Institute.
- NSCSSMP – National Study of College Students Search for Meaning and Purpose.

Site and Participant Selection

The research took place on the campus of a public Illinois university, located approximately 35 miles southwest of the city of Chicago. This institution provides both upper and undergraduate level coursework for community college students seeking a baccalaureate degree. Participants included students who were community college graduates and currently enrolled at the research site institution for no less than six semester hours during the spring 2011 term.

Organization of Dissertation

Chapter one introduces the research study along with background information relevant to the research being conducted. The purpose of the study is also discussed and this chapter introduces the reader to the study’s research questions, significance of the study, limitations,

delimitations, research assumptions, along with furnishing a definition of terms utilized throughout the course of the study. Chapter two reviews the literature referenced during the course of the research study and provides both supporting and opposing views of the theoretical concepts and conceptual frameworks utilized for the purpose of the study. It also provides a contemporary perspective on the subjects of spirituality and persistence along with critiques of the scholarly research on spirituality in higher education, persistence at the community college level, and spirituality and educational persistence. Chapter three discusses all aspects of the research process in full detail including, but not limited to, research design and methodology, the data collection process, and the stages of the research process in its entirety. Chapter four provides the reader with findings related to the research questions along with a priori themes and emerging themes. Chapter five concludes with a comprehensive discussion, conclusions drawn from the research, implications for student affairs practitioners, and recommendations for future research studies.

Chapter Summary

Persistence at the post-secondary level, particularly community colleges, is an issue of great importance to the field of higher education and society at large. In recent times, spirituality has been given some attention, particularly as it relates to college student development and more specifically, student persistence. The purpose of this research study was to examine the relationship between spirituality and the educational persistence of Illinois community college graduates who matriculated to the baccalaureate degree granting institution. The research questions are addressed along with the provision of both limitations and delimitations of the study conducted. Assumptions are provided along with the definition of specific terms that are used throughout the study.

The following chapter will provide a review of the literature documenting the relationship between educational persistence and spirituality in community college students. The goal is to provide a historical overview of literature on this topic as well as to discuss the contemporary state of this body of research as it relates to community college students.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

When I use the word spirituality, I don't necessarily mean religion; I mean whatever it is that helps you feel connected to something that is larger than yourself. Dean Ornish

Introduction

The body of literature appraised for this study examines the relationship between spirituality and persistence among Illinois community college students who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. The review of literature focuses primarily on two distinct entities – spirituality and persistence. This chapter identifies some of the most current bodies of literary research examining spirituality and its role and presence in the lives of college students along with their post-secondary educational persistence. Furthermore, the researcher selected both primary and secondary source literature as these provided the most relevant and up-to-date critiques of the original works cited, in addition to furnishing subsequent research studies relative to theorists' seminal literary works.

The literature specifically sheds light on the ways in which community college students prioritize numerous life responsibilities, manage to sustain themselves, understand and connect with the world around them, and how they come to find purpose. Additionally, it further illuminates the historical background of the role of spirituality in community colleges, and provides a current overview of the context in which current research is presently situated. A history of the problem of community college student persistence and matriculation to the four-year institution is addressed during this chapter along with support for the connection between spirituality and educational persistence. The researcher also provides a review of recent literature which further illustrates how students come to make meaning of the force that drives educational persistence beyond the community college degree.

In summary, this review of literature provides information which supports the relationship between community college students' spirituality and educational persistence. It concludes with an overview of where this body of research is currently situated in the context of 21st century community college student persistence. In addition to the moral and ethical obligation to ensure the success of community college students, institutions are now held to an even higher standard of accountability where overall performance and completion will be both measured and gauged to determine which highly coveted financial resources will be allocated and distributed to post-secondary institutions. Community colleges can no longer rest on the laurels of open access with regard to enrollment, particularly with the onset of performance-based funding. With performance mandates directly tied to funding, both academic and student affairs professionals will need to make more overt and transparent efforts to identify those areas deemed to be important to community college students that will support their persistence, graduation, and matriculation to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. In doing so, community colleges will continue to make enormous contributions to the nation's workforce, thus allowing this country to continue to actively participate and remain competitive in the world's global marketplace.

Historical Background

Towsend and Braggs (2006) refer to community college as "an outstanding institution, perhaps the greatest educational institution of the twentieth century." Community colleges were introduced to higher education near the turn of the twentieth century as transfer institutions that were little more than extensions of high school or a junior academy, whose role was to relieve some of the burden of teaching first- and second- year students (xix). These institutions also afforded students the opportunity to pursue higher education while staying close to home.

William Rainey Harper, considered by many scholars to be the father of the community college, viewed the Associate's degree as an academic credential for students completing the first two years of college (p. xix). Recipients of the Associate's degree could matriculate to a four-year degree granting institution to pursue the baccalaureate degree or they could exit the junior college, having completed an adequate amount of higher education to secure viable employment (p. xix).

The hallmark of community colleges has always been flexible and rapid response to learners' needs (Phillipe & Sullivan, 2005). From the very early stages, community colleges soon became more comprehensive beyond their transfer function (Townsend & Bragg, 2006). Walter Crosby Ellis (1931) and Leonard Koos believed there to exist a broader function of the community college beyond the traditional post-secondary academic instruction (Townsend & Bragg, 2006). They identified a need to also prepare students for immediate employment after obtaining the two-year degree as an additional function of the community college (Townsend & Bragg, 2006). After World War II the GI Bill was introduced as there was a need to educate veterans returning home from war to a more industrialized nation. Educating this population allowed veterans to become positive, contributing members of the American workforce by enhancing their ability to gain viable employment.

In 1956, Jesse Bogue advocated for the *community junior college* adding that in contrast to the more traditional, full-time enrollment residential college experience, an additional function of the community college was to "offer students the opportunity of part-time education" in response to industrial developments, post-World War II (p.xx). The Truman Commission Report stated that junior colleges were "critical to expanding access to higher education" (p. xx). In 1974, the Carnegie Commission "advocated that junior colleges become an avenue to enhance

access and used the term *community college* to convey the intent of these institutions offering the comprehensive curricular mission that permeates community colleges today” (p. xx). From the very onset, community colleges served as the primary portal for minority and low-income students and are still today viewed by many as the gateway to the four-year college and baccalaureate degree (Townsend & Bragg, 2006). However, Cohen and Brawer caution that “for most students in two-year institutions, the choice is not between community college and a senior residential institution; it is between the community college and nothing” (2003, p. 52). Consequently, community college professionals must take on the responsibility to be fully vested in the persistence of their students, given these critically high “all or nothing” stakes.

Contextual Perspective

Spirituality

Although not pervasive in institutional mission and vision statements, strategic plans, program reviews, or assessment surveys, spirituality has a historical connection to higher educational institutions. Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) opine that the history of higher education is integrally linked to the dominant role of Christianity in shaping American social and political institutions (p. 66). “Values formation and cultural learning, in addition to professional preparation, were considered vital societal functions provided by institutions of higher education” (p. 66). They further posit that there “exists a historical legacy of concern for students’ internal lives of personal meaning, faith, values, beliefs, and spirituality” (p. 145). They further posit that “there is a historical perspective for students’ mental, physical, and spiritual development dating back to the first dean of students at Harvard in 1890” (p. 145).

Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) believed that “student affairs deans recognized early on that friendship, finance, faith, and fun, all played important roles in the academic

success of students in college” (p. 147). However, despite spirituality’s innate historical connection to the mission of higher educational institutions, student affairs practitioners are hesitant to engage students through the lens of spiritual development. It appears to be a pervasive fear of compromising “separation of church and state” at non-religiously affiliated higher educational institutions. Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) are highly critical of student affairs professionals for their failure to act as advocates for the role of spirituality in higher education. In the interest of avoiding the appearance of meddling in those areas relative to values and morality, they accuse student affairs professionals of compartmentalizing religion and spirituality to the category of private concerns and neglecting to attend to the role spirituality plays in identity development and coping with stress (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006).

Persistence

There is a very limited body of scholarly research devoted to community colleges exclusively and this void in the research calls into question the extent to which the literature has addressed psychosocial developmental concerns facing community college students, particularly those issues specific to their persistence. Community college students face challenges not typical to those of students enrolled at traditional four-year colleges and universities. They are more likely to attend part-time, tend to be the least academically prepared, more financially challenged, are often working, and have a greater likelihood of being single parents. These myriad challenges regularly compete and interfere with their educational pursuits and many students suggest that their reasons for leaving school are above and beyond the scope of the institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). There are many who attribute these challenges as the causal factors in low persistence rates in this population. But for those students who persist, what

drives these students to not only graduate from the community college, but to go on to matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution?

Spirituality, Persistence, and Community College Students

There is an inherent challenge in reviewing and examining the role of spirituality as it relates to the persistence of Illinois community college students as there is no crystallized definition for spirituality in higher education literature. In addition, the story of the community college is often told through the narration of the four-year voice which often casts disparaging remarks on the community college student, the quality of community college education, and constant relegation of the community college to the ranks of “junior academy” (Bean, 1980, 1982, 1983, 1990; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Tinto 1975, 1981, 1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005). Despite the ambiguity and elusiveness that characterizes efforts to define spirituality in the literature, recurring themes support the connection between spirituality and motivation or influence on an individual’s life and purpose (Fowler, 1981, 1996, 2000; Fried, 2001; Palmer, 2003; Speck, 2005; Speck & Hope, 2005; Tisdell, 1999, 2001, 2003; Vogel, 2000).

Additionally, there are recurring themes in the research literature which echo college students’ quests for truth and knowledge through spirituality as in doing so, they embrace, question, challenge, and come to make meaning of themselves and their connection to the world around them (Astin, Astin & Lindholm, 2010, 2011; Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006; Cohen & Brower, 2003; Evans et al, 2009; Fried, 2001; Palmer, 2003; Parks, 2000; Speck, 2005; Tisdell, 1999, 2001, 2003; Vogel, 2000; Watt, 2003). Furthermore, there is strong evidence to further support a relationship between spirituality and adult learners (Speck, 2005; Speck & Hope, 2005; Parks, 2000; Tisdell, 1999; 2001; 2003). Cohen and Brower (2003) challenge us to find out what

is important to community college students as, by ignoring these critical factors, we are likely to miss what matters to them most.

Fliegler (2007) believes that community colleges pave the way for persistence; however Fliegler also opines that despite making college accessible, community colleges are under-performing with regard to retention, graduation, and transfer rates. Fliegler (2007) applauds the efforts of community college administrators who implement programs designed to promote retention, graduation, and transfer through unified services, college success courses, and dual enrollment at both the community college and university level. Unfortunately, even with these efforts in place, “only about one in four of the 60 percent of those students seeking a degree or certificate succeeds in transferring to a four-year university and /or earning an associate degree or certificate within six years” (Shulock & Moore, 2007, as cited in Fliegler, 2007).

Scrivener and Coghlan (2011) highlight this discrepancy by noting that nearly 50% of American high school graduates utilize community colleges as their initial step towards post-secondary education. They believe that the route of community college is often the path frequently taken due to the community colleges’ open access policies and affordable tuition. Unfortunately, they also note that only one-third of those students intending to earn a certificate or degree actually accomplish this goal within six years. Scrivner and Coghlan (2011) characterize these persistence rates as unacceptably low and give cause to insufficient financial resources, conflicting demands outside of the academic institution, and a general lack of preparedness for college-level academic requirements as the primary reasons why community college students are unable to be retained. McClenney and Greene (2005) echo these concerns, and also note that gaps in academic achievement are particularly pronounced in students from low-income backgrounds as well as in students of color.

Community college students' graduation and persistence rates across the country arguably remain lowest in comparison to their four-year college and university counterparts. However, in the most recent literature provided by Scrivener and Coghlan (2011), "the current national focus on increasing these rates is encouraging" (p. 8). They highlight initiatives taken at the institutional, state, and federal levels to increase graduation rates of community college students. Moreover, they specifically cite federal programs, such as the Obama Administration's "Achieving the Dream" initiative which encourages community colleges to further examine student-outcome data in an effort to improve and enhance existing programming designed to increase student retention (Scrivener and Coghlan, 2011). Community colleges are currently at the forefront of educational reform and in addition to being in the national spotlight, community colleges are being given support for the daunting and tireless task that is community college student retention, persistence, and graduation.

Theoretical Framework

Spirituality and Fowler's Stages of Faith Development

This literature review examined the theoretical framework of spirituality as defined by James W. Fowler (1981, 1996, 2000) who suggests that spirituality is the application of seven developmental stages of faith through the framework of "making meaning" and finding one's purpose. Through the course of his research on faith, Fowler conducted more than 5,000 interviews where he asked participants to tell something about their lives, pilgrimages, and their journeys which helped him to formulate their ways of "making meaning" (Fowler, 1981). In his book, *Stages of Faith* published in 1981, Fowler presented faith as a developmental process encompassing seven stages:

Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith – the first pre-images of God are here...the seeds of trust, courage, hope and love are fused in an undifferentiated way and contend with

sensed threats of abandonment, inconsistencies and deprivations in an infants' environment...the quality of mutuality and the strength of trust, autonomy, hope, and courage (or their opposites) developed in this phase underlie (or threaten to undermine) all that comes later in faith development (p. 121).

Stage 1 – Intuitive –Projective Faith – the intuitive-projective child whose age ranges from two to six or seven uses the new tools of speech and symbolic representation to organize his or her sensory experience into meaning units (p. 123)...children begin to construct their first image of God through the fantasy-filled, imitative phase in which the child can be powerfully and permanently influenced by examples, moods, actions, and stories of the visible faith of primarily related adults (p. 133).

Stage 2 - Mythic-Literal Faith – the stage in which the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs, and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community. Beliefs are appropriated with literal interpretations, as are moral rules and attitudes. Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience. This is the faith stage of the school child (ages 6 and 7). The transition to formal operational thought makes such reflection possible and necessary. Previous literalism breaks down; new “cognitive conceit” leads to disillusionment with previous teachers and teachings. Conflicts between authoritative stories (Genesis on creation versus evolutionary theory) must be faced. The emergency of mutual interpersonal perspective taking (“I see you seeing me; I see me as you see me; I see you seeing me seeing you.”) creates the need for more personal relationship with the unifying power of the ultimate environment (pp. 149 -150).

Stage 3 - Synthetic-Conventional Faith – a person's experience of the world now extends beyond the family. A number of spheres demand attention: family, school or work, peers, street society and media, and perhaps religion. Faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements. Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook. It is a “conformist” stage in the sense that it is acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others and yet does not have a sure enough grasp on its own identity and autonomous judgment to construct and maintain an independent perspective (pp. 172 – 173).

Stage 4 – Individuative- Reflective Faith – most appropriately takes the form in young adulthood. This stage is marked by a double development. The self, previously sustained in its identity and faith compositions by an interpersonal circle of significant others, now claims an identity no longer defined by the composite of one's roles or meanings to others. To sustain that new identity it composes a meaning frame conscious of its own boundaries and inner connections and aware of itself as a “world view”. Its dangers inherent in its strengths: an excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought and a kind of second narcissism in which the now clearly bounded, reflective self over-assimilates “reality” and the perspectives of others into its own world view (pp. 182-183).

Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith – involves the integration into self and outlook of much that was suppressed or of unrecognized in the interest of Stage 4's self-certainty and conscious cognitive and affective adaptation to reality. This stage develops a "second naivete" in which symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meanings. Here there must also be a new reclaiming and reworking of one's past. There must be an opening to the voices of one's "deeper self". Importantly this involves a critical recognition of one's social unconscious – the myths, ideal images and prejudices built deeply into the self-system by virtue of one's nurture within a particular social class, religious tradition, ethnic group, or the like. Unusual before mid-life, Stage 5 knows that sacrament of defeat and the reality of irrevocable commitments and acts. Stage 5 can appreciate symbols, myths and rituals (its own and others') because it has been grasped in some measure, by the depth of reality to which they refer (pp. 197-198).

Stage 6 – Universalizing Faith – Stage 6 is exceedingly rare. The persons best described by it have generated faith compositions in which their felt sense of an ultimate environment is inclusive of all being. They are "contagious" in the sense that they create zones of liberation from the social, political, economic and ideological shackles we place and endure on human futurity. Living with felt participation in a power that unifies and transforms the world, Universalizers are often experienced as subversive of the structures (including religious structures) by which we sustain our individual and corporate survival security and significance. Many persons in this stage die at the hands of those whom they hope to change. Universalizers are often more honored or revered in death than in their life (pp. 200 – 201).

For the purpose of this study based on Fowler's (1981, 1996, 2000) Stages of Faith Development, both Stage 4 – Individuative-Reflective Faith, and Stage 5 – Conjunctive Faith, were employed as one could comfortably place the majority of community college students within this range regardless of age. During Stage 4 – Individuative-Reflective Faith, people come to understand themselves and their identities as it relates to their role in connection with the world around them. As Stage 4 happens during early adulthood (Fowler 1981), this stage best describes the faith development of a more traditional-aged community college student. During this time, individuals formulate meaning which allows them to understand and interpret the world for themselves. However, since his original theories of faith development published in 1981 and 1996, Fowler has revised Stage 4 to be more reflective of mid-life as opposed to early adulthood.

Stage 4: Individuative -- Reflective Faith (*initially labeled individuative-reflexive*). This stage is initiated when one's self-definition becomes self-authored, and one's system of beliefs, values, and commitments becomes a coherent and explicit meaning-making system. In his 1981 work, Fowler suggested that stage 4 thinking "most appropriately takes form in young adulthood" (p. 182). However, in later writings (see Fowler, 2000), he indicated that this transition usually occurs between ages thirty and forty, typically resulting from changes in relationships or challenges in one's environment (Evans et al, 2009, p. 198).

During Stage 5 – Conjunctive Faith, people draw from both their cognitive and affective adaptations to reality where symbols and images are connected with meaning. This stage happens before mid-life and would be most applicable for the returning adult community college student. At this stage in life, one has already experienced setbacks and disappointments that have caused an individual to not only question him or herself, but also life in general. Coming to terms with who one is and the circumstances around oneself, reaffirms and solidifies one's own respective identity. Furthermore, this level of maturity gives cause for not only the acceptance of others, but also the appreciation of differing opinions. The beliefs of others at this point in life do not challenge, threaten, or interfere with ones' self-concept with regard to knowing who one is along with one's own personal beliefs, morals, and values.

Fowler (1981) describes faith as universal and fundamental. While the symbolic and ritualistic traditions used to describe a particular faith or religious belief may differ as a result of culture or other factors, the core essence of the faith is the same for all human beings. At the same time, however, Fowler (1981) sees infinite individual variation in the experience of faith as he argues that "each person's faith is unique" (p. xiii). Moreover, Fowler (1981) sees faith as serving a role in human socialization. He explains that the way in which our expressions of faith are acknowledged and encouraged (or dismissed and ignored) by others drastically alters the way in which faith manifests in our individual lives. Fowler (1981, 1996, 2000) believes this to be a

person's way of seeing themselves in addition to how they come to know themselves in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose.

A great majority of the scholars and theorists who reference Fowler's (1981, 1996, 2000) Stages of Faith Development take issue with his research because Stage 6 – Universalizing Faith, is so extraordinarily unattainable by the average human being. Fowler (1981, 1996, 2000) himself claims this stage to be exceedingly rare as only those very uniquely, exceptionally, and extraordinarily spiritually developed human beings will reach this level of self-actualization. Fowler believed “this level of faith development was likened to that of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., (during his last years of life) and Mother Theresa of Calcutta” (1981, p. 201). Regardless of one's age or stage of faith development, Fowler believed that “central among the qualities that make and keep humans is our capacity for trust and fidelity” (1981, p. 292). Fowler believes that “humans cannot live without meaning, and that our meaning making is intrinsically tied up with promises and fidelity” (1981, p. 292). He further asserts that our efforts to make meaning are fully interconnected with “covenants”, or our ability to make and sustain promises to ourselves and others (1981).

Support and Critiques of Fowler's Stages of Faith Development Theory

This review of literature presents both support and critiques of some of the most groundbreaking spirituality research, particularly relative to higher education and students' spiritual development. Making meaning and adult faith are further explained and supported through the more recent works of Parks (2000), who employs Fowler's faith theory as the basis for her work on mentoring young adults in their search for meaning, purpose, and faith. Tisdell's research (1999, 2001, 2003) also stems from Fowler's (1981) faith development theory; however, she infuses spirituality with culture in adult and higher education. Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm

(2006) share tremendous insight on college students' spiritual development in their text, *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2009) discuss the works of Fowler and Parks in particular as they provide reviews of their respective theories along with critiques of the application of spirituality to developing college students.

The debate over Fowler's Stages of Faith is likely to continue for years to come. As much as Fowler's work has been celebrated, it has been equally criticized. However, his original theory (1981) of faith development and making meaning has been the cornerstone of some of the most ground-breaking national research studies on college students in their quest to find purpose, develop spiritually, and understand life. Additionally, Fowler's research permeates the literature on spirituality and is often referenced as the basis for many studies on this topic. However, there are solid oppositions to Fowler's (1981) Stages of Faith.

According to Evans et al. (2009) who cited Broughton (1986) and Moran (1983), there is little evidence to even support the experience of Stage 6 – Universalizing Faith. Since his original 1981 faith theory and in response to his critics, Fowler (2000) has since revised his position with regard to both Stages 5 and 6 as he believes that Stage 5 – Conjunctive Faith, is the usual natural end-point to human spiritual progression (as cited in Evans et al., 2009). He then goes on to claim, however, “that in partnership with the spirit” any individual has the ability to advance to Stage 6 – Universalizing Faith (Evans et al., 2009, p. 199). Fowler (2000) does, however, further clarify, that individuals who embody universalizing qualities are not “perfect” in any physiological, psychosocial, or moral sense. Additionally, Evans et al. (2009) provide additional revisions to the theory with particular regard to Stage 5, as posited by Fowler in 2000:

Stage 5: Conjunctive faith (labeled paradoxical-consolidative initially). Movement into this stage takes place in midlife or beyond. It involves an increasing awareness of the

complexity of life and unconscious influences on one's behavior and attitudes. Symbolism is again appreciated in conjunction with conceptual meanings, and individuals are more deeply aware of their convictions. Individuals are more accepting of other faith traditions while also holding a deep commitment to theirs (Evans et al., 2009, pp. 198 – 199).

Despite her admiration for his contribution to spirituality theory, research, and literature, Tisdell (2003) criticizes Fowler's (1981) study citing his sample as almost 100% white and male, many of whom largely identified themselves with both the Judeo-Christian faith and traditions. Tisdell (2003) believes Fowler's faith development stages (1981, 1996, 2000) to be far too linear and that development of this kind is far more spiral-shaped as it is a consistent process of evaluation and re-evaluation, in which one constantly reconsiders and reinterprets one's faith in accordance with changes in one's life. Tisdell (2003) suggests it "offers a broader, more inclusive definition of faith as related to meaning making beyond religious tradition" (p. 97).

Tisdell (2003) credits Fowler (1981, 1996) for bringing spiritual knowing to the fore; however, she claims that he overlooked symbolic processes that are often deeply cultural (p. x). Tisdell (1999, 2001, 2003) considers spirituality to be an important part of the human experience and further believes culture to be of equal importance. She reaffirms that there has been recent consideration for the role of spirituality in teaching and learning; however, she also informs that there has been little discussion of the connection between one's culture and spirituality in research literature (p. ix). Tisdell (2003) makes seven assumptions about the nature of spirituality which are as follows:

1. Spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many people they are interrelated;
2. Spirituality is an awareness and honoring of wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things through the mystery of what many refer to as the Life-force, God, Higher Power, higher self, cosmic energy, Buddha nature, or Great Spirit;
3. Spirituality is fundamentally about meaning making;
4. Spirituality is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment;

5. Spiritual development constitutes moving toward greater authenticity or to a more authentic self;
6. Spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes, often made more concrete in arts forms such as music, image, symbol, and ritual, all of which are manifested culturally; and
7. Spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise (Tisdell, 2003, p. xi).

Tisdell (2003) accepts that there are as many definitions of culture as there are of spirituality but she defines culture as “shared beliefs, values, behaviors, language, and ways of communicating and making meaning among a particular social group” (p. xi).

Tisdell (2003) looks at spiritual development as change over time where spiritual development is moving forward and spiraling back. She says that, while some people are likely representative of the stages as prescribed by Fowler, many people need to “spiral back” and reconsider events and experiences in our lives that occurred at earlier points in the developmental process (p. 99). However, Tisdell (2003) purports that the integration of cognitive development, moral development, cultural development, and gender identity development are essential to the spiritual developmental process and cannot be ignored. Tisdell (2003) further posits that, despite the limitations to Fowler’s 1981 study, it “contributes to our understanding of how people construct knowledge through image and symbol” (p. 99). In addition, Tisdell (2003) believes spiritual development to be an area that has been ignored by both development and learning theorists and suggests that further research should be inclusive of gender patterns and the ideology of embracing cross-cultural spirituality.

Parks (2000), like Tisdell (2003), speaks of culture and its connection to spirituality. Parks describes culture as being a mentor with regard to spirituality as she purports “...every culture serves as a mentoring environment mediating expectations of adulthood and the terms of faith” (p. 206). Parks describes the shared lineage between the terms “culture” and “cultivation”, by explaining that culture contains the rituals and methods by which people cultivate or grow

their sense of meaning and personal significance. Parks sees culture as a mediating and organizing influence on not only our social relationships, arts, rituals, symbols, and practices, but also on our faith.

Parks (2000) maintained that faith is multifaceted as it manifests in our experiences in several forms (p. 20). She also suggests that “the will to find meaning is a primal force that courses through human life as a demand for order, pattern and relation” (p. 20). Parks quotes William F. Lynch, a Jesuit priest, who described faith as “the most elemental force in human nature” (p. 20) and Parks herself, speaks of faith as a center of power, value and affection. She cites Fowler in describing the activity of faith as “intuiting life as a whole” – a wholeness that is felt as a sense of relatedness among self, others, and a center of power and value that some would name God (Fowler, 1981, as cited in Parks, 2000, p. 21). Parks also posits that in examining faith in this vein, that which centers us, allows us to make meaning, and helps us to sustain, is the nucleus which functions as “God” (p. 21).

Parks (2000) quotes H. Richard Niebuhr (1993) who acknowledges the presence of God or a Higher Power along with the value of the belief in same: “To deny the reality of a supernatural being called God is one thing; to live without confidence in some center of value without loyalty to a cause is another” (p. 21). Parks believes faith to function as truth and trust suggesting that “when the activity of meaning-making is recognized in these comprehensive dimensions, we begin to perceive how both truth and trust are at stake in the composing of faith” (2000, p. 23). Parks (2000) affirms faith to be the core component of trust and like Fowler (1981), there is a shared belief in the role that both promise and fidelity play in how human beings come to make meaning in their lives.

Parks also goes on to specify that a worthwhile faith must stand up to the tests and trials that come with real-life experiences. According to Parks (2000), joys and disappointments, successes and failures, along with loves and betrayals – all serve as factors that test and mold our mature faith. Parks explains that at its best, faith serves as a foundation for altruism, bravery, fidelity, and self-confidence, even when confronted by catastrophic life events. For Parks (2000), faith “enables one to feel at home in the universe” (p. 23) as in addition to centering the mind, “it provides a resting place for the heart” (p. 24). Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) suggest that Fowler (1981, 1996) provides a more theological perspective in distinguishing the concepts of faith, belief, and religion (p. 39); however, faith is defined more personally and existentially. Faith is not always religious in its content or context. “...It is a generic feature of human life and is foundation to social relations, to personal identity, and to the making of personal and cultural meanings” (Fowler, 1996, as cited in Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, p. 39). They further believe that Fowler’s (1981, 1996, 2000) conception of faith is similar to the understanding of spirituality in common usage among Americans today (Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006, p. 40). They reference Parks (2000) as she, like Fowler (1981), believed that human beings came to make meaning through their faith. Faith is seen as transcending religious belief as it is an act of contemplating one’s purpose and the meaning of life. Faith is the act of seeking, discovering, and making meaning out of all aspects of the human experience (Parks, 2000 as cited in Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, p. 40).

This is not the only shared similarity between the research of both Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000). Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) see Parks (2000) as building upon the work of notable developmental psychologists “particularly that of Piaget, Erikson, Levinson, Kegan, Gilligan, and Belenky and her colleagues” (p. 58). Chickering, Dalton and Stamm (2006) argue

that as a result of her study of theology and leadership ethics as well as her work as a minister, Parks' (2000) work is grounded in both the practical applications of theology and faith, but also student development theory.

While Parks (2000) received very positive reviews with regard to faith and spirituality development, Watt (2003, as cited in Evans, et al., 2009) suggests that in attending to both the cognitive and affective aspects of faith development, Parks (2000) favored the cognitive and as a result, her theory may not be useful in working with African-American women as their faith development is more affective in nature (p. 209). Watt (2003) also believed Parks (1986) ignored the role of ethnicity in the faith development process and Anderson (1994) purports that Parks' 1986 study did not consider the very unique aspect of women's faith development (as cited in Evans, et al., 2009, pp. 209-210).

Evans, et al. (2009) believe the works of both Fowler (1981, 1996, 2000) and Parks (2000) to have added "important dimension to our understanding of student development"; however, they found "most of the studies of spiritual and faith development to be cross-sectional in nature" (p. 210) encompassing more than one aspect of students with regard to gender, race/ethnicity, theological belief or lack thereof, age, and culture. Additionally, they have identified clear voids in the research on spiritual development. Evans, et al. (2009) outline the following critiques and voids in the research of spiritual development. First, spirituality outside of Western cultural and religious context needs to be explored (Cartwright, 2001). Second, Goodman and Mueller (2009) call for additional attention to be drawn to the worldview of atheists and agnostics. Third, Love (2002), called for more research on the interaction between culture and spiritual development, which has since been addressed by Tisdell (2003). Fourth, Watts (2003) initiated research on faith development in African American women. And

fifth, Anderson's (1994) investigation of spirituality and feminist ideology calls for more in-depth investigation and consideration.

Spirituality and College Student Development

Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) claim there to be a resurgence of interest in examining the authenticity of spirituality, personal meaning, and values as part of higher education's mission. They also suggest that, although it is clear that there is an apparent growing interest in spirituality on our campuses, it is difficult to determine the cause of said interest. However, they purport that students are attracted to spirituality in college because of their "struggle with the big questions of identity, career, relationships, and purpose" (p. 153).

As stated by Tisdell (1999, 2001, 2003), Parks (1986, 2000), and Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006), college students develop in myriad ways during their college experience and spirituality development provides yet another lens by which practitioners can enhance, guide, enrich and facilitate this developmental experience. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2009) believe that "student affairs professionals are the strongest and most consistent voice in the academy articulating concern for human growth and the development of students" (p. 20). They further suggest that the increase in literature devoted to the various aspects of student development supports the need to take a more holistic approach to student development theory.

It is affirmed by Evans, et al. (2009) that the interest in spiritual development on the part of college students gives ample reason for campuses to create an increased sense of awareness and sensitivity to spiritual development. They strongly advise that education on spirituality and faith development in students be infused through campus-wide educational programs as well as faculty and staff development training opportunities. They cite Gilley (2005) who cautions educators by reminding them of the responsibility to do no harm and states that "fulfilling this

responsibility can only be accomplished through comprehensive study directed at addressing the spiritual issues with which many students may be grappling” (Evans, et al. 2009, p. 211).

Additionally, Evans, et al (2009) advise higher education professionals that “a learning environment in which the meaning making associated with spiritual development can occur must include a careful balance of care, support, and challenge” (p. 211).

Tinto and Student Departure Theory

The seminal work on student persistence in higher education, as told by Vincent Tinto (1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005) is, interestingly enough, written in the context of student departure. Tinto (1999) highlights problems in obtaining, interpreting and standardizing data from institutions, and the additional challenge of determining students’ departure rates from the mass of data collected (p. 9). According to Tinto’s Theoretical Model of Student Departure (1975, 1981, 1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005), determining student departure in a traditional four-year college or university setting is difficult; however, student departure at the community college level presents a greater level of challenge in higher education. Tinto (1993) believes “this problem is especially acute among part-time or non-degree seeking students, forms of participation far more common in the two-year college environment” (p. 8).

Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) take a more personal approach and position suggesting that institutions think of student departure beyond institutional fiscal accountability as there are far greater stakes that may have long-term adverse consequences in the lives of college students. They see this as an issue intimately connected to the “development of human potential” in college students (p. xi). Students who drop out may never return to higher education, thus, placing life-long constraints on their future success.

The views of Tinto are arguably less personal than those of Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) as he attributes community college student departure to overall academic under-preparedness (1993). It is further opined by Tinto (1993) that the quality of education received at the community college is sub-par leaving students ill-equipped to face the academic rigor of senior-level, post-secondary higher education. Tinto describes two-year colleges as less academically demanding than four-year institutions. He further supports his opinion that two-year colleges lack academic rigor by pointing out that two-year academic dismissal rates are higher than those at four-year institutions, despite the purported “less demanding” environment at two-year schools (Tinto, 1993, p. 80). However, Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) affirm that there is a moral commitment to students and an obligation as institutions of higher learning in a developed nation as “our success has been tied to a large college-educated workforce” (p. xi). Retention, when viewed in this vein, becomes imperative to the future of a nation. For Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004), there is a moral and ethical obligation on the part of the academy with regard to retaining community college students as this is directly tied to the nation’s ability to produce educated citizens who are members of a productive, adaptable, workforce.

Tinto (1975, 1981, 1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005) considers it to be inherently a part of the mission of the community college to accept those students who might not otherwise continue in post-secondary educational institutions. He further suggests that “a greater proportion of such students leave because of an inability to meet the academic demands of college is not surprising” (1993, p. 80). Juxtaposed to Tinto’s assertions about community colleges and their students, Townsend and Bragg (2006) claim that “most researchers judge the value of community college education through the lenses of the four-year college and university”

(p. xxi). They also believe that the literature is skewed offering that community college literature is dominated by a few elite voices, generally white males in highly selective, often private universities” (Townsend & Bragg, 2006, p. xxvi).

When examining persistence from this perspective, it is evident that there exists an inconsistent body of literature which praises community colleges for the open access and affordability, while at the same time, vilifying them for sub-par academic performance and retention outcomes. This creates the conceptualization of the community college as “second best” institutions of higher learning. From this perspective, student outcomes such as persistence, program completion, transfer, and post-program employment are now of greatest importance. It is on these terms that a substantial body of evidence has accumulated, both lauding the openness and inclusivity of community colleges but also condemning them for inadequate results...it is easy to cast community college as a “second best” higher education institution (Zwerling, 1976, as cited in Townsend and Bragg, 2006, p. xxi).

Townsend and Bragg (2006) provide cautionary advice with regard to judging the community college by the four-year institution’s yardstick. Although these comparisons are convenient and automatic (Townsend & Bragg, 2006), they portray the community college as inadequate and inferior. “Such simplistic comparisons are unfortunate because they undermine the community college as an important form of higher education with its own unique mission and agenda” (p. xxi).

Bean’s Theoretical Model of Student Attrition (1980, 1982, 1983, 1990) provides an explanatory model of student retention in which elitism and student retention and persistence function in concert. Like Tinto (1975, 1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005), Bean (1980, 1990) believes there to be certain environmental factors that affect retention. Bean (1980, 1990)

further gives merit to the students' educational intentions upon entrance to the post-secondary institution with regard to their desire to obtain baccalaureate degrees. However, in examining students' persistence, it is relevant to note research findings which provide the characteristics of those students who are most likely to persist at the post-secondary education level:

1. The higher the degree offered, the higher the retention rates; the exception to this rule is that elite private liberal arts colleges have higher retention rates than many institutions offering masters or doctoral degrees.
2. The higher the quality of the institution and the more elite it is, the higher the retention rates.
3. Older institutions with longer traditions and larger endowments have higher retention rates.
4. Institutions where the majority of the students attend classes full-time, are of a traditional age (18–23), and reside on campus have higher retention rates than institutions where the majority of students attend part-time, are older or commuter students, and work full-time.
5. Predominantly white institutions that enroll a relatively high percentage of African-American, Hispanic, or Native American students will likely have lower retention rates than similar institutions enrolling fewer students from these groups; however, at many institutions minority students have higher graduation rates than majority students (College student retention, n.d.).

There appears to be a bias against community colleges and community college students in the literature with regard to persistence. Tinto's earlier research in particular is criticized by Barbatis (2010) who states that Tinto's findings reflect the positions of a more elite research participant as he studied mostly White, Non-Hispanic, students who came from middle-class and higher socioeconomic levels with higher levels of achievement in secondary education. However, Tinto (1993) did take into account the challenges faced by lifestyles which mirror those of community college students offering that "events which occur elsewhere in a student's life may also play an important role in determining what transpires within the college" (p. 109). Tinto (1993) describes the external obligations of work, families, and communities as, at times, working in opposition to the demands of the academic institution. He also notes that, in cases

where the social and academic “systems of the institution are weak,” the external demands will greatly compromise an individual’s persistence (p. 109).

Based on Tinto’s own description of the myriad challenges faced by community college students, it evident that this population would be deemed the least likely to persist in higher education. Furthermore, Bean (1980, 1990) suggests that students who possess economic, social, or educational advantages are the most likely to persist in college while those students who lack these advantages are the most likely to depart. Therefore, from Bean’s Student Attrition theory, community colleges, regardless of their quality or value, are the lowest status institutions therefore, they will have the lowest rates of retention as they will continue to enroll those students deemed the least likely to persist (Bean, 1980,1982, 1983, 1990).

A typical retained student will enroll in college directly after high school (at age eighteen or nineteen); will attend, full-time, a selective four-year residential private college or university seeking a Bachelor’s degree; will come from a white or Asian family with educated parents with relatively high incomes (high socioeconomic status); and will have attended a high quality high school, taken college preparatory courses, received high grades in high school, and scored well on standardized tests. In addition, the student will intend to graduate, have a major and career goals clearly in mind, participate in numerous campus activities, enjoy being a student, feel that he or she fits in at school, and will have a positive attitude toward the school, the faculty, the courses taken, and the academic and social life of the college. The effects of these characteristics or circumstances are cumulative. The fewer of these attributes a student has, the greater the chances of the student withdrawing from college (College student retention, n.d.).

The aforementioned description is the antithesis of the community college student and such variables need to be taken into consideration when gauging the post-secondary educational persistence of this student population.

Conceptual Framework

Bruce W. Speck’s (2005) conceptual framework defining spirituality, aptly referred to as the “definitional dilemma”, was applied in selecting literature for this research study as Speck advises that in examining spirituality, it must first be defined and in doing so, one must ask *who*

exists?, who or what is in charge (man in the natural or in the supernatural power)? and, what is the purpose of existence? By addressing these questions, spirituality is not defined nor restricted by religion. Evans, et al. (2009) posit that spirituality, faith, belief, and religion as concepts, are confusing and often used interchangeably. Parks (2000) even intimates that for many, faith is simply equated with religion (p. 15). Parks (2000) explains that religion provides a condensed, bounded, delineated set of symbols, stories, and rituals that help people to impose order on a chaotic reality. A consensus regarding the order of reality is shared by a whole community of people and, according to Parks (2000) “the religions of the world survive only when countless people are able to confirm, “Yes, life is like that” (p. 118).

On the contrary, Parks’ (2000) description of spirituality speaks to a connection with one’s self in relationship to understanding one’s existence in the world and with others. For Parks (2000) spirituality is founded in the human quest for purpose, meaning, and the desire to transcend the limitations of the physical world. She sees spirituality as growing from the desire to find coherence between the meaning of our inner spiritual world, against the understanding of our external reality (Parks, 2000). In summary, religion is founded in the desire to create a group identity or shared framework for “acceptable” social behavior whereas spirituality is a highly individualized experience rooted in the personal need for each individual to make meaning in his or her own life. Throughout the course of each day, one is required to engage in constant reconciliation with the existence between one’s inner-self and the external world, or “common ground” shared with others.

From another perspective, Chickering, Dalton and Stamm (2006) define religion as “the conceptual framework and the recognized institution within which a society’s deep moral values and the rules governing what is defined as correct behavior for individuals are generally

associated (p. 37). In their text, Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) cite the work of Hill and colleagues (2000) who researched spirituality and religion as two separate entities with “definitional distinctions and overlaps” (p. 47). Hill, et al. (2000) maintain that “despite the tendency among scholars and researchers to distinguish between spirituality and religion as understood and practiced by individuals, these phenomena are inherently interrelated” (p. 47). They further posit that “religion and spirituality involve a process of individual search to identify what is held as sacred and therefore worthy of devotion and commitment” and conclude with the following:

- Religion and spirituality are both understood by individuals to include “subjective feelings, thoughts and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred” (p. 68).
- Religion is distinguished from spirituality in that it may include a search for non-sacred goals, such as societal identity, affiliation, and health and wellness, with a context that has as its primary goal the facilitation of the search for the sacred – for example, membership in church.
- Religion involves the means and methods, such as rituals or other prescribed behaviors, through which the search for the sacred is validated by and receives support from a recognized group. Spirituality in contrast may not require external validation (Hill, et al 2000, as cited in Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm 2006, pp. 47- 48).

Tisdell (2003) however, is staunchly opposed to the concept of spirituality and religion being one in the same and states that despite the overlaps, there are inherent differences.

Notwithstanding the fact that religion is a framework for rituals, images, and symbols that are intimately tied to our cultural traditions, spirituality and the quest for meaning are distinct from the formalized social construct we call religion. Tisdell (2003) speaks of leaving the religions of our childhoods and offers that people make their exodus from religion for a variety of reasons:

...primarily because they are rejecting the codified rules and regulations of their religious traditions...Sometimes they are rejecting the negative messages they appropriated (rightly or wrongly) from various leaders within those traditions about their badness, their inferiority to others of a different status, gender, or culture...Some leave because they are ashamed of the role their religions played in a history of colonization, in the Holocaust,

or in committing human atrocities in the name of “God”...Furthermore, some leave simply because there is too much of a dichotomy between their personal beliefs and the official creed or ideology of their religious traditions (pp. 52-53).

Tisdell (2003) believes it important to note that many aspects of spirituality have nothing to do with religion and further states that “religious traditions and institutions do not have a corner on the market of who does and does not have spiritual experiences” (pp. 54-55). With regard to her own research conducted on spirituality and culture in adult and higher education, Tisdell (2003) notes that most of the personally significant spirituality experiences shared by participants interviewed for her research had very little to do with religious traditions of participants’ childhoods. Instead, Tisdell’s (2003) participants reported that their encounters with spirituality were more “in their life experiences and relationships with others, the earth, and the larger cosmos” (p. 55).

Defining Spirituality and Speck’s Definitional Dilemma

Speck (2005) provides illustrative examples of the multiple definitions which he claims describe spirituality in current and available literature and believes that “foundational to any definition of spirituality is the worldview from which the definition arises” (p. 9). Speck further purports that the definitions of spirituality are biased as they are “cogent statements that explain a scholar’s worldview” (p. 9). He further argues that a scholar’s worldview might be suggestive, at best. Speck (2005) believes that one must entertain two possibilities when responding to the question of what exists; (a) existence in the natural only, and (b), the possibility of existence in both the natural and supernatural. Speck (2005) cites Sagan (1980) who suggests that existence in its entirety within the natural world is the cosmos and spirituality in this vein must be defined in terms of the natural order. According to this worldview of naturalists, like Sagan (1980), the supernatural does not exist. Fried (2001) expands this and argues that spirituality is a means of

creating meaning for ourselves. From this perspective, looking to an external or supernatural source to provide meaning is not possible (Fried, 2001). Conversely, when examining what exists in the possibility of the natural and supernatural world, the relationship between these two realms varies given particular philosophical or theological traditions but, the supernatural realm is primarily metaphysical (Speck, 2005). According to Speck (2005), “when employing this ideology, the natural realm exists because it is derived from and sustained by the supernatural realm” (p. 9).

In answering the question of who or what is in charge with regard to spirituality, Speck (2005) utilizes the same two worldviews -- one solely natural and the other encompassing both the natural and supernatural. Speck (2005) suggests that when addressing who or what is in charge from the naturalistic worldview, one can only refer to natural forces, “whether nature or humans or a combination of both” (p. 10). Speck comments that most “generally in the literature on spirituality in higher education, humans are the focal point of authority” (p. 10). However, in the supernatural realm, the authority appeals to the ontological primacy of the supernatural realm (Speck, 2005).

By arguing that “the dependency of the natural realm on the supernatural realm is evidence of the ultimate authority vested in the supernatural realm” (p. 10), Speck (2005) clarifies that this does not fully remove the authority of humans, but does make humans accountable to an authority within the supernatural realm. Speck (2005) suggests that in describing purpose with regard to spirituality in the natural realm, one cannot include an afterlife “so whatever counts for purpose only counts to the natural order” (p. 10). “Under naturalistic worldviews, ethics takes on high importance because how a person relates to the natural order is paramount” (p. 10). Speck (2005) highlights the confusion resulting when individuals espousing

a naturalistic perspective use “God terms” (e.g., God, Higher Power, Sacred Spirit). In this case, the person is not speaking of an actual supernatural order, but using terms that indicate the existence of a supernatural deity.

Speck (2005) believes “the same principle holds true for definitions about spirituality grounded in a natural-supernatural worldview” (p. 11). Speck (2005) explains that defining spirituality in terms of a “dualistic worldview” must give equal weight to the supernatural and naturalistic perspectives. Speck (2005) conceptualizes spirituality as having both a vertical and horizontal dimension. Speck’s (2005) vertical dimension reflects one’s relationship to God or a Higher Power. The horizontal dimension reflects our connections to others, nature, and ourselves. However, Speck (2005) takes special care to advise that those supporting a dualistic worldview not “fudge on either side of the dualism to minimize the other side” (p. 11). Speck and Hope (2005) characterize spirituality as a hybrid as it is neither religious nor secular and difficult to define and analyze. They caution that despite commonalities in spiritual experiences, “not all spiritual journeys lead to the same destination” (p. 280). They further purport that because definitions of spirituality suffer from vagueness, “those who are serious about engaging the academy in a genuine academic discussion of spirituality should tackle the problem of defining spirituality so that it can be discussed rationally” (p. 280).

Current Spirituality Research in Higher Education

The UCLA Higher Education Research Institute’s (HERI) team of Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer Lindholm (2010) are the co-investigators and directors of the National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose (NSCSSMP). Since 2003, these researchers have embarked upon a longitudinal study that examined the spiritual development of undergraduate college students and is the most ground-breaking study of its kind

to date. As a multi-year study, their research has spanned the course of seven years. However, one of the biggest challenges presented to the HERI research was the belief that religion and spirituality are one in the same.

During the course of the HERI study the NSCSSMP research team reviewed and compiled data from 14,527 students at 136 colleges and universities. The research team also collected data in the form of focus group surveys, and interviews with both students and faculty (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). The National Study of College Students Search for Meaning and Purpose (NSCSSMP) sought to first explore the various definitions of spirituality proposed by scholars in business, education, and other fields (Astin, Astin & Lindholm, 2010). Much like the literature in higher education regarding spirituality (Agha & Miller, 2005; Anderson, 1994; Astin, 1993; Cartwright, 2001; Chickering Dalton & Stamm, 2006; Dykstra & Parks, 1986; English & Gillen, 2000; Evans, et al, 2009, Fernout, 1986, Fleischer & Schulman, 2005; Fried, 2001; Gilley, 2005; Goodman & Meuller, 2009; Harris, 1986; Hill, et al, 2000; Jarrell, 2009; Love, 2002; Moran, 1983; Parks, 1986, 2000; Speck, 2005; Tisdell, 1999, 2001, 2003; Vogel, 2000; Watt, 2003), they too experienced challenges in *defining* spirituality. In addition, the research team from the HERI NSCSSMP grappled not only with the issue of how to *measure* spirituality, but also, how to do this with the appropriate instrument. Despite the myriad challenges faced by the HERI team in conducting research on the topic of spirituality, it was the shared belief of the team that “higher education should attend to the spiritual development of college students” (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). The findings from this study provide a powerful argument that spirituality is essential to college students’ lives (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010, 2011).

Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) assert that facilitating the spiritual growth of students will create a more socially aware generation, committed to social justice. They also link spiritual development to greater tolerance, acceptance of diversity, the ability to adapt to social and technological change, and the ability to evaluate multiple perspectives in efforts to confront the challenging and rapidly shifting social, political, and economic landscape on a more individual level. They further advise that bringing students in touch with their own spiritual growth enhances interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, promotes the development of leadership abilities, and generally contributes to overall emotional well-being and a sense of motivation with regard to students' educational pursuits (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011).

The work of the HERI team shows the critical importance of spirituality as it relates to the lives of America's college students. Throughout the course of their study, they re-emphasized the difference between spirituality and religion but respected the positions of those who believed them to be one in the same along with those who chose to not acknowledge spirituality and/or God or a Higher Power at all. Additionally, the HERI team solicited the positions and opinions of faculty with regard to their own spirituality during the course of their longitudinal study. The faculty's perspective added great depth and breadth to the study as they have ongoing and consistent interaction with students in their respective classrooms, opportunities for further engagement outside of the classroom, and great influence over college students' decisions and sometimes, overall academic success. It was also posited by the HERI team that the faculty opinion and/or belief with regard to their spirituality might have some bearing with regard to their classroom instruction styles in addition to how they interacted with their students on a daily basis (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011).

Current Community College Persistence Research

In 2009, Xueli Wang published a research study entitled *Baccalaureate Attainment and College Persistence of Community College Transfer Students at Four-Year Institutions*. Wang (2009) views community colleges as a gateway to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution and suggests that many students who aspire to earn the Bachelor's degree, or higher, begin at the community college level. Wang (2009) also quotes Davis (2001) who believes that the outcome of higher education not only shapes economic returns, but also determines quality of life.

Scrivener and Coghlan (2011) share the belief of Davis (2001) as they affirm that in today's economy, "having a post-secondary credential means better jobs and wages" (p. 1). Scrivener and Coghlan (2011) also speak of the critical role community colleges play in terms of graduating individuals who make up more than half of America's educated, trained, and skilled workforce. They cite the Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce in stating that 22 million new jobs for workers with college educations will exist by the year 2018 (Scrivener and Coghlan, 2011). A potential crisis looms on the horizon in the form of insufficient completion rates at America's community colleges as it is these institutions that produce 50% of the country's workforce. At the current rate of graduates, Georgetown University projects a three million worker shortfall in meeting this demand (Scrivener and Coghlan, 2011).

Community college graduates are a sizable percentage of baccalaureate degree-granting institutions' enrollment and because of such, there is a need for both community colleges and four-year colleges and universities to be vested in community college students' success.

Characteristics associated with the educational success of these students, therefore, are important factors to be taken into account when considering the mission and functions of four-year institutions, especially at a time of increased accountability pressures facing post-secondary education, when student outcomes such as persistence and completion rates become pivotal performance measures (Wang, 2009, p. 571).

Wang (2009) discusses the very negative portrayal of community college graduates' baccalaureate-degree attainment and cites numerous theorists, like Tinto (1975, 1981, 1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005) whose opinion reiterates the assertion that students who begin their educational experience at the community college do not fare well at the four-year college or university (Bean, 1980, 1990; Christie 1999; Crook & Lavin, 1989; Dougherty, 1987, Ganderton & Santos, 1995; Rouse, 1995; Scrivener & Coghlan, 2011; Whitaker & Pascarella, 1994). However, Wang (2009) further opines that those who take this position create an obligation for "higher education researchers to look within the community college transfer group in identifying factors that affect these students' educational attainment" (p. 571).

There has been abundant empirical evidence to confirm repeatedly that community college beginners fare less satisfactorily than four-year beginners. Not as much empirical attention, however, has been directed towards studying community college transfer students in their own right to examine what exactly influences their attainment (p. 571).

In Wang's (2009) research study, precollege characteristics such as psychological attributes, post-secondary experiences, and environmental factors were used to predict the educational outcomes of community college transfers. Wang (2009) also examined persistence literature along with other scholarly works which provided empirical data from earlier research studies on community college student outcomes (e.g., Adelman, 1999; Tinto, 1993; Pascarelli & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Lee and Frank, 1990; Velez & Javalgi, 1987). Student demographic backgrounds (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) were identified as predictors of both community college beginners and those who are most likely to persist in addition to the level of secondary educational skill and mastery obtained.

Wang (2009) suggested that there is a common limitation in existing persistence models as they examine external motivating factors more so than internal motivational factors. Wang (2009) cites "abundant empirical evidence" that supports the achievement gap between first-year

community college and first-year university students (p. 572). However, Wang (2009) notes that there is a lack of empirical research focused on community college transfer students' academic success and persistence. According to Lee, Mackie-Lewis, and Marks (1993, as cited by Wang, 2009), students who succeed in the community college to university transfer process face a more complex path to the baccalaureate degree, and according to the authors "it seems reasonable that students who are successful in transferring...are an especially motivated and resilient group" (pp. 572 – 573).

Wang (2009) identified three factors that contributed to community college student persistence: (a) locus of control, (b) self-concept, and (c) educational expectation. Wang (2009) described the concept of locus of control as a psychological construct used to study academic outcomes and believes "the internal locus of control, as community college transfers perceive themselves, may play a positive role in determining whether they can successfully navigate the less traditional route of persisting to their degree goal" (p. 573).

It was further posited by Wang (2009) that students' self-concepts had an enormous influence on their educational success. According to Wang (2009), the majority of research on self-concept has been reflective of pre-school, elementary and secondary school students; however, "existing research on college students has also shown self-concept to be important in explaining educational outcomes" (p. 573). "It is reasonable to argue that community college transfers who have positive self-concept are more likely to follow their educational goals than those with similar abilities and backgrounds but with negative self-concept" (p. 573).

The third motivational factor for community college student's persistence identified by Wang (2009) was that of educational expectation as this is measured by whether or not the student entered post-secondary education with the intent to obtain a baccalaureate degree.

“Motivation theorists believe that individuals’ choice and persistence in a given activity can be explained partly by beliefs about how well they will perform on the activity” (Atkinson 1957, 1964; Atkinson & Feather, 1966; Wigfield 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, as cited in Wang, 2009, p. 573). From this perspective, students’ expectations about the possibility of earning a degree play a significant role in dictating the effort devoted to earning said degree. Furthermore, research suggests that students’ motivations to earn a degree are strongly associated with academic success and degree attainment (Camburn, 1990; Carter, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005, as cited in Wang, 2009).

Wang (2009) concluded the study by noting the importance of community college transfer students in the four-year college and university pipeline through facilitating more seamless transitions and the creation of policies designed to assist with baccalaureate degree completion. In summary, Wang (2009) opined the belief that community college transfer students not only affected the influence of the missions and functions of community colleges, but also helped redefine and expand the missions of four-year colleges and universities (p. 585).

Chapter Summary

Community colleges have a historical connection with the spiritual development of their students and these intrinsic values – spirituality, faith, belief, and religion, for many seem synonymous. Fowler (1981, 1996, 2000) provided the researcher with a solid theoretical framework to examine the role of faith development in the lives of community college graduates. Using Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development (1981, 1996, 2000) the researcher employed both Stage 4 – Individuative and Reflective Faith, and Stage 5, Conjunctive Faith, as these were most applicable to the age and maturation of both traditional-aged college students as well as adult learners. The researcher also utilized Tinto’s Student Departure Theory (1975, 1981, 1986,

1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005) as an additional theoretical framework employed to examine the persistence of community college students who graduated and matriculated to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. In order to best examine the relationship between spirituality and educational persistence, the researcher utilized Speck's (2005) conceptual framework of defining spirituality, paying close attention to how research participants defined spirituality, who they believed to hold the position of authority – man in the natural or the supernatural referred to as God or a Higher Power, and determining the purpose of one's existence.

Fowler's (1981) original work has since been the foundation for several scholars and theorists who present research to support the existence of a relationship between spirituality and college persistence. However spirituality, unlike faith, belief, and religion, defies absolute explanation and definitions of spirituality are influenced by the belief and value systems of the respective theorists doing the interpretation. Although gaining attention on America's college campuses within the last decade, the available literature on spirituality is still based primarily in those participant responses of white males who are steeped in Judeo-Christian based religious practices, beliefs, and traditions. Additionally, the lens by which most literature is written, researched, studied, and referenced still belongs to that of the four-year baccalaureate-degree granting institution. Noticeably absent from the literature is the presence of research focusing solely on community colleges and their students. Scholars and theorists continue to ask which students persist and the reiteration of questions of "why" and "how" are pervasive in the persistence literature. However, community colleges, as a whole, are not invited to the research table and in doing so, viable research literature on large numbers of students who will graduate from the community college and matriculate to the four-year baccalaureate-degree granting

institution is unavailable despite continual references to their meriting worthiness and recommendation for further study.

It is hoped that this dissertation will play a role in the efforts to close this gap in higher education literature. Chapter three of this dissertation will outline the methodology by which these issues will be explored in a specific population of community college students who graduate and matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

It isn't until you come to a spiritual understanding of who you are — not necessarily a religious feeling, but deep down, the spirit within — that you can begin to take control. – Oprah Winfrey

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology utilized in this study. The researcher explored the relationship between spirituality and persistence among Illinois community college graduates who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. Throughout the course of this chapter the researcher will describe the methodology used to explore the relationship between spirituality and persistence among Illinois community college graduates who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. The organization of this chapter includes the research design, data collection procedures, advertising the research study, data collection procedures, pilot study, recruitment of research study participants, delimitations, and a concluding summary. This chapter also provides a detailed description of the qualitative case study design selected by the researcher.

Creswell (2007) posits that qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants (p. 38). Creswell also affirms that qualitative research begins with assumptions, a world-view, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Merriam (2009) provides the following which summarizes the use of this methodology for the purpose of the research being conducted in this study:

Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences. These insights can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure

future research: hence, case study plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base (p. 51).

For the purposes of data collection the researcher employed an on-line questionnaire, utilizing software and online survey tools provided by Survey Monkey.com which is a company specializing in online survey construction. In addition, the researcher conducted a guided focus group discussion along with open-ended, face-to-face interviews to gather necessary data to respond to study's research questions. The researcher also referred to copious notes taken during on-site data gathering process along with memoing done during the guided focus group discussion. Creswell (2007) suggests that the qualitative researcher typically gathers multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source. As stated by Merriam (2009) "...case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis. Any and all methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used..." (p. 42).

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to the start of any research activities being conducted at the research site, the researcher was required to complete the site institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. The researcher was also required to provide all documentation submitted and approved by the National Louis University Institutional Research and Review Board (IRRB) for further review and consideration at the site institution. The researcher registered through the research site institution's formal research process and in doing so, was required to name the Senior Student Affairs Administrator as the "researcher" or "advisor", and the researcher as the "student" or "advisee". Additionally, the researcher completed the Research Subjects and Safety Review form and awaited a response from the site institution's Institutional Review Board. Once approval was granted at the research site institution, the researcher was able to begin conducting

the research activities. The researcher maintained the highest level of professional ethics meeting all of the requirements of the National Louis University Internal Research Review Board (IRRB) and those of the site research institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) throughout the course of this research study.

Advertising the Research Study

The researcher created an electronic web-based email account along with an electronic web-based phone number linked directly to the researcher's personal cell phone number. This phone number was provided on all of the printed advertisements for the study and allowed for students to contact the researcher to express interest in the study. The electronic web-based phone number also provided a transcription of the voice message which arrived in the researcher's e-mail account inbox established for the research study.

The researcher worked closely with the Senior Student Affairs Officer at the research site institution for access to prospective participants in the study. The researcher was asked to provide no less than eight posters advertising the study designed to recruit potential research participants. The posters were used like similar advertisements of programs and various events at the site institution as they were displayed on easels in those areas heavily trafficked by students. The image for the graphic was critically important to the research being conducted as the researcher believed an image, more so than words, would capture the attention and interest of on-lookers, students, and others at the university. Furthermore, as there is no pure definition of spirituality, the researcher believed an image would allow for the on-looker to create one's own interpretation and/or definition based on the image provided.

In an effort to evoke an image that captured what the researcher believed to be the essence of spirituality and educational persistence, the researcher solicited the assistance of a

professional graphic designer. Using the concept of hands breaking through and/or pressing towards light, the graphic designer created an image for the research study. The graphic used for advertising the research conducted is provided in Appendix A.

The researcher forwarded the image to the research site institutions' advisor for approval to ensure that this would be appropriate for public display at the university and to also ensure that it provided the clarity and resolution necessary for the university's student newspaper's printed advertisements. After the advisor and the editor of the student newspaper gave appropriate feedback and approval the researcher created posters and flyers to be both displayed and distributed throughout the research site institution.

The researcher created an on-line survey questionnaire via Survey Monkey which is an on-line software program whereby researchers can create, invite, tabulate, cross-reference, eliminate (as a result of non-eligibility), and store data on all recipients and respondents including those who opt out and/or partially respond. Through Survey Monkey, the on-line survey questionnaire invitations were forwarded to the researcher's web-based electronic email addresses provided as a means of contact.

Pilot Study

Two weeks before the researcher's scheduled date to begin on-campus recruitment activities, the researcher conducted a pilot exercise. The purpose of the pilot exercise was to assess the clarity of the research questions posed to actual community college graduates at the research site institution. Furthermore, the pilot participants' response would give a good indication as to whether or not the researcher's survey instrument utilized language that would be easily understood, that the graphic used for advertising the survey was appealing, and that the length of the instrument was appropriate for research purposes.

The researcher obtained the names of two faculty members teaching undergraduate courses in the social science/education area(s). The researcher asked the faculty if they would announce the upcoming study in their classes in an effort to recruit pilot participants. Each of the faculty announced the research study during one of their respective classes and a total of sixteen names and electronic mail addresses of community college graduates were provided to the researcher. Through Survey Monkey, an invitation to participate in the pilot study was forwarded to the sixteen names provided. The researcher received a total of eight completed on-line survey responses.

The pilot study participants included five males, three females, four African Americans, one Hispanic, two White Non-Hispanics, and one Asian or Pacific Islander/American Indian, or Alaskan Native. Fifty percent (four) of the respondents fell between ages 25 – 34, two were in the 35-44 categories, and the remaining two fell in the 45-54 categories. With regard to spirituality, their responses varied as did their religious affiliation which they identified as Baptist, Muslim, Agnostic, and Catholic, Non-Denominational and Other.

Of the eight pilot participants, four (50%) reported that they believed in God or a Higher Power, six (75%) reported that they were people of faith and their spirituality connected to their faith, and four (50%) believed that their spirituality helped them to cope with their educational experiences. Additionally, three (37.5%) believed their spirituality would play a role in the completion of their baccalaureate degree, and three (37.5%) also believed that their educational experiences were enhanced by their spiritual development.

Because the image on the recruitment flyers, posters, and newspaper ad was so critical to the recruitment of student participants, this was also included as a part of the pilot survey. Pilot study participants were asked to provide feedback on the image created to advertise the study.

Almost all of the pilot study participants believed to some degree that the image was appropriate for the nature of the study being conducted. Six of the eight pilot study participants commented that the image was inviting and appealing and also believed that the image would catch the eye of potential research participants, additionally, the pilot study participants stated that the image would very likely stimulate conversation by others who viewed the graphic advertising the research study on the campus.

The pilot study participant's responses offered the researcher a glimpse of what the actual research participants would provide in the way of responses. Pilot study participants' responses also solidified the purposeful sampling utilized by the researcher as pilot study participants were all community college graduates currently enrolled at the research institution for the spring 2011 term for a minimum of six semester hours. As suggested by Patton (2002), in the researcher's quest for responses, the researcher was mindful to "value the potential response against the potential distress of the respondent" (p. 415). At no time were pilot participants placed in harm's way and their responses (e.g., audio, transcribed, etc.), along with their respective identities, remain anonymous.

Recruitment of Research Study Participants

Initial contact with prospective participants was made through posters advertising the research study. The researcher received approval from the host institution's Senior Student Affairs Officer to hang posters and distribute flyers in the institutions' common areas, heavily trafficked by students also for the purpose of soliciting prospective research participants. In addition, the researcher secured a full-page, paid advertisement to be run in two consecutive editions of the student newspaper. These ads were strategically run during, and shortly after, the

period in time in which the researcher was scheduled to be on the campus of the research site institution. This was done for the purpose of encouraging student participation.

The researcher forwarded an electronic announcement to each of the institution's clubs and organizational advisors along with Chairs of specific academic departments (Education, Social Work/Sciences, Women's Studies, and Humanities). The researcher also made concerted efforts to meet with each of the student clubs and organizations, specifically the Student Government Association; however, this organization did not think that the researcher's interest and/or intent was aligned with their purpose of said organization and denied the researcher's request to present to this student group. The scheduled student clubs/organizations' meeting times posed a conflict for the researcher and as a result, the researcher was not able to meet and present the research study to students in this venue either. However, the researcher did make contact with the faculty/staff advisors of every authorized student club and/or organization via email, as these professionals have daily interaction with numerous students enrolled at the institution and were well positioned to forward the names of potential research study participants.

Arrangements were made for every aspect of the data collection to be conducted at the research site institution. The researcher made an inquiry to the university's Registrar as to which days and times were most populated by students visiting the campus and was told Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, between 3:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. The researcher reserved a table to be used for recruitment purposes. The researcher sat behind the table with a poster advertising the study along with flyers, and sign-in sheets for interested students. This also provided potential participants with the opportunity to meet with the researcher and ask questions about the research

being conducted. The researcher's recruitment table was adjacent to the university's food court and cyber café, directly off of one of the main entrances to the university.

The researcher arrived no less than twenty minutes before the three o'clock hour to set up the table advertising the research study, pens for students to provide contact information, and flyers to be given to students, faculty, administrators as well as various other interested on-lookers. The researcher left between 7:45 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. on each of the scheduled visit days. The researcher also brought along a laptop so that interested students could receive the survey via electronic mail, on the spot. The laptop also allowed the researcher to answer queries of interest that had come through the electronic web-based email account established for the purpose of the research project. In this location which appeared to be the nucleus of the site institution, the researcher was immersed in the research study participants' environment.

Initially, the researcher made arrangements to visit the campus for two consecutive weeks during the aforementioned days and times. After the initial two weeks and in an effort to increase the overall participant/respondent pool, the researcher was advised by both the advisor and the researcher's Dissertation Chair to extend the campus visits by an additional week, and as a result, both Wednesday and Thursday afternoon/evenings of the following week were added.

At the beginning of the research study, the researcher did not receive much correspondence from the electronic announcements to faculty, staff and advisors; however, once on campus, after connecting the researcher with the corresponding emails and advertisements of the research study throughout the research site institution, the researcher was approached by several club and organization advisors who provided many student referrals. Several referrals for potential participants were provided to the researcher from individual faculty, academic

advisors, multicultural affairs, the transfer coordinator, veterans and military affairs coordinator, and various other academic and non-academic entities within the institution.

Connecting with these individuals was critical as these individuals have numerous contacts with community college graduates throughout their matriculation process at the research site institution. Additionally, two faculty, one teaching Research Methods and the other Social Work, but teaching research and research concepts relative to their specific courses during the spring 2011 term, invited the researcher to present to two of their evening classes. This provided the researcher the opportunity to present to four undergraduate classes in total. In addition, the researcher received referrals for additional possible research participants from other administrators and faculty throughout the host research institution.

Through these planned, purposeful selection and recruitment efforts, in addition to faculty, staff, and administrator referrals, the researcher was able to obtain the names of several potential research participants. Over the course of three weeks, the researcher spent a combined total of approximately 30 hours on the campus of the research site institution. Through face-to-face recruitment efforts along with posters, newspaper ads, flyers, classroom visits, and faculty/staff referrals, the researcher identified 268 potential research participants which was more than a sufficient potential participant pool to begin the research study.

For those students who contacted the researcher via advertisement or referral (e.g., poster, student newspaper advertisement, flyer, word of mouth, etc.), they were asked to forward their electronic mail address and phone number to the web-based electronic mail address created for the research study. After having done this, an invitation for the on-line survey, via Survey Monkey, was forwarded to each of the potential research participants. It is at this juncture students were able to formally indicate, solidify, and confirm their interest as a participant

regardless of their completion of the on-line survey, or lack thereof. A copy of the informed consent document forward to all research participants is provided in Appendix B.

On-line Survey Questionnaire

Upon receipt of the on-line survey, participants were able to fully review the scope of research being conducted along with the terms of agreement for research participants. Research participants were also provided an informed consent document which outlined the nature of the research study, the incentive for participating, contact information for the researcher and the researcher's Dissertation Chair, along with the researcher's promise to at no time place participants in harm's way in addition to the option to withdraw from the study at any given time. All participants were required to provide an electronic signature for the informed consent documentation. An electronic signature was necessary as the informed consent was the first page of the on-line survey questionnaire. Students who chose not to provide an electronic signature on the informed consent page were deemed ineligible and were not allowed to continue with this portion of the research study. A copy of the on-line survey questionnaire utilized in this study is included in Appendix C.

Each component of the research was conducted sequentially with the on-line survey questionnaires distributed first, the guided focus group discussion, second, and open ended face-to-face interviews conducted last. Through these planned efforts of data collection in stages, or sequentially, the researcher was able to streamline the data collection process. Also, by collecting the data in stages, the researcher was able to readily identify data that would be deemed most beneficial to the research study. Merriam (2009) advises that "gathering data is a systematic procedure that evolves from the topic of inquiry itself" (p. 150). It is also suggested by Merriam (2009) that when judging the value of a data source, "a researcher can ask whether it

contains information or insights relevant to the research question and whether it can be acquired in a reasonably practical yet systemic manner” (p. 153).

Of the initial 268 students who received the on-line Survey Monkey invitation, 35 of the electronic invitations were returned as undeliverable and ten students opted out of the research study. Sixty-two students responded to the on-line Survey Monkey invitation and they were required to provide demographic information (age, ethnicity, gender, and student status, religious/theological/metaphysical affiliation,) to ensure that the researcher had a diverse participant pool. Of the 62 respondents, 10 elected to not complete the on-line survey questionnaire in its entirety thus deeming them ineligible. Of the 52 remaining, only 47 met all eligibility criteria.

These 47 potential participants were offered a \$5.00 cafeteria meal card as compensation for their time and also, as a means of thanking them for their contribution to the research effort. The meal card provided a place for the researcher’s signature and also required that the participants’ name be provided. This also aided in the audit trail as students were required to sign for the meal cards upon retrieval and the corresponding meal card number was assigned to each name and logged as received. The Higher Educational Research Institute’s National Study of College Student’s Search for Meaning and Purpose (2010) emphasized the importance of compensating student participants for their time and involvement with the research being conducted and also provided comparable monetary compensation. Patton (2002) suggests that “the interviewee is usually getting paid” (413). Compensation, however, does not have to solely be in the form of monetary payment.

Focus Group Discussion

From the 47 eligible, completed survey respondents, 25 were invited to take part in a guided focus group discussion. These 25 participants provided the most divergent responses with regard to age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and their own personal definition of spirituality. Of the 25 invited to take part in the focus group, ten responded with interest.

Merriam cites Macnaghten and Myers (2004, p. 65) who believe that “focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives – but don’t” (2009, p. 94).

Patton also provides the following in terms of defining a focus group:

It is not a problem-solving session. It is not a decision making group. It is not primarily a discussion...it is an interview. The twist is, in a focus group participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say (p. 386).

From the original ten focus group participants, one student phoned the researcher on the morning of the focus group and shared that he had been involved in an automobile accident and would not be able to attend. The researcher wished him well and encouraged him to continue his educational journey. The other student was out of town and asked if he could participate via speaker phone or Skype. Because this was not provided in either of the IRB’s submitted and approved by National Louis University and the research site institution respectively, the invitation to the out of town would-be student participant had to be rescinded.

In an effort to establish the comfort level necessary to conduct this type of research, and to ensure that participants’ personal views along with the integrity of the research was not compromised, only those directly involved in the research study (e.g., researcher and participants) were allowed in the room reserved for the purpose of the guided focus group discussion. The focus group discussion took place on the campus of the research site institution in a reserved secured room which required key-code access. The room had no windows and the

researcher arranged the tables in board room style. There was no head of the table as the researcher wanted to convey a message of equal partnership with the research participants establishing a symbiotic relationship whereby the researcher benefitted from the information gleaned, and the participants benefitted in this forum which allowed them to share and tell their very own personal story of community college graduates' educational persistence.

On the day of the scheduled guided-focus-group discussion, seven of the eight scheduled research participants arrived for the session. Prior to the beginning of the focus group, the researcher announced general housekeeping rules as it related to the tape-recorded conversation, the openness, honesty, and respect necessary for rich and robust discussion, the required informed consent, and the \$10.00 compensation to be paid to each focus group participant upon the conclusion of the guided focus group discussion. The researcher also made it clear that there was no authority figure or expert on spirituality and that no response, statement, or opinion would, nor could, be judged by anyone in the room as absolutely right or wrong. The participants agreed and the focus group discussion began. Approximately ten minutes into the focus group discussion, the missing eighth participant arrived late. While this was initially set up to be a closed-door discussion, the participants unanimously agreed that the additional participant be invited into the running discussion. The researcher gave the focus group participants ownership over the discussion thus empowering them to be more open and free to tell their stories.

The researcher asked members of the guided focus group discussion the guided research questions along with the interview questions, or sub-questions. A copy of the Guiding Focus Group Discussion/Interview Questions Matrix is included in Appendix D. From their responses, it was evident that participants wanted to share their experiences as it related to spirituality and

community college students' educational persistence. Throughout the course of the discussion there were resounding affirmative vocalizations, nodding of heads, laughs, and stirring moments of absolute silence as respondents focused deeply entrenched in the words that flowed from their fellow participants' mouths. Through the course of the conversation and based on the responses from both guiding and interview questions posed, the focus group participants came up with their own definition of spirituality as it relates to community college graduates' persistence which is as follows:

Spirituality is greater than any organized religion. It is the driving force that allows you to keep going in spite of. It is the belief in God and the driving force that is faith which motivates you and encourages you to continue. It is the acceptance of His will for your life and in spite of the many obstacles that come, it is the confidence that God will get you to graduation and in knowing this, it allows you to seeing yourself "walking across that stage!"

In that room not only was spirituality defined, but also stories were told, relationships were created, commonalities were established, and much needed hope and encouragement, for some participants, were provided. In fact, focus group research participants collected phone numbers and even asked if the researcher could come back for a "Part II". Upon the conclusion of the focus group discussion, each of the eight participants was given \$10.00 as compensation for their time, as well as a personal hand-written thank you note mailed to their home address.

While capturing the audio tape recording of the guided focus group discussion, the researcher took additional precautionary measure. In addition to a micro-cassette tape-recorder, the researcher used the Livescribe smart pen along with the voice recording device located on the researcher's personal Blackberry Smartphone. Through the use of multiple audio recording devices, the researcher was assured that several efforts to record the focus group discussion accurately were taken. Patton (2002) reminds that "...some method of keeping track of what is observed must be established" (p. 309). Patton (2002) also cautions qualitative researchers from

absolving themselves of note-taking as “the use of a tape recorder does not eliminate the need for taking notes, but does allow you to concentrate on taking strategic and focused notes, rather than attempting verbatim notes” (p. 383). Notes taken by the researcher reflected those variables more tangential to the central factors addressed in the study, but clear and distinct factors, nonetheless such as seat selection and/or arrangement, how participants entered the room, demeanor during the discussion, time of day, weather, and lack of windows for utmost privacy, and overall mood upon the conclusion of the focus group and exit of participants.

The researcher contracted with a professional transcriptionist whose role and function was to capture a written record of the conversations and statements from focus group participants as if in real time so that the discussion could be translated into written records. The transcriptionist was critical in assisting the researcher in documenting the focus group forum along with the face-to-face interviews. Through audio recording along with the aid of a transcriptionist, the researcher was better positioned to be actively involved as a facilitator conducting the research and interviews and not concerned with capturing the event, at that moment in time, in its entirety. Rather than distracting the participant(s) with a frantically moving hand taking copious notes, the researcher was able to engage in the discussion vis-à-vis non-verbal gestures of smiles, nods, uh-hum’s and laughter when appropriate. Additionally, the researcher believed that the eye contact made between the researcher and the participants was essential to the truth and honesty necessary for this research endeavor.

The participants trusted the researcher and the research environment, including the other participants. They felt safe enough to tell their stories and based on comments provided by each participant, they were not ashamed of their respective religious and/or spiritual opinions and beliefs as their individual definitions of spirituality and the relationship to their educational

persistence were as uniquely different as each focus group discussion participant. Copies of audio and written responses will be kept secured in a locked file cabinet belonging to the researcher for no fewer than five years and deemed highly confidential. Participants will have access to the data collected (interview transcription, written field notes, survey results and audio recordings) along with any data relative to their individual responses upon their request at any given time for no fewer than five years, in accordance with the standards of National Louis University.

It was presumed by the researcher that 45 minutes to one hour would be more than sufficient time for the purpose of the focus group; however, the discussion exceeded the time allotted for this purpose. The entire focus group discussion lasted one hour and twenty-six minutes and even after the tape(s) stopped rolling, participants continued their personal conversations, both group and individually, with other participants. As with the on-line survey portion of the research study, the majority of the focus group discussion participants informed the researcher that their personal interest, more so than monetary compensation, was their incentive to participate. This concluded the second phase of the data collection process for the research to be conducted.

Face-to-Face Interviews

After reviewing the transcripts of the focus group session, three of the focus group members were selected for individual face-to-face interviews. An effort was made to select participants with highly divergent ages, genders, ethnic backgrounds, religious beliefs, and responses regarding spiritual beliefs, and definitions of spirituality. When the researcher contacted the three participants selected for face-to-face interviews, immediately, two of three participants asked about the room where the focus group took place. Interview participants made

comments about the energy in the room used for the focus group discussion saying that they shared a positive experience in that location and would be very comfortable speaking more in depth to the researcher in that particular space. As with the guided focus group discussion, face-to-face interviews were audio tape-recorded; however, to convey a more intimate and personal setting, the researcher did not take any hand-written notes but did create a personal reflective journal after the individual meetings in an effort to capture the importance of the face-to-face interview conversations with participants. During the actual interview, however, the researcher's focus and attention was solely on the research participants and the stories they told.

Interview participants were asked specifically about their responses to the initial on-line survey questionnaire, their experience as a participant in the guided focus group discussion, and presented with both guided research and interview questions. As these questions were open ended, face-to-face participants were allowed to elaborate in greater detail with regard to their responses to the research questions posed in addition to shedding more light on their experience in on-line survey questionnaire as well as the guided focus group discussion.

One of the three face-to-face interview participants was an African-American male, age 25, who began his educational journey at a four-year university, but as a result of his academic under-achievement, he had to start over at a community college. He shared that he had come from a family of successful college graduates who now had lucrative careers as medical doctors, pharmacists, and attorneys. His failure at the university level was seen as an embarrassment to both him and his family. He viewed his community college graduation as redemption and because of his past, is now wholly committed to his education. He claims that this experience made him humble and enhanced his spirituality as it drew him closer to God.

The second of the three participants selected for face-to-face interview was a White female, 41 who, on her deathbed, as she lay in waiting for a double lung transplant, shared with the researcher that she promised God if she lived; she would complete her Bachelor's degree. As a parent of teenager (at the time), she could only think that should she die during surgery, what type of educational example would she leave for her son? She even stated that if it took her another twenty years to complete her bachelors' degree, she promised the Lord and committed her life to finishing her education.

The third of the three selected for face-to-face interview was a 47-year-old African-American woman who also faced death but not in a hospital bed, but on the battlefield where she served in the United States military during the Iraqi War. She now suffers from post traumatic stress disorder and credits God with not only keeping her alive on the battle field, but also guiding her in her educational journey as He (God) serves as the driving force in her continuing her education so that she can help other veterans, like herself, continue their education.

In addition to a handwritten thank you note, each of the face-to-face interviewees received a \$25.00 gift card to be used at a national retail store. Transcribed record of the face-to-face interview was also offered to interview participants in addition to their initial monetary compensation. This was done as a gesture of goodwill and in appreciation for their time and their contributions to this research effort. Patton (2002) found it to be very much appreciated by participants when they received copies of their interviews and this gesture "increased the depth of responses as they were speaking not just to me, the interviewer..." (p. 414).

The basic principle informing these exchanges is reciprocity. Participants in research provide us with something of great value, their stories and their perspectives on their world. We show them that we value what they give us by offering something in exchange (p. 415).

The researcher conducted member checks with both guided focus group discussion members as well as face-to-face interview participants, referring back to the respondents to ensure their interpretation of responses is accurate. Merriam (2009, p. 217) refers to this as *respondent validation*:

...the idea here is that you solicit feedback on your emerging findings from some of the people that you interviewed. This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed (Maxwell, 2005, p. 11, as cited in Merriam, 2009).

Instrumentation and Interview Questions

To begin the initial examination of the relationship between spirituality and community college graduates who persist and matriculate to the four-year institution the researcher designed and created an on-line survey instrument. As affirmed by Leedy and Ormrod (2010), survey research involves acquiring information from a group of people – their characteristics, opinions, attitudes and previous experiences through asking them questions and tabulating their answers (p. 187). The on-line survey questionnaire was administered to 268 students in total with the purpose of identifying community college graduates who were currently enrolled a minimum of six semester hours at the selected research site selected. The on-line survey instrument had a total of twenty-two questions with several sub-questions and presented statements where participants were to indicate via a Likert scale “strong agreement”, “agreement”, “indifference”, “disagreement”, or “strong disagreement” to each statement.

Leedy and Ormrod (2010) support this type of varying language by suggesting that a rating scale (or Likert scale) is more useful when a behavior, attitude, or other phenomenon of interest needs to be evaluated on a continuum of, say, “inadequate” to “excellent,” “never” to “always,” or “strongly disapprove” to “strongly approve” (p. 189). Leedy and Ormrod (2010)

also believe that survey instruments are simple in design; however, conducting survey research is not as easy as it may appear to be, nor does it make the process of conducting research any less rigorous. The survey instrument did, however, assist the researcher in drawing basic descriptive statistics and allowed the researcher to then summarize participant responses with percentages and frequency counts to draw inferences (Leedy and Ormrod, 2010).

Merriam (2009) purports that in qualitative research data collection, the focus group is an interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge of the topic and that the data obtained from a focus group is socially constructed within the interaction of the group. It is suggested by Merriam (2009) that “the key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions” (p. 95). The researcher referred to the information gathered from the initial on-line survey instrument in an effort to solicit additional responses designed to generate robust and hearty discussion during the guided focus group activity as well as the face-to-face interview component of the research study. The researcher presented the guided researcher and interview questions in a way that would solicit responses to the questions of (1), “*who exists?*”, (2), “*who or what is in charge (man in the natural or a supernatural power)?*”, and (3), “*what is the purpose of the existence?*” (Speck, 2005). According to Speck (2005), the wording or phrasing of questions is a crucial consideration in extracting the type of information desired (p. 95).

Chapter Summary

This study examined the relationship between community college graduates’ spirituality and their persistence at the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. During the course of the study the researcher examined the lesser studied area of spirituality in terms of how students come to make meaning. The researcher asked the following overarching question as the basis for all research conducted in the study: What is the relationship between spirituality and college

persistence among Illinois community college students who not only graduate, but matriculate to four-year institutions?

The researcher elected to conduct a qualitative case study design. For the purpose of the study, Fowler's (1981) spirituality theory and the context of making meaning provided the theoretical framework for the research conducted. In order to answer the research questions, the researcher employed Speck's (2005) conceptual framework to address the issues of (1), "*who exists?*", (2), "*who or what is in charge (man in the natural or a supernatural power)?*", and (3), "*what is the purpose of the existence?*". In addition, Vincent Tinto's (1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005) theory of student departure was used to examine student persistence.

A copy of the researcher's proposed methodology was reviewed by a panel of experts in the field including the researcher's Dissertation Chair and the Institutional Research and Review Boards at both National Louis University and the research site institution, respectively. A pilot study was conducted with eight community college graduates (17% of the actual research participant population of 47 sampled) currently pursuing baccalaureate studies at the research site institution.

Each component of the research was carried out in stages, or sequentially with the on-line Survey Monkey questionnaires being distributed first, guided focus group discussion held second, and face-to-face interviews conducted last. The research study was advertised at the selected research campus. It was the intent of the researcher to recruit no fewer than 200 potential research participants. The researcher exceeded the original recruitment number having recruited 268 potential participants for research purposes. From the 268 potential participants identified, having received the Survey Monkey invitation, 62 students responded and/or partially responded. Of this number, 52 students fully completed the survey and from this number, forty-

seven eligible student participants remained. Forty-seven students were given an on-line survey questionnaire and asked questions about, but not limited to, the following: age, gender, and ethnicity, belief in a God or a higher being, and religious/theological/metaphysical affiliation. Additionally, research participants were also asked to provide their own definition of spirituality.

Twenty-five of the most diverse student respondents were invited to take part in a guided focus group discussion and from this number, eight of the invited respondents participated. Out of the eight guided focus group discussion participants, three stood out as they had the most fascinating stories to tell as it related to spirituality and community college students' persistence and because of such, they were selected by the researcher for the purpose of face-to-face interviews.

Data collected during all three phases of the research study were coded by participants' age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation / non-religious affiliation, and definition of spirituality. The researcher also reviewed the data gathered from both individual and group responses from the online Survey Monkey questionnaire, audio recordings, transcriptions provided by the guided focus group exercise, individual face-to-face interviews, memoing conducted throughout the data collection process and a personal reflective journal. With these combined data, the researcher was able to visualize connections as well as create correlations based on participants' responses. The researcher believes these results will crystallize recurring patterns, emerging themes, and valid conclusions on spirituality and educational persistence. Additionally, this particular study will provide three significant contributions to the field of community college research as it will (a), add to the current but very limited body of scholarly research devoted solely to community college students and spirituality, and it will (b), provide an additional lens by which student affairs practitioners can enhance the development of community

college students holistically, thus enhancing the overall retention, graduation, and matriculation rates of this student population. Lastly, (c), this research also furnishes examples of the numerous definitions of spirituality not only in higher education literature, but also spirituality as defined by the research participants and its' relationship to their educational persistence.

Jarrell (2009) created a diagram which shows each step of the research approach employed during the course of her doctoral study. The researcher adapted Jarrell's (2009) model and modified it to reflect the research approach utilized for this research study. A diagram illustrating the data collection process is provided in Appendix E.

The following chapter provides a description of the data analysis along with the research findings of the study conducted. It reflects all responses as given by the research participants and provides data to support the existence of the relationship between spirituality and community college graduates who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Sometimes people get the mistaken notion that spirituality is a separate department of life—the penthouse of existence. But rightly understood, it is a vital awareness that pervades all realms of our being. David Steindl-Rast

Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed account of the findings from the research study derived from an on-line Survey Monkey questionnaire, a guided focus group discussion, and open-ended face-to-face interview questions. The primary purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between spirituality and educational persistence of community college graduates who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. The ambiguous and elusive topic of spirituality was defined by research participants during each stage of the data collection process. Additionally, participants were asked to explain the role that spirituality played in their own educational persistence.

The researcher identified some initial a priori themes based largely on those reoccurring in the literature on spirituality and persistence respectively (e.g., faith, making meaning, religion, God, Higher Power, self, motivation, retention/graduation, etc...). However, the researcher remained open to the discovery of additional emerging themes which surfaced during the course of the data collection and analysis derived from each research participants' varying response(s). Germane to the findings of the research is the discovery of how community college graduates defined spirituality, in their own terms. The researcher sorted participants' interpretations of spirituality based on common words used by participants such as God, religion, faith, church, self, man, Lord, Savior, Him, Higher Power, driving force, Jesus, purpose, motivation, voice, support, guidance, journey, and strength. Each word or term and the frequency in which it was used during the on-line survey questionnaires, guided focus group discussion, and face-to-face

interview process was coded and assigned a point value based on the number of times used by each participant both individually, and collectively. Through the effective use of triangulation – on-line surveys, the guided focus group discussion, and face-to-face interviews, the researcher was able to compare and cross-check data (Merriam, 2009). However, Merriam (2009) further purports that in postmodern research, “we do not *triangulate*; we *crystallize*. We recognize that there are far more than three sides from which to approach the world” (Richardson, 2000, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 934).

Crystals exhibit “an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of response – no triangulation but rather crystallization” (Richardson, in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963).

These measures of crystallization also help to ensure validity and reliability.

Additionally, it established recurring themes and patterns in subject responses that help to unify both quantitative and qualitative research findings gleaned from various components of the research; from the survey stage through oral interviews portion of the process. The researcher created initial codes from the themes that emerged through data compilation, review, and analysis. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) coding is analysis and it may take the form of reviewing field notes, transcribed or synthesized, dissecting them meaningfully while keeping the relationship of the parts intact. They refer to this as the “stuff of analysis” (p. 56).

Codes are tags or labels for assigning information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to “chunks” of varying size—words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting (p. 56).

The findings in this chapter are discussed in three sections: Initial responses from the on-line Survey Monkey questionnaire are shared, participants’ own individual definition of spirituality provided, and relevant data collected from this stage of the research study are

presented in both chart and table formation. The second stage of the research findings involves identifying emerging, reoccurring, and undiscovered themes gleaned from the guided focus group discussion along with the focus group participants' collaborative definition of spirituality as it relates to educational persistence. The third and final stage of the research involves the identification of those occurring themes which appeared as constants during the open-ended face-to-face interviews and throughout each phase of the research study in its entirety. These constants allowed the researcher to analyze the data collected through each stage of the research which also provided uncovered emergent themes which support the existence of a relationship between spirituality and community college graduates' persistence at the baccalaureate degree-granting institution.

On-line Survey Questionnaire

Two hundred and sixty-eight potential research participants received an invitation to an on-line survey created with the use of Survey Monkey on-line web tools and data hosting software. Students were required to provide demographic information such as their age, ethnicity, gender, student status, religious/theological/metaphysical affiliation, eligibility criteria, etc. They were also asked questions about their belief in God or a Higher Power (or lack thereof) along with their belief in spirituality. Additionally, each participant was required to provide a definition of spirituality in his or her own words. The researcher believed providing this definition was an important component in the discovery of certain themes. Furthermore, the researcher believed it to be significantly important to the discovery of themes based on certain demographic and definitional information so questions regarding gender, age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and participants' own definition of spirituality were essential in the data collection process. Additionally, this type of initial data supported the researcher's concerted efforts

towards purposeful sampling, which in turn, would yield a most diversified research participant pool.

From the initial 268 participants, 35 of the electronic surveys sent to e-mail addresses provided were returned undeliverable. Ten students opted out of the research study in its entirety. Sixty-two potential research participants responded to the on-line Survey Monkey invitation; however, 10 of these chose not to provide the very relevant demographic information necessary to derive themes based on participants' responses and some only provided partial responses thus making them ineligible for participation in the research being conducted. Of the 52 students remaining, 47 met all eligibility criteria which required that all eligible participants be community college graduates currently enrolled at the research site institution for a minimum of six semester hours during the spring 2011 term. Table 1 provides the age range, gender, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation and spirituality definition for each of the 47 on-line Survey Monkey participants.

Table 1. Demographic Information Derived from On-line Surveys

*Names not used	Age Range	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Religious Affiliation	Spirituality Definition
Participant 1	18-24	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	Having faith in God or a Higher Power.
Participant 2	18-24	Female	White / Non-Hispanic	Non-Denominational	Spirituality includes believing in God, praying to him, and reading the Bible. It is believing without seeing. Walking with God every day.
Participant 3	35-44	Female	White / Non-Hispanic	Raised Lutheran but studying Buddhism	Something that can be religious or come from a state of religion but can come from within.
Participant 4	18-24	Female	Other	Muslim	Sense of feelings towards something spiritual.
Participant 5	25-34	Male	White / Non-Hispanic	Catholic	Beliving in spirits.

Participant 6	45-54	Female		Non-Denominational	I define spirituality as who you really are. Your inner being.
Participant 7	35-44	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	The belief in a Higher Power not of this earth.
Participant 8	18-24	Male	Hispanic	Non-Denominational	To me spirituality is a concern for that which is unseen and intangible, as opposed to a physical or mundane.
Participant 9	35-44	Male	African American / Non-Hispanic	None	An intimate journey one takes in order to find and understand the connection to a greater reality, be it nature, a higher being, or humanity as a whole, etc.
Participant 10	45-54	Female	Other	Other / Inclusive	The acknowledging of practicing of the essence of who I am.
Participant 11	35-44	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	Spirituality to me is your religion.
Participant 12	25-34	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	Spirituality is believing in God and knowing that he died for our sins and if we are true believers we should worship and praise him according to his word.
Participant 13	35-44	Female	White / Non-Hispanic	Lutheran	Being connected to the world and everything that surrounds you and it.
Participant 14	35-44	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Non-Denominational	Spirituality is the belief in a Higher Power. Not necessarily organized religion.
Participant 15	35-44	Male	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	An inner strength.
Participant 16	35-44	Male	African American / Non-Hispanic	Non-Denominational	All mankind has been created in the image of God (Genesis Ch. 1:26-28). We are a three-part being (Spirit, Soul, Body). GOD is a three-part being (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) I am connected to God Spiritually through His SON/ JESUS. Through Prayer, Meditation on scripture (BIBLE/GOD's WORD) and personal experiences with HIM that cannot be denied(In HIS Presence) I find myself in pursuit of Goals that will please

					Him. (Building His House, Adding to His Kingdom, Being Who He created to BE) Unfortunately most of mankind is spiritually dead because of SIN. This is a problem that can't be denied. This disconnection causes us to pursue our own pleasures, choices, decisions, whether right or wrong. The yield is a life produced in the darkness of Sin instead of in the Light of GOD's Presence. HIS PRESENCE CHANGES EVERYTHING!!! (out of time not out of words).
Participant 17	35-44	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	A faith that is not seen yet its known.
Participant 18	35-44	Female	Hispanic	Non-Denominational	Knowing that there is a Higher Power other than ones' self.
Participant 19	25-34	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Pentecostal	I would define spirituality as the belief in a higher being then yourself.
Participant 20	18-24	Female	Hispanic	Non-Denominational	Spirituality is the transcendence beyond materialism, and the body. It is the connection that you can find with your soul in order to reach peace, love and much more.
Participant 21	25-34	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Other / Christian	Spirituality, in my opinion, is feeling something deep in your soul that you follow and seek whenever you feel the need to.
Participant 22	25-34	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Non-Denominational	Spirituality is a connection felt between yourself and a Higher Power. It is the awareness that a whole universe exists beyond our current lifetime. Spirituality is an inner peace that can be felt and not seen.
Participant 23	25-34	Male	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	Belief in God and Jesus our Lord and savior.
Participant 24	25-34	Female	Hispanic	Catholic	Believing in a Higher Power guiding you through life.

Participant 25	25-34	Female	White / Non- Hispanic	Non- Denominational	I have a personal walk with the Lord. I believe in him wholeheartedly that He is the True God. I believe in the trinity Jesus is the Father, Jesus is the Son, and Jesus is the Holy Spirit. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.
Participant 27	35-44	Female	White / Non- Hispanic	Other / Pagan-like	My spirituality is about energy, the universe, nature, and using that energy to bring what you need to yourself, also for protection and healing.
Participant 28	35-44	Female	African American / Non- Hispanic	Pentecostal	Spirituality is the base of my reality. Spirituality is the inner being the lives on the inside of me. My relationship with God is included in my spirituality. Prayer, communication with God, praise to God, are also a part of my Spirituality. The acceptance of God's son Jesus Christ is a part of my spirituality. I believe that he was crucified for all sin and rose again and is coming back for the believers. One of the most important part of my spirituality is I believe in the gift of the holy ghost, the comforter who came when Jesus went back to be with his father. The Holy Ghost leads and directs me, instructs me, keeps me. My spirituality gave me the strength to go back to college after 20 years, and will continue to be my strength as I continue on to achieve my bachelors May 2012, and masters 2013!
Participant 29	25-34	Female	African American / Non- Hispanic	Pentecostal	Spirituality to mean is to have and actively participate in a deep relationship with a Higher Power. That Higher Power for me is God whom I reach by magnifying his son Jesus. For me, it is also about gaining wisdom and applying what you have learned to your life so that you can reach others and allow a light to shine through you.

Participant 30	25-34	Male	Asian or Pacific Islander / American Indian or Alaskan Native	Lutheran	Belief in something higher.
Participant 31	25-34	Male	African American / Non-Hispanic	Non-Denominational	Spirituality is connecting with God beyond the natural realm. It is understanding that there is a Force that even man cannot explain in words or figure out mathematically.
Participant 32	45-54	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	When your mind is on God and everything you see around you reminds you of him and you talk to him and about him constantly.
Participant 33	45-54	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Pentecostal / Bible Believing	Having the belief of the spirit of God; the father, the son, and the holy ghost. That his son Jesus died for my sins.
Participant 34	55 and beyond	Male	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	Fear God and keep his commandments. Belief in a Higher Power, not man or objects. Something unknown to our five senses. To seek and understand why we were put here to and to satisfy what purpose.
Participant 35	35-44	Male	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	Having Faith in God...knowing that there is more to life than the physical realm.
Participant 36	25-34	Male	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	An ultimate or immaterial reality.
Participant 37	25-34	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	Believes all things are possible.
Participant 38	35-44	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	The belief in something elevates your person to a higher being or purpose in life.
Participant 39	45-54	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Pentecostal	Spirituality is the relationship that you have with God that is through fellowship. To fellowship is to acknowledge the existence, read the Bible, pray, and mediate. Operate in faith and relinquish the negative

					motive or to a more positive one.
Participant 40	45-54	Male	White / Non-Hispanic	Catholic	To have a conviction from within.
Participant 41	18-24	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	Spirituality is connected to a Higher Power. It is knowing that there is a higher being that controls everything you do.
Participant 42	25-34	Male	African American / Non-Hispanic	Agnostic	I believe that people are spiritual if they believe in a Higher Power.
Participant 43	45-54	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Baptist	Being in touch with the fact that a Higher Power is at hand.
Participant 44	45-54	Female	White / Non-Hispanic	Other / Meseanic Jew	Believing in God and Jesus
Participant 45	45-54	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Non-Denominational	A personal relationship with God the father, the son, and the holy spirit.
Participant 46	25-34	Female	African American / Non-Hispanic	Undecided	Spirituality to me means having a relationship with God or the "Higher Power"...anyone can attend and say they belong to a religion.
Participant 47	35-44	Female	White / Non-Hispanic	Lutheran	Spirituality is inner strength which provides motivation within myself to continue to have faith that God will continue to carry me through the hard times in life. This spirit keeps the passion growing for new challenges and glows brighter when I am overwhelmed with life's challenges.

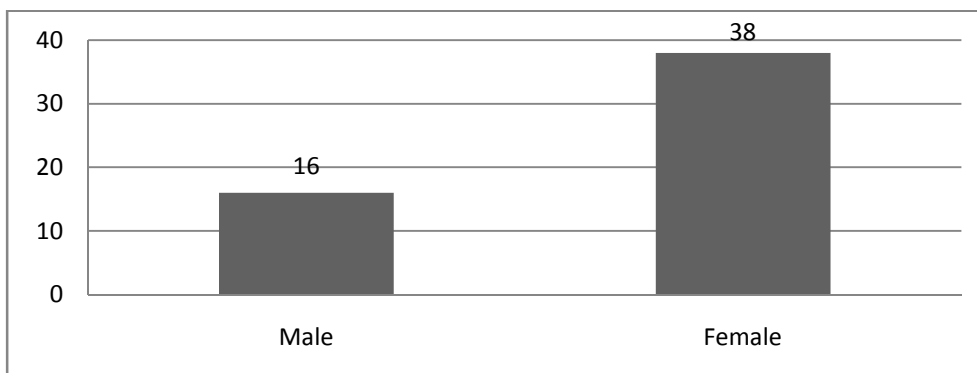
Note. The demographic information provided above is reflective of On-line Survey Participant Responses.

Participants and Exclusion Criteria

Gender

Of the 54 students who responded to this question, 16 were male and 38 were female giving the researcher a total of 54 potential research participants (See Figure 1).

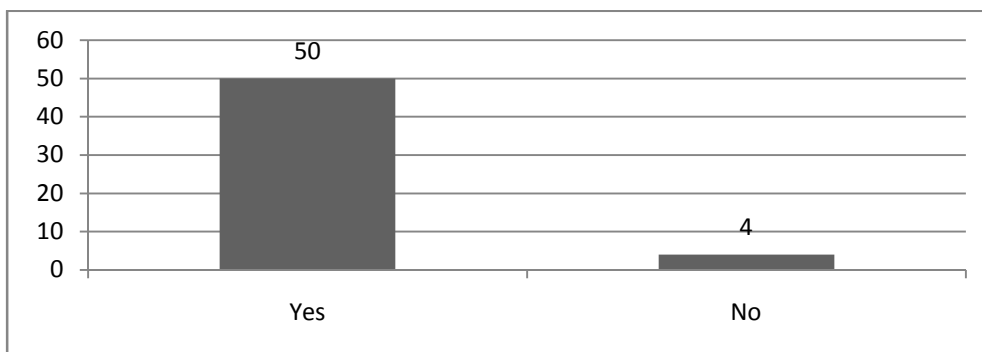
Figure 1. Breakdown of number of research participants by sex.



Enrollment Criteria

Of the 54 students who responded to this question, 50 were enrolled a minimum of six hours for the spring 2011 term and four were not, thus reducing the total to 50 potential research participants (See Figure 2).

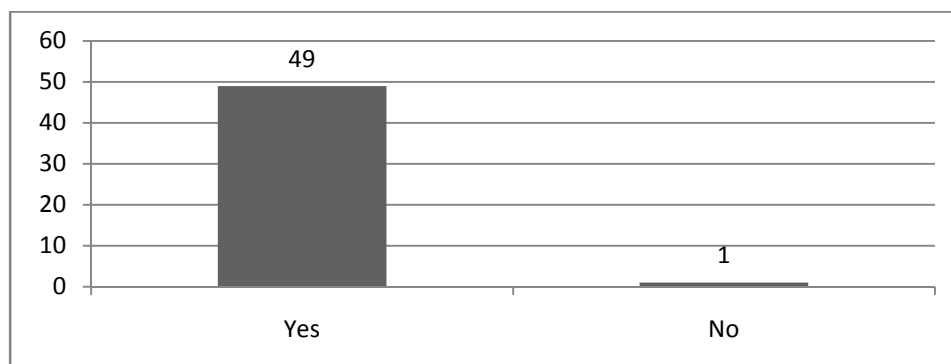
Figure 2. Depiction of enrollment criteria for participation in project. “Yes” reflects number of participants eligible for inclusion into study. “No” reflects number of participants subject to exclusion criteria.



Graduation Status

Of the 50 students who responded to this question 49 identified themselves as community college graduates and one did not, thus leaving the researcher with 49 potential research participants (See Figure 3).

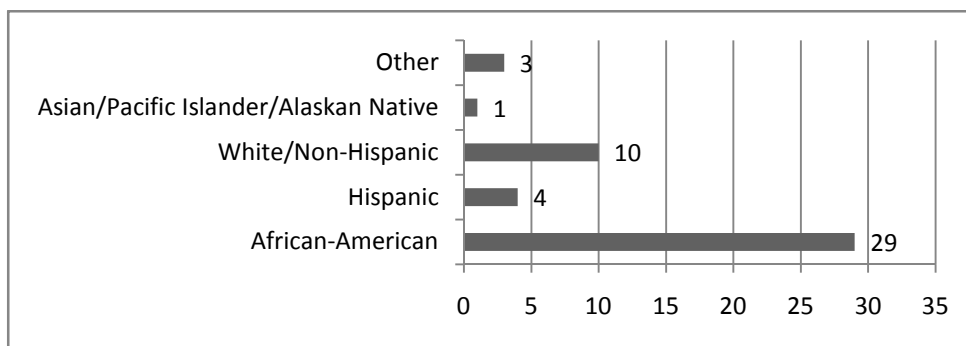
Figure 3. Graduation status of recruits. “Yes” indicates number of eligible participants identifying themselves as community college graduates, and “No” indicates number of subjects excluded from participation as result of lacking community college graduate status.



Race and Ethnicity

Of the 47 students who responded to this question, 29 were African American, four were Hispanic, 10 were White/Non-Hispanic, one was an Asian/Pacific Islander/Alaskan Native, and three identified themselves as Other (See Figure 4).

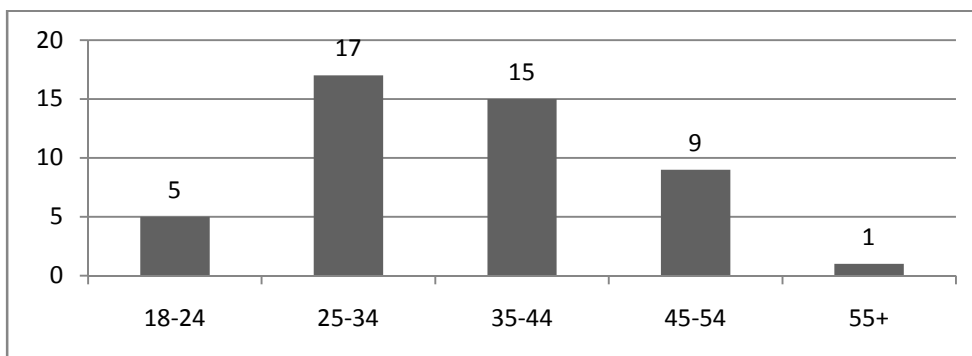
Figure 4. Breakdown of number of participants by self-identified racial/ethnic identity.



Age

Of the remaining 48 students who responded to this question, five were age 18 – 24, 17 were age 25 – 34, 15 were age 35 – 44, nine were age 45 – 54, and one fell into the 55 and beyond category (See Figure 5).

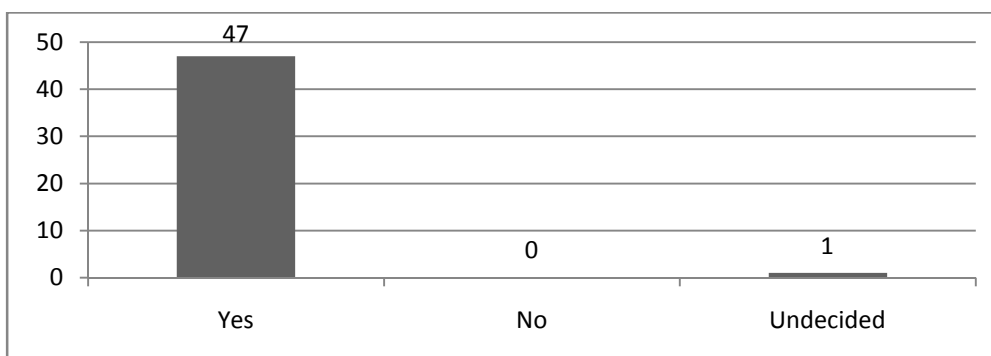
Figure 5. Breakdown of number of participants by self-identified age category.



Belief in God or a Higher Power

Of the 48 students who responded to this question, all responded as having belief in God or a Higher Power although one student did submit two responses to this question as s/he also selected undecided (See Figure 6). However, it is important to note a significant limitation of the project, in that none of the research participants responded as having no belief in God or a Higher Power.

Figure 6. Breakdown of number of prospective participants by self-identified religious affiliation status. “Yes” indicates some belief in a God/Higher Power, “No” indicates no belief in a God/Higher Power, and “Undecided” indicates expressed uncertainty regarding the belief in a God/Higher Power. **However, one participant indicated both yes and undecided.*



Coding and Classification of Terms

The researcher closely examined the definitions of spirituality provided by each of the 47 on-line Survey Monkey questionnaire participants. From these definitions the researcher established additional a priori themes based on those words or phrases participants frequently used to define spirituality. The researcher identified the number of times these specific words and/or phrases were used by participants and assigned a numeric point value (or weight) to each word and/or phrase. The point value assignment was coded with numbers by range beginning with 10 (ten) assigned to the word and/or phrase used most often and subsequent numbers (e.g., 9, 8, 7, etc..) used thereafter, based on a lesser frequency of use by research participants.

Table 2 provides a detailed list of terms by frequency of use.

Table 2. Frequency of Verbiage Used in Spirituality Definitions Derived from On-line Surveys

Word or Phrase	Number of Times Used	Weight Assigned
Faith	5	5
God	26	10
Prayer/Praying	3	3
Bible	3	3
Him	8	6
Belief/Believing	13	7
Religion	3	3
Knowing	4	4
Within	3	3
Higher Power	13	7
Journey	1	1
Inner	5	5
Personal	3	3
Connection	4	4
Relationship	5	5
Strength	5	5
Soul	4	4
Holy Spirit	2	2

Presence	3	3
Peace	2	2
Feeling	4	4
Understanding	1	1
Lord	3	3
Force	1	1
Son (Jesus)	23	9
Universe	2	2
Myself/Me	14	8
Body	2	2
Continue	4	4
Guide/Guiding	2	2
Life	8	6
Purpose	2	2
Energy, Earth, Nature	1	1
Walk	2	2
Man/Mankind	4	4
Motivation	1	1
Challenge/Hard Times	3	3
Communication/Talk	2	2

Note. “Number of Times Used” reflects the frequency in which the listed terms appeared in participants’ on-line definitions of spirituality. “Weight Assigned” is a weighted value assigned to terms used by participants. Higher weighted value numbers indicate higher frequency of usage of that terminology.

Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes

After reviewing the definitions provided by the 47 research participants, the researcher reviewed the weighted values assigned to each of the themes derived from students’ own definition of spirituality. From these weighted codes, the researcher was able to establish four emerging themes: 1.) God, 2.) Me / Myself, 3.) Belief, Believing, and Faith, and 4.) Relationship. Additionally, thirty-three sub-themes categorized by relevance were aligned with the four

identified emerging themes. Table 3 provides a detailed breakdown of themes and sub-themes found in the definition analysis.

Table 3. Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes Identified in Spirituality Definitions

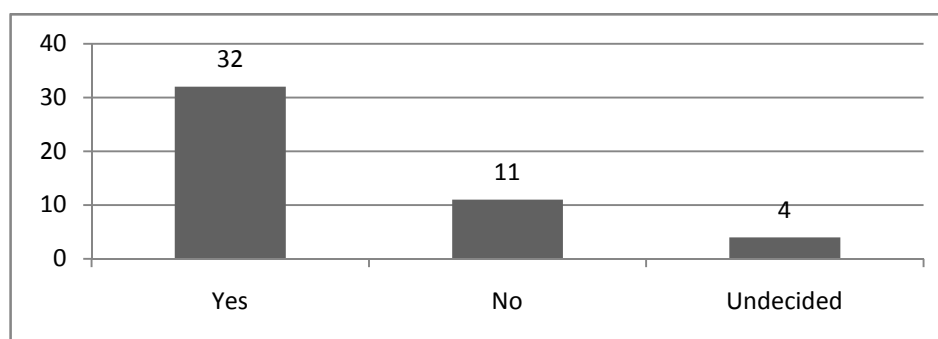
Emerging Themes	Sub-Themes
God	Him, Higher Power, Holy Spirit, Lord, Jesus/Son
Me/Myself	Inner, Personal, Body, Soul, Life, Within, Man/Mankind, Universe
Relationship	Connection, Presence, Peace, Continue, Energy/Earth/Nature, Strength, Walk
Belief/Believing/Faith	Bible, Religion, Prayer/Praying, Knowing, Understanding, Knowing, Feeling, Guide/Guiding, Journey, Purpose, Motivation, Force, Challenge

Note. “Themes” indicate major categories of overarching themes derived from spirituality definition surveys. Sub-themes are classified by relevance into categories under existing major themes.

Religiosity

When asked if they were “religious people”, of the 47 research study respondents, 32 responded yes, 11 said no, and the remaining four were undecided (see Figure 7).

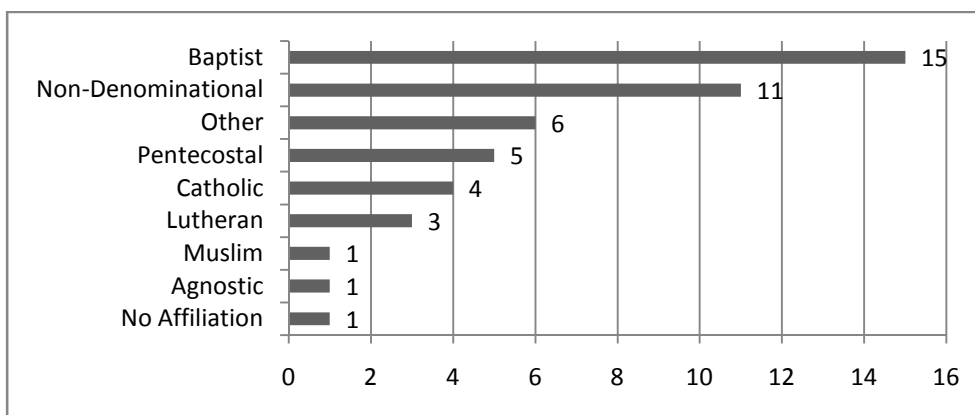
Figure 7. Breakdown of religiosity self-reported in surveys. Responses indicated answer to question “Are you a religious person.”



Religious Affiliation

Of the 47 research participants, all 47 provided the following in terms of their religious affiliation: 15 were Baptist, four were Catholic, five were Pentecostal, three were Lutherans, 11 were Non-Denominational, one was Muslim, one was Agnostic, one responded as having no religious affiliation whatsoever, and six responded as “other.” (see Figure 8).

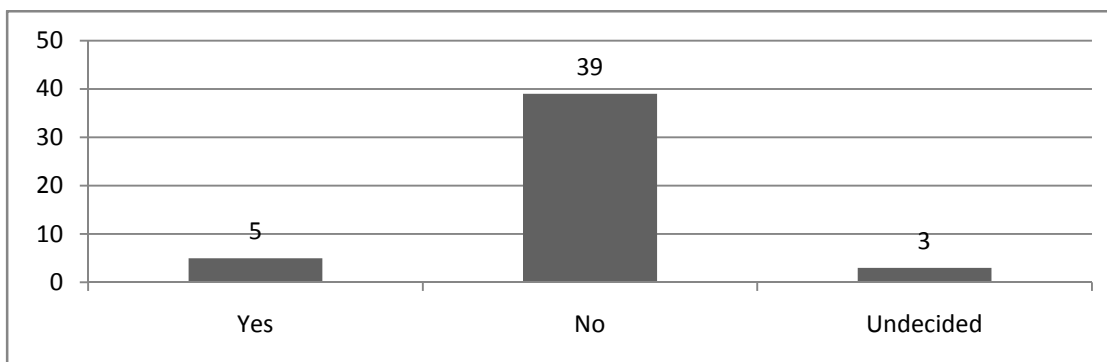
Figure 8. Participant self-reported religious affiliation.



Religion and Spirituality

When asked if one had to be a religious person in order to be a spiritual person, of the forty-seven research study participants, five said yes, 39 said no, and three were undecided (see Figure 9).

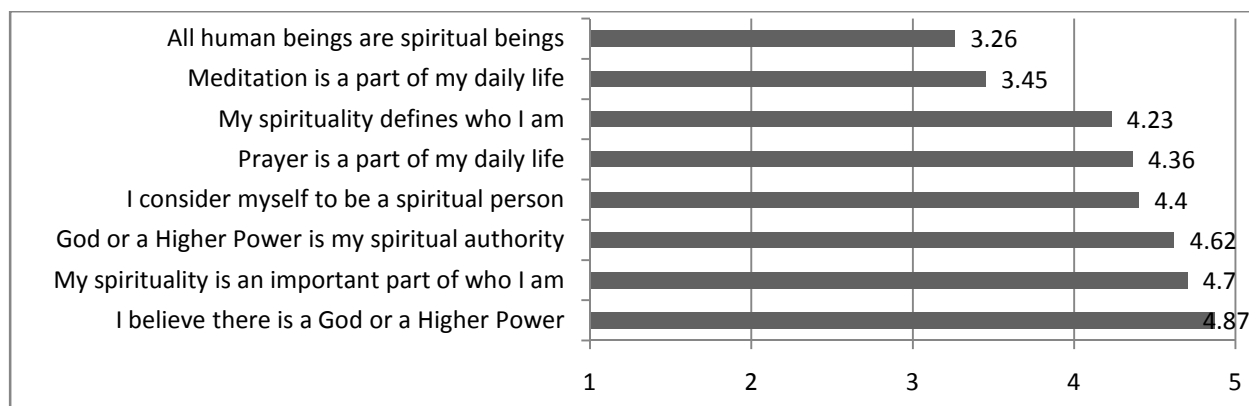
Figure 9. Religion and spirituality response. Figure indicates number of participants responding to the question “Does one have to be a religious person in order to be a spiritual person?”



Spirituality Responses

When asked to provide responses to various questions regarding spirituality as it relates to others, participants' own spirituality, belief in God or a Higher Power, and the role of spirituality in their lives, the forty-seven research participants provided the following Likert scale responses in terms of majority: 14 (29.8%) disagreed that all human beings were spiritual beings, 23 (48.9%) agreed themselves to be spiritual beings, 41 (87.2%) strongly agreed that there was a God or a Higher Power, 37 (78.7%) strongly agreed that in terms of their spirituality, God or the Higher Power is the authority, 21 (51.1%) strongly agreed that their spirituality defined who they were, 28 (59.5%) strongly agreed that prayer was a part of their daily life, and 15 (31.9%) agreed that meditation was a part of their daily life (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Selected frequencies of response to a number of questions regarding spirituality. Figure indicates average level of agreement with each statement on a 1-5 Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

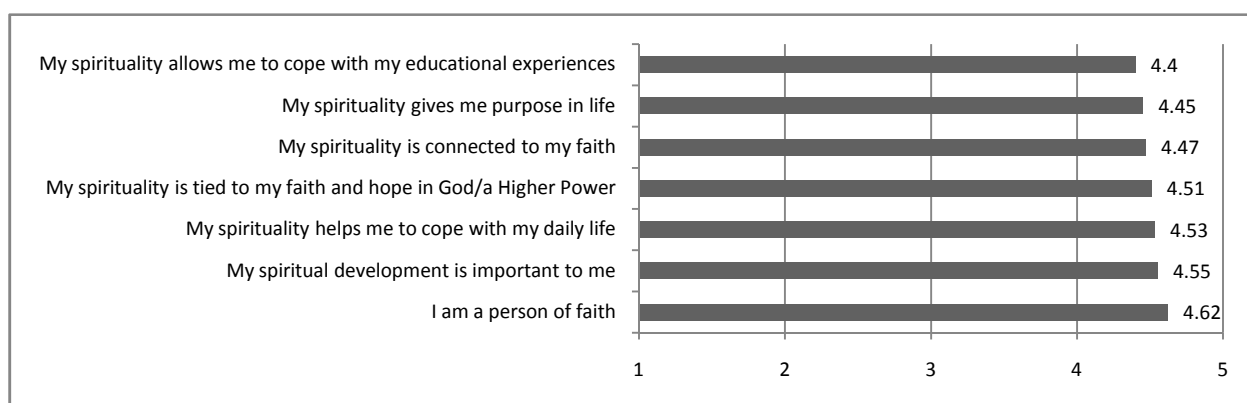


Making Meaning

When asked to provide responses to various questions regarding spirituality as it relates to their educational journey, the 47 research participants provided the following Likert scale responses in terms of majority: 30 (63.8%) strongly believe themselves to be a person of faith, 28

(59.6%) strongly agreed that their spirituality is connected to their faith, 30 (63.8%) strongly agreed that their spirituality helped them to cope with their daily life, 27 (57.4%) strongly agreed that their spirituality helped them to cope with their educational experiences, 31 (66%) strongly agreed that their spirituality was tied to their faith and hope in God or a Higher Power, and twenty-nine (61.7%) strongly agreed that their spiritual development was important to them. In addition, see Figure 11 for a depiction of Likert scale responses to a number of questions regarding “making meaning” on the spirituality survey.

Figure 11. Selected frequencies of response to a number of questions regarding the “making meaning” component of the spirituality survey. Figure indicates average level of agreement with each statement on a 1-5 Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

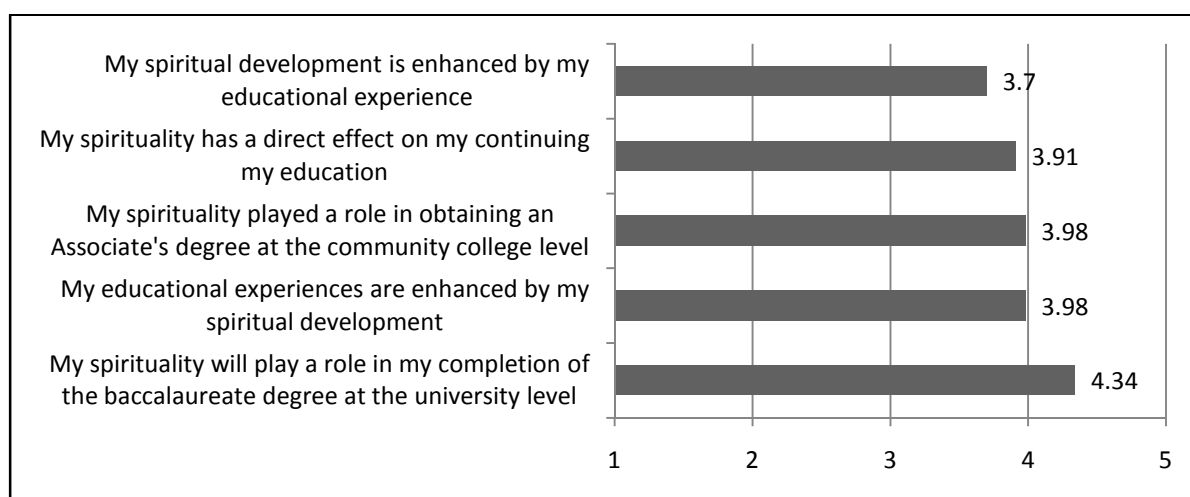


Spirituality and Educational Persistence

When asked to provide responses to various questions regarding spirituality as it relates to their educational journey, the 47 research participants provided the following Likert scale responses in terms of majority: 17 participants (36.2%) agreed that their spiritual development was enhanced by their educational experience, 19 participants (40.4%) strongly agreed that their educational experiences were enhanced by their spiritual development, 22 participants (46.8%) strongly agreed that their spirituality had a direct affect on their continuing their education, 20 participants (42.6%) strongly agreed that their spirituality played a role in their having obtained

an Associate's degree, and 29 participants (61.7%) strongly agreed that their spirituality would play a role in their completion of their baccalaureate degree at the university level. Furthermore, depictions of Likert scale responses to the "educational persistence" component of the spirituality survey are depicted in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Selected frequencies of response to a number of questions regarding the "educational persistence" component of the spirituality survey. Figure indicates average level of agreement with each statement on a 1-5 Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).



Focus Group Discussion

From the 47 eligible completed survey respondents, 25 were invited to take part in a guided focus group discussion. These 25 survey participants provided the most divergent responses with regard to age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and their own personal definition of spirituality. Of the 25 who received this invitation, 10 responded with interest and eight ultimately participated in the guided focus group discussion. From the original 10 focus group participants invited, eight actually participated. Table 4 provides general demographic information on the guided focus group discussion participants.

Table 4. Demographic Characteristics of Guided Focus Group Discussion Participants with Accompanying Spirituality Definitions

Name	Age Range	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Religious Affiliation	Spirituality Definition
Participant 1	45-54	F	AA	Pentecostal	Spirituality is the relationship that you have with God that is through fellowship. To fellowship is to acknowledge the existence, read the bible, pray, meditate, operate in faith and relinquish the negative motive over to a more positive one.
Participant 2	18-24	F	AA	Baptist	Spirituality is being connected to a Higher Power. It knowing that there is a higher being that controls everything around you.
Participant 3	45-54	F	AA	Pentecostal / <i>*Bible believing</i>	Having the belief of the spirit of God: the father, son, and holy ghost. That his son Jesus died for my sins.
Participant 4	25-34	M	AA	Non-Denominational	Spirituality is connecting with God beyond the natural realm. It is an understanding that there is a force that even man cannot explain in words or figure out mathematically.
Participant 5	45-54	F	Other	Other / <i>*Inclusive</i>	The acknowledging and practicing of the essence of who I am.
Participant 6	35-44	F	W	Lutheran	Spirituality is inner strength which provides motivation within myself to continue to have faith that God will continue to carry me through the hard times in life. This spirit keeps the passion growing for new challenges and glows brighter when I am overwhelmed with life's challenges.
Participant 7	35-44	F	AA	Pentecostal	Spirituality is the base of my reality. Spirituality is the inner being that lives on the inside of me. My relationship with God is included in my spirituality. Prayer, communication with

					God, praise to God, are also a part of my Spirituality. The acceptance of God's son Jesus Christ is a part of my strength as I continue on to achieve my Bachelor's degree in May 2012, and masters 2013!
Participant 8	25-34	F	AA	Other	Spirituality is the base of my reality. Spirituality is the inner being that lives on the inside of me. My relationship with God is included in my spirituality. Prayer, communication with God, praise to God, are also a part of my Spirituality. The acceptance of God's son Jesus Christ is a part of my daily life.

Note. The demographic information provided above is reflective of guided focus group participants' responses.

The guided focus group discussion was conducted in a secured room on the campus of the selected research site institution. The room had no windows and provided optimum privacy and discretion. Additionally, this room required key-code access, preventing unauthorized interruption of the discussion. Although the group was comprised of seven female and one male participant, their ages, religious affiliations, race/ethnicity, and definitions of spirituality were very diverse. It should also be duly noted that of the eight focus group participants, none indicated compensation as a motivation for their participation. Participants either participated because of their interaction with the researcher while visiting the research site institution, faculty referral, or out of their own personal feelings of curiosity about spirituality and the research being conducted.

The researcher began the discussion going over general housekeeping rules as they related to respect for each other's opinion and informing the participants about the purpose of the

meeting. The researcher stated that the intent of this meeting was to provide respondents with an opportunity to come together to discuss, in further detail, their initial responses from the on-line Survey Monkey questionnaire. The researcher also indicated that this type of discussion was designed to further stimulate participants' thinking about their initial responses through talking to other research participants. It was also stated that this venue gave participants the opportunity to hear other participants' responses and positions to the research questions posed. The guided focus group discussion was structured so that they might feed off of one another and encourage a more hearty and robust discussion on the topic of spirituality and educational persistence.

The researcher shared with the group that they were each selected as a result of their responses to the initial on-line survey questionnaire. Spirituality means something different to each individual person and there was something unique about what they each said. The researcher established a very user-friendly environment informing participants that this was indeed their discussion and her role was to solely facilitate.

Research Question 1: How is spirituality defined by community college students who persist?

The focus group discussion began with the overarching research question: What is the relationship between spirituality and college persistence among Illinois community college students who not only graduate, but matriculate to four-year institutions? The researcher, after having asked the group to think about that question for a minute or so, asked the group more specifically, "what is spirituality?" Immediately, Participant 1 responded with, "It's that inner guidance...that voice that will compel you to reach higher -- to go further." Participant 1 believed that spirituality was often her sole source of support that enabled her to do these things. She shared with the group the following:

As for me, I received my Associate's degree back in '97. However it's taken me this long because I had to overcome a lot of obstacles -- family, emotional, even mental living conditions -- you know, to get to this point. And at a time I think I would have given up, it was that small inner voice that says, "You know what? You've got to keep going." You got to keep pushing. And it was that very thing -- my spiritual life and existence -- that guided me to this point (Participant 1, personal communication, June 15, 2011).

Participant 2 echoed Participant 1's sentiment but spoke of spirituality as a motivating factor in persistence.

...spirituality is that inner motivation definitely, as you (Participant 1) were saying, because your inner motivation lets you believe within your whole heart and your whole soul and mind that you can be the best that you want to be. Whatever you want to do, you can do it, regardless of whatever is going on in your life or regardless of what people may think of you or how people may view you in society by you just going to a community college. Your inner spirituality, it just allows you to say, "You know what? I'm going to do what I have to do to better myself (Participant 2, personal communication, 2011)!"

Participant 7 believed that her spirituality was her life but in addition to serving as a motivational factor, her spirituality provided her with a source of strength. According to Participant 7, "...spirituality is who I am and I would not be who I am at all if it wasn't for God in my life." Participant 7 was divorced and the sole provider for her own biological children as well as foster children. She claims to have been inspired by a motivational speaker who visited her church. According to Participant 7, the speaker was at the top of her field at a private Illinois university, and the words of the speaker motivated her (Participant 7) to return to school.

For some of the focus group participants, their definition of spirituality was directly connected with their religion and/or religious practices. However, the majority of the group voiced a clear delineation between the two. Participant 2 spoke of the division created by religious denomination and dogma. She also believed spirituality in terms of it being larger than religion:

God is a spirit. And that's how He talks to us, through our spirit, you know. And He corrects and fixes things and also tests those things in our physical lives along with the people who are around us. Now, religion, that's really something that I have been

thinking a lot about lately because I'm a part of a gospel singing group and we go to different churches in different denominations. And, you know, we have been in all types of churches – Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Lutheran...and when you get to a certain type of church, you expect the people of that denomination to act a certain kind of way. This really bothers me because I feel like if we're all Christians then we're all serving the same God, right? Are we really expected to behave a certain way because our religious affiliation says Baptist, or Catholic, or Methodist? That is something that my church has been struggling with -- and I see it. And sometimes it really hurts me and it makes me cry because I feel that God wouldn't want us to be so divided. So, yes, religion and spirituality are two different things. And I'd definitely believe that spirituality is greater than religion (Participant 2, personal communication, 2011).

Participant 3 also made a clear demarcation between spirituality and religion and provided the group with the following:

Well, to me -- you know, you may have your own opinion, but to me, religion means to do it over and over again. But with spirituality, you're seeking to hear the word of God. It no longer becomes going to a certain church, practicing certain things. You're really listening for a word from God...something specifically for you. And, correct me if I'm wrong, have there been times when you've gone to the church, and God spoke exactly what you needed to hear (Participant 3, personal communication, 2011)?

Participant 5 echoed the sentiments of many of the other focus group discussion participants in terms of defining spirituality from the relationship aspect; however, she also provided an undiscovered notion of spirituality not addressed in the body of literature perused for this research study nor, identified by the researcher in terms of a priori codes and themes. This notion of spirituality involved gender identification, or a male or female categorization being assigned to God or Higher Power. According to participant 5, spirituality is relational but religion (in terms of organized hierarchical religious institutions) is simply codification of the laws of the dominant power structure and this resulted in gender identification being assigned to God or a Higher Power.

Participant 4, like Participant 5, spoke of spirituality from another very different vantage point that had not been identified by the researcher in the literature reviewed for this study, nor through her own creation of a priori themes and codes. According to Participant 4, his

spirituality was symbiotic with humility. For this participant, God is in control and is viewed as the absolute Higher Power and he willingly surrenders to His will.

During the course of the focus group discussion, eight community college graduates students created their own definition of spirituality and educational persistence that the researcher summarized and read aloud in their presence:

Acceptance of His will for your life, in spite of when you're at a place that you never thought you would be because it wasn't part of your life's navigational system. In spite of the struggle, even when the very road and the continuous pseudo practice of going here and there is not doing it for you; you know it's not about the worship building or the worship service; in spite of war zones and the myriad issues that you have to deal with as a parent, a mom, a soldier, a student, life-altering changes, in spite of near-death illnesses, in spite of the children, in spite of the changes in terms of what the family thought you should, or could, or might have been, and even in spite of grades in those classes where we were not as successful as we wish we would have been, we still accept His will for our life because you know, in spite of it all, you see yourself graduating with a Bachelor's degree – walking across that stage (Participants 1 – 8, personal communication, 2011).

Research Question 2: For community college students who persist, how do they come to make meaning of their educational journey?

Focus group Discussion participants claimed that they were able to “make sense of it all” (e.g., life, school, purpose, meaning, obstacles, etc.) because of their spiritual connection and relationship with God or a Higher Power. They claimed this relationship to be very personal – liken to that of “me and God or a Higher Power, against the world.” For the greater majority of the focus group discussion participants, spirituality was intrinsically tied to their motivation to persist in their educational studies. They often referred to God or a Higher Power speaking to them or “hearing a word from Him”. They believed that this communication with God or a Higher Power created an interactive relationship between themselves, their spirituality, and God or a Higher Power. They fully acknowledged God or the Higher Power as the authority and in this trichotomous relationship, self, spirituality, and God or the Higher Power was linked with their walk (way in which they behaved, functioned, and interacted with others), their daily life,

and essential to their existence as this relationship is a continuum – far above and beyond their educational experiences and pursuits. They looked to spirituality for not only guidance, and motivation but also, a much needed source of sustenance.

...that's what it means to me, spirituality. When you have a connection with God and you believe in God, you know? Whatever you are about to go through, He's going to take care of you, and you're going to hear a word from Him. I no longer sought a certain religion. It's who is feeding my soul (Participant 3, personal communication, 2011).

Participant 3 believed that when one practices spirituality, as opposed to religion, one is able to arrive at a place where one is able to have a true relationship and connection with God and because of this relationship she was also able to accept that this was His will for her life. She understood that there would be struggles and problems but because of her faith and connection with the Lord, she believed that despite these things, all would be well.

Although all of the focus group participants claimed themselves to be spiritual beings, the majority of them did not believe that all people were spiritual. Participant 3 however, provided a different perspective.

I think that all people -- I believe that all people are spiritual. I think that's the thing that connects us all. And I also think that that's one of the things that we don't recognize -- that we are spiritual beings. My personal belief is that God is spirit. And without God, there could not be. And I believe that God lives in all of us. And, again, we just don't recognize that. We were created to be in His image and His likeness. But, again, there are times to where I believe that there's so much that's going on in the lives of people to where we just have not come into the awareness and the knowledge (Participant 3, personal communication, 2011).

Participant 5 believed that human beings communicate spirit-to-spirit and further suggested that we misinterpret the spirit of God in limiting our spiritual connection to gender specificity, particularly, the male/female perspective. She believed that because God is a spirit, we reference Him as "He" but there are those who describe God as being "Mother God" just as others reference Him as "Father God." In viewing God as a spirit opposed to God being

identified by gender, she claims to make meaning in her ability to see the full glory, abundance, kindness, and love in the world and this keeps her going. Participant 5 also referenced the Bible as referring to “God as love” and questioned that, because love is without boundary, how one could relegate an omnipotent and omniscient power to male and female terminology. For Participant 5, specific religious and denominational descriptors did not apply.

In addition to how focus group participants viewed the world, students spoke to how they were able to better understand their life-course. They saw God or a Higher Power as providing support, instructions and directions for their life – telling them what to do and where to go. Participant 4 claims to seek the Lord for direction in every aspect of his life and even shared with the group that he gives all credit to God for his Associate’s degree completion and connects his spirituality with his faith in God. For this participant, God is in control and he willingly surrenders as he views God as the absolute authority.

I pray to God about everything. I even prayed to God even before I came here. I said, God, please help me to communicate with everybody so that they are able to understand how important my spirituality is to me. Spirituality has helped me to be humble. It has helped me to realize that I need to do the things that God has told me to do. And if I do that, then I will prosper. He’s still given me another chance to succeed so it's because of that, I can't prosper in college without spirituality -- it's helped me in so many ways. (Participant 4, personal communication, 2011).

All of the focus group discussion participants spoke to the obstacles, trials, tribulations, and insurmountable challenges faced but many referenced their faith as being a conduit to God or a Higher Power. According to these students, their faith allowed them to better understand life accepting both the good with the bad as this was all a part of their journey. For these students, the journey was also a part of God or the Higher Power’s divine purpose for their lives.

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between spirituality and community college student persistence?

When the members of the group were asked how their spirituality their educational persistence, they spoke of spirituality as the driving force behind their ability to continue. Participant 7 said that when her body is tired, her spirit tells her to continue. Participant 6 claimed that there was a direct correlation between her spirituality and her persistence stating that with the personal attacks on her body and just life's issues, without Him, she would not have made it. She gives herself no credit for her academic successes thus far and attributes it all to her relationship and faith in God.

When the group was asked if they could do college without God, they unanimously said, "no." They shared that their spirituality sustains them, keeps, them, and allows them to continue their education in spite of the obstacles, stumbling blocks, and hurdles of not only baccalaureate studies, but also, life. Participant 3 further provided the following:

When my flesh doesn't want to do homework or study or whatever, the spirit speaks to me and says, you've got to do this! You were assigned this! No matter how hard it may seem, even in uncharted territory, learning something for the first time, you're going to get through this (Participant 3 personal communication, 2011)!

Participant 8 believed that despite the myriad obstacles that could have impeded her educational pursuits, she could hear the voice of God in the back of her head. She claims that without Him, she would not have been able to continue and His voice and His presence in her life gave her the will to persevere.

For many of the students who participated in the focus group discussion, their re-entry into higher education was not immediate. Although Participants 2 and 4 entered post-secondary education as traditional-aged students matriculating immediately upon high school graduation, this is, by far, the exception, and not the rule for most community college graduates. For both

Participant 1 and Participant 6, it took more than a decade for them to begin pursuit of a baccalaureate degree and Participant 7 stated that even after being motivated to return, it still took her an additional two years to enter the community college where she received her Associate's degree.

All of the focus group participants acknowledged the presence of God or a Higher Power in their lives and spoke of the presence as a relationship, a connection, a "walk" with the Lord and being able to talk with Him and/or hear His voice. They also believed that the presence of God or a Higher Power provided a guiding force in their decision making and strongly influenced their decisions to not only remain in school, but also the strength, motivation, inspiration, and courage to finish. In spite of the delay in starting, Participant 7 completed her Associate's degree in a year and a half and is already entertaining thoughts of pursuing coursework at the graduate degree level. According to Participant 7, "she heard the right things because she was in the right place because God placed her there and this motivated her to begin her post-secondary educational pursuits." She admitted openly to the group that she had her share of challenges with her health, her children, and with various other things. However, Participant 7 firmly believed that in spite of the aforementioned obstacles, God gives her strength. "I lean on Him and not myself for strength -- that I am able to continue on with school, and in two semesters, I'll be done!"

Participant 4's story, although entering post-secondary education immediately upon high school graduation, was uniquely different from the seven other members of the group. Participant 4 started out having been admitted to a competitive Chicago-area university but was, unfortunately, unsuccessful in this endeavor, and as a result had to begin his academic career again at the community college level. He views his spiritual connection with God as having

allowed him a second chance, or redemption. For him, God is the leader and the guider and has an ever-present role in his life.

...and I attribute that to the Lord because I constantly pray for words to say. You know, I pray for things to do. I pray for even the small stuff...God, please help me to drive here safely; God, please help me to study hard; please give me the energy to study. And He always delivers at the right time, at the right place. So, you know, I just pray. And there's no way that I can do without Him for even one single second. Not just one single day, but not even a single second (Participant 4, personal communication, June 15, 2011).

Participant 1 summarized the connection of her spirituality to her educational experience by stating that for her, spirituality “kicks in” when she experiences self-defined “weakness” and allows her to continue even when she wants to give up. The focus group participants all agreed that their spirituality helped them to stay focused as it provided clear direction, instruction, a path to follow, and allowed them to see the end result of the journey – graduation at the baccalaureate level. Students also attributed their receipt of financial aid monies to cover their cost of attendance to their spirituality and their faith in God. Many in the group shared stories of harsh economic struggle, single parenting, and a long history of challenges with academic achievement and poor performance. They all believed that God, even more than their own family and friends, provided them with their sole support for academic pursuit. Despite insurmountable obstacles, guided focus group participants believed, stated, and agreed that their being enrolled at the university, at this particular time in their lives, was divinely ordered and part of the plan that God had for them.

Students metaphorically described their academic experience as it related to their spirituality and educational persistence to that of a car without gas. Spirituality was the fuel that kept them going. Without their connection to God, they described themselves as running on empty and believed, like a car, they would have long since stopped. For this group of students, spirituality ran parallel with their educational persistence and Participant 4 even provided

scriptural passage to support their position. “Jesus says in the book of Job that He is the vine, and we are the branches; and apart from Him, we can do nothing.”

Sub-Themes and Discovery

After having listened to the tapes and having conducted a thorough review of the transcription of the focus group discussion, the researcher grouped the themes into three separate coding categories: God or Higher Power, Self, and Purpose. In doing so, the researcher was able to discover the sub-themes attached to each of these to the aforementioned codes. Additionally, the researcher discovered three additional themes, which were as follows:

Man / Mankind, Gender Assignment, and Challenges faced by research participants. Table 5 reflects those re-occurring themes, those discovered, and sub-themes for both.

Table 5. Emerging Themes, Recurring Themes, Discovered Themes and Sub-Themes

Emerging Re-Occurring Themes	Sub-Themes	Discovery	Sub-Themes
God	Faith, Knowing, Prayer / Praying / Praise, Meditation, Bible, Him Belief / Believing, Religion, Higher Power, Soul, Holy Spirit, Jesus, Lord, Son (Jesus), Force, Presence, Acknowledging, Fellowship, Control, Scripture, Positive, Motive	Man / Mankind	Energy, Earth, Nature, Universe, Beyond the Natural, Lack of Understanding
Self Me / Myself	Inner, Personal, Feeling, Body, Walk, Communication / Talk, Relationship, Connection, Life, Within, Overwhelmed, Essence of who I am, Reality, Acceptance, Flesh, God’s Plan	Gender Assignment	“Father God”, “Mother God”, “Him”, “He”, Or “His”, Male / Female Terminology
Purpose	Journey, Strength, Peace, Understanding, Continue, Guide / Guiding, Motivation, Divine Order, Achieve	Challenges	Obstacles, Stumbling Blocks, Hard Times, Humility, Family, Physical Health, Mental / Emotional Instability,

			Financial Means, Weakness / Tiredness / Fatigue, Struggle, Desire to “give up”, Unchartered Territories, Lack of academic success
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Note. The above-listed themes are derived from information gathered in both on-line questionnaires and the guided focus group discussion.

Face-to-Face Interviews

Although each of the eight guided focus group participants told fascinating stories about their spirituality and how they came to make meaning of their educational experience, there were three participants who were uniquely different from the others and because of such, they were selected to take part in the face-to-face interview portion of the research study. Two of the face-to-face participants asked the researcher if it was at all possible to meet in the room where the guided focus group discussion took place and because of limited scheduling during that time at the research site institution, two of the three interviews took place in the room requested. The final interview took place in a secured, private conference room in the Student Affairs suite. The three participants selected for the purpose of face-to-face interviews were assigned pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

As with the guided focus group discussion, the researcher had multiple methods of recording the audio of the participants' spoken words; however, the researcher did not take any hand-written notes and shared with the interview participants that she would not be doing so. The researcher felt it important to clearly communicate to the interview participants that their stories being told in a more intimate setting merited the researcher's undivided attention. The researcher made constant eye contact with the interview participants and made a conscious effort to convey through non-verbal gestures of focused looks, a nodding head of agreement, and

occasional smiles and laughs where appropriate, that she was connecting with them both in-person and verbally. This connection was evident as face-to-face interview participants went into much more personal detail with their stories of spirituality and educational persistence. This gesture of pure interest on the part of the researcher made the interviews with the participants more conversational and as a result, yielded rich and robust stories. However, the researcher did keep a personal reflective journal of her interaction with face-to-face participants which helped to connect the actual physical interview experience with the transcription of the conversation in absence of hand-written notes.

Eric

The first participant interviewed was Eric. Eric is a twenty-six year old African-American male who comes from a family of accomplished professionals, many of whom currently practice medicine and/or work as licensed pharmacists. This, as he shared, was to be his lot in life also and for him, academics have never presented much in the way of a struggle. Prior to high school graduation Eric was admitted into a competitive Chicago-area university. He shared with the researcher that he never studied and for the most part, took his educational experience for granted.

I came from a background where, you know, studying wasn't important to me because I didn't have to do it. And I didn't realize that until I got to college -- actually until I got to my second college. Before that I went to the university and I was one to always go off the cuff, you know, always just trying to do things at the last minute and I realized, after I flunked out, that wasn't going to work for me anymore. It was humbling having to go to a community college after that but my spirituality has helped me to be humble. It has helped me to realize that I need to do the things that God has told me to do. And, if I do that, then I will prosper. He's shown me in many different ways. There are times where I've said, "Nah, come on... I don't need to do that -- that way." And yet, God has still forgiven me and He's still given me another chance to succeed. So it's because of that, I just feel so fortunate to have another opportunity because I know that I can't prosper in college without my spirituality which connects me to the Lord. My spirituality has helped me in so many ways...(Eric, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Eric, Research Question 1: How is spirituality defined by community college students who persist?

When Eric was asked by the researcher to define spirituality, he opined as follows:

Well, spirituality involves a relationship with God. It involves you realizing that there's a higher self, that there's someone that is beyond you, there's someone that is looking out for you and that is guiding your every step. Spirituality exceeds, of course, the physical senses of sight, smell, hear, or touch. It's something that can't be explained. It's something that is very... you know... it's there, but you can't put your finger or you can't really explain it in words. It's just there (Eric, personal communication, July 23, 2011).

Eric informed the researcher that his spirituality was very important to him and without it, he wouldn't be here. When asked by the researcher to specify, "what is here?", Eric stated the following:

...In school, at my job, at home, anywhere, just being alive in general. Spirituality is a driving force for me to really live. And there's a difference between existing and living. Existing involves you're just being there physically. And, again, we talk about the physical senses. But spirituality is more -- you're not only existing, but you sense everything that's around you, including the things that you really can't explain in words or you can't touch with your hands. It's something that is -- it's just there. And you know it's moving you (Eric, personal communication, July 23, 2011).

Eric believed that spirituality was an awareness of the presence of a Higher Power which guides you every step of the way and he also believed that all people were spiritual beings but suggested that many are unaware.

All people are spiritual beings. However, there are those that really don't sense their spirituality. They don't embrace spirituality as they should. There are those that just want to live logically. They want to live by everything that they touch, everything that they can see. But spirituality involves faith, which according to the Word in Hebrews 11:1, Faith is the substance of all things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. So we're all spiritual human beings, but there are those that really embrace their spirituality and know that there's something in the air (Eric, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Eric has a strong belief in God or a Higher Power and affirmed that there was an obvious distinction between spirituality and religion. For Eric, spirituality provided him with a

relationship with God and because of this relationship he possesses a broader scope of the world around him. According to Eric, "...although you won't know everything that's around you, you are aware of a presence." For Eric, religion was more routine.

There are people who go to church, and they live in religion. There's nothing spiritual -- there's very little that's spiritual in their walk. It just is there. I know that there's a church building I have to go to. I know I have to do these certain things -- like a practice -- bow and pray and stand and sit -- like going through the motions (Eric, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Eric, Research Question 2: For community college students who persist, how do they come to make meaning of their educational journey?

Eric spoke of spirituality as being relational as "you are willing to put your heart and soul into it and you know that you want to do this because it is the right direction for you." For Eric, spirituality is an intimate part of his daily life. He shared with the researcher that he prays because he wants to commune and fellowship with God and in doing so, he is better able to experience all that God has for him. He referred to God as being the driving force in every aspect of his life and the connection to God is through his faith. Eric believed that his faith and spirituality allowed him to believe in the unseen. For Eric, "spirituality involves just knowing that there's something in the air, something that is driving you, something that is guiding you -- in the right direction." Eric stated that he had humbled himself to God's will for his life and in doing so, his spiritual connection to God allowed him to better understand the plan He had for him. When asked how he came to make meaning through the driving force of faith, Eric providing the following:

...with faith, you know that there's a purpose. You know that you're supposed to do something, and you're supposed to impact certain people. But you don't know with just your natural mind. However, when there's something that is driving you to do something that you really are born with, that you have a gift within you but that needs to be developed, then you understand that there's a purpose -- that you're not just here to make money. You're here to impact people. You're here to be successful. You're here to help

others be successful. And that really is the meaning of life. (Eric, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

For Eric, his educational experience was enhanced by his spirituality and he conveyed this message as he spoke of his first post-secondary educational experience at the university. According to Eric, his family wanted him to pursue pharmacy as this would be a more financially lucrative career. After taking the initial science courses, he failed miserably. Soon after, this lack of academic success was reflected in his other courses and for a brief time, he thought about giving up as opposed to starting over. When he first arrived at the community college, he began with English. His love for language and speaking was further increased by his Communications class and he believes that his spirituality led him to the community college to pursue that major as this is what God intends for him to do.

Eric spoke metaphorically about his relationship with God in terms of finding his purpose as God placed a seed, or purpose, within him and despite the storm, or obstacles, with nourishment, or spirituality, the seed will still come forth and bear fruit:

The seed is able to withstand the storm, particularly when it is developed in a really solid foundation. God placed that seed under good ground and that soil was my family. My family is comprised of, of course, people who are from the medical field. But they understand the importance of education, and they understand the importance of gifts. My grandfather in Cameroon was an economics major and he loved economics. He was in the labor union in Cameroon and he really wanted his kids and his grandkids to know the importance of a good quality education; but also that you use your education to not only make money, but to impact those around you...So there, with that seed implanted by God, the soil that was my family which really helped to surround – you know, surround that seed against all the storms that might have come. And the storms are people that just talked negatively about me and said, “Well, communications isn’t going to be anything.”...”You’re not going to make money in doing that.” And even though people said that, somehow or another, that seed developed in the soil which helped me to realize my gift – Communications. I didn't realize it fully until I went to the community college and even today, I still don't realize it to its fullest extent. But eventually, with more sunlight and with more water of the Word (of God), it will begin to grow into a beautiful harvest (Eric, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Eric went on with the metaphor of the seed and the good, fertile ground stating that as he grows in his faith, his spiritual connection to God increases and like a seed, his spiritual maturation develops roots. According to Eric, no matter what is going on around the seed (obstacles or impediments to growth such as wind, rain, storm, heat, etc.), his spiritual roots allow him to yet withstand.

Eric, Research Question 3: What is the relationship between spirituality and community college student persistence?

When Eric was asked about the relationship with spirituality and educational persistence, he spoke of trials and tribulations and the desire to give up. He openly shared that sometimes school is just tough and in spite of him knowing that communication is a gift that God has placed within him, there were times when it still just becomes too much.

I had to work also and take care of family. So it was really just tough for me. And I had to really rely on spirituality and it helped me realize that I have to be humble. I have to realize that nothing good comes easy... You know, we look at the story of Jesus. In order for us to really receive eternal salvation, he had to pay the hard price of going on the cross. And there are many others in the bible that show that nothing really good comes easy...that eventually you will have to go through trials and persist amongst those trials and this is tested by your faith...I had to realize this with my education. I had to accept that even though I'm doing all this homework and I have to study a lot for tests, I have to rely on Him and persist in my relationship with Him in order to complete my education (Eric, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Eric affirmed that his education is but one of the trials of his life's journey, all of which are designed to fulfill his own unique purpose. He also shared that in his completing his Bachelor's degree he will be able to share with others the story of God planting the seed within him and in doing so, help them to realize that they too have a destination, purpose, and goal.

Susan

The next participant to take part in the face-to-face interview portion of the research study was Susan. Susan was a forty-one year old White/Non-Hispanic woman and she recalled

that during a near-death experience, her only regret in life was not finishing her Bachelor's degree. During the guided focus group discussion Susan told the group that she couldn't expect her son, at the time graduating eighth grade, to understand the impact of not being able to finish what you started unless she finished what she started. Susan spoke very candidly to the researcher about the day she got the call that the lungs for transplant were available. She walked the researcher through every step that she and her husband took, from leaving the house to being rolled down the hospital hallway on the gurney. According to Susan, "I remember telling God that if He gave me a chance to succeed and get this transplant and do what I needed to do and get back on my feet, that I would finish it before my next time around. Now, I'm just twenty-six hours away from finishing and I'm going to do it!" Susan's story of thoughts of baccalaureate degree completion from her deathbed compelled the researcher to invite her to take part in the face-to-face interview portion of the research study.

Susan, Research Question 1: How is spirituality defined by community college students who persist?

When asked to define spirituality, Susan opined the following:

Spirituality, for me, is the driving force that keeps me not only internally happy, but externally. I don't choose to deviate from what I spiritually believe in and that which I've been taught. This keeps me on the straight and narrow to where I try and not take the left turn or the right turn, or worse yet, a wrong turn (Susan, personal communication, June 23, 2001).

Susan shared more intimate details about the day in the hospital. She spoke to me about the surgeon on the cell phone with the medical transport team in the Lear jet which carried her new set of lungs. She talked about the priest who came to pray with her and her family. She also talked about how much she regretted, at that moment in time, not finishing what was important to her – her education. She also shared with me that after the surgery she was in a coma for a month and her belief that, because of God's will, she awakened.

Susan affirmed that she definitely believed in God or a Higher Power and although deeply spiritual herself, she did not believe that all human beings were spiritual and this was also her position while participating in the guided focus group discussion:

As I said in the focus group, the generation today wants to have physical proof. They don't believe in spirituality or faith, because they want to have the instant gratification. They've lived in this instant gratification world of telephones being stuck to their pocket, Facebook, Twitter, Skyping, and texting in kindergarten -- things that we didn't ever have. So because you can't see it, there's doubt...because you can't put your hands on it, to them, it doesn't exist (Susan, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

When asked about the difference between spirituality and religion, Susan made reference to rote practices associated with various religious dogmas and doctrines:

Religion is a faith-based idea where you go to church. You know, you open the Holy Bible or it could be, you know, the Koran. It is whatever religion you are practice. But with spirituality, I don't have to go to church on Sunday, because I've got every day. I have every second of Him. I'm selfish. I may call on Him 50 times in one day. In fact, I've got him on speed dial...I'm weird, because I could be driving down the road or sitting at work, and I speak to God. He's on call 24/7. He's mine and I have a personal relationship with him (Susan, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Susan, Research Question 2: For community college students who persist, how do they come to make meaning of their educational journey?

When I asked Susan how she came to make meaning of life she took in a deep breath and said that she was going to be here – regardless. She indicated her belief that God gives her support, holds her up when she needs it, and also keeps her motivated. She referred to Him as her driver and herself, just a passenger in life. She also talked about countless job opportunities that required a Bachelor's degree for which she was unqualified. Surprisingly, she was not upset by this but in fact, laughed and referred to this as God's way of making sure that she turned out to be what He wanted her to be and finish what He wanted her to finish – her Bachelor's.

For Susan, faith was the conduit to her personal connection with God. According to Susan, “when you put your faith in something, whether it's your marriage, God, your child, your

education, or your goals...you have to believe in them.” She stated that she had a commitment with the Lord so much so that she was able to articulate to Him that she believed in Him. She affirmed her belief in God and stated that even though she couldn’t see Him, when she was at her lowest of the lows, she could feel Him as if He were holding her shoulders. Susan’s spiritual development was also critically important to her as she affirmed that she continually renewed her faith and spirit as this allows God to continue to touch her both inside and out. According to Susan, He fills the void and because of this, she is able to positively affect the lives of others. Susan referred to this as spiritually “paying it forward.”

When Susan was asked about the connection between faith and spirituality, she referenced her near-death experience once again.

You have to have faith in what you can't see. But for spirituality to exist, you do have to let go and say, “You are truly my God – You are!” You have to let go of the inhibitions, the fears and doubts that perhaps He really doesn't exist...you know, the unknowns...that when we do die, you know, do you believe that you're going to go to heaven or hell or in between and linger? To me, if you have true faith, you know you're going to go to heaven because no matter how bad you are, if you ask God for forgiveness on your death bed -- and let me tell you, I asked Him for a lot of forgiveness on my true death bed, He’s going to be there. For me, God was there the whole time (Susan, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Challenge is not foreign to Susan as she disclosed during the interview that she was a teenage mom. She believed that because of her faith, even then, she has been able to overcome.

...it was as if God slapped me in the head and said, “You have now a life lesson.” And let me tell you, without God -- and I thank God every day for my son because honestly, I would not have been so determined, for 20 years, to get my degree finished. I'm going on 20 years now but I'm going to do it. It doesn't matter if it's one class a semester or 12 credit hours like last semester, plus three for portfolios, 15 credit hours, which was insane, working full-time, being a wife, a mom...But He puts stepping stones in front of us which stops us for a minute and gives us a chance to look at the whole picture – from start to finish...from the day that -- He knew my path before I was even created, before I was even in my mother's womb, God knew I would have these journeys. And even when I step out of line, He’s going to bring me back (Susan, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Susan, Research Question 3: What is the relationship between spirituality and community college student persistence?

Susan suggested to the researcher that finishing was synonymous was completion and in order for her to complete, she'd have to persist.

I won't give up. I won't lose faith in myself, because God won't lose faith in me. God makes me be held accountable for the promises that I made to him. Even if it is one class a year, one class, I just -- I don't want to be a liar. I made Him a promise so if I start lying to Him, how's He going to believe me when I truly need Him? And He knows when I call on Him, that it really is something -- it's not just trivial... that's not what He's there for. And, to me, He's the one that -- God, meaning "He" is God -- He's the one that makes me be accountable to everyone. That's how it is...I could have had an abortion. I could have made so many other choices in life but God sustains me and makes me be held accountable for my actions -- not anybody else -- nobody. Because I am accountable to him, I am a better person every day (Susan, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Susan believed that spirituality and the person themselves have a connection to God. For Susan, her spirituality was at the nucleus of not only her connection with God but also with her family, her education, and the world. Her spirituality also allowed her to hear God's voice and when she didn't do that which He desired for her to do, she felt unsettled. She spoke of being stirred one day in the summer and how her spirit was restless. Her health was stable and her family was good but she knew that she had not yet fulfilled the promise she made to the Higher Power which she believed.

...just inside, I had this hole. And I kept saying, "What is it? What am I missing that I don't have?" And that's when it hit me like a ton of bricks -- you need to get back in school. You're healthy enough now. And it was just a divine intervention from God. I happened to mention it at work. And all of a sudden, by the next day, I was registered at the university, on my way over here to buy my books and pay for class. You see, I realized why I wasn't spiritually happy. Even if I only take one class, and some terms I did, I'm still on the right path and doing exactly what I promised Him (Susan, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

When I asked Susan about her near-death experience and how this tied into her spirituality and her education, she responded with the following:

That was the one thing that I could not face my own self – failure...that I did not finish my Bachelor's degree. When I walked across the stage from the community college in 2001 with honors, everything was going great. I had a scholarship to a private Indiana university – then my health began to fail. I started to feel like school was not important anymore and I needed to go to work. I put everything aside – my education, the loss of two foster children, and my healing – all to go back to work where I thought I could pretty much block it all out -- ignore it. So when I got sick, it was so hard to know that -- you know, my son was in 8th grade. All of his friends...how could I tell them to continue on no matter how hard it gets? That, you know, God is there. He's going to lift you up. He's going to take you over the speed bumps in life. And if I couldn't finish, how could I make him finish? How could I even expect any of my kids to finish? I remember saying, "God, please let this work so I can finish the one thing I regret." I had a perfect son. I had a perfect husband. I had a perfect family. I just didn't have that one thing – my Bachelor's degree and the memory of me walking across the stage (Susan, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Susan believed that it was truly God's plan for her life to be completing her baccalaureate degree at the research site institution. Susan openly shared her initial dislike for the institution and said that she had lost her \$25,000 scholarship to a private Indiana University. She believed that because of her original feelings about the institution and the course of events that caused her to lose the scholarship from the private university, it was God's plan for her life to be at the research site institution at this particular time in her life. Susan stated that even she couldn't figure out why God wanted her here, at this time, but she willingly accepted that this was His plan for her life's journey. For Susan, her spirituality was extremely important and it was part and parcel for her having attended the research site institution in pursuit of her Bachelor's degree for the past five years.

Adrienne

The third and final participant was a 47 year old African American woman named Adrienne. Hearing a word from God was critically important to Adrienne as like Susan, she too faced death, head on, but for Adrienne, hers was not in a hospital room, but on the battlefield of the Iraqi War. Adrienne is a retired military veteran who publicly shared during the guided focus

group discussion that had it not been for God, not only would she not have finished her Associate's and matriculated to the baccalaureate degree-level, she would likely not be alive. Adrienne's presence and stories during the guided focus group discussion brought a sense of maturity wrought with inner emotional and mental struggle along with sage advice gained only through personal experience. She told me about having church on the side of the road in a combat environment, oftentimes after a bomb had exploded near their tank, and even with bullets and missiles flying overhead.

When we moved from base to base, as they gave you orders to go, you had to find the best church for you. And for me, that was where I could hear from God. It wasn't a specific religion, a denomination. It was some place where God could really speak to me, some place that I could really exercise my spirit, and I could hear from God and that's the difference to me. Because, as I said before when I talked with you, when we were in a convoy going from Kuwait to Iraq, there were no buildings. There were no denominations. We all got out of our vehicles, and we praised God right on the road. Everybody came out with a bible, if they had one. The Chaplain got out. And we had service right there (Adrienne, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Adrienne, Research Question 1: How is spirituality defined by community college students who persist?

When I asked Adrienne to define spirituality, she responded that it was a belief in a Higher Power and knowing that there is a God that died for your sins. She also affirmed that this same God was a protector. Like both Eric and Susan, Adrienne made reference to not being able to see God but believing within one's heart that He exists. For her, spirituality was extremely important and it was aligned with her belief in God. Adrienne saw a clear delineation between religion and spirituality and made reference to practicing religion or religiosity.

Well, to me, religion is just religiously, or repeatedly, practicing a habit. And, to me, spirituality is not just a habit. It's a belief. It's a belief in a Higher Power, somebody that protects you, you know. But there's a big difference between the two...And, you know, like they say, people can go to church every Sunday. But if somebody needs twenty dollars, or whatever, you know, they wouldn't help them out. If they saw somebody in need, they wouldn't help them out. And, to me, that's just religion. You're religiously going to church, but spiritually, you know, you haven't developed. You haven't developed

-- you haven't matured in the word of God (Adrienne, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Adrienne further discussed spiritual development in terms of defining spirituality, suggesting that it was visible through one's actions.

...Well, you know, what I'm talking about is displaying the fruits of the spirit, being loving, kind, meek, having the traits of God, and loving your fellow man. You know, love your neighbor as you would want them to treat you. And, you know, your spirituality is external. It's a part of who you are but it can be seen through your actions towards others (Adrienne, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Adrienne expressed a belief that spirituality was as much internal as it was external. She shared with me how she was often approached by people who said that they had watched her as she interacted with others and questioned her as to whether or not she was a minister. She attributed this to the way she carries herself and also how she practices her belief in God – being good to others. Adrienne stated that she believed in God but specifically, believes in the Holy Trinity often referred to in the Christian faith as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. She believes that Jesus laid down his life for our sins when He laid down His life on the cross. She also believes in the word of God and believes the Bible to be true. When questioned about her faith in God as it relates to her spirituality she provided the following:

...As I said before, faith is -- if I will quote the bible -- the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things that you can't see. And spirituality is the belief, not just in God, but it's exercising your faith in God. It's not just believing in it, but exercising a faith in God. Like I said, you know, developing some of the fruits of the spirit. You know, trying to mature in God. You know, not letting things upset you. You know, it's the way you live your life, because of your belief in God, because of your faith in God, and the word of God in the bible (Adrienne, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

For Adrienne, spirituality was a verb as opposed to a noun as she saw this as more than something to have, but something continually moving as it operates within you. For Adrienne, hearing the word of God, particularly on Sunday, not only renewed her but also refreshed her academically which allowed her to get ready to face the challenges she knew were soon to follow

throughout the week as she attended the university. Because spirituality for Adrienne continuously renewed both her mind and spirit, she saw spirituality as constantly moving.

Adrienne, Research Question 2: For community college students who persist, how do they come to make meaning of their educational journey?

When I asked Adrienne to share with me how she came to make meaning through the driving force of faith she referred to hearing from God. According to Adrienne, the Lord speaks to her through the Holy Spirit and this voice leads and guides her. Adrienne makes meaning through her faith and it is her faith in God which guides her and directs her path. Adrienne believes that her spirituality not only directly affects her ability to persist in college but also, has the ability to motivate others to continue as well. For Adrienne, spirituality is an intimate part of her daily life and she attributes a great deal of this to her being diagnosed with PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). With this disorder, which often has the propensity to cripple both mentally and emotionally, she indicated that it was her belief in God that sustains her.

You know, as I told you before, I have PTSD. Without God, I think I would lose my mind. You know, you have people with PTSD. They act out. Some of them commit suicide. But because of my belief in God, He keeps my mind. You know, He drives me through college to do the right things...I pray and ask God for the right things to do. And He speaks to me sometimes. You know, through the Word of God...You know, I believe that being at school right now is where I'm supposed to be. I'm where I'm supposed to be. And God, you know, He's a driving force on why I'm in college right now (Adrienne, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

When I asked Adrienne about faith she informed me that it was a belief in both people and things you can't see – even the belief that one day you will obtain a Bachelor's degree that right now, today, you can't even see. Adrienne even affirmed, like both Eric and Susan, that faith was a belief in a God that you can't see

...faith is just believing in something. It doesn't have to be religion. It could be as simple as just believing that you're going to attain something or do something or going to reach a certain place. You know -- and although you can't see it, you can't touch it, you know that you will make it (Adrienne, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

I asked Adrienne to tell me about this degree that she couldn't see but yet knew that she would one day obtain and how this was connected to her faith. According to Adrienne, God had her where He desired for her to be at this very moment and time in her life and because of such, she was able to see herself obtaining her degree.

...I can see me getting a degree. I can see it. And it drives me. Even though, you know, I have stumbling blocks, obstacles, or whatever you want to call it, He keeps me going and allows me to see myself obtaining the degree. You know, God gives me visions. I can see it. I can see that if I keep on the road that I'm on, that I will obtain my degree. No matter how hard it gets, no matter what I have to do over, I will obtain it (Adrienne, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Adrienne, Research Question 3: What is the relationship between spirituality and community college student persistence?

When I asked Adrienne about the connection between college persistence and spirituality, she shared that she probably would lack the confidence, strength, and ability to persist in college and pursue her Bachelor's degree without her spirituality. According to Adrienne, she didn't believe that she could make it as she admitted to being tired; however, she also re-affirmed that despite her mental, emotional, and physical fatigue, she must go on. Additionally, she said that without her faith and belief in God, she would not be able to persist in the completion of her Bachelor's degree. Adrienne's spiritual development was also critically important to her life. She stated that the word of God was nourishment to her spirit as it fed her soul and when she wasn't able to get to church and hear the word of God, she felt drained. When asked about her educational experience being enhanced by her spirituality, Adrienne purported the following:

I believe that as I obtain more education and incorporate that with the word of God, I will be able to help more people -- bring more people to Christ. So maybe even see their purpose or see that they're strong enough to get their degree. Like I said, I have a couple of cousins, one outside the door. I'm trying to help them to -- they go hear the word of God. But it's not until you receive God in your heart and, as other people call it, being saved, or whatever, that God gives you strength and confidence. You know, He strengthens you to go get a degree, you know. And it plays a big part. I couldn't do it

without my spirituality, my belief in God. The combination of the two is going to bless other people (Adrienne, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Adrienne shared in more intimate detail about the stumbling blocks that she referred to and stated that these blocks, while impediments, they would not be deterrents to her completion.

Like I said, I have post-traumatic stress disorder. It seems like it is getting worse. I am now at the point where I had to go to the doctor and get my paperwork for disability services, you know. But I'm encouraged because I see people with physical disabilities. They don't let it stop them. They're going to get their degree. And I say to myself, Adrienne, if they can do it, you can do it. And then I go to the Bible. And it says that I can do all things through Christ, which strengthens me, you know. If it were not so, it would not be in the Bible. And so, you know, I'm encouraged. I watch. I watch everything. You know, if other people can do it, I can do it, too. What makes anybody any better than me? My other stumbling block is, I'm not good at writing -- using words. I need to improve on that. And I would say those are my two stumbling blocks. The PTSD, it decreases my concentration. I have flashbacks from war and all that. And I don't sleep well. I have nightmares and, you know, lots of dreams and all that. But I'm not going to let it get to me. I'm determined -- I have PTSD but PTSD doesn't have me! And that no matter what I've got, I'm going to get my Bachelor's degree (Adrienne, personal communication, 2011).

Eric, Susan, and Adrienne, each three very different people with very different stories to tell; however, they somehow echoed the same sentiment throughout their individual interviews—faith. For each of them, their faith connected them to their spirituality and also served as the conduit which allowed them to walk, talk, fellowship, connect, and hear from their God. They each spoke of this relationship as being very intimate and personal and they all believed that without their spirituality and faith, not only would they not be attending the university but two of the three even questioned as to whether or not they would even be alive.

For these individuals, spirituality affected how they see the world in addition to how they responded to others around them. It enhanced their educational experience as it gave them strength when they were weary and gave them comfort during times of struggle. It provided a roadmap, a sense of direction for them, and they each believed that God ordered their steps in placing them on their respective paths or life's journey. Their spirituality provided them with

much needed support when friends and family couldn't or wouldn't and their unyielding faith allowed them to believe with their whole heart, mind, and soul in a God they could not see and also, allowed them to see a Bachelor's degree that they did not have. Their spirituality encouraged them to continue no matter how long it took and for some, this has been more than a twenty-year journey. It served as the driving force and motivator for their educational achievements and goals. Their spirituality also allowed them to identify their purpose so much so, they were able to withstand the obstacles and despite the fatigue, the desire to give up, and the stumbling blocks, they each affirmed and re-affirmed that no matter what, they would persist and complete at the baccalaureate degree-granting institution.

Table 6 provides a summary of the constant themes which emerged from the face-to-face interviews. It is important to note that these are considered constants as they were identified by participants in each of the three stages of the data collection process (on-line Survey Monkey questionnaire, guided focus group discussion, and face-to-face interviews). Relevant sub-themes which correlate to each of the respective constant or re-emerging themes are also provided.

Table 6. Constant Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
Faith	God or Higher Power Is In Control Belief Without Seeing Connection With Spirituality (or conduit) Driving Force Motivation
Relationship	Connection With God or Higher Power Walk, Talk, Fellowship Hearing His Voice Accepting His Will Intimate and Personal
Obstacles	Mental, Physical, Emotional Health Lack of Support Financial Means Family and Personal Commitment (children, spouse, work) Academic Challenges

Purpose	God's Plan for Your Life Part of the Journey Doing What He Wants Obeying His Word
Persistence	Continuing In Spite Of Finishing Goal Achievement The End Result of Faith -- Outcome

Note. The above-listed constant themes and sub-themes emerged from the face-to-face interviews with research participants.

Limitations

There are particular limitations which the researcher believes merit bringing to the fore as they relate to the study conducted. As mentioned previously, the research was limited to one public university in Illinois and conducted on the institution's main campus. The research site institution is a secondary level university largely fed by community college graduates. The average age of students attending the institution is thirty-five and the enrollment is majority female. Additionally, the researcher believes the findings of this study to be largely dictated by the geographic location of where the study was conducted.

The Midwestern region of the United States is largely Christian and this alone has a tremendous influence on the potential applicant pool. Had this study been conducted in another part of the country, particularly on either the east or west coast or other regions heavily populated with immigrants from other nations where the predominant theological belief was something other than Christian, the participant pool and relative responses could have potentially been very different. Although students of all religious/theological/metaphysical beliefs in addition to those who identified themselves as atheists and/or agnostics were invited to participate, the respondents were largely Christian and this remained constant throughout all aspects of the research study. From the original 47 participants, the majority of the respondents

identified themselves as Christians. There was one agnostic who participated in the on-line questionnaire portion of the research study; however, this participant chose to go no further in the research study and none of the participants identified themselves as being atheists.

Additionally, the majority of research participants were women and for the most part, women tend to be more open to discussion of intimate topics such as spirituality and/or religion. According to Fleischer and Schulman (2005) more women than men are on a spiritual quest and they provide the following statistics:

- 79% of women vs. 72% of men are searching for meaning and purpose in life;
- 74% of women vs. 58% of men are striving to become a more loving person;
- 59% of women vs. 48% of men are seeking beauty in their lives;
- 58% of women vs. 49% of men consider it very important to improve the human condition; and
- 52% of women vs. 45% of men are striving to attain inner harmony (p. 2).

Moreover, as the principal investigator, having spent more than 30 hours on the campus, potential research participants were able to see the researcher as a more personal, human component of the data collection process. During this time prospective participants had ample time to ask the researcher her role as the primary investigator, questions concerning the research study in addition to her own personal opinions and positions regarding spirituality, religion, and religious beliefs prior to their decision to participate in the study conducted. Many participants connected with the researcher while at the research table or during one of the classroom presentations. For many, the decision to participate is likely to have been made based on participants' perception of similarities with the researcher with regard to gender, ethnicity, religious belief, and overall personal presentation.

There were some additional identified limitations addressed, not least of which was the researcher's religious background and upbringing. The researcher is Christian and believes that there exists a connection between one's spirituality and religion; however, this belief did not, nor

should it have, defined spirituality for everyone and as a result, it was the intent of the researcher to be as unbiased as possible. It is with this mindset that the research for this study was conducted. Patton (2002) believes that “any credible research strategy requires that the investigator adopt a stance of neutrality with regard to the phenomenon under the study”, and suggests the following:

This simply means that the investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths. The neutral investigator enters the research arena with no ax to grind, no theory to prove (to test but not to prove), and no predetermined results to support. Rather, the investigator’s commitment is to understand the world as it unfolds, be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge, and be balanced in reporting both confirmatory and disconfirming evidence with regard to any conclusions offered (51).

Delimitations

There are certain delimitations to the study which were addressed as they entail planned restrictions to the research conducted. For example, the researcher only looked at one institution and limited the scope of the research to a public university in the state of Illinois. Additionally, the researcher did not examine community college students who transferred to the research site institution without an Associate’s degree. In addition, those students pursuing less than six semester hours, despite their having been community college graduates, were deemed ineligible to participate in the research being conducted as the researcher determined that anything less than half-time pursuit lacked sincere educational commitment to baccalaureate completion. Merriam (2009) believes that the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case. Leedy and Omrod (2010) further affirm that only a researcher who thinks carefully about the problem and its focal center can distinguish between what is relevant and what is not relevant in the problem (p. 57). “The limits of the problem

should be as carefully bound for a research effort as a parcel of land is for a real estate transfer” (p. 57).

Chapter Summary

The data analysis for this research study was done in three sections which correlated to the three phases used for data collection: (1) the on-line Survey Monkey questionnaire, (2) guided focus group discussion, and (3) open-ended face-to-face interviews. The researcher used a Likert scale survey instrument that she created. This instrument required that participants provide relevant demographic information (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender, religious/theological/metaphysical belief in addition to their own personal definition of spirituality. The researcher sorted participants based on demographic information provided and along with their definition of spirituality. From their definitions, the researcher identified a priori codes in the form of words used to describe spirituality. The researcher created a table reflective of those words which emerged as themes and assigned these themes with weight based on the number of times used in the definitions provided by each participant. The researcher reviewed the weighted values assigned to each of the emerging themes derived from the first phase of the research study and created emergent themes based on the top four: (1) God, (2) Me and Myself, (3) Belief, Believing, and Faith, and (4) Relationship.

From the original 47 research participants, 25 were invited to take part in a guided focus group discussion. From the 25, ten accepted the invitation; from this ten, eight actually took part in this phase of the research being conducted. The researcher used a micro-cassette tape recorder, memoing, field notes, and a transcription of the conversation to establish re-occurring themes which emerged from the first and second phases of the research conducted. Guided focus group discussion participants responded to the overarching research question which asked them

to reflect on the relationship between community college graduates who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution but more specifically, they were asked to define spirituality, explain how they came to make meaning of their educational journey, and speak to the relationship between spirituality and community college students' persistence. Guided focus group participants also created their own group definition of spirituality which was analyzed by the researcher in an effort to match the group definition with individual participants' responses from the on-line Survey Monkey questionnaire.

The result of the data analyzed for this portion of the research study resulted in six themes; three of which had been identified as initial a priori themes by the researcher and relevant research reviewed for this research study (God or Higher Power, I/Me/Myself, and Purpose), and the other, Man/Mankind, Challenges, and Gender Identification, were categorized as undiscovered themes which surfaced during further analysis of the data collected from this phase of the research being conducted.

Three participants were invited to take part in the open-ended face-to-face interview portion of the research study conducted and they were of varying ages, races/ethnicities, and genders. As with the guided focus group discussion, interview participants' conversations were digitally recorded. The researcher, after having conducted further analysis of the transcribed face-to-face interview conversations, discovered five re-emerging themes which were referred to be the researcher as being constants: (1) Faith, (2) Relationship, (3) Obstacles, (4) Purpose, and (5) Persistence. These constants appeared in every aspect of the data collection process and further support how community college graduates come to make meaning of their educational experience at the baccalaureate degree level.

The final chapter of this dissertation will provide a discussion of the research findings along with conclusions as they relate to relationship between spirituality and the educational persistence of community college graduates. Additionally, there will be implications for student affairs practitioners based on the findings of the research along with recommendations for both future practice and future research as given by the researcher.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sometimes people get the mistaken notion that spirituality is a separate department of life, the penthouse of existence. But rightly understood, it is a vital awareness that pervades all realms of our being. David Steindl-Rast

Introduction

Problem

Persistence at the post-secondary level, particularly community colleges, is an issue of great importance to the field of higher education and society at large. Community colleges graduate approximately 50% of the nation's workforce and if the United States of America is to remain at all competitive in the global marketplace, it is essential that community college students persist in their educational pursuits. Within the last decade, spirituality has been given some attention, particularly as it relates to college student development and more specifically, student persistence. Unfortunately, there is an inherent challenge in reviewing and examining the role of spirituality as it relates to the persistence of Illinois community college students as there is no crystallized definition for spirituality in higher education literature. In addition, the "story" of the community college is often told through the narration of the four-year voice which casts disparaging remarks on the student, the quality of education received, and constantly relegates the community college to the ranks of "junior academy."

Purpose

The purpose of this doctoral study was to examine the relationship between spirituality and the educational persistence of Illinois community college graduates who matriculated to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. Over the course of this final chapter the researcher provides a brief description of the methodology utilized, a discussion of the study's findings with

specific focus on synthesized conclusions derived from the research and the interview questions posed. The researcher also shares implications for student affairs practitioners along with recommendations for various aspects of spirituality and educational persistence worthy of additional consideration for subsequent research studies. The researcher further suggests how community college student affairs practitioners can enhance and increase their awareness of spirituality in the lives of community college students so that practitioners may employ spirituality as an additional developmental lens utilized to enhance the lives of this student population.

Methodology

The researcher conducted a qualitative case study on the campus of a secondary level baccalaureate degree-granting institution, located approximately thirty-five miles southwest of the Chicago area. This body of research examined spirituality and the extent to which it provides personal capital, serves as a buffer to life's happenings, and aids in the development of coping mechanisms necessary for overall well being for community college graduates who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. Through purposefully constructed guided research and interview questions, the researcher was able to obtain relevant and sufficient data to support the study. Moreover, through this method of inquiry, the researcher was able to identify a relationship between spirituality and how community college graduates persist in higher education, prioritize numerous life responsibilities, sustain themselves, and find their purpose.

Discussion

The topic of spirituality as it relates to college students has now taken national focus. Germane to this researcher's findings, like that of Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2010, 2011) was the importance of the role of spirituality in the lives of community college graduates and the

prominent place it holds in their lives with regard to their decision making, interactions with others, and how they come to make meaning and find purpose in their lives and the world around them. Through the exchange of dialogue and ongoing conversations with colleagues, advisors, and critical friends, the researcher discovered that there was a challenge in delineating between spirituality and religion. After having perused countless articles, journals, and books devoted to spirituality and higher education, the researcher found this to be a pervasive thought shared among scholars and theorists alike, particularly in higher education literature. However, the researcher also learned that despite the elusiveness that seemed to follow spirituality in the literature, there was an undeniable interest in this topic, particularly as it related to twenty-first century American college students.

Conclusions

Higher Education is now giving considerable attention to the lesser discovered area of spirituality as it relates to student identity and the non-traditional adult learner. Moreover, the findings of this study show a relationship between community college graduates' spirituality, their connection to God or a Higher Power through their faith, their perceived divine purpose, and their overwhelming ability to persist at the baccalaureate degree level despite myriad obstacles, challenges, and impediments to their educational pursuits.

In an effort to provide the most comprehensive yet concise overview of the research findings, the researcher presents the following conclusions from the perspective of the guided research questions.

Research Question 1: How is spirituality defined by community college graduates who continue their education at the baccalaureate degree-granting institution?

For the participants involved in the study, spirituality was very personal. Participants used intimate verbiage when describing their spirituality (e.g., inner, personal, within) and for

one research participant in particular, she described spirituality as being her life as according to her, “without spirituality, I would be nothing.” Participants believed their spirituality provided them with guidance, a voice which gave them direction, and support along with inner motivation to continue their educational pursuits. They believed their spirituality to not only be an innate part of who they were internally, but they also affirmed that it gave them the ability to externally express themselves and their beliefs to the world and others around them. The research findings presented show a very clear and direct connection between participants and their spirituality. Additionally, their faith served as a conduit which directly connected them to God or a Higher Power. Participants reported that even when their own faith wavered, their spirituality refueled them and provided them with the motivation and strength to continue. For these students, they spoke of letting their faith lead them to where they were supposed to be rather than where they themselves desired to be in their own lives. They believed that their faith had brought them this far and this same faith would see them through to baccalaureate degree completion.

Many of the research participants believed that all people were spiritual beings and because of such, they were divinely connected to others and the world around them. However, the majority of research participants believed there to be an obvious difference between spirituality and religion. Participants defined religion as being dogmatic—adherence to religious doctrine and practices. They spoke of it as being robotic in its function as motions and believed religious behaviors to be learned through indoctrination, weekly rehearsals, and for many theologies and religious denominations, practiced every Sunday. Spirituality, however, was very different for participants as they posited that spirituality was something defined, cultivated and nurtured like any other intimate and personal relationship. They believed spirituality could not be relegated to a building, place, space, and time and for one participant in particular,

spirituality could not be limited by gender definition and association in making reference to God as our Father, having male orientation.

Research Question 2: For community college graduates who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution, how do they come to “make meaning” of their educational journey?

For research participants, faith allowed them to know themselves, to develop a personal sense of meaning, to cope with their respective life situations, and to develop an understanding of the world around them. Participants stated that spirituality served as a motivator for not only their post-secondary educational pursuits, but also other aspects of their lives. In speaking about their relationship with God or a Higher Power, their connection with the divine entity provided them with strength, peace, and also acceptance of those incidents in their lives which caused setbacks, stumbling blocks, grief, emotional/mental/physical pain and anguish, and lapses in time and mini-sabbaticals from their educational pursuits. They spoke of a communing with God or a Higher Power in their talk with this divine entity. In addition, they metaphorically described their life’s journey as a walk with this omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent being.

Several research participants subscribed to the belief that God or a Higher Power was the authority figure in control of their lives and they in turn, acquiesced to the desires or will that God or a Higher Power had for them. Participants often referred to God or a Higher Power as a potter and they themselves, clay. They further affirmed that only the potter knows what they themselves (the clay) would become as this divine entity would lead and guide them according to that divine entity’s will and desire for their lives. They believed that this same God or a Higher Power had a unique purpose for their lives and expressed belief that all of the events that occurred in their lives were a part of the divine power’s uniquely orchestrated plan for them.

Research participants believed that they did not have to ask God or a Higher Power what to do because of their relationship with the divine entity, directives for their lives came naturally. However, for many participants, the direction came through prayer, or their “talk” with God or a Higher Power. Prayer was an essential component in their daily lives and through this intimate conversation with the divine entity, direction, guidance, and re-affirmation flowed freely to them. Participants affirmed that their presence at the research site university at this particular time in their life was a part of a divine order that had been created by the omnipotent power and this too, was part of their life’s journey. More importantly, research participants firmly believed that in addition to God or a Higher Power guiding them and providing them with purpose for their lives, this omnipotent being gave them the strength to conquer and overcome insurmountable obstacles in their lives on a daily basis.

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between spirituality and community college graduates’ ability to matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution?

Participants shared openly about their stumbling blocks which often compromised their ability to persist – a struggle which is commonly expressed by so many community college students. For many of the research participants, they believed that they would not be able to pursue post-secondary education at both the associate and baccalaureate degree level without God or a Higher Power. They discussed their challenging lifestyles and their efforts to balance, school, work, and family obligations. They spoke of limited finances along with their constant struggles and ongoing fatigue. They also, however, believed that their struggle was validation that they had not been conquered or defeated in pursuit of fulfilling God or a Higher Power’s will and purpose for their lives. Some participants were candid about their lack of academic preparedness for both the community college and baccalaureate degree rigor they faced. And most participants admitted experiencing a desire to give up at time. Even in participants

purporting to have a great deal of faith, their nature ability to persevere and continue was challenged on numerous occasions. Students referred to their bodies as being tired but stated that their spirituality demanded that they must finish their education, Participants shared that during these times of doubt, fatigue, challenge, and struggle, they drew from their spirituality which through faith, connected them to God or a Higher Power. Because of the personal relationship they had with the divine entity, they accepted that both the good and the bad were a part of their journey and because this was the will of God or a Higher Power for their lives, they would not give up.

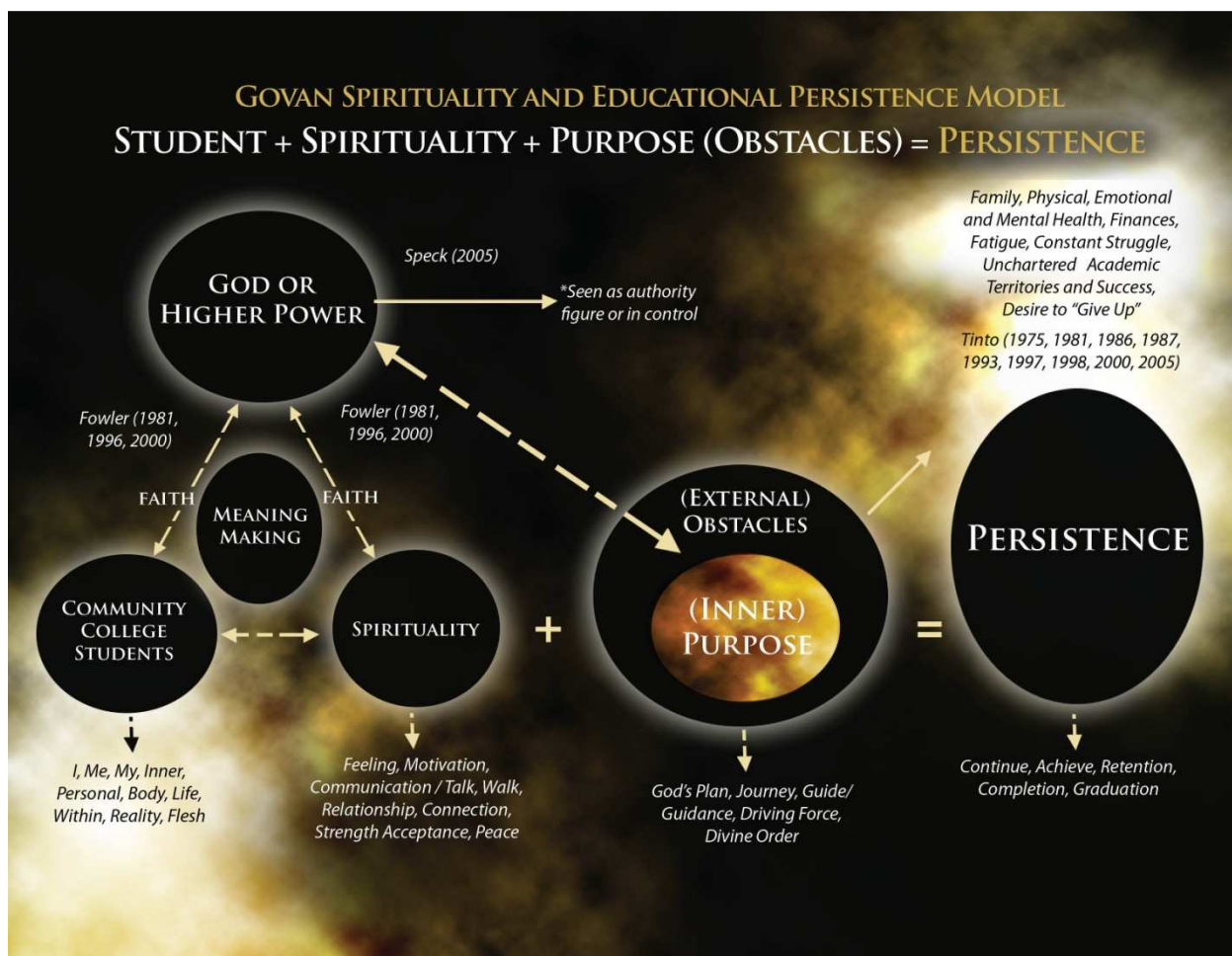
A considerable number of participants spoke of “seeing themselves walk across the stage” and believed, whole-heartedly, that baccalaureate degree completion was too, a part of God or a Higher Power’s plan for their lives. For these individuals, their life’s journey was pre-ordained by the omnipotent, omniscient divine entity and because of such, their purpose at the research site institution at that time, was to fulfill the plan that God or a Higher Power had for their lives. As a result of their relationship with God or a Higher Power as defined by participants as a “walking”, “talking”, relationship, source of strength and acceptance, motivator, and feeling, they were able to see themselves continuing, achieving, and completing this part of their life’s journey and most importantly, graduating from the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. During the course of the study, focus group research participants formulated their own definition of spirituality as follows:

Acceptance of His will for your life, in spite of when you're at a place that you never thought you would be because it wasn't part of your life's navigational system. In spite of the struggle, even when the very road and the continuous pseudo practice of going here and there is not doing it for you; you know it's not about the worship building or the worship service; in spite of war zones and the myriad issues that you have to deal with as a parent, a mom, a soldier, a student, life-altering changes, in spite of near-death illnesses, in spite of the children, in spite of the changes in terms of what the family thought you should, or could, or might have been, and even in spite of grades in those classes where

we were not as successful as we wish we would have been, we still accept His will for our life because you know, in spite of it all, you see yourself graduating with a Bachelor's degree – walking across that stage (Participants 1 – 8, personal communication, 2011).

Based on the research findings, the researcher concluded that the addition of spirituality along with a sense of purpose is a vital element of persistence among community college grades. The researcher was able to conclude that for many community college graduates, even in the face of myriad obstacles faced daily, they are able to persist at the baccalaureate degree granting institution. To support my research findings, I have created the Govan Spirituality and Educational Persistence Model (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Govan Spirituality and Educational Persistence Model



Implications

In an effort to provide the most appropriate implications for student affairs practitioners, the researcher believes it to be of paramount importance to present the implications within the framework of the research questions which guided the study.

Implication 1: Student affairs practitioners should recognize that spirituality is unique to each individual and, as a result, has innumerable definitions

When given the opportunity to define spirituality during the on-line survey questionnaire portion of the study there were many comparable themes; however, there were no two identical definitions of spirituality as given by research participants. Their definitions were as unique and as varied as they were and for each of them, their definition of spirituality was personal as they were given the opportunity to describe it for themselves. The very individualized way in which students come to define spirituality for themselves is the same way that it is suggested that student affairs professionals' approach spirituality with students – each person is different and the role that spirituality plays in their lives and the significance of this aspect of their lives, too, is different.

Implication 2: Student affairs practitioners might want to facilitate the development of spirituality in students who request guidance as this helps community college students come to understand and cope with their personal and educational lives simultaneously

We cannot ignore the fact that the ethos of the very existence of student affairs practitioners is to develop the whole student. In doing so, as Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) explain, spirituality is a very critical component in the lives of college students and if we miss this, for many, we potentially overlook an essential aspect of their lives, one of which matters to them most. Just as student affairs professionals acknowledge, teach, and embrace gender differences, ethnic/racial differences, sexual orientations, and other variables to be recognized in the development of college students, it may behoove student affairs professionals

to become aware and more sensitive to the concept of spirituality and spiritual development. In doing so, we provide students with evidence that this aspect of their lives as a whole person—multidimensional, multifaceted human beings, is important to not only them, but also those professionals given the charge to aid in their development at the institution.

Implication 3: Student affairs practitioners might want to further examine the relationship between spirituality and community college graduates' abilities to matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting Institution

Through strategic measures created to focus on the spiritual development aspect of community college students' lives and educational experiences, student affairs practitioners have the ability to enhance their educational experience and simultaneously, increase their overall retention, graduation, and matriculation rates to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. For many community college students, spirituality serves as a motivating factor in their educational persistence. Spirituality also serves as a buffer when faced with the competing agendas of work, school, family obligations, limited financial resources, personal tragedies, and sometimes questionable academic ability. More importantly, spirituality provides community college students with a sense of hope, purpose, and the strength to continue, despite the obstacles, as for many of them, their spirituality reinforces their belief that the inherent challenges they face are all a part of their educational journey.

Further Recommendations for Research

The researcher has identified two recommendations for research and they are they are to (1) continue to dedicate research devoted solely to community college students with a particular focus on persistence, and (2) continue to dedicate research devoted solely to spirituality and the significant role it plays in the lives of community college graduates. The justifications for the aforementioned recommendations are as follows:

Research Recommendation 1: Continue to dedicate research solely devoted to community college students with a particular focus on persistence

There is a huge void in the research devoted solely to community college students, particularly those who matriculate to the baccalaureate degree granting institution. Community college students' ability to overcome and their capacity for resilience merits further study in the area of persistence in particular, as for community college graduates, the stakes for baccalaureate degree completion are enormously high and wrought with obstacles, challenges, and ongoing strife. Unfortunately, when reviewing higher education literature, research studies, and national trends, the vast majority of the work written, cited, and spoken is articulated through the voice of national theorists or scholars who present a very elitist view of the information as seen and studied through the four-year institutional lens. When higher education research is approached like this, the true voice of the community college is not heard, and more often than not, more relevant data specific to this population is not provided.

Research Recommendation 2: Continue to dedicate research devoted solely to spirituality and the significant role it plays in the lives of community college graduates

There is an enormous amount of spirituality literature focusing on the fields of nursing, counseling, and social work and although important, more specific spirituality research on community college graduates would be of tremendous benefit to the field of higher education literature. For many community college graduates, the road to the baccalaureate degree is wrought with struggle, strife, and enormous challenge. A great many of them are the first in their families to attempt post-secondary education and, despite that which would be deemed a Herculean achievement on their part, the out-of-classroom life coupled with the out-of-classroom obstacles, can be overwhelming. Even Tinto (1993) espoused that the attrition rate of community college students was largely a direct result of external factors in their lives above and

beyond their control. However, for the vast majority of this study's participants, despite their obvious disadvantages, they continually affirmed the belief in their ability to "see themselves walking across the stage."

For these students, their spirituality served as a conduit to God or a Higher Power which not only gave them strength, but also gave them motivation to continue their educational pursuits. In spite of the obstacles, baccalaureate completion was a part of a divinely ordered purpose and as told by the study's participants, God or a Higher Power allowed them to complete the Associate's degree and this same divine entity would see them through baccalaureate completion.

Further Recommendations for Practice

The researcher has identified two recommendations for practice and they are (1) to provide student affairs practitioners with the opportunity to learn more about spirituality development as it relates to community college students, and (2) to make a conscious effort to incorporate spirituality as an additional dimension by which student affairs practitioners might further engage students in an effort to increase retention, persistence, and graduation rates. The justifications for the aforementioned recommendations are as follows:

Practice Recommendation 1: Encourage professional development in the area of spirituality

It is believed by many scholars and student development theorists that spirituality provides college students with the answers to big questions concerning their personal lives, careers, and even their choice to enroll, persist, and complete their post-secondary education. These areas, career development, enrollment, retention, and transfer, more times than not, are traditionally housed within the division of student affairs. Therefore, it might prove to be beneficial for student affairs professionals to incorporate spirituality and the role it plays in the

lives of our students as a segment in divisional/departmental in-services, trainings, and/or other professional development opportunities designed around this aspect of student development.

It is important, however, that student affairs professionals be comfortable with this topic and have a clear understanding that to engage a student on a spiritual level does not mean that they are proselytizing or attempting to convert or condemn the student religiously. As with any professional development or training opportunity, spirituality must be introduced to student affairs professionals appropriately and moreover, it cannot be “force-fed” to either student or professional as in doing so, there exists a possibility to do far more harm than good. However, if approached and delivered in a comfortable, structured, learning environment, spirituality, like any other student development modality, has the potential to be yet another avenue by which student affairs professionals can engage the student at the community college which ultimately has the potential to increase their ability to be retained, persist, complete, and matriculate to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution.

Practice Recommendation 2: Incorporate spirituality development in efforts designed to engage students

The spiritual beliefs of community college students, whether publicly or personally acknowledged, is uniquely a part of who they are as a human beings and also, helps them to understand themselves and the world around them. From the genesis of the community college, spirituality was mentioned as a core component in the development of the community college student. Additionally, a great many community colleges across the United States still mention spirituality in their mission statements along with their institutional Core Values.

Community college student affairs professionals need to be transparent in their efforts to design and implement programs to aid this aspect of how students come to learn, grow, and develop at the institution. This type of effort will provide students with evidence that this aspect

of their lives as a whole person—multidimensional, multifaceted human beings, is important to not only them, but also those professionals given the charge to aid in their development at the institution. As Vogel (2000) opines, as adult educators we recognize that there are multiple intelligences by which our students learn and if we are to teach community college students and learn with them, they must be addressed as whole persons and invited to bring their life experiences and questions to a safe table where all are given voice and can be heard.

Summary

Community colleges are being challenged to address the issue of persistence on a plethora of levels. Additionally, federal and state government funding for community colleges will soon be allocated and distributed based on performance measures gauged by retention and graduation outcomes. Unfortunately, community colleges overall, do not fare well in these areas and in a time of national focus and attention on community colleges, community college student persistence is of paramount concern.

In more recent years, higher education scholars and theorists have challenged student affairs professionals to examine the role that spirituality plays in the lives of college students. They suggest that spirituality serves as a motivator, provides students with strength, and also provides them with a sense of purpose. They also affirm that spirituality aids college students in their ability to understand the world around them as they attempt to make critical decisions in an effort to provide answer life's big questions including, but not limited to, their decision to begin their post-secondary education and subsequently, their decision to persist.

The purpose of this doctoral study was to examine the relationship between spirituality and the educational persistence of Illinois community college graduates who matriculated to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. The researcher conducted a qualitative case study on

the campus of a secondary level baccalaureate degree-granting institution, located approximately thirty-five miles southwest of the Chicago area. The researcher used the research questions that guided the study in addressing the study's findings. In doing so, the researcher was able to show that for community college graduates, as with higher education scholars and theorists, the definition of spirituality is unique and very personal. However, despite the obvious definitional differences, higher education research studies on spirituality among college students conclude with findings that support an increased interest in spirituality along with a direct connection to spirituality serving as a motivator for college completion.

Given the national focus that has been given to America's community colleges under the Obama Administration, it is critical that student affairs professionals make concerted efforts to engage our students in a way that might assist in their retention, graduation, and matriculation to the baccalaureate degree-granting institution. Scholars and theorists remind student affairs professionals of their charge to provide holistic development opportunities for students, including spirituality. They also affirm that in offices like counseling, advising, orientation, career development, multicultural affairs, ethnic/racial clubs, student political organizations, service learning projects and even the student newspaper, community college students make critical decisions that could potentially have long-term effects on their lives. More importantly, they affirm that when student affairs professionals assist community college students with their spiritual development, they are challenged to think not only of themselves, but also others, and the world around them. This, in turn, aids in creating more empathetic human beings who are likely to make more positive contributions to their own lives, their families, their communities, and society at large.

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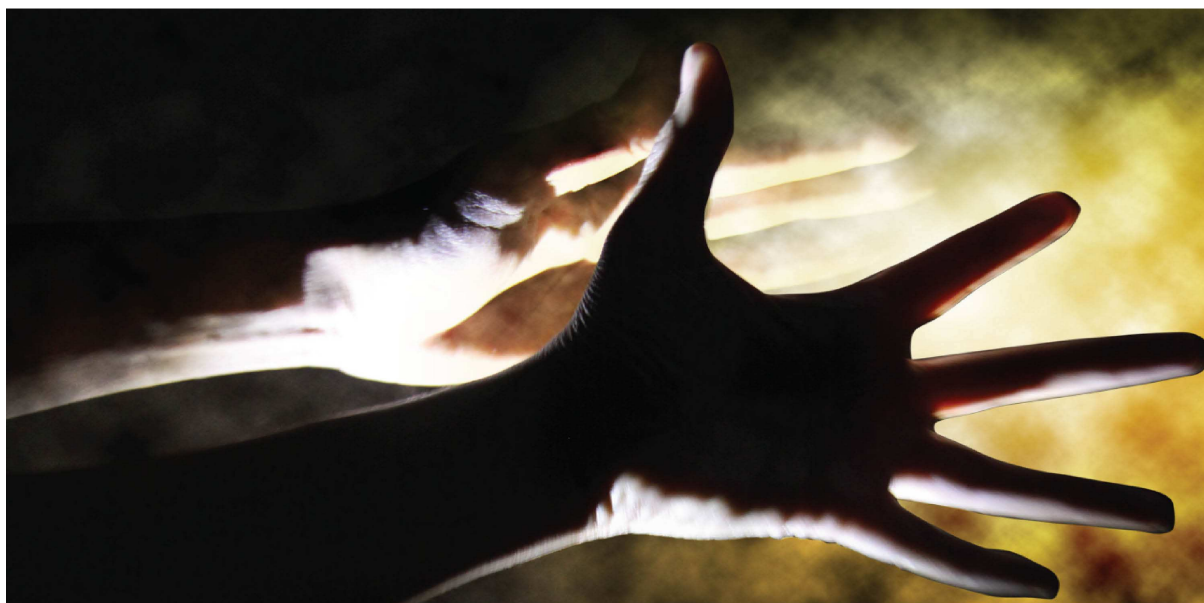
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Appendix A

Spirituality and Educational Persistence Recruitment Poster



**Spirituality and
Educational Persistence**

Fifty community college graduates currently enrolled at the research site institution needed to participate in a doctoral study on spirituality and educational persistence.

INCENTIVE:
The first 50 completed survey responders will receive a \$5.00 cafeteria gift card.

INTERESTED PARTICIPANTS:
contact the researcher, Shawn L. Govan
at shawnlgovan@gmail.com or via phone at (708) 381-0016

**This project has been approved for implementation
by the research site institutions'
Institutional Review Board*

Disclaimer: The researcher will make the final determination as to whether or not completed survey responses have been submitted seriously and for the purpose and intent of the research being conducted. Incomplete surveys and/or those submitted for any other purpose outside of the nature and scope of the research will not be considered, nor will any incentive be provided to the respondent. It is anticipated that there will be no risks to research participants. Participants and their responses will remain confidential and anonymous to all but the researcher, Shawn L. Govan.

Appendix B

Informed Consent: Spirituality and Persistence Survey

This study will take place from March 2011 to January 2012. This document informs you of the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. You are encouraged to keep a copy for your records.

I consent to participate in a research project conducted by Shawn L. Govan, a doctoral student at National-Louis University located in Chicago, Illinois. I understand the purpose of the study titled EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND PERSISTENCE AMONG ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE GRADUATES WHO MATRICULATE TO THE BACCALAUREATE-DEGREE GRANTING INSTITUTION explores the motivation behind community college students who not only graduate, but go on to pursue their education at the baccalaureate level. Also, this study will explore how these students define, or come to “make meaning” of the force that drives their persistence in higher education.

I understand that my participation will consist of completing a survey which will be used to collect data in the form of participants’ responses to each question/statement. I will be expected to respond honestly to each of the questions/statements presented. I understand that this exercise will take approximately 5 – 10 minutes. I understand that the researcher will provide me with a \$5.00 [Name of Institution] cafeteria gift card as compensation for my participation in this activity providing that I meet the following criteria: community college graduate, currently enrolled at the university for the spring 2011 term, enrolled in a minimum of six semester hours. I understand that I should carefully review each of my responses prior to submission. I understand that at no time will my identity or any of my identifiable information be compromised. I also understand that should I complete the survey without having met the aforementioned minimum requirements, I will be ineligible to receive the compensation offered as my responses cannot be used for the purpose of this study.

I understand that only the researcher, Shawn L. Govan will have access to a secured file cabinet which will be used to ensure that all participant responses are secure. I am also fully aware that the results of this study may be published but my anonymity will not be compromised, nor my community college revealed.

I understand that participation in this study poses minimal if any risks to me and will involve my responding to questions or statements liken to that of daily, adult conversation. I am however, aware that the questions/statements presented may challenge me to think about my own very personal spiritual and/or religious beliefs.

I understand that in the event I have questions or require additional information I may contact the researcher: Shawn L. Govan, 1214 Baythorne Drive, Flossmoor, Illinois 60422 . Phone: (708) 381-0016 or email: shawnlgovan@gmail.com.

In the event that I have questions, issues and/ or concerns at any time during my participation in the research being conducted by Shawn L. Govan, or I deem her response to be insufficient, I may contact her Dissertation Chair: Dr. Dennis K. Haynes, National-Louis University, 122 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60603. Phone (312) 261-3728 or email: Dennis.Haynes@nl.edu.

Appendix C

On-line Survey Questionnaire

Question 1: I acknowledge that I have been fully informed of the nature and scope of the research being conducted.

- Yes
- No

Question 2: Full name, last name first: _____

Question 3: E-mail address: _____

Question 4: Area code and Contact phone number: _____

Question 5: Gender

- Male
- Female

Question 6: I am currently enrolled for a minimum of six semester hours at Governors State University for the spring 2011 term.

- Yes
- No

Question 7: I am a community college graduate?

- Yes
- No

Question 8: Please provide the name of the community college where you received your Associate's degree: _____

Question 9: Race / Ethnicity

- African-American Non-Hispanic
- Hispanic
- White Non-Hispanic
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Unknown
- Other

Question 10: Age

- 18 – 24
- 25 – 34
- 35 – 44

- 45 – 54
- 55 and beyond

Question 11: Do you believe in God or a Higher Power?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided

Question 12: Do you have to be a religious person to be a spiritual person?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided

Question 13: Are you a spiritual person?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided

Question 14: In your own words, how would you define spirituality?

Question 15: Are you a religious person?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided

Question 16: What is your religious affiliation?

- Baptist
- Catholic
- Pentecostal
- Jewish
- Episcopalian
- Methodist
- Lutheran
- Non-Denominational
- Jehovah's Witness

- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Agnostic
- Atheist
- None
- Other (fill-in-the-blank)

Question 17: Please provide a response to each of the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
All human beings are spiritual beings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I consider myself to be a spiritual person.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe there is a God or Higher Power.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In terms of my spirituality, God or a Higher Power is the authority.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spirituality is an important part of who I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spirituality defines who I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prayer is a part of my daily life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Meditation is a part of my daily life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Question 18: How do you come to “make meaning” (or come to understand the purpose) of your educational journey?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am a person of faith.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spirituality is connected to my faith.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spirituality helps me to cope with my daily life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

My spirituality allows me to cope with my educational experiences.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spirituality gives me purpose in life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spirituality is tied to my faith and hope in God or a Higher Power.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spiritual development is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Question 19: How would you describe the relationship between your spirituality and your educational persistence beyond the community college level?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My spiritual development is enhanced by my educational experience.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My educational experiences are enhanced by my spiritual development.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spirituality has a direct affect on my continuing my education.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spirituality played a role in obtaining an Associate's degree at the community college level.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spirituality will play a role in my completion of the baccalaureate degree at the university level.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Question 20: How did hear about this research study? Please check all that apply.

- Posters / Flyers displayed throughout the institution
- Faculty recommendation / referral
- Club / Organization Advisor referral
- Student Newspaper advertisement
- Friend
- Researcher's table presentation while visiting institution
- Word of mouth
- Other (fill-in-the-blank)

Question 21: What motivated you to participate in this study? Please check all that apply.

- Posters / Flyers displayed throughout the institution
- Faculty recommendation / referral
- Club / Organization Advisor referral
- Student Newspaper advertisement
- Friend
- Researcher's table presentation while visiting institution
- Personal interest / curiosity
- \$5.00 monetary incentive
- Other (fill-in-the-blank)

Question 22: Please provide feedback on the Spirituality and Educational Persistence graphic used for this study.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The graphic used is appropriate for the nature of the study being conducted	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The graphic is inviting and appealing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The graphic will catch the attention of potential research participants	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The graphic used will stimulate conversation by students on the campus	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix D

Research Questions Matrix

Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p>1.) <i>How is spirituality defined by community college students who persist?</i></p>	<p>a.) What is spirituality? b.) How important is your spirituality? c.) Are all people spiritual beings? d.) Do you believe in God or a Higher Power? e.) Explain the relationship and/or difference between spirituality and religion. f.) Is spirituality a part of your daily life?</p>
<p>2.) <i>For community college students who persist, how do they come to “make meaning” of their educational journey?</i></p>	<p>a.) What is faith? b.) Do you have faith in God or a Higher Power? c.) What is the connection between faith and spirituality? d.) How important is your spiritual development? e.) How does one come to “<i>make meaning</i>” of life through the driving force of faith?</p>
<p>3.) <i>What is the relationship between spirituality and community college student persistence?</i></p>	<p>a.) Has your educational experience been enhanced by your spirituality? b.) How has spirituality affected your persistence in college? c.) How will spirituality assist you in the completion of your Bachelor’s degree? d.) What is the connection between spirituality and college persistence?</p>

Appendix E

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH APPROACH UTILIZED FOR THIS STUDY



Biographical Sketch

Shawn L. Govan is the Dean of Student Development and Campus Life at Prairie State College in Chicago Heights, Illinois. In her current role, the scope of her responsibilities includes, but is not limited to, the following areas: Personal, Career, and Transfer Counseling; Academic Advising; Career Development Services; Phi Theta Kappa; Retention; the Protégé Program; Latino Outreach; International Students; Veterans; Health Promotions; Student Life and Multicultural Affairs; Disabilities Services; International Students, Mediation/Adjudication, **TRiO**/Student Support Services; **TRiO**/Educational Talent Search. In addition to this wide range of duties, Shawn also functions as the College's Judicial Officer.

Shawn is a seasoned administrator with more than twenty years of experience in the field of higher education, a great deal of which has been in the area of student affairs. Prior to pursuing her doctoral degree, Shawn earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications and a Master of Science degree in College Student Personnel from Western Illinois University. She is an accomplished federal, state, and private grant writer. In addition to successfully managing multiple federally-funded grant projects simultaneously at colleges and universities throughout the Chicago-land area, she at one time functioned as the youngest director of multiple **TRiO** programs at any institution in the country. Shawn has committed her professional career to the education of under-represented student populations as she firmly believes that this is part of her life's purpose. She prides herself on being a voice for those who have been silenced along with providing a presence for those who for so very long have been absent from academia, both in the classroom and in the boardroom.

Among her friends, family, and colleagues she is best known for her practical common-sense approach coupled with her "tell-it-like-it-is" humor, quick wit, and delivery. She is also

deeply rooted and grounded by her religious faith and attributes all of her successes to her relationship with God and her family. Shawn's dissertation topic was chosen largely due to her faith and her own personal experiences as a first-generation college student. She also believes that this body of research will provide an avenue by which she can further inform and encourage others about the essential element of faith and the very positive effect it has on educating, servicing, and retaining under-represented student populations at post-secondary institutions.