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Serving a Higher Power: The Influence of Alternative Break Programs on Students' Religiousness

Elizabeth Niehaus
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, eniehaus@unl.edu

Mark Rivera
University of Maryland

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The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between students' religiousness and participation in alternative breaks (ABs) using both survey and interview data from the National Survey of Alternative Breaks. Findings from this mixed methods study demonstrate the potential for ABs to facilitate religiousness and help students connect (or reconnect) to religious faith, particularly through participation in service with an explicit religious connection, individual written reflection, and interaction with community members.

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the religious and spiritual lives of college students in the United States (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). *Spirituality* refers to a broader focus on students' search for meaning and purpose in their lives— which may or may not involve identification with a particular religious tradition— while *religiousness* is defined as an "adherence to a set of faith-based beliefs (and related practices) concerning both the origins of the world and the nature of the entity(ies) or being(s) that created and/or govern the world," (Astin et al., 2011, p. 40). The latest research on students' religiousness and spirituality has demonstrated that one or both are relevant to the lives of most students. According to Astin et al. (2005), 79% of college students report believing in God, 69% pray, 81%

attend religious services, 80% have discussed religion/spirituality with friends, and 76% have discussed religion/spirituality with family.

Much of the recent emphasis in this area has focused on issues of spirituality, but students' religiousness is itself an important area of study. A large majority of undergraduates that enter college identify with a particular religious tradition (Astin et al., 2011), and for many of these students religiousness plays a key role in *how* spirituality influences their lives. For example, in a study of high school students, Dowling et al. (2004) found that religiousness partially mediated the relationship between spirituality and thriving. Consequently, they argued that both religiousness and spirituality were important constructs to consider. Similarly, Owens (2013) found that religion and participation in religious groups may serve as a mechanism of social support, particularly for students of color. In both cases religiousness, and not spirituality, provided the foundation for a positive outcome. Additionally, religiousness itself has been associated with an array of positive outcomes, both in high school and college. For example, religiousness has been associated with improved self-esteem (Astin et al., 2011), more frequent exercise (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006), participation in cultural events (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006), gains in well-being (Astin et al., 2011; Bowman & Small, 2012),

and higher GPAs (Astin et al., 2011).

Despite the potential value of religion in college students' lives, research on the effects of college on students' religiousness is mixed. Some studies point to the ways in which higher education environments facilitate religiousness (e.g., Astin et al., 2005; Kuh & Gonyea, 2006), while others point to a dampening effect of higher education on religious identity and commitment (e.g., Astin et al., 2011; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). These seemingly conflicting findings may result from different conceptualizations of religiousness (e.g., frequency of participation in religious activities such as worship or prayer, religious identification, religious commitment, etc.), but also may point to the likely fact that different college environments and experiences have different influences on students' religiousness. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between students' perceptions of their own religiousness and one particular college experience—participation in service-learning based alternative breaks.

Relationship between Service-Learning and Religiousness

The relationship between service-learning (SL) and students' religiousness is deep and complex. On the one hand, students' religiousness is a positive predictor of service participation in high school (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999) and in continuing service participation from high school to college (Marks & Jones, 2004). On the other hand, SL participation has the potential to affect students' religiousness by influencing areas related to religion: Students who participate in SL show greater gains in outcomes like moral reasoning (Lies et al., 2012), interest in theology (Seider, 2011), and concern for others (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Among these outcomes, interest in theology has perhaps the most direct connection to religiousness, but concepts like moral reasoning

and concern for others undergird religious teachings from multiple faith traditions. This may explain why, although many studies have identified declines in religiousness throughout college, participation in service or religious mission trips may partially attenuate that decline (Astin et al., 2011).

One important factor in considering the relationship between religiousness and service is the way in which religiousness may imbue the service experience with added meaning (Dalton, 2006). This may be especially relevant for students attending religious institutions or those who participate in service in religious contexts. As Youniss et al. (1999) argued, service in explicitly religious contexts provides students with a religious lens through which to make sense of their experiences. Seider (2011) echoed this theme in a study of a year-long SL program at a Jesuit institution, finding that students were able to connect a deeper understanding of poverty through SL with the theological texts they read in class, and the SL experience provided a lens through which to view theological teachings. Seider also found that nonreligious students often credited the experience with showing them a side of Christianity that they could relate to through service.

Purpose of the Study

Although SL experiences clearly have the potential to influence religious growth in students, one particular type of SL experience, alternative breaks (ABs), has received little attention in this area. ABs are increasingly popular opportunities for groups of students to spend their academic breaks engaging in extended SL projects, often in another city, state, or country. ABs have been associated with a number of positive outcomes related to spirituality, such as questioning one's values (Rhoads & Neurerer, 1998) and finding a sense of purpose (Jones et al., 2012), but with

the exception of explicitly Jewish ABs (e.g., Swackhamer et al., 2013), few studies have specifically explored the potential for ABs to influence religiousness. As such, the purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which ABs can influence students' religiousness. Using a national dataset of AB participants from almost one hundred colleges and universities across the country, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways do students report that AB experiences influence their religiousness?

2. To what extent and in what ways does students' religiousness change following an AB experience? and

3. What specific experiences within ABs might influence religiousness?

Conceptual Framework

One of the most popular conceptual frameworks for analyzing student outcomes in higher education is Astin's (1991) Inputs–Environments–Outcomes (I-E-O) approach. The specific conceptual framework for this study was a modified version of Niehaus's (2012) framework describing the key inputs and environments that may facilitate student outcomes in ABs. The outcomes, inputs, and environments included in this framework, and the rationale for the inclusion of each, are described below.

Outcomes. The two outcomes for this study were students' perceptions of the change in their religiousness in the year after their AB experience and the influence of the AB experience on their religiousness. Religiousness has been operationalized in the prior literature in a variety of ways, often including frequency of participation in religious activities (e.g., Kuh & Gonyea, 2006; Bowman & Small, 2012). Following Astin et al. (2011), however, we focused on the internal dimensions of religiousness rather than strictly on religious behavior. Therefore, we chose three dimensions of students' own perceptions of their religiousness— the strength of their religious identity, their commitment to a particular religious tradition, and their understanding of the role of religion and spirituality in their lives— and examined these in terms of students' perceptions of both change following the AB experience and the influence of the AB experience.

Inputs. The demographic variables serving as inputs for this study included gender and race. Research has identified significant differences in outcomes related to spirituality and religiousness by race and gender (Owens, 2013; Swackhamer et al., 2013), and race and gender are both significantly related to participation in as well as outcomes related to SL, ABs, and similar college experiences (Cruce & Moore, 2007; Marks & Jones, 2004). Students' prior experience with community service and SL, ABs, and study abroad were also included as input measures. Research has shown that students with prior experiences show less growth than students without these types of experiences (e.g., Marmon, 2007).

Distal Environments. In his I-E-O framework, Astin (1991) separated environmental measures into those furthest from the actual student (distal environments) and those closest to the students' individual experience (proximal environments). One distal environment was included in this study: institutional control (private nonreligious and private religious, dummy coded with public as the referent group). Previous research has shown institutional control to be a significant predictor of outcomes of ABs (Niehaus, 2012) and to influence outcomes associated with religion and spirituality (Bowman & Small, 2010). Other factors, like size and selectivity, which have been shown to have only trivial effects on students' religious and spiritual engagement (Kuh &

Gonyea, 2006) were not included in this study.

Proximal Environments. The proximal environments for this study were those facets of students' AB experiences that have been shown in the previous literature to be those most likely to have an influence on students' religiousness, including community engagement and interactions, student inter-actions, being emotionally challenged, connec-tion to social issues, reflection, journaling, and trip location. In prior work with the National Survey of Alternative Breaks (NSAB), Niehaus (2012) found that each of these variables was significantly related to the influence of the AB experience on students' future plans. Other research on ABs and SL also point to the importance of these variables to ABs. For example, Welch and Koth (2013) identified that encounters with the "other" facilitate spiritual development. In addition, ABs facilitate learning through interactions with diverse peers (Jones et al., 2012), and peer interactions have also been shown to facilitate religious growth (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004; Small & Bowman, 2011).

One of the ways in which ABs facilitate learning is through providing new, emotionally challenging experiences. This cognitive dissonance is key, both in SL experiences (Kiely, 2005; Welch & Koth, 2013) and in religious and spiritual growth (Bowman & Small, 2010; Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013). Often this dissonance is provided through learning about social issues related to the SL experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jones et al., 2012).

Reflection is perhaps the most often cited characteristic of quality SL programs (e.g. Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kiely, 2005). The research also points to the importance of distinguishing group/discussion reflection from individual/written reflection (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Niehaus, 2012), as each may facilitate different outcomes.

Finally, although there are few studies that directly compare international and domestic SL experiences, Niehaus & Crane (2013) found that students who participate in international and domestic AB experiences *do* have significantly different experiences, with students participating in international programs generally reporting higher levels of key program characteristics than those in domestic programs.

Methods

Data for this study come from the National Survey of Alternative Breaks (NSAB; Niehaus, 2012), a multi-institutional, longitudinal study of students who participated in ABs during the spring of 2011. The NSAB employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach, whereby quantitative data were collected first and qualitative data collected second in order to explore in more depth issues that arose from the survey results (Creswell, 2003).

Data Collection

In the quantitative phase of this study, two online surveys were administered to students who participated in AB trips during the spring of 2011. The first was administered immediately after students returned from their AB experience, the second one year later. Both surveys were developed based on the existing literature on ABs, SL, and study abroad, were reviewed by content and survey methodology experts, and were piloted by a smaller group of Alternative Winter Break participants each year (see Niehaus, 2012, for more information).

Sampling for the first survey involved a random stratified sample of colleges and universities with ABs to ensure a wide array of institutional types in the sample; large research universities with large ABs were over-sampled to ensure adequate sample size. All students

who participated in ABs during the spring of 2011 at selected institutions were invited to participate in the first survey. At the end of the first survey, students were asked to provide an email address if they were willing to complete a follow-up survey. The next year the principle investigator emailed all of the students who had provided an email address, inviting them to complete the follow-up survey.

Over 2,000 students responded to the initial survey (approximately a 35% response rate); of those, over 1,800 provided a valid email address and agreed to be contacted for a follow up survey, and 558 students from 84 colleges and universities completed the second survey (a 30% response rate). Data for this study came from those completing both the year 1 and year 2 surveys. These respondents were predominantly female (81%), White (77%; 8.5% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 7.3% as Multiracial, 4.9% as African American, 1.8% as Hispanic, and 1% as another race), and Catholic or Christian (61%; 27.6% identified as Agnostic, Atheist or None; 6.8% as Jewish, 1.6% as Muslim, and 2.7% as other), and attended public institutions (62%; 23.3% private religious and 14.6% private nonreligious). The majority of respondents participated in domestic ABs (86%), while fewer participated in international trips (14%). Most respondents' AB trips focused on poverty or housing issues (36%), environmental issues (13%), education (11%), healthcare (9%) or disaster relief (8%). Just over 6% of students participated in ABs as part of an academic course, while 94% of respondents participated in cocurricular ABs.

Although there is no known accounting of the total number and demographic break-down of students who participate in ABs each year nationally, the racial and gender makeup of the NSAB respondents is similar to Skendall's (2012) findings relating to students who participated in short-term service immersions (including ABs) from a national sample of college students (the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership). A comparison of the two surveys indicated that the NSAB might have an overrepresentation of students who identified as White and female. Between Phase 1 and Phase 2 there were significant differences by race, gender, and institution type in the respondents who provided email addresses (and thus were invited to complete the Phase 2 survey), and differences by race in the respondents who completed the Phase 2 survey once invited. However, it is important to note that response rates do not necessarily indicate response bias. As Groves and Peytcheva (2008) found in a meta-analysis of the relationship between nonresponse rates and nonresponse bias, surveys like the NSAB that focus on specific behaviors, target specific populations (e.g., students or people participating in particular organizations), and where the target population has a prior relationship with the sponsor of the survey (in the case of the NSAB, the office who sponsored the AB experience sent out the invitation to the survey) have overall lower nonresponse bias, regardless of response rates. Consistent with this, an analysis comparing students who did and did not respond to the Phase 2 survey showed no significant differences in outcomes measured on the Phase 1 survey.

The qualitative phase of the NSAB employed instrumental, collective case study methodology, in that multiple cases were considered independently and together in order to examine the larger issue of the role of ABs in students' lives (Stake, 2000). Each student was considered a case. Consistent with case study methodology, multiple sources of data were collected and analyzed (Merriam, 1998)—each participants' survey data (as described above), along with data from in-depth interviews (described below).

All students who indicated on the Phase 2 survey that they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview were contacted via

email approximately 1.5 to 2.5 years after their 2011 AB experience. A total of 52 students were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol included a number of general questions about the role of the AB experience in students' lives, along with specific follow-up questions based on each student's survey responses. Interviews lasted approximately 30–60 minutes, were conducted via phone or Skype, and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (except in a few cases where technical difficulties prevented audio recording; in these cases, interviewers took detailed notes on the interviews). Students were given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

While the purpose of the qualitative phase of the NSAB overall was more broadly defined, the focus of this particular study is on the role of the AB experience in shaping students' religiousness. As such, this study focused on four information-rich, or exemplar cases (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000). The use of exemplars to illustrate a phenomenon is widely used in higher education research, particularly in case studies. As recommended by Stake (2006), we sought to identify at least four cases to maximize the benefits of a multiple case study approach. To select exemplar cases for this particular study, we first identified fourteen interviews where students specifically mentioned a relationship between their AB experiences and their religiousness. We then re-read each of those fourteen transcripts to identify the students who: (a) discussed in most depth the influence of their AB experience on their religiousness, and (b) represented diverse experiences with religion in their AB experience.
The four selected students were:

1. Clarissa, a White female student at a small public university in the South. In the first survey she indicated no religious affiliation, but in the second she identified as Christian;

2. Damien, an African American male student at a large public research university in the Midwest. In the first survey he identified as Baptist, in the second as Methodist;

3. Eric, a White male student at a mid-sized public university in the Midwest. In the first survey he identified as Lutheran, in the second as nondenominational Christian; and

4. Hank, a White, Presbyterian, male student at a small religious college in the South.

These students are not representative of all students surveyed or interviewed; rather, their stories illustrate some of the ways in which AB experiences influence some students' religiousness.

Variables

Dependent Variables. The dependent variables of interest in this study were students' perceptions of the change in their religiousness following their AB experience and the extent to which they thought that their AB experience influenced their religiousness. As noted above, we chose to focus on internal dimensions of religiousness: religious identity, commitment to a particular religious tradition, and understanding of the role of religion and spirituality in one's life. One year after their AB experience (during Phase 2), students were asked to compare themselves to before their AB experience and to rate themselves on each of these three dimensions of religiousness. Exploratory factor analysis was used to combine these three items into a single measure of perceived change in students' religiousness. Later in the survey they were asked to indicate the extent to which their AB experience influenced those same three items. These items were combined into a single measure of the perceived influence of the AB experience on

students' religiousness (see Table 1 for factor loadings and scale reliabilities).

There is significant debate in the field about the validity of student self-reported gains (e.g., Bowman & Seifert, 2011), particularly when it comes to students' ability to assess the influence of educational experiences on their own learning and development. There is some empirical support, however, for the validity of student self-reported gains in certain domains and under certain conditions. For example, Bowman and Herzog (2011) described "how surprisingly accurate self-reports can be under ideal conditions" (p. 118), specifically using the example of student self-reported gains in spirituality and religiousness. They noted that constructs such as religiousness tend to be highly salient for students and less subject to problems of social desirability than other outcomes, which likely contributes to the validity of student self-report of gains in religiousness. They also noted the importance of a response scale that permits students to report no or negative change, consistent with the response scales for the religiousness outcome items in the NSAB.

Independent Variables. The independent variables in this study included those inputs, proximal environments and distal environments described in the conceptual framework. All independent variables were measured immediately after students returned from their AB experience (during Phase 1). Three composite measures were used among the independent variables—community engagement, social issues, and reflection. All three composites were developed using exploratory principle components analysis. Factor loadings and reliabilities are provided in Table 1. All other independent variables were measured as single items.

Data Analysis

Consistent with the sequential nature of the research design and subsequent data collection, data analysis also proceeded in two phases—quantitative and qualitative. First, in the quantitative phase, descriptive statistics (frequencies, mean, and standard deviation) were calculated for each of the six individual outcome items on the survey. Next, two separate hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted (one for each composite outcome measure), following the I-E-O conceptual framework, to identify the factors that predict both perceived changes in religiousness and perceived influence of the AB experience on religiousness. For each significant predictor in the final model we calculated effect sizes (f^2) by hand, using the semi-partial R^2. The data in each analysis were found to meet the core assumptions of regression analysis; specifically, tolerance levels for both regression models ranged from .557 to .996 and VIF from 1.004 to 1.795, both well within the acceptable range.

In the qualitative phase, consistent with a collective case study, data analysis proceeded in two steps: within-case followed by cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006). In the within-case analysis, each researcher examined the survey data and interview transcript for two of the students chosen for the study and then wrote a case summary to attempt to fully describe each student's unique story. To ensure consistency and to strengthen the interpretation of the data for each student, each researcher then carefully reviewed the data and the case summary for the other two students and made edits to the case summaries as needed. When disagreements arose in the interpretation of the data, the researchers discussed until they came to a consensus. Next, researchers conducted line-by-line open coding of the case stories. To ensure consistency and accuracy of the coding, one researcher conducted a first round of open coding, and the second researcher reviewed

TABLE 1.

Input, Environment, and Outcome Variables

Variable (Scale Reliability)	Description	Factor Loadings
Outcomes		
Change in Religiousness (α = .861)	*How would you rate yourself on the following, compared to before your 2011 AB trip? (1 = much less than, 5 = much more than)*	
	Strength of your religious identity	.863
	Commitment to a particular religious tradition	.890
	Understanding of the role of religion or spirituality in your life	.900
Influence of the AB on Religiousness (α = .944)	*To what extent do you feel that your 2011 AB experience influenced your . . . (0 = not at all, 4 = quite a lot)*	
	Strength of your religious identity	.935
	Commitment to a particular religious tradition	.960
	Understanding of the role of religion or spirituality in your life	.950
Inputs		
Gender	0 = Female, 1 = Male	
Race	Five dummy-coded variables with "White" as the referent group: African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Multiracial, Other Race	
Prior AB	Number of prior AB experiences	
Prior Community Service Experience	How often students reported engaging in community service during college *(0 = never, 1 = less than once a month, 2 = once a month, 3 = more than once a month but less than once a week, 4 = once a week or more)*	
Prior Study Abroad	1 = Yes, 2 = No	
Distal Environment		
Institutional Control	Two dummy-coded variables with "Public" as the referent group: Private/religious and private/nonreligious	

table continues

TABLE 1. *continued*

Variable (Scale Reliability)	Description	Factor Loadings
Proximal Environment		
Community Engagement (α = .868)	*The extent to which . . . (1 = not at all, 5 = very much)*	
	Students worked directly with the community	.848
	The community was involved in the execution of the project	.857
	The community was involved in the design of the project	.822
	Students developed relationships with people in the community being served	.797
	Students met community-identified needs	.719
Emotional Challenge	The extent to which students felt that they were emotionally challenged by their experience *(1 = not at all, 5 = very much)*	
Community Difference	The extent to which students felt that community members were different from themselves *(1 = not at all different, 5 = completely different)*	
Community Learning	The amount that students reported learning from community members *(0 = nothing, 4 = quite a lot)*	
Community Religious Difference	Whether or not students felt that community members differed from themselves based on religion *(0 = no, 1 = yes)*	
Student Difference	The extent to which students felt that other students on the trip were different from themselves *(1 = not at all different, 5 = completely different)*	
Student Learning	The amount that students reported learning from other students on the trip *(0 = nothing, 4 = quite a lot)*	
Student Religious Difference	Whether or not students felt that other students on the trip differed from themselves based on religion *(0 = no, 1 = yes)*	

table continues

TABLE 1. *continued*

Variable (Scale Reliability)	Description	Factor Loadings
Social Issues (α = .805)	*The extent to which students agreed that . . . (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)*	
	I was able to see the larger context of the social issue addressed by my 2011 AB trip	.819
	My 2011 AB experience allowed me to come to a greater understanding of the social issue being addressed by my trip	.824
	My 2011 AB trip helped me connect real people to the trip social issue	.786
	I was able to connect my 2011 AB trip to other things I have learned outside the classroom	.670
	My 2011 AB experience allowed me to come to a greater understanding of the region where my trip took place	.659
Reflection (α = .831)	*The frequency with which students . . . (0 = never, 1 = once or twice during the week, 2 = more than once or twice but less than every day, 3 = once a day, 4 = more than once a day)*	
	Spent time with the entire group reflecting on their experiences	.837
	Discussed the impact of your group's service work with other students on your trip	.803
	Engaged in activities with others in your group to help you reflect on your experiences	.822
	Discussed your experiences with a student trip leader	.813
Journaling	How frequently students wrote in an individual journal (0 = never, 1 = once or twice during the week, 2 = more than once or twice but less than every day, 3 = once a day, 4 = more than once a day)	
Location	1 = international, 0 = domestic	

those codes. When questions arose, researchers returned to the original transcripts and survey responses to ensure that the codes were consistent with the data. Next, researchers grouped the initial codes thematically, looking for places where students' experiences were both convergent and divergent. Researchers continued to group and regroup themes and codes, at each step striving for increasing levels of abstraction, until a core story began to emerge to tie together the experiences of these four students.

The trustworthiness of the qualitative phase of the study was ensured in three ways: triangulation of data, researcher reflexivity, and member checks (Jones et al., 2006; Stake, 2000). First, data triangulation was achieved by including two years of survey responses along with the interview data. Second, both researchers engaged in dialogue about the creation and analysis of the four case stories and the cross-case analysis in order to illuminate the ways in which each researcher's perspectives may have influenced the interpretation of the data. Finally, respondents were emailed a copy of their case summaries and asked to give feedback. Two students responded confirming that the case summaries accurately described their experiences.

Results

Quantitative Phase

In the year after students' AB experiences, many saw changes in their religiousness. Almost half of all respondents (43.9%) indicated that their religious identity had changed in some way (growing stronger or weaker) or that they saw a change in their understanding of the role of religion or spirituality in their lives (44.7%); about a third of students reported a change in their commitment to a particular religious tradition. Over three quarters (76.0%) of respondents indicated some influence on the

strength of their religious identity (29.2% greater than "somewhat"), 72.5% saw some influence on their commitment to a particular religious tradition (23.0% greater than "somewhat"), and 76.6% saw some influence on their understanding of the role of religion or spirituality in their lives (31.2% greater than "somewhat").

The results of the regression analysis indicated that there were significant differences in perceived change in religiousness by race and institution type, and in perceived influence of the AB experience on religiousness by gender and institution type; none of the other inputs or environments were significantly related to either outcome. We report standardized coefficients below in order to allow for the comparison of coefficients and as another measure of effect size.

Identifying as African American was a positive predictor of perceived change in religiousness (β = .112, p < .05, f^2 = .013); identifying as male was a significant positive predictor of perceived influence on religiousness (β = .141, p < .01, f^2 = .023); and attending a religiously affiliated institution was a positive predictor of both outcomes (β = .160, p < .01, f^2 = .023 for change, β = .162, p < .01, f^2 = .026 for influence). The only proximal environment that positively predicted perceived growth in religiousness over the prior year was writing in an individual journal (β = .163, p < .01, f^2 = .023), but the proximal environments as a block did not explain significantly more variance in the model than the inputs and distal environments alone. The proximal environments as a group *did* significantly explain more variance (ΔR^2 = .083, p < .01) in perceived influence of the AB experience on students' religiousness. The amount students reported learning from community members (β = .134, p < .05, f^2 = .013) and the frequency with which they wrote in an individual journal (β = .162,

$p < .01$, $f^2 = .025$) were both significant positive predictors of perceived influence on religiousness. Overall, the regression model explained 6.0% in the variance in perceived change in religiousness and 12.5% in the variance in perceived influence of the AB experience on religiousness. The f^2 for each of the significant predictors identifies a very small to small effect (where a small effect is defined as $f^2 = .02$; Cohen, 1988).

Qualitative Phase

Consistent with the two-phase process of data analysis for a multisite case study, we will first present a short version of each case summary, then the results of the cross-case analysis.

Clarissa. In 2011, Clarissa travelled to Galveston, Texas, for her third AB trip. For Clarissa, the most important parts of *this* AB experience were learning about homelessness and working with a Christian organization. As she described, "they really taught us how to be humble with what we have, how to appreciate the small things in life, like appreciate the people around you." Upon returning to campus, Clarissa channeled the dissonance she felt between her AB experience and her life on campus into a number of positive changes, including focusing on a career in the nonprofit sector and volunteering with homelessness issues closer to campus. Despite these positive changes, Clarissa struggled with the scope of the issues she learned about through her AB. Clarissa made sense of this struggle by turning to religion. As she explained, "it was hard not to believe in something higher than yourself, especially with the Galveston trip and working with the organization we did." Prior to the trip, Clarissa did not identify with any particular religion, but by being exposed to Christianity, and to a community member who read passages from a religiously-themed book, she began to explore her own religiousness. Clarissa eventually chose to identify as a Christian, in large part due to her AB, and in the process found a way to come to terms with the small impact she could have on big issues like poverty.

Damien. Like Clarissa, Damien travelled to Galveston, Texas, but with a different AB. He valued the opportunity to interact with students different from himself, observe the staff working at his host site, and get out of the busy environment of his everyday life to be present in the moment. Particularly important for Damien was time spent talking with a former pastor, who motivated him to explore religion more deeply. Damien described, "talking with [this pastor] . . . and reading the Bible verses and relating them to [the pastor's] life, I was looking back telling myself that this is definitely something that I need to get more involved in." Much of what Damien took away from the experience focused on being grateful for what he has, because he saw people who had everything taken away from them by a hurricane, but they still had their faith.

These interactions with the pastor and community members were instrumental to the influence of the AB experience on Damien's religiousness. After his AB, Damien reported a stronger religious identity, better understanding of his own values, stronger commitment to a particular religious tradition, and a greater understanding of the role of religion in his life. This all led to changes in his religious behavior. As he explained, "my fiancé is also very religious so she has got me going to church more . . . and I have a Bible next to my bed now . . . and I have two devotionals that I read before I go to bed every night."

Eric. Eric came to college with a specific desire to explore his religious faith. During the trip, Eric was particularly inspired by a staff member who led a prayer with all of the volunteers during a pre-construction meeting. This positive example of faith as well as "just being around other Christians on spring break

really encouraged [Eric] to really branch out in [his] Christianity and walk with Jesus." Indeed, at the time of the interview, Eric considered himself to be "very, very faithful." As Eric pursued his faith more vigorously, past relationships and activities that he previously enjoyed faded away. Activities like partying and drinking, which Eric's roommates did frequently, lost their allure. Instead "the combination of the spring break trip, the different people that I met, the personalities that I actually could latch onto, and the positive influence with Jesus Christ . . . made me change the way I thought."

For Eric, religious curiosity led him to service, which in turn led him to a stronger religious identity that had real and immediate consequences in his life. He even identified the service he continued to perform in religious terms, observing "that there's people out there who need help and whether I'm in a position to give or not I'm blessed with what I have and I might as well do with what I have to help other people."

Hank. Despite being the son of a Presbyterian minister, at the time of his first AB trip in college, Hank was struggling with his faith. He explained, "I've become increasingly disillusioned with . . . a lot of the way that the church's energy gets . . . wasted in a lot of ways . . . I see a lot of the things the church does falls short of its . . . stated mission." His experience on his AB trip, however, reinforced what he *did* like about the church— mission work. Hank reported, "the things that I always . . . wish the church would invest more in, is mission work because that is the actual . . . life-changing thing for both the people who are being served and for the people that are serving."

While Hank continued to distance himself from the Presbyterian Church, his commitment to service, reinforced by his AB experience, allowed him to find a way to continue to connect to his church background in a way that was meaningful for him.

The decline in religious identity Hank experienced following his AB trip could be construed as negative, but really his continued and increased participation in community service reveals a renewed commitment to the Presbyterian Church on Hank's own terms. As Hank saw it, "I have a lot of positive feelings about the church, but I think if I'm going to continue to be involved in the church, it's going to be through outreach-like mission work."

Cross-Case Analysis. The cross-case analysis identified a number of themes that describe the process by which these four students' AB experiences influenced their religiousness. These themes included students' openness to a religious experience, the challenge and support provided by the structure of the AB, the religious filter through which students interpreted their experiences, and the ways students made sense of the relationship between religion and service.

This core story begins with the individual and environmental factors that facilitated for these four students a degree of openness to the AB experience, and specifically to having a religiously profound experience. Each student had a specific motive for participating and was looking to having a meaningful spring break. Importantly, the structure of the AB trip— taking students out of the comfort and routine of their everyday lives—helped facilitate further openness to the experience. As Damien described, "I'm usually busy from 8 to 5 every day and going to Galveston, none of that was there anymore. I didn't have my cell phone. I didn't have work. I didn't have an agenda." Finally, all four students were in specific places in their lives that made them specifically open to religious influence. Damien and Eric both acknowledged the importance of religion in their lives even before the AB experience, Hank was working through his inner conflict with the Presbyterian Church, and Clarissa

was wrestling with how to make sense of her previous AB experiences and the "big picture" of social issues like poverty.

Building on that openness, the AB provided cognitive dissonance through interactions with diverse others and the exploration of complex social issues. Eric, for example, talked about learning that poverty existed in the United States. Clarissa similarly described the importance of "learning about [homelessness] and actually seeing it and understanding . . . and coming back with just a completely different attitude."

Importantly, though, this dissonance happened within a community of students, host site staff, and community members that provided the support that students needed to work through their experiences, as opposed to rejecting new information that did not make sense within their existing frames of reference. Hank commented on the value of "little conversations that happen with people trading different experiences and reflecting about what happened during the day." Damien found meaning in observing the work of the host site staff, and learning "everything is not about you. It's about others as well."

Yet these interactions were not all serious; there was value in the joy of the experience. As Eric described, "it makes time go by faster when you're working with people who share passions with you and are working hard and just loving life."

While this balance of challenge and support is common in many transformative experiences, these particular AB experiences were specifically religiously transformative for these four students due to the explicitly religious aspects of their ABs. These experiences provided a religious filter through which students could make sense of their service. This filter was formed by religiously-based service and religious learning. All four students volunteered with Christian organizations, which gave them the opportunity to see service through a religious lens. Each student also had interactions with specific community members who inspired them in different ways to explore religion. Clarissa, for example, explained:

> one of the men that led [the host organization] would read a passage out of a book called *Messy Spirituality*, and it really just piqued my interest, I guess. After the trip, I actually bought the book and started reading it and so it really did kind of shift my outlook.

Finally, each of the four students engaged in a process of making sense of religion and service, leading to changes in perspective and behavior. Damien used his faith to make sense of the destruction he saw in the wake of a hurricane. He saw that faith was something that could never be taken away, even for people who had lost everything. Clarissa used religion to come to terms with the small, but still meaningful contribution she could make to addressing complex social problems. Through the influence of the staff leader at her host site and her continued study of the book he introduced her to, she came to consider herself Christian. Eric made new, more meaningful connections that enabled him to let go of previous friendships with individuals who did not reflect his evolving values. Equally important, these new relationships reaffirmed his desire to volunteer and further develop his religious identity. Finally, Hank, who had been struggling to make sense of conflicting feelings about his religion, was able to find some resolution to this conflict through service. He still did not want to be involved in what he saw as petty arguments within the church, but "when the church begins talking about doing social outreach and funding programs . . . then I can be more supportive of that."

Limitations

Before discussing the results of this study, it

is important to note a few key limitations. First, we did not employ a pre-test/post-test design, and therefore, we are only able to examine students' own perceptions of their religiousness. Unlike much of the previous research that has defined religiousness as frequency of participation in religious activities, we chose to use a specific, internally-focused operationalization of religiousness in order to explore how AB experiences may influence students' religiousness at a deeper level. However, a different operationalization of religiousness may have led to different findings. Additionally, the overall variance accounted for in each model is relatively low (approximately 6 and 13%) and the effect sizes for each of the significant predictors was very small to small (f^2 = .013 to .025). As Cohen (1988) noted, however, effect sizes in the behavioral sciences are often quite low. In this study in particular, it is not surprising that the overall effect of AB experiences, and of specific pieces of the AB experience, had a small effect on students' religiousness overall. For some students this effect may be profound (as evidenced in the qualitative results), but there is only so much influence that we can expect from one short experience such as an AB. The fact that there is even a small measurable effect of something like learning from community members or writing in a journal can have practical significance considering the short-term nature of the AB, the complexity of religiousness as a phenomenon, and the multitude of other factors in students' lives that may influence their religiousness over time. The results of this study can inform the relationship between ABs and perceived religiousness, but this study was not meant to model all of the factors that may contribute to changes in religiousness over time.

Similarly, the qualitative phase of this study was not meant to be comprehensive nor representative of all students who participate in ABs. Rather, the purpose was to provide a deeper explanation of *some* of the ways that ABs *may* influence religiousness. One significant limitation of the qualitative phase of this study was that all four students included identified as Christian and participated in Christian-based service projects; the process by which ABs may influence other religious identities may look different than that which is represented by these four students. Additionally, while we were able to triangulate survey and interview data, we had no data that came from outside of the students themselves. Adding more data about the AB programs would have added more depth to the case study analysis. The primary purpose of the NSAB interviews was also not expressly to explore religion— only those students who had indicated on the second survey that their AB had some influence on their religious identity, commitment, and/or understanding were asked to expand on this further. Had we conducted interviews with the sole purpose of exploring the relationship between ABs and religiousness we may have elicited more and different information from students.

Discussion

The purpose of this sequential mixed-methods study was to explore the ways in which ABs can affect students' religiousness. Specifically, we sought to identify the extent to and ways in which students report that AB experiences influence their religiousness, the extent to and ways in which students perceive changes in religiousness following an AB experience, and the specific experiences within ABs that might facilitate this change. The results from each phase of this study provide complementary insights into these questions.

The first finding of interest in the quantitative results was the extent to which students reported changes in their religiousness overall, and more specifically that their AB experience

influenced their religiousness. While not the majority of students, a solid quarter to a third of all respondents experienced substantial changes in and influence of their AB experience on their religiousness. The results of the qualitative phase of the study provide added description of some of the ways in which students' religiousness may change following an AB experience. Eric and Damien found a deeper connection to their existing religious faith, Clarissa discovered a new religious faith, and Hank was able to reconnect to his faith on his own terms through service. Importantly, Hank's experience reflects Seider's (2011) finding that students were able to see a "softer" side of Christianity that they could relate to through service, and Clarissa's experience demonstrates that unaffiliated students may be just as interested in religious development as those who have a strong religious affiliation (Bowman & Small, 2010).

Although the effect sizes for each significant predictor were small at best, the regression analyses do illuminate some interesting relationships between specific individual, institutional, and AB program variables and students' perceptions of their religiousness. The quantitative data showed that students at religious institutions were more likely than those at secular institutions to report both change in and an influence of the AB experience on their religiousness. This is perhaps parallel to Bowman and Small's (2010) findings that students at religiously affiliated institutions reported larger gains in spiritual identification and quest. Although their focus was on spirituality, Bowman and Small hypothesized that interacting with "students who understand others' personal religious situations can offer the most encouragement in the process of knowing oneself and one's spiritual path more fully" (p. 609). The results of the present study point to the possibility that the same may be true for the process of knowing one's religious path more fully.

Bowman and Small (2010) also found that the differences in spiritual development between religious and secular institutions was fully mediated by students' engagement in religious and spiritual activities. Although their focus was on spiritual development, this is parallel to the findings from the qualitative phase of the study. Although only one student in the qualitative study attended a religiously affiliated institution, all four volunteered with religiously-based service organizations; this connection between service and religion was key to their religious growth. The ways in which all four students connected service and religion reflects suggestions by Seider (2011) and Youniss et al. (1999) that service in a religious context helps provide a religious lens through which students make sense of their service (like Clarissa), and a service lens through which students make sense of religion (like Hank).

The results of the regression analysis regarding the importance of learning from community members were also further explained by findings from the qualitative analysis. Each of the four students interviewed spoke of a meaningful interaction that shaped their religious views during and after the trip. Clarissa connected to a staff member who shared passages from *Messy Spirituality*, which she later read and used to make sense of her experiences. Damien was impressed by the perspective of a former pastor he worked with, and Eric was inspired by a team leader who led prayers before the start of each work day. Hank made a more general but equally meaningful connection, taking note of the professionalism and dedication of secular team members. Previous research on ABs has also pointed to the importance of interacting with community members (Jones et al., 2012; Niehaus, 2012) and host site staff (Niehaus, 2012), but these

findings expand on the specific ways that students may benefit from these interactions.

One surprise in the quantitative results was that there were not more individual significant predictors among the various AB program features. The range of ABs, and likely the range of quality of ABs, included in the NSAB may at least partially explain this. Although the purpose of the NSAB was to "unpack" the AB experience and explore how different features of ABs may contribute to student outcomes, there is only so far that a survey instrument can go in understanding what actually happens during an AB program. For example, reflection was measured by asking students to report how frequently they engaged in various reflection activities, but we have no measure of the quality of that reflection. This is where the qualitative results are particularly helpful in illuminating connections between the actual experience within an AB and an influence on students' religiousness. In particular, the quantitative results did not point to the importance of learning about broader social issues, as would be expected from the previous literature (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jones et al., 2012; Marks & Jones, 2004; Niehaus, 2012; Welch & Koth, 2013), but the qualitative results do reflect previous findings in identifying the cognitive dissonance that students experienced in learning about complex social issues as an important factor in their growth.

Similarly, the fact that the quantitative results showed no significant relationship between interacting across *difference*, religious or otherwise, and growth in religiousness was surprising, based on the extensive literature on the importance of diversity interactions in SL and ABs (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jones et al., 2012; Kiely, 2005; Niehaus, 2012; Welch & Koth, 2013). However, the qualitative findings may explain this relationship better. For Hank and Clarissa, interacting across difference with

people in a secular and explicitly Christian context, respectively, was important in their AB experiences. For Damien and Eric, though, it was really through interacting with people of similar religious traditions that they grew in their own faith. For all four students, the ability to connect to other students and community members provided the sense of community and support they needed to work through and grow from their experiences. Thus it was really the *similarities* they saw between themselves and others, rather than the differences, which mattered. This may reflect Small and Bowman's (2011) finding that above and beyond the effect of religious engagement, interactions with peers with similar religious beliefs was positively associated with gains in religious commitment.

One issue that students discussed in the interviews that was not reflected in the quantitative data was the ways in which they built on and maintained the influence of their AB experience over time. In regards to if/how students maintain their faith, responses by Eric, Damien, and Hank indicated that in the absence of school sponsored supports (which no one mentioned) students may seek out their own. Damien found support in the faith of his girlfriend, and in part due to her influence now attends church services regularly and reads Bible passages each night. Eric, who reflected the kind of cognitive dissonance Ueker et al. (2007) identified in the conflict between typical college activities and religiousness, traded old friends for new ones whose convictions aligned more closely with his own, instead of turning away from faith like the students in the study by Ueker et al. Hank acted on his reconnection to the Presbyterian Church by continuing to engage in mission activities, which may also reflect the findings of Astin et al. (2011) that certain activities like religious mission trips can attenuate drops in religious engagement.

Conclusions and Implications

Consistent with previous research on ABs (Jones et al., 2012; Niehaus, 2012), the results of this study demonstrate the powerful potential of ABs to have profound effects on students' lives. In this study, the data show that AB experiences can influence students' religiousness and help students connect (or reconnect) to religious faith. This may be particularly true for students who are open to a religious experience, who participate in service with an explicit religious connection, and who are able to interact directly with community members who in some way teach them about religion.

This study has a number of implications for practice and future research. First, those working with ABs and other service-learning programs should pay attention to what students bring to the AB trip, as their orientation toward the experience and other issues in their lives may influence how they make sense of the AB experience. In this case, it was the students' orientation towards religion that mattered, but this might be similar for any number of other issues that are particularly salient for students at the time. Next, practitioners should consider the role that religiously based service might play in students' AB experiences and should not be afraid to engage students in discussions about the connections between religion and service. These conversations may happen more naturally at religiously affiliated institutions, but are also important for students at public and nonsecular private institutions.

The centrality of religiously-based service in the qualitative findings is particularly noteworthy considering the popularity of ABs with Habitat for Humanity, an explicitly religious organization (over the past 25 years over 230,000 students have participated in Habitat ABs; Habitat for Humanity, 2014). Practitioners should be particularly attuned to the potential for these experiences to influence students' religiousness, and should provide support and opportunities for students to continue to engage in questions of religiousness upon returning to campus. Again, this may be easier at religious institutions, so practitioners at secular institutions may want to consider how partnerships (e.g., with campus ministry offices) may better enable them to support students struggling with religious questions.

One key implication for both practice and research in service-learning is the importance of *sameness* in facilitating student development. Much of the prior research in service-learning focuses on encounters with difference (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jones et al., 2012; Kiely, 2005); as such, many service-learning programs (including many ABs) focus on providing opportunities for students to interact across difference. Although there are clear benefits to focusing on difference, the results of this study point to a need for practitioners and researchers to also focus on how similarities (among students and between students and community members) may also facilitate student growth and development.

The results of this study also point to specific directions for future research in this area. As other studies have noted (e.g., Niehaus, 2012), more work needs to be done to investigate the role of journaling in facilitating learning in ABs. Additionally, future research should focus on the role of challenge and support in AB experiences to help practitioners identify how to create optimally balanced programs. Finally, more research should be done to explore the religious experiences of non-Christian students who participate in ABs and the experiences of all students who participate in ABs with non-Christian, religiously affiliated organizations.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elizabeth Niehaus, 133 Teachers College Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588; eniehaus@unl.edu

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