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Student Perceptions on the Community of Spiritual Formation at a Faith-Based University

Jonathan R. Colburn

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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON THE COMMUNITY OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION
AT A FAITH-BASED UNIVERSITY

By

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“STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON THE COMMUNITY OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT A FAITH-BASED UNIVERSITY,” a Doctoral research project prepared by JONATHAN COLBURN in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

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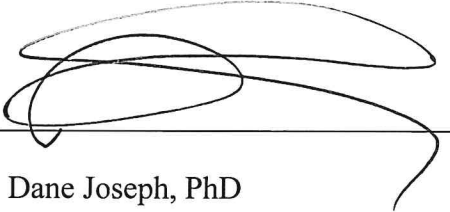
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ABSTRACT

Spiritual formation has always been of utmost importance in Christian education as faith-based institutions strive to educate the whole person; body, mind, and spirit. Because of this, Christian universities work to create programs and provide activities that challenge the minds and hearts of the students in order to promote spiritual growth. This study seeks to answer the following question: What does a phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of students at a Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCC) institution reveal about their perceptions of the spiritual formation priorities of the institution? Stated another way, what do students report about their lived experiences in relation to the spiritual formation practices at their institution? This research captured a glimpse of the spiritual formation programming at Pacific Northwest Christian University, or PNCU (pseudonym), as six students shared their experiences through a process of interviews.

As the interview data and field notes were analyzed, four themes emerged from the research: Classes and professors impacted their spiritual growth, a sense of community was important to their well-being and spiritual formation, faculty and staff provided a platform for spiritual mentoring, and communal worship in various formats was meaningful. These themes proved consistent with the literature, and offered a snapshot of the overall health of the spiritual formation paradigm at the institution. As a result of this research, a few suggestions were formulated as to how the university could continue to improve its offerings of spiritually formative experiences, and offered insight into potential further study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My journey toward the world of education has been unconventional to say the least. As I pen the final words of this dissertation, I sit in an empty classroom—a room in which 130 high school students gather throughout each weekday, looking to me to provide insight and wisdom into the world of English Language Arts and Communication. As I reflect in this space, I am humbled and deeply grateful that the Lord chose me to teach, for this time and in this season. They say that education is the noblest profession, and I couldn't agree more. It is also the most difficult, in my opinion, as we who call ourselves educators are charged with such a high duty—to shape the future as we shape lives. As I discovered through doing this research, people make all the difference. That God would call me to make a difference is a profoundly humbling.

People make all the difference. I have always wanted to pursue a doctorate, dreaming of someday working in education, specifically in a Christian university. Although my journey has taken many twists and turns along the way, I am grateful to Patrick and Lori Allen. Lori recruited me to my undergraduate institution 22 years ago, where I also met Patrick. As we shared life in my undergrad years and later reconnected when my family moved to Oregon, I knew it was a special relationship. It was Patrick who first told me I would be a candidate for a doctorate at George Fox, and it was he who gave me the idea for this research. Thank you, Patrick, for believing in me even in the most difficult moment of my life. I'm grateful for your wit and wisdom, and the encouragement you so graciously gave me along the way.

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did not believe in myself. Karen and Dane, I am so grateful for your insight and kind encouragement through this process, and blessed that you made up the remainder of my committee. It is amazing to me that you both were the ones who interviewed me for this program, even when I didn't believe I had a chance to get in, and that you are the ones seeing me through to the end. Karen, thank you, too, for believing in me. I'll never forget the conversation we had in one of my first classes with you when you told me I could do this even though I was the only one who was unfamiliar with pretty much everything in education. I'm so grateful for the gentle ways in which you encouraged me, and the creative methods with which you instruct. Susanna and Scot, your encouragement and instruction have formed me in profound ways, and I am so grateful for your influence in not only my education, but my life. I could not have asked for a better, more inspirational experience in my doctoral journey than what I have encountered at GFU.

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People make all the difference. I learned that from my dad. He has been with Jesus for over 11 years now, and I still remember and cherish so much of what he taught me. He was the greatest educator I ever knew. I dedicate this dissertation to him. Dad always wanted a doctorate, but was never able to achieve that dream as he worked to provide for our family, serving as a teacher, principal, and superintendent of public and Christian schools throughout his career. I pray that I am half the educator that you were, Dad, and that someday my students will say some of the things about me that I've heard your former students say about you. This is for you, Dad. I love you, I miss you, and you will always be with me as I teach.

People make all the difference. As much as I believe that is the case, I know that it is truly God who makes *all* the difference. Our Creator sustains all, just as God sustained me and somehow brought me through this part of my journey. To God be the glory, now and forever.

Soli Deo gloria.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Having grown up in a Christian educator's home, attending a faith-based school at every level of my education, I have come to appreciate Christian education—the good, the bad, and everything in between. More recently, I became interested in what faith-based higher education institutions do to promote spiritual formation amongst their students. I became curious about what works, and what does not work. This interest came from my own undergraduate experience in a faith-based institution, as well as my work in the Office of Student Development and Office of Spiritual Development at a small Christian university. Throughout my own student journey, and then as a staff member, I have observed the way students experience what would be considered success spiritually, and those who have chosen otherwise. These observations have given me pause to consider what, if anything, a university might do to promote the best possible outcome for students spiritually.

Christian spiritual formation and Christian education seem almost inextricably linked (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003). In general, spiritual formation practices have always informed and played a significant role in Christian education. Likewise, Christian education has always contributed to, or been a means of spiritual formation (Bramer, 2010; Otto & Harrington, 2016). This connection, then, suggests that faith-based higher educational institutions should be compelled to invest in intentional spiritual formation programming for their students (Otto & Harrington, 2016). Initially, spiritual formation at Christian colleges and universities was viewed almost as an afterthought—a byproduct of education within the context of a Christian worldview (Bramer, 2010). Toward the end of the 20th century, however, Christian institutions adopted the

idea that spiritual formation must be intentional, and, as such, should be approached programmatically (Bramer, 2010; Otto & Harrington, 2016). Such programs often include, but are not limited to: Chapel services, worship experiences, local service opportunities (on-campus and off-campus), mission trips, small groups, mentoring programs, and various discipleship initiatives. While at a Christian institution, any one or a combination of these may effectively contribute to a student's spiritual maturity; however, institutions' spiritual formation programming varies widely (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003; Otto & Harrington, 2016). Although there seem to be some universally accepted practices of spiritual formation in Christian education, such as the programs listed above, the precise execution of the program differs from institution to institution.

There is some empirical evidence to suggest that Christian undergraduate students do not attend faith-based schools in order to escape the world, but rather to be informed about how to make a difference in it. For instance, a case study by LeBlanc and Slaughter (2012) reported that students at Christian universities did not seek to escape the world, but to learn how to engage the world and change it. Further, the authors indicate students attend distinctly Christian institutions in order to grow spiritually, in addition to their academic pursuits. This enables them to make practical spiritual application of their faith to their life experience. Other studies suggest that students who had actively engaged in missions or social justice ministry during their college experience reported growth in spiritual maturity and that their worldviews have been enlarged (Porter, Heykoop, Miller, & Pickett, 2015; Schneller, Minardi, & Lake, 2016).

Correspondingly, research has shown that faith development is directly relatable to peer relationships, and vice versa. In other words, peers influence spiritual formation, and spiritual formation influences peer relationships (Powell, Tisdale, Willingham, Bustrum & Allan, 2012).

Indeed, the students interviewed by Powell et al. (2012) indicated that acceptance and high-quality relationships with friends influenced how they relate to themselves and to God. In the same study, a connection was made regarding student spiritual formation and engagement in leadership, service opportunities, and Christian community. Interviewees self-reported that these opportunities for involvement enhanced and impacted their spiritual growth. Other research suggests leaders at Christian institutions must simply find ways to help emerging adults in their quest for "...meaning and identity" (Ma, 2003, p. 324). Ma (2003) indicated both curricular and extracurricular programs helped students discover meaning in life and build identity through spiritual formation.

While many specific studies have been conducted to assess spiritual formation at various Christian universities (Love & Talbot, 1999; Ma, 2003; Otto & Harrington, 2016), it would seem that no consensus of best practices has been identified that would indicate success of spiritual formation programming as a whole (Ma, 2003). While this may be impractical, if not impossible to measure outright across a wide range of institutions, it would be a valuable exercise to identify and assess the best practices of spiritual formation at a single Christian institution. From such an effort some insights may be drawn as to how specific programming and initiatives may inform those of other schools. Such research could help establish the importance of certain aspects of spiritual formation programming at a given institution, as well as further the knowledge in regard to what kinds of programs constitute best practices for forming students spiritually (Love & Talbot, 1999; Otto & Harrington, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the wide-ranging awareness of the connection between spiritual formation and Christian education, no two institutions seem to approach spiritual formation in the same fashion

(Bramer 2010; Ma, 2003). Programs vary greatly from school to school, and an initiative that may be effective for one does not necessarily indicate success at another. Even more problematic is that there does not seem to be an efficient standard for measuring spiritual formation in students at any given institution (Ma, 2003). While no single study can attain consensus about how spiritual formation at a Christian university is best achieved, stakeholders in spiritual formation work cite the need for additional research into the programming and processes by which spiritual formation might be well-enacted within a Christian university context (Love & Talbot, 1999; Ma, 2003).

Purpose Statement

This qualitative study sought to answer the following question: What does a phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of students at a Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCC) institution reveal about their perceptions of the spiritual formation priorities of the institution? Stated another way, what do students report about their lived experiences in relation to the spiritual formation practices at their institution?

Research Questions

The study consisted of a series of interviews and took place at a Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCC) institution. Participants included six senior level students with whom I conducted semi-structured interviews designed to gain insight into their perceptions of institutionally designed spiritual experiences. In an effort to achieve a phenomenological understanding of the broader questions stated above, I used a combination of “grand tour” questions and assorted probes (Giorgi, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). The interviews were conducted in such a way as to answer the following research questions:

Research Question #1

From their lived experiences, do the participants report that their spiritual formation was enhanced by the purposeful activities and programs provided by the institution?

Research Question #2

From their individual experiences, what were the most beneficial activities or programs the university offered to aid in their spiritual formation?

Research Question #3

From their lived experiences, what activities or programs offered by the university were ineffective at contributing to their spiritual formation?

Key Terms

All studies contain important key terms central to understanding the context of the research. Below is a list of terms that assist in providing such a context.

Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU): An association of over 180 Christian, faith-based institutions committed to advancing scholarship and Christian values amongst its institutions around the world (About CCCC, n.d.).

Spiritual Formation: Practices of the heart and mind that lead to deep devotion to God and the community of faith (Bramer, 2010).

Spiritual Formation Programming: Any program or initiative intentionally employed by an institution to enhance or encourage spiritual growth in and amongst its students.

Organization of the Study and Significance of the Research

This study was conducted over two days as I had the opportunity to extensively interview six college seniors at a particular CCCC institution, Pacific Northwest Christian University, or PNCU (pseudonym), learning what their experiences were in spiritual formation at the

institution. I wanted to know what kinds of programming or experiences most influenced their spiritual lives, what may have been a distraction to their growth, and what the university may be able to do better to more effectively promote spiritual formation. Conducted in a semi-structured interview format, this phenomenological study offered insight to myself and the university as to what kinds of programs, activities, or experiences are most beneficial to encouraging spiritual formation amongst students—and perhaps some things that are not useful or effective.

Although spiritual formation programs abound, and could even be considered paramount at Christian universities, each seems to have its own priorities, and, more specifically, means to arrive at effective success. A review of the literature suggests that while each university employs different practices to aid in student spiritual formation, there does not appear to be a specific formula for success. Although it would be beneficial to study multiple universities to determine what a more specific pathway to effective spiritual formation could look like, a wide-ranging study of multiple universities would be impractical. Consequently, I focused my efforts on a phenomenological study of a single institution, listening to the voices of a few students who have experienced spiritual formation. From these conversations I attempted to extrapolate what kinds of programming or experiences the institution provided that may have contributed to their formation. Although not generalizable, this information could prove valuable in determining what a specific institution does to successfully promote spiritual formation amongst its students.

Limitations and Delimitations

As with any research, there were some inherent limitations associated with this particular study. One such limitation was based on the qualitative design of my research. Qualitative data are inherently subjective and, as a result, open to interpretation. Because of this limitation, the researcher should publicly acknowledge his or her personal experiences and biases relevant to

the research topic. Additionally, the qualitative researcher needs to design careful data analysis protocols and use them with integrity (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Huffman, 2013). Another limitation exists in the sampling strategy. Data was derived from nonprobability samples and, thus, findings will not be generalizable. However, the findings will likely be highly transferable and, thus, have great inherent value (Daniel, 2011). Another limitation was a result of the nature of the data collection strategy of interviewing. Personal interviews using small samples are especially vulnerable to social desirability effect biases (Maxwell, 2005). An important limitation was the use of a key informant, or gatekeeper. Specifically, the gatekeeper was an individual who occupied an administrative leadership role in the university, and thus recruited students who tended to be more highly involved in campus leadership. In fact, four of the six student participants were involved in campus leadership. This fact represents an obvious bias that I will discuss in greater detail in chapter five.

Additionally, there were a few delimitations to my research. While it would be ideal to measure the transferability of my findings by conducting the study at several institutions, I chose to focus my efforts on a single university. The use of only one faith-based, Christian institution is, in some respects, perhaps not ideal, but it is practical and makes the study more possible. Moreover, the use of one institution is not inconsistent with the research parameters of phenomenological research (Giorgi, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Further, limiting the student subjects to seniors and not lower-classmen/women enhances the possibility for greater reflection on spiritual formation among those who are nearing the end of their education at a faith-based institution. Finally, the use of six students was a pragmatic sampling target and consistent with the purpose of phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994; Padilla-Díaz, 2015).

Bracketing

My interest in this particular area of research arose through both my own educational journey as well as my professional experience. As mentioned previously, every level of my education has been at a faith-based institution. It was during my secondary experience that I really began to think through both the systemic and emotional aspects of spiritual formation as part of an educational experience. That became more of a passion of mine in my undergraduate work as I became more involved in the spiritual formation process, both as a participant, then as a peer facilitator. My interest in the topic continued as I entered into professional youth ministry, then began working in student and spiritual life at a regional, denominationally affiliated Christian university. During that time, I watched as some students fully engaged in spiritually formative processes, and others who chose to leave the faith. It was during this time that I really began to simply question what worked well in regard to spiritual formation, and what was simply ineffective, or, perhaps, nonexistent at the institution.

I went on to pursue a master's degree in spiritual formation, and continue in professional ministry in the church. As I began to look toward an Ed.D. in higher education, I began to think about how my work in my two degree programs may coincide with my passion for student spiritual formation among undergraduate students. Thus, my professional work combined with my educational work have brought me to this point. I sought to discover what may or may not be effective in regard to spiritual formation programming at a faith-based institution in order to apply my findings to a future role in student spiritual formation at a Christian university.

Admittedly, I hoped to hear that students whom I interviewed at the institution at which I conducted the research have experienced meaningful spiritual formation, for that is at the heart of who I am professionally and spiritually. Additionally, I know that this is the ideal outcome of

any spiritual formation paradigm at a faith-based institution. I believe, however, that for the purposes of this study I have kept my biases in check as I investigated and analyzed the lived experiences of the students whom I interviewed, reporting my findings appropriately as an outside researcher, unaffiliated with the institution inasmuch as the spiritual formation program is concerned.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

As mentioned previously, faith-based institutions of higher education, across the board, integrate spiritual formation into their overall experience (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003; Otto & Harrington, 2016). This holistic integration seems to be a trend amongst Christian universities (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003; Otto & Harrington, 2016; Powell et al., 2012). That said, faith-based institutions often, if not always, program spiritual formation into more than simply the academic curriculum (Rhea, 2011). Research has suggested, "...the Christian academy should increasingly orient their students' lives and learning toward the glory of God...Notions of integration, epistemology, and a doxological orientation for all of life must be central discussions in Christian higher education" (Rhea, 2011, p. 11). The author's idea of complete integration of spirituality is important because it supports the notion that spiritual formation must be intentional and deliberate in all aspects of the Christian university experience. Academic and spiritual development need not be exclusive from one another (Rhea, 2011).

This literature review is organized to offer insight into what is presently known about the spiritual formation practices at Christian institutions. Specifically, this review highlights (a) the role of spiritual formation in Christian higher education, (b) components of spiritual formation programs, and (c) results of spiritual formation programming in Christian higher education. The search was conducted using databases associated with the George Fox University library, including Primo, EBSCO and ERIC. Search terms included *spiritual formation*, *college students*, *student success*, *college students—religious life*, *student development*, *student engagement*,

Christian education, and *undergraduates*. Some of these terms were used in combination with Boolean operators *or* and *and*. Restrictions were made to full text, peer-reviewed articles written after 1996. This date was chosen because of the renewed emphasis of spiritual formation at Christian institutions in the past couple decades (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003), including a shift at theological schools from more scholastic theology to Christian spiritual formation (Bramer, 2010). Additionally, many articles and studies have been published on the subject of spiritual formation within Christian education over the past 20 years (Otto & Harrington, 2016).

The Role of Spiritual Formation in Christian Education

Spiritual formation and Christian education are tandem efforts, leading to the holistic development of students (Bramer, 2010). They often complement each other, and both strive to inform and enrich one another. Bramer (2010) outlined what spiritual formation is, including its four “fields of interest” (p. 335), and how it can contribute to Christian education. He also mentioned repeatedly how both disciplines are involved in the business of character and virtue development. The most basic responsibility of a Christian university, according to Otto and Harrington (2016), is to successfully integrate spiritual formation into the collegiate experience. To illustrate their point, the authors cited the increase in studies by the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) in the last two decades, as well as highlighted the spiritual foundations of higher education itself. Given their dynamic level of personal development, the importance of spiritual formation to undergraduate students cannot be overemphasized. Spiritual formation at this age (from 18-22 years old) has a positive influence on students’ sense of self and purpose (Morris, Beck, & Smith, 2004; Otto & Harrington, 2016).

Spiritual formation in pedagogy. Research in spiritual formation at the university level advocates for the importance of integration of spiritual formation practices into the curriculum,

rather than what is dubbed as simply an “add on” program (Morris et al., 2004). Otto and Harrington (2016) and Bramer (2010) both cited scholarship on “soul projects” by Setran, Wilhoit, Ratcliff, Haase, and Rozema (2010). In their seminal article on spiritual formation in Christian higher education, these authors explored the importance of intentional spiritual formation by emphasizing seven different formative curriculum-related experiences that have implications for spiritual growth as an intentional byproduct. These purposely-designed experiences included the following: Reflective exercises, statements of personal intention, spiritual practices, prayer projects, journaling and discernment, awe-evoking experiences, and identity formation. Each of these experiences represented a project that tied into academic curriculum, but also evoked intentional spiritual formation. Spiritually linked, co-curricular activities have helped faculty make connections to student spiritual development (Otto & Harrington, 2016; Setran et al., 2010). Besides providing academic practice, these activities served to enhance students’ spiritual experiences, and provided opportunities for growth beyond the classroom. Soul projects can be employed in any academic discipline, and serve to enhance the university’s overall academic and spiritual programming, providing positive cross-disciplinary outcomes for students across the board (Setran et al., 2010).

Related studies indicated the need to view a liberal arts education through a “Christocentric” lens (Otto & Harrington, 2016, p. 257). Going as far as to dub them, “The Christian Liberal Arts” (p. 257), research in the spiritual formation movement argued that students in all disciplines should be prepared to think critically and understand ideas through both an academic and spiritual lens. Additionally, faculty should work to integrate spirituality into the classroom curriculum, and intentional spiritual formation programming should be employed campus wide (Morris et al., 2004).

Although this is accomplished in different ways, it would seem as if integrating faith into the academic curriculum has a direct effect on the spiritual growth of students (Setran et al., 2010) , and that faculty, as Christians themselves, desire to play a more active role in student spiritual formation. Using a case study approach at Azusa Pacific University, McCoy (2014) found that integrating faith into the physics curriculum helped to inform the worldview of the students and encouraged them to be “...ethical practitioners of science...[as well as] dispelling the common misconception that science and Christianity are irrevocably at odds...” (p. 350). This notion of spiritual formation integrated within a science (in this case, physics) curriculum is important due to the nature of science itself. Generally speaking, it is thought that Christians cannot fully believe in all aspects of science, and scientists cannot fully believe in all aspects of Christianity (McCoy, 2014). Insisting in a Christocentric view of science helps professors in that particular field reconcile the two (McCoy, 2014). Instructors at Christian institutions of higher education have the great privilege of speaking into the lives of their students in unique ways as they sense their responsibility to encourage spiritual development in their area of discipline (McCoy, 2014; Steele, 2004).

Spiritual formation and self-identity. Holistic student development in any context must have spiritual undertones, at best, but especially when related to a distinctly Christian institution. The failure to address the spiritual needs of students leaves them vulnerable in the development of other areas of their lives (Love & Talbot, 1999). At such an impressionable time in their development, undergraduate-age students must be challenged and encouraged by the practices and self-exploration that spiritual formation affords (Love & Talbot, 1999). Humans are inherently spiritual beings, each uniquely possessing a sense of “self.” Research attempts to reconcile a student’s “sense of spiritual self” as he or she journeys through the educational

process at a Christian university, with the educational theory and practice of the social sciences, specifically. To that end, an analysis of Harold Burgess' "evangelical/kerygmatic" model, emphasizing the integration of "a message as central to religious education" (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell, 2006, p. 241) was conducted. In Burgess' model, spiritual formation was identified as an essential component to education and sense of spiritual identity (Kiesling et al., 2006). Through the lens of Erik Erikson's theories on the adult's sense of "self," Kiesling et al. (2006) performed a qualitative study of 28 students who identified as "devoutly spiritual" in order to understand the importance of spirituality in their lives and its implications to educators at Christian institutions of higher education.

In a study on spiritual development in Christian higher education, Ma (2003) of Biola University, provided a lengthy, definitive treatise on spiritual formation. She cited the significance of her own research by relaying that there has been little to no research regarding how spiritual maturity in Christian students at Christian institutions is programmed and assessed (Ma, 2003). She justified her study, relaying that most studies on student development in higher education focus on the "...cognitive, moral, and psychosocial aspects" (Ma, 2003, p. 325). Ma's (2003) quantitative research design sought to inform her theory that there are a range of factors that contribute to the spiritual formation of students at Christian institutions. As no survey instrument seemed to exist that measured the spiritual aspect of a Christian college education, she developed an instrument for her study. With a high 87.5% return rate across 20 Christian colleges and universities, her survey garnered a wide swath of self-reported information, which aided her in conclusions about what parts of the Christian college experience contributed most to the spiritual growth of students. Among her findings were the importance of living on campus, personal spiritual disciplines, and others. She concluded nonacademic activities are more

important to spiritual formation than academic factors. Notwithstanding the importance of integrating spirituality into the academic curriculum, as noted earlier, spiritual formation initiatives outside the classroom played a vital role in student spiritual development and a student's sense of self (Ma, 2003; Otto & Harrington, 2016; Powell et al., 2010). Ma's (2013) study is significant as it stands out in the research for providing quantitative data regarding the impact of spiritually formative activities at Christian institutions.

Spiritual formation and culture. Beyond the obvious contributors to spiritual formation, an institution's level of diversity may provide a predictor for spiritual growth (Paredes-Collins, 2013). Using a quantitatively sophisticated structural equation modeling approach, Paredes-Collins (2013) attempted to find the link between diversity and spiritual growth and concluded that the climate for diversity played more of a role for students of color than Caucasian students. She noted that the importance of a sense of belonging as being paramount to spiritual formation, and asserted that in order to promote spiritual formation, Christian institutions must promote inclusive practices that consider the individual cultural needs of all students.

Comparatively, a quantitative study regarding student "fit" at Christian universities utilized data from Tinto's "Model of Student Departure and a Spiritual Integration" construct to analyze spiritual integration and "fit," or sense of belonging (Morris et al., 2004). The aforementioned study also examined student retention at Christian universities in relation to the integration of spiritual formation and spiritual programming. Using Tinto's theoretical model, the authors attempted to apply retention predictors to the Christian university experience. With a nod to the work of other researchers, Morris et al. (2004) concluded spiritual formation and integration significantly impacts student retention and satisfaction. Through a thorough analysis

of their findings, the authors concluded that Christian institutions should focus more on how a student could potentially fit into the campus spiritually even prior to recruitment.

In their qualitative study with 12 students at a Christian college, authors Powell et al. (2012) discovered how students perceive change and spiritual influence throughout their Christian college experience. In what could be deemed the most significant study on spiritual formation and the cultural experience at a faith-based university, the researchers narrowed their study down to four specific aspects of the experience: Mentoring, gender, active searching (in identity formation), and exposure to diversity. The results indicated several factors the participants cited as important to their spiritual formation, the most important being peer relationships. From there, the researchers determined the most important themes that developed were connections to self, others, and God. Their conclusions involved admonition to universities to include intentional spiritual programming, in addition to student activities that help inform and develop these important, overarching relationships. Additionally, Powell et al. (2012) offered encouragement to churches to actively pursue relationships with, and develop programs for emerging adults. While not an exhaustive study, this article helped further the idea that intentionally Christian universities should be about the business of helping students make connections—with themselves, with each other, with God, and with the culture (Love & Talbot, 1999).

Another study attempted to identify cultural influences and their impact on students at Christian higher educational institutions (Rhea, 2011). As others have mentioned, Rhea (2011; see also Kiesling et al., 2006; Love & Talbot, 1999), in his review of the existing literature on church and academy debates, reminded readers that undergraduate age students are in one of the most volatile, formative periods in their lives. This creates urgency for Christian educators to

contribute to their spiritual formation in meaningful ways. Citing several seminal authors and Christian thinkers, Rhea (2011) relayed the importance for Christian students and educators alike to understand the “language” of culture, so they may be better able to engage those not associated with the church. The “integrative task” to which the author referred is the notion that spirituality and academics be administered together rather than in competition with one another (see also McCoy, 2014; Setran et al., 2010). Although this integration begins with a healthy discovery and sense of oneself, one must also have a clear understanding of one’s unique role within the culture (Rhea, 2011).

Summary of the role of spiritual formation in Christian education. Christian institutions must be about the business of spiritual formation (Bramer, 2010) if they are to adhere to the mission upon which they were founded: To nurture scholarship in an environment of vital Christianity (Otto & Harrington, 2016). Although there has been a recent rise in awareness by many institutions of higher education as to the need to support students in their spiritual quests (Astin & Astin, 2010; Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006), the role of spiritual formation at the Christian institution remains a vitally important part of the overall experience. Undergraduate students, particularly at their volatile stage of development, must sense their university provides an environment conducive to spiritual formation, as well as serving their academic needs (Morris et al., 2004; Otto & Harrington, 2016).

Components of Spiritual Formation Programs

Arguably, all aspects of student development, and even academic growth, are enhanced by spiritual formation (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Hindman, 2002), and Christian institutions must be about the business of providing specific, intentional programming to stimulate spiritual growth and formation (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005). Through her research of student affairs

literature, Capeheart-Meningall (2005) identified several specific outcomes to spiritual formation programming during the undergraduate years, including better physical health, positivity and optimism, increased self-awareness, civic responsibility, cultural awareness, and better academic performance. These outcomes are best achieved as faculty, staff, administrators, and spiritual formation personnel join together to foster an environment in which spiritual formation can take place for students (Dalton & Crosby, 2006; Hindman, 2002). Spiritual formation and its myriad of programmatic elements are what help students make connections to their purpose, and make meaning of their circumstances (Dalton & Crosby, 2006). In short, spiritual formation programs help students sort out the meaning of life—academically and beyond (Dalton & Crosby, 2006; Lovik, 2011). Although specific spiritual formation programming varies from institution to institution, many common practices exist. These include, but are not limited to: Dedicated physical space on campus for meditation and spiritual reflection, retreats, wellness education, travel, the arts, religious dialogue, worship experiences, and spiritual disciplines (Dalton, Eberhardt, & Crosby, 2006). Despite the different ways in which they are executed on specific campuses, these, and other practices, contribute greatly to students' spiritual formation and development (Dalton et al., 2006).

Spiritual disciplines in community and solitude. A hallmark of most any Christian institution's spiritual formation program is worship, often taking the form of chapel services. These experiences provide for worship in many forms, including music, prayer, the proclamation of scripture, and administration of the sacraments (Benac, 2015). Services of worship afford moments for the campus to gather as a community to affirm their faith and commitment to spiritual formation (Benac, 2015; Lovik, 2011; Paredes-Collins, 2013). Opportunities for worship, such as chapel services, contribute greatly to positive spiritual development outcomes

as students and institutional personnel gather to encourage one another and promote spiritual growth and unity in campus community (Benac, 2015; Lovik, 2011).

Just as the communal practice of worship experiences is important to spiritual formation, so are other disciplines that foster a sense of community (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006). Discipleship programming is one such community-building practice. These programs carry many different names (small groups, discipleship groups, etc.), but each exists to perform the same essential function: To encourage community and deeper spiritual development by building meaningful peer relationships (Holmes, Roedder, & Flowers, 2004; Astin & Astin, 2010). Although on the surface, the practice of discipleship seems to be an individual response as one is involved in the process of "...becoming more like Jesus" (Byrd, 2011, p. 246), it is best implemented within the context of community as individuals are enabled to share their journeys with others (Byrd, 2011). Discipleship communities foster intimate relationships through social interaction, biblical study, and accountability. These groups, ultimately, provide students with a supportive network of peers devoted to each other's spiritual formation (Byrd, 2011; Holmes et al., 2004). Additionally, discipleship initiatives tend to produce what some researchers have dubbed an "ethic of caring" (Astin & Astin, 2010, p. 5). Students who experience peer relationships such as these develop a deeper sense of responsibility for investing in others (Astin & Astin, 2010; Kiessling, 2010).

Opportunities for service offer students the occasion to grow spiritually. The discipline of serving gives students the chance to mature in their own faith in addition to contributing to society on different levels, with the ultimate goal of being agents of change in the culture (Barrett, 2016; Braskamp & Remich, 2003; Welch & Koth, 2013). The discipline of service affords students the opportunity to build a sense of civic responsibility, as well as develop a

sense of connectedness (Astin, 2004; Braskamp & Remich, 2003). Although the concept of service is not exclusive to Christianity, for the Christ-following student, it reflects a longing to create meaning and purpose for one's life, and to make a difference in society (Barrett, 2016; Braskamp & Remich, 2003). This sense of calling gives students a more communal perspective, and institutionally sponsored opportunities to serve others provide students with a sense of civic duty and moral responsibility (Braskamp & Remich, 2003). Simply put, the discipline of serving others can foster spiritual growth and formation in most anyone (Porter et al., 2015), and especially in undergraduate students at a Christian institution (Barrett, 2016; Welch & Koth, 2013).

The practice of service and related spiritual disciplines has an effect on a student's ability to lead as well (Bowman & Small, 2010; Dalton, 2004; Gehrke, 2008). Students who hold leadership roles are more likely to self-report or exhibit spiritual growth and vice versa (Bowman & Small, 2010; Dalton, 2004). Additionally, student leaders are better equipped to deal with difficulties, make connections, and experience peace (Gehrke, 2008). These implications for spiritual formation are profound, as they suggest that leadership practices and spiritual growth connect to some degree (Gehrke, 2008).

Related, in that it promotes a sense of community and globalism, but is not based on spiritual disciplines, is the practice of studying abroad. Such opportunities provide students with a more global perspective, and a sense of purpose within a worldwide community (Schneller et al., 2016). Also, study abroad programs give students a more internal perspective, resulting in greater self-awareness and a deepening sense of who they are individually (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2010). Participants in such initiatives readily and enthusiastically report an increase in their faith and spiritual growth, and a greater awareness of themselves in relation to their own

culture (Perrin & Thompson, 2010; Schneller et al., 2016). Further, student participants relay changes in worldview and connection to the global community (Schneller et al., 2016). Study abroad programs enhance one's spiritual formation through the opportunity to view the world from a different perspective, and more readily apply one's faith to daily living (Perrin & Thompson, 2010).

A unique community-building activity that specifically promotes spiritual formation exists in the form of wilderness orientation programs. Available at a few faith-based institutions as well as some secular institutions, these programs promote community building through shared experiences in the outdoors (Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2008). Participants in these programs have reported growth in their knowledge and skills in relation to outdoor recreation, as well as a deep sense of spiritual growth, stewardship, and sense of belonging within a community (Bobilya et al., 2008).

In stark contrast to the communal practices listed above, another spiritual discipline Christian institutions employ to encourage spiritual formation is solitude (Dalton et al., 2006). Though done in privacy, these introspective activities are encouraged to enhance prayer, scripture reading and meditation. Dalton et al. (2006) indicated these practices are important because of the “inherently personal” (p. 8) nature of spiritual formation, as they foster inner development of the individual's spirituality. Often, these practices are encouraged through the offering of “space” by the institution—that is, a specific location in which such exercises are allowed and encouraged (Dalton, 2004). Giving students a place to “get away” and be alone before God through prayer and meditation has proven beneficial to students' spiritual formation, and overall development (Bobilya et al., 2008; Dalton, 2004).

Mentoring. Mentoring programs can also elicit specific and profound results for the spiritual formation of undergraduate students (Cannister, 1999; Holmes et al., 2004). In fact, mentoring has been reported to be one of the most significant contributors to student spiritual formation (Holmes et al., 2004). Conceptualized as a blend between encouragers, challengers, and vision-givers, mentors at Christian institutions have the unique opportunity to speak into the lives of undergraduate students at critical stages in their spiritual and cognitive development (Cannister, 1999). In the case of the aforementioned quantitative study, mentors were members of the faculty, charged with going above and beyond their normal pedagogical duties. They intentionally engaged with students beyond the classroom and curriculum, and invested in their lives in significant ways (Cannister, 1999). Students in the experimental group participated in a freshman seminar program, while students in the control group did not. Through a series of survey instruments at the beginning of their experience and at the end, it was determined that students who had received intentional mentoring from faculty reported more spiritual well-being than those who had not (Cannister, 1999).

Mentors have the opportunity to help students navigate the struggles of life and spiritual growth (Rockenbach, Walker, & Luzader, 2012). Although spiritual formation is wrought with difficulty at any stage of life, it can be especially daunting for emerging adults as they journey through their college years. Mentoring initiatives provide students with the opportunity to process the throes of spiritual development with someone more experienced, who ultimately has the student's best interest at heart (Bryant, 2008; Rockenbach et al., 2012). Mentoring can offer students a support system in which they are afforded safe space to work through spiritual issues, inner struggles, personal problems, or simple questions of life, in addition to discovering their implicit meaning and purpose (Bryant, 2008).

Students who experience mentoring tend to engage in other spiritual formation practices, which can be viewed as a fortunate byproduct of the mentoring process (Kiessling, 2010). In Kiessling's empirical study of student affairs professionals (2010), she noted although there is strong evidence to support the role of mentoring in spiritual formation, more institutions should employ such initiatives to better prepare future student affairs professionals to engage in mentoring with undergraduates. The author contended that although undergraduate students desire these kinds of relationships, often student development personnel have not been adequately trained to facilitate mentoring, or be mentors themselves (Kiessling, 2010). She therefore called upon graduate programs in student affairs to consider the positive implications of placing a stronger emphasis on mentoring practices in their own programs (Kiessling, 2010). Mentoring relationships can be life-giving to students as they navigate the ups and downs of spirituality and collegiate life (Rockenbach et al., 2012).

Academic courses in religion and spirituality. Christian institutions are known for core academic requirements in religion and/or spirituality. This holds significance because these classes promote the overall mission of the university; but also, if taught effectively, these classes can contribute to student spiritual formation (Lovik, 2011). Christian institutions should be concerned with both academic, as well as spiritual development as they relate to holistic education (Cochran, 2012), giving students the ability to practically apply the things they learn in the classroom (Hilton & Plummer, 2013). Consequently, the role of religion courses is important in advancing these outcomes.

This gives professors in the discipline of religion the unique opportunity to speak into their students' lives both academically and spiritually, which will help them synthesize biblical principles with matters practical and relevant to faith (Astin & Astin, 2010; Cochran, 2012).

Although, as argued earlier, faculty in all disciplines may contribute to the spiritual growth of their students, full-time religion faculty are uniquely poised to propel students' knowledge of scripture as it applies to their lives holistically (Hilton & Plummer, 2013).

In religion classes, spiritual formation and academic training clearly go hand in hand, and, based on the existing research, should not be at odds with one another, according to a scholarly article by Cochran (2012). Bible and religion professors should promote spiritual growth in their students by encouraging deep reflection and application of biblical principles. In so doing, they promote spiritual formation within the context of the classroom (Cochran, 2012). Spiritual formation can also take place as students are assigned meaningful classwork that relates both academically and spiritually, even in the construct of online religious education (Maddix & Estep, 2010). When professors intentionally design their undergraduate classes to integrate spiritual formation in their curriculum, students experience meaningful lessons and beautifully applied concepts as they develop their spiritual identity.

Summary of the components of spiritual formation programs. Spiritual formation must be both intentional and practical (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005). At universities that promote and encourage vital Christianity, spiritual formation programming must be integrated into the institution at every level. Though different from institution to institution, the mission of spiritual formation programs remains the same—to help students develop holistically, and to help students make meaningful connections between their academic and life experiences (Dalton & Crosby, 2006). Through spiritual disciplines, community, mentoring, and religious education, Christian institutions have the unique opportunity to provide programs and initiatives that contribute to the overall growth and wellbeing of their students as they experience spiritual formation.

Results of Spiritual Formation Programming in Christian Higher Education

Spiritual formation is not only a hallmark of the Christian educational paradigm; it is intrinsically at the heart of the paradigm (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003). Christian institutions must not simply be in the business of providing an academic education, but in providing intentional programs and opportunities that contribute to the growth of the whole person (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Lovik, 2011; Otto & Harrington, 2016; Powell et al., 2012). Capeheart-Meningall (2005) specifically urged that spiritual formation was, and is, a vital factor in the holistic process of learning and personal development. As such, in recent years student life personnel at secular institutions have come to recognize and embrace various paradigms of encouraging “spirituality” and formation of worldview as they relate to the development of the whole person (Bowman, Felix, & Ortis, 2014; Bryant, 2009; Chickering, 2003). Consequently, practices of spiritual formation have become more mainstream in higher education of late (Bryant, 2009; Dalton et al. 2006). However, faith-based institutions continue to lead the way in encouraging the holistic growth of students through the employment of spiritual formation programming (Bryant, 2009; Chickering, 2003). Because of this integrative approach, a small body of recent research has uncovered some specific, yet overarching results of spiritual formation initiatives in Christian colleges and universities (Astin & Astin, 2010; Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Lovik, 2011; Ma, 2003).

Results for individual students. As indicated previously, a holistic approach to education that includes spiritual formation can have a profound effect on undergraduate students, specifically those between the formative ages of 18 to 22 (Morris et al., 2004; Otto & Harrington, 2016). Practices that encourage spiritual development provide students with space to express their innermost thoughts and feelings (Bryant & Lindholm, 2009), giving them the

opportunity to discover meaning and purpose in their lives (Bowman et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2004). One of the most important ways institutions can program appropriately to encourage such growth is by thoroughly knowing who their students are (Bryant & Lindholm, 2009; Rennick, Smedley, Fisher, Wallace, & Kim, 2013). It is imperative that Christian universities understand the individual backgrounds, cultures, and experiences of their students in order to offer programming that meets their developmental needs as much as possible (Bryant & Lindholm, 2009; Rennick et al., 2013). When an institution makes the effort to clearly identify whom it is serving, it can better create meaningful opportunities for formation.

Though the results of spiritually formative activities are varied, research has highlighted several areas in which students involved such activities tend to excel. One particular area of noticeable difference is in the area of personal health (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Rennick et al., 2013). Using a meta-analysis, Rennick et al. (2013) drew upon previously collected quantitative data that suggested a direct connection between engaging in spiritually stimulating activities and health practices. Their analysis confirmed that students who self-reported they engaged in spiritual formation activities tended to exercise more, to consume less alcohol and other addictive substances, to be more stress-free, to maintain a healthier weight, and to feel overall physically healthier. This increase in health awareness had several other implications, including improved self-esteem and greater psychological wellness (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Rennick et al., 2013). Further, quantitative data derived from a survey of freshmen and sophomore students at a northeastern university, Hooker, Masters, and Carey (2014) presented evidence that students who regularly participated in spiritual disciplines self-reported an increase in physical activity and wellness. Their research further indicated that first and second year undergraduate students who engaged in spiritual formation tended to have overall healthier

behavioral patterns and habits (Hooker et al., 2014). They concluded the resulting interpersonal nature of spiritual formation led to positive peer pressure, including the avoidance of excessive drinking habits and maintaining a healthier weight (Hooker et al., 2014). Although one possible limitation of their study involved not controlling for specific personality characteristics of individuals in the sample surveyed, Hooker et al. (2014) determined that there was a direct correlation between overall health and students' spiritual engagement.

Relatedly, spiritual formation programs have implications for student satisfaction and overall perception of their collegiate experience (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Ma, 2003; Rennick et al., 2013). Further, involvement in spiritual formation contributes to an individual's perception of self-worth, providing him or her with a sense of meaning and purpose (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Powell et al., 2012; Rennick et al., 2013). This sense of calling may serve to encourage individuals toward better moral choices and more ethical behavior, and provide a propensity for socially minded leadership and engagement (Rennick et al., 2013). Moreover, Rennick et al. (2013) indicated that students who participated in spiritual formation reported they were more likely to be involved in activities such as cultural events, musical events, and other extracurricular experiences (Rennick et al., 2013).

Research has confirmed that individuals who engage in spiritual formative practices tended to excel academically (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Rennick et al., 2013). Data analyzed by Rennick et al. (2013) indicated that students who regularly participated in spiritual formation reported more hours studying, and had overall higher GPAs. Further research indicated a correlation between spiritual formation and student likelihood to attend graduate school and possess "intellectual self-confidence" (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005, p. 33). According to these

studies, spiritual engagement may have contributed to overall greater academic performance (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Rennick et al., 2013).

In congruence with the research reviewed above, Bowman et al. (2014) indicated those whom they dub “nones” (i.e. students who claim no spiritually formative engagement) tended to perform more poorly. Their research confirmed that “religious nones” struggled to create meaningful friendships, were less likely to engage with people from different cultures, and reported less satisfaction in their collegiate experience (Bowman et al., 2014). Also, this group seemed to have had more difficulty discovering meaning and purpose in their individual lives (Bowman et al., 2014). Though reported from a more negative perspective, Bowman et al. (2014) relayed their findings from a detailed quantitative data set in which they measured the correlation between race, religious identification, and spiritually formative engagement. Despite its more negative nuances, this research further reinforced the positive aspects of spiritual formation programming on individual growth on all levels for students who choose to engage therein.

Results for the campus and global community. Besides the affective outcomes of spiritual formation on individual students, research strongly indicates spiritual formation programming has positive implications for a campus’ sense of community as a whole (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Otto & Harrington, 2016). In a concise article on various aspects of spiritual formation programs faith-based institutions, Otto and Harrington (2016) relayed the importance of this sense of community as vital to faith development. To summarize, faith influences community, and community influences faith (Otto & Harrington, 2016). On a faith-based campus, students have the opportunity to explore the many facets of spiritual formation and Christianity in conjunction with other like-minded individuals. This process of “iron

sharpening iron” creates an overall sense of community and togetherness, shaping the very culture and climate of the institution (Hindman, 2002; Otto & Harrington, 2016). This results in a safe place in which students, faculty, and staff are enabled and empowered to share in the struggles and joys of life together (Hindman, 2002). The communal idea of togetherness is encouraged as Christian institutions employ initiatives to encourage spiritual formation and development (Hindman, 2002; Otto & Harrington, 2016). These initiatives serve to center the institution around practices that not only encourage individual growth, but also enhance and reinforce the values, rituals, beliefs and structures of the institutional community itself (Hindman, 2002). In short, a deeply Christian community is achieved as an institution fosters spiritual formation in its students, faculty, and staff on individual and communal levels (Otto & Harrington, 2016).

Further, healthy engagement in spiritual formation by individuals tends to foster a more accepting campus climate for students with different worldviews (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013; Mayhew & Bryant, 2012). Campus climate, or the perception of specific practices by stakeholders in an institution, can directly influence the institutional sense of community (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013). Using existing data collected as part of the Spiritual Climate Survey, Rockenbach & Mayhew (2013) determined faith-based institutions that encourage a positive exchange of ideas and perspectives regarding spirituality and individual worldviews reportedly have a healthier campus climate, thereby promoting a healthier community as a whole (Mayhew & Bryant, 2012). Research findings revealed that institutions willing and equipped to promote acceptance and appropriate openness achieve greater communal spiritual formation and are campuses on which individuals felt they belonged (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013).

Connecting to a sense of institutional community is the notion that spiritual formation contributes to the idea of global community (Astin, 2004; Astin & Astin, 2010). Students who engage in spiritually formative practices gain a greater sense of who they are in relation to others. Their worldview is expanded beyond themselves, and even their institution, to include their perceived responsibilities as global citizens (Astin & Astin, 2010). This sense of global citizenship, combined with the developing “ethic of caring” discussed earlier, contributes to an intrinsic desire of individuals to make a difference in the world through social justice, acts of service, and an understanding of the connectedness of all (Astin & Astin, 2010). According to a large-scale national study with over 14,000 college students by Astin & Astin (2010), students attending faith-based institutions grew significantly in their spiritual formation and ability to perceive their role in the community, and world as a whole. This sense of belonging and responsibility has implications for faith-based institutions as they intentionally program spiritually formative exercises that shape the culture, and ultimately promote a sense of the global community (Astin, 2004; Astin & Astin, 2010; Braskamp & Remich, 2003).

Summary of the results of spiritual formation programming in Christian higher education. Spiritual formative practices by Christian institutions have implications for the growth of individuals and the campus community. Research has proven the value of spiritual formation in all facets of holistic individual development (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Lovik, 2011; Otto & Harrington, 2016; Powell et al., 2012), as well as an institution’s perceived sense of community (Hindman, 2002; Otto & Harrington, 2016). Even as secular institutions begin to explore the deep benefits of spiritual formation to individual and institutional development (Bryant, 2009), Christian institutions must continue to establish and evaluate programs and

initiatives that encourage holistic success for individuals, thereby enhancing the university's sense of community (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Hindman, 2002; Otto & Harrington, 2016).

Conclusions of the Literature Review

The primary concern of Christian higher education is to holistically develop students, providing them with the knowledge and experiences necessary to be productive citizens (Leblanc & Slaughter, 2012). As such, Christian institutions must be about the business of spiritual formation, due to its effectiveness in promoting individual and communal growth (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003). Programs that enhance spiritual formation have proven to encourage significant development in student academic achievement, perceived self-worth, overall wellness, social mobility, and sense of belonging (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Ma, 2003; Rennick et al., 2013). Further, students who engage in spiritual formation exercises report a greater sense of meaning and purpose, as well as a desire to make a difference—on their campuses, as well as in society (Powell et al., 2012; Rennick et al., 2013). In short, programming in spiritual formation, if executed with care and intentionality, has great implications for the overall health and wellbeing of individual students and institutions alike (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003). Spiritual formation, then, is not simply *at* the heart of Christian education. Spiritual formation, quite simply, *is* the heart of Christian education.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A spiritual formation program is a vital component of a faith-based collegiate experience. As such, Christian institutions employ a variety of means and systems by which to promote spiritual formation among their students. This qualitative study sought to answer the following question: What does a phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of students at a Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCC) institution reveal about their perceptions of the spiritual formation priorities of the institution? By hearing their stories, the data provided insight into the institutional programming, and uncovered what contributed to the participants' spiritual formation, and what may have been less than effective in encouraging spiritual growth.

Setting

My research was conducted in a small, faith-based, denominationally affiliated CCCC institution in the Pacific Northwestern United States. Pacific Northwest Christian University (PNCU) has a rich tradition of offering a liberal arts education from a Christian perspective. The institution claims to provide a rigorous academic program combined with a meaningful spiritual life experience. These offerings combine to provide both a nurturing academic environment, and programs designed to encourage vital spiritual formation for individuals as well as the campus community. The university offers numerous opportunities for spiritual growth, including chapel services, discipleship small groups, local and international service projects, retreats, as well as pastoral care. In addition, the university requires all students to earn credit hours in religion and spiritual life-related disciplines, thus it integrates spiritual formation into the whole curriculum.

The institution's mission is to educate the whole person as students immerse themselves into the academic, social, and spiritual aspects of the community.

Participants, Sampling Strategy, and Research Design

Participants for this study included six senior-level, traditional undergraduate students who have attended PNCU for the duration of their undergraduate experience. The reason for selecting such participants was to gain the best insight possible into their lived experiences across their entire graduate careers at the university. It is my belief that this provided the greatest information about how students perceived their spiritual formation experience as they have been immersed in the setting for four years or more.

The group of students included four women and two men from a variety of major disciplines, including the sciences, business, and communication. Studying students from a variety of academic disciplines provided specific nuances of insight into how each discipline may or may not approach spiritual formation differently. Additionally, the students were selected based solely on their assumed spiritual maturity; rather, they were individuals with varying degrees of involvement in university-sponsored spiritual life initiatives. Further, students who were selected were identified as having lived on campus for the majority of their college career as those students tend to have a greater sense of the community of the place versus commuter students.

The students were selected to be part of the sample through purposive sampling techniques (Lavrakas, 2008). This method of nonprobability sampling was effective for this kind of phenomenological research, as it produced a small sample that can be assumed would be representative of the population. For the purposes of this project, a key staff informant with

whom I am acquainted was consulted to recruit the specific participants based on the criteria mentioned above.

Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews during the early part of the 2018 fall semester. The interviews began with a few open-ended, “grand tour” questions typical of phenomenological research (Appendix A) that led to follow-up questions designed to probe for either clarification or to dig deeper into individual stories or experiences (Vagle, 2016). This interview methodology was utilized for the sake of allowing the students to share their stories in a real and relevant way, allowing me to extrapolate data while probing for greater insight the participants’ experiences with the spiritual formation programs at the university.

I selected this method of data collection as it renders the greatest, yet most practical means by which to truly hear the stories of the participants. Semi-structured interviews, by design, offer the chance to investigate the lived-experiences of the students and gain as much insight into their participation in the spiritual formation programs as possible. Additionally, this method of data collection seemed practical for this type of phenomenological research, as it was convenient due to access to the university and the students, and time restraints.

Phenomenology

I selected a qualitative, phenomenological design for this research as it offered the greatest insight into the spiritual formation program at the institution through the eyes of a small group of students who have experienced it first-hand. Phenomenological studies, by nature, allow researchers to gain awareness of the experiences of people (Gallagher, 2012; Vagle, 2016; van Manen, 2016). As van Manen (2016) asserts, phenomenology “...begins with wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself” (p. 27). Phenomenological research, in van

Manen's estimation, can only be effective if it is "...pursued while surrendering to a state of wonder" (p. 27).

Phenomenological study is focused on discovering the commonalities of a group of participants' experiences as they experience phenomena (Vagle, 2016). Phenomenology captures a particular snapshot of the human experience through the eyes of those who live it (Gallagher, 2012). That, in essence, is why a phenomenological design was most appropriate for this study as it allowed a unique opportunity to gain insight into the spiritual formation paradigm at this faith-based institution through investigating the personal experiences and perceptions as reported in the first-hand accounts of the participants.

Analytical Procedures

The interviews I conducted were audio-recorded to assure quality, accuracy, and completeness of the stories. When all the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed by a third party. Once the transcription was complete, I began the process of formally and systematically analyzing the data.

Data analysis was critical to understanding the phenomena I desired to study. As such, it was crucial that I carefully analyzed the data I collected through hearing the stories of the students in order to best represent their views regarding their spiritual formation experience at the institution. To that end, I analyzed the data using a three-stage coding process: initial coding, focused coding, and thematic coding. In this way, I was able to discover and describe specific themes that existed in the data which gave me a better idea of how the students' stories were affected by the spiritual formation programs at the university (Creswell, 2013; Freeman, 2017; Pratap, 2018).

Through initial coding, I intended to obtain an overall view of the transcripts, gaining insight into some of the commonalities between each of the students' stories. Through immersing myself in the written versions of their stories, I attempted to increase my understanding of both who they are, and how their experiences related to the overall spiritual formation experience at the university. This step required reading and re-reading text in order to fully grasp what the students wanted to relay about their shared lived experiences.

In my second step, focused coding, I began to identify themes and categories that appeared to be significant across all the interviews. To do this, I employed in vivo coding, or identifying exact words in the stories of the students that appeared in one or more of the other stories, then assigning that word or phrase as a name for a subcategory. Through careful reading and analysis, I identified subcategories that helped make sense of the overall themes.

Finally, I employed thematic coding in order to understand how each of the previously identified themes and subcategories are related. This helped me focus and narrow the large number of themes into fewer in order to better manage the data for proper analysis. This final step in the process helped me uncover and understand the phenomena.

Research Ethics

There are three ways in which I regulated the ethics pertaining to conducting such a research project. First, my personal moral code of conduct (Nakray, 2016) was the overarching guide to everything I did. To better ensure transparency and ethicality, however, I abided by a professional code of ethics as stated by the American Psychological Association (Nakray, 2016).

To that end, I went through the process of approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at George Fox University (GFU). Prior to commencing my study, I submitted the required IRB documentation, including the written application form, a sample of my Letter of Informed

Consent (Appendix B), and a draft of my interview guide questions (Appendix A). I waited to begin the research until after I received approval from the IRB.

I discovered that permission to conduct the study was not required from the IRB or appropriate authority at the institution at which the research took place. Once I was told that, participants were identified and selected through the implementation of the sampling plan. Before I began each interview, I presented the Letter of Informed Consent to each participant for their consideration and signature. The letter included an overview of the study, an overview of potential social benefits of the research, the associated risks of the research (which will be negligible), how the resultant information will be handled, and how I intended to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

Anonymity and confidentiality are imperative to a quality, ethical investigation such as this. I handled all information with utmost respect and security. Sensitive audio recordings were stored on my computer and secured with a password. Similarly, the transcripts of the recorded interviews were secured digitally, and any printed versions were stored in a locked file. The Letters of Informed Consent were locked in a similar file, as well as the field notes I obtained. Audio recordings will be deleted after a period of three years following the acceptance of this dissertation, and the Letters of Consent will be destroyed at that time. Field notes and transcripts will be kept indefinitely, although identifying names and information will be redacted.

Anonymity is guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms for the student participants, in addition to the institution itself. I have reported the data in such a way that no identifying personal information was disclosed. Every effort was made to guarantee that the identity of participants cannot be decoded, including proper handling and disposal of sensitive information as outlined above.

There were few risks associated with my research, aside from those potentially resulting emotionally from the discussion of personal spiritual formation. There were no physical or mental risks to the participants, and I believe the emotional risk was minimal.

Conclusion

The phenomenological research design scheme proved to be an effective means by which to collect and report data for this study. The stories the participants shared gave me data that offered enlightening insight into the value of the programs employed by the university to encourage spiritual formation in the students. The results of the research are discussed in the ensuing chapter.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

This study examined the lived experiences of six students at Pacific Northwest Christian University, a CCCU institution, that have achieved the rank of “senior” according to their academic status. Additionally, each of the students has lived on campus for most of their undergraduate experience, and has been very involved in the life of the campus community. Each of the participants identified themselves as Christ-followers (Christians), and explained that they had a desire for personal spiritual growth. In the study, I sought to recognize ways in which the students identified their personal spiritual growth process as a result of institutional programming. I also wanted to recognize ways in which the institution’s spiritual formation programming may not have been helpful to their spiritual growth. As I interviewed each student for this phenomenological study, I wanted to discover what in their journey was most affected by the spiritual formation experiences offered by the university.

With the help of a gatekeeper, or key informant at PNCU, I was able to gain access to the student participants, and have a relatively private location in which to conduct the interviews. The building was a house-turned-office facility on campus, and was affiliated with the Office of Spiritual and Intercultural Life (SpIL). It was a warm and welcoming environment, and on the first day on which I conducted interviews, I noted that it seemed to be a student gathering place; specifically, for students who identified with or were part of different cultures.

Before the interviews officially began, however, I wanted to get to know the students in a more informal manner in order to build rapport, so my gatekeeper arranged for lunch at a local

eatery that Friday. Five of the six participants and my gatekeeper attended the gathering. The restaurant was a pleasant environment in which to introduce myself and my study, and simply begin to establish a bit of a relationship with each individual. We enjoyed a meal together and talked about who I was, what exactly the interviews would entail, and what I hoped to do with the interview data. A few of them asked questions about my research, my doctoral program at George Fox University, and what I hoped to accomplish after earning my doctorate. Throughout the luncheon, we laughed together, shared our goals and dreams, and simply enjoyed an opportunity to converse about things of which we shared mutual interests. At the conclusion of the meal, I thanked everyone for coming and for agreeing to participate in the study, and I paid for the students' lunches as an incentive to thank them for their willingness to participate.

Immediately following the luncheon, my gatekeeper and I returned to the office building, where she offered her personal office for me to conduct my first and only interview of the day. The office was a relatively small, yet inviting space in which to chat with my participant, and the gatekeeper left as the student arrived. The student and I sat in chairs opposite one another, with a small side table between us. It is important to note that although the interview was conducted in a private office, there were several students and employees in the outer office area in order to maintain the integrity of the situation and enable the student to feel at ease. This afforded both privacy for our interview, and a degree of comfort for the student participant.

The other five interviews took place the following day (Saturday) in order to accommodate the students' schedules. The interviews occurred in the lobby of the aforementioned office building. When I arrived that morning to prepare, the gatekeeper met me and gave me access to the facility. She showed me the lobby and kitchen area, and asserted that I make myself feel "at home" throughout the day, offering me access to the assorted food and

beverage options. The environment in which I conducted the remaining interviews was cozy and inviting, feeling more like a living room than an actual lobby. For each interview, I sat on a couch opposite the students who sat on overstuffed chairs, providing a sense of relaxation and coziness. The natural light and multiple windows provided both an aesthetically pleasing setting, and a degree of comfort to the students as we were alone in the building due to the office being closed for the weekend. The main door was left unlocked, however, to allow a sense of ease regarding the situation for the sake of the students, and to maintain the integrity of the interviews. Although each interview, with the exception of one, ended up being uninterrupted by others, the building was technically open for anyone to walk in at any time.

Profiles of Participants in the Study

The participants in the study were identified by my gatekeeper as being highly involved in the activities and experiences of the campus community, four of whom had held a leadership role at some point. Further, each student has lived on campus for the majority of their journeys at PNCU, and have attended the institution for the entirety of their undergraduate careers. Coincidentally, the participants exemplified a racially diverse cross-section of the institution, which, notably, is not necessarily representative of the student body as a whole. One participant was Asian-American, two were Latinos, one was African-American, and two were Caucasian. Among the participants, there were four females and two males. Although they all came from different backgrounds, socioeconomically and otherwise, their past experiences were not necessarily the focus of this study, thus the biographical information about each student is limited here. Commonalities exist, however, in their current openness to spiritual formation, and their identities as Christ-followers, in addition to the criteria mentioned previously. I use pseudonyms throughout to identify each participant in lieu of their real names.

Student one: Christina. Christina is a 21-year-old Caucasian senior from southern California who is studying to achieve a Bachelor of Science degree in cognitive science, with a neuroscience concentration and a minor in biology. She lived on campus for two years and now lives off campus, as she did last year. Christina plans to graduate in the spring of 2019, and believes she will be working in applied behavioral analysis therapy with children with autism. Her long term goal is to “...one day change the world” after eventually obtaining a PhD in a similar field and “...[bring] the neuroscience together with the behavioral.” Her dream is to see the marriage of behavioral and neuroscience. She claims both her parents have earned graduate degrees, and her family consists of practicing Catholics. Although she never viewed Catholicism as a “...branch of Christianity,” she does not identify as Catholic anymore; just as a Christian.

Student two: Serenity. Serenity grew up in a Baptist pastor’s home and enjoyed an ideal childhood, growing up in a Christian environment. She was born in the Bay Area of California and has lived in Denver, Colorado, and Portland, Oregon. She chose PNCU because of the community it offered and the feeling of “home” she experienced when she first set foot on campus. She has lived on campus for all four years of her undergraduate journey, and is majoring in biochemistry. Serenity is in the university’s honors program where she has enjoyed all the benefits that particular community of student and faculty scholars offers. As an Asian-American, she has also appreciated the opportunities for leadership in the Intercultural Life programs offered by the institution.

Student three: Carlos. Carlos’ journey to PNCU began when he received a four year, full ride scholarship from the Act Six organization. Triple-majoring in marketing, management, and entrepreneurship, his rigorous academic journey has led to numerous opportunities for growth. Carlos currently serves the student body as the Student Government Executive Vice

President, and he has lived on campus for all four years of his college experience. The 21-year-old Latino student currently identifies as a Christ-follower, but confesses that for many years of his life he did not profess to be one. He cites a friend convincing him to go to Young Life gatherings as what led him eventually to fully commit to Christ. Carlos is from Portland, Oregon, and is grateful to a Young Life mentor for convincing him to go to church and live out his faith. Planning to graduate in the spring of 2019, he is focused and determined, and enjoys fellowship with his roommates.

Student four: Austin. Austin grew up not very far from PNCU. He is 22 years old and is studying organizational communication. The Caucasian senior student lived on campus for his entire undergraduate experience until the fall of 2018. He plans to graduate in December of 2018 and begin his career. Although he grew up in the Baptist tradition, he attended a few different churches throughout his life and eventually considered himself nondenominational. Claiming to really commit to Christ in high school at a camp, Austin has been a student leader, serving as a Resident Assistant (RA) for two of his four years at PNCU. He cites that experience as the single most impactful part of his journey at the institution.

Student five: Ariana. Also enjoying the opportunity to serve as an RA, Ariana's journey to PNCU was quite different from the experiences of the other participants. Growing up in a traditional Catholic Mexican home, she cites her first real spiritual experience occurred when she was 16. The exercise science major plans to graduate with her bachelor's degree in May of 2019. Ariana grew up primarily in Mexico before immigrating to the Pacific Northwest as a teenager. She claims her experience in leadership for Residential Life has led her to become more open to accountability and community throughout her journey at PNCU. The senior student has lived on

campus four years and has thoroughly enjoyed the atmosphere and sense of belonging the university has to offer.

Student six: Jasmine. Jasmine is an African-American senior. The 21-year-old lived on campus her freshman and sophomore years and has lived off campus since. From the Central Valley of California, she is majoring in exercise science with a minor in psychology. Jasmine hopes to further her education and go into occupational therapy as a career. Not preferring the term “Christian” due to its often negative connotations as a label, she prefers to be called a Christ-follower. Although she grew up in a home in which her family went to church, she finally came to more of a personal realization of Christ when she was going through difficult circumstances and reached out to a friend. Jasmine has enjoyed the experience at PNCU and appreciates the steady spiritual growth she has experienced.

Thematic Overview

I had the privilege of sitting down to talk with all six students who have collectively experienced most of what the university offers to its students, certainly in relation to spiritually formative opportunities. As I have analyzed data collected from these interviews, four themes central to their stories emerged: (a) the academic curriculum and professors themselves have had a profound impact on their spiritual formation; (b) the sense of community at PNCU, including friendships, residential life, and campus climate have influenced their spiritual growth; (c) mentors across the campus have influenced their journeys in profound ways; and (d) worship in a variety of organized chapel services has contributed to the spiritual formation of some, while not really being a significant contributor for others. This section will highlight the participants’ stories as they relate to these four themes.

Theme one: The academic curriculum and professors themselves have had a profound impact on their spiritual formation. Most of the six participants reported that one of the biggest contributors to their spiritual formation was the integration of faith into the academic curriculum. This is not surprising as it is a vital part of their mission as a faith-based institution of higher education. That said, PNCU seems to do so very successfully, and with intentionality. This effort is shown, of course, through the institution's variety of religious classes. Jasmine shares:

I took a "Women in the Bible" class, and I learned so much I never knew about mostly all these people, and it was so...just changing my mind on so many things of what I saw and how people are represented, and a lot of people don't know about these people...like the normal men are always brought up, but I'm like, "But you don't know there's been so many women." That was just so amazing.

She continued to share her enthusiasm for her new discoveries, "It was fun reading, and...knowing that there's these stories and these trials that women have gone through in there that were never really advertised to me before." Jasmine took a breath and continued:

And also, I like how we have the Bible survey class when we are freshmen. My teacher was amazing and so hands-on and interactive. I didn't know a lot of this stuff, and so it was like, "this is really cool." And I kind of remember in Sunday School, the stories that get repeated but there's so much more to those stories than we get told in Sunday School and just so many different ones too, so I really enjoyed classes.

Christina shared Jasmine's enthusiasm for the religion curriculum:

Everyone has to take Bible 100. So learning about the Bible, about the history of the Bible, and reading the Bible in a different way than I had before....That was a funny

thing coming to [PNCU], people were like, “Oh my gosh, this is the first time I get to talk about the Bible in class.”

Clearly, classes in religion and the Bible are an intentional aspect of the overall curriculum designed to encourage Christian scholarship and spiritual formation.

This theme of faith and formation being encouraged in academic classes does not seem to be limited only to religion classes. Christina relates:

I think one of the unique things about [PNCU] is how my study of science has...formed me spiritually, and that's been a big part of it. I think for me...my roommate's a Bio major as well, and she feels the same way. It's just so cool to study God's creation, something that's been a big part for me.

She mentioned how she chose PNCU intentionally for that reason:

When I was looking for schools, I wanted a Christian university where I could talk about calling and vocation and God, just in the classroom setting, and I think I was not expecting to be spiritually formed by my neuroscience class. Like that is just the coolest thing, and I am really grateful that we have a space where we can talk about, “This is what I like doing, this is what I'm good at, but also, God has put these things in my life for me for a reason, and this is what I am supposed to be doing.”

This experience of spiritual formation in her classes, in fact, is what has led Christina to define her calling. She said that now, “I know exactly what I'm supposed to be doing....”

Serenity shares many of the same sentiments as Christina. Also majoring in one of the sciences, Serenity enjoys making connections between the discipline of science and her faith. She mentions:

I've always been curious as to how Christian scientists find a common ground between all these really controversial topics like evolution and creationism. And I was really surprised coming here to [PNCU] when all of my professors...didn't find any dissonance at all with their faith, and I was like, "Wow, I want that confidence in our God, in our Creator." And so starting freshman year, that was kind of my journey in just really discovering who our creative God is...all that to say that the traditional programming here at [PNCU] has been monumental in the sense that it's been a solid ground for me while I pursue these very tension filled ideas.

Aside from her excitement about exploring the different sides of controversial topics, Serenity praises her department itself:

I think our department is very intentional about integrating faith into our curriculum. And so, in a lot of our classes we're reading books that I think supplement the academic piece of science. And so, we've read some books on the dissonance between faith and science and what that means for us as Christians. And we have some days that are carved out of our schedule to discuss these books. I think that the professors have created that space for us, but then it's also up to the students to respond. For me, I think coming in, that was something I wanted to explore a lot, and so having that space was incredibly helpful. And it's done a lot to strengthen my faith and my understanding of God in relation to science and nature.

Jasmine feels much the same as her fellow science majors. When I asked her an open ended question about any additional information she'd like to share, she enthusiastically added:

I think teachers were really great. My physics teacher this semester before class, he reads to us a verse that he is reading from some book he is reading at the moment. And he reads

to us a verse before every class. His verses take up two slides; it's not a quick thing, it's something he's really devoted to.... And sometimes when he's reading these things, I'm learning new things.... And so, it's...really cool and like he's introducing us to what he is doing in his own life, spiritually, in reading. And I know a lot of teachers bring up, "pray for us" before things and just are open. And so, teachers are truly pretty great here.

Through sharing of scripture as well as what they are learning individually, professors and instructors are making a difference in the lives of their students' spiritual formation. They are promoting the spiritual mission of the institution by being vulnerable with their students, encouraging growth intentionally and organically.

Though coming from the perspective of a different area of study, Ariana relayed the importance of the professors and staff to her spiritual formation in another way, "...even professors, they pray before tests...so that's really great...I will say just the personality of some staff members...they're so kind and so patient and so willing to help, and that gives you so much hope and excitement towards the future." Austin agrees. "So, the ability to be a Christian here is really easy," he said. "Everyone could talk about it...people could go to their professors like it was very good."

That said, Austin had some different thoughts to add. He mentioned more than once throughout our interview that classes, at times, could add a sense of confusion to the process of spiritual formation. He relayed that especially his sociology and psychology classes create tension between his call to be like Christ and evangelize and the need to be culturally sensitive. He mentioned, "I'm not hearing what's in class the same as what I'm hearing in chapel." He went on to say:

But you are a Christ follower, you have to go out there and bring people to Christ. But if you do that it feels like, “Well, I am being ethnocentric. I am being, seeing my own view as the way,” so not having that resolution. So, in those classes, it’s like I believe I should go out and evangelize...just go talk about Jesus and present my way of living, like “Christ is the way to God.” But in the classes, it feels like that’s not the right thing to do. Because it says my view is right, my culture, that view is correct, so therefore I’m the person that we’re learning not to be by having that.

Austin went on to relay that he has learned to deal with that tension through the help of mentors, and the freedom he feels to discuss it freely with leaders on campus.

Overall, the students who mentioned academics or professors in regard to their spiritual formation did so in a very positive way, relaying that their classes had a great impact on their spiritual growth. This seems to align well with the idea that spiritual formation at PNCU is intended to be integrated throughout the curriculum. If that is indeed the case, it would seem as if the university excels in this area of integration.

Theme two: The sense of community on campus is a major contributor to spiritual formation, including friendships, residential life, and the overall feel of the place. All of the six participants indicated the “feeling of belonging” on campus contributed greatly to their spiritual development. Although it is unclear as to whether this is intentional, or simply a byproduct of the overall campus programming, the word “community” itself arose repeatedly in nearly every interview. Specifically, “community” seems to refer to specific relationships, friendships, roommate situations, residence life, and simply an overall feeling of connectedness to the institution.

When I asked Austin what drew him to PNCU, he quickly responded, “I knew [it] was the place I wanted to go...I felt drawn to go [here].” He immediately continued:

Because the faculty were really kind. It was a first name basis...so people actually cared to figure out who I was and not just see me as a number. And then people talked about Jesus...it wasn't like just a Christian college just with the name. They actually tried to live that and that's the difference 'cause I went to [another Christian institution] and that's a Christian college. But I didn't feel that way. It just felt like a school that had the name, Christian college. When I came to [PNCU] it was like, “oh yeah, Jesus is here.”

The people here actually care.

From the moment he stepped on campus during a college visit, Austin knew he had found a place that truly embodied the essence of “community.”

Without being prompted, Ariana opened up quickly about the idea of “community” in regard to her spiritual formation. “This is my fourth year, I can see why I was brought here. I just see the growth. I see all the opportunities that I have. I see the community, and [I'm] just so happy to be here and it's been so rewarding and so worth it.” Later in the interview, I asked an open ended question regarding anything else she might like to share regarding her experience in spiritual formation. Without hesitation, she mentioned:

I think my community, my friends; there are many times when we just not even are intentionally planning it, but we end up talking about it, or someone's having a hard time, or someone wants to pray together, or someone wants to pray for someone else, or we wanna worship together. So that's been great because we're all on the same page, wanting to worship, wanting to pray together. So, I think the community, like your friends...so that's really great too.

Her experience with community comes largely from her role as a Resident Assistant (RA) for the past two years. She mentioned, "...we do have the space to pray for each other and to check in with each other. And if we have a question about our relationship with God, our faith, or whatever, I know they're open for that." To put it simply, her sense of community and belonging at PNCU has been intimately tied to her role as an RA.

...there have been many times when I've been challenged, and here I am trying to solve it with my own hands. But then I've been reminded that I have been placed in this position not just because I want it, but it was because God put that desire in my heart for a purpose. And I've been always reminded that I don't have to do this by myself, that yes, I can do it with help but the one that makes a change is God....And my faith grows so much by just realizing that I am not just me doing what I'm doing with my job, with my residents, with my staff, but it's God's hands. Like, I'm his hands, I'm his feet doing something for him, and not just me because I wanna help someone, because I wanna feel good. It's just me serving God, and that's how you understand that God is in the center of my life. And because of those two things, that's how I...grew even more.

Leadership in Residential Life, clearly, has been a major contributing factor to Ariana's spiritual development at PNCU.

Likewise, Austin served in Residential Life as an RA two of his years at the institution. Just as Ariana relayed, much of Austin's spiritual formation can be attributed to his service as an RA. Building community in his residence hall included the introduction of a house Bible study.

We started doing our own Bible studies at my house last year for a year and 30 people would show up every week because we as students were like, "[PNCU] can only give so much. We have to take our faith into our own hands. I'd say [PNCU] in my view of their

mission isn't to lead people to Christ. I don't think that's what their goal is...I think their goal is to help you come to your own conclusions.... I think their goal is to just say, "here are all these perspectives. Now you need to pick which one you want." And I think they do a good job of that. But then if you really want to dive in with your fellow believers and [believe] like, "Christ is the way. He is what we got to live our lives around," then you kinda gotta do that a little bit more yourself. So we had our Bible studies...we'd have...30 plus people....But...that's something that we did for our formation is we would do Bible studies, and we felt like that was a good thing 'cause I could use my RA position to get that information out there.

Continuing to discuss the university's role in promoting spiritual formation amongst the residents of his hall, Austin mentioned, "That's something [PNCU] does well, is it doesn't hinder your ability to talk about Jesus in those kinds of settings." It would appear that the institution promotes a sense of community and formation amongst its residential students as it supports student leadership in creating spaces for formational experiences.

Carlos recounted being a beneficiary of those experiences.

My freshman year, my RA made food for us and wanted us to do a small Bible study...I remember that. I'm like, "Oh shoot, okay." He's really serious about this whole Jesus stuff...which I guess can derive from the activity of his Area Coordinator, right?

Allowing him the space to create something for students on the floor.

He went on to talk about how although he doesn't remember attending a lot of those studies, the fact that they were available had an impact on him as a leader, and in developing a sense of responsibility in him as a member of the community. "So, everything we do has an effect [on]

other individuals [on] the planet.... We have the right motive and we do things for others. But it starts with us and how we lead our lives.”

That sense of personal responsibility, though, seems to be only part of the overall vision of community at PNCU. Serenity talked quite a bit about the intangible ideal as I interviewed her. She thoughtfully mentioned:

...I’ve always wanted to be very intentional about how I can really focus on who God is and why I’m here. I will say though that I came from a tradition that understood that our Christian faith is very personal and individual. And then so coming here and seeing how communal our faith was and then also being able to see God in everything. Prayer doesn’t have to happen behind closed doors, but I can pray any moment of any day, and that I can see God in my friend, but also in like I’m studying for my biochemistry exam.

Serenity didn’t stop there, though. When I asked her how she would define spiritual formation, she immediately put it in the context of community. She relayed, “...the communal aspect I think is...important, and that comes out in fellowship and opportunities to come together.” Later in the interview, she expressed how blessed she felt to be part of the PNCU community, “[PNCU] is like kind of all that I’ve ever wanted growing up. And so, I dived right in, into finding a Christian community that I could just grow in.” Like the others, she attributed this sense of community largely to those with whom she has lived. She mentioned:

I had met two girls on my floor freshman year [and we] became good friends. One of them has actually graduated already, but she’s still here in the...area, so we still meet. I remember freshman year, those moments were so important for me when I would meet with them just for Bible study because it became time for me to catch up and really lean into each other as well....finding the community that I can lean upon here at [PNCU], but

having that being rooted in my faith too was really incredibly just hopeful, and I don't know if I could have done it without them.

Though community could be thought of as an intangible concept, it is embodied through relationships forged through life in residence halls and classrooms. The idea is woven throughout the stories of students just as it is woven throughout the campus; from the cafeteria to the athletic fields, to the offices and beyond. More than simply being a byproduct of university life, community is at the very heart of what it means to belong at PNCU.

Theme three: Staff and faculty from all departments play a vital role in mentoring students and fostering spiritual formation. Theme three is perhaps the most profoundly tangible aspect of the whole spiritual growth experience expressed by participants; namely, people make a significant difference. While it is no surprise that employees have an impact on student growth, the level of love and care they give to both their careers and the students whom they serve is evident in the stories of the participants. While not every interaction between staff and students is intended to directly impact them spiritually, influence from those positioned to speak into the lives of students seems to have a profound effect on their spiritual growth. This is evident especially in relation to spiritual life personnel. Christina recounted:

I love the university pastors for who they are, and meeting with them one-on-one has been extremely helpful, particularly [Jimmy].... I picked him; he's my pastor. So, I talk to him about anything and everything.... I got to know [Jimmy] because I was in a life group my freshman year. I saw that there was one led by [him], and I was like, "I love him. I'm gonna be in his group. He's the best." And it wasn't just me, it was a group of people, and we all kinda did life together. And then that's kind of where our relationship

bloomed from that.... He calls me “friend” all the time, and I’m like, “We’re friends?” like “That’s crazy. You’re like my uncle, what do you mean we’re friends?” It’s so cool. Clearly, Jimmy, as a member of the Spiritual Life team, has made a difference in Christina’s life. Carlos happened to mention Jimmy as well. Carlos often goes to visit him in the Spiritual Life office to ask difficult questions. He mentioned:

So, I had a conversation with [Jimmy]...and I’m like, “Yo, what’s up with all this God stuff?” ...and I was frustrated ‘cause...there’s a bunch of fake people out there saying that they’re about God...but...they’re all hypocrites and I’m like, “Am I a hypocrite?”

So, I’m talking to Jimmy and [he is] trying to [help me] navigate this landscape. Later, Carlos added, “I think [the university pastors are] doing their absolute best to provide opportunities for students to grow, and I think...they really care about students.”

Besides the university pastors, there are other Spiritual Life personnel that have a mentoring relationship with students that leads to their spiritual formation. Austin specifically mentioned two individuals in the Intercultural Office of the Spiritual Life department:

I feel like I’m always able to at least ask a question about faith or Christianity. So that’s something that I have felt really good [about], like [Roxanne] and [Westin] in the [Intercultural Office], or the people in the [Spiritual Life department]. I feel like I can ask a question and they genuinely want to help me figure it out and they’re not there to hate on me or judge me based off of my questions. I’m genuinely going in there to try to understand something.... I always feel like I can ask questions.... So that’s something [PNCU] does well is their leadership can answer questions, and if they don’t know the answer, they’ll at least listen to you. [Even if they are] really hard questions...I ask...they affirm like, “Yeah, that’s a good question. Let’s talk it out and figure it out.”

Carlos affirmed much of what Austin mentioned, specifically regarding the Intercultural Office personnel:

But honestly [Roxanne] is probably...the one person on campus where I could literally talk to her about anything without filter. And I think that's a really good place to be...when you need mentorship. And [Roxanne] is...amazing because she always follows through with what she says she would do. Me and [my friend] were talking about her the other day, and we were just really grateful. Because honestly, we have no idea where we would be without her guidance. Because she has this ability to just be very caring and very...lets you make your decisions, but still be there. And I was like, "How can I be somebody like that?" Not a copy, not a replica, 'cause I have my own person to grow into.... because of just who she is, but added with her being close with Christ, it impacts my life in a profound way.

Each member of the Spiritual Life team is uniquely poised to speak into the lives of the students. Whether it is a spiritual issue, or simply a life question, their investment is meaningful to the students with whom they work, and has a great impact on their spiritual growth.

Another specific group of staff members that participants recalled contributed to their spiritual growth were the Area Coordinators who lead the residence halls and houses. Ariana, who is a Resident Assistant, spoke highly of this group of leaders:

We...have the space to pray for each other and to check in with each other. And if we have a question about our relationship with God, our faith, or whatever, I know they're open for that. Our ACs are wonderful and they're just so prepared for that, and if you have questions, they openly and nicely will talk to you about that....

Austin, who also serves as an RA, shared many of the same sentiments as Ariana. Additionally, he talked about the mentoring component in relation to the ACs:

[Being an RA] really helped me with my spiritual formation because I had a mentor to talk to. [My ACs]...were really, really helpful in different ways. Even...next week I'm gonna go meet with [Greg] about some spiritual topic like dating, like how can I put Jesus in my dating relationship? I don't know what that looks like. So, he's that mentor I can go to and talk about these things. So, Res Life was helpful because I had the mentorship....

Later, I asked Austin if the mentoring relationship was intentional or more organic. He replied:

I think it's both and, 'cause they have to do one on ones with us every week or every other week. So, they had to talk to us about how life was going.... So, there's like...you could say a business part of it, but then there's also if you want to, which I chose to, dig in a little deeper with the mentorship, then you can. So, I chose to ask hard questions, and I chose to be a part of it and they were willing. [Greg] was really helpful where I could say, "I'm dealing with this thing. How would you deal with this?" and he would just be real and just tell me the struggles he dealt with. So that was really helpful.

According to Austin and Ariana, the ACs play a vital role in mentoring the students and providing opportunities for spiritual growth.

There are other staff members on campus who contribute to real growth as they show their care for students. As an example, Carlos mentioned:

There is this amazing lunch lady named [Sheila]. [She] is probably 70 years old, right, but it's so cool because what she does is every so often when you leave, she asks you what she can pray for about...And she asked me the other day, but there's something

very authentic and very real about when she asks you that, right. And she has this little booklet, I think she tries to hide it, but she writes down so she can remember, and she asks a lot of students. And then when you go back, she'll ask you about it.

Sheila seems to be just one example of staff across campus, in any and every role, living out the mission of the university to put students first. Mentoring students takes on many different forms as members of the campus community do whatever it takes, going above and beyond to encourage spiritual formation in the students.

Theme four: Worship is an effective means of spiritual formation for some, and is at the very heart of the spiritual formation curriculum. For others, chapels are not significant contributors to their spiritual formation. Worship as a centerpiece of a spiritual formation paradigm came as no surprise, as it is a staple in university spiritual life programs worldwide. In fact, the worship gathering is key in any church and most religious entities. One could probably infer that in order for spiritual growth to occur and community to be experienced, corporate worship must be incorporated in some form. PNCU seems to execute this activity very well, and in many different variations and venues; although for a couple of the participants, chapel itself was not highly regarded.

“Our university has created a lot of different ways for us to interact and experience God.” Serenity made a good point when I asked about things the institution did to advance spiritual formation. Her first answer was about her chapel experiences. “I really do enjoy the chapels that we have on campus. When I came in, it was two chapels a week, and the requirement is for us to attend 15 a semester, so it's at least once a week.” After explaining the chapel requirement, she clarified the various programs themselves:

There's also a lot of opportunities I think outside of traditional "sit-down-and-receive-a-message chapel that we have. We have Shalom, which is more of communal worship, I and we have International Chapel, which is also very communal. It's smaller, and they bring in guest speakers to share. And we also have Spanish chapel...[and] more liturgical prayers. The Common Prayer, that's what we have at times. They have a Catholic chapel once a month as well. And so, I think it's very inclusive. Honestly, for me, I think there has been a wealth of opportunities for me to get involved. I really enjoy the worship, personally for me, and so just having that at chapel is one of the ways that I experience God best.

The diversity of chapel and worship options PNCU offers seem to be intentionally focused on catering to a variety of students. Ariana agreed that she appreciates these opportunities. Having grown up Catholic, she enjoys having the chance to be involved in worship experiences with which she is most familiar. She reported about a time a priest led a worship gathering in a Prayer of the Holy Spirit, "...that's when I felt God breaking those chains in my heart."

Ariana's appreciation for chapel extend to the university's more mainstream offerings as well. Much of her love for chapel revolves around the moments of corporate worship through song. "You know the song 'Reckless Love'? You know...the lyrics where it says, 'There's no shadow You won't light up, mountain You won't climb up coming after me'? Every time we sing that song, I'm just picturing God coming after me...." Ariana took it a step further and mentioned how most every time she goes to chapel, she experiences just what she needs to make it through a challenge or situation.

I'll just leave the chapel so excited and so happy. And that's when I knew that that was meant to happen because God was calling me, telling me, "I need to show you something,

I need to tell you something.” I really appreciate that from chapel because that was a space for me to worship and also learn from the Scriptures.

Jasmine echoed many of the same sentiments. For her, chapel is key to her spiritual growth at PNCU. She reported:

I have enjoyed worship so much on campus and those are kind of the moments where I feel the most impacted and emotional, and feel God talking to me and saying, “You got this” and telling me exactly what I need at the moment, or just smacking me out of bad moments. And so, worship has been one of my top things of learning and appreciating more and more....

Later in the interview, she offered more insight into the different types of chapel offerings, including some unique experiences that don’t happen on a regular basis, and the impact they have made on her journey. “It just fit in the perfect moment. I don’t know how they just knew that it was needed.” She concluded that experiences like that really make a difference for her.

This diversity of experiences provides a hint of controversy, though, as students are able to choose what type of worship paradigm fits them best. A few of the participants mentioned specifically appreciating the Wednesday evening chapel experience, in which there are longer musical sets and the campus pastors speak. Alternatively, the Tuesday morning experience involves guest speakers and an overall briefer timeframe, which is appreciated by others.

Jasmine especially appreciates the Tuesday morning format:

Those are mostly guest speakers, and I enjoyed those a lot. And sometimes they have worship teams singing. The whole entire Tuesday morning chapel is singing. And I enjoy those, and they sometimes talked about their singing and...why they sing this song or

kind of their story with it. And I thought that was really good because it's good to hear other's stories, other people's stories...challenges and trials.

Later, she mentioned appreciating the speakers in Tuesday morning chapels, especially those who are published authors. "Some of them have books that they've made, and we've had a couple really good guests and I've...tried to find their books after chapels because they just told amazing stories of their trials and how they found God and the relationship with God and I really enjoy that."

Ariana and Serenity both highlighted the importance of the Wednesday evening experiences to their spiritual formation. Ariana mentioned, "[I go] on Wednesdays. I always get something from Wednesday night." Similarly, Serenity shared: "...I often go to the Wednesday night chapel because of worship. For me, I think it's important to be centered; to really focus my attention back on God and being reminded why I'm doing what I'm doing.... My experience in chapel is [that] I really love toing to chapel."

On the contrary, for three (half) of the participants, chapel has held little to no significance when it came to their spiritual formation. When I asked Christina what activities or programs have had the least effective impact on her spiritual formation, she immediately answered that it was chapel. "I haven't gone in so long," she said, "'cause I don't like it." She recalled knowing what it was for and why they do it, but admitted that it doesn't do anything for her in terms of growth.

When I asked Carlos the same question, he quickly shared Christina's sentiments. He cited the chapel requirement itself as perhaps the biggest detriment to the chapel program.

One, chapel is required. Two, if you don't go to chapel, you'll get fined per credit that you don't go. Three, the second level of chapel, everybody's on their laptops and on their

phones and they're not listening to anything that's going on in chapel. And I'm one of those people that does that occasionally. Four, people on the lower level are on their phones and laptops. They don't wanna be there because they have to be there. And I...understand making it required because it's a private Christian institution, so you must have some type of thing that connects with that, right? But my rebellious side is like, "Well, if I was required to go to church on Sunday, would I wanna go? If I was required to do Bible studies, would I wanna go?" Because it takes away that special aspect of, "I'm doing this because I wanna do this."

For Carlos, it seems it is the requirement to go more than chapel itself that makes it a less-than rewarding experience for him; and, in his opinion, others.

And that's the whole aspect of formation. For me, if I go to chapel and it's not required, that means that I am in the space and I'm being intentional with my time to go there. But if it's required, it's me being like, "Ugh. I gotta go. I'd rather do this essay or sleep 30 minutes." And I think a lot of students would agree...a lot of students don't really pay attention when they're in chapel because they have all these other things that they're thinking about. And once you make it required, then it's like, "Oh, another class," or, "We have to go." And what you will notice too, the first couple of chapels of the year are so packed...and then you get to the chapels at the end of the year, and you'll notice there's a difference in the amount of students who attend. That's because less and less students have to go to chapel. And if you don't go to chapel, then why would you go? Because now it's something that is required of you. So, seeing it as a requirement versus seeing it as being intentional with Jesus are two different things.

As he wrapped up his answer to that particular question, he offered some interesting insight, “The people that don’t wanna be there, I feel like it is negative for their spiritual formation....”

Austin had not really brought up chapel at all in his interview, except at one point when he mentioned that he liked the worship time in chapel. I asked him later about whether or not he felt not having a chapel requirement as a senior has impacted his spiritual growth. He answered:

It feels kinda nice that I don’t have to go, ‘cause then I can work on homework or something. It’s not fun to go to chapel when I have a million things to do and it’s a requirement. Chapel’s not bad at all. It’s not a bad thing. They can’t serve everyone.

Some people wanna go, some people don’t. They do their best. But it’s been kind of nice that [I] don’t have to go, ‘cause then I can just do my own thing. It doesn’t affect my spirituality negatively. It’s just different now.

Although he tried to be a bit more positive about the chapel experience and requirements than a couple of the other participants, he, too, indicated that it is freeing to not have the requirement hanging over his head.

It is no surprise that corporate worship is a vital means of spiritual formation, and an important part of the routine at PNCU. Chapel is a place in which the spiritual and Christian ideals of the campus are communicated and celebrated. The stories of the student participants verify the seemingly universal ideal that chapel services belong at the heart of a spiritual growth paradigm; something which the university seems to accomplish quite well. Conversely, there were a few students for whom chapel plays an insignificant part of their overall spiritual formation, and could even be viewed as detrimental to some due to the attendance requirement. For them, chapel has been little more than something to check off their list each week rather than an opportunity for significant growth.

Summary

My research in this study was intended to examine the lived experiences of six students at PNCU who profess a relationship with Christ, and have chosen to be intentional in their faith as they engaged with the spiritual formation programming at the university. Despite the variety of answers the participants provided to my questions, four themes arose as I analyzed the data in regard to their spiritual growth: (a) the importance of the academic curriculum; (b) the sense of community at PNCU; (c) mentors across the campus have influenced their journeys in profound ways; and (d) worship in chapel services has been both beneficial and not very effective. Through these themes and the other feedback my six participants provided, one thing is imminently clear: the university does a profoundly effective job of providing opportunities for students to know and grow in Christ in a variety of ways. It is a campus-wide effort to produce a community of scholars as they work together to form the whole person. These ideas will be analyzed further in chapter five.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research was conducted in order to examine the spiritual formation experiences of senior level students at a faith-based CCCU institution in order to gain insight into the benefits and potential pitfalls of such a program. After conducting a review of the literature, gathering data in the form of interviews, and coding the data, four themes emerged: (a) the academic curriculum and professors themselves have had a profound impact on their spiritual formation; (b) the sense of community at PNCU, including friendships, residential life, and campus climate have influenced their spiritual growth; (c) mentors across the campus have influenced their journeys in profound ways; and (d) worship in a variety of organized chapel services has contributed to the spiritual formation of some, while not really being a significant contributor for others. These themes comprised a comprehensive organizational framework for the study. In this chapter, I will answer the research questions, provide insights I gained as I analyzed the data, offer some further questions that arose from the data, suggest implications for policy and practice, and identify potential opportunities for future research.

Discussion of the Findings

Research question one: From their lived experiences, do the participants report that their spiritual formation was enhanced by the purposeful activities and programs provided by the institution? The answer to this question could be interpreted in a number of ways. The simple answer is “yes.” It seems as if the university does offer intentional programming that promotes spiritual growth. Each of the participants identified a handful of things that the university did intentionally to develop their spirituality. At first glance, worship programming

like chapel may have been the most obvious contributor, but I would assert that the spiritual formation programming runs deeper than simply providing activities that have a direct effect on student spiritual formation. Additionally, I would add that the spiritual development paradigm is the responsibility of the entire campus community, not just the Spiritual Life office. It is every staff member's duty to promote and live out the institution's spiritual development ideals. From the campus pastors to the lunch lady, each member of the faculty and staff is charged with the responsibility of doing his or her part to promote the sense of community that is so evident to the students, and so vital to their spiritual formation.

To put it another way, while the university claims several unique programs that specifically target spiritual formation among the students, both corporately and individually, the university and its personnel recognize that student spiritual formation cannot depend solely on a handful of programs. Rather, it lies in its people. It relies on community. Pacific Northwest Christian University is not a place that simply offers programs for spiritual formation. It is a place of formation through transformational community (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Otto & Harrington, 2016).

It is my opinion that it is people, not programs, that make PNCU what it is. As I got to know the students for whom the entire institutional experience is designed, I realized that PNCU's people make all the difference. Faculty have the unique role of teaching curricular content from a Christ-centered worldview. Campus pastors offer worship and teaching from the Word of God, as well as a listening ear and mentoring spirit. ACs challenge their staff, giving them a safe place to ask questions and seek advice. Lunch ladies intercede on behalf of the students, regularly checking in with many of them to make sure they are doing well. The students

themselves encourage each other, meet together for worship, pray with one another, and challenge others. The PNCU difference is not about programming. It is about people.

The university lives out its mission as its people live out theirs; to do whatever it takes to create an environment of belonging and form community. Community is known as it is shown, and the stories of the students whom I had the privilege of interviewing prove that community is shown daily by the faithful stewards of the university; it's faculty and staff. Although they are responsible for creating a sense of community, it is the students themselves who are both recipients of it and participants in it. Community requires the effort of all, not just a few (Rhea, 2011).

I sensed this almost intangible element myself as I drove on campus. I noticed it immediately as I sat down to eat with the students and my key informant before I conducted the interviews. Spiritual formation is happening at PNCU in obvious, yet seemingly intangible ways as community is built and maintained at the university.

Research question two: From their individual experiences, what were the most beneficial activities or programs the university offered to aid in their spiritual formation?

This question was answered thoroughly through the four themes that resulted from the interview data. The most beneficial activity or program that reportedly contributed to their spiritual formation isn't an activity at all. It is the people. Staff and faculty at PNCU take this role very seriously, as evidenced by the stories shared by the student participants. Faculty openly share about their own faith journeys in classes, discussing their challenges and how they wrestle with their faith versus their field of study at times. They offer encouragement through prayer and scripture. Many professors weave their faith into the classes they teach (Otto & Harrington,

2016; Setran et al., 2010). They actively work to make faith part of the curriculum (Cannister, 1999).

Mentoring is a significant part of campus life, and mentors come from many different departments at PNCU (Holmes et al., 2004). Student leaders in Residential Life are mentored by ACs, who regularly check in with their RAs to inquire about their spiritual journeys. Campus pastors are available often to exhort and challenge any student who desires to meet with them. Intercultural Life personnel are standing by to answer big questions or simply listen to students who need to talk. Cafeteria personnel regularly ask students how they are doing and offer to pray for them.

Besides people, though, there are actual programs offered that contribute to spiritual growth. The most significant, it seems, are those that are more academic in nature. Several participants mentioned that their Bible and religion classes have greatly impacted their spiritual formation (Cochran, 2012; Lovik, 2011). Others talked about classes that are not overtly religious, but have challenged their faith simply by challenging their minds. As I mentioned earlier, faith runs throughout the curriculum at PNCU.

Chapel and worship experiences, of course, play a significant role in spiritual formation as well, as is consistent with the literature (Benac, 2015; Lovik, 2011; Paredes-Collins, 2013). The university offers a wide variety of regularly scheduled, and randomly scheduled worship opportunities, intended to reach a diverse student body. These experiences offer a chance for the community to come together to worship, celebrate, encourage, and build a sense of belonging (Benac, 2015; Lovik, 2011).

Student-led Bible study groups offer students the opportunity to grow through encouragement and discipleship. Life groups are offered by the Spiritual Life office, and give

students the chance to meet on a regular basis. Other opportunities happen more organically as student leaders are empowered and encouraged to begin groups themselves in residence halls and beyond (Holmes et al, 2004; Astin & Astin, 2010). No matter the specific circumstance, the ethic of care suggested in the literature is embodied as students choose to engage in discipleship and accountability (Astin & Astin, 2010; Kiessling, 2010).

In addition, participants cited service opportunities, relationships with other students, and simply a sense of belonging as the greatest contributors to their spiritual formation, which is consistent with the literature (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Ma, 2003; Rennick et al., 2013). Again, it seems as if the institution's mission is lived out through those who serve at the university, and those who are served. The all-important sense of community may be greater than any single program or activity the university offers when it comes to the spiritual formation of the students (Hindman, 2002; Otto & Harrington, 2016).

Research question three: From their lived experiences, what activities or programs offered by the university were ineffective at contributing to their spiritual formation?

According to the data collected during the student interviews, the only programming that seemed to be deemed ineffective by three of the participants was the chapel experience. Ironically, as discussed earlier, chapels were one of the prevailing answers as being one of the best avenues of spiritual formation offered by the university as well. This particular activity seems to elicit different responses from different individuals.

That being the only answer, in my opinion, speaks highly of the institution and its programming structure. The fact is, I did not hear a list of activities that the students felt were ineffective; I simply heard the one, and I only heard it from a couple of the students. While it would require gathering more data to prove this theory, the participant sample from which I drew

the data was clear that there was nothing else the institution offered specifically for spiritual formation that was not helpful. The analysis of the data indicates that PNCU is a healthy place that has focused its energy on providing experiences for spiritual growth that are meaningful to as many students as possible.

That said, given the small sample size, it could be that the six of them have not personally experienced all the university has to offer in terms of spiritual formation. Only one of them brought up any kind of community service or mission-type opportunity, and the one who did speak about it did so only after being asked a probing question. So, either none of the other students have personally been part of service-oriented experiences, or they have been and did not find them valuable. I would assume the former, as our interview was pretty broad.

It is important to note that seeking exhaustive information as to all the programs offered by the university to intentionally foster spiritual formation was beyond the scope of this study. Thus, one could argue that my participants may have experienced opportunities of which I was unaware or uninformed. The fact remains, however, that nothing else deemed ineffective by the students was mentioned.

It bears mentioning that I did ask a question in each of the interviews probing into what kinds of things on campus were a distraction or a hindrance to their spiritual formation. Their responses were quite varied, hence not including them in the thematic analysis. The most notable response came from only two of the students, and that was classes and homework. Other responses included friends, social events, and simply a lack of time. While this is not indicative of an issue with ineffective spiritual formation programming, it is worth mentioning here.

Implications

Christian spiritual formation and Christian education fit together effortlessly (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003). This connection suggests faith-based higher educational institutions are compelled to invest in intentional spiritual formation programming for their students (Otto & Harrington, 2016). Pacific Northwest Christian University does this very well by offering a variety of worship opportunities that serve a diverse campus community. In addition to worship, though, the university integrates faith into every aspect of campus life—from the residence halls, to the classrooms, athletic fields and beyond. PNCU lives out its mission of providing a competitive education in a Christ-centered environment in every possible way, it seems. This mission is embodied in the lives of the students as they experience the transformative experience that is Pacific Northwest Christian University.

The oft intangible sense of community at PNCU, as voiced by the participants, reinforces the intentionality behind the institution's marketing campaign that all students are recognized and known. This concept is woven through everything that happens on campus. Ironically, this is not a program; rather, it is an idea. Perhaps an even better term would be it is an ideal. It is not simply a clever advertising tool coined by the marketing department; it is a way of life for all who call PNCU home. Being recognized and known creates a sense of community (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Hindman, 2002; Otto & Harrington, 2016). It creates a safe environment in which ideas can be freely and honestly shared without fear of recourse. Being recognized and known gives rise to hall Bible studies, peer mentoring groups, meaningful worship experiences, and simply a sense of belonging. Being recognized and known is an ideal that truly embodies the feeling of community reported by each of the participants whom I interviewed. To be recognized and known as an individual is, thus, simply to be part of community.

What makes this sense of belonging possible is not the activities offered, nor the programming of well-intentioned people. What makes it possible *is* the people. For the privileged professionals charged with the honor of working with the students day in and day out, year after year, their mission is to create community. According to each of the student participants, this is something the university does immensely well. Not only do each of the students feel as if they are known, they feel as if they matter. They feel as if they have someone to talk to. They know they have mentors who care, and will stop at nothing to ensure the students achieve success in all areas of life (Cannister, 1999; Holmes et al., 2004). For a student, learning about who they are as individuals, and as part of a greater community is paramount (Ma, 2003). The PNCU community is made up of loving adults who are there to challenge, encourage, and mentor students along the journey.

As with any educational institution, however, the students are what it is all for. Perhaps the sense of community at PNCU is encouraged and enhanced most of all by peer relationships. This is not surprising as research has shown that this is the case (Powell et al., 2012). Each of the students I interviewed reported significant relationships with peers that made them feel like they belonged. Additionally, they reported that it was largely their peers who supported their spiritual formation in informal, unprogrammed ways as they simply traversed the collegiate experience together. “Together” seems to be key (Hindman, 2002; Otto & Harrington, 2016). From the lived experiences of my participants, it was that sense of togetherness that seemed to provide the motivation, accountability, encouragement, and friendship necessary to grow. The university can only do so much. When all is said and done, it is up to the students themselves to choose whether or not to grow. Perhaps the greatest catalyst for student spiritual formation is the students themselves.

Suggestions for Policy and Practice

While there are many insights a faith-based institution could gain from the stories of the participants in this study, the following suggestions offer some ideas for further reflection.

1. The Spiritual Life office at PNCU should spend some time rethinking their philosophy of chapel, specifically in regard to attendance requirements. Although chapel is reportedly a valuable part of the student spiritual formation experience, the attendance requirement seems to be volatile even to students who appreciate the activity. The university could reach out to stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, and others) in order to evaluate the attendance requirement through surveys and focus groups. This would provide some valuable feedback for consideration of how to improve the program for maximum spiritual return.
2. The university would do well to continue their practice of encouraging a sense of community on campus through their marketing campaign that emphasizes that individual students will be recognized and known and not merely treated as a statistic (Capeheart-Meningall, 2005; Hindman, 2002).
3. PNCU should continue to challenge faculty to connect faith to curriculum and making spiritual formation a regular part of classroom activities (Dalton & Crosby, 2006).
4. The university must continue to capitalize on its greatest asset, people. Staff members who do the meaningful work of encouraging, challenging, and mentoring students every day should be commended for their fine efforts.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study was a simple phenomenological effort to gain a small picture of the spiritual formation programming on a single CCCU campus. It is my opinion that faith-based institutions,

specifically PNCU, could benefit greatly from further research in this area (Bramer, 2010; Ma, 2003). One approach that could be beneficial to PNCU specifically would be to conduct a broader qualitative study. This could consist of more interviews with students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders. Additionally, one could conduct focus groups, make observations of specific programming, and even participate in different activities. This would provide an even greater perspective into the programming at PNCU, and elicit greater insight into the benefits or potential downfalls of their programming.

It may be beneficial to explore “best practices” of institutions that self-report a healthy and vibrant spiritual climate on campus. This could be achieved through a broad quantitative study across multiple institutions. Such research would provide the sample size necessary to ensure generalizability, providing a far more detailed level of insight into what really does and does not contribute to spiritual formation on faith-based campuses nationwide. The data gained from such a study would provide institutions with a framework of ideas for building or maintaining robust spiritual formation initiatives with the goal of growing students with a sense of spiritual wholeness. Research such as this could help fill in some of the gaps that appear in the literature (Love & Talbot, 1999; Ma, 2003; Otto & Harrington, 2016), and, practically speaking, provide some meaningful information to institutions that struggle, at times, to simply reinvent the proverbial wheel.

Finally, a word of caution is necessary regarding the use of gatekeepers or key informants in qualitative research such as this. Clearly, the gatekeeper I used had some inherent biases given the individual’s administrative role at the university. Since the present study was exploratory research, such a bias was not seriously damaging because I needed to gather data from individuals who had strong experiences with spiritual formation. As such, I accepted this

limitation. However, other studies designed to gain a fuller array of perceptions need be more cautious about the recruitment of participants and potential biases of the gatekeepers.

Conclusion

I am a product of Christian education; specifically, Christian higher education. I believe in its mission—to educate the whole person in an environment of vital Christianity. I believe that in order to achieve such a lofty mission, a university must truly practice the concept of community. Pacific Northwest Christian University embodies this practice.

This research was intended to provide insight into the lived experiences of the students for whom this practice exists. In the moments in which I was privileged to have conversation with those six students, I witnessed firsthand how PNCU lives out its mission. I immediately was caught up in the sense of community, and I experienced the mission to be recognized and known first-hand.

The spiritual formation programs at PNCU are effective. The activities themselves work, as evidenced by the stories of the students who experience them. However, the real truth is, the programs and initiatives set forth by the institution to promote spiritual formation would not be possible without the people who live out the mission every day. The programs are not the real catalyst for spiritual growth; the people are.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide Questions

Spiritual Formation at a Faith-Based Institution: A Phenomenological Study

Biographical Questions

Name _____ Age _____

How long have you attended the university? _____

Major(s)/Minor(s) _____

1. Would you consider yourself a Christ-follower/Christian?
2. How would you define “spiritual formation”?
3. In what ways was your spiritual formation enhanced by the purposeful activities and programs provided by the institution?
4. What were the most beneficial activities or programs the university offered in which you felt the most spiritual growth?
5. What were the least effective spiritual formation activities or programs the university offered in relation to your spiritual growth?
6. Were there activities or other circumstances that were not university-programmed spiritual formation experiences that enhanced your spiritual growth?
7. Has there been anything about your entire undergraduate experience that has distracted you from or been a barrier to your spiritual formation?
8. Do you expect there to be any impact to your spiritual formation now that you are free of regular undergraduate chapel requirements?
9. How would you describe your openness to your own spiritual formation prior to enrolling in the institution?
10. Is there anything else related to your university spiritual formation experience that you would like to share?

APPENDIX B

Letter of Informed Consent

Spiritual Formation at a Faith-Based Institution: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Student,

My name is Jonathan Colburn and I am a student in the Doctor of Educational Leadership program at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. I am conducting research for my dissertation on the experiences of college seniors regarding the spiritual formation aspects of university life. You are invited to engage in a personal interview (about 45 minutes to an hour) regarding your perceptions of your own experiences in the spiritual formation programs at your institution.

This study promises some social benefits. First, it will provide insight into fourth or fifth year students' lived experiences pertaining to the spiritual formation programming at their university. It is my hope that the university may be able to use this information as part of the evaluation processes of their programming, and to help gauge the effectiveness of various institutional initiatives related to spiritual formation. Additionally, it will be beneficial for the university to simply read the stories of those who have experienced the programs personally.

The risks associated with this research are minimal. The personal interview questions are innocuous and should not create distress. Nevertheless, please be aware that your participation is completely voluntary and you may decline to continue at anytime or decline to answer any question at your discretion.

The results of this study will only be used for research purposes and may be used for presentations at a professional conference and/or academic publications. Personal interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed. Information will be analyzed and presented in an anonymous fashion and no individual will be personally identified. I will keep any personal information and identities confidential.

All research materials (i.e., audio recordings, transcriptions, and signed consent forms) will be locked in separate, secure locations for a period of no less than three years. I will be the only individual who will have access to these materials. After three years, I will personally destroy all relevant materials and delete the audio recordings.

I thank you for your time in considering this project. If you choose to participate, please be aware that you are making a contribution to furthering educational research. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX. If you have any additional questions, you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Terry Huffman at (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

If you understand the use of this research and agree to participate, please sign below.

Participant signature _____ Date _____

Researcher signature _____ Date _____