

**Being and Becoming:  
An Exploration of Student Spirituality in the Second Year of College**

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## **Abstract**

Spirituality is a critical component of the holistic development of college students. This phenomenological case study explored the ways in which 11 second-year students conceptualized and experienced spirituality while enrolled in a course addressing life purpose at a large public research institution. Their unique journeys captured how students encountered a spirituality framed in meaning, purpose and connectedness during their second year of college. Their experiences were shaped by influences of their past, present and future which therefore created a unique and individualized spirituality. Students experienced connectedness as a sense of belonging in college and in relation to a universal connectedness. Students' spirituality emerged in how they experienced diversity, the campus climate, their spiritual practices and wellbeing, and through co-curricular involvement. The busyness and pressures of college life served as a barrier to their spirituality. A course exploring life purpose provided a guiding framework to accompany, support and stimulate the motion of spirituality during their second year. Implications of the study address intentional policies and practices that encourage and support students' spiritual development.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
List of Figures.....	vi
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
The Value of Holistic Education.....	2
The Role of Higher Education.....	3
Spirituality as a Dimension of Students' Lives and Development.....	7
Holistic Education Promotes Deeper Learning.....	10
Purpose of the Study.....	12
Chapter II: Literature Review.....	15
Constructs of Spirituality.....	15
Spirituality and Religion.....	16
Defining Spirituality.....	18
Conceptual Framework.....	26
Spirituality and the College Student Experience.....	28
Spirituality in Higher Education Project.....	29
Spiritual Development Theory.....	31
Spirituality within Student Development Theory.....	38
Spirituality and Identity.....	46
Spirituality in the Classroom.....	51
Spirituality Outside the Classroom.....	53
The Second-Year Experience.....	58
Chapter III: Methodology.....	64
Methodology.....	
Methodological Approach.....	64
Conceptual Framework.....	67
Methods.....	
Context and Participant Selection.....	70
Participant Consent, Confidentiality, and Protection.....	73
Data Collection.....	74
Data Analysis.....	77
Trustworthiness.....	80
Researcher's Perspective.....	81

Chapter IV	Findings: Study Participants	84
	Overview of Students	84
	Samantha	85
	Juan	89
	Amanda	94
	Josh	100
	Michelle	105
	Laurie	109
	Suzie	114
	Kiab	119
	Maggie	124
	Choi	130
	Kelly	135
	Conclusion	140
Chapter V	Findings: Collective Themes	142
	Conceptualizing Spirituality	
	Defining Spirituality	142
	Connectedness	148
	Meaning	152
	Conceptualizing Purpose	154
	Experiencing Spirituality	160
	Consciousness of Spirituality	160
	Barriers to Experiencing Spirituality	163
	Wellbeing and Spirituality	165
	Spiritual Practices	166
	Campus Climate	169
	Experiencing Difference	171
	Campus Involvement	174
	Living on Purpose Course	179
	Course Learning Outcomes	180
	Course Topics	185
	Course Structure	190
	Conclusion	193
Chapter VI	Summary, Discussion, and Implications	194
	Key Findings: Conceptualizing Spirituality	195
	Individualized and Pluralistic	195
	Language of Spirituality	196
	Secular Purpose	197
	Connectedness	197
	Key Findings: Experiencing Spirituality	199
	Spirituality as Motion	199

Negotiating Tensions .....	202
Tending to Spirituality .....	203
Key Outcomes: Exploring Purpose Course .....	205
Course Outcomes and Influence .....	205
Course Structure.....	206
Living Learning Community .....	207
Implications.....	208
Policy Implications .....	208
Curricular Implications .....	212
Co-Curricular/Student Services Implications .....	216
Contextual Considerations .....	218
Future Research .....	221
Conclusion .....	223
References.....	224
Appendices.....	236

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Forms of knowing, dependence and community.....	34
Figure 2. The model of multiple dimensions of identity .....	43
Figure 3. Reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity .....	44
Figure 4. Transcendence model of identity construction.....	50
Figure 5. Conceptual framework of an expanded spirituality.....	68
Figure 6. Data collection timeline.....	77
Figure 7. Conceptual framework of an expanded spirituality.....	195



## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

The social contract between higher education and society promises Americans the opportunity to better themselves and improve their overall quality of life. Society expects higher education to not only educate traditional-aged students and prepare them for productive careers, but also guide them through the transition into mature adulthood so that they can lead meaningful and productive lives (Parks, 2011). The public assumes that through the process of a college education, students will graduate with a greater sense of their individual talents, values, and commitments that will give their lives meaning, allow them to contribute to society as leaders and citizens, and put into practice the knowledge and skills to implement a fulfilling life.

In recent years, scholars have questioned if higher education has lost sight of its responsibility to educate students as whole beings (Astin, 2004; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Lewis, 2007; Newman, 2000). Pressure to compete for students, funding, and prestige has shifted the focus away from undergraduate education in order to achieve more external goals. Lewis (2007) asserts that the drive for excellence and the forces of consumerism have overshadowed the primary role of education. He argues that colleges and universities, specifically research institutions, have forgotten that the fundamental job of undergraduate education is to “help [students] grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings” (Lewis, 2007, p. xii). Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011b) state that undergraduate education has become out of balance and focuses too heavily on developing students within their fields of study and future careers while neglecting the development of their

own self awareness, values and beliefs, emotional intelligence, moral development, and spirituality. The forces within and surrounding higher education have caused colleges and universities to lose sight of their vital role in educating young people to their fullest potential and in helping students create meaningful – not just economically productive – lives.

In order to meet this responsibility, it is essential for colleges and universities to recommit to undergraduate education and the holistic development of students.

Spirituality is an aspect of a holistic approach and a component of the student experience that is often ignored. This dissertation explores the role of student spirituality within the undergraduate experience, specifically during the second year. I begin by emphasizing the importance of a holistic education inclusive of a spiritual dimension and then providing a brief overview of the purpose of this study.

### **The Value of Holistic Education**

Higher education has the potential and responsibility to develop students holistically, encompassing not only the capacities of their mind, but all the elements involved in the journey to mature adulthood. This responsibility is outlined in early descriptions of the role of U.S. higher education and the field of student affairs stating that institutions have

the obligation to consider the student as a whole – his intellectual capacity and achievement, his emotional make up, his physical condition, his social relationships, his vocational aptitudes and skills, his moral and religious values, his economic resources, his aesthetic appreciations. (American Council on Education, 1937, p. 3)

The updated Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1949) emphasized that students' overall growth and development includes that students "discover ethical and spiritual meaning in life" (p. 7). Today, as scholars advocate for higher education to return to educating students as a whole, spirituality is one dimension of students' lives that needs to be more fully understood and integrated into the educational process (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006). This section addresses the value of a holistic approach within the undergraduate experience for the following three reasons: (1) it is a primary role of higher education to prepare students for meaningful and productive lives, (2) to truly integrate a holistic education higher education must recognize the role of spirituality as a dimension of students' lives and development, and (3) acknowledging and honoring students' spiritual selves enhances the undergraduate experience by promoting deeper learning.

### **The Role of Higher Education**

One of the essential contributions of higher education is to help students develop as mature individuals, effective leaders, and engaged citizens in an increasingly complex world. Parks (2011) argues that the formation of mature adulthood is a societal expectation of the post-secondary experience and that issues "pertaining to the development of character and conscience – competence, courage, integrity, freedom, compassion, responsibility, wisdom, generosity, and fidelity, all qualities associated with exemplary citizenship and the best of the intellectual life – are embedded in our assumptions about the formation of adulthood" (p. 6). Newman (2000) writes that over time, the "most enduring role for the university has been the socialization of young people for their roles in society" (p. 18). This socialization process relies on colleges and

universities to go beyond training for specific careers to develop within students the skills and attitudes necessary to be responsible citizens and future leaders within society.

For students to develop in such holistic ways, institutions must move beyond the dominant paradigm of logic and rationalism to address issues of affective complexity and social responsibility (Chickering, et al., 2006). Chickering, et al. argue that political leaders and the general culture are functioning at the bottom levels of cognitive and affective complexity at a time when issues need to be addressed from more multidimensional thinking. Colleges and universities are the nation's most significant resource to develop leaders and citizens who are able to address complex issues from not only an intellectual paradigm but also with compassion, integrity, and a responsibility towards interconnectedness. The recent report *Attending to Students' Inner Lives: A Call to Higher Education* (Higher Education Research Institute, 2011) implores higher education to embrace the responsibility and opportunity of holistic education:

Finally, as educators and citizens we must ask ourselves: What kinds of people will our global society of the future need? It goes without saying that technical knowledge and skill are becoming increasingly important for one's effective functioning in modern society, but technical knowledge alone will not be adequate for dealing with some of society's most pressing problems: violence, poverty, crime, divorce, substance abuse, and the religious, national, and ethnic conflicts that continue to plague our country and our world. At root, these are problems of the "heart," problems that call for greater self-awareness, self-understanding, equanimity, empathy, and concern for others. (p. 4)

If higher education is to incorporate a multi-dimensional approach in its educational process, it should consider the spiritual dimension as part of the process. It must aspire to develop the aspects of students that serve as the foundation on which they build upon to become more soulful leaders, engaged citizens, and authentic beings.

Students also see the role of higher education as going beyond employment or graduate school preparation. Students expect that during college they will develop and mature as individuals in multidimensional ways. Findings from the Study of Spirituality in Higher Education, a multi-year research project that explores spiritual development among college students from over 240 colleges and universities, indicate that first-year students expect their college experience will help them develop their self-understanding, personal values, and sense of place in the world (HERI, 2005). Students are also interested in dimensions of spirituality, with 76% of first-year students stating that they are “searching for meaning/purpose in their life” (p. 4). Forty-eight percent of these students say that it is “essential” or “very important” for college to encourage their personal expression of spirituality. Additional research supports these findings and affirms that students have an interest in exploring the existential questions of meaning and purpose or life’s big questions during the college years (Nash & Murray, 2010; Parks, 2011). These “Big Questions,” as Parks (2011) labels them, linger in students’ minds as they navigate their college experience. Students recognize the role of spirituality in their lives and look to their college experience to provide opportunities for growth.

Despite this interest from both scholars and students, significant barriers to addressing spirituality within higher education continue to exist. Private and religiously

affiliated institutions have attended to students' spiritual development for years. However, secular institutions experience significant barriers that curtail the ability of colleges and universities to address matters of spirituality. One such barrier is the understanding of separation of church and state within public higher education. The U.S. Supreme Court established that government agencies must be neutral in matters of religion (Clark, 2001). In practice, this has resulted in the marginalization or exclusion of religion on public campuses (Jablonski, 2001). With spirituality being so tightly linked with religion, it often falls under the umbrella of separation of church and state and is therefore approached with great caution within public education. Rather than ignore religion and spirituality within the lives of students and society, the challenge for secular institutions is how to engage in these conversations without promoting one religion or worldview as the normative (Laurence, 1999).

In addition to the barrier of church and state, many public institutions do not value spirituality as an aspect of the undergraduate experience. Tisdell (2003) believes that the ambivalence towards spirituality is rooted in the emphasis on rationality and the scientific method within the context of higher education. Spirituality is not viewed as a rational, intellectual endeavor so therefore has less value than more traditional ways of knowing. Jones (2005) reflects on her experiences as a faculty member who teaches a course incorporating spirituality at a public institution and states that "educators interested in holistic education know that to discuss feelings, passion, and connections is to risk being unscientific, impractical and 'out there'" (p. 2). The recent discourse surrounding spirituality in higher education reflects a more complex understanding of spirituality and recognition of its role in individual and societal life (Waggoner, 2011). Although barriers

still exist, the collective call and growing body of research is providing opportunities to understand students' spirituality as a facet of holistic education.

### **Spirituality as a Dimension of Students' Lives and Development**

Spirituality is part of the human experience and therefore is a dimension of students' lives and development. Parker Palmer (2009) describes spirituality as the "eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos" (p. 3). This searching, many scholars suggest, is part of being human and the natural desire to be part of something larger than ourselves. Victor Frankl (1992) states that striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force of being human. Students also recognize spirituality as part of the human experience. In a national survey of 3,680 college students in their junior year, 77% agreed to the statement that we are all spiritual beings (Astin & Astin, 2004). A group of 10 university college presidents, deans, and faculty from across the United States convened in 2011 to discuss the findings and implications from the Study of Spirituality in Higher Education. In a report based on their meeting, they acknowledge that "spirituality is fundamental to students' lives" (HERI, 2011, p. 2) and call on higher education to recognize spirituality as a dimension in student learning and development.

Spirituality, as a function of meaning making, is viewed by many scholars as an innate part of the human experience that influences how we learn, develop, and see the world (Fowler, 1981, Palmer, 1998a; Parks, 2011; Tisdell, 2003). Parks (2011) states that "to be human is to dwell in an ongoing process of meaning making, to dwell in the sense one makes out of the whole of life – what is perceived as ultimately true and trustworthy about self, world, and cosmos" (p. 10). As an ongoing process of making

sense of the world, spirituality is an important element of how individuals construct knowledge and therefore learn and develop as human beings (Tisdell, 2003). Spirituality is embedded in human actions, thought process, and identity. As higher education strives to acknowledge and integrate the multiple identities of students, so too must it acknowledge and weave in the dimensions of students' spiritual selves.

Spirituality shapes and influences who students become and how they develop. Research investigating human development highlights the unique changes that occur during the early adult years. Student development research supports that the college years are a critical time for personal growth (Evans, 2010). It is during these early adult years that students examine the external forces that shape their current way of being and begin to develop a more self-authored life based on their constructed understandings of self, other, and knowing the world (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This process reaches beyond developing intellectual capacities to include spiritual elements relating to identity, the search for meaning, and finding one's sense of place in the world. Dalton (2001) writes, "Spiritual development is a lifelong journey but it fully emerges as a developmental theme during the transition from young adult to adult" (p. 17). Current student development theories examine the cognitive, moral, identity and personal development of college students but mostly ignore the spiritual dimensions that may intersect or influence these theories (Love, 2001). Arguably, there exist spiritual elements woven throughout student development theories but until recently they have not been examined or named as such (Jablonski, 2001).

The college years are also a time of great transition which contributes to the potential for transformation. For traditionally-aged students, they enter a new



environment often on their own away from friends and family; they are expected to choose a major and career path to guide their future; and their identity and sense of self may be in flux as they encounter new experiences. These transitions create both opportunity and tension. For students between the ages of 18-22, college can be an idealistic time as they prepare for their future and yet also a time of great uncertainty regarding how their life will unfold (Dalton, 2001). The privilege of a college education and high expectations from obtaining a degree creates an increased sense of optimism and hope. Upon graduation, students struggle with the tension between idealism and reality (Nash & Murray, 2010; Parks, 2011). Robbins and Wilner (2001) interviewed over one hundred college graduates in their twenties and identified a new phenomenon they describe as the Quarterlife Crisis. This crisis occurs post-graduation into the late twenties and is a response to the uncertainty of their lives, the surplus of choices, and feelings of helplessness. The Quarterlife Crisis is a time filled with denial, disappointment, and vulnerability to doubts as individuals move from “student life to real life” (p. 12). Nash and Murray (2010) argue that the characteristics of the emerging Quarterlife Crisis phenomenon are grounded in the reality that young people are not exploring questions of purpose in the supportive context of higher education. Robbins and Wilner (2001) agree with this premise and state that the college experience needs to do more to prepare students for their lives beyond graduation in which they are searching for their place in the world. Within these transitions lie questions that are spiritual in nature and need to be considered as part of the educational and developmental process as students prepare for life after graduation.

## **Holistic Education Promotes Deeper Learning**

The transformational power of the college experience lies in its ability to engage and develop the whole student. For traditional aged students, the college years are a critical time in their overall development, yet few public institutions are intentional in their efforts to educate beyond the intellectual domain (Chickering, et al., 2006). Higher education often assumes that through the process of intellectual development it is also developing mature adults who possess the capacity to be ethical, authentic, and compassionate individuals (Parks, 2011). This lack of intentionality leaves to chance the opportunity for the holistic development of students and ignores the interconnectedness of learning and development. The *Wingspread Declaration on Religion and Public Life: Engaging Higher Education* states that “students learn in the context of their personal values, beliefs, and experiences. Teaching and learning that ignores this dimension to student learning and development lacks authenticity or, worse, effectiveness” (Society for Values in Higher Education, 2005, N.P.). The isolation of learning and development is similarly reflected in other fragmented aspects of higher education including the separation of the objective and subjective (Palmer, 1998b), the cognitive and the affective (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010), and the inner and outer lives of students (Astin, et al., 2011b; Palmer, 1998b). These scholars argue that too often the educational process isolates the dimensions of learning and development and does not guide students as to how to integrate these fragmented domains. Higher education must recognize that students do not develop their intellectual capacities in isolation, but rather as an interconnected process within the context of their larger selves.

Educational practices that allow students to engage multiple dimensions of themselves, including their spiritual selves, provide a greater opportunity for deep learning and transformational growth (Mentkowski, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Tisdell, 2003). Dalton (2001) acknowledges that this learning is effective “because it touches the deepest feelings and commitments of students and offers a holistic experience of learning that links knowing and feeling” (p. 18). This transformational process is grounded in shifting frames of reference (Mezirow, 2000) or ways of knowing (Kegan, 1982) as students examine current paradigms in light of new information. These frames of reference or ways of knowing may go beyond intellectual paradigms and include reframing values, beliefs, culture, relationships, and ways of engaging in the world. Baxter Magolda (2001) found that environments that promote transformational growth invite students to go beyond receiving knowledge as passive learners to engage more fully in constructing knowledge in partnership with others. When students are invited to participate in creating knowledge, it encourages them to bring their whole selves to the learning process and to explore the interconnections between the multiple dimensions of the self. Parks (2011) argues that this type of learning, which develops critical thinking and connective thinking, is the fundamental purpose of higher education. Learning that goes to a deeper level or is considered transformational connects and integrates the multiple dimensions students bring to the learning environment including the dimension of spirituality (Astin, et al., 2011b; Chickering & Zajonc, 2010; Dalton, 2001; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Parks, 2011; Tisdell, 2003).

By integrating a holistic approach into the educational experience, higher education returns to one of its founding roles of preparing students for meaningful and

productive lives. Recognizing the spiritual dimension of students' lives as part of a holistic approach enhances the undergraduate experience through deeper learning and multidimensional development. To serve this goal, it is important for professionals in higher education to understand the ways in which students grow and develop as they journey into and through adulthood. Tisdale (2003) argues that educators cannot truly separate spirituality from the conversation of student development as students are whole individuals that bring all aspects of themselves to the college experience. Laurence (1999) proposes that future research explore the question of how spirituality serves as a web that interconnects various aspects of student development in order to shed light on the ways in which spirituality intersect and influence their undergraduate experience. The goal of this study was to understand the role of student spirituality within the undergraduate experience in order to advance institutional efforts to engage in student development.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study is an exploration of the lived experience of students' spirituality during the undergraduate experience, specifically in the second year of college. Although there is a growing body of research relating to spirituality in higher education, further research is needed in relation to understanding the interconnectedness of spirituality to other aspects of the student experience, specifically the second year (Lindholm, 2010). Currently, there is little known about how students experience spirituality during the transition into and through the second year. Lindholm (2010) encourages researchers to design qualitative studies employing interviews to explore in-depth how second-year students conceive of their spirituality, the extent to which they are

struggling with various aspects of developing meaning and purpose in their lives, and how they perceive the respective roles...on campus with respect to potentially facilitating their spiritual growth during this specific phase of their undergraduate careers. (pp. 213-214)

Although there is no agreed upon definition of spirituality that grounds the literature, the common themes of meaning, purpose, and connectedness are central to the exploration of spirituality for this study. Existing research relating to the second-year experience points to internal transitions and development anchored in questions of meaning and purpose in students' lives (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012). The intersections of spirituality and the second year of college as represented in the conceptual framework for this study provide insight into how students experience spirituality and the ways in which it weaves into their college experience.

Through a phenomenological study, I sought to understand the lived experience of students' spirituality during their second year by answering the following research questions:

- How do students perceive and describe their spirituality during the second year of college?
- What college influences and experiences affect their spiritual development?
- How does participating in a course exploring life purpose influence their lived experience of spirituality?

Phenomenology as a research methodology explores the essence of the phenomenon through the descriptions and meanings that participants construct. The purpose of

phenomenology is to “gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (van Manen, 1990). I chose this methodological approach because it requires an openness to the phenomenon being explored and honors multiple ways in which individuals may experience the phenomenon. Research on spirituality has demonstrated that there is no single definition of spirituality so utilizing a research methodology grounded in the unique experiences of each participant allows for their personal meaning and experiences associated with the phenomenon of spirituality to guide the study.

The purpose of this study was to explore spirituality in the second year of college in an effort to gain greater insight into student spirituality and ways in which to create a more holistic educational experience. The following chapter offers a review of the literature focusing on spirituality, both generally and in the context of higher education, and the second-year experience.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

To study the lived experience of students' spirituality during the second year of college requires a review of the educational research relating to both spirituality in higher education and the experience of the second year of college. This section begins by exploring the constructs of spirituality and the assumptions that form the conceptual framework for this study. Next, I explore research on spirituality within the context of higher education. This section concludes with a review of the second-year experience literature.

### **Constructs of Spirituality**

In recent years, a distinction has emerged between the concepts of spirituality and religion. During most of the twentieth century, the conversation of spirituality in higher education was mostly limited to the context of religiously affiliated or private institutions (Waggoner, 2011). The secular environment of public institutions, grounded in the separation of church and state, created a barrier to campus dialogues regarding spirituality (Clark, 2001; Waggoner, 2011). One contributing reason for this barrier is the assumption that spirituality is inseparable with religion. Estanek (2006) conducted a study exploring the definitions of spirituality in the higher education literature and found evidence of a shift in language from religion and spirituality as synonymous terms to meanings that are distinct from the other. Although spirituality is not a new concept, the emerging discussion of spirituality separates the concepts of religion and spirituality. Estanek argues that spirituality as its own construct separate from religion contributes to a new dialogue within the field of student development. Secular colleges and universities

are now freer to explore spirituality within the context of public institutions. In this section, I explore constructs of spirituality that shape the current conversation and research of spirituality in higher education and propose elements of spirituality that serve as a guide for my scholarly inquiry.

### **Spirituality and Religion**

Although spirituality and religion are not new concepts, the recent uncoupling of the terms has created the opportunity to characterize their unique meanings. What has emerged is a separation in which religion is more often identified with structured religious institutions and a prescribed set of beliefs, while spirituality is used to describe individual experiences identified with personal transcendence and meaning (Hill, et al., 2000). Fuller (2001) explains that during the latter half of the twentieth century the distinction between religion and spirituality became associated with the public and private realms of one's life. Similar to the previous description, the word spiritual refers to the private realm of thought and experiences while the word religion is associated with the public sphere of religious institutions and official doctrines. The Dalai Lama (1999) describes the distinction as the following.

Religion I take to be concerned with faith in the claims of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is the acceptance of some form of heaven or nirvana.

Connected with this are religious teaching or dogma, ritual prayer, and so on.

Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit – such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which bring happiness to both self and others.

(p. 22)



Teasdale's (1999) description of spirituality and religion is used by Chickering, et al. (2006) to frame this distinction for use in the context of higher education. Teasdale (1999) states

Being religious connotes belonging to and practicing a religious tradition. Being spiritual suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality. Religion, of course, is one way many people are spiritual. Often, when authentic faith embodies an individual's spirituality the religious and the spiritual will coincide. Still, not every religious person is spiritual (although they ought to be) and not every spiritual person is religious. Spirituality is a way of life that affects and includes every moment of existence. It is at once a contemplative attitude, a disposition to a life of depth, and the search for ultimate meaning, direction, and belonging. The spiritual person is committed to growth as an essential ongoing life goal. (pp. 17-18)

These unique meanings provide a framework in which to study spirituality and religion as two unique and separate constructs. However, it is important to recognize that there may be overlap. A useful image for religion and spirituality may be that of a Venn diagram, each with their own distinct characteristics yet recognizing areas of overlap or interconnectedness. The research related to spirituality within higher education has shown that religion and spirituality can operate as separate and overlapping constructs. For example, studies have found that during the college years, students' religious activities decline while their interest in spirituality increases (Astin, et al., 2011b). In addition, Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) studied the religious and spiritual dimensions of first-year college students and found that of the students with no religious preference,

12% were considered highly spiritual. They also found overlap between the two in that 67% of highly religious first-year students were also highly spiritual. These two studies support spirituality and religion as elements that are able to operate independently of the other. Although there may be overlap, there is general consensus among scholars that these two constructs are distinct enough to allow the exploration of spirituality as an independent construct separate from religion.

### **Defining Spirituality**

Currently, there is no common or agreed upon definition of spirituality within the literature (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011a). The emerging paradigm of spirituality is fundamentally a personal and relational experience and therefore leads to a diversity of definitions and meanings (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Spirituality is viewed as a complex, multidimensional, and personal construct that derives meaning based on the experiences of each individual. Estanek (2006) states:

No one definition of spirituality informs this emerging discourse. Instead, the definition itself is part of the hermeneutic process. That is, studies are not conducted based upon a commonly held definition of spirituality. Instead, defining spirituality is part of the interpretation itself. (p. 272)

Studies that attempt to measure how individuals define spirituality and religion have found the terms to be “fuzzy” (Zinnbauer, et al., 1997) and “messy” (Zabriskie, 2005) without consensus of a definition. In describing the messiness of these terms, Zabriskie (2005) found that college students defined religion and spirituality in ways that “intermingle, at times they represent the same concept, at other times they function as opposite polarities, and at yet other times they intersect in unusual and unpredictable

ways” (p. 119). However, he also found that students provided their own definitions, thereby suggesting that students use these constructs in making sense of their lives. These studies support the individual nature of these terms and that the meaning of spirituality rests in the lived experiences of each person.

Despite the challenge of defining spirituality, Estanek (2006) examined various definitions of spirituality within the higher education literature and affirmed that although there is no common definition of spirituality there are recurring patterns that frame the discussion. These common patterns include: 1) spirituality defined as spiritual development, 2) spirituality used as critique against religion as an institution, 3) spirituality understood as an empty container for individual meaning, 4) spirituality containing an invisible connective energy, either through a higher power or as a common human force, and 5) spirituality as quasi-religion, it may or may not involve a higher power or god.

The pattern of defining spirituality and spiritual development as synonymous is worthy of further exploration. Many definitions of spirituality share a theme of movement – one of seeking, developing, exploring, making meaning, or quest. For example, Hoppe (2005) reflects this movement as she defines spirituality as “the search for depth and meaning in our entire being” (p.84). In addition to definitions, researchers have described spiritual individuals as active seekers (Roof, 1993), spiritual seekers (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006), and individuals embarking on a spiritual quest (Astin, et al., 2011b) or asking life’s big questions (Parks, 2011), all of which suggest an active process and continued development as key to spirituality. Within the context of higher education, this movement is magnified as it overlaps, intersects,

coexists, and/or influences or is influenced by the multiple layers of the cognitive and psycho-social development of college students. The developmental intensity during the emerging adult years provides the opportunity for students to actively engage in the process of seeking and composing a life, a concept that will be discussed further later in this paper.

The other common themes suggested by Estanek (2006) may be illustrated by further exploring scholarly definitions of spirituality within educational research. A widely cited definition within higher education is that of Love and Talbot (1999). Coming from the assumption that spirituality and spiritual development are interchangeable, they define spirituality in the following way.

1. Spiritual development involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development.
2. Spiritual development involves the process of continually transcending one's current locus of centrality.
3. Spiritual development involves developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community.
4. Spiritual development involves deriving meaning, purpose and direction in one's life.
5. Spiritual development involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing. (pp. 617-620)

Love and Talbot's definition reflects the growth inherent in spirituality through the process of seeking, transcending, developing, deriving, and exploring, which creates the underpinning for spirituality and spiritual development to be synonymous.

Fowler (1981) and Parks (2011), as two of the leading scholars in the area of spiritual development, use the term "faith" rather than spirituality but the elements parallel recent definitions of spirituality. Although faith is often associated with religion, these researchers expand the definition to be anchored in the process of meaning making and interconnection. Fowler (1981) describes faith as

A person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose. (p. 4)

Parks (2011) also describes faith broadly to mean "the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience" (p. 2). This process of meaning making is intensified during the early adult years and includes critically examining one's self, participating in an ongoing dialogue exploring what is true, and aligning this awareness and discovery towards authentic action (Parks, 2011).

Developing faith reflects the ongoing process of composing and recomposing one's place in the world. Parks states that:

To become an emerging adult in faith is to discover in a critically aware, self-conscious manner the limits of inherited or otherwise socially received assumptions about how life works and what counts – and to compose more adequate forms of meaning and faith on the other side of that discovery. (p. 10)

These two definitions of faith reflect the process of spirituality and making meaning of one's life in a manner that is interconnected to a greater context.

In developing the framework for the Spirituality in Higher Education study, Astin, et al. (2011a) explored definitions of spirituality in fields such as business, education, health, psychology, sociology, and others. Based on their findings, they define spirituality as

a dynamic construct that involves the internal processes of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness, of being open to exploring a connection to a higher power, of transcending one's locus of centrality while developing a greater sense of connectedness to self and others through relationship and community, and of defining one's role and place in the world and the universe.

(HERI, 2011, p. 2-3)

The researchers developed measures for the study that examine spirituality and religion as separate constructs. The measures of spirituality include

- spiritual quest: the search for meaning/purpose in life;
- equanimity: the extent to which students feel centered, are able to find meaning during difficult times, appreciation for each day, and confident in their life's direction;
- ethic of caring: a commitment to values that focus on helping others and making the world a better place;
- charitable involvement: behaviors that focus on helping others and world such as community service and helping friends in need;

- ecumenical worldview: the extent to which students believe in the interconnectedness of life and seek to understand these connections.

The measures of religiousness used for the study include

- religious commitment: sense of religiousness and degree to which “my spiritual/religious beliefs” play a central role in students’ lives;
- religious engagement: behaviors that align with religious commitment such as attending services, praying, and religious readings;
- religious/social conservatism: beliefs relating to their religion and social issues that are considered more fundamental such as abortion, casual sex, proselytizing, and belief that non-believers will be punished;
- religious skepticism: belief that the universe arose by chance, that science will explain current uncertainties, and disbelief in life after death;
- religious struggle: the extent to which students are feeling unsettled in religious matters and are questioning their religious traditions. (Astin, et al., p. 20-21)

To develop these measures, the researchers began with a process they describe as “informed consensus” (Astin, et. al., 2011a, p. 41), consisting of an in-depth literature review, ongoing consultation with a team of experts in the field, and continuous dialogue about new insights gained from this iterative process. The researchers created and piloted the College Students’ Beliefs and Values (CSBV) survey with approximately 3,700 college students and then more extensively with two large-scale surveys (described in more detail later in this paper). An extensive analysis of the survey results formed the measures outlined above. These measures and dataset from this survey have been used

for additional studies on college student spirituality, many of which are cited in this paper.

As an alternative to defining spirituality, some researchers frame spirituality as a set of assumptions or forms to provide a framework in which to rest the personal definitions of spirituality and lived experiences of individuals. Emerging from her research on spirituality and culture in higher education, Tisdell (2003) outlines the following assumptions of spirituality as a guiding definition:

- Spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many people they are interrelated;
- Spirituality is about an awareness and honoring of wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things through the mystery of...the Life-force, God, higher power, higher self, cosmic energy, Buddha nature, or Great Spirit;
- Spirituality is fundamentally about meaning making;
- Spirituality is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment;
- Spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes, often made more concrete in art forms such as music, art, image, symbol, and ritual which are manifested culturally;
- Spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise. (pp. 28-29)

Tisdell's assumptions contain elements shared by previously discussed conceptualizations of spirituality but are unique in that they emphasize the role of symbolism as part of the process of constructing knowledge. Tisdell argues that symbols are heavily rooted in one's culture and experiences. Therefore, an educational approach



that recognizes and integrates cultural identities into the learning environment also promotes spiritual development through the recognition of cultural.

Spirituality has also been defined as a form of intelligence (Zohar & Marshall, 2000) that together with the measures of one's Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and Emotional Intelligence (EQ) (Goleman, 1995) results in a holistic perspective of aptitude. For years, IQ has been the accepted measure of intelligence through standardized tests. Goleman (1995) argues that intelligence goes beyond the rational as captured in IQ testing to include Emotional Intelligence (EQ). He describes Emotional Intelligence as the awareness of one's own feelings and the feelings of others, empathy, compassion, motivation and the ability to respond appropriately to pain or pleasure. Zohar and Marshall (2000) added Spiritual Intelligence or SQ as a third and unifying type of intelligence. Spiritual intelligence is defined as

the intelligence in which we address and solve problems of meaning and value, the intelligence with which we can place our actions and lives in a wider, richer, meaning-giving context, the intelligence with which we can assess that one course of action or one life-path is more meaningful than another. SQ is the necessary foundation for the effective functioning of both IQ and EQ. (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 3-4)

These authors contend that a holistic measure of intelligence includes cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions and that human beings possess an innate need for meaning that separates humans from animals and technology. Zohar and Marshall (2000) ground the theory of SQ in evolving research including neurological evidence that the human brain has evolved to ask the big questions of meaning and value. Similar to other

forms of intelligence, it is possible to develop spiritual intelligence by cultivating curiosity, to look for the connections between things, to examine existing assumptions and meanings, to become more reflective and self-aware, and to see beyond one's own needs. Wolman (2001) defines spiritual intelligence as "our human capacity to ask ultimate questions about the meaning of life; and to experience simultaneously the seamless connection between each of us and the world in which we live" (p. 1). He asserts that spiritual intelligence reflects the basic human need to understand the world and one's place in it and that it is important to develop the ability to think with the soul. A holistic education addresses this dimension by acknowledging and developing multiple forms of intelligence including intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Given the array of definitions related to spirituality, it is important to articulate the spiritual assumptions that I hold that shape the framework of this study: first, that the meaning of spirituality is a multidimensional and personal construct; second, it is a process in motion that changes throughout one's life; third, searching for meaning, purpose, and connectedness is at the core of the motion; and finally, it is not reliant on a theistic view.

I believe that spirituality is a multidimensional and personal construct. Because of the "fuzziness" associated with the terms spirituality and religion (Zinnbauer et al., 1997), it is not possible to rely on a standard definition or set of assumptions given the personal nature of the concept. Individual experiences, culture, family, and beliefs shape how one defines and thinks about spirituality. Because spirituality and religion are so closely coupled, personal experiences with religion and the role religion plays within

society may also influence how one defines and thinks about spirituality. The research within the field of spirituality in higher education has already demonstrated that these two domains may or may not be distinct (Zabriskie, 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Given the individualized nature of spirituality and the general consensus that there is no consensus, the discourse on spirituality needs to move beyond the focus of developing a precise definition of spirituality (Astin, 2004; Palmer, 1998b). The literature does offer useful insight into the essence and common elements of spirituality that provide scope and focus for further study.

The second assumption that informs my work is that spirituality is a process in motion that changes throughout one's life. The essence of spirituality lies in the continuous search for meaning and purpose within the given context or stage of life being experienced. The motion exists within the continuous process of defining spirituality and how that definition shapes and reshapes the ways in which one's spirituality is experienced. Spirituality is also in motion through the action reflected in the definitions previously shared. Verbs such as seeking, developing, deriving, increasing, cultivating, exploring, and transcending, reflect the action of spirituality that leads to continuous motion. For traditional college aged students, the movement may be intensified as it overlays with the process of becoming and the transitions that occur as emerging adults.

The third assumption that informs my work is that meaning, purpose, and connectedness are the key elements of spirituality. Spirituality as meaning making is embedded in how one understands self, everyday life, and the entirety of life. Developing a sense of purpose provides a narrative as to why one exists and a surrounding life philosophy. It is the ongoing process of meaning making and seeking

purpose in one's life that reflects the motion of spirituality towards authenticity.

Connectedness provides the context for which meaning and purpose are explored in relation to our everyday life, relationships, work, community, understanding of truth, and overall place in the universe.

The final assumption in my conceptual framework of spirituality is that theism is not a required element. I believe that an expansive conceptualization of spirituality is not reliant on the belief in a higher power. Spirituality built upon elements of meaning, purpose, and connectedness captures the universality of humans as spiritual beings. For some, these elements are guided by or influenced by their belief in a higher power. For others, these elements may be shaped by humanistic values, social justice work, a spiritual atheism (Nash, 2003), or other values, perspectives, and life philosophies. Bagwell (2003) illustrates a non-theist perspective through his definition of his own atheism.

I am an atheist ... but I am an atheist who knows that I am a spiritual being, a human hardwired (as we all are) to seek meaning beyond my existence, to grapple with understanding *how* and *why* this world that we all share came to be. (p. 23)

An expanded conceptualization of spirituality provides room for a more complex, diverse, and multidimensional view of spirituality within the lives of students.

### **Spirituality and the College Student Experience**

The emerging research exploring spirituality in the context of higher education provides insight into how students experience spirituality, how spirituality intersects and influences their learning and development, and what experiences contribute to their overall spiritual development. In the following section, I discuss what is known about

how students experience spirituality in the undergraduate experience. I then examine spiritual development as its own developmental process, as an element woven within existing human development theories, and finally, how it relates to identity and identity development. The last segment concludes with a review of the practices that promote spirituality within the curricular and co-curricular realm.

### **Spirituality in Higher Education Project**

The largest quantitative study of spirituality in higher education to date is the Spirituality in Higher Education project out of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California at Los Angeles. This multi-year study explores how students' spiritual qualities and religious experiences change during the college years and examines the role higher education plays in facilitating students' growth (Astin, et al., 2011b). The study began in 2004 when the College Students' Beliefs and Values Survey was administered to over 112,232 college freshmen from over 236 institutions as an addendum to the Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP) survey. In 2007, a follow-up survey was administered to students completing their junior year who had taken the original survey in 2004. The follow-up survey resulted in responses from 14,527 students from 136 of the original institutions. Results were weighted based on institutional type and expected retention rates. The survey was based on the ten measures described earlier which include the five spiritual qualities of Spiritual Quest, Equanimity, Ethic of Caring, Charitable Involvement, and Ecumenical Worldview; and the five religious qualities of Religious Commitment, Religious Engagement, Religious/Social Conservatism, Religious Skepticism, and Religious Struggle (Astin, et al., 2011b).

The findings from the HERI study illuminate the interest that students have in developing their spirituality during the college experience and that students across institutional types experience interest and growth in their spiritual orientation during college (Lindholm, 2009). Although their religious activities declined during the college years, students' interest in spirituality grew (Astin, et al., 2011b), therefore reinforcing the independence of these two constructs. The study also found that specific college experiences can have an effect on students' spiritual growth. For example, opportunities to interact with diverse individuals and ideas through service learning, study abroad, and interdisciplinary coursework promote spiritual development. Also, when students have faculty who encourage them to ask questions of meaning and purpose, students increase in their overall engagement of these questions and their own spiritual quest. Students who are provided opportunities to reflect and connect with their "inner selves" demonstrate growth in their academic and leadership skills, experience greater self-confidence and psychological well-being, and increased satisfaction with college (Astin, et al., 2011b).

This study is valuable in understanding the attitudes and behaviors of college students as they relate to spirituality. However, there are a few limitations that are important to address. One limitation is the use of quantitative data to capture the nuances and complexity of spirituality, especially given the personal nature of its definition. Another limitation is that in the initial analysis of the data findings, the researchers focused on students as a whole and did not investigate the findings to more specific subsets of student characteristics and identity. Follow-up studies from this data set explore aspects of spirituality as it relates to identity, college experiences, and the ten

measures of spirituality and religion and continue to find differences among sub-populations.

### **Spiritual Development Theory**

Operating from the assumption that spirituality and spiritual development are synonymous (Estanek, 2006; Love & Talbot, 1999), it is useful to discuss how that movement is reflected as its own developmental process by examining Fowler's stages of faith (1981) and Park's model of faith development (1986, 2011).

Fowler's stages of faith (1981) is one of the first theories to explore faith development as a unique developmental process. Fowler argued that key theories of psychology-based human development (such as Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, and Gilligan) separate cognition and knowing from emotion or affection and include a limited understanding of the role of imagination, symbolic processes, and unconscious ways of knowing shaped by past experiences, messages, or memories. These limitations prompted Fowler's research on faith development throughout the lifespan. Fowler and his research team conducted 359 interviews between 1972 and 1981. The sample was 98% white, mostly Christian, evenly divided by gender, and representative of various age categories. From this study, Fowler mapped out a lifespan model of faith development that parallels cognitive development theories while drawing out new dimensions. A brief summary of Fowler's stages of faith (1981) illustrates the theoretical contributions of this expanded view.

The first stage of faith development, intuitive-projective faith, begins as the initial period of self-awareness and a sense of self. During this time, children are greatly influenced by and seek to imitate the visible faith of the primary family or caretakers.

Fantasy and imagination are unrestrained by logical thought and provide a way to understand and unify the world.

As concrete thinking begins to evolve, Stage 2 emerges as a mythical-literal faith. Individuals begin to narrate for themselves the stories, beliefs, and observations of their community. These stories and beliefs are taken literally and one-dimensional. The fantasy and imagination from the previous stage begins to provide logical explanation and meaning.

Fowler's research found that most college-aged students were in Stage 3 and began to transition to Stage 4 through their twenties. In Stage 3, synthetic-conventional faith, individuals experience a world beyond their family and must create meaning of multiple spheres including school or work, peers, media, and possibly religion. Faith in this stage begins to provide unified meaning within a growing number of diverse and complex contexts. Exposure to more ways of living, information, and values relies upon faith to help synthesize and shape one's identity and outlook. This stage is highly interpersonal, and without a strong established sense of self, results in conforming to the expectations and judgments of others. Transition from this stage is sparked by significant change, clashes of values, or experiences that lead to critical reflection. Parks (2011) speaks of shipwrecks that students may experience - the events or experiences that trigger crisis or prompt meaning-of-life questions.

Movement to Stage 4, individuative-reflective faith, is the process of taking responsibility for one's own life including values, beliefs, and commitments. This stage typically begins in the twenties, but for many individuals it may extend into the mid-thirties or forties, if experienced at all. Fowler describes a double development in this



stage consisting of the self (identity) and outlook (worldview). An individual begins to create a new identity which differentiates themselves from the expectations defined by others and recognizes the interdependence between self and other. This stage deals with tensions between individuality and individualism against being defined by a group and common good.

The final two stages, Stage 5, conjunctive faith and Stage 6, universalizing faith, are found later in life if at all. Conjunctive faith is a true connection with one's deeper self. It involves recognizing the influences from the past and how unconscious paradigms shaped by one's class, culture, gender, and other identities and experiences are integrated into a centered self that lives consciously and with integrity. The final stage, universalizing faith, is extremely rare and describes individuals who have developed a faith "in which their felt sense of an ultimate environment is inclusive of all being" (1981, p. 200). They include individuals such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa, who live with a self-power that unify and transform the world around them beyond the limitations of political, social, and religious structures.

Based on her years of experience with young adults and an extensive analysis of developmental perspectives, Parks (1986, 2011) offers a critique and elaboration of cognitive developmental and faith developmental theories. Parks' model of faith development builds off the work of Fowler's stages of faith (1981) as well as the developmental theories of Erikson (1985), Kegan (1982), and Perry (1970), to identify a distinct pattern of meaning making during the emerging adult years. From the perspective of constructive-developmental psychology, Parks proposes two distinct stages during the transition from adolescence to maturing adult - emerging adult and

tested adult - which capture unique patterns of meaning making. It is during this time that individuals engage in the process of composing a worldview for themselves (emerging adult) and then begin to experience and test these new truths within the outer world (tested adult). The emerging adult and tested adult stages apply to forms of knowing, forms of dependence, and forms of community. Parks states that these three forms of development are an interdependent process that is at the core of meaning, purpose, and faith.

	<b>Adolescent/ Conventional</b>		<b>Emerging Adult</b>	<b>Tested Adult</b>	<b>Mature Adult</b>
<b>Forms of Knowing</b>	Authority-bound, Dualistic (tacit)	Unqualified relativism	Probing commitment (ideological)	Tested commitment (systemic)	Convictional commitment (paradoxical)
<b>Forms of Dependence</b>	Dependent/ Counter-dependent		Fragile inner- dependence	Confident inner- dependence	Inter-dependent  Open to other
<b>Forms of Community</b>	Conventional	Diffuse	Mentoring community	Self-selected class/group	

*Figure 1.* Forms of Knowing, Dependence and Community (Parks, 2011, p. 118)

The three forms of development outlined by Parks describe the process from adolescence to mature adult but focus primarily on the emerging adult and tested adult periods. Forms of knowing describe the intellectual development from authority-bound dualistic ways of knowing to convictional commitment. Individuals move from truth defined by a source outside of themselves to ultimately a self-composed, mature wisdom that recognizes the complexity and mystery of life. The time of probing commitment describes emerging adults as they embark on an intentional and critical exploration of the adult world and consider the range of possibilities to engage within society. It is the time

to explore assumptions about the meaning of career, family, faith, and lifestyle. The next period, tested commitment, moves beyond exploring to implementing these newly formed worldviews within a greater context while constantly working towards a more authentic alignment of self and world, and ultimately the convictional commitment of mature adulthood.

The forms of dependency described by Parks acknowledge the role of affect in meaning making and gives insight to how a person feels in addition to how they think. As forms of knowing are transformed, there is also an interrelated process of emotions that may range from curiosity, awe, or joy to anxiety, frustration, or loss. At the early stages of dependency, individuals' sense of self relies on their relational and social ties outside of themselves. Feelings such as restlessness, curiosity, or devastation may give rise to a desire to explore more independence. Counterdependence is marked by moving apart and creating distance from authority. The proceeding forms describe a move into inner-dependency, first fragile and then tested. Parks uses inner-dependent rather than the term independent to move away from the paradigm of individualism and individual rights. The use of inner-dependent describes a movement that "occurs when one is able to consciously include the self within the arena of authority" (2011, p. 101). The stage of fragile inner-dependence recognizes the vulnerability of this time as individuals explore their own inner strength. If individuals experience encouragement and support, over time they will develop a more tested inner-dependence that allows them a deeper capacity to understand their internal needs and voice within the context of and in relation to others. Within the constructs of meaning, purpose, and faith, the move to inner-dependence allows an individual to form a conscience that may guide the formation of a moral and

ethical life. The final stage of dependency is that of interdependency, where an individual is able to fully recognize the interrelatedness of all of life and an understanding of their own perceptions.

Finally, Parks acknowledges the basic human need for belonging by exploring forms of community. The process of meaning making and faith development is dependent on the interaction between individuals and their social context creating a constant tension between exercising their individual power and the desire to belong and feel connected. Forms of community begin by associating with groups defined by similarity, proximity, culture, family, or other external forces. As individuals' worlds expand, they discover other ways of being and develop relationships outside of their conventional community. The emerging adult begins to establish mentoring relationships that provide challenge and support in a trustworthy community. Parks believes that "the character of the social context to which the emerging adult has access may be the most crucial element in transforming what an emerging adult 'knows'" (2011, p. 122). A trusted community provides emerging adults context to become more confident with their own voice and understanding of the complexity of their lived experiences. As this confidence rises, tested adults expand their community to include self-selected groups based on shared meanings. The final form of community, open to the other, reflects a deeper understanding of diversity, interconnectedness, and practices of inclusiveness.

Grounded in constructive-developmental psychology, Parks acknowledges the importance of environment in fostering the faith development of emerging adults. She argues that "emerging adults are especially vulnerable to whether or not such questions [life's big questions] are posed and how their dreams are seeded, assessed and nurtured"

(2011, p.13). The power of context in shaping the process of becoming is an important element within student development and spiritual development. It is through interaction with relationships and institutions that individuals are challenged, supported or ignored. Parks argues that environments that are indifferent to faith development miss the critical opportunity to nurture emerging adult lives toward a greater range of their potential and developing lives of deeper meaning.

The three interdependent components of development outlined by Parks – forms of knowing, dependence, and community – create a framework of faith development that is useful in the discussion of spirituality in higher education. Parks’ work aligns with how other scholars describe spirituality in that it reflects the process of becoming authentic and aligning students’ inner and outer lives (Astin, et al., 2011b; Palmer, 1998a). Aligning inner and outer lives represents the developmental process of becoming what Parks (2011) describes as being at home in the universe. She states that “to be at home within one’s self, place, community, and the cosmos is to feel whole and centered in a way that yields a sense of power and participation” (p. 46). What ultimately emerges from this process, although typically not during the traditional college years, is a stable life framework in which to make meaning of one’s own life in relation to the surrounding world and events.

One of the challenges of framing spirituality as a developmental process is that it implies a movement towards a greater, more desirable consciousness. Parks (2011) acknowledges that this limitation creates a dangerous role for researchers to distinguish individuals who have or have not grown and labeling one stage as more desirable than another. Fowler (1981) addresses the complexity of development as well by displaying

his stages not only as linear but also as a spiraling model with movement occurring forwards and backwards to capture the interdependence and complexity of this process. Tisdell (2003) agrees that the imagery of a spiral more accurately reflects the process of spiritual development positioning individuals in the center of the spiral or present moment while looking back to make sense of one's life now and looking forward to what it means for the future. Parks (2011) describes this process as simultaneously holding both venturing and dwelling which reflects the concurrent state of seeking while also experiencing a sense of place or home. The balance of these two states and the imagery of development as spiraling capture the complexity and challenges of describing spirituality as a developmental process.

### **Spirituality within Student Development Theory**

Research in the area of student development examines the cognitive, psychosocial, and social identity of college students but mostly ignores the spiritual dimensions that may intersect or influence these theories. Baxter Magolda (2009) argues that these student development theories have remained as separate developmental processes and are rarely integrated to provide a holistic approach to student development. Although not specifically identified, constructs of spirituality can be found woven within existing theories of human and student development. Dalton et al. (2006) identifies five spiritual questions that are prompted by student development factors during the college years: 1) who am I? (identity); 2) where am I going? (destiny or calling); 3) what can I believe in? (personal faith); 4) how can I be happy? (wholeness); and 5) will my life make a difference? (mattering). These questions illustrate connections between spirituality and student development that often reside in the intersections of student

development theory. In the following section, I will highlight the spiritual elements within three types of development theory: broad human development theory through Maslow's theory of human motivation (1943); student identity development theory through Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors of student development (1993) and Jones and McEwen's model of multiple dimensions of identity (2000); and an integrated theory of student development through Baxter Magolda's self-authorship theory (2001).

Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation is useful to explore because it contextualizes spirituality within the framework of basic human needs. Maslow believed that humans possess an inner nature and the process of understanding one's uniqueness allows individuals to lead healthy and happy lives. The pyramid of needs begins with physiological needs at the bottom and then once these needs are met, individuals move on to meeting safety needs, love/belonging needs, esteem needs, and ultimately the need for self-actualization. The most direct tie to spirituality within Maslow's theory is in the need for self-actualization. The process of becoming self-actualized involves the constant seeking of an individual's full potential. This includes living out one's vocation and doing "what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy" (Maslow, 1973, p. 162). Maslow described the process of self-actualization as not one big moment of transformation but rather in little ways of being. He states that these individuals "listen to their own voices; they take responsibility; they are honest; and they work hard. They find out who they are and what they are" (1971, p. 50). In addition, self-actualization includes an element of self-transcendence which reaches beyond the self to connect to something larger. Although Maslow's theory does not speak directly to student development, it does

provide a wider view of the human experience in which to position the role of spirituality within holistic student development.

Theories that explore how college students develop their sense of identity are useful in conceptualizing spiritual development. Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) identify three characteristics that identity development theories share: first, a progression through stages or statuses from simple to more complex understandings of identity; second, the assumption that identity is socially constructed and reconstructed; and finally, that the environment or context plays a role in identity development. These common characteristics of identity theory align well with the assumptions of spirituality used for this paper.

Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of student development is an example of a theory that does not explicitly talk about spirituality; nevertheless, aspects of spirituality are evident. The seven vectors of this theory include: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Chickering's original research published in 1969 involved ten years of survey results from traditionally aged students enrolled as sophomores through seniors attending small colleges. The updated theory by Chickering and Reisser integrates the research and theories since the first publication to expand and strengthen the vectors.

Within Chickering and Reisser's (1993) identity development theory, aspects of spiritual development are woven through many of the vectors although not always identified as such. For example, moving through autonomy towards interdependence

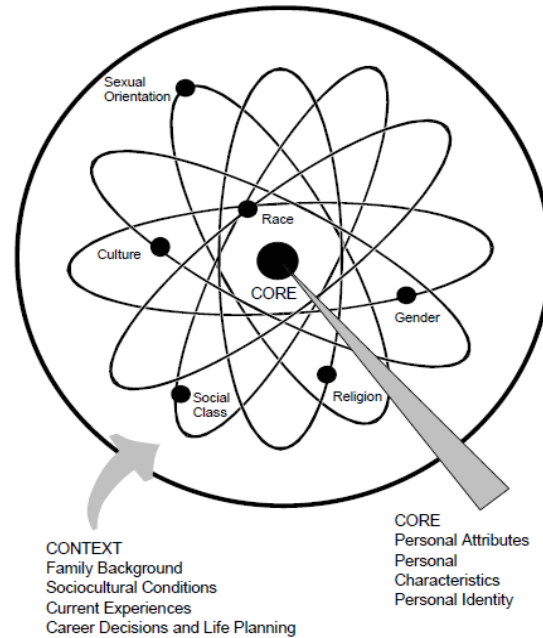


includes the process of understanding self in relation to others and to explore “one’s place in the community and global society” (p.140). The researchers describe an interdependence grounded in reciprocity and compromise with little mention of a more spiritual connectedness. Regardless, it is possible to assume a more spiritual construct of interdependence or recognize ways in which this vector serves as the scaffolding necessary for students to compose a spirited interdependence.

Developing purpose has the potential to contain spiritual dimensions as students begin to map out their future and compose their own life. Chickering and Reisser point to three major elements in this vector: 1) vocational plans and aspirations, 2) personal interests, and 3) interpersonal and family commitments. The description of these elements focuses on clarity, prioritizing and setting goals, and creating a future path more so than purpose as an element of spiritual development. The authors briefly refer to religious and spiritual development as a source for developing students’ guiding purpose but specifically through religious organizations and campus ministry support.

Developing integrity provides a more direct reference to spirituality as it addresses core values and beliefs that are intertwined with interpreting experiences and guiding behaviors. The process of developing integrity requires students to deconstruct their existing values and internal processes and re-compose their beliefs and values addressing the balance of their own self-interest and the interest and needs of human kind. Questions of a spiritual nature and examination of existing religious beliefs are part of this and allow students to re-compose a personal spirituality. Applying a spiritual lens to the seven vectors of student development, this theory seems ripe for many questions of meaning, purpose, and connectedness.

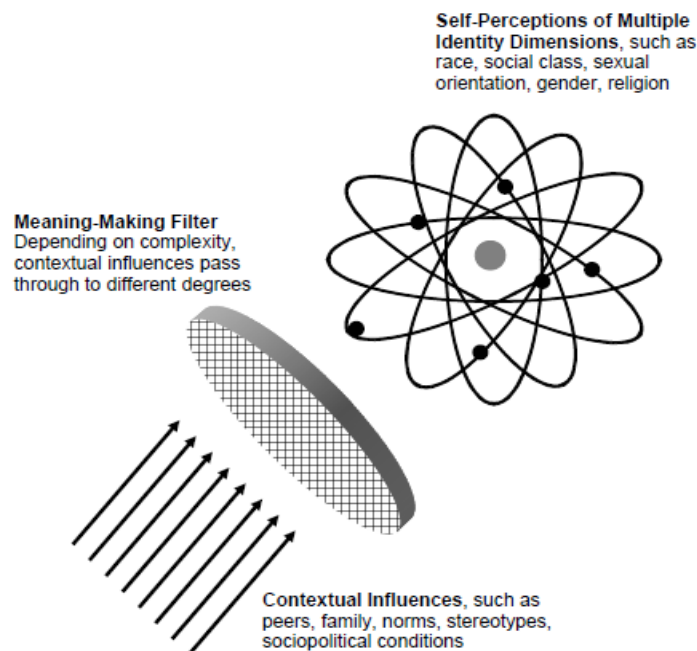
More recent models of identity development explore the formation of socially constructed identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation, economic status) and the influences of context. The model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) views identity development as a fluid, dynamic, and ongoing process of constructing identity that is shaped and influenced by context. Based on their study of 10 undergraduate women enrolled at a large East Coast university, the researchers explored “students’ understanding of their own identity and experiences of difference and of the influence of multiple dimensions of their identity on an evolving sense of self” (p. 407). Students in the sample identified as White (n=5), African American (n=2), African (n=1), Sri Lankan (n=1) and Asian Indian (n=1). Through a series of in-depth interviews with each participant, the researchers presented a model of multiple dimensions of identity (see Figure 2). This model recognizes that multiple social identities can exist simultaneously and that changing contexts can influence the level of saliency of these identities. At the center is a core sense of self that participants described as their “inner identity” that is more personal and protected.



*Figure 2.* The model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes & McEwen, 2000)

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) later reconceptualized the model of multiple dimensions of identity by applying a meaning making filter grounded in self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This change was based on the findings from a study exploring how lesbian college students perceive their sexual orientation identity and its interaction with other social identities (Abes & Jones, 2004). The 10 participants in this study participated in three in-depth interviews and were asked to map their identity on the model of multiple dimensions of identity. The results from this study suggested that meaning making serves as a filter to contextual influences. The level of complexity in which individuals are able to filter external influences determines how those influences relate to identity. Less complex filters result in formulaic meaning-making that closely links contextual influences to perceptions of identity. As meaning-making filters become more complex, participants move from transitional to foundational meaning-making capacities as they possess more agency to determine the relationship between context and

identity. Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) created a revised version of the original model to account for these findings (see Figure 3). This expanded model of framing identity, including both social identity and core self in relation to context, provides opportunities to explore spiritual development within the framework of identity development.



*Figure 3.* Reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007)

Self-authorship theory provides an integrated approach to student development which considers the intellectual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions as individuals move from external formulas to developing their own internally defined beliefs, identity, and relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Baxter Magolda conducted a longitudinal study with 101 participants following them from their first year of college through their early thirties, with 39 participants continuing in the study for 14 years. Through annual interviews, Baxter Magolda tracked the movement of these individuals

towards self-authorship. She found that this movement includes three distinct yet interrelated questions: how do I know? (epistemological); who am I? (intrapersonal); and how do I want to construct relationships with others? (interpersonal). For each of these questions, individuals progress through four phases: 1) Following Formulas, the external forces that define oneself; 2) Crossroads, the transition out of the earlier stage triggered by the dissatisfaction of external formulas and conflict created by new contexts; 3) Becoming the Author of One's Life, the process of choosing one's beliefs, values, identity, and creating authentic relationships; and 4) Internal Foundation, the phase of being grounded in one's own sense of self, beliefs and mutuality.

The process of self-authorship and defining one's own values and philosophies encompass elements of spirituality. Baxter Magolda (2001) found that many of the participants used the term "spiritual" to describe the internal sense of peace they experienced as they authored their own lives. Developing that sense of peace stems from three elements that reflect a more nuanced self-authorship: trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments (Baxter Magolda, 2008). The process of developing a trusted internal voice to guide personal decisions, building, testing, and solidifying an internal belief system, and then integrating this internal system into the core of one's self, describes elements within the spiritual dimensions of students' lives. Holistic student development theories such as self-authorship provide opportunities to explore the spiritual dimensions within the framework.

## **Spirituality and Identity**

Research is emerging that explores the intersections of identity and spirituality in higher education contexts. For many students, spiritual development and identity development are intertwined and strongly influence each other. Tisdell (2003) argues that the college experience must acknowledge the spiritual dimensions of meaning making in order to create more culturally relevant educational practices. The lack of integration of spirituality in the learning environment has a greater negative effect on students whose culture is more grounded in spiritual and communal ways of knowing (Tisdell, 2003). In the following section, I highlight recent studies that explore the intersections of social identity and spirituality.

**Racial and ethnic identity and spirituality.** In their study of spirituality and ethnic identity, Chae, Kelly, Brown and Bolden (2004) found that ethnic identity is positively correlated with measures of spirituality. From their quantitative study of 198 college students comprised of 65 White Americans, 47 Asian Americans, 44 African Americans, and 42 Latino Americans, the researchers found that three groups of students, African American, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans, scored higher on measures of spirituality than the white students. Specifically, these students held a more intrinsic sense of spirituality driven by a sense of connectedness to and relationship with a higher power. These findings suggest that students of color may have a stronger sense of spirituality and perhaps different way of experiencing spirituality than the dominant student population.

Herndon (2003) explored the role spirituality plays in helping African American men succeed at a predominately white college. In his study, Herndon interviewed 13

African American male students enrolled at a rural, predominately white institution, who were between 19-26 years of age. He found that spirituality played a role in student persistence in three primary ways: 1) it bolstered their resilience by providing a coping mechanism against the stresses and strains of life, 2) it provided a sense of purpose by providing focus and guidance, and 3) it provided valued spiritual support through their African-American religious institutions. These findings were confirmed by a second study but in the context of a historically black college (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). It is important to note that the definition of spirituality used for this study encompassed religion and religious practices as part of its meaning.

Watt's (2003) study found that African American women also use spirituality as a coping strategy. In her research, Watt focused on identity development of African American college women at two historically black institutions of higher education – one coeducational and one single-sex (Watt, 1997). The researcher examined the dimension of spirituality through focus groups involving 48 women from these institutions using the faith development frameworks of Fowler and Parks and the Myer's theory of optimal psychology (Myers et al., 1991). Watt (2003) found that African American women's spirituality not only helps them cope, but also is to develop their identities and psychologically resist negative societal messages. The resulting seventeen themes describe spirituality as a coping strategy in relation to dealing with the challenges of college, taking control of the future, and developing life philosophies. Identity development themes relate to development through different relationships, life events, and a life purpose. Finally, the themes that relate to psychological resistance focus on using internalized messages to rise above difficulty and defining one's relationship to the

ultimate (Watt, 2003). The studies above illustrate ways in which spirituality relates to dimensions of identity and the experiences of ethnically diverse students during college.

**Gender and spirituality.** It is commonly assumed that there are differences between how men and women experience spirituality but there is little empirical research to describe these differences. Sax (2008) explored overall differences between college men and women using the extensive data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey and the College Student Survey (CSS), a follow-up survey in 1998 for students entering college in 1994. Sax found that in regards to religious beliefs and convictions, women grew slightly stronger than men during their college experience with 40% of women reporting “stronger” or “much stronger” growth compared to 35% of men. In relation to students’ interest in developing a meaningful philosophy to life, the findings indicate only a small difference between genders with men reporting a slightly stronger preference than women at the start of their college experience. However, this difference disappears by the end of four years. For both women and men, feeling supported by faculty and exposure to diversity have a positive influence on students’ interest in exploring meaning and purpose in their lives (Sax, 2008).

Another study using data from the CIRP survey along with the Spirituality in Higher Education dataset explored gender differences related to spiritual development during college (Bryant, 2007). Bryant’s (2007) study is more focused on elements of spirituality and therefore provides greater insight to this topic. The findings point to significant differences in how women and men experience spirituality and how college experiences affect their development. Overall, the findings show that women tend to be more spiritual than men. Some of the strongest differences reside in measures of



charitable involvement, equanimity, and religious skepticism (men having stronger skepticism). Additionally, men's spirituality tends to be more strongly linked to religion than was found for women while women tend to rate their own spirituality in relation to others. College experiences are found to have various effects on spiritual development based on gender. The study found negative associations for men in the areas of hours per week spent studying and majoring in scientific fields. On the other hand, Bryant found that discussions of a spiritual nature and charitable involvement have an equally positive effect on men and women.

Although this research begins to illuminate possible gender differences, Bryant points out that the survey data may be biased towards women given the language and gendered expectations around the survey measures. In a recent qualitative study exploring spirituality and masculine identity among college men, Wilcox Elliot (2012) found that spirituality is a component of men's identity development but in ways not captured in Sax's or Bryant's measures. In this study, the author used multiple data collection methods to develop the narratives of seven college men enrolled at a selective public institution. The findings show four dimensions of identity construction including the intrapersonal (inner) dimension, the interpersonal (social) dimension, the extrapersonal (engaged) dimension, and the dimension of the ultimate(s) (see Figure 4). The experiences of spirituality within these dimensions align closely with Love and Talbot's (1999) framework for spiritual development cited earlier in this paper. The findings relating to gender illustrate the research challenges in exploring spirituality and how different conceptual frameworks for spirituality can lead to different conclusions.

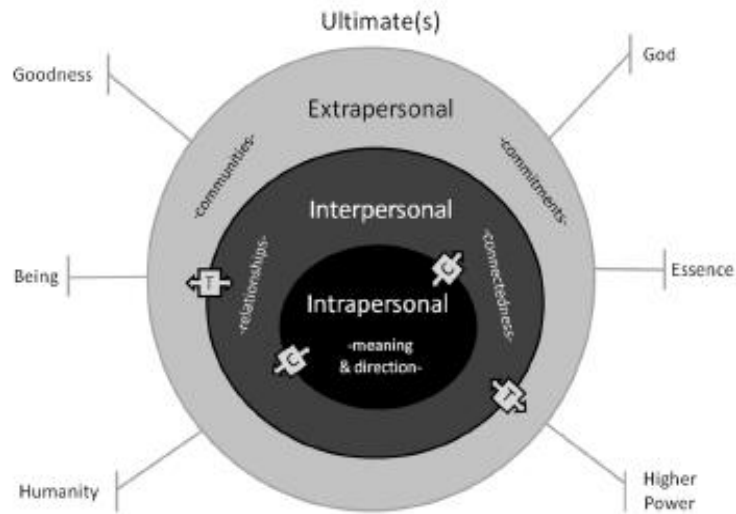


Figure 4: Transcendence model of identity construction (Wilcox Elliot, 2012)

**Sexual identity and spirituality.** A study conducted by Love, Bock, Jannarone, and Richardson (2005) examined the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian college students by exploring the socially constructed phenomenon of the intersections of spirituality and sexual orientation identity. The subjects for this qualitative study consisted of 5 gay male and 7 lesbian students from two public institutions; all the subjects racially identified as White. Participants self-selected for this study and both expressed an interest in spirituality and were “out” on their campus. One of the first findings that emerged is that although the researchers articulated the distinction between religion and spirituality as outlined earlier in this paper, the students in the study often used the terminology interchangeably which resulted in organized religion playing a center point for the remaining findings. Overall, the participants in the study each possessed a strong sense of their sexual identity but there was a greater range in terms of their spiritual identity. The researchers’ findings identified various degrees in which students had reconciled their sexual identities and spiritual identities ranging from

reconciliation, nonreconciliation, and undeveloped spiritual identity. Reconciled students embraced both their identity as gay or lesbian individuals and their identity as a religious or spiritual person. The categories of nonreconciliation and undeveloped spiritual identity both represented experiences of lesser or non-interaction between the two identities. Although each of the student experiences was unique, they all spoke to the complex nature of intersectionality, in this case that of sexual identity and spiritual identity.

### **Spirituality in the Classroom**

Student learning is more likely to be transformational if it fully engages the whole student including “the rational, affective, spiritual, imaginative, somatic, and sociocultural domains” (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006, p.38). Parker and Zajonc (2010) suggest that underlying a pedagogy that encourages spiritual development resides a relational ontology and epistemology. They propose a shift away from the dominant positivist paradigm of higher education towards views that recognize a level of subjectivity that is at play in all learning and discovery. A move towards the subjective and relational invites students to participate more actively in the learning process and reflects a learner-centered approach. Baxter Magolda (2001) states that an epistemological paradigm that views knowledge as socially created is central to promoting self-authorship and trusting in students’ own knowledge construction. These shifting paradigms create a learning environment that invites students to bring their whole selves, including their spiritual selves, to their classroom experiences (Parker & Zajonc, 2010).

In recent years, pedagogy and practice within the classroom that promote spiritual development have surfaced. Chickering, et al. (2006) propose that almost all subject

areas across the curricula provide opportunities to help encourage spiritual growth, authenticity, purpose, and meaning. Lindholm, Millora, Schwartz, and Spinoso (2011) collected survey responses from colleges and universities who replied to their request to share promising practices that support students' spiritual development. They received 570 responses to their survey from 407 institutions representing a range of institution types. Based on the survey, the researchers found that strategies within the curriculum include degree programs and stand-alone courses that intentionally address spirituality or provide opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue. Topics for these courses focus on areas of spirituality including big questions or spiritual exploration, spirituality and wellness, and religious studies.

Strategies within the curriculum also include general teaching approaches used across the curriculum designed to foster spiritual dimensions. Most commonly cited as useful pedagogical approaches were reflection, journaling, and contemplative practices (Lindholm, et al., 2011). Astin, et al. (2011b) found that students' spiritual development is enhanced when they actively engage in self-reflection. Storytelling as a reflective tool provides a format for self-reflection and an opportunity to construct personal meaning (Nash & Murray, 2010). Experiential education that encourages reflection, such as service learning and study abroad, has been found to promote spiritual development (Astin, et al., 2010; Chickering, et al., 2006). In both of these strategies, students typically interact with individuals different from themselves, an experience which is strongly associated with greater spiritual development (Astin, et al., 2011).

An emerging strategy to promote spirituality is the use of contemplative practices within the classroom. These contemplative practices include meditation, silence, and

other experiential means designed to still the mind. This approach is described as “a historical phenomenon and as a method to develop concentration, deepen understanding, and foster an interest in and understanding of the nature of mind and consciousness” (Bush, N.D., p. 77). One of the faculty leaders in this area, Arthur Zajonc, incorporates contemplative practices into his undergraduate physics course as a means to broaden the concept of scientific learning (Parker & Zajonc, 2010). Research describing the effects of contemplative practices is still emerging but initial findings indicate that meditation within higher education promotes cognitive and academic performance, mental health and personal well-being, and development of the whole person (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011).

Pedagogical approaches, courses, and teaching strategies outlined above provide opportunities to foster the development of spirituality within students. Astin, et al., (2011b) found that structured opportunities for students to do the “inner work” greatly contribute to students’ spiritual growth. Although these opportunities may be either intentional or unintentional in their spiritual focus, their outcomes suggest that they promote various aspects related to spiritual growth.

### **Spirituality Outside the Classroom**

Opportunities for holistic student development are not limited to the classroom. They occur in the everyday experiences of college life through conversations with peers, interactions with people from different identity groups, and work environments (Astin, et al., 2011b). An increasing number of colleges are responding to the growing interest in spirituality by offering intentional co-curricular programming or seeking ways to understand spirituality in the context of student services. Lindbergh et al. (2011) found a

variety of co-curricular programs and services were being offered and summarized them in the following areas: Awareness Weeks and Events; Spiritual Mentoring; Caring and Compassion for Others; Service and Immersion Programs; Encouraging a Search for Vocation; Dialogues About Spirituality and Religion; Meditation, Reflection, and Retreats; General Wellness; and Student Leadership Training and Governance (p. 33). For public institutions, the opportunity for spiritual development may reside more within existing co-curricular programs that are able to weave in intentional reflection, meaning and purpose, social justice, civic responsibility, and diversity. Although the empirical research for these efforts is still emerging, the areas of leadership development and career development are worth further exploration.

**Spirituality and leadership development.** Over the past decade, elements of spirituality have emerged within the rhetoric of leadership. The study of leadership and spirituality has gained strength in the business sector and is evident in mainstream leadership books, management journals, organizational textbooks, and graduate and undergraduate business programs (Dent, Higgins & Wharff, 2005). This increased interest in spirituality in the workplace reflects a shift away from more traditional models of leadership towards a focus on leadership as relational, process-oriented, and personal (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006).

Emerging definitions and models of leadership have broadened to reflect the nature of spirituality in leadership. Bolman and Deal (1995) describe leadership as a gift and state that a true leader must “lead from something deep in [their] heart” (p.21). Speck and Hoppe (2007) describe leading with spirit to contain “meaning that derives from connectedness and unity; wholeness that comes from an integrated and balanced

life; authenticity that comes from congruence between beliefs, values, and behaviors; and contextual understanding that begins with acceptance and tolerance and moves toward forgiveness” (p. 116). Models of leadership such as Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1985), and Relational Leadership (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007) are a few examples of emerging paradigms that imply a spiritual dimension to leadership.

Given these new models, how universities teach about leadership and develop student leaders within the context of higher education has changed. The Social Change Model of Leadership Development is widely used in student leadership programs and consists of three interconnected dimensions: self, group and community (HERI, 1996). Gehrke (2008) conducted a study to explore the relationship between spirituality and leadership in college students. The researcher created a survey using dimensions of the social change model based on the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (Tyree, 1998) and three spirituality scales from the Spirituality in Higher Education study (HERI, 2006). The sample consisted of 449 students who were enrolled at a small, secular, selective liberal arts college. Of the respondents, 60.6% were women, 81.7% white, 10% multiracial, 6.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% or less for Latino/Hispanic, African American or Native American students. The study found a positive relationship between spirituality and leadership with the strongest correlation between the spiritual dimension of equanimity (finding meaning in hardships, feeling centered, and experiencing a strong bond with humanity) and the leadership measures of citizenship, consciousness of self, and congruence (Gehrke, 2008). Similarly, Astin, et al. (2011b) found that leadership training programs contribute to spiritual development, specifically levels of equanimity,

ethic of caring and charitable involvement. These studies suggest that student leadership development and spiritual development may be related and efforts to enhance one area may also contribute to growth in the other.

**Spirituality and career development.** Research exploring the relationship between spirituality and the career development of college students is expanding. This interest is spawned by a few factors, one of which is research that positively links spiritual wellbeing with greater levels of job satisfaction (Robert, Young, & Kelly, 2006). In addition to research, a growing number of college programs address vocation as part of the career development process. Since 1999, the Lilly Endowment has given over \$217 million to 88 church-related, liberal arts colleges and universities to establish programs that help students understand the relationship between their faith and vocational choices (Lilly Endowment, Inc., 2012). This investment has created a surge of programs that link values, spirituality, and career development. As career counselors work with college students to clarify their major and career goals, understanding the role that spirituality plays in career development may lead to greater satisfaction and overall wellbeing for students in their chosen career and life after graduation.

The majority of research related to spirituality in the area of career development has focused on the concepts of vocation and calling. Dik and Duffy (2009) define vocation as “an approach to a particular life role that is oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation” (p. 428). The definition for calling shares many similarities to vocation but is distinct in that the impetus to approach purpose-driven work originates from a source external to the self, typically a higher power or the needs



of society (Dik & Duffy, 2009). A recent qualitative study explored students' perceptions of the term calling (Hunter, Dik & Banning, 2010) to discern if the scholarly definitions and students' definitions were closely aligned. The study found that students identified three themes related to defining calling: 1) Guiding Force, the idea of a transcendent or summons beyond the self; 2) Personal Fit/Well-Being/Meaning, which includes strengths, interests, positive outcomes, and an overall sense of well-being and meaningfulness; and 3) Altruism, an agenda that is beyond the self and includes helping the needs of society (Hunter, Dik & Banning, 2010). The constructs of the terms calling and vocation derived from these studies provide a working framework for incorporating spirituality into the career development process.

Research relating specifically to exploring the intersections of career development and vocation and/or calling has demonstrated that there is a relationship between the two constructs and an interest from many students to explore this facet in their career decision-making process. In a recent study of 5,523 incoming first-year students at a large, public institution, 72% resonated with some form of calling within their career development process. Forty-four percent indicated that having a career calling was either mostly or totally true of them with an additional 28% reporting that searching for a calling was either mostly or totally true of them (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010). Another study found different outcomes for students who have a calling compared to those students who are searching for a calling. The presence of a calling relates to a variety of positive career development outcomes indicating that these students are more likely to be more mature in their decision making process. On the other hand, students who were searching for a calling were more indecisive and slightly more likely to lack educational

information (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). A study exploring spirituality, religiousness, and career adaptability among college students found that students with a strong intrinsic religiousness and spiritual awareness tend to be more confident in their ability to make career decisions and are more open to exploring a variety of career options. Although they were found to be more confident in these areas, they were not necessarily found to be further along in the decision-making process (Duffy & Blustein, 2005). These studies demonstrate that spirituality, primarily through the construct of career calling and vocation, is an important element to consider when working with students in their career development.

### **The Second-Year Experience**

As discussed earlier, spiritual development occurs in relation to one's context and experiences. Research on the experiences of college students during their second year provides insight into the unique nature of this transition period and how it relates to student persistence, graduation, and their student development (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006, Gardner, Pattengale, Tobolowsky, & Hunter, 2010). Pattengale (2000) found that students experience academic, institutional, and developmental issues in unique ways during their second year. In this section, I explore the literature related to the second-year experience of college students and highlight studies that specifically intersect with spirituality.

The term "sophomore slump" was first coined by Freedman (1956) to describe the academic disengagement and overall dissatisfaction of students during their second year of college. More recently, scholars have described the sophomore slump as a multidimensional phenomenon that may include academic deficiencies, academic

disengagement, dissatisfaction with the collegiate experience, major and career indecision, and developmental confusion (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010). The second year is a critical time when students experience barriers to retention and success. In a national study of students from high school through college completion at four-year institutions, Adelman (2006) found that 8% of students who enter college drop out of higher education during their second year, indicating a significant number of students are lost during this time. Other studies of the second year suggest that up to 25% of second-year students experience a slump academically, motivationally, or relationally (Schreiner, 2010). Despite these challenges, Schreiner, Louis, and Nelson (2012) discovered that many students thrive during their second year and their research has provided insight into the developmental opportunities and experiences that contribute to student success.

Academic issues during the second year relate to academic standing, academic motivation and engagement, and major decisions. Nearly 16% of second-year students perform poorly during their first year and therefore begin their second year already at an academic disadvantage (Adelman, 2006). It is also during the second year that students are found to be less academically motivated and engaged compared to students in the other years (Gardner, 2000). Schreiner, Miller, Pullins, and Seppelt (2012) found that second-year students have reduced motivation, often due to taking general education courses that may not relate to student interests. Data from 9,906 undergraduate students through the Student Experience in the Research Universities (SERU) Survey at the University of Minnesota found that compared to first-year students, second-year students are more likely to go to class unprepared and with unfinished assignments (University of Minnesota, 2012a). Second-year students also feel increased pressure to select and

confirm a major (Gordan, 2010) which can evoke larger questions relating to their overall sense of purpose (Lindholm, 2010).

In general, second-year students report lower levels of satisfaction with a range of college experiences compared to other class levels. Juillerat (2000) conducted a survey of 118,706 undergraduate students and found that second-year students were more dissatisfied with a range of issues relating to their lives on campus including food, living, parking and activities, their experience with advising, interaction with faculty, healthcare, and financial aid. Gahagan and Hunter (2010) state that many second-year students expect the same level of support from the institution as they received during their first year. Students in their second year describe feeling more on their own which may contribute to the lower levels of overall satisfaction.

Challenges to the second year are not only academic and institutional, but also developmental (Schaller, 2010). Margolis (1989) argues that sophomores experience more of an identity crisis than a slump. The transition of the second year, including the process of declaring a major, triggers their existential turmoil and “search for meaning and ways to create meaning” (p. 78). Schaller (2005) found that second-year students move through four stages in three aspects of their lives: random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment that relate to three dimensions of their lives: how they view themselves, their relationships, and their academic experiences and decisions.

In Schaller’s (2005) study of nineteen traditional-age sophomores at a mid-sized, private, Catholic university, most of the students were in random exploration during their first year as they experienced college for the first time. In the second year, random

exploration includes an awareness of choices that need to be made but finding ways to delay making a decision. The majority of students in this study moved from random exploration to focused exploration early in their second year. During focused exploration, students express a level of frustration with relationships, themselves, or their academics which serve as a catalyst towards making decisions. It is a time when second-year students “look backward and see their first year of college and their childhood, and they look forward and see the rest of their college career and their future” (Schaller, 2005, p. 19), a juxtaposition that complements the movement of spiritual development outlined earlier. The added pressure to make decisions during the second year creates tensions and opportunities. Schaller warns that if students move through this stage too quickly, they may rush into making decisions that are strongly influenced by pressures from external sources such as parents, peers, institutions, or society at large. As students progressed through focused exploration, they began making tentative choices that set them on their future path. In this stage, students find some clarity to their life direction and sense of responsibility that allows them to make choices aligned with their values and interests. A few students in this study experienced the final stage of commitment where they confidently planned their future and engaged in their learning more deeply. The caution here is that students may jump to commitment in an effort to avoid the uncertainty and may end up foreclosing on a decision before fully exploring their options. Based on this research, Schaller (2010) argues that “because of the development questions facing students during the sophomore year, it is a fertile time to begin to ask questions related to life purpose and meaning” (p.74).

The findings from the Sophomore Experiences Survey provide insight into the various aspects of the second-year experience included student thriving, faculty interaction, and student involvement (Schreiner, Miller, Pullins, & Seppelt, 2012). The construct of student thriving is grounded in positive psychology and proposes that a college experience goes beyond survival and graduation to allow students to thrive. According to Schreiner, Miller, Pullins, and Seppelt (2012), students who thrive in college

are not only succeeding academically, but they are also engaged in the learning process, investing effort to reach important educational goals, managing their time and commitments effectively, connected in healthy ways to other people, optimistic about their futures, positive about their present choices, appreciative of differences in others, and committed to enriching their community. (p.5)

The Sophomore Experiences Survey measures student thriving along with other aspects of the second year. The survey was administered in 2010 to 4,845 traditional-aged sophomores from 41 four-year institutions across the United States. The study found that feeling a sense of community on campus is the largest contributor to thriving for second-year students. Other positive contributors include faculty interaction, spirituality, and being certain of one's major. A high concern about college debt had a negative effect on student thriving. Specifically relating to spirituality and the second year, the study showed that spirituality was the third largest contributor to thriving, accounting for 8% of the variance. Spirituality in this study was defined as "the belief in a higher power beyond oneself and a reliance on that belief as a source of strength during difficult times and as a foundation for making life decisions" (p. 122). Students with high levels of

spirituality also reported higher levels of optimism and life satisfaction, an openness to others who were different, and higher motivation to make a contribution to society. This was particularly true for African American students in the study.

Although there is a growing body of research relating to the second-year experience, further research is needed in relation to understanding spirituality during the second year (Lindholm, 2010). Research indicates that questions of meaning and purpose are evident during the second year as students explore issues related to choosing a major, career planning, and continued self-awareness (Schaller, 2010). Given the spiritual framework outlined in this paper, the intersections of spirituality and the second year of college may provide insight into how students experience these questions. Gaining a greater understanding of how students experience their spiritual selves and what college experiences promote or hinder their spiritual development provides valuable insight for faculty and staff committed to holistic educational practices.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

The study of student spirituality is challenging in that it is an experience that may be difficult to describe or define. Chickering and Mentkowski (2006) recognize the inherent complexity in studying and assessing “ineffable outcomes” (p. 220) such as spiritual development, but argue that it is possible, worthwhile, and necessary if higher education is going to effectively integrate holistic educational practices. By utilizing a phenomenological case study methodology, this study explored how students experience the phenomenon of spirituality during their second year. Specifically, I examined the following research questions:

- How do students perceive and describe their spirituality during the second year of college?
- What college influences and experiences affect their spiritual development?
- How does participating in a course exploring life purpose influence their lived experience of spirituality?

#### **Methodological Approach**

This study employs a phenomenological case study design to focus on how students experienced their spirituality while enrolled in a course exploring life purpose during their second year of college. I chose the philosophy and methodology of phenomenology because it provided the opportunity to understand the essence of this phenomenon through the lived experience of each participant. It is a methodology that honors the unique and diverse ways in which spirituality can be expressed. I chose to join this approach with a case study methodology in order to recognize and honor the



context in which this phenomenon occurred. Yin describes a case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (2003, p. 13).

Van Manen states that research in the human sciences is “the curriculum of being and becoming” (1990, p. 7). The study of an individual’s spirituality is at its core their story of being and becoming. It is also in harmony with the social-constructivist worldview which is rooted in meaning constructed by the individual and socially through community consensus about what is real, what is useful, and what is important (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). A key assumption of social-constructivism is that individuals seek to understand the world around them and develop subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). Research from this perspective depends on the participants’ view of the situation and recognizes that subjective meanings “are formed through interaction with others...and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). The researcher serves as a quilt maker - weaving together the different voices and perspectives shared by participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Spirituality, as a multidimensional and individual construct, lends itself to this epistemological view.

Phenomenology is a philosophy and methodology that aligns with the study of spirituality and captures the theoretical underpinnings of the social constructivist worldview. Van Manen (1990) describes phenomenology as “a philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the *logos of other*, the *whole*, the *communal*, or the *social*” (p. 7).

It is an approach that seeks to reveal the structure of individual experiences in order to gain insight into what it means to be human in the world.

This philosophy is captured in the methodology which seeks to understand the lived experience and the meaning of the everyday experience with that phenomenon. It relies on the individual consciousness or awareness of the experience and the ability of individuals to describe the nature of their experience reflectively. These descriptions give insight into the essence of the phenomenon and ultimately what it means to be human (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology as a methodology is the study of individuals' lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon and develops a shared description of the essence of the experience, both what participants experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell, 2007). The lived experiences of a phenomenon are not only what is experienced in relation to the object being perceived but also the memories, imagination, and feeling in relation to that object (Polkinghorne, 1989). The methodology of this approach

attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41)

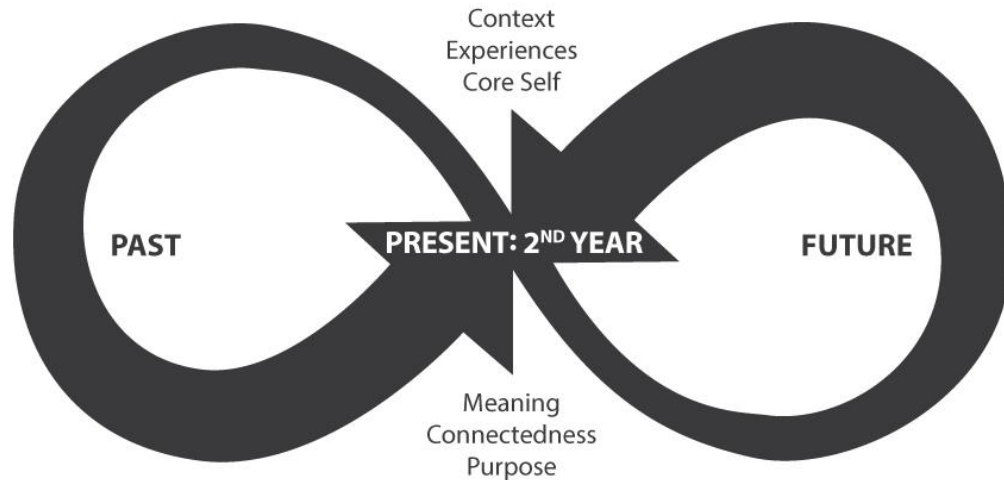
In an effort to understand participants' perspectives, researchers approach this work with openness and curiosity as if learning this phenomenon for the first time (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). They accomplish this by "bracketing" or setting aside as much as possible their own understandings of the phenomenon in order to more fully understand the

participants' experience (Moustakas, 1994). By identifying and acknowledging my own understandings, biases, and experiences with this concept, I attempted to approach this study with fresh eyes in order to provide fertile ground for the phenomenon to authentically emerge.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this research study was grounded in the assumptions of spirituality outlined in the previous chapter. These assumptions include: 1) the meaning of spirituality is a multidimensional and personal construct; 2) spirituality is a process in motion that changes throughout one's life; 3) searching for meaning, purpose, and connectedness is at the core of the motion; and 4) theism is not a required element.

As Figure 5 illustrates, this study explored the personal nature of spirituality through context, experiences, and core self; the conceptualization of spirituality through the primary elements of meaning, purpose, and connectedness; and the motion of spirituality by capturing a specific time during the undergraduate experience, namely the second year.



*Figure 5: Conceptual Framework of an Expanded Spirituality*

**Spirituality as multidimensional and personal.** This study explored spirituality as a personal construct that is unique to each individual. The study was designed to allow participants to define spirituality for themselves and the key constructs that shape how they experience the essence of spirituality. The conceptual framework points to context, experiences, and core self as influencers of how individuals perceived their spirituality. While participants were given the opportunity to explore these constructs broadly, I specifically looked at the contextual influences of being a student at a large, public research institution and the experiences within that context that shaped their spirituality.

**Spirituality as a process in motion.** This conceptual framework is grounded in the assumption that spirituality is the continuous seeking and questioning of life within a given context or stage of being. This study specifically explored the ways in which second-year college students experienced and conceptualized spirituality during this specific time and context. Tisdell (2003) describes the experience of spirituality as being in the present while simultaneously looking back on the past and forward towards the

future which contributes to spirituality as integration and wholeness in the present moment. The conceptual framework acknowledged that past experiences including culture, family, events, and beliefs shape how one defines and thinks about spirituality. It was also influenced by how one conceptualizes the future and the ways in which one sees their life unfolding. Focusing specifically on students in their second year of college, this study also explored significant experiences that took place during the first year of college that shaped their current perceptions of spirituality and how they envisioned their future lives.

**Spirituality as meaning, purpose, and connectedness.** This study explored spirituality as it was experienced by participants. However, it also focused on three elements of spirituality that emerged in the literature as common themes: meaning, purpose, and connectedness. These concepts were broad enough to honor a phenomenological approach without limiting participants' descriptions. These elements were used to frame phenomenological questions that explored deeper meaning and significance of spirituality.

**Theism is not a required element.** The conceptual framework offered for this study was built upon an expanded conceptualization of spirituality that was not reliant on the belief in a higher power. Although the presence of a higher power may influence students' experience of meaning, purpose, and connectedness, this study approached the phenomenon of spirituality from a more multidimensional view.

Although I have outlined a conceptual model to frame this study, I recognized that participants may describe their own lived experiences of spirituality in ways that go beyond the conceptual framework offered here. These descriptions were important to the

understanding of spirituality and were captured and reported as they emerged. The use of this model offered some parameters anchored in the existing research in order to explore spirituality as a unique phenomenon.

## **Methods**

### **Context and Participant Selection**

Participants for this study were selected from a group of second-year students enrolled in a 2-credit course entitled “Living on Purpose: A Student Exploration of Self, Purpose, and Community” (Living on Purpose). This course was offered as part of a second-year residential learning community at the University of Minnesota called the Second-Year Experience (SYE) House. This specific context provided access to a group of second-year students over time to increase the likelihood of their continued engagement in the study. It also provided a convenient sample of purposeful participants as the course topic and themes of the SYE House aligned with the conceptual framework of this study. As one of the coordinators of the SYE House and co-instructor for this course, I had direct access to the setting. This section will provide a more detailed description of the context and participant selection.

Residential learning communities provide an opportunity for students with a common interest to live together within a university residence hall and participate in common activities, courses, or experiences based on that interest. These communities provide students “a level of intellectual intensity in their everyday lives, both in and out of the classroom, that integrates their academic and personal development” (Schein, 2005, p. 87). Residential learning communities have a significant positive effect on student achievement and retention (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Schein (2005) argues that

these environments provide a unifying learning experience for students attending large Research-I institutions that by their very nature are fragmented.

The SYE House at the University of Minnesota is a residential learning community sponsored by the department of Housing and Residence Life and the Center for Academic Planning and Exploration (CAPE). The goal of the SYE House is to meet the unique needs of second-year students by focusing on three themes: Leadership and Engagement, Major and Career, and Community and Connection (University of Minnesota, 2012b). Students engage with these themes through a common course of their choosing and various events and programs throughout the year.

The SYE House was open to students who lived in university housing during their first year of college and chose to live on campus during their second year. Students indicated their interest in the SYE House during the housing re-application process in the spring semester of their first year. Interested students were asked to complete an initial pre-registration form that had them review the expectations of the SYE House. These expectations included taking a course in common, engaging in house activities, and respecting the diverse community in which they would live. Any student who completed the form and agreed to these expectations was accepted into the SYE House. There were 84 students who participated in the SYE House for the 2013- 2014 academic year.

As part of this living learning community, students were expected to enroll in a common course chosen from a list of offerings that related to the themes outlined above. One of the courses, Living on Purpose, was designed specifically for this living learning community. The goal of this course was to help students explore questions of meaning and purpose in college and in their lives. It was a 2-credit hybrid course that was both

online and in-person. The course began with an extended in-person session for 5 hours followed by online course delivery for the weeks throughout the semester. Towards the end of the term, students met again for another extended in-person class. The course was sponsored by the Center for Spirituality and Healing at the University of Minnesota. I served as one of the co-instructors for this course.

Qualitative research relies on information-rich participants who demonstrate an experience with the topic being explored (Polkinghorne, 1989). According to Creswell (2007), participants “need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, so that the researcher, in the end, can forge a common understanding “ (p. 62). Moustakas (1994) identifies additional criteria that include demonstrating an intense interest in the topic and a willingness to participate in lengthy data collection methods. For this study, it was important that the students had an interest in the elements of spirituality that aligned with the conceptual framework. Students self-selected to enroll in the Living on Purpose course and by doing so demonstrated an interest in this topic and therefore served as information-rich participants related to spirituality. All second-year students enrolled in the Living on Purpose course were sent an email and consent form inviting them to participate in the study prior to the start of the class (see Appendix A & B). Participant numbers for phenomenological studies vary greatly but Polkinghorne (1989) recommends 5-25 participants. There were 17 students registered for the course. Twelve of these students agreed to participate in the study with one student withdrawing two weeks into the study. The remaining 11 students continued with the study throughout the duration of the semester.



I recognized that the context and participant selection influenced the nature of this study and how students experienced spirituality during this time. In a recent study on purpose, engagement, and well-being of emerging adults, Bundick (2009) found that the reflective questions posed in the study interview functioned as a trigger that helped students consider these issues more deeply. Students enrolled in the Living on Purpose course did have their meaning and perception of spirituality affected by the content and experiences of the course compared to second-year students not enrolled in this course. Acknowledging this contextual influence was important and was reflected in one of the primary research questions for this study. It was also essential to approach the data collection points throughout the study with a phenomenological openness that asked questions of meaning that drew out rich descriptions of spirituality. As van Manen (1990) points out, “phenomenological questions are meaning questions. They ask for the meaning and significance of certain phenomena” (p. 23). A further description of the data collection and analysis is discussed further in this chapter.

### **Participant Consent, Confidentiality, and Protection**

I obtained approval by the University of Minnesota’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects prior to the start of the study (see appendix C). All students signed an informed consent form granting permission to conduct interviews, release demographic information, and allow access to their written documents from the course. Pseudonyms were used for each student and identifiable characteristics were changed or removed in order to protect the identity of each student.

Participation in this study provided minimum risk to students; however, the topic of spirituality proved to be personal and students responded to questions in ways that led

to self-disclosure. To honor the personal nature of the content, I worked to build and maintain a relationship of trust between myself and the students. All interviews were conducted in a quiet, private area to ensure confidentiality. Also, because this study took place over the span of a semester and my relationship with the students continued beyond the study, it was important to assure students that their responses and identities would remain strictly confidential. Students were given the option to select my co-instructor as the lead in grading their assignments. All students were assured that their grades for the course, their participation in the SYE House or any aspect of their course or LLC experience were not affected by their participation in this study. Students were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

### **Data Collection**

The two most common methods of data collection for phenomenological studies are interviews and written statements (Polkinghorne, 1989). Data collection methods for this study included both individual interviews and written statements from each of the students to answer the research questions.

**Interviews.** A one hour semi-structured interview was conducted with each student at the start of the fall semester. Merriam (1998) supports the use of interviews when researchers are not able to observe an event or behavior, stating that “interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 72). To explore the topic of spirituality, in-depth interviews were necessary to understand how participants perceived and experienced this phenomenon. The interview format was semi-structured. According to Lewis-Black, Bryman, and Liao (2004), the aim of this format is to

ensure flexibility in how and in what sequence questions are asked, and in whether and how particular areas might be followed up and developed with different interviews. This is so that the interview can be shaped by the interviewee's own understandings as well as the researcher's interests, and unexpected themes can emerge. (p. 1020)

Moustakas (1994) specifically describes that the phenomenological interview “involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114). The semi-structured interview for this study was conducted during the first week of the fall semester, prior to the first in-person class. The goal of this interview was to explore how students conceptualized spirituality, describing how they experienced spirituality during their first year and identifying spiritual questions that existed as they proceeded into their second year. The interview protocol (see Appendix D) was piloted on two students to refine the interview design and relevant lines of questions (Yin, 2003). Pilot students were asked to provide feedback regarding language, interview questions, structure, and general comfort level. This information was used to revise the interview format and address interviewer bias.

At the end of the semester, I concluded the data collection process with a final face-to-face half-hour semi-formal interview with each student. This interview focused on students' second-year experience, the ways in which they experienced their spirituality, and their views on the Living on Purpose course. The interview protocol was created to inform the conceptual framework and in response to the insight gained from the first interview (see Appendix E).

**Written statements.** The other source of data for this study was the written statements in the form of personal documents from the students. Personal documents are written by students on their actions, experiences, and beliefs (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). Personal documents can provide rich descriptions as to how participants view specific aspects of spirituality. This study relied on written statements collected from relevant assignments and final capstone projects from within the Living on Purpose course. These assignments include:

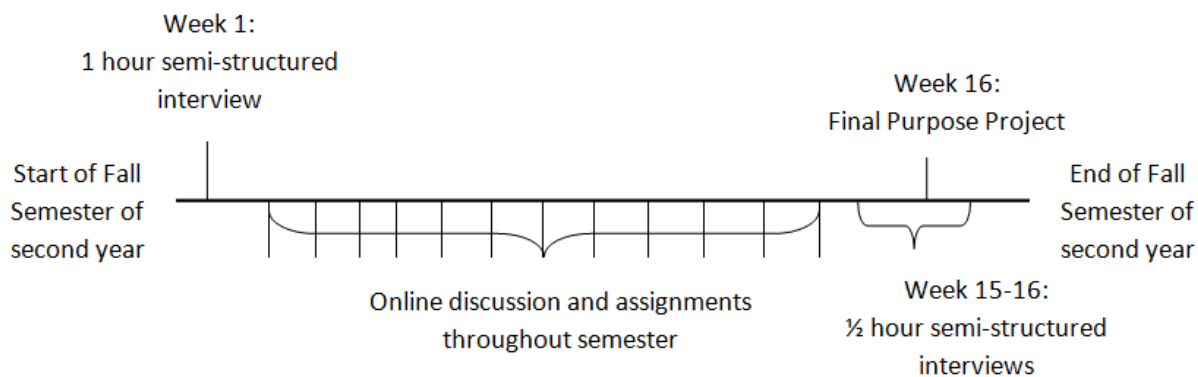
***Online discussion responses.*** These personal documents were collected through the online discussions posted through the Living on Purpose online course management system. For twelve of the weeks, students were asked to provide a brief response to an online question posed by the instructor. Students then posted a response to a classmate's posting on the topic as the start of a conversation. The data collected from the online discussions within the course was chosen based on how it enriched, clarified, or related to the aspects of spirituality previously identified from the individual interviews or how the data aligned with the collective themes that emerged.

***Assignments.*** There were ten assignments collected for each student over the course of the semester. These individual assignments related to the weekly topic and took the form of a reflective writing exercise, a guided worksheet, an online assessment and reflection, or a written reflection based on an experiential activity. Data from the assignments were chosen based on how they informed my understanding of students' spirituality or the collective themes.

***Final purpose project.*** Students were asked to complete a capstone project for the course in the form of a written paper or digital narrative. The purpose of this project

was for students to integrate the themes of the course into an overall purpose statement and future implications. Students chose to write a 5-page paper or create a 3-5 minute video representation of their final purpose project.

Overall, the data collection process integrated interviews of each student and written statements collected through the Living on Purpose course. In addition to these two methods, I utilized field notes based on observations from the two in-person class sessions. See Figure 6 for a timeline of data collection.



*Figure 6: Data Collection Timeline*

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of the data analysis in qualitative, phenomenologically-oriented studies is to ultimately identify the essence of how participants experience a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Data for this study was collected over a period of time so a sequenced and reiterative data analysis was utilized. I analyzed and reported findings relating to the individual experience of participants and the collective essence shared by all participants as it related to the essence of spirituality. Creswell (2007) outlines a simplified version of Moustakas's (1994) method for analyzing phenomenological data that I used as a general guide for this study.

**Individual analysis.** Data were collected from students over the duration of the semester to provide the essence of their experience of spirituality in their second year and the movement that occurred for each individual. The individual interviews with students were digitally recorded and then transcribed. I reviewed the interview transcripts to ensure their accuracy and completeness. The text from students' course discussions, assignments, and capstone project were added to the transcripts to create a complete representation of the data chronologically. This allowed me to view the process of spirituality as it emerged or shifted over the course of the semester.

Student transcripts were read in their entirety to “acquire a feeling for them” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 53). The transcript was reviewed for statements that describe what students experienced as spirituality and how they experienced it in relation to the conceptual framework. Moustakas (1994) calls this phase horizontalization where each statement in the transcript “holds equal value and contributes to an understanding and meaning” of the phenomenon (p. 123). I then read the transcript again and developed a list of significant statements. In an effort to understand the gestalt – the whole or pattern of students' spirituality - I created a visual map to capture the dominant themes and their relationship to one another. I also developed an analytical memo for each student that I used between each step of the analysis as a “prompt or trigger for written reflection on the deeper and complex meanings it evoked” (Saldana, 2013, p. 42).

These statements were then grouped into larger “meaning units” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159) of information that aligned with the research questions and conceptual framework. In this process, I paid attention to the “what” and “how” of the phenomenon by creating a textural description and structural description (Creswell, 2007). I then

created descriptive codes as a secondary coding system to capture the general topics expressed by students (Saldana, 2012). From each student's experience, I created a textural description to provide an understanding of the nature and focus of spirituality for that participant and a structural description to describe the underlying dynamics of their experience including thoughts and feelings connected to spirituality, contexts and situations, and conditions that influence their spirituality (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). I used these textural and structural descriptions to write a final composite description representing the essence of spirituality for each participant (Creswell, 2007).

**Collective analysis.** The purpose of this analysis was to determine the collective experiences of spirituality shared by all students. I began by reading the final composite descriptions of the first four students to compare and contrast the common themes that were shared. I then read each of the remaining composite descriptions in light of these themes and documented themes that aligned and any additional themes that emerged. The process continued until all 11 students' composite descriptions were reviewed in relation to each other. The final collective analysis served as the foundation for the collective themes represented in chapter 5.

**Journaling.** Throughout this process, I kept a researcher journal to help bracket and identify my assumptions, provide direction for the next steps in the study, and reflect upon my positionality within this research and in my own spiritual journey. This helped me to approach the data collection and analysis process with curiosity and openness. Through journaling, I was able to document my initial observations and acknowledge any assumptions I made about students at the beginning of the semester and then have these observations and assumptions confirmed or contradicted over the course of the semester.

It also brought forth hidden dimensions of my own spirituality and unacknowledged bias I held. The journaling process allowed me to see more clearly my unconscious paradigms and by doing so, approach the data analysis with an expanded openness, curiosity and humility.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research requires a unique set of criteria in order for standards of research rigor to be met (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Given the social constructivist paradigm of this study, measures of trustworthiness provided an appropriate standard. Specific study design techniques were utilized to support the criteria of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell (2007) recommends that studies utilize at least two unique design techniques to support trustworthiness. I chose to utilize prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, thick descriptive data and reflection of my personal bias to support trustworthiness of this study. Credibility for this study was supported through prolonged engagement with the students which allowed a more in-depth understanding of how students experienced spirituality over a significant portion of their second year. Conducting this study over time provided greater insight into the nature of spirituality. Beginning with the first interview and continuing throughout the course of the study, I strived to build and sustain trust with the students (Creswell, 2007). I also employed triangulation of data by building off of the initial interview descriptions with the written statements gathered in the course. These statements helped to confirm, elaborate, and clarify the initial descriptions. I utilized member checking after the first interview so that students could review the themes and descriptions generated. Two of the 11 students



returned revised descriptions while the rest approved the statements as offered. The findings were presented as thick descriptive data that portrayed the essence of spirituality. This strategy supported transferability of the study's findings so that others may judge the context and degree of similarity as they attempt to apply the findings elsewhere. Throughout the study, I reflected upon my personal biases and assumptions that arise. Merriam (1988) suggests that researchers comment on past experiences, biases, assumptions, and worldviews that may affect the interpretation and approach to the study.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

A phenomenological approach asks researchers to acknowledge their personal experiences and assumptions that relate to the phenomenon so as to set aside their own views in an effort to be more open to the phenomenon as experienced by others (Creswell, 2007). By sharing my own experiences of spirituality and what brought me to this topic, I hope to provide insight into my pre-assumptions and therefore which allowed me to approach this study with a fresh curiosity.

I came to the study of spirituality as a searcher and an educator committed to student development. I am currently and have always been someone who seeks meaning and connection within the various events and stages of my life. The process of asking, discovering, and exploring is what brings a richness and intentionality to my life. To me, these are the spiritual questions that are within each of us and manifest themselves in diverse and unique ways. I believe we are wired for connection and that community is fundamental to all humans.

My conceptualization of spirituality includes the process of finding and developing one's inner wisdom. For this reason, I chose to separate religion and

spirituality, although I recognize that there may be overlap and ways in which they influence and inform the other. For me, the distinct nature of these two constructs occurred as I came to understand different ways of being. I remember the moment when my religious teachings failed to align with my growing understanding of the diverse world around me. It was then that I realized that it was my responsibility and journey to discover for myself the answers to the questions that provide my life meaning.

My professional career in higher education has also contributed to my interest in this topic. I have recently been involved in work that has sparked my curiosity in the unique nature of the second year. I helped to create and now oversee a department called the Center for Academic Planning and Exploration (CAPE) at the University of Minnesota that assists undecided students as they choose their academic major. CAPE targets second-year students since they are required to declare a major at 60 credits, a milestone that often falls in the second year. In this work, I found that the time and process is ripe for questions of meaning and purpose. Big life questions, such as - What do I want to do with my life? What difference do I want to make? - underlie this process for many students. The conventional approach to choosing a major relies on exploring majors and academic requirements, researching careers and occupational trends, and clarifying personal interests and values. These elements are all important to the process but seem to be missing some of the deeper, more meaningful questions that students may wish to explore. In addition, I am currently leading the development of a second-year initiative at the University of Minnesota. Through the research for this initiative, I have discovered that the second year provides fertile ground for student development and creating the future trajectory for students' lives. These two efforts have shaped my

research interests around the unique nature of the second year and how students experience their spiritual selves during this time.

I believe, and my experiences have reinforced, that college has the potential to be a truly transformational experience for students if the conditions are right. The process of learning and developing in a supportive and challenging community expands students' understanding of self, other and community – all elements that I believe are foundational to a life of meaning and a democratic society. The topic of spirituality encompasses the themes within the college experience that align with my values and earlier experiences – holistic education, identity development, diversity education, and leadership development.

Having worked in a large, public research institution for over 22 years, I have experienced first-hand the growing pressures for accountability and measures of success anchored in retention and graduation. Although these are important to pursue, I am concerned that the focus on the inputs and outputs of the college experience has diminished the attention paid to the holistic development of students during the college years. I pursue this research to gain a greater understanding of how the college experience can positively affect students' development as whole beings so that institutions can design experiences that allow students to develop to their full potential while in our care. I turn now to the findings that emerged from this study exploring the spirituality of second-year students.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings: Study Participants**

As a phenomenological case study, understanding the unique story of each participant provides a rich view into their lived experience within a specific context. In this chapter, I offer an introduction of each student to provide an overview of his or her unique background, view of the world and college experiences. I briefly describe students' general background and the themes that emerged as they traversed from their first year of college through the first half of their second year. Students' background and first-year experience often laid the foundation for their second year in college and how they experienced their spiritual selves during this time. I then share their self-described spiritual identity at the start of the study as insight into the paradigm in which their experiences resided. As represented in my theoretical framework, students' spirituality is experienced in the moment by influences of the past, present and future so understanding these stories is important to provide the reader with greater context. Finally, I portray their conceptualization and experiences of spirituality and purpose and the movement that occurred over the course of the semester. Variations exist as to how the stories are presented because each student spoke about the experiences and influences that were most salient in their lives.

### **Overview of Students**

This study is based on the experiences of 11 students as they journeyed through the first semester of their second year in college. Of the 11 students in the study, 7 identified as white, 3 identified as students of color, and 1 student was an international student. The students were mostly female with only 2 males participating. All of the

students were in their second year at the University of Minnesota although one student had the credit equivalent of a freshman and two students had the equivalent of junior status. The students represented 5 of the 7 undergraduate colleges at the University and 6 of the 11 had not yet declared their major at the point of the first interview. All of the students lived in the Second Year Experience House located on the same floor in a campus residence hall. Given the topic of this study and the close association students made between religion and spirituality, it is useful to be aware of their religious backgrounds. Of the 11 students, 6 identified as Christian, 2 grew up with a religious tradition but no longer identified with that religion, and 3 had no formal religious upbringing.

I interviewed each of the 11 students at the start of their second year in college as an opportunity to learn about their first year of college and understand the lens in which they experienced their spirituality. I then collected their online discussions, course assignments, and capstone project at the completion of the Living on Purpose course. Finally, I interviewed each student at the end of the semester to gain insight into their experience during their second year, the course, and their evolving perspectives relating to their spirituality. The following student introductions were based on segments of their story that emerged throughout the data.

### **Samantha**

Samantha was a second-year student who came from a small town in a neighboring state. She had a close relationship with her family and heading off to college was her first true experience away from their daily support. Samantha declared her major of sociology at the beginning of her second year although she was still uncertain about

her career path. Her concept of spirituality was strongly coupled with religion. Having grown up in a non-religious family, Samantha did not see herself as a spiritual person.

During Samantha's first year of college she experienced some difficulties which included unmet expectations and the disillusionment of friendship. Samantha looked back on her first year and described herself as a "hopeless prospect". She saw her initial expectations as unrealistic and possibly naive.

I expected to be completely happy when I came to college, and when my grades weren't the best and I didn't make as many friends as I wanted right away, I was severely disappointed and I was the complete opposite of happy.

Samantha described the struggles she experienced in her transition to college as a time when she lacked a sense of purpose. She also struggled with negotiating friendships. She found that the more she "clung" to her friends for support, the more they pulled away from her.

Through these challenging experiences, Samantha learned to be more resilient and self-reliant. Looking back on her first year, Samantha could see the ways in which she had grown from these struggles:

Learning that you have to find self in yourself instead of others. I mean, that's a complete 180 from how I was when I started school. I was completely worried when I got to school that the only thing I worried about was making friends. And now I feel like, you know what? Friends will come. If you worry about it that much, it's gonna be more of a problem than it really is. It's just, people are there [and] you just kind of have to deal with it, you know? Everyone is a potential friend. So, just talk to anybody and it'll happen. Whereas, I was like, "I have to talk to this person, like, five times a day or they don't like me!" So, you know, I guess in a way I've kind of grown I think.

These new lessons shaped her outlook on life and her approach to her second year of college. She consciously shifted to a model of self-reliance in which she looked within herself for strength rather than depending on the acceptance of others.

Based on the experiences from her first year, Samantha began her second year as a “fresh start”. She intended to be more independent, rely more on herself for a sense of purpose and become more involved on campus. By the end of the first semester of her second year, she achieved these expectations and her excitement was palpable. She joined a sorority, applied for and was offered an internship, and planned to study abroad her junior year. She attributed these accomplishments to her willingness to be open to new experiences and finding a community to support her through the process. She described these successes with enthusiasm:

Being open and joining a sorority was the most wonderful experience I’d ever personally experienced. And thank goodness I decided to be more open, because it’s a wonderful, supportive group of people that I never would have met had I been as closed-minded as I was last year.

This sense of belonging contributed to her overall success of her second year and gave her the confidence to be open to other experiences as well. She looked back on the semester and stated:

I think I’ve finally figured stuff out here. I’ve kind of found my place at the U and it’s so weird how much can change in one semester. I was kind of a Negative Nancy at the beginning...but I think it’s really working. I mean, it does get better. I think it’s important to know that. Because you hear people say that, you don’t know it until you’ve experienced it yourself.

By comparing the different experiences between her first year and second year of college, Samantha was able to identify her first-year struggles with more clarity and hope for the future.

The need to connect with others and feel a sense of belonging was a driving force in Samantha’s college experience. Her desire and ultimate success in finding campus community gave her the confidence to take greater risks and seek out new and more

challenging opportunities. These experiences contributed to her self-discovery and provided support for her to explore her life purpose.

Samantha began the course believing that she had a purpose but had no idea what it was for her. She acknowledged having spent little time thinking about this topic prior to the semester. By the end of the semester, Samantha did not have a clear purpose statement but she was able to articulate a vision of how aspects of her life could weave together to provide a purposeful life and a framework in which to gain more clarity.

I believe that my purpose isn't exactly figured out yet. But I can see myself wanting to get up every morning to help people. I want to be a lawyer, to give a voice to those who don't have one. It isn't necessarily helping in the normal sense, but I believe that I can truly affect people's lives. I'm extremely passionate about animals and animal rights, and although I once wanted to be a vet, I discovered I will be able to help animals more (without doing the awful part of being a vet) by donating my time and money to local shelters and a national wildlife fund...My purpose may be helping people, it may be helping animals, or maybe it'll even be starting a family, but I know that because of this class, I have learned that having a purpose is essential to living life.

Samantha trusted the ambiguity of not knowing and developed confidence in her ability to figure it out. Although her major was declared and she had clear ideas regarding her chosen career path, her sense of purpose was still undefined, indicating that she was moving away from a paradigm where purpose was achieved solely through her career.

Samantha's purpose framework also consisted of being open to new experiences and having a connection to others. This belief was formed and tested more by her second-year experience than the context of the course. Her success in trying new things and experiencing a sense of belonging affirmed for her that this philosophy was the right path to finding her purpose:

And I think that's important [being open to opportunities] to finding your purpose as well. I mean, you may think something sounds ridiculous, but maybe that's



actually what you're supposed to do with your life and you never knew it. Like, so I guess that's like really important just to be open to everything

Overall, Samantha enjoyed the class although it was more work than she had expected but “definitely worth it.” This course allowed her understanding of purpose to emerge and be formed:

When I think of [purpose] now I think of it like something that I can actually achieve in the next couple years even. Which, I mean, some people don't ever find it. So that's kind of crazy. And I guess I never even thought of having one before this class.

Samantha's exploration of purpose through the class contributed to an increased consciousness of purpose and an increased self-efficacy in finding her purpose. She stated in her final project: “This class has shown me that there is more to purpose than meets the eye, and it certainly is important in anyone's life, maybe even essential.”

Samantha demonstrated an increased consciousness and value of purpose due to the intentional introduction of the concept through the Living on Purpose class.

### **Juan**

Juan's life was strongly shaped by his exposure to international experiences while growing up in a rural Midwest town. His mother was born in South America and he took frequent trips to her home country during his youth which allowed him to learn more about his culture and global issues. During high school, he commuted to a boarding school with a high number of international students. He was multi-lingual and an avid soccer player which allowed him to meet and interact with diverse individuals. Juan described being close to his family and spoke of his mother's strong influence in instilling a sense of giving to others. His father worked hard and was absent for much of his growing up, an experience from which Juan formed his philosophy to “work to live

rather than live to work.” His Catholic religion was an integral part of Juan’s upbringing and his current identity. Juan’s spirituality was grounded in his relationship with God and provided a source of strength and guidance.

Juan’s entered college as a first-year student feeling well prepared and his first-year academic success affirmed his confidence and sense of self-efficacy. Juan began as a business major and his commitment to this field did not waiver throughout his college experience. During his first year, Juan “found his people” and a sense of belonging with the students in his academic major. This sense of belonging contributed to the most meaningful moments of his first year which centered on activities in which “we are all in this together” and “we’re all trying to succeed.” These experiences were meaningful to Juan because they connected multiple values in his life including his major, community, academic success, and feelings of connectedness. Although Juan was very social and had no trouble making friends, he desired a deeper connection with others, looking for a “wingman” to go with him to student groups or events. This was the primary reason he cited for his lack of involvement in activities outside of his academics.

Juan reflected on his first year and recognized that he was “gradually growing up” and described himself as being “more sculpted now.” These changes resulted in him being more mature in his relationships, confident, outgoing, and open. Juan could see that he was still forming his own values and understood that this was the process of moving on to “the next phase of my life”.

At the start of his second year, Juan hoped to do better academically while making more friends and good memories. By the end of the semester, Juan experienced an unexpected “shift in his focus.” He was surprised by how much he learned about

himself during his second year and this changed his perspective both on the purpose of college and how he experienced it. At the start of his second year, Juan believed that the purpose of college was to earn a diploma as a necessary credential needed to start his career:

I feel like college is just a phase to get your little certificate, go show it to a company, get in there, and then you start doing stuff, and so that's what my picture is right now in my head.

This perspective changed for Juan during his second year and he began to recognize that there was more to college than acquiring a degree. In describing this change, Juan said "I think I've learned a lot. Coming into the year I don't think I had really planned on learning much about myself, but I think I've learned a lot more about myself and my direction right now." Juan gained a greater understanding of how personal development was possible in college in addition to his academic pursuits. He recognized and valued the learning that occurred from being involved in experiences outside of the classroom.

Juan was driven by his sense of responsibility towards others and his desire to make a positive impact in the world. He recognized the privilege he was born into and saw it as his responsibility to give back to others so that they too could realize their full potential. Juan's sense of responsibility and humility was strongly grounded in his belief that God had a larger plan for him.

It has been a long time belief by me that I was born into my family, and given the resources that I was because God has big plans that he wants me to fulfill. I find it incredible that I have been able to stay healthy, have good life experiences, and have nothing life threatening happen to me for my 19 years of existence. I believe that my guardian angel is watching over me, protecting me, so that I am able to return this opportunity of living to those whom started off in this world with less abundant resources.

Juan viewed God as his provider and protector. He saw the purpose of his college experience as part of God's overall plan for his life.

Juan believed that a life of purpose was actualized through his career and the actions of his life. He would realize his purpose by finding work that was important to society but also one that he felt a strong personal interest. Juan possessed a clear idea of his career path from an early age and did not waver from this decision to major in business. His major was unquestionably the right fit and where he found his sense of community. He spent his spare time learning and thinking about business and planning for his future:

I think my social identity would be student and lover of business. These both influence my sense of purpose because while I am a student and learning many useful things to prepare myself for my future career, I am combining that with my interest in finance to learn as much as I can. I feel that my purpose has to do with business in general because I sincerely enjoy reading about topics of that nature, which I think people may find a little bit odd. I believe my interests and social identities will be aligned for my greater purpose in life.

The clarity and certainty relating to his purpose contributed to Juan's confidence in his reason for attending college and the sureness that he will graduate.

At the start of the semester, Juan had a clear idea of what purpose was and felt as if he lived that purpose. He simply stated: "I just want to positively affect a community, my community, wherever I'm at." The detail of his impact was vague but the day-to-day living of this purpose was achieved by positively affecting those around him:

For me the central theme for a meaningful life is making a positive impact on others because through that influence, you yourself feel empowered from that relation. Purpose fits into this well because for me personally, I want to make a positive impact on people in my life. It sounds very vague, but maybe it should be. The underlying influence on that returns to the sense of purpose, belonging, and social interaction. All three characteristics can be found through making positive impacts on other people.

Over the course of the semester, Juan experienced a tension in how to position himself in the overall scheme of his purpose. At the start of the semester, his purpose was focused on making a positive impact on others. As the semester progressed, a new focus emerged which introduced the idea of taking care of his own self-interest.

I felt like purpose before was more about what you can do for others. And making a positive impact on a community, like I said, I'm all for that. But now I think purpose is also about...taking care of yourself and making sure that you're happy too. You want to make sure that you have a good experience. And coincidentally, helping others makes you feel like you have a good experience. But that doesn't mean that you just help others, but you have to make sure that you're also feeling good about life and being happy.

This tension created uncertainty in regards to his overall purpose. He did not question his choice of career or major, but rather what the "it" of his purpose would be. He explained: "I still have the idea, my purpose, what I want to do with life...But in the sense of knowing my vehicle for performing my purpose? It's a little bit more disfigured now."

When asked to elaborate on what he meant by "disfigured", he explained:

I'd just say that there's a mask on [purpose]. It's going to be there but there's a mask on it until I get to that point where I can take the mask off and see what it is. It's still up in the air. So living right now I think I'm doing a good job, like as a student, but I'm not doing a phenomenal job. I'm doing a decent job.

Juan possessed a future orientation to his purpose believing that when he grows older and has "no distractions or excuses" he will know from his life experiences what his purpose will be and then he will live it. While in college, he worked at his purpose by engaging with his peers, staying on focus with his career aspirations, and by networking in the engineering world. He believed these activities helped him meet his overall career goals while being a good person.

By the end of the semester, Juan's overall purpose statement did not change but rather he demonstrated a more complex view of his purpose.

To define purpose for me, I had to take multiple things into account. These perspectives ranged from looking at my past, my present, and what I want to be in store for me in the future. Through my experience learning about myself this semester, I have found it essential for me to understand myself better to be able to project the opportunities that I will find enjoyable and purposeful for the short and long term. It changes slightly every day and I continue to discover things about myself and my surroundings, but I would say a good foundation for the definition of purpose for me is: “Live in love, and create positive experiences with those who I interact with”. This is only skimming the surface, but I think that by following this rule, no matter what I do, it will be making the world a little bit better, and making me feel fulfilled in doing good things for others as well as myself.

Juan recognized that possessing a clear purpose could serve as a guide to help him make decisions that were authentic to his purpose.

I think my sense of purpose will kind of be a way to check myself. For example, if I say, ‘do I want to do this? Hold on. Let me look at what I want to do long-term. What’s my purpose right now? What’s it going to be like forecasted out in the future? Does it align with that? Sure? Yes? Okay, then I’ll do it. Does it not align with that? No? How can I spin that off to see how it could benefit me in the future?’ Or just enjoy it, like the experience thing too. Or, C would be, ‘Is this not what I want to be doing with myself? Is this like, looking back, would I be happy about what I did? Or not be happy about that? No? Then I better not do it.’ So, it’s a good way to guide myself I think.

Juan’s personal growth during his second year of college formed his commitment to increasing his self-awareness as a means to discovering his purpose. He then envisioned his purpose to guide his future behaviors and reinforce how he lived his life aligned to that purpose.

### **Amanda**

Amanda attended the University to pursue her interest in science which would ultimately lead her to a health career. She experienced academic success in high school and was accepted into a competitive college within the university. Growing up, Amanda lived in various locations across the U.S. and was exposed to different people and perspectives. She spoke fondly of her upbringing and the support she experienced from

her family. Amanda acknowledged Catholic as an identity but from a standpoint of distancing herself from the label and the associated beliefs. She spoke of being in the process of defining her own spirituality based on a foundation of inclusion and openness to others. The values of acceptance and openness permeated her story.

Amanda's first year on campus was positive and she enjoyed living on campus although she did not make the friendships she had hoped. Her primary focus was on her academics but she soon recognized the need to develop a community of friends. She did well in most of her classes but struggled in an advanced math class during her first semester. This setback affected her greatly and caused her to question her purpose in college and ability to succeed. It was a new experience for Amanda to struggle academically and the ripple effect permeated her confidence in succeeding in a science-based major and her overall academic plan. The following semester she found success in a smaller science class that was more hands-on. This class restored her confidence in her ability to succeed in science as long as she found the "right sciences."

One of the highlights of Amanda's first year was joining the soccer team. She enjoyed the physical fitness along with being part of a community on campus. This group expanded her concept of friendships beyond hanging out with those in her "grade" and was her first experience of belonging to a group while in college. Unfortunately she was cut from the team her second semester and therefore lost the social connections that this experience provided.

Amanda reflected upon her first year and identified many learning experiences. She learned how to "approach problems at the college level" which included taking risks, asking for help, and trying new things. My sense was that Amanda had not failed often

in her life prior to coming to college, so the struggle with a class, not making the soccer team, and the overall hard work of college had been an unsettling experience for her.

Amanda's solution to these setbacks was to try harder and make things happen. Amanda approached these difficulties in a logical, matter-of-fact manner and successfully identified strategies to improve her situation.

As Amanda started her second year, her focus was on finding a sense of community. Amanda hoped to assist others through her position as an orientation leader and by helping her younger sister transition to campus as a new student. She felt confident in her ability to succeed academically thanks to her improved resourcefulness acquired during her first year. The motivation for her taking the Living on Purpose class was to provide more time to reflect on her life and develop a stronger sense of direction.

Unfortunately Amanda's goal of connecting with others during her second year was overshadowed by her heavy academic course load. By the end of fall semester, Amanda was fairly burnt out and talked about experiencing a lack of motivation and "the sophomore slump." Her sense of purpose at the end of the semester reflected this struggle:

I guess right now it's just being a college student, kind of living through day-to-day and doing the best that I can...I have a goal of where I want to go after college and I guess in order to get to point B you kind of have to get through the dirty work first.

Amanda focused on her future goals after college to provide motivation to get her through the daily stress or "dirty work" of college. It is possible that this was a temporary state which reflected the stress of the end of the semester. The tone of her final project was optimistic and positive of her college experience.



Amanda believed in a broader spirituality that transcended religion. She attended a catholic school growing up but disagreed with the religious teachings. She viewed spirituality as oneness, a universal that connects all humans. She recognized that there can be multiple faiths but held that these diverse beliefs linked together by this universal. She described living out her spirituality by being inclusive of others, being a good person, and working to make the world a better place. This directly shaped her morality and how she lived her life. Her view of spirituality gave her a sense of being connected to the universe. An example of when Amanda felt her spirituality in the forefront of her first-year experience was when she voted in the fall elections against the state's proposed ban on gay marriage. The vote was an opportunity for her to affirm her own beliefs in a public way, separate from her Catholic upbringing. This was a time when her spirituality became more "clear" to her.

Overall, Amanda's story was one of understanding her own responsibility and ability in shaping her college experience and life. She experienced tension as she struggled to align her stated values with her experiences in college. She was a bit reserved but was continually trying to push herself to take chances and try new experiences. Her final purpose project was in the form of a third-person narrative of a hero's journey that told the story of her own struggle and claiming of her personal power.

By the end of the semester, Amanda's perception of purpose experienced two shifts. First, she moved away from planning out her purpose and controlling how to find it towards a belief in allowing purpose to emerge by living life to the fullest. She demonstrated a growing trust that her purpose would reveal itself in time and a comfort in the ambiguity of not knowing. She believed that "purpose is not something you have to

go out and find. Do what you love and chase your dreams; your purpose will find you.”

Letting go of the pressure to find “the” answer seemed to be freeing for Amanda and one less thing to worry about in college. A criterion needed for her to let go was experiencing a sense of belonging. She stated that “I may not know exactly what the future may hold for me but I do know that these people [family and friends] will be there to help support me each step of the way.”

The second shift that occurred for Amanda was recognizing that living a purposeful life can happen through smaller things. Amanda acknowledged that she was always a hard worker and strived for achievement, challenging herself to accomplish big things. Through the course, she realized that her purpose doesn’t have to be at such a grand scale. She could live a purposeful life by making simple changes in her daily interactions and through achieving smaller accomplishments. Both of these shifts released Amanda of some of the pressure and control of finding a purpose: “If we allow ourselves to get caught up in the idea of happiness and purpose such that we are constantly in search mode, it can be easier to forget or not to notice the journey.”

The course topic addressing vulnerability and risk-taking resonated strongly with Amanda because it allowed her to hear the stories of other students and affirm her own experience and struggles: “It was interesting to hear your classmates talk about some of the things they’re vulnerable about, or things that they’ve had that are hard and it makes you realize that you’re not necessarily by yourself.” By the end of the course, Amanda spoke of her emerging understanding of the ways in which she pushed herself and the value of forgiveness in that process. Amanda accepted that future failures and obstacles will occur in her life but by linking these experiences to a greater purpose, she could view

these as challenges and opportunities to grow: “Every [person] has a purpose, a reason that they go on through all hardship. It is their driving force that keeps them going when hope dwindles.”

Overall, Amanda liked the course and found the readings and exercises interesting. The assignments of the course pushed her to try new experiences on campus. She also acknowledged the timing of these topics as relevant to her second-year experience:

I really liked having [the course] in my second year. You probably know about “sophomore slump”? I was reading an article about that and that’s probably why this [class] was made. I think it fits really well with that. I think there was that and I think that sometimes you forget, when you’re coming in as a freshman you have that motivation of “I’m going to graduate in four years; I’m going to do this”. Then in sophomore [year], you don’t necessarily have that motivation because it seems so far away.

Amanda completed the course without a clear statement of purpose but a trust that it would unfold and a framework in which to support its emergence. She discovered that she could live her life by being reflective and setting goals that would keep her living intentionally. She believed that a purposeful life was one where she could do what she was passionate about while giving back to the community. This offered a reciprocal benefit in that it provided a greater connection to others while contributing to the greater whole.

Amanda came to believe that the source of her purpose was from within rather than from external sources. In her capstone project, Amanda described this belief through the experiences of her story’s hero:

She would use this time [in college] to learn more about herself and develop a more positive outlook on life. What were her values? What were her talents? Too often she had looked to the outside world to answer these questions. It was time to look within. She would spend the time learning and growing as a hero

until the plot in her story revealed itself. No longer feeling lost, she looked about her at the wide world and for the first time saw it for all the possibilities.

Amanda recognized her reliance on the “outside world” to shape her self-perception. She was beginning to recognize that she needed to become more inner-dependent in order to live a purposeful life. This new found realization created a sense of excitement for the possibilities that college had to offer.

### **Josh**

Josh was an out-of-state student who grew up in a Midwest city. He was strong academically in high school and started college with a significant number of college credits completed. He came to the University because of the chemistry program and an academic scholarship. He quickly discovered that chemistry was not for him and explored different science majors and ultimately landed on neurology at the start of his second year. Josh’s spiritual identity was newly discovered since he came to college. He grew up with no religious affiliation and was taught the value of living a good life. His worldview was “very focused on science, numbers and analysis before I came to college” but now he was actively cultivated his spiritual self in relation to his previous views.

Josh’s first year was marked by challenges. During his first semester he struggled with depression and anxiety. Living in a single room, Josh did not experience a sense of community in the residence hall. He isolated himself for days at a time as he struggled with depression. He recognized that he needed help and finally sought out a counselor in the campus counseling center. Through his therapy, he came to understand that his feelings of anxiety and depression had always been part of his life but the transition to college intensified these feelings. He was beginning to understand and embrace this aspect of his identity.

During his freshmen year, Josh was forced to return home and take a leave of absence for most of his spring semester. Josh looked back on this experience and recognized the tremendous personal growth from these struggles. He described starting his first year as a “freaked out freshman”. Although he recognized that his transition issues were linked to his mental health, he found comfort in knowing that many first-year students struggled as well. His greatest growth came from the process of recognizing his need for help and taking the steps to reach out: “I feel like I got more perspective and I started thinking less about just myself like teenagers are apt to do. It came with the ability to look at myself and be introspective. It helped me look outward too.” Overall, Josh recognized that he had grown a great deal in his first year and his view of the world was continuing to expand.

Josh chose to live in the SYE House because he wanted a second chance at college. He was hoping to experience a sense of community that he did not develop during his first year. He expected to make stronger friendships, get involved in groups on campus, and get his first job doing something that related to his field. He hoped to “grow up” a bit during his second year and to be more centered and calm. He recognized the ways in which his past behaviors were not helpful and hoped to alter those patterns.

Josh’s second year played out well and he was able to meet many of his expectations. He opened himself up to new experiences, saying “yes” to whatever opportunities were offered. This resulted in managing two jobs and working over 30 hours a week. Financially he did not need to work and his extensive schedule negatively affected his academics and wellbeing. He took pride in the fact that in addition to working and school, he was able to spend time maintaining and deepening relationships.

He was able to do all this and survived. Although these are all goals he had, he was showing signs of being tired and worn down.

This semester I've just sort of taken the mentality of "whatever comes at me I'll just say 'yes' and go for it!" and ended up really crushing myself under the weight of things, but you know, made it through. So that says something.

He had no regret about the semester or desire to change any of the choices he made although he suffered academically and physically. Josh was proud of the resiliency he demonstrated and it contributed to his self-efficacy.

Josh was negotiating many things as he traversed through his college career. His questioning and wonderment of how things worked – the universe, the human brain, wanting to "understand how we understand" – both motivated him yet caused him angst. He struggled with losing the mystery and magic of life as he encountered the scientific explanation of human behavior. Another tension for Josh was managing his past behavior of isolating himself yet wanting to be part of a community through connectedness. Josh was learning to understand and own his mental health in ways that were empowering to him. He was developing and practicing strategies to help move forward with his life and manage his courses. This journey into himself had been the most profound learning and growth for him through his college experience.

Josh believed that the source of purpose came from within and that the activity of searching for purpose leads to unhappiness. This aligned with Josh's lived experiences that having expectations often lead to disappointment. He explained, "If I just let things be as they are and know that they are changing because that is the nature of life, then I find I achieve a lot more in my life and I am happier." Josh was learning to live in the present moment and found that releasing expectations provided a sense of calm. He also

saw the importance of being open to new situations, to go with the flow of life and to smile more as key strategies for him to discover his purpose. By the end of the course, he described his purpose as fluid and unknown:

When I think about the idea of purpose in general, a lot of big and abstract ideas come to mind: connection with the universe, the meaning of life, achieving happiness, and the like. Over the course of this class, I've come to accept that each person's purpose is a subjective matter. My purpose could involve anything from firefighting to stock trading and beyond. What my purpose becomes is completely up to me. Therefore, it's also free to change. In my opinion, purpose is best to think of as a fluid state. It is an aspect of someone that constantly changes with age and experience. Sometimes it changes in small increments and in other times of great growth in large leaps.

The ways in which Josh conceptualized purpose were intertwined with his identity as someone managing his mental health. Josh learned that he was able to manage his anxiety best when he lived in the moment and let go of future worries. Viewing purpose as fluid and something in his control aligns with his strategies for successful living day-to-day. Josh stated: "I feel like for me, finding my values and purpose is going to have to happen at the same time as I chase happiness and calm."

Josh identified his purpose stating "I see it as my purpose to help further our understanding of our understanding." This purpose is grounded in his career contributions so his major choice was important to his ultimate purpose in life. Josh explored a variety of majors in his first year but ultimately chose neurology. The study of neurology sits at the intersection of Josh's life: it fed his strong curiosity by the fact that there was so much unknown about the human brain; the heavy science emphasis complemented his preference for objective analysis; it allowed him to integrate his own mental health issues and exploring how his brain works; and it spoke to his passion to change society's perception of mental illness. This combination provided a solid

foundation for a career that aligned with a purposeful life. Josh's description of his journey paints a picture of his transition in thinking:

For as long as I've thought of having a career, I have been really focusing on picking a career path that balances doing something I love, doing something meaningful, and doing something that pays the bills. In trying to find this balance, I've gone through periods where my major changes weekly. When I first came to college, all three of my main goals were really overly ambitious. I wanted to be rich, I wanted to discover something brand new that changed the world, and I wanted to feel fantastic doing it all! Over time, I've found that each of my goals have stayed on the same trajectory, but become much more thought out and modest. I want to make enough money to live comfortably, I want to contribute something to the world's wealth of knowledge (even something that might be "small and inconsequential"), and I want to be happy. I think that I have finally found something that can fulfill all of these goals in Neuroscience. Neuroscience surely pays the bills, it is a relatively new and untapped field full of things to discover, and I have a really strong personal interest in it. Furthermore, it's a field that I found I can help the people I love [family] by studying. ... Going into that area of research and development is important to me, and will help me achieve a sense of purpose in my career.

Although the Living on Purpose class may not have contributed to his career purpose directly, he did learn that to stay focused on a path that contributes to his purpose will help him in the future. "One valuable thing I learned from this class is the importance of giving my passions direction, and not whip back and forth from dream to dream." He also learned to not worry about finding a purpose and trust that things will be ok. Prior to the class he tried not to worry about these things and at the conclusion of the course he felt that he really did not worry. This shift occurred as the source of his purpose became associated with personal choice and the "internal". He believed it was not something you force but need to keep "an eye out for it". Staying true to what he is drawn to will lead him to his purpose.

I'm much more confident after the course that it's there. I can choose to have it. Whereas before it was more, "Well I gotta find this. Time's running out. Time's always going." And now I can't think about that. [I] don't think about that... [Before] I wasn't keeping track of where the internal was leading me. Now



that I sort of watch where it's leading me I sort of see the trends and realize that sometimes it has a tendency to just whiplash back and forth. And, you know, you gotta stay on a general path if you can. I still go [to] what I'm drawn to, but I have a more conscious direction to it.

Because of the course, Josh developed stronger self-efficacy that he can create for himself a meaningful life. He has become more aware of observing his life and developed a purposeful eye to keep watch on the direction his life is going.

### **Michelle**

Michelle grew up in a mid-sized town close to the University and returned home regularly to work one of her two jobs. Michelle was interested in pursuing a career in health as a way to make a difference in the world. She came to the U with a year of college credits completed so she was required to declare her major at the start of her second year. Michelle was not religious but identified as spiritual. She was raised Unitarian which shaped her open approach to spirituality.

Michelle ended up liking the U more than she had expected. During her first semester, she spent most of her time with her boyfriend and did not make many friends or get involved. They broke up at the end of the semester as her interests expanded beyond the relationship. She made good friends in her second semester and "started to have fun". Her friends were a good support system for her as they studied together and were "going through the same kind of thing that I'm going through". Michelle's goal was to attend medical school and become a doctor. In order to accomplish this, she was pursuing a competitive major that required a secondary admission process. She struggled with some of the required science courses so this weighed on her as she started her second year. Michelle identified this struggle, along with "living in the real world" as her key growth areas during her first year.

As Michelle began her second year, she was optimistic and her expectations for herself were “nothing less than academic success”. She recognized that there was a strong possibility that she would be overloaded as she balanced two jobs and a full academic load of challenging courses. As she predicted, Michelle’s fall semester was marked by struggle. The reality that she did not have the GPA to get into her first-choice major was disappointing and caused her a great deal of stress. She had to declare a different major although it was not what she wanted.

I’m feeling really stressed out about figuring out my major because I’m declared right now, but not in something that I want to be declared in. I knew when I was declaring it, I didn’t like it, but I had to in order to register. And it was the only thing in [my college] that I could declare. It felt like I was accepting defeat. It felt pretty bad.

For undergraduate students, declaring a major is a key milestone in their college career. Michelle felt forced into declaring a major she didn’t want and this experience left her feeling upset. Given Michelle’s high need to achieve and her past success in high school, this was an unsettling experience for her. Despite this setback, Michelle said her fall semester went well with the exception of her academics.

I think it was what I hoped it would be, but I’m not doing as well as I’d hoped - like in academics. My GPA is not where I wanted it to be but other than that, social wise is good, and I have worked harder in school this semester by far than last year at all. But the success isn’t following.

Michelle’s vision of her future was uncertain at the end of the fall semester having felt limited by what she “can” do academically. She wanted to be in a health field but without better grades in her science courses, this was not going to be possible.

Michelle defined spirituality as “each person’s individual connection, rituals, and beliefs”. She saw all humans as being spiritual and believed that most people have a connection to something outside of themselves and ways to practice these beliefs in order

to ground their lives. Spirituality for Michelle was a personal experience grounded in yoga and meditation practices that draw her inward.

Michelle enrolled in the Living on Purpose course at the start of her second year because she was driven by the “Dharma question” of her life purpose and wanted to explore this question further. Unfortunately, the pressures she experienced during her second year overshadowed her ability to pursue these questions and spiritual practices. Michelle ended the semester with little evidence of optimism or excitement. She had friends who were transferring to other schools and Michelle was questioning if she even belonged at the U. As she reflected on her current state at the end of the semester, Michelle realized that her overall wellbeing had declined.

Mentally I’m probably in a worse state now because coming in I had a really low level of stress and had just gotten done with my yoga teacher training and all that meditating, and I was in a really good place mentally. Now I’ve been exposed to all sorts of stressors. And so mentally I can tell that I’m not in as good of a place as I was at the start of the semester.

Michelle’s lack of academic success prompted her to question her academic abilities and sense of purpose. By the end of the semester, she felt that her life lacked meaning, describing that “all I do right now is go to school and then study. It’s not meaningful.” Her day-to-day life focused on getting through school and dealing with the stress of college, work, and financial pressures. In contrast to the tone of the interview, Michelle’s final project was optimistic and hopeful. The shifting of Michelle’s perspective within a one week time span sheds light on the motion and permeable nature of purpose, especially given the influences of context and developing self.

As described above, Michelle’s day-to-day life at the end of the semester was not meaningful to her. She identified her purpose in general as helping other people yet this

was not being actualized in her daily life. There was a disconnect between what Michelle believed contributed to a meaningful life and her own sense of purpose and how she was living her life in that moment. For Michelle, the future held the key to her living on purpose as she perceived life after college as having more time to do what she viewed as meaningful.

At the end of the course, Michelle stated that she still did not know what her purpose was but that she had an idea of how she would go about exploring her purpose. Michelle believed that purpose was discovered through self-awareness. She stated, “for one to explore their purpose, they could start by refining their sense of identity in order to figure out where they want to go and what they want to do moving forward.” This course helped to lay the foundation for her to explore purpose in her life once she had the time to dedicate to self-awareness: “I think I gained insight as far as how I would go about exploring my purpose but not exactly about what my purpose is.” She demonstrated some of this insight as she articulated her purpose at the end of the semester.

My mission is to go deeper within myself to become more comfortable with who I truly am. I vow to live compassionately, and make the most ethical choices, even if they aren't the easiest. I put good intentions behind all my actions. I want to be a part of something greater than myself, working with the human race for the benefit of mankind. If I can at least make one small positive difference before I go to sleep each night, I will be on my way to living more mindfully and meaningfully.

She also learned that there were a lot of different ways to think about purpose, “It kind of brought up all sorts of...ways of going about exploring what you think your purpose could be. I haven't thought about it that in-depth before, like what causes you happiness versus what will cause other people happiness”. By the end of the semester, Michelle was beginning to differentiate the values and expectations of others from her own ideas.

Although Michelle stated that she learned valuable insight from the class, she regretted taking it. She thought the course was too much work for 2 credits and since it did not relate to her major or specific requirements, that it should not have been so time consuming. Her expectations at the beginning of the course were to learn more about herself and what she wants to do with the rest of her life. The major-declaration obstacles she encountered during her fall semester did not help her clarify this question and this course was not intended to address academic major issues. Since Michelle's purpose was strongly associated with her career, not having a desirable plan caused her to question her current purpose in college and how to proceed. In addition, she viewed self-awareness as key to finding purpose yet she did not have the time to dedicate to this process during her second year. These incongruencies seemed to have contributed to Michelle's current state of frustration.

### **Laurie**

Laurie was from a small town in a neighboring state. She was very close to her parents and leaving college was her first significant time away from home. Laurie came to the University because it offered the major she was interested in pursuing. She was very confident in her major choice and this held consistent into her second year. Laurie grew up in a Christian family and was very outspoken about her faith. Growing up, her hometown friends and sense of community centered on her religion.

Laurie struggled during her first semester as a freshman. She came to college with a best friend and spent most of her time with him. When he didn't return for the spring semester, she needed to make new friends and rely more on herself. That spring semester, Laurie described feeling a lack of purpose in her college experience:

I didn't feel like I had friends or anything. I didn't have any really strong connection. I just felt like I was kind of almost going through the motions of going forward. I just was going to class and then coming back...I always need connections with people, so it was just hard for me not having that right away this semester. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know where to look for people because everybody had their friends. Everybody has their niche. I felt it was too late for me to find new people.

Laurie recognized that connecting with other people was important to her but she struggled in accomplishing this goal. Without a sense of belonging, Laurie also experienced a lack of purpose and direction in her overall college experience.

Two experiences during her spring semester helped turned this around. The first experience was a service-based spring break trip with 45 other students. She was nervous to sign up for the trip but knew that she had to push herself. Laurie had a great experience stating, "I've never had a more exciting and fun and good experience with that many people". This experience was meaningful to her because she connected with other students and it aligned with her values of giving back to community. The second experience that was significant for Laurie was meeting someone who was "really genuine to me". During fall semester, Laurie felt that other students were being what other people wanted them to be. This new friend seemed authentic and was one of the first people Laurie could trust. This also led to Laurie joining a sorority which provided a sense of purpose outside of her academics.

I started to feel more balance in my life again. ...Once I had more friendships, I was in a place I could start thinking about other things more. That I wasn't so much focused in the now but like in the "if" and in the "when" in a different, where am I going, sort of sense. I didn't have to focus on more of a short term goal. I could start thinking about ...what might happen after [graduation] with my life goals.

Without a sense of community, Laura's focus was on the day-to-day struggle and questioning her purpose for being in college. By feeling part of a community, Laurie was able to start thinking about her future goals.

Starting out her second year, Laurie felt both a sense of excitement and nervousness. She was excited to begin a new job writing about her experiences for her college blog. She was hoping to make more friends and deepen the connections with her current friends. Her nervousness stemmed from all the opportunities that were possible in her second year and taking the risk to "put herself out there."

Laurie's second year was more stressful and busy than she had expected. She had a busy schedule with 18 credits, 15 hours of work, and commitments to her sorority. Overall, she was happy with the semester and proud of all that she accomplished. It was evident during our interview that she had felt an increased sense of personal responsibility and self-efficacy in her college experience. During her fall semester of her second year, Laurie's courses were challenging for her and required technical skills she did not have. At first she blamed others and found excuses for her lack of preparedness, but over time she took ownership of her situation and taught herself the skills she needed to be competitive with her peers. This experience had a great impact on her both personally and academically. She transferred this sense of responsibility to other areas of her life such as her time management, learning, and confidence that things will work out. It also gave her the confidence to take a risk and study abroad for her spring semester in which she was excited to learn more about her own sense of purpose and other worldviews.

Although she felt competent in her college experience, Laurie was in a place of transition in regards to her spiritual beliefs. She began her second year stating that “I don’t know where to go with my spirituality.” She found that religion was not an easy subject to talk about with her peers on campus. Her experience of spirituality in college focused around the negativity and bias against the expression of religion. She struggled with how to negotiate between stating her Christian views without being isolated for her beliefs. At the start of the academic year, Laurie joined a Jewish sorority which contributed greatly to her spirituality during her second year:

I feel like I’m very satisfied with where I’m at right now [spiritually]. I have a lot of friends that have different religious beliefs from me. It’s nice for me to learn more about where they come from and seeing what they do.

Through these relationships, Laurie developed an openness to diverse perspectives and felt less anxiety about her own spiritual uncertainty, “I just feel like I’m in an awkward place in my life spirituality. I don’t feel negative or positive towards what anyone believes but I don’t know what I believe still.” Laurie viewed her spirituality as distinct from her sense of purpose so her uncertainty about her beliefs did not affect her class experience and exploration of purpose.

Through the Living on Purpose course, Laurie’s conceptualization of purpose shifted. She started out equating the concept of purpose strictly with career. As she engaged in the course, her definition expanded to see purpose as a broader concept that is lived out through intentional interactions. Laurie was extremely certain about her major and what type of career it would lead to. Perhaps her confidence in her major and career choice provided her the foundation in which to broaden her conceptualization of purpose beyond her career.



By the end of the course, Laurie was still uncertain about her purpose but trusted that it would emerge in time as long as she lived her life pursuing her passions and helping the broader community.

When thinking about where I was when we started this class to now, I feel that there were a few big turning points for me and learning about finding my purpose. I still feel that I am unsure of what my exact purpose is, but I now know that as long as I am working toward things that I'm passionate about that help my community, it's okay to be unsure of my ultimate purpose. I need to search for ways to be involved with these passions and actively participate in having my voice be heard.

Laurie's description implies that purpose is an elusive and definitive concept, an "ultimate" purpose. Although her purpose was still not known, she was able to develop a life philosophy and identify practices in which to live a meaningful life. The class seemed to bring to light specific strategies that Laurie could use to discover and maintain a sense of purpose. She identified the practices of cultivating gratitude, slowing down, opening her mind to new experiences, and choosing a positive attitude as ways to discover and live her purpose. Laurie described these future practices in the following way:

I think that this applies to my life in that I should look for peace inside the chaos of everything. When things seem to be going awry, I need to focus on the positives to keep myself going...I believe that this [class] would help me find my life purpose by helping me open up my mind and sight to see things in a new light. It would help me to appreciate the simple things in life that others do and understand that all things are important, no matter how insignificant that they seem.

Laurie was developing an inner-dependence that allowed her to trust and rely on her own actions and choices to live a purposeful life while still being of service to others. Her paradigm of purpose shifted from focusing on finding her purpose to "the manner in which you live your life to the fullest, thinking and caring for more than just yourself."

At the end of the semester, Laurie felt like she was on the cusp of self-discovery and it brought a renewed sense of confidence and a positive outlook. She worked through many struggles and created a college experience grounded in relationships and finding her place in the world. Laurie's perspective shifted to not only include the end goal but to also focus on the moments along the way:

I believe we too often focus on reaching a goal, and we can't be happy or satisfied without it. However, if we live like that we will miss all of the steps along the way that are filled with more beauty and magic than most of our goals.

Laurie's recognized the value of appreciating the process of life which resulted in an appreciation of the present moment.

### **Suzie**

Suzie grew up in a suburb located near the University. She came from a close knit family that was instrumental in shaping her values and beliefs. Suzie was an excellent student in high school. She started her college career interested in physics but was still exploring what career to pursue. As one of the few women in the physics program, she was motivated to achieve and "proving them wrong." Her spirituality was anchored in her identity as a Catholic and formed by the experiences she had growing up and attending church activities.

During her first year, Suzie experienced difficulties along the way but her ability to persevere through these challenges gave her faith in her ability to overcome various obstacles. She struggled as she adjusted to the rigor of college science courses. This was a new experience for her since she was used to academic success in high school. Suzie found herself working exceptionally hard to stay on track with her classes. She also did not have a good roommate experience which made it difficult for her to feel at home in

her residence hall room. Suzie's initial expectations of what she wanted from a roommate and social surroundings were not met: "while I did love school and my newly found freedom, I was actually struggling daily with my roommate. I felt the need to keep it inside because I felt a sense of guilt; things could have been worse." In dealing with this situation, Suzie discovered that she was motivated by these challenges: she found that she enjoyed the classes when she struggled; seeing her roommate not care about school motivated her to define her reason for being in college and excel for her own intrinsic reasons; and being one of the few women in the chemistry program motivated her to prove the stereotypes of women in science wrong. Suzie recognized the lessons she learned from the challenges of her first year:

College is a time full of extreme changes, all of which bombard you at one time. My first year here at the U tested me in all aspects of my life. Never in my life did I think I would be the one who had to deal with so much difficulty.

Suzie witnessed her personal growth over the course of her first year and the process of "becoming my own person."

The challenges in Suzie's first year prompted her to sign up for the SYE House. She hoped to have the social experience that was lacking in her first year. She started her second year wanting to do better in school and have more fun. At the conclusion of her fall semester of her second year, Suzie described the semester as "insane". She found classes to be really tough but "life-wise, way better". She had a good relationship with her roommate and made many strong friendships in the residence hall. The community on the floor made a positive difference in her college experience by providing a sense of fun when school was difficult. With the continued challenges from her academics and a

new found social life, Suzie was figuring out how to balance her priorities. In describing what she learned halfway through her second year, she said:

[My] learning [was] how to balance the insane school and then, how much fun I would have just living [in the SYE House]. Last year I could just do school all the time because there wasn't anything going on in the floor and no one was really...having fun with each other. And then this semester – it's constant fun going on so you don't want to do school. So, I think balancing it kind of teaches you. It's more realistic in the real world and everything.

Suzie's second year exposed her to experiences that she believed were more representative of the real world. She believed that her ability to handle these situations well and overcome obstacles demonstrated her growth and development. It also gave her the confidence to deal with future challenges.

Suzie's spirituality was anchored in her religion. She grew up Catholic and went to church her entire life. She attended church camps when she was younger and found these experiences significant in forming her individual relationship with God. During her second year of college, Suzie thought about her spirituality less than she did her first year. This was due in part because she did not attend church and felt that she had no personal reflection time amidst the demands of college. Suzie's definition of spirituality altered in response to her experiences which she revised to rely more on her internal beliefs. At the end of the semester, Suzie described her spirituality as "what's going to drive you and help you decide what's right and wrong...kind of like your 'moral compass'. And it doesn't have to be church." Suzie began to understand a transferability of her spirituality, learning that she could experience it outside of the context of defined church activities and rely more on creating spiritual moments within herself or in alternative spaces.

Suzie's movement during her second year was the process of trusting her own strength and inner voice.

Although my first year of college was a struggle, I was able to define what it is in life that I want out of myself and others. Without this bad experience [roommate conflict], I don't think I would have discovered some of my traits and values. These values aren't fully set yet, but I am on my way to discovering them fully.

She formed this trust through overcoming the challenges and obstacles she faced in college. One specific challenge that influenced her sense of purpose was her experience as a woman majoring in the male-dominated field of physics.

Sometimes I feel pressure to succeed because of my gender, like I have to "live up" to the boys and what they can do. I firmly believe girls are underestimated in a large majority of man dominant fields, physics included. The somewhat negative pressure felt by being one of few girls has actually become a motivator in my life. I feel I will be able to find my purpose by using this motivation. By getting through my undergrad and finding (hopefully) something I truly enjoy on a day to day basis will lead me that much closer. Like I have said over and over, I do not fully understand my purpose, but this social identity influences it by giving me motivation and a reason to work hard.

Her ability to deal with her roommate conflict and persevere in her major taught Suzie that she was strong and motivated to overcome challenges in her life. She used the insight gained from this experience and her awareness of her emerging values as the cornerstone of her conceptualization of purpose.

For me, I think my purpose will be found through the culmination of every one of my experiences. Each will teach me a lesson. Whether it be good or bad, these lessons will guide me through life. The most important thing for me to realize is finding purpose takes time. I may not know my purpose now, or five years from now. What matters is my consciousness of purpose; I need to live my life with it in mind. This technique of living will not only guide me to purpose, but allow me to put my best self forward. I will know I have found my purpose when I can look at the present and past, and be content in all aspects of my life. Until that point, the search continues.

Having invested little thought about her purpose prior to this class, Suzie formed an emerging consciousness that incorporated her college experiences and growing awareness.

Overall, Suzie described her learning from the course as a process that brought forth the information she previously knew about herself. The course affirmed for her that she already had the answers within herself rather than seeking them from external sources.

Coming into this class, I had expectations of learning many things about myself. I figured I had a lot to learn, that I had no clue who I am or want to be. Looking back on the semester, though, I have come to realize just how much I knew about what I want from life. Although I don't know my purpose, I think my values and morals will help me find it! One thing from the class that stood out to me was the sections on values and talents. The most effective way to find purpose, to me, is searching internally. Once the internal is dealt with, we can move to the outside world. Finding identity is essential to finding purpose. As I continue through life, I think I will be able to find my purpose through the exploration of my values, strengths, and talents.

Suzie was learning to trust herself and the knowledge she held within.

Suzie also felt that this course gave her the tools to continue to self-reflect as she goes through each day. This will help her purpose come to light over time.

For the future, I am hoping to carry what I have learned from this class with me. Realizing how my talents, strengths, values and morals all play into finding purpose is something that never crossed my mind. The in depth analysis of each topic throughout the class gave me a chance to self-reflect and realize how capable I am at finding purpose. I need to remind myself daily to keep my purpose in mind. As I continue through college, I need to be mindful of my choices and how they can impact my future. I need to keep goals in mind; they will hold as guidelines. Purpose doesn't come all at once. It is something that will take time, and I am more than on my way.

The Living on Purpose course provided Suzie with the time and space to clarify her values, affirm her inner strength and create a framework in which to allow her purpose to emerge in the future.

## **Kiab**

Kiab grew up in an urban setting close to the U. She had strong ties to her family as the oldest of a large family. Going to college was Kiab's first significant experience outside of her home and became a journey of discovering who she was away from her family. She declared a sociology major during her first year after her parents would not allow her to major in art. Kiab stated her spiritual identity as a Christian and she was baptized the summer before her second year. This experience was significant for her in that she "became more appreciative toward everything and everyone".

Kiab's past history of experiencing abuse was a strong force in her life that shaped who she was and how she experienced college. She was abused by her family and bullied during her previous school years. The messages she received through these formative years reside deep within her and have shaped her self-perception. From these difficulties, she developed a strong desire to help others, both by protecting those she loves as well as putting others' needs before her own.

That this is why I am the way I am now. My parents abused me. I was bullied from preschool to twelfth grade. Even through all of this, I would bounce back to my feet and accept the people who came my way. I would talk to them and smile and forgive them. I would hug my parents and obey them. I just wanted to forgive them because there's a deeper reason as to why they treat me this way. These experiences made me see that people are always in need of someone. I was always able to forgive and just open my arms and accept everyone, which created my personal philosophy.

These past experiences have been a driving force in shaping Kiab's current sense of self, her worth, her attitude, and how she interacts with the world. She displayed no self-pity or feelings of victimization but rather espoused happiness and positivity. This was a perspective and mental state that she practiced to help her make meaning of her past. Remaining positive and grounded in her belief in God allowed her to look back on her

past experiences and reframe them from a place of love and understanding. This became her coping mechanism for her to understand why she had to live through these painful experiences. As her college experience helped her gain friends, new perspectives, and greater self-confidence, she saw herself growing stronger and more confident in her own voice.

Kiab had a rough start to her first year not only because of the large adjustment to leaving home, but also changing residence halls early on and not making many friends at the start of the year. She struggled with her academics due largely to her lack of motivation and being “lazy”. She started out strong but then began to miss classes and stop studying. Her experience dramatically improved once she joined a student group that focused on her cultural identity. This group was the most meaningful experience of her first year providing a sense of purpose, community, and personal development. It was through her involvement that she learned to speak up and say what was on her mind. This group also provided Kiab with a sense of responsibility and a feeling of being busy which resulted in a positive effect on her entire experience. She continued to struggle with academics because she allowed her social life to take precedence over her studies. Her friends recognized times when she was struggling and pulled her into group study times. This worked well for Kiab as it met her need for social interaction while supporting her academic success. Overall, it was a challenging year for Kiab but she was able to overcome these difficulties by finding a sense of belonging in the student organization.



Kiab began her second year with a sense of optimism and hope. She felt that her grades would improve as she began to take classes that related to her major. She had clear expectations for what she hoped to accomplish during her second year.

For my second year, I hope that my spirituality will get bigger and I'll know more about God and the Bible and to also make a lot of friends and become a better speaker. I want a higher GPA. That's all.

By the end of fall semester of her second year, Kiab's experience did not meet her initial expectations. She continued to struggle with her academics and admitted that she did not put effort towards some classes. She continued her leadership role in the cultural student group but her confidence in her voice faltered. The most meaningful experiences of her second year and overall source of happiness came from spending time in the student union lounge socializing.

I spend most of my time there - going to my dorm and then go walk back. It's given me a lot of the people in the group I'm in, and we get to know each other more and it's just like the place where everybody goes I guess. And it's not just the people in my organization. It's their friends and I get to meet their friends. And my friends will come too.

Kiab experienced a strong sense of belonging spending time in the lounge and her time socializing became the priority over her academic pursuits.

Kiab's identity as a Christian and her relationship with God were strong forces in her life. It was the source of her ultimate purpose and provided her strength as she dealt with difficult situations. With her definition of spirituality firmly anchored in Christianity, her experiences of spirituality came from direct practices of attending church, reading the bible, and praying. Over the course of the semester, her definition of spirituality evolved beyond the external identity of being Christian to a more internal focus of "how I am with God and our relationship". For Kiab, God was responsible for

the good things that happened in her life which evoked feelings of daily gratitude and happiness. However, she was still negotiating God's role in the negative things that happened in life and trying to understand their meaning. Kiab believed that God had a specific purpose for her and she would discover this through the life-changing events he sent her way. Kiab's relationship with God grew stronger during her college experience. It served as a source for her sense of belonging and provided strength through difficult times.

The Living on Purpose course facilitated Kiab's self-awareness by providing language in which she clarified and organized her values and thoughts. Kiab reflected on the topic of exploring personal values and how they informed her purpose.

Knowing my values and seeing them work in my life helps me think about my purpose. Actually knowing the names of [my values] and reading the descriptions from the Life Values Inventory has helped me know more about myself and organize my mind a bit more. This will help me think about my purpose because I'm seeing a sense of direction where my purpose is leading, and that's toward helping others.

The online format of the course was a positive experience for Kiab in that she felt she was able to express herself better without the group dynamics and with the extra time to reflect.

I think I'd rather it [be] online because then I don't have to see them [other students]. And, like, it would make me more nervous. That's just me personally. ...I'm just in a big group I wouldn't want to say a lot because I feel like I would take more time to just process my thoughts. Because it just comes more naturally through my fingers.

I witnessed the difference in Kiab's ability to express herself in person versus in writing. Kiab's written reflections possessed a more thoughtful and articulate insight than her in-person interviews, where her responses were much shorter and general. For a topic as

deep and rich as life purpose, the online format allowed Kiab to participate in a more meaningful way.

Kiab's concept of purpose became more complex and enigmatic over the course of the semester.

During the beginning of the course, I thought that purpose was something simple. My definition in early September was that purpose meant doing something you were meant to do. Now, I believe that, although purpose is just that, it means something more and something different for every person in the world. For me, the definition of purpose is how you will live your life to do what was meant for you to put an impact in the world, no matter how small or big the impact you make is. That may be how I view purpose, but I still do not know what my sole purpose is. I have little inklings on which path to take to find this purpose but, for now, I am still searching for what my life's purpose truly is. Because of this, I still do not have a clearly stated purpose statement or a personal mission statement.

Although Kiab stated that she was unclear as to her purpose, she went on to state her reason for being on this earth.

This leads to my reason on why I am on Earth. I am on Earth because I want to follow my own personal philosophy to help people. If I believe something is wrong, I will challenge it. I will do what is always morally right to me. When I do something morally wrong, I know that I will feel a great pit of shame and guilt until I tell someone about it. So, my reason on being on Earth follows my personal philosophy on being able to help people. This, in itself, is a part of how I view my purpose statement. It all leads back to one another...Love is my personal philosophy in one word, and my purpose in a sentence is: I want to help people.

Kiab denied that she could identify a purpose in her life yet she clearly and eloquently articulated a purpose. Throughout the semester, Kiab seemed to be testing her concept of purpose as she negotiated helping others while also caring for herself.

I still don't know what my purpose in life is, but I do know the path of which to take to get to my purpose (or, at least, I hope I do). This class has made me think more about who I am as a person, and that in part has helped me more with figuring out what my purpose should do. One strategy that I want to practice to help me live on purpose is to be more self-compassionate. I highly lack self-compassion and I want to be more able to have this self-compassion. As was

said, along these lines, if one doesn't have self-compassion, how can they be compassionate towards others? And it's because of this that I want to be more self-compassionate so that I can be even more compassionate with others. I believe that my purpose is to help others and if I can't help myself, I won't be able to help others to my full extent. Self-compassion will help with that. So I am grateful for having learned more about self-compassion, what it is, and how it can help contribute to purpose.

The Living on Purpose course provided Kiab the permission and space for her to reflect on her life. She stated that “it made me think a lot about myself, because I don’t really think about myself. I think about other people”. The course provided a structure and language for Kiab to journey deeper into self-discovery.

### **Maggie**

Maggie grew up in a suburban setting close to the U. Her family was important to her and provided her unconditional support as she pursued her college career. Maggie talked about being responsible for her brother as she was growing up so coming to college was a time to separate from her family and focus on herself. Maggie declared her major in psychology during her freshmen year intending to pursue a career in occupational therapy. Maggie’s spiritual identity was synonymous with her religious affiliation. She was raised Lutheran and her belief in God was a strong part of her identity and purpose. Maggie’s faith was solidified when she experienced the presence of God during a moment of crisis. This significant experience created for her an unwavering faith and belief in God.

Maggie had a challenging first year both in negotiating her academic transition and developing relationships. She had always been a good student prior to coming to college so she was caught off guard by the amount of work that was required to be

successful in college. It was not only the amount of time she needed to spend studying but also the way in which she needed to learn.

At the beginning of the semester, I had a 3.0 GPA and towards the end of it, I was in like a 2.5 area. And for me that's really not good at all. I hate that. I'm very hard on myself. I make goals and I set plans. So when I'm lower than what I want then I get really hard on myself.

Maggie was able to improve her academics during her second semester. She credited her turnaround to the support and encouragement from her adviser and a paradigm shift in which she viewed asking for help as an act of resilience rather than failure. Maggie also struggled with developing relationships with others. She came into college fresh off a negative experience with a group of friends from high school. She felt betrayed and rejected from these relationship issues, so coming to college was a time to start fresh. She met people in her residence hall that she became friends with but over time these relationships ended similarly to her high school situation, which left her feeling rejected once again. In the second semester of her first year, Maggie began to develop relationships with peers in her academic major. One of these friendships she identified as the most meaningful experience of her first year describing her emotional connection as "that best friend feeling about her." Maggie felt that this relationship was based on honesty so therefore she would not experience the negativity she had in the past.

Overall, Maggie believed that she grew a great deal during her first year. She learned technical skills to help her be a better student but she also learned more about herself as a person through experiencing difficulties in her social relationships.

I think I know more about my study habits. But then I also think I know what kind of person I am. In high school, you're always trying to be in the "it" crowd or things like that, and then college, I'm like, "You know what? I am weird. I talk to myself sometimes, or I sing really loud, and I think I'm a very good singer, but apparently people think not." I can hold a tune. I know that, but I know that what

my personality is, is what my personality is, and if someone doesn't like my personality, then I'm fine without them. So, that's what I've learned in college.

Maggie is starting to move away from the need to conform to other people's expectations and begin to embrace her unique personality.

Maggie started the second year with a level of excitement for her classes since many of them were related to her major. The academic skills she learned in her first year were still tentative so she hoped to make these stronger. Her expectations remained high in regards to forming friendships, hoping to make "lifelong friendships" with people who shared similar values. Half way through her second year, Maggie felt her expectations were being met. She was doing better in her classes and she found a community living in the SYE House. Maggie also had a student leader role as a health advocate helping students with health related topics. She found this work rewarding and a way in which she could make a difference in the lives of others.

Maggie believed strongly that her past experiences shaped her purpose and future path. Most significantly, she talked about her accident prone behavior that resulted in many broken bones, her difficulty in developing relationships, and her growing comfort with being alone. Her experiences growing up exposed her to a variety of careers in the health field and led to her passion for occupational therapy. She believed she could relate well with people and make a difference in their lives. The challenges she experienced in building relationships led to her being comfortable alone. When she was alone, she felt like she was able to be her true self. It gave her the strength to feel good about who she was and a growing confidence that she could live her true self out in the world: "If I can be my true self alone, then I should be spontaneous and be my true self with the world too."

During her second year, the definition of Maggie's spirituality did not change. The personal experience that solidified her spirituality occurred in such a significantly transformational moment that it was steadfast moving forward. Having experienced the presence of God in a moment of crisis, Maggie did not question nor waver in her beliefs. Her spirituality is synonymous with her religious beliefs:

I think that spirituality, I mean, it's more of a religious aspect for me. So, believing in a higher power and...not praising him outwardly all the time, but praising him within yourself – and knowing that he's always there for you and with you and just – believing that they are with you at all times and knowing that they have that plan for you. So that's what my spirituality is.

Maggie believed that her life purpose was determined by God and she was the recipient of God's plan and his love. However, this was not a passive process and the act of increasing her self-awareness and discovering this purpose was a process that she had to determine. From this perspective, Maggie was actively engaged in the course content as she worked to discover a predetermined purpose determined by God.

From the start of the semester, Maggie was able to articulate a clear sense of purpose – helping others. She did not falter from this purpose but rather was able to build upon it to include other elements such as living in the moment.

I thought my purpose was to help others. And I think it still is to a certain point. But I think that was more of my future goals. Like when I become a physical therapist I can really help people. But now my purpose I think is really to be in the moment. And if that involves helping a person whether it's myself or another human being – being in that moment is really what I want to be my purpose. Because if I don't enjoy the little things now I won't have anything to look back on and being – and be happy about my life.

This addition to Maggie's purpose gave her permission to push herself to try new things and challenge herself. She was contemplating taking an alternative spring break trip for the following semester but was nervous about the experience. With this new

commitment to live in the moment as part of her purpose, she had a more open mind to taking this risk.

Along with living in the moment comes letting loose. By nature, I am a very cautious person, because of what has happened in my past. Now that I have committed myself to living each and every day, I need to be more spontaneous. I need to take more risks in my life. I want to have the relationships in my life that are healthy and happy and I believe that taking risks and letting loose in my life will help me get to those people. With letting loose comes becoming less responsible. I like to be responsible with my life, but I don't need to be responsible for everyone around me too. Being accountable with my life is necessary, however, I need to sit back and enjoy the ride that life gives me. Giving myself space to live free and in the moment is what I need to do now that I have my purpose down.

This new attitude helped her try new things outside of her classes and in the residence halls. She felt as if she had become more active this semester due to this new aspect of her purpose.

Maggie also recognized that her purpose was grounded in other people, both her need for relationships as well as her desire to help others.

I look to others to make me happy and that is sometimes a bad thing because I always get hurt. Then I start over with finding more happiness in relationships. Because I am looking for happiness in relationships, my pursuit in life is to help others and myself through relationships.

Maggie seemed to understand the dependency inherent in her happiness coming from others, especially given her past experiences with relationships. She appeared to be navigating this tension throughout the semester. Her connection to relationships as a source of her purpose also gave her reason to be involved on campus as a peer educator to allow her to live out her purpose in her college experience.

I think with the health advocacy I'll be helping a lot of students out and doing that and having them come to me with a problem, and, I mean, we're going to be helping with mental health issues as well as the physical, and knowing that they can come to me any time and ask for resources or ask for advice, that's what's



really going to help me with the school coming and being able to relate to others in my building.

By the end of the semester, Maggie was able to articulate her purpose clearly in her capstone project.

My purpose is to help others and to live in the moment, and if I am already living in the moment, then helping others is what I need to do. Focusing on the joyous things in life does not mean that I cannot focus on helping those around me every day. There will be moments that will allow me to help others and still let loose and live spontaneously. Helping others gives me a great feeling in my life and I am happy that I have such a great life purpose. I look forward to those moments because that is my purpose in life. And if I am living my purpose then I have nothing to worry about. Helping others and living in the moment can coincide in my life and create the best life purpose for myself.

Maggie credits the assignments and course topics to changing her purpose “just a tiny bit”. The most significant outcome was adding the focus on the present moment. She saw ways in which the content and learning from this course would inform the rest of her second year.

When next semester rolls around, I know that this class will be with me in the ways that I look at the world. The entire semester, we have been focusing on becoming a person living with purpose, but in so many ways. One strategy that I think I will be using is to be more in touch with what I feel on a day to day basis. Too many times have I had things to pile up because I keep pushing them away. This causes me major stress and inevitably, a crisis. Allowing myself to focus on the now and be in the present will really help me to live my purpose in my life to come.

Maggie had a clear sense of her purpose from the beginning of the class. Her commitment to help others was a strong motivation to her career choice and aligned with her personal passions. The added benefit of this course was in bringing the concept of purposeful living into her current experience so that she didn't have to wait until after graduation to live intentionally.

## **Choi**

Choi was an international student from Korea. She was not a traditional second-year student because she transferred to the university in January of last year. She was starting her second semester on campus when we met so her ability to answer questions about her first year was limited. Choi was very soft spoken and struggled with her English as it is not her first language. I quickly came to learn that the concepts of purpose and spirituality did not resonate with her both from a language perspective and as a cultural understanding. Choi had neither a religious nor spiritual identity that she claimed, nor did she have a spiritual background to draw upon in answering my questions. We did our best to adjust the initial interview and found common ground in which to discuss the essence of the research questions.

Choi was not new to university life as she attended a year of school in Korea and studied English in Canada. However, this was her first experience being taught strictly in English and in the context of the United States. Choi's goal in attending college was to gain a career as a clinical technician back in Korea and her reason to study in the U.S. was for personal growth and development. Choi experienced many academic transitions in her experience at the U including her adjustment to the U.S. college classroom setting. Despite the cultural differences, Choi did well in her classes during her first semester and spent a great deal of her time focusing on academics. Choi had a difficult time meeting people and making friends. She lived in a single room and had no campus involvement outside of her classes. She experienced homesickness many times and her mother served as a source of support and motivation for her to continue. She recognized that it took a

lot of personal strength and determination to study abroad, yet now that she was here, her attention was focused on making sure she didn't go home.

Choi decided to live in the SYE House to meet more people. She was drawn to the idea of connecting with others and being more involved on campus. She wanted to be more confident and outgoing during her second year so she looked to this experience to assist her. Choi had three primary expectations for her second year: to do well in her classes, meet more people, and talk to professors. By the end of the semester, Choi's social life had improved greatly with a new boyfriend and a group of his friends. This was the most meaningful aspect of her second year as it provided the social connection she was seeking. She enjoyed being with them because they were very social and friendly. She watched as they easily talked with different people and she learned ways in which she could overcome her shy tendencies. The relationship with this group came at the expense of her studying and goal of meeting a professor, her earlier expectations. Overall the semester was much busier than she expected with harder classes and more reading. However, she also felt that she was "lazy" this semester and she acknowledged that the cold weather was difficult for her. When we spoke at the end of the term, Choi was experiencing a lot of stress. She attributed this stress to the turbulent relationship with her boyfriend and their unhealthy patterns.

Choi was in the process of learning a great deal about herself as an international student. Being in a new country, she was learning how her Korean culture shaped her worldview in contrast to the U.S. She became aware of her own strengths, weaknesses, values, and needs. Overall, she had a positive view of herself and was proud that she was studying abroad and becoming stronger through this experience. On the other hand, she

was also struggling with her ability to build relationships with others and the challenges from being so isolated.

One of my social identities would be international student. I have started studying abroad ever since I finished my freshman year in Korea, and I well know how it feels like studying abroad without having friends and family close to me. I feel lonely, and I suffer from homesickness time to time. However, my unique social identity has taught me a lot about diverse cultures and many different experiences that I could not get to experience in Korea. Also, most importantly the ability to speak English has made me possible to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds and learn something from them. These all have affected who I am right now and the way I think about others different from me.

The saliency of Choi's identity as an international student was so strong that it impacted almost every aspect of her experience including her ability to communicate and create social connections, her sense of belonging, her academic adjustments and her overall wellbeing.

One cultural difference of significance for this study was that the concept of spirituality was unknown to Choi. She was not familiar with the word or concept saying that it was not something that was discussed in her country. Although spirituality was not an experienced phenomenon for her, she was able to relate to purpose when it was framed as creating a meaningful life. Through this lens, she was able to experience the class content in relation to how she examined her own beliefs and those of her home country. From her perspective, purpose in Korea centered on earning money to achieve happiness and as a means to provide for a good life.

In Korea, it's really important to go to a really good school because that's going to make you earn a lot of money in the end. And getting a good job. If I wanted to be a successful person, I had to go to a good school. I had to study because if I didn't study, I couldn't go to a good school and that's going to make me unhappy person. That's the way I learned in Korea, but...here I started learning a different concept of purpose in life from other American students.

The greatest shift for Choi was in how she re-examined the role that money played in creating a meaningful life. Two topics in the course, values and risk-taking, resonated with Choi as the most meaningful to her. She described how these topics changed her thinking compared to our first interview together.

When we first talked to each other, I said I value a lot about money. Money is happiness and everything. But, I don't know, this class change[d] me a lot. You know. I mean, I got to learn that there are many people out there who really think that money is not everything. There's more than that. For example, like people, relationship, and connection with another people, and helping others. That could be another purpose for them, and money is not everything. Yeah. So, that's for the Values. And Risk-Taking. I don't know. I just...I was just so afraid to be bold in some kind of circumstances that I am not familiar with. I learned if I do try to take risk[s], I can actually always learn something from that experience. If it's bad I can still learn something. The fact that I can learn something is real world. Trying new stuff and taking risk.

This realization that money does not have to be the sole source of her happiness allowed Choi to expand her sources of purpose. Choi described it this way: "I started caring more about myself. And...people like my family and friends. Because, money – you can always have money. But people cannot wait [for] you all the time. You cannot have good people forever."

Choi found the experience of taking the Living on Purpose course useful in that it introduced the concept of purpose and encouraged the consideration of her own happiness in the "process" of achieving her goals. Previously, she focused solely on her final goals and did not consider the experience leading up to the goal.

So before I used to set up a goal, my dream. And I didn't care if I felt unhappy or depressed in the way to just get the goal. I didn't care about the, how do I say? The process! During the process how would I feel. I got stressed, I didn't care, I was just looking for the goal. But I have realized that the only thing really I should care about is me being happy. Even during the process.

After this class, she now considered her own needs and happiness in the process of accomplishing her goals.

Choi's experience in the course was markedly different from other students because of her identity as an international student. The personal nature of the course content was not only significant to her learning but it also provided an opportunity for her to interact with domestic students in meaningful ways. Through the course, Choi was able to learn more about the mindset of American students and also to share her own culture and experiences.

It was really interesting learning how others think about purpose and life in general. It was really interesting because I haven't really had [a] chance to talk to people about, like, 'What is your purpose in life?' And it was interesting discussing with my group members every week.

It also provided opportunities for Choi to feel like others were listening to her and allowed her to share the deeper parts of herself that she was unable to do in her daily interactions or other courses.

I mean the fact that there's this class every week and I can talk about my own perspective and my own concept of purpose, and through these questions I could develop my view about purpose. Yeah. That was really huge difference with other class.

Each course topic seemed to be fairly novel for Choi. These were not subjects that she had previously spent time pondering so they had a more transformational impact compared to other students. For example, after watching a documentary on happiness, Choi again challenged her assumptions about the value of money.

I had only been thinking that money was taking a huge part of happiness in my life, and my purpose and goal of life was money too. But after watched this movie my view has completely changed, I used to judge people with lower income would be living in unhappy lives. But this movie made me think that I can make my life fulfilling and happy just by doing what I want and what I enjoy without much money. I thought I had to build and find my own happiness, but

actually the happiness has to come along with my life. I realized that I do not have to spend my time struggling to find my own happiness, for happiness should come naturally if I enjoy my life and do some outdoor activity.

By the end of the course, Choi was able to articulate a purpose statement in a way that integrated what she already knew to be true but expressed from the lens of purpose:

I had never thought of what my purpose in life was before I started taking this class, but when I think of it now, I was already aware of my purpose in life. I grew up listening to my mom telling me that I have to give back to people by using my talents. If I phrase my purpose in a sentence it would be “People are born to be sharing what they have and feel with others”. I think that sharing is one of very important element of happy life. If we start sharing from small things such as either happiness or sadness, I believe it would come to us with more happiness, and we do need someone to share something. So my purpose sentence reflects my perspectives on being appreciative to people around me.

By the end of the semester, Choi was exploring the concept of purpose and spirituality and came to see it as something that was “really profound” and a “new way of seeing the world.”

### **Kelly**

Kelly grew up in a small town and was home schooled along with her three sisters. Her family was very close and a source of great support for her. Kelly had a strong interest in literature which she immediately pursued as a possible academic major upon arriving to college. Having spent a summer in Germany when she was 15 year old, she was also interested in a major or minor in German language. Kelly was driven to achieve and this was evident in her motivation to do well in school. Her spiritual identity was one and the same with being Christian. She grew up living close to her church and attending church functions multiple times each week. Although she was interested in talking about spirituality, she acknowledged that it was something that she did not think about often in the context of her college experience.

The theme that stands out for Kelly in her first year was her new found inner-dependence. She moved away from home and a very tight family structure to living on her own in a single residence hall room. Kelly had some adjustments to the rigor of college life and having to study harder than she did in the past. One of the most meaningful experiences for Kelly was the emerging relationship she had with a past high school teacher. He became a mentor to her and supported her interest in literature. He and his wife started a scholarship for college students and Kelly was the first recipient. The money was certainly a relief but more importantly was the fact that someone believed in her and cared about her educational journey.

...just knowing that someone cares about me and my education is important to them even, it's really cool. That's meaningful to me. It's not just a scholarship, but it's this relationship too. And he's such a nice person. He just wants to help people.

Kelly recognized that she grew a lot during her first year. Most of that growth centered on being comfortable with herself and more confident in her ability to succeed. She learned to rely on herself not only to manage the logistics of college but also learning “to be okay with being me.” Kelly described this in her own words:

When I came to college, it was like I was just on my own, and I needed to figure out how to be...not happy, but just how to be okay on my own. I made a few friends that I could talk to them about things, but it was mostly just how to be okay with being me, and not caring what other people think and having to be under the social side of what people think of me. So yeah, I definitely grew a lot in how I see myself and my confidence kind of went up. But I think I still have a lot of growing to do.

As she transitioned into the second year, Kelly's primary concern was deciding what she was supposed to do with the rest of her life. Her need to achieve and plan ahead contributed to her worry and questioning of her college purpose.



Kelly began her second year with a sense of excitement and anticipation for the coming year. For her, the second year was about figuring out her life and what she was going to do in the future. She had a fairly good plan for her major but was still tentative in this choice. She was excited to learn and get deeper into her major. She hoped that during her second year she would get good grades, become more involved on campus, work a lot, and figure out her future path. She did not mention relationships or connecting with others as part of her goals.

Kelly's first semester of her second year was hectic. She worked two jobs and studied late into the evenings. She developed a stronger sense of self-efficacy as she felt proud that she "earned" good grades despite her initial academic failures. She was most proud of the moments where she adjusted her approach and kept trying until she experienced success. Kelly was always thinking of the future and her path to accomplishing her goals. Making plans and having a plan provided her comfort. She stated that this was a very selfish time in her life and she was "just so involved in myself." She assumed this was a temporary state and a necessity since the purpose of college was for her to focus on her education and her own life.

Kelly was home schooled in close association with her church so this was a strong influence in how she viewed her spirituality. She made minimal references to her belief in or relationship with God throughout the study. She believed that spirituality and religion could be separate constructs but she was unable to describe how this occurred. She acknowledged that spirituality was "an awkward concept for me to understand." She expressed an acceptance of diverse views of spirituality and acknowledged that it was different for everyone. She believed that spirituality was just part of being human and

part of that was how people worked together in a civilized way. Kelly did not have a conscious experience of her spirituality while in college.

Kelly began the semester with a set belief in a singular purpose that was actualized through her future career. Her college experience was focused on achieving success in her academics and gaining strategic experiences that contributed to her ultimate goals. At the start of the class, she did not think about purpose or spirituality stating: “I typically don’t think about it. Like I said, I kind of have a one track mind to succeed, and then I don’t think about the stuff on the side.” She registered for this class with the hope of increasing her self-awareness and figuring out her future purpose in life which closely aligned with her career. For Kelly, college was a means to achieving her career goals and therefore ultimate success.

Because of the class, Kelly was able to let go of her worry about “figuring out her purpose” and began to trust that it would emerge. Early in the semester Kelly made statements that her life purpose was probably to help people and make a difference for others. Yet these comments were never made as a definitive statement. Kelly seemed to be wrestling with letting go of her previously held purpose but the ambiguity of not knowing was stressful. This was evident in how Kelly approached the class with a checklist mentality expecting to have the answers by the end of the course. Midway through the semester, I saw Kelly on campus and she was visibly worried about not knowing her purpose at this point in the course. I reassured her that the course was more about exploring purpose rather than deciding on one purpose and she may not have an answer by the end of the semester. With this new paradigm, she was able to more easily accept the ambiguity and begin to question in a more authentic and vulnerable way. She

shifted away from definitive answers in the class discussions to asking more questions and sharing statements of uncertainty. Although Kelly didn't "find" her purpose, she was able to develop a framework in which to discover her life purpose:

Throughout the course of this semester I have been learning concepts and ideas to apply to my life so I can discover my life purpose. Understanding how to use these skills has been easy but actually identifying my purpose has been a challenge...I now have the tools to live a purposeful and meaningful life. And that is what I intend to do."

During the course, Kelly eventually came to question aspects of her core identity. She worried that she was too selfish and wouldn't be able to change this part of herself. She wrestled with the reality that changing a part of her core identity, even if it was negative, resulted in uncertainty. The uncertainty of not knowing her core self provoked a sense of fear of the unknown:

I currently do not act in love in everything I do. I know I am selfish and I would like to learn how to not have that be my "default setting." It is hard to change. It is a challenge to change who you are because then you don't feel like you are you anymore! It's challenging to grasp at something you want to achieve, but possibly never truly will. What I can do each day so that I live a life more in sync with my vision is to change the way I act slowly over time so I do not feel as though I am changing myself.

Kelly's experience illustrated the fragile nature of the emerging self. The fear of letting go of the known to make room for the unknown was a scary prospect. By the end of the course, Kelly was able to acknowledge that ultimately she needed to love herself for who she was and not who others wanted her to be.

The personal barriers and obstacles to me becoming more self-compassionate are learning how to forgive myself, learning how to accept my failures, and learning how to love myself for who I am and not who society expects me to be. These are all obstacles I believe I can overcome with practice and patience.

She came to realize that part of forgiving herself is to accept the failures and to trust in the process.

And from this semester, I just learned that I am going to fail a lot in my life but as long as I keep getting back up, those failures just kind of go away. I'm going to keep growing. I'm mean, I'm only 19 right now so everything will be ok in the end.

The concept of living purpose daily and in the present moment was just emerging for Kelly by the end of the class.

As a result of taking this course, I have been influenced to take action to live purposefully. In the short-term I am going to remember to focus on my strengths rather than my weaknesses, be open to vulnerability, be grateful for the people and experiences I have had in my life, and take time to reflect on the positive and negative experiences I have had. I also intend to live on purpose in my long-term future. The main thing I will do is focus on achieving my educational and career goals. After I reach my goals, I would like to stop focusing on myself and instead focus on helping others. I want to make a difference in the world because I have the ability to. Another thing that I intend to do is to learn how to be free, relax, and pause to enjoy life in the moment.

Kelly's experience of spirituality and purpose was driven by her future orientation. This paradigm allowed her to accept college as a "selfish" time and choose experiences that directly supported her goals. Her tentative view that "helping people" was her life purpose stood in conflict with how she was experiencing college therefore casting doubt on this previous notion. Through the Living on Purpose course, she created a purpose framework that allowed her to reconsider the possibilities of her purpose while still appealing to her preference for structure.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the story of each student in this study to illustrate the unique ways in which they experienced their spirituality and sense of purpose during their second year of college. Students came from different backgrounds and had different college experiences. Some experienced spirituality as a salient dimension of their lives, while others struggled to understand how it related. Largely supported by this class, all

of the students sought to better understand their purpose though they experienced different levels of clarity and motivation in this search. In the following chapter, I describe the collective themes that emerged from these student stories.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings: Collective Themes**

As I journeyed with students over the course of the study, the ways in which they experienced their spirituality and how it unfolded within their college experience was unique for each student. I discovered that understanding and describing spirituality is challenging as it weaves in and out of students' awareness. In the interviews, some students struggled to articulate their experiences and thoughts related to their spirituality, providing tentative statements or expressions of uncertainty that indicated they were still forming these ideas or had yet to articulate these concepts. My endeavor to understand how students "experience" spirituality attempted to open up how spirituality was part of their lives although they had varying levels of consciousness of the experience and language in which to describe it. The differentiation between purpose, meaning and connectedness was difficult to discern at times as these themes wove together to form the unique story of students' spirituality. Although students did not always connect these concepts directly to spirituality, their ability to describe experiences and share insight provided understanding of their relationship to the elements of an expanded spirituality.

In this chapter, I address the collective themes that emerged relating to how students conceptualized spirituality, experienced their spirituality, and their involvement in a course designed to explore life purpose during their second year.

### **Conceptualizing Spirituality**

#### **Defining Spirituality**

Students' individual definitions of spirituality were provided in the previous chapter. Collectively, broad themes in how students constructed spirituality emerged

although their individual views and experiences varied. The following section highlights three themes regarding how students' defined spirituality including the individualized meaning of spirituality, spirituality in relation to religion, and past influences that shaped the ways in which students described their spirituality.

**Individualized meaning.** Each of the 11 students expressed their own unique definition of spirituality which was congruent with the theoretical framework outlined for this study as well as supported by previous research (Estanek, 2006, Zabriskie, 2005, Zinnbauer, et al., 1997). Students' ability to articulate their definition of spirituality varied with phrases such as "I don't know" or "I'm not sure" as common statements during the interview responses. For some, there seemed to be a tentativeness that perhaps mirrored the forming of their definition or the emerging of their consciousness of spirituality. The movement of forming and emerging definitions was expected given the abstract nature of spirituality and the personal growth occurring for students at this time in their life. Ultimately, all of the students (with the exception of the international student) were able to articulate a definition or description of spirituality that reflected their unique life experiences.

In addition to students' own individualized meanings of spirituality, there was also a shared belief that spirituality as a construct was individualized. This belief was embedded in an acceptance of diverse spiritual views and non-judgment as to whether there was a right or wrong way to believe. For some students, a pluralistic paradigm was pivotal to their stated definition of spirituality which embraced multiple forms of spiritual expression and diverse faiths. Amanda defined her belief by describing one "spiritual force" that showed itself in multiple ways:

I think that there's a spiritual force, but that it appears to people in different ways. It doesn't limit to just one faith. I think there's just multiple faiths that all come from a spiritual, universal kind of thing. ...but I think in my life I think spirituality isn't so much tied to one figure or one being, as it is to believing in many multiple aspects of different faiths. You don't have to tie yourself down to one so to speak.

Students also shared the value of personal freedom to express religious views. For Juan, diversity and spirituality was based on the freedom to express individual beliefs. He stated, "I feel it's fine if people don't have religion or don't believe in God. They can do whatever [they] want." The acceptance of diverse and individualized views of spirituality created a sense of ownership and accountability for students to determine their own meaning rather than accept an existing definition. This was evident in Kelly's experience as she was still figuring out her personal definition of spirituality. When asked to define it for herself, she stated: "I don't know, I can't say, but everyone is different in what they believe in, so I don't know what I think yet. I need to learn about it more." Kelly's conceptualization that individuals have different ways in which they experience spirituality led to a responsibility for her to create her own definition.

**Relationship to religion.** The relationship between spirituality and religion was acknowledged in each of the interviews either as a starting point to describe their own spiritual journey such as, "I was raised being Roman Catholic" or as a means in which to differentiate their definition such as, "I would say that I'm spiritual but not religious." At times students described the relationship between spirituality and religion as synonymous stating, "when I think of spirituality, I think of religion," as separate but connected, "religion and spirituality [are] linked," or as independent of each other, "I think that it's a clear difference between spirituality and religion." Students' responses throughout the study often reflected the framework in which they approached this relationship. This



occurred most strongly for those students who associated religion and spirituality as synonymous as they described their experience of spirituality from the paradigm of religious beliefs and practices. This arose not only for the students who identified with a religious tradition but also for those who did not affiliate with a religion. The two students who did not have a formal religious membership struggled to describe their experiences of spirituality because of how they associated spirituality as religion. Since the two concepts were so closely coupled in their mind, the word spirituality provided a barrier to responding to the interview questions. For these students, I asked them to provide alternative language that captured the essence of the conceptual framework of this study in order to continue with the interviews. Over the course of the study and as students were able to expound on their definition, most students differentiated spirituality as a more private, personal or internal construct than religion.

**Past influences.** Past experiences played a role in shaping the foundation in which students perceived and experienced spirituality. Students shared influences from their past that affected how they constructed their definition of spirituality including family and exposure to diversity.

**Family.** The ways in which spirituality was expressed in the context of students' family played a strong role in how they constructed their definition of spirituality. For some, it laid a foundation in which they built their spiritual definitions. Michelle, who was raised in a specific religious tradition, was able to directly identify the influence this upbringing had on her spiritual identity stating:

I was raised Religious Science religion. It's a really small kind of religion and they actually are merged with Unity, if you've heard of that. So that's how I was raised and that kind of has helped shaped my beliefs."

Kiab credits her family for starting her spiritual journey but takes pride in how she has developed it for herself, “The source of my spirituality value comes from my family’s influence and my own influence because it was them who introduced me to God, but myself who went on my own way to find Him.”

For others, their current spirituality was in reaction to their family beliefs.

Amanda’s spirituality emerged from her negative reactions to extended family and how they expressed their beliefs in relation to their religion.

My Dad’s family was very religious, very Catholic, and they would come to family events, and then certain topics would come up, and they would kind of, not so much degrade but kind of downplay, just be disrespectful to groups of people. I really didn’t like that. I really did not appreciate when that would come up or when that would happen. And I think that kind of pulled me further away from connecting with just one faith or just being one denomination, really pulled me away from being strictly Roman Catholic.

For Josh, his family played less of a direct role but the absence of a religious tradition influenced his paradigm as well:

I guess it’s been a part of me that I ignored for about 18 years of my life. I was never brought up with any sort of religion or guidance in this way. My world view was very focused on science, numbers and analysis before I came to college.

Josh became more spiritual once he came to college but his focus on science continued to shape his approach to his spiritual development.

*Exposure to diversity.* The amount of exposure students had to diversity while they were growing up had an effect on their conceptualization of spirituality. Jose’s upbringing was filled with international experiences that shaped his openness to diverse spiritual perspectives. His mother was born outside of the U.S. and he traveled internationally during his youth. He also attended a boarding school that had a high

number of international students. These experiences created not only an openness to others but also a curiosity and desire to explore differences.

In my high school there [were] always international students. I was trying to practice my languages with them and just hang out because it's really cool. Like you don't know what you're going to get with [local] students but seeing what people in South Korea do and stuff - the whole international thing. I'd say it's like a mix between like I was pretty good at picking up languages, so I had that. Hanging out with international students, studying abroad and, you know, I think that was about it.

Amanda was exposed to diversity by moving to new locations while she was growing up. This allowed her to meet different types of people and experience different views of spirituality.

I moved around a lot. I think we moved every year of my life until I was 15. So you meet a lot of different people. You have a lot of experiences with different people. I didn't have as great of experience when [spirituality] was like exclusionary. I think too much of the time at different phases they exclude a specific portion of the population that has just as much right as anyone else to be a part of it, but I don't know. I didn't like the whole exclusionary idea. So, I thought there was some truth in everything.

Maggie's exposure to diversity came from a science teacher who challenged her to think about evolution in relation to her religious beliefs. After hearing his perspective and feeling pushed to adopt his views, Maggie reacted by standing stronger in her own beliefs but accepting that multiple views exist as part of her spiritual framework.

Our teacher he was a Catholic, but he is now atheist, so he had that whole, "I believed in God but this is my way of thinking now, and it's almost should be your way of thinking as well." Sort of made me think that, you know, everyone has their own beliefs, but I still believe in my own spirituality and my own faith, and I had a different way of looking at evolution and religion and how they could have been connected for myself.

Exposure to diversity while growing up positively influenced students' experience of spirituality. The theme of experiencing difference is explored further in relation to how students experienced their spiritual development during their college experience.

## **Connectedness**

Connectedness was at the core of how students conceptualized spirituality although not clearly articulated as such. Rather, it was the underlying concept that spoke to their relationship to something larger and provoked the question as to why they were here in the world and what gave their life meaning. Students hinted at connectedness through statements of purpose that were tied to making an impact in the world.

The concept of connectedness emerged at two levels. At the macro level, it was embedded in students' conceptualization of spirituality through a belief in the connection to other humans, energy or a common source. It also emerged at a micro level, grounded in students' sense of belonging and feeling connected in their immediate college context. In the following section, I will describe students' conceptualization of connectedness at the macro-level as universal connectedness and then continue with their desires and experiences of connectedness through a sense of belonging.

**Universal connectedness.** Students expressed a connection to something outside of themselves as part of their spirituality. They described their belief in connectedness as a responsibility to humankind and the world or as a link to a universal source or shared energy. The conceptualization of connectedness existed separate from or in addition to a belief in god.

Students described ways in which connectedness served as a guiding philosophy for how they lived their daily lives or as a moral compass providing the foundation for their expressed values. It also informed their sense of purpose in that it provided meaning to their future career path or overall reason for being.

*Connectedness to humankind.* Students described a connection to fellow humans and the world that shaped their outlook on life. Michelle positioned this connection as central to a worthy life, “I believe that person-to-person relationships are the most important part of the human experience and the central element of a meaningful life.” Maggie described her belief in a human connection through science by stating, “we’re all one family if you want to say. I mean, having those connections not just like gender or race or religion, but also having that genetic connection as well.” She continued to describe scientific evidence that suggested that most of the world is genetically linked. Similarly, Kelly believed that “the world has one race--the human race. And it is my duty to care for and help the people I share this planet with.” For these two students, their belief in human connectedness was shaped by objective reasoning grounded in science and logic. These students actualized their belief in how they lived their daily lives. For Kelly it was in her duty to care and help others. For Maggie, it guided how she treated people on a daily basis.

I mean I think we’re always connected, this entire world and having that belief with me at all times and having to do good to others and good will come back to you. Having that belief always and not being like I want to say rude [things] or being unchivalrous to people is not what I want to do. I’m always very kind and courteous to people, and that’s what my belief is because if you’re going to be nice to everyone, then you shouldn’t have any problems with anyone.

Students’ belief in the connectedness of humankind stood on its own as a philosophy or in harmony with the belief in a higher power.

*Connectedness to a common source.* Connectedness for some students was expressed as a larger unifying source or shared energy. This concept was more difficult for students to describe as it was fairly abstract and they seemed to be still forming their

beliefs or ability to articulate their perspective. Amanda described her belief in connectedness as coming from the same source.

We are all a part of the same universal being, I guess. We're all from the same energies, I don't know. It's hard to explain. So I think that it kind of gives you common ground with every person you meet as long as you can maybe reach some understanding of where you're both coming at, which perspective you're coming from in the world. There's different ways you perceive that universal being and universal energy.

Similarly, Josh described and experienced it as a feeling of connectedness

I guess I would define it personally as just sort of an inner peace and feeling of your unity with everything. There's really no way to describe it well in words. It just sort of is a feeling of understanding without actually knowing. I don't know, it's something [that] since I've experienced personally, I've sort of been striving for and wanting to develop.

As the semester progressed and Josh was immersed in his science courses, he was able to clearly articulate this connectedness and how it provided a framework in which to position his existence.

Learning how the universe works has always been a really inspiring and humbling way of putting myself in perspective of the big picture. While admittedly at times looking at this big picture leads to a bit of apathy and rejection of things like consumerism and politics as trivial, it also feels amazing to see yourself in the whole as objectively as possible. I often come to the conclusion that I don't matter, nothing matters, and that's fine. I really feel the most content when I can be at peace with the idea that I don't matter. I feel a comfort in the undeniable fact (in my mind at least) that none of us are living in the universe, we literally are the universe. It makes me happy to be alive, to help people, to care for the planet, and to be a part of the universe just as each cell in my body is a part of me.

For both of these students, their perspective of connectedness gives them ways in which to live out their spirituality as either a guiding principle in which to interact with others or as a feeling that is linked to an inner peace.

Students struggled with knowing how to think about and define this aspect of their spirituality. During the interviews, students hesitated with the questions that related

to connectedness including asking for clarification, long pauses as they gathered their thoughts or uncertainty reflected by tentative statements such as “I don’t know”, “sort of”, or simply “I don’t know how to answer that question”. Eventually, all students were able to describe their currently held beliefs but it was evident that for most students it was a concept that was still forming. Some students were able to develop and articulate their views more clearly as the semester progressed, as was the case for Josh. Using reflective writings as data in addition to the in-person interviews provided a different form of expression for students which often elicited more thoughtful and clearly stated expressions of their beliefs and experiences.

**Sense of belonging.** Connectedness at the micro-level emerged as a sense of belonging. Students expressed the value, desire, and feelings associated with a sense of belonging in their daily life. As students described their first year on campus, they inevitably talked about their experiences relating to a sense of connectedness with others. A number of the students chose to live in the SYE House in an effort to make stronger connections to others or as Josh states it, “to get more of a full sense of community here.” For some, living in the SYE House was a second chance to make the connections that did not occur for them during their first year. Laurie described the disappointment from her first year and why she chose the SYE House for her second year.

I didn’t like where I ended up being before. It just wasn’t a place for me, like I didn’t get a sense of community where I was living at all. There’s a few people that were really close that I got to know, but past that I just didn’t know them, and I really wanted to find a new place. I could just tell by reading the description that [the SYE House] was going to be students who were like me and interested in making connections, that were looking for something more. For me, I wanted other people who were feeling the same amount of investment and also were looking for the same things which I think is hard to find at bigger universities sometimes, and I wanted another small group to be with that had the same ideals as me.

Laurie identified the need to connect to other students as an important element of her college experience. Although she did experience community in the SYE House, her deeper sense of belonging came from her sorority sisters.

Being with my sorority and just the fact that I could feel connected to them I guess was helpful. I started to feel more balance in my life again once I had more friendships. I was in a place I can start thinking about other things more. That I wasn't so much focused in the now but like in the "if" and in the "when" in a different [way], like "where am I going?" sort of sense. I didn't have to focus on more of a short term goal. I could start thinking about "what might happen after my life" goals, I guess if that makes sense.

A sense of belonging with others allowed Laurie to feel more balanced overall and allowed her to stop focusing her attention on the immediate need of building relationships and begin to experience different questions to ponder about her life. Similarly, Samantha described the importance of a sense of community to serve as a foundation to help her grow as a person.

I think you need a strong base to help you. And now, I have twenty two sisters or whatever to help me figure out what I'm really passionate about and to inspire me and whatnot. And I think that helps a lot.

Students' need for connectedness through a sense of belonging was evident in how they described the most meaningful moments of their college experience. Nine of the students identified a connection with another as the most meaningful moment from their first year. Students spoke of finding authentic friendships with one person or from membership in a group. These relationships met an important need for students and provided meaning in that they offered an ultimate sense of belonging during the major transition to college.

### **Meaning**

Spirituality as meaning-making did not arise as an independent theme as much as it informed the other themes of the study. The meaning that students attributed to their



lived experiences informed, reflected, or challenged their identity, values or elements of spirituality. As described previously, meaningful moments that most students identified in their first year centered on ways in which they experienced a sense of connection to others. Three students referred to their involvement in civic activities such as voting or community service as meaningful in that it connected them to something larger than themselves.

The types of events that students identified as meaningful in their second year shifted slightly. Three of the students spoke of relationships as the most significant while six of the students identified their personal growth as the most meaningful. Students described the overall change they observed in themselves, the pride in getting through a tough situation or the new skills they learned in balancing life and school. Meaningful moments in the second year focused more heavily on the tangible ways in which they experienced personal growth and the increased self-efficacy that resulted.

The ways in which students identified and described meaningful moments in their college experience shed light on their identity, values or dimensions of their spirituality. For some, their responses uncovered or reinforced elements of students' spirituality that they did not consciously associate. For example, meaningful moments that were anchored in experiencing positive relationships reflected the value of connectedness that brought purpose to their lives. For some students, their meaningful moments were opportunities that allowed them to live out their values or purpose. Students also attributed great meaning to their personal growth that contributed to their evolving identity formation. How students identified and described meaningful moments provided insight into salient aspects of their core self and spirituality.

## **Conceptualizing Purpose**

The design of this study was structured in such a way that privileged purpose as a dominant theme. Students were enrolled in a course exploring the topic of purpose so many of the assignments and reflective writings used for data sources uncovered rich conceptualizations and experiences that continued to shift and evolve throughout the course of this study. Students' sense of purpose was shaped by their experience in the course and learning about dimensions of purpose and other ways of being. It also illuminated their existing thoughts and beliefs regarding purpose that had previously gone unexamined. In this section, I explore purpose in greater detail highlighting the relationship between purpose and spirituality and the themes that emerged as students described their conceptualization of purpose.

**Relationship to spirituality.** The conceptual framework for this study embeds purpose as a dimension of spirituality. Students viewed the relationship between spirituality and purpose with varying degrees of interdependence. In the following section, I outline how students describe the relationship between spirituality and purpose in four ways: 1) as distinct concepts that don't inform each other, 2) as highly interdependent concepts, 3) spirituality as a tool to guide purpose, and 4) spirituality as a factor of wellbeing that influences purpose.

***Distinct concepts.*** For Samantha, Kelly, and Choi, there was no relationship between spirituality and purpose. They each acknowledged that spirituality could be a source of one's purpose but in their own experiences they were not connected. The spirituality of these students was not a salient identity in their lives so by separating the two concepts they were able to engage in the exploration of purpose free from a spiritual connection. Samantha demonstrated this distinction as follows:

Meaning and purpose...you have to work at it. I feel like more with spirituality – to me it almost seems like you're made to do something and that's what you're going to do. Whereas I feel like meaning and purpose is more like making your own decisions, finding your own purpose - not having one laid out for you.

For Samantha, her purpose was a process that was dependent on one's individual decisions and life choices. She described an underlying belief in choice and control in discovering and determining the outcome.

***Interdependent.*** For some students, purpose and spirituality were highly interdependent with the source of their purpose coming from God or a higher power outside of themselves. These students described their purpose as being a definitive plan determined by God. Kiab described how her religious beliefs formed her conceptualization of purpose and how that in turn shapes how she interacts with the world:

Being a Christian has heavily influenced my sense of purpose. I believe that what my purpose in life is what God has set for me; a path predetermined, but something that I must find for myself and in His name. When I finally realized this, I started to look at things differently. I became more open-minded and, in my opinion, more free and open just in general. I'm not as straight-laced as I used to be, or the super-introvert and the anti-social. Now, I'm just me, still trying to find the purpose God has given me.

Maggie also described a purpose bestowed by God and one in which He will reveal at a given time. She described this as follows:

I think that God knows what my purpose is. And I think that He's going to slowly let me in on that secret and tell me – you know – and open the doors that I need to go through to get to my purpose [which] I believe is to be in the moment and to help others. Right now it looks like maybe those doors aren't opening. I know that He will let me go through into the path that I'm supposed to be going into.

For both Kiab and Maggie, their belief in God determining, holding, and revealing their purpose when the time was right allowed them to let go, be open and trust that it will happen.

***Spirituality as a guide.*** Suzie, Laurie, Michelle, and Amanda spoke of spirituality as an ethical guide that therefore influenced one's purpose. Suzie believed that spirituality was a tool used "to help you find your way." Laurie held similar beliefs:

I feel that your spirituality can help you find your purpose because if your purpose is doing things - living your life in ways that benefit others or helping you be satisfied and feeling that you've done something meaningful with your life. A lot of people find that through their spirituality, just connecting with things that they know to be true or positive. I just feel that their spirituality can influence them and help them find their purpose by searching for things that they are passionate about.

Michelle described spirituality as a guidepost in which to live a "good life" which in turn related to living a life of purpose. Amanda described her related thoughts stressing values as the link:

Our spirituality kind of shapes our values and it shapes who we are as people. And I think that in turn would affect your purpose. I don't see...necessarily my spirituality affecting directly what my purpose is. I guess I see it more as affecting me and then that in turn affecting my purpose. I guess I would more say it's your sense of purpose. I wouldn't necessarily say that it comes from a higher power. I think it comes from you. I think you make your decisions and it's your choice.

The relationship here between spirituality and purpose is one of interdependence in that they inform and benefit the other. Spirituality provides the moral framework in which to guide one's purpose and living a purpose filled life that benefits others aligns with spirituality and the fundamental beliefs of many religious traditions.

***Spirituality as wellbeing.*** For Josh and Juan, spirituality was a factor of their overall wellbeing that ultimately influenced their purpose. Josh saw the two as highly interdependent as a cause and effect relationship. He formed this belief based on the ways in which he experienced his spirituality during his first year in college: "I would say that the more healthy I felt spiritually the more confident I felt in my purpose, so that

must go hand in hand. Having a stronger sense of spirituality brings a calmness about purpose.” Both Josh and Juan viewed spirituality as an internal resource in which to support purpose. Juan described his views on the distinction between spirituality and purpose and the ways in which spirituality affected purpose:

I would say purpose is more of the doing, like making the difference or whatever. But then spirituality fits in with making sure that you’re taken care of. I feel like spirituality has to do with yourself. I feel like purpose kind of has that part in it because you have to make sure you’re doing well in order to do whatever you want to do.

For both of these students, spirituality was a foundational building block which allowed purpose to be discovered and lived out.

**Sources and constructs of purpose.** Similarly to spirituality, purpose was conceptualized as a highly individualized concept. This was a common theme in how students described their understanding of purpose and was evident in how they each expressed their sense of purpose and the sources from which purpose derived and was discovered. Purpose originated from two sources: as an external source, determined outside of themselves to find or figure out; or as an internal source, discovered through self-awareness or created by personal choice. Students believed that they would discover their purpose through life experiences that would shed light on their reason for being or by waiting for it to be revealed at some future point when the time was right. For many students, the source of purpose aligned with how they viewed its connection to spirituality which I outlined previously. For students with a strong overlap between religion and spirituality, the sources of spirituality related to their religious beliefs and practices. For students who experienced the relationship between the two as distinct, purpose emerged from self-understanding, life experiences or self-determination.

The ways in which students described their conceptualization of purpose demonstrates how these themes are intertwined and offers insight into the individualization, complexity, and interconnectedness of this concept. Maggie expressed her belief in the individuality of purpose and proceeded to share her unique conceptualization of purpose.

Everyone has his or her idea about purpose and no one can say that it isn't right. For each and every one of us, purpose is in the eye of the beholder. For me, purpose is something that you were born with and you discover through living out your life. You reach the goal of your purpose by finding what has meaning in your life and choosing that path. And sometimes, that view can change. My purpose has changed only slightly. I still want to help others in my everyday life, but I also want to live in the moment and be spontaneous. I feel that both of these purposes can become one and I can live to the full potential of both. With my past shaping who I am today and giving me the purpose of my life, and new promises that I make to myself, my purpose will be something attainable in my life.

As Maggie described her paradigm on purpose, she revealed the source of her purpose as predetermined outside of herself and that it is discovered through the process of living her life. Her description of purpose aligned in many ways with the conceptual framework of spirituality for this study. Maggie recognized the malleability of purpose yet described it as something attainable. She conceptualized both past and future shaping how purpose is formed and experienced. Although she had not experienced a great change in her specific purpose, she recognized that as she gained more life experience her views related to purpose may change.

For Michelle, purpose resided within and emerged from an understanding of one's identity. The function of a clear purpose was to serve as a guide towards meaningful experiences and a fulfilling life.

I consider purpose to be a sort of internal compass. It is a strong pull towards what an individual will find deep meaning and satisfaction in. For one to explore their purpose, they could start by refining their sense of identity in order to figure out where they want to go and what they want to do moving forward.

The source of Michelle's purpose was from her internal self and discovering one's purpose was through a greater self-awareness. Michelle believed that this could be achieved through spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation that draw one into themselves to evoke clarity and illuminate knowledge.

Josh's conceptualization of purpose consisted of a flexible and changing construct with the locus of control residing within him. As described in the previous chapter, Josh defined purpose as the following:

I've come to accept that each person's purpose is a subjective matter. My purpose could involve anything from firefighting to stock trading and beyond. What my purpose becomes is completely up to me. Therefore, it's also free to change. In my opinion, purpose is best to think of as a fluid state. It is an aspect of someone that constantly changes with age and experience. Sometimes it changes in small increments and in other times of great growth in large leaps.

Josh believed he was solely responsible for creating his purpose. He believed that he had a purpose but that was up to him in how that was discovered, experienced, and revised. His view of purpose as fluid and changing provided a framework in which he could revise his purpose as he experienced life.

The collective themes outlined in this section provide insight into the ways in which students perceived and described the phenomenon of spirituality. The themes also demonstrate the independence and interdependence of meaning, purpose and connectedness as spiritual elements. In the next section, I will address the ways in which students experienced their spirituality during their second year of college.

## **Experiencing Spirituality**

The question of “experiencing” meaning, purpose and connectedness attempted to open up how students’ spirituality is part of their actualized identity, worldview, and their day-to-day experience. It asked students to articulate the ways in which they exist in the world and the meaning they attributed to these actions. This was a challenging task and not a conscious experience for all of the students. Ways in which students framed spirituality influenced their ability to articulate their experience with spirituality. For those who associated spirituality with a tangible practice or belief, they were able to express concrete ways in which they did or did not experience spirituality. For others, spirituality was not a mindful phenomenon that was present in their college experience either because they did not think about it or because they didn’t associate their experiences as spiritual. In the following section, I provide the themes that emerged from the collective analysis that reflect the ways in which students experienced spirituality.

### **Consciousness of Spirituality**

The awareness of spirituality and purpose in the lives of second-year students varied. All of the students stated that their personal interest in exploring life purpose led them to register for the Living on Purpose course. As expected, students’ awareness of purpose increased during the semester due to their participation with the course. However, this was not always the case with their consciousness of spirituality. Kelly illustrates this in that she simply did not think about nor value the larger questions of life that would be deemed spiritual.

I guess you could sit down with yourself and figure it out, you know, just be philosophical, think about things. But I don’t do that. I never really thought “what am I here for?” I just figure I am here. I’ve got to do something about it while I am.



Thinking back to her first year, she had a similar response regarding her purpose as she described her awareness as being “neutral”. She reflected:

I don't ever remember feeling like I had a purpose last year. It was just to get done with my classes and get the credits. I never felt like I had a purpose in life here. And then on the flip side, there was no lack of purpose. I think it was very neutral.

Kelly's focus was to succeed in school and not to “think about the stuff on the side”.

Samantha began the semester with a similarly neutral experience as she described her spirituality as just being there.

“To be honest, I think [meaning and purpose] is just there, unless you specifically think about it. I don't. I mean it just kind of is there. When things get tough I think about what I have and what means a lot to me and that it's still there. And then it becomes pretty meaningful.”

By the end of the semester, Samantha continued to disassociate with the word spirituality stating that she did not think about it during her second year. However, her views on purpose shifted from “just kind of is there” to being “essential to living life”. Samantha's experience was similar to Amanda and Juan who each stated they did not think about their spirituality during their second year while simultaneously engaged in a course addressing life purpose. Their conceptualization of purpose existed separately from their definition of spirituality. They were also able to answer interview questions with thoughtful insight and rich examples that reflected ways in which they experienced meaning, purpose, and connectedness although they did not associate the concepts with spirituality. This disconnect points to the limitations of the language of spirituality as a phenomenon that students consciously experience or name.

Laurie, who initially associated her spirituality strongly with her religion, found it easier to articulate how she experienced her spirituality but still found it to be separate

from her college experience. She expressed that her spirituality during her first year was “usually really distant.” Laurie felt this distance because she did not attend church during her freshmen year although she expressed a desire to do so. Without someone to accompany her or the feeling of an established church community, it was challenging for her to regularly attend a service. Laurie struggled with this distance stating that “I’ve lost touch with it which makes me really sad.” Suzie’s response was similar in that her ability to experience spirituality was linked to going to church. When asked if she thought about her spirituality during her second year, she responded “Not really. Maybe even less than before. I don’t know whether it’s [because] I didn’t go to church as often, or...I just didn’t have a lot of down time.” The time pressures Suzie described emerged as a theme for most students and will be explored further in the following section.

Although the degree to which students were conscious of their spirituality and ways in which it wove into their college experience varied, nearly all of the students could speak of moments when they questioned their purpose, specifically during times of struggle. Michelle, Suzie, and Maggie questioned their purpose for being in college and overall life direction as they struggled with their coursework. As strong students in high school, the academic adjustment coming to college and not excelling in their classes triggered doubts about their major path and their ability to succeed in college. For Laurie, Suzie, Samantha, and Amanda, their struggle stemmed from negotiating relationships and finding community. Questions of belonging and college fit arose as they searched for a sense of belonging on campus. Josh and Choi experienced personal struggles transitioning to college that evoked doubt about their chosen path and sense of

purpose. So although the consciousness and connection to spirituality may not be evident to students, their experiences reflect a relationship to an expanded spirituality.

### **Barriers to Experiencing Spirituality**

One of the strongest themes that emerged from students' stories over the course of the semester was the busyness of college and how this served as a barrier to experiencing spirituality. Students expressed that they did not have enough time to think about their purpose or spirituality. One student withdrew from the study and the course citing that although she would love to explore her life purpose, she had too many required courses to focus on and could not give this topic the proper attention. Students perceived college life as being filled with tasks, requirements, and deadlines that were more pressing. Eight of the 11 students spoke directly and repeatedly about the pressures of college life and lacking time to explore their spirituality. Laurie reflected on her first year and how she experienced purpose:

I don't think I felt [purpose] during the school year. I don't think I took the time to reflect on myself. I was too busy pushing forward with my life thinking like almost a tunnel vision to reflect purpose. I think I need to take a breather and reflect on where I'm going. I need to. I have to take a breath, but I didn't do that last year. I just kept focusing on: what was next, what is next, how do I keep up, how do I not fall behind, was more so my thing. I never took the chance to see why, ask myself why am I here. It was just...where am I going next?

Laurie found that she was able to experience a sense of purpose after her first year was over and she had time to reflect upon the previous year: "I think it was definitely the summer when I just came back to help out the college for a day. I realized at that point I thought, 'I really do have an impact here'." It was only after Laurie was home for the summer and away from her college experience that she was able to identify a sense of

purpose. Suzie also focused on the future and what was next. She found that because of this continued pattern, she became out of touch with her core self:

I would say like school just gets really overwhelming, so then that goes to the forefront, and then...I put myself on the back burner kind of. I kind of forget about myself and I'm so focused on, you know, the next due date, the next thing. The "next" kind of like gets in the way and everything else is like lost, until I realize. Then I'm like, "Oh. I haven't had time for myself."

Suzie's experience illustrates the separation between her "self" and her college experience. Perhaps not unrelated, Suzie found school to be overwhelming and struggled with persevering:

Sometimes I just...want to give up. Like, sometimes you want to give up 6 times a day but, you just gotta remember that is not an option and you have to...it'll be worth it in the end. This one stupid test now will help you get to where you want. You just have to do it.

Prior to college, Suzie used to spend time driving as an opportunity to think and reflect. Now that she was living on campus with no car and surrounded by "tons and tons of people", she realized the "disconnect" that was being perpetuated in her life.

Similarly, other students expressed these concerns. Kelly, who did not think about spirituality, acknowledged that she needed to focus on the things she had to do in college and eventually she would think about purpose once she graduated.

I think it's mostly clouded by what I need to get done on a daily basis, and what I'm striving to be. Right now it's like there's so much that I have to do before I realize what is my purpose, so I don't think about it usually.

The lack of time affected students in how they came to define and perceive their overall purpose. Students shifted their conceptualization away from seeking a definitive purpose towards a philosophy of letting go and allowing purpose to emerge. Josh experienced this shift and stated "I'm...too tired to worry about it right now. Now I just have to go

day-by-day.” The demands of college life did not provide the conditions for students to reflect on their own lives and served as a barrier to experiencing their spirituality.

### **Wellbeing and Spirituality**

The lack of time for students’ spirituality also had an impact on their overall wellbeing. Michelle began her second year with a strong spirituality that was a source of meaning, connectedness, and inner calm. However, by the end of the semester Michelle felt that her day-to-day life was not meaningful as it focused on getting through the requirements of college: “All I do right now is go to school and then study. It’s not meaningful.” In the past, her spiritual practices helped her deal with the pressures of school and her anxiety that she continually strived to manage.

I use it to like help my college experience because academically I get anxiety. I’ll like freak out, but then I’ll have to kind of be spiritual for a little bit to tell my brain not to explode, I guess. It’s a brain non-exploding mechanism.

Michelle’s spirituality was the way in which she practiced self-care and kept herself grounded in general. At the end of the semester, Michelle was visibly stressed as she described how she was not getting enough sleep, was worried about her finals, and didn’t have enough time to do everything she needed to do. She recognized that she was not paying attention to her spirituality and that things would be better if she did spend more time on this. Unfortunately this was the cycle Michelle was caught in, having no time to focus on her spirituality which then caused her to experience more anxiety. This was also the case for Josh who acknowledged that he did not have time to focus on his spirituality although he knew he would have benefited from doing so.

I think [spirituality] is, at least in my case, something for somebody with more time. Like I know it’s good for me, I know I feel a lot better, and I know I’ve suffered a lot and I probably shouldn’t have had to if I had taken more time to

reflect and think about these kinds of things. But [I] just haven't had the time or energy lately. I wished I could've.

In his first year, Josh experienced ways in which his spiritual practices allowed him to cope with his depression and mental health. Despite knowing this would help him overall, he still did not have the time to engage in practices that would contribute to his overall wellbeing.

### **Spiritual Practices**

Although students spoke of not having enough time for their spirituality, they were able to cite ways in which they connected with their spiritual selves or felt a sense of spirituality. It was through these practices or perspectives that students articulated how they would still their minds and tune out other distractions. For some, this was an intentional mindfulness practice. Michelle experienced spirituality through her meditation and yoga.

Like when I'm meditating, and I finally get to like that kind of juicy spot where I can like completely control my mind, where all of the fluctuations are like still, and everything's just really clear, and I have like a great sense of perspective.

She also experienced a similar feeling from exercising where she was able to focus her mind on the movement of her body. Through these practices, Michelle cultivated her spirituality as a means to greater self-awareness and keeping open to future opportunities.

By making a conscious effort to pay attention to what is going on in my head, hopefully I will notice patterns and puzzle out what brings my life meaning. On the other hand, I am very open-minded to the idea of letting flow shape my life. I will try to not let my preconceived ideas of what I should be doing get in the way of taking the available opportunities.

Josh applied a variety of techniques to experience his spirituality which included listening to music, thinking, and imagining things at the most basic level. Whereas Michelle spoke

of a “juicy spot”, Josh described spiritual moments as “jolts” that left him feeling more centered.

The main ways I used to do it were through music and thinking about the abstract concepts of connection to everything, and thinking about these concepts can still do it, but I find what works for me a lot better now is just using my imagination sort of on overdrive. For instance, if I’m seeing something beautiful or like even just a tree or anything. It’s about just sort of trying to shut down my mind and see it for what it is instead of putting like human labels like “tree,” “roots,” and “bark” on it. It’s tough to do, but sometimes things just strike me, and I get a jolt sort of feeling, and that jolt feels like it gets me closer to the feelings of peace and unity. It only lasts about 30 seconds or so, but I always feel happier after it and more centered. I used to be able to do it pretty frequently with music, but I guess, you know, the same thing over and over sort of loses it. For some reason imagining things on a micro-scale also works, if I’m just walking around and I walk up to a plant and see how they feel and actually feel what that feels like to touch it and imagine what’s going on at the point of contact, this can induce one of those jolt feelings.

These private moments provided Josh with more energy and positive feelings that would linger on as he interacted with the world. It was a way for him to refuel as he lived his college experience. He started out his second year generating these feelings through long walks by a river but stopped going as often when school and work became more demanding.

Similarly to Josh, Juan also found that nature evoked ways in which he experienced spirituality:

It’s like looking at a sunset is something. There’s just something about how nature works or clouds and stuff that’s so beautiful. It’s warming to you, I guess. Kind of like spiritually in tune with the earth I guess through that.

With Juan’s spirituality grounded in nature, he integrated his spirituality easily into his college experience. Juan incorporated these moments into his daily life on campus by noticing the environment around him.

When I walk to class I always like just observing everything when I’m walking. See how green the grass is. You’re like, the wind’s blowing. It’s more like

environmental things I connect spirituality with. Because I feel like spirituality is like the basic things. They're kind of like how the earth is the basic thing there. We have buildings and stuff and all that infrastructure. Take it away and what's left is the earth. Kind of like with us, get away all the materialistic things and what do we have left? Our souls, our spirits, us, like as, ideas, how we act and stuff...Like you stray from the path, but it's always good to come back to your path to remember you should be grateful for everything that you have that God provided. You're learning about stuff. I always feel like it's really important to be grateful for that because that humbles you back to the basics.

The environment served as a catalyst for Juan to evoke feelings of gratitude and returning to what he referred to as the basics, thus grounding him in his spirituality.

Other students described external sources or activities that elicited internal responses of spirituality. These reflective and private moments played an important role in allowing students to connect with their spiritual selves. Listening to music was a reoccurring theme for students as highlighted previously by Josh. Kelly too found that music had a soothing effect:

Having alone time, like maybe, it could be sitting in my room listening to my favorite music, I mean that always, you know, makes me feel better when you hear what you like...It's just being alone and being able to have quietness so you can think.

Students also found creativity as an outlet to elicit calm and reflection. Laurie, Kiab and Amanda described how forms of artistic expression allowed them to connect to their inner selves. Amanda identified creativity as one of her values that was important in her life and how it played a role in her daily life.

In recent years I have loved looking for new ways to express my creativity. I enjoy drawing as it gives me a way to calm down at the end of the day and reflect on what has come to pass. I often call these moments "me time".

The activity of drawing for Amanda provided an opportunity to review the day's activities and reconnect with her inner self.



Two students spoke of attending church as a way in which they experienced spirituality while in college. Juan not only connected with nature but also attended church in order to connect with God: “Just going to church is like my time to talk with God, thank him for giving me the strength to get through the last week [and] ask for strength to get through the next week”. For Juan, attending church was a quiet time dedicated to focusing on his relationship with God although he struggled to find time to attend. Kiab also found that church was a place where she experienced spirituality but more through interacting with others: “Going to church helps or like being around friends who are Christians. That helps too because I can just talk to them about it.”

Overall students expressed that the primary ways in which they intentionally cultivate their spirituality was through being alone. Students used these times to still their minds, focus on the beauty of nature, listen to music, or experience the arts.

### **Campus Climate**

On the surface, students stated that they did not have a high expectation that the University would or should play a role in developing their spirituality. Student responses seemed to be referring to a spirituality closely coupled with religion and were not associating spirituality with broader questions of meaning, purpose and connectedness. When the focus of spirituality was on inner development and exploring their place in the world, eight of the 11 students expressed a desire to develop more spiritually during college. The following discussion describing the campus climate includes both a spirituality rooted in religion and a more expanded view of spirituality.

Student responses indicated that they found the University promoted spirituality by allowing religious-based student groups to exist and through the expression of free

speech. The University's commitment to diversity provided the environment in which students could seek out ways in which to express their spirituality if they desired. The simple offering of these opportunities and commitment to diversity was perceived as supportive. However, students spoke of a less supportive climate among their peers and in the classroom. Students struggled to find students in their immediate social circles in which to freely share their religious beliefs or practices. This was the case for Laurie who came to college expecting to continue practicing her spirituality through her Christianity. She quickly found that these conversations were not welcomed and she felt she could not express her spirituality without the risk of losing friends.

I've lost touch with [my spirituality] which makes me really sad, and I try to do different activities, and then I just, I think it's really difficult. I feel like a lot of people have very negative connotations about spirituality...A lot of people I've met coming to the U are very against spirituality I've found. It seems like they speak very negatively towards it. So it's difficult for me to try to figure out. It's hard for me because I feel it's peer pressure I guess you can say. It would essentially boil down to feeling guilty if you do that or you say something that they're not going to like you. It's just kind of like that sort of feeling. So that's different. That's something that's been hard for me.

Laurie did not feel comfortable expressing her religious views with others yet she also chose not to seek out the religious-based groups where this could have been more welcomed. It is not unusual for students' participation in religious practices to decline during their college experience (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011b). Kaib was the only student whose religious activities increased through attending church and engaging in religious discussions with her peers.

Students spoke of ways in which the research mission of the University affected the positioning of spirituality. The value of objectivism and scientific method were

subtly embedded in the classroom experience, especially for those in the science fields.

Amanda shared her views as a science major:

I think sometimes in a lot of the science courses, you meet people who are not, I'm not going to say afraid to have any spiritual connection so much as there's a stigma in science where you're not allowed to have this spiritual connection because then it somehow faults the science that you are doing, or that it makes it less valid. I think sometimes you come across a lot of people who, it almost seems to me, are afraid of having any spiritual connection with anything. And sometimes that comes across as negativity to anyone who is.

Laura shared a similar experience in her science based courses and posed the exclusion of spirituality as a contradiction to the values of scientific discovery:

I think a lot of times when you are in the hard sciences and in the labs, people are not as accepting of different sides or different views I think, which is weird because you think that science should be [accepting] because it's all about different views, different opinions, but for some reason spirituality doesn't factor into that.

Students whose spirituality was at the forefront of their awareness agreed that their spiritual selves were disconnected from their college experience. They expressed interest in integrating and developing their spirituality during their undergraduate experience but not from a religious framework. Students did not have any tangible suggestions as to how the institution should encourage their spirituality but they expressed hesitancy to include religious discussions for fear it would promote a particular morality.

### **Experiencing Difference**

Experiencing difference was a prevalent theme that emerged as students described ways in which they developed and understood their spiritual selves. Amanda expressed the value of interacting with others when asked what influenced her spiritual development.

I think it's more interactions with different groups of people and different clubs and with different cultures. One of my sister's good friends that I actually happen

to really enjoy hanging out with, he's part of this Indian kind of Hindu branch, and I went to their church a couple of times, and that was a really cool experience, and I think it's just more going out there and experiencing different things and learning more about this, wondering more about the differences, and the connections between different groupings of people.

Amanda found that experiencing different things and interacting with diverse people allowed her to see the differences and connections they shared.

Choi had a similar experience in finding value in interacting with others different from herself. Spending time with a Muslim student, Choi became aware not only of her own cultural views but of another worldview that provided meaning in his life.

The whole education system of Korea made me think that studying is the only way of you to be successful person and make money. But he thinks totally differently. He appreciates what his country has done to his life, and he thinks he needs to improve his country by dedicating his knowledge. The most outstanding difference between he and I was that he has been Muslim ever since he was born and his purpose of life is coming from his religion. Also I have been studying to get a good job and make money because that's what I think how purposeful life should be. But my friend does not try to find either happiness or purpose, it came naturally to him. He feels his life is full of purpose by talking to his God and taking care of his life. I think those huge differences can bring and change life. I have realized that the more you try to actually find happiness the more you would be tired and far away from being happy. I do not think I can believe God but I learned that having something that I truly believe in my life would bring many meaningful purposes in my life.

Choi was so intrigued by this conversation that she attended a church service to see if she could experience this type of connection with God. Choi was intrigued by the comfort and support that a belief in god provided: "I always wanted to know how it would feel like having someone who is greater than a human being that you can consistently rely on and get help." Although she decided church was not for her, Choi valued the opportunity to understand the views of another and learn from a new experience.

Students in the study described ways in which visibly seeing and interacting with difference on campus served as a catalyst to their spiritual development. Michelle found this to be the case by simply walking through the student union and around campus.

Well, for one, walking through the student union and everyone trying to convert me to Christianity and like just tons of people like, 'Do you have a moment of time? I have chocolate over here.' And listening to the preachers [on the Plaza] because then when listening to what *they* believe, I'm just thinking about what *I* believe.

Michelle found that the freedom for others to express their religious beliefs in public ways challenged her to think about her own perspective and beliefs. Similarly, Josh found that simply seeing diverse people and new things prompted him to think and be in new ways.

It helps I think to have so many different, unique people everywhere. Walking around, no matter when I take a walk, I always see somebody I've never seen before or don't remember seeing. So, I think that it helps me to find that sense of spirituality to see something novel, and so if I'm constantly having new experiences, experiencing new people, new everything, it helps.

The process of interacting with difference was not always easy for students.

Experiencing different values and worldviews caused students to look at their own beliefs and question paradigms that had provided a solid foundation and comfort. Laurie joined a culturally Jewish sorority which initially caused uncertainty of her own beliefs and this was unsettling for her.

I've lost touch with what I felt. I used to be very strong in [my religious beliefs], and so it's hard for me to know where to go spiritually which makes me upset. I'm just at a strange point. I feel like I want like the purpose I had with it back...it's difficult for me. I don't know where to go with my spirituality if that makes sense.

By the end of the semester, Laurie's outlook had changed. She was able to appreciate the different perspectives of the women in her sorority and learn by observing their day-to-

day experiences of their spirituality. Laurie became more comfortable in the uncertainty of not having a set spiritual view of her own:

I'm very happy. I feel like I'm very satisfied with where I'm at right now. I have a lot of friends that have different religious beliefs from me. It's nice for me to learn more about where they come from and seeing what they do. I've learned more and more about Judaism because my sorority is culturally Jewish so I get to learn about why they feel things are certain ways and I find it very nice to see how their culture questions a lot of things which is different from certain things, they encourage that. And I feel like that from where I came from a lot of times you just don't question, it is what it is. So it's just nice for me to see...just to see how different people incorporate stuff like that into their daily life. I know a lot of my friends have had struggles with that this past semester. I know with eating and how to eat kosher and just stuff like that. It has really been a big learning experience for me to see how they deal with doing that in their daily lives with just what I want with my spiritual life. My spiritual life really doesn't influence my purpose because I still don't know where I want to go with it. I just feel like I'm in an awkward place in my life spirituality. I don't feel negative or positive towards what anyone believes but I don't know what I believe still.

Experiencing close up the lived experiences of others allowed Laurie to see beyond her own worldview and exist in a space free of judgment and open to new possibilities. She lost the stability provided by having a clearly defined set of beliefs but came to accept the uncertainty of not knowing. Observing and interacting with diverse individuals and viewpoints allowed students to examine the paradigm in which they had previously operated

### **Campus Involvement**

Opportunities to be involved in activities outside of the classroom contributed to students' spiritual development. Students spoke of the significance of learning more about themselves and the world, experiencing new things that pushed them outside of their comfort zone, and feeling a sense of belonging that contributed to their overall spiritual development. These experiences also allowed students to actualize their

spirituality and purpose by providing opportunities to help others, give back to the community and feel connected to something larger than themselves.

During the second year, students described ways in which they took greater risks compared to their first year. They described the value of trying new things as a way to learn more about themselves and gain insight into their life purpose. In asking students about meaningful experiences, they shared times in which they pushed themselves to try new things. They described the fear they overcame by taking a risk and the personal growth that ensued. Amanda shared a time in which she attended the Salsa Dancing Club meeting knowing she had little dance experience:

Looking back on that evening, I wonder what I was so afraid of to begin with. I think that part of the college experience is getting to know a wide variety of people; a view that many people share. I genuinely believe that these people were just happy to share with me one of their passions. I have come to find that I love being a part of this “team”, and yet, I’m still one of the most awkward people there but I have found that sometimes standing out isn’t always the worst thing that can happen to a person. I already knew that this wasn’t going to be easy, that it was going to take hard work and practice, but I think the thing that was most useful to me and I can apply to other situations is that, though I may not fit the textbook definition of what a dancer looks like, but that isn’t going to stop me from going out there and trying to challenge myself in a different way. On top of that I am finding out that I am really starting to enjoy it and the people there. I have only been to a couple of meetings but I think that the people that I have met are people that I would like to keep in touch with. They are all very supportive and make me feel comfortable with the way I am (even if I’m slightly clumsy!). I would like to continue supporting those around me the same way and apply this philosophy to other endeavors.

The success of this experience allowed Amanda to feel more confident in pursuing other opportunities that would initially feel uncomfortable. Samantha developed a similar view as she pushed herself to try new things and take risks. During her second year, Samantha continued to work on campus, joined a sorority, secured an internship and was now exploring study abroad options.

The choices I've made have changed everything. I mean, for instance, say I didn't think I was going to get the internship and I wouldn't have applied. Then I would have never known that I definitely could have gotten it, you know? I think it's important to take risks with things that make you kind of feel uncomfortable, because in the end they probably will end up either making you grow or you'll become a better person because of it.

In addition to personal growth, students described ways in which these opportunities provide insight into understanding life purpose. Samantha viewed the relationship between trying new things as essential to finding purpose in her life.

I think it's all based on trials and trying again and learning from your mistakes. Because for a while I thought my purpose was going to be saving animals and becoming a vet. And that didn't work out for me. So I learned from that, and now I'm going to something else. Maybe I could help animals through a different way. So, you know, it – it's all about trying, failing, learning about it, and trying again. Because if you give up you'll never find it.

Kiab also experienced the connection between becoming more involved on campus and contributing to her sense of purpose. For her, taking the risk to run for an officer position in her student organization pushed her to be more open and accepting of herself. She described it as follows:

I feel more "on purpose" because of running for the board of [student group] because I have a more acceptance to myself (there are a few more factors in this, like being baptized which caused me to feel more content and driven in life). Being more "on purpose" was led by me being more open as a person and accepting of myself. I hadn't known that to know more about myself I would have to accept myself. Right now, I think that knowing that should have been obvious, but it took a while for me to figure it out.

Students' experience of spirituality and purpose was fostered by feeling a sense of community through these student groups. Samantha's sense of belonging she experienced with her sorority provided the foundation and confidence for her to try new experiences which in turn helped inform her sense of purpose.



Campus involvement also provided a means in which students could live their sense of purpose by helping others and feeling connected to something larger than themselves. Amanda described one of her most meaningful moments in her second year as a time when she mentored another student.

I consider this a great success in my life because I was able to help another student who was struggling much like I did my first year. By the end of my freshman year I was able to finally overcome many of these challenges, but I wish I had been aware of some of the resources that were available to me. I didn't want her to make the same mistakes that I did, and I wanted to be a resource for her in the future. I call this a success as together we have worked out a system that has helped her stay on track with her goals.

Amanda's spirituality is centered on connectedness and her ability to contribute positively to the world. The experience of mentoring another student allowed her to be involved on campus while simultaneously giving back and therefore allowing her to live out her spirituality. Maggie sought a similar outcome through her volunteer role as a health advocate which provided an opportunity to not only help people but also a means to experience a stronger community compared to her first year.

Campus involvement opportunities that touched on multiple dimensions of students' lives had a strong meaning for students. For example, Samantha's student employment position allowed her to earn money for college, experience community with her fellow student employees, and also help other students by providing a valuable service. Her own spirituality was grounded in a sense of connectedness so through this position she was able to experience micro-level connectedness through a sense of belonging while contributing to a universal connectedness by helping others. It was through this campus job that Samantha discovered her strong desire to help others as one

of her primary purposes in life. This in turn informed her major and career interests knowing that she wanted to continue to help others throughout her life.

Although not directly a campus involvement opportunity, three students in the study spoke to the significance of voting in their first national election. For Juan, voting was an act that made him feel a greater connection to a larger whole:

So it was the first year I could vote obviously. It was like, “Wow. I’m part of whatever happens.” Like right now we call this the president, but people are going to call this history. So we’re living that. So it’s like we can make a positive impact, a negative impact, whatever impact, but we have our say.

For Amanda and Suzie, the impact of voting related to the proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. Amanda described the act of voting as a means to express her values and spirituality.

I think a time where I felt like my spirituality came more to the forefront is that we had the big election last year, and there was the vote no, vote yes [constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage], and then there was a lot of negativity surrounding that, different ideas. And I think for me it was more of a reaffirming that I don’t want to be the type of person that excludes other people, that I want to be the type of person that can make moral decisions based on not only how I can see the world but maybe try to see the world through other people’s eyes. And I think that that was a particular example where it started to become more clear to me.

Amanda and Suzie found significance in having an opportunity to demonstrate their values independent of their family and religious background.

Students experienced their spirituality in relation to their campus involvement as a way to increase their self-awareness and learn about the world around them. Being involved also provided a sense of belonging that contributed to their ability to feel confident in trying new things. In recounting meaningful college experiences, students described opportunities that were positioned at the intersections of their wholeness, aligning aspects of their identity, interests, values, purpose, and sense of connectedness

within their college experience. The significance of these experiences seemed stronger for students if they satisfied multiple outcomes relating to their college life.

### **Living on Purpose Course**

This section explores the ways in which the Living on Purpose course influenced students' lived experience of spirituality. The course was a 2-credit online course with two in-person classes required, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the semester. The course was only offered to students who resided in the Second-Year Experience Living Learning Community (SYE House). The following is the course description from the syllabus:

Living on Purpose is a course designed to help students explore questions of meaning and purpose in college and in their lives. In this class, students will examine the context and meaning of their own lives, explore other people's ways of living on purpose, and consider the big questions that shape their present and future. Through two, in-person classes, readings, reflections, experiential exercises, and assignments, the course will offer students time to define their own purpose at this time in their lives and to help build a framework to lead a purposeful life now and into the future.

Each week, the course addressed a different topic related to purpose through readings and/or videos, a weekly quiz on these materials, a small group discussion, and an assignment that was either reflective or experiential (see Appendix F for an abbreviated syllabus). The course provided new information, diverse paradigms and personal reflection for students to consider as they experienced their second year. Although spirituality was not directly addressed in the course, the question of purpose is ultimately linked to the essence of an expanded spirituality as expressed in the conceptual framework.

## Course Learning Outcomes

The achieved learning outcomes for the course were evident by students' self-described growth and the changes that were apparent in their writing. The two primary learning outcomes related to shifts in students' conceptualization of purpose and letting go of the pressure to find a purpose.

**Shift in conceptualization of purpose.** All of the students in the study articulated ways in which their construct of purpose had shifted due to the course. Students were asked at the start and the end of the course to identify which statements best described their current experience with life purpose:

Statement:	Before	After
I don't worry about purpose, I just live life doing things I am drawn to	2	4
I know exactly what my purpose is and work at it joyfully each day	2	2
I believe I have a purpose but have no idea what it is or how to find it	7	5

Most students identified with the same descriptive sentences at the completion of the course but with a more complex, blended or evolved view of purpose. Kiab describes how her experience of purpose expanded after the course:

During the beginning of the course, I thought that purpose was something simple. My definition in early September was that purpose meant doing something you were meant to do. Now, I believe that, although purpose is just that, it means something more and something different for every person in the world. For me, the definition of purpose is how you will live your life to do what was meant for you to put an impact in the world, no matter how small or big the impact you make is. That may be how I view purpose, but I still do not know what my sole purpose is. I have little inklings on which path to take to find this purpose but, for now, I am still searching for what my life's purpose truly is. Because of this, I still do not have a clearly stated purpose statement or a personal mission statement.

Students shared similar understandings of purpose as something more than what they previously believed. Laurie described her expanded view as moving from a career-based focus to a broader outlook on purpose.

I feel like when I started the course, I thought [purpose] is just what you want to do with your life. I felt purpose was very similar to like career and what you wanted to do with your career. I guess I tied those purposes very closely because I feel like career is something you do every day but now I see it might not necessarily be your overall career. It would be more so how you live your life each day for your purpose not necessarily what I do for my job. It's nice if you can find your career to help you live what you feel your purpose is everyday so that when you go to that job you're living your purpose.

Amanda's purpose shifted from a grand concept to one that was more accessible and attainable.

I think my definition of purpose has changed a little bit. I think before I thought it had to be some worldly goal. I think now my purpose is something that's very individualized and it doesn't necessarily have to be, "I'm going to stop world hunger" or something that like. It can be something as simple as being smaller goals like being a good mom or doing something like that. I think it's a healthier shift. I feel like I'm not as stressed out, you know? Like I have to go make my world mark. I feel like you can do that in small ways.

Students' new view of purpose contained a more nuanced and personalized description of life purpose.

**Letting go.** For some students, this course allowed them to let go of the worry or pressure they felt to have their life plan figured out or identify their specific purpose.

Students commented on feeling this pressure, specifically those students who had not yet determined their academic major or career path. This was the case for Kelly who was able to let go of her worry about "figuring out her purpose" and trust that it would emerge. She approached this class expecting to have her purpose figured out by the end. Once she realized that that was not the intent of the course, she was able to open up to the ambiguity of purpose and begin to question in a more authentic and vulnerable way:

I felt like the course was designed to help us find our purpose and I was like ‘shoot, I’m not figuring it out.’ And then I just kind of...after talking to [the instructor], I was like ‘I don’t *need* to find it’ so I just kind of went along with it and I felt more comfortable with the assignments actually just being like, ‘well I don’t know, but I know I have one’ and that was like my thesis for a lot of my assignments. It kind of helped me feel less stressful about it. The course became more easier for me.

Amanda also became more trusting in allowing her purpose to emerge:

I think sometimes you feel like you have to have it all, everything figured out, you know like, I have to have my life’s goal planned out ahead of me. And I’m kind of planner so that’s, yeah. But I think now, a lot of the activities we’ve done and a lot of the articles we read it’s like, ‘you’ll find your purpose, but when you’re looking for it, it kind of pushes it farther away.’ So I think a more laid back approach is probably the better idea to find [purpose].

Other students also focused on letting go of identifying their exact purpose and learning to trust that it would emerge. Josh became more comfortable in letting go of the pursuit of purpose:

I’m much more relaxed about [purpose]. Like I said, it’s not something to worry about I feel more now. I’m much more confident after the course that it’s there. I can choose to have it. Whereas before it was more, ‘Well I gotta find this. Time’s running out. Time’s always going.’ And now I can’t think about that. I *don’t* think about that.

Laurie described her shift in thinking this way:

I know I have a purpose. I’m not worried about finding it. I feel like it will find me. I feel like there is going to be one point down the road I’m just going to know that this is where I’m meant to be. But I’m not necessarily worried about finding it. I know it’s there and it’s going to be there and I’ll get there sometime.

The ways in which students described “letting go”, feeling “more relaxed” or “not worried” about purpose reflected a pressure to find their purpose. The source of this pressure was not discussed by students. Perhaps it came from the course itself or possibly stemmed from the pressures students described earlier in the study. Regardless,

the releasing of the expectation of finding a purpose provided relief and comfort for students.

**Purpose framework:** The process of letting go of a singular purpose allowed students to develop a framework in which to discover their purpose throughout their life. These frameworks served as a tool to guide their future decisions and allow them to develop and adapt their purpose knowing that life circumstances would change and therefore their purpose would change as well. At the conclusion of the course, Suzie articulated her framework as follows:

For the future, I am hoping to carry what I have learned from this class with me. Realizing how my talents, strengths, values and morals all play into finding purpose is something that never crossed my mind. The in depth analysis of each topic throughout the class gave me a chance to self-reflect and realize how capable I am at finding purpose. I need to remind myself daily to keep my purpose in mind. As I continue through college, I need to be mindful of my choices and how they can impact my future. I need to keep goals in mind; they will hold as guidelines. Purpose doesn't come all at once. It is something that will take time, and I am more than on my way.

Similar to Suzie, most students integrated topics and insights from the course into a reflective framework to live a more intentional life. As illustrated earlier in chapter 4, Kelly described how the course helped her create a new approach to life:

As a result of taking this course, I have been influenced to take action to live purposefully. In the short-term I am going to remember to focus on my strengths rather than my weaknesses, be open to vulnerability, be grateful for the people and experiences I have had in my life, and take time to reflect on the positive and negative experiences I have had. I also intend to live on purpose in my long-term future. The main thing I will do is focus on achieving my educational and career goals. After I reach my goals, I would like to stop focusing on myself and instead focus on helping others. I want to make a difference in the world because I have the ability to. Another thing that I intend to do is to learn how to be free, relax, and pause to enjoy life in the moment. I now have the tools to live a purposeful and meaningful life. And that is what I intend to do.

Maggie saw application of the course content to her immediate future and life as a student:

When next semester rolls around, I know that this class will be with me in the ways that I look at the world. The entire semester, we have been focusing on becoming a person living with purpose, but in so many ways. One strategy that I think I will be using is to be more in touch with what I feel on a day to day basis. Too many times have I had things to pile up because I keep pushing them away. This causes me major stress and inevitably, a crisis. Allowing myself to focus on the now and be in the present will really help me to live my purpose in my life to come.

Students' frameworks often included finding meaning and gratitude in the smaller things in life, staying focused on students' values and strengths, contributing to something larger than themselves, and cultivating a mindset of positivity.

**Secular purpose.** Students did not experience the Living on Purpose class as a course related to spirituality. They were able to explore the various topics and their conceptualization of purpose as separate from their spirituality. Two students identified the weekly topic of "Ways of Knowing" as the spirituality week because it included a reading on spiritual and emotional intelligence. Students included references to their spiritual beliefs as part of their assignments or discussions but it was a topic they contributed by choice. Of the eleven students, only Laurie and Choi stated that they actively thought about spirituality during their second year. Five students said they did not really think about their spirituality during the semester and four students said they regressed in their spirituality because they did not have time to maintain their spiritual practices. Students were actively engaged in a course exploring life purpose and yet experienced no change or a decline in their spirituality which indicates a separation between the two constructs.



## Course Topics

The multiple ways in which this course explored purpose contributed to the creation of a multidimensional purpose framework. In addition to the overall course outcomes described previously, specific topics resonated positively with students as they examined life purpose. During the final interview, I asked students to identify the course topics that were the most meaningful to them. The top three topics they chose were 1) exploring their strengths (n=7), 2) happiness (n=5), and 3) vulnerability/risk-taking (n=4). In the following section, I will highlight these areas and the ways in which students engaged with these topics.

**Strengths.** Students at the University were required to take an inventory that focused on identifying their personal strengths. All of the students in the study, with the exception of Choi, took the strengths assessment and received their individualized results before their freshmen year. In the Living on Purpose course, the learning objectives for the strengths week were to: help students identify and learn about their top 5 strengths, reflect upon how these strengths show up in their life, and integrate their strengths into their daily life, future goals and purpose. Students enjoyed this topic because it provided individualized insight into their personality and provided a language in which to articulate their talents. Juan talked about how he found the inventory to be more meaningful in his second year:

Freshman year, I thought the Strengths assessment was a complete waste of time, but during this semester I have realized how powerful knowing myself in this sense has helped me to understand who I am better, and realize which environments I can thrive in. To me, they seem like the perfect combination of strengths for me. Through learning about how they affect me every day, I have a firmer grasp on myself as a person and the types of things that I want to do in my life (i.e. significance reaffirms my desire for recognition, while futuristic affirms my excitement for what I plan to do in the future)

Kelly also shared the sentiment that the strengths results were more valuable in their second year than their first:

During the first year, I just didn't care. I was just like – oh, this is just some busy work, I don't want to deal with it. And then when we did it this time we actually paid attention to what it said in there and I could not believe it described me exactly. I was shocked actually. It was really cool.

For Kelly, the strengths topic was useful because it helped her to develop a more positive view of herself rather than focusing on her weaknesses. She summarized that topic as teaching her the following:

Don't focus on your weaknesses, focus on your strengths. For me, I'm always kinda getting down on myself because I'm like – I'm doing that wrong and I could be improving on this and doing better but yet I'm being lazy today. But when you focus on your strengths you're like, "well- no, I'm actually a really hard worker". I realize that I am actually using this stuff *every day* and those are my strengths and so I'm not just sitting and doing nothing every day. And it just gives me a more positive outlook on myself.

Students valued the focus on their positive contributions and what they were good at rather than a critique of what they needed to improve upon. Juan and Kelly did not seem interested in the inventory during their first year but the insight regarding their personal strengths became more relevant in their second year.

**Happiness.** The topic of happiness was addressed early in the course and expected students to: identify constructs and sources of happiness, recognize multiple perspectives on the sources of happiness, and identify personal sources of happiness and how they relate to the concept of purpose. All of the students in the study articulated an interdependent relationship between happiness and purpose. For most, the relationship was linked by causation believing that happiness led to finding one's purpose or living on purpose led to happiness. For Choi, having a sense of purpose led to happiness:

I think the process of pursuing happiness is tough to everyone, but it all depends on how much you can enjoy when you are seeking for happiness. And I believe that the more you are well aware of the purpose of your lives the more you can enjoy the journey of finding happiness. If one can have concrete purpose in life, it would be much easier to go through all obstacles they have to meet in lives.

Similarly, Samantha explained the relationship of happiness and purpose as follows: “if one seeks purpose, rather than happiness, happiness will come with it. When you know what you're meant to do, and what you enjoy doing, then you will be happy.” Suzie on the other hand, believed that through happiness one can find purpose:

By analyzing and realizing the things we already have, learning to appreciate them, and beginning to find happiness within them, I think people will find purpose more often. I think ‘The Pursuit’ needs to stop, and we should start linking our current state of being with being happy!

Suzie’s rejection of the pursuit of happiness was echoed by other students as well. Josh found similarities between the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of purpose and both were unproductive:

In my experience, the search for purpose has made me unhappy. Really this should be expected. After all, the search for purpose is supposed to have some element of suffering. I have also spent a good deal of time in the "pursuit of happiness" and found it true that searching for happiness causes unhappiness. The only times I really find happiness, and perhaps purpose, is when I quit trying to find them. If I just let things be as they are and know that they are changing because that is the nature of life, then I find I achieve a lot more in my life and I am happier. The trick I've found is telling myself ‘everything is exactly as it is supposed to be in this moment, it's completely different than the last moment and will be completely different than the next moment, and while it's not all good, it is all perfect.’

Students felt a sense of relief by letting go of the task of seeking happiness. Similarly to Josh, Suzie recognized that “the downside of this search can lead to unwanted stress and anxiety.” The process of letting go of these expectations allowed students to accept the present moment and create a sense of gratitude. Kiab described happiness in the little things and how that allowed her to let go of pursuing purpose.

What I found that I consider ‘happiness’ is a feeling that comes from every little thing that gives off a vibe of positivity or goodness. It’s this sort of surrounding entity for me, because happiness is visible in almost everything that I look at. It’s constant for me. This relates to finding my purpose in life by letting me know that I can just let the days come and go. With what I consider happiness, and having a finding within it, I know that finding the purpose in my life is important.

Kiab’s approach for finding happiness in the little things was shared by others. The act of being grateful and living in the present moment was a common strategy identified by students as a way to live a more happy and purposeful life. Students expressed a desire to focus on the present moment and to appreciate the things around them. They found this practice as a way to release expectations and pressure about their future.

**Vulnerability and risk-taking.** The topic of vulnerability and risk-taking addressed the meaning and value of vulnerability, personal barriers to finding and living on purpose, and self-compassion. These topics were presented together because often feelings of vulnerability arise through taking chances and possible failure therefore serving as a barrier to taking risks and living more fully. Nearly all of the students recognized that they were lacking in self-compassion due to not possessing a strong self-love or because of expectations of perfection. Kelly’s insight illustrated the role of self-love and coping with the tension of internal and external expectations:

The personal barriers and obstacles to me becoming more self-compassionate are learning how to forgive myself, learning how to accept my failures, and learning how to love myself for who I am and not who society expects me to be. These are all obstacles I believe I can overcome with practice and patience.

Samantha addressed how she needed to accept her disability first before she could love herself.

I tend to be pretty negative when it comes to myself. I think my personal barrier is having a [disability]. I feel like I can’t accomplish as much as others, even though I prove myself wrong often. It still is a problem trying to teach myself to love myself, even though others can’t truly understand the way I feel. However, I

do want to become more self-compassionate, and I think the first step is trying to finally accept my situation. I can mope all I want, but that will do nothing. I can sink or swim.

Students also expressed their tendencies to have high self-expectations that stood in the way of their ability to forgive and accept themselves. This was true for Michelle who described the following:

I know I am harsh on myself and tend to feel alone and incompetent. Personally, my perfectionist mindset gets in the way of being self-compassionate. Also, I think I don't take care of myself enough. I can take small steps towards being more self-compassionate by taking a little bit of time each day to take care of myself.

Laurie also had high expectations of herself but then described a process in which she accepted her mistakes:

I think that I struggle with self-compassion because I expect myself to achieve high standards. When I fall short, I become upset and think of all of the ways I could have done better. From there I have to tell myself that it is in the past and that I have to move on and take what I've learned to do better next time. In the end, I accept myself as I am, but it is a long process for me to get there. I am a perfectionist and it is really hard to accept my imperfections right away in a situation. Logic overrides my emotional acceptance of myself.

This topic was significant to students not only because they examined their own self-compassion but because they found comfort in knowing they were not alone. Amanda identified this topic as her favorite because of the validation she felt by sharing with others:

I think it was just interesting to read about some, and hear your classmates talk about some of the things they're vulnerable about, or things that they've had that are hard and it makes you realize that you're not necessarily by yourself. I don't know, I just liked that one.

Suzie also found comfort in sharing these struggles with the class:

One personal barrier to becoming more self-compassionate is being able to accept the things I cannot change and love myself for what I am capable of doing. Once I reach this point, my self-compassion will be as high as possible. The most

difficult thing to do in overcoming these barriers is realizing we are all going through similar struggles.

Although this topic was difficult for students to address, the challenge, awareness, and validation made this one of the most meaningful topics of the course.

**Big questions group project.** The Big Questions group project asked students to identify an existential question that was relevant to them at this time in their lives. Once everyone posted a question online, students were placed in small groups based on similar questions. The groups investigated and presented their ideas in the final in-person class. The following five questions emerged: 1) What is a good life? 2) How do we know right from wrong? 3) How does money affect our happiness? 4) What does it mean to love? and finally, 5) What motivates people to live a life of purpose? The students in this study were dispersed throughout these five groups and presented their final project during the last in-person class. These questions shed light on the types of big questions that are relevant to students during their second year.

### **Course Structure**

In addition to course topics that students found interesting, they also shared insight into the structure of the course that they found desirable or challenging.

**Personally relevant topics.** Students commented on how different this course was in comparison to their other classes. They enjoyed the personal nature of the topic and how they were able to reflect on their own experiences, values and perspectives.

Choi commented on how the personal application of the course was positive for her:

I mean the fact that there's this class every week and I can talk about my own perspective and my own concept of purpose, and through these questions I could develop my view about purpose. Yeah. That was really [a] huge difference with other class.

Kiab agreed and commented that she “liked the feedback from faculty. For my other classes it’s not as personal as this one, so I like this one more.” The opportunity to reflect and apply the course materials to their own lives created greater engagement with the content. Kelly compared this course to her other classes:

[In this course] the readings were actually really interesting. This is something that I would like to read. The other classes I wouldn’t want to do it but [this one] I actually read and reflected on it for my own assignment. And that was what was really important to me.

Students resonated with course topics that was useful in their own lives and provided them time and structure in which to reflect on what was important to them and applicable in their lives.

**Course priority.** Students commented that as the semester went on, the demands from their other classes pushed this course lower in their priorities. This was the case for Josh.

I enjoyed the course, though near the end I honestly had a tougher time being as engaged with it because there were so many pressures everywhere, and it was just sort of ‘the online thing I had to do’ by the end.

Because the Living on Purpose course did not meet any curricular requirements for students, it was described by some students as an “add-on” or a course that was “just for fun”. Over half of the students shared that the class was a lot of work for two credits or more work than they had anticipated. Samantha had a positive experience with the course but felt it was more work than she expected.

I enjoyed the class, but it was a lot of work for two-credits. Which I didn’t really expect, but I mean, I guess it’s definitely worth it? You learn quite a bit about different, like, experiences that you can do to make yourself feel more purposeful on a day-to-day basis.

Students found it challenging to dedicate time to a course that did not meet academic requirements even though they enjoyed the topics and personal nature of the content.

**Online format.** The online format for the course was appealing to students.

Most students acknowledged that they were drawn to the course because of the convenience and self-directed nature of the online format. Kelly stated:

This has probably one of my favorite classes this semester because not only was the topic interesting, something I have never explored before, but also it was online and that relieved a lot of stress. You don't have to go out in the cold to get to class and there wasn't a lot of pressure.

After experiencing the course, there were mixed reactions to the online format. Some students preferred to have more in-person opportunities to allow for more natural conversations around the topic of purpose. Students also felt that an in-person format would have held them more accountable to staying engaged in the course as competing priorities emerged. However, the online format was appealing for students who wanted more time to formulate their responses. For Kiab, this format provided her the extra time to reflect and eliminated the group dynamics which makes her uneasy.

I think I'd rather it [be] online because then I don't have to see them [other students]. And, like, it would make me more nervous. That's just me personally. ...I'm just in a big group I wouldn't want to say a lot because I feel like I would take more time to just process my thoughts. Because it just comes more naturally through my fingers.

The hybrid offering of both online weekly topics and in-person classes offered a good compromise to the needs of both learning types.

**Experiential activities.** A number of the course assignments required students to do experiential activities outside of the online environments. Students had to interview other people about purpose, choose an experience that exposed them to a different culture or worldview, and experience something that elicited a non-rational way of knowing.



Students' activities included attending a religious service different from their own views, attending cultural events on campus, meditation or yoga, interviewing peers from different ethnic backgrounds, and attending a hunger simulation. Students commented that these activities provided the opportunity to interact with different students and have deeper conversations than they would have typically. They also used these activities to do something outside of their comfort zone which resulted in rewarding experiences for students.

### **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of spirituality was experienced in unique ways by students as demonstrated in the previous chapter. This chapter attempted to capture the themes relating to the collective essence of how students conceptualized and experienced spirituality while taking a course exploring life purpose during their second year in college. By sharing their journeys, students provided insight into the ways in which they traveled through the first half of their college life. These narratives illuminate the richly colored and textured tapestries that compose students' lives. Woven into this fabric is the movement of meaning, purpose and connectedness that describe the lived experiences of students' spirituality.

## Chapter 6

### Summary, Discussion, and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which students experienced their spirituality during the second year of college in an effort to gain greater insight into student spirituality and ways in which to create a more holistic educational experience.

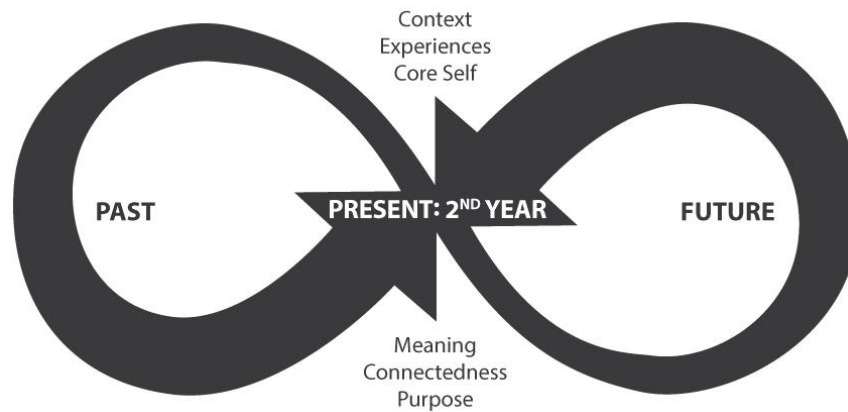
This study explored three research questions:

- 1) How do students perceive and describe their spirituality during the second year of college?
- 2) What college influences and experiences affect their spiritual development?  
and
- 3) How does participating in a course exploring life purpose influence their lived experience of spirituality?

The focus of this final chapter is to discuss the key findings of this study in relation to the research questions, conceptual framework and previous research. The chapter will conclude with proposed recommendations for how this research informs student development policies, practices and future research.

This study was based on the experience of 11 second-year students enrolled in a course addressing life purpose while residing together in a living learning community. I journeyed with these students through the first semester of their second year as they experienced their spirituality and navigated the emerging consciousness of meaning, purpose and connectedness within their lives. This study was designed to capture not only the perceptions of students' spirituality at a given point in time, but to accompany and witness the motion of spirituality in relation to the context of the second year of

college. The conceptual framework outlined in chapter 3 provided the guiding structure for which the questions and data collection were framed.



*Figure 7: Conceptual Framework of an Expanded Spirituality*

### **Key Findings: Conceptualizing Spirituality**

The themes that emerged regarding how students perceived and described their spirituality both reinforce existing research regarding spirituality and provide additional insight into the nuances of these constructions. Here I will address the individualized and pluralistic construction of spirituality, the language of spirituality, the experience of a secular purpose and the experience of connectedness within the current higher education research.

#### **Individualized and Pluralistic**

The ways in which students conceptualized their spirituality was found to be unique and multidimensional in how they constructed their meaning. One of the key findings that emerged from this study and is reinforced in previous research demonstrates that spirituality is an individualized construct (Zinnbauer, et al., 1997, Zabriskie, 2005). Students varied in how they described and experienced their spirituality as well as

demonstrated different levels of consciousness of the word and experience. It was evident that students were still forming their awareness and articulation of the key elements of spirituality. As students were asked to articulate and describe these concepts, the emerging of their assumptions and values became clearer. This supports Estanek's (2006) assertion that the definition of spirituality is part of the hermeneutic process and that no one definition will suffice in exploring student spirituality.

Similarly to spirituality, students held the belief that life purpose was unique to each individual. This pluralistic view of purpose and spirituality created both an openness to accepting a diverse range of views but also carried with it the responsibility to define and actualize it in their own life. This contributed to the pressure students felt to determine their future path and ultimate contribution to the world. The weight of this responsibility became evident as students progressed through the course and began to speak of letting go and trusting in the unfolding of their purpose.

### **Language of Spirituality**

Students had mixed responses to the word spirituality. Although students varied in how they described spirituality, most often students' default was to position their spirituality in relation to religion. This made it difficult to separate spirituality as a unique construct from religion when asking students to describe their spirituality within the context of their college experience. So although the conceptual framework and design for this study assumed an expanded paradigm of spirituality and students were informed of this wide framework as I introduced the study, the language of spirituality may or may not have elicited this broader view. As evident in other studies, this issue has emerged regardless of the researcher's efforts to distinguish the two as separate but

possibly overlapping constructs (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005).

Researchers must proceed with caution when using the language of spirituality and work diligently to identify the assumptions that underlie students' associated meanings. This too should be considered when generalizing findings from these studies, recognizing that student responses may reflect a range of experiences and associations. Regardless of the limitations of the word spirituality, the constructs of meaning, purpose and connectedness are important concepts for higher education to foster and were evident in students' lived experiences.

### **Secular Purpose**

One of the most unexpected themes that emerged related to the concept of purpose was the uncoupling of spirituality and purpose. Students perceived the Living on Purpose course as having minimal to no relationship to their spirituality. At the end of the semester, most of the students stated that they did not actively think about their spirituality or that it had regressed regardless of exploring topics related to life purpose during this time. When directly asked about the relationship between the two, students were able to describe how spirituality and purpose were associated but this was not reflected in their experiences. Irrespective of their spiritual paradigm and the source of their purpose, students believed that the process of discovering their purpose or living a purposeful life was realized through their self-awareness, actions and choices. Purpose was a secular process that was actualized by how they chose to live their life.

### **Connectedness**

Students' experience of connectedness emerged as both a sense of belonging and a universal connectedness. The simultaneous holding of their daily experience of

connectedness (sense of belonging) occurred while forming their beliefs and understanding of their larger place in the world (universal connectedness). These two levels were not required to align with each other but rather co-existed in ways that at times overlapped or presented themselves as hierarchical.

Research in higher education supports the significance of sense of belonging as contributing to student success (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). There is less existing research that speaks to sense of belonging in relation to spiritual development. Strayhorn's model of college students' sense of belonging (2012) is built around Maslow's hierarchy of needs and suggests that the need to feel as if one belongs contributes to increased involvement, achievement and retention. As Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation suggests, there are basic human needs that must be met in order to progress to self-actualization, where questions of meaning and purpose reside. The findings of this study point to sense of belonging as foundational in order for students to engage in questions of meaning and purpose. Specifically, as students experienced community or supportive environments, they were able to focus on larger goals, take greater risks in other areas, and consider new worldviews that could challenge their own sense of self. This theme is important for higher education professionals as they consider the value, benefits and strategies of building community both in and outside of the classroom.

Experiences of universal connectedness were intentionally fostered by the structure of the Living on Purpose course but may have also been nourished by the second year of college. Sullivan (2014) found that programs that explore purpose, specifically when they include a community engagement component "provided

participants with a sense of participating in aims larger than themselves but at the same time included and enlarged them as people who mattered and had something to contribute to the community” (p. 10). The conditions of the second year of college could have also triggered experiences of universal connectedness as students explore issues relating to choosing a major, career planning, and continued self-awareness (Schaller, 2010). Regardless of the impetus, this study supports Schaller’s (2010) assertion that the second year of college is a fertile time to ask questions of life purpose and meaning.

### **Key Findings: Experiencing Spirituality**

This study provided unique insight into the ways in which students experienced spirituality over time. Journeying with students shed light on the day-to-day lived experiences of students as well as how they positioned their daily experience in relation to a larger whole. The following discussion addresses the motion of spirituality, the ways in which students negotiated tensions in their lives, and the tending to spirituality during their second year.

### **Spirituality in Motion**

The conceptual framework for this study assumed that spirituality was a process in motion, a continuous practice of searching, defining and experiencing elements of spirituality. Schaller’s description of the second year as a time when students “look backward and see their first year of college and their childhood, and they look forward and see the rest of their college career and their future” (2005, p.19) held true for this study. As I journeyed with these students through the semester, the motion of spirituality emerged as a dominant force. I use the word motion rather than development because the movement did not always follow a forward progression which is implied in the word

development (Parks, 2011). Rather, the movement I witnessed over this time period ebbed and flowed within students' consciousness. It was sometimes transient and fragile, struggling to be named and comprehended by students. It was palpable and inspiring when pieces aligned or obscure and disconcerting when parts misaligned. At times, the motion was still, resting in the comfort of old paradigms or the neutrality of uncertainty. The motion of spirituality moved in all of these ways and in all directions for students. The stages of emerging adult and tested adult as proposed by Parks (2011) closely align with this motion. Students experienced the process of composing and testing a way of being in the world and as they experienced success or positive reinforcement, they progressed from a fragile worldview to a more confident inner-dependence. At other times or for some students, the movement retreated resulting from feelings of inadequacies, negative results or failures of the tested form.

The testing themes from this study related to relationships, values, and resiliency. Students tested new ways of approaching relationships learning from previous struggles and sampling new strategies to be more effective in their second year. Others tested their emerging values by finding opportunities in which they could express their distinct beliefs separate from external forces or previously held beliefs. A number of students struggled with finding success in their academic life or overall wellbeing in balancing the demands of college. Subsequent success in the second year reinforced new behaviors and were integrated into students' worldview and understanding of how to effectively navigate their world. Continued struggles resulted in uncertainty and doubt in students' sense of belonging and ability to be effective in college. The motion students



experienced in the second year of college reflected the state of being while simultaneously becoming.

One theme of this motion that occurred was the emerging consciousness of spirituality over the course of the semester. The act of being enrolled in the Living on Purpose course and participating in this study served as a catalyst for students to become more mindful of their spirituality and purpose and begin to verbalize the ways in which they conceptualized and experienced these concepts. They also came to value the role of exploring purpose and viewed it as an important aspect of their future life. Over the course of the semester, students' voices became stronger in how they expressed their forming opinions and articulated their thoughts. Guiding students through the process of self-discovery and intentionally introducing new paradigms to being in the world nurtured an internal trust in their ability to create a meaningful life.

Motion was also evident in how students shifted their conceptualization of purpose. Over the course of the semester, students moved away from life purpose as a commodity to understanding it as a process or mindset. Closely aligned with this shift was a change in conceptualizing purpose as a future state to understanding it as a present condition. At the start of the semester, students spoke of purpose as a tangible good they would obtain someday. Their language reflected purpose as something outside of themselves that would be known and felt once obtained. As the semester progressed, students examined their current existence from a lens of life purpose. They recognized the value of experiences and an open mindset as the process that led to purpose therefore releasing their hold on defining a singular purpose. As students described purpose as a process, they spoke of living in ways that aligned with their values and a curiosity to

discovering themselves and the world around them. This shift in how students conceptualized purpose allowed them to apply purpose to their current life as a student. It provided a rationale and motivation to create a meaningful undergraduate experience. Identifying a life purpose still resided in the future but the ability to live on purpose became a practice that could be actualized in their college experience and exist in alignment with that future vision.

### **Negotiating Tensions**

During the semester students negotiated various tensions that were informed and illuminated by their college experience. Questions of spirituality resided in the ways in which students experienced these pressures. Tensions revealed themselves as struggles that parallel Baxter Magolda's (2001) intrapersonal, interpersonal and epistemological questions raised through becoming self-authored. The movement these students experienced provides insight into the complexity and interdependence of underlying spiritual questions during the crossroads phase (Baxter Magolda, 2001). In this study, the intrapersonal tensions existed in how students perceived the gap between who they were and who they wanted to be. The interpersonal tensions existed as students explored their emerging self and their current and future relationship to family, community, and career. The epistemological question was evident in how students began to consider and explore their inner voice as a valid way of knowing. The tension between science and spirituality also emerged as a heightened example of how to integrate two conflicting paradigms into one coherent narrative. Tension existed when students experienced a dissonance or incongruence between their perceived and lived spirituality or their being and becoming.

In contrast, students described meaningful moments which reflected alignment or confluence of the important features of their lives.

What became clear through the motion of spirituality is that students experienced a simultaneous tension between the present and the future, supporting the process of spiritual development put forth by Tisdell (2003). Similar to how connectedness existed at a micro and macro level, other elements of spirituality rested both in the daily experience of students and in their larger life framework. Purpose included the regular practices, mindset and experiences that contributed to meaning and happiness in each day. It was also about the bigger contribution that students expected to make in this world. As students were able to align these two tensions in harmony with one another, their overall wellbeing and engagement in their college experience seemed to benefit.

### **Tending to Spirituality**

Students understood the value of nurturing their spirituality and its importance in supporting their overall wellbeing. Previous research indicates that religious and spiritual engagement relates to students level of personal well-being (Park & Millora, 2010) and that spirituality serves as a coping mechanism, especially for students of color (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008; Herndon, 2003; Watt, 1997). Regardless, students in this study struggled to find the time or place in which to intentionally practice or connect with their spirituality even when they knew it would be beneficial. This issue was evident from the beginning of the study when one student dropped the class and consequently withdrew from the study citing a lack of time to think about life purpose. Students acknowledged that the course was not as much of a priority due to other demands on their time. The lack of institutional value of this topic was reinforced for students because it

didn't "count towards anything". Students were constantly forced to balance multiple demands on their time and mounting pressures to do well academically, be involved on campus, and often times work to cover the financial costs associated with attending college. Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2005) describe this as the fragmentation of the aspects of student life:

Managing time and establishing order and structure in their lives are among the most important survival skills every college student must master. It is far more than a scheduling problem; creating structure and a sense of wholeness and meaning out of so much disjointed activity is a task so relentless that it threatens to overwhelm students at times. (p. 169)

Students spoke of being overwhelmed at times and struggled with how to respond to the demands of college life. Attending to students' spirituality is an attempt to bring wholeness to their lives but unfortunately exists as an add-on in relation to more pressing demands.

In addition to time for the course, students also had limited time or opportunity for personal practices. One of the ways in which students experienced their spiritual practices was in being alone or quiet. The lack of privacy in the residence hall or inability to escape other people made it difficult to create opportunities to still their minds and reflect. In addition, students were just discovering the portability of their spirituality. Rather than restricting their spiritual practices to a church or a set location as they had in the past, the transient life of college pushed students to consider ways in which their spirituality could be experienced outside of these locations. Students began to realize that

their spirituality came from within and therefore they could choose to be spiritual in a variety of locations.

### **Key Findings: Exploring Purpose Course**

The final research question for this study explored the influence of a course exploring life purpose on students' spirituality. Here I address the overall course outcomes and influence, the course structure and the living learning community.

#### **Course Outcomes and Influence**

Students found the Living on Purpose course to be valuable to their student experience and in how they viewed their lives. Although they struggled on occasion with finding time for the Living on Purpose course, the ways in which the curriculum guided them through various topics and assignments relating to purpose expanded their self-awareness and worldview. The course allowed students to bring their whole selves to the class environment and relied on them as content experts. They described the course as valuable because it was highly personal. Jones (2005) describes the connections that can occur when we invite all aspects of a student into the learning process:

Spirituality in education refers to no more—and no less—than a deep connection between student, teacher, and subject—a connection so honest, vital, and vibrant that it cannot help but be intensely relevant. Nourishment of this spark in the classroom allows it to flourish in the world, in the arenas of politics, medicine, physics—wherever our students go after graduation. (p.1)

Offering a course such as this encourages students' connectedness and demonstrates that higher education values content that invites subjective, affective and lived experiences as sources of knowledge. The opportunity to connect at these levels allows students to learn

how to acknowledge and navigate the non-rational world, to cultivate curiosity towards themselves and others, and honor the stories that come from the deepest places within themselves. Certainly a course addressing life purpose lends itself to wholeness; others would argue that this can also exist in various disciplines throughout the curriculum (Parker & Zajonc, 2010).

Exploring life purpose has been a centerpiece of the Program on the Theological Exploration on Vocation which evolved into the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (Council of Independent Colleges, 2014). Studies are now emerging that demonstrate the outcomes of this work in the context of small and mid-sized, independent, liberal arts colleges and universities. Clydesdale (2014) found that a purpose curriculum had a positive and lasting impact on students' life. He states that "the takeaway lesson is that purpose exploration produces a pattern of examined living and positive engagement with others, thereby increasing the odds that emerging adults will flourish after they graduate from college" (Clydesdale, 2014, para. 14). The lasting impact of the Living on Purpose course in this study is unknown; however, students did create a multidimensional framework in which to examine their life moving forward which suggests this study may align with elements of Clydesdale's findings. This course became a meta-analysis of students' current and future life that served to integrate the fragmented aspects of their college experience and vision of their life post-graduation.

### **Course Structure**

The format of a mostly online course to explore the topic of life purpose is an unusual design for a highly personal and relational topic. My assumption was that this topic required frequent in-person discussions and community building to allow students

the necessary trust to self-disclose. The initial in-person retreat focused heavily on community building in order to establish a strong foundation in which to begin the online weekly modules. It became evident in the early weeks of the course that students felt free to express their personal stories, beliefs and opinions in an online setting. The online format allowed some students to have a stronger voice than they would have experienced in a traditional classroom setting, especially if they needed more time to compose their thoughts. The two 4-hour in-person classes did serve an important purpose in establishing trust, creating a connection among the students and creating a capstone experience. Levine and Dean (2012) studied the changing trends of this generation of college students and found that 52% of students want more blended instruction of in-person and online classes. This course appealed to students because of the format in which it was offered while still providing an impactful learning experience.

### **Living Learning Community**

Living on Purpose was offered as one of the course options for students living in the SYE House. These environments provide a unifying learning experience for students (Schein, 2005), so it was expected that students would not only interact through the course but naturally carry these conversations into the living environment. By the end of the semester, there was little indication from the data that students interacted in-person around the course content in the SYE House. Small groups of students were friends outside of class but it was not clear if that was because of the course or if they engaged with the course content in their interactions. Why these conversations did not happen is unclear since students expressed an interest in having more in-person classes so that they could further discuss these topics. These students lived together on the same floor and

ate together in the same dining center, yet did not engage in the course content on their own. Perhaps the ways in which students shared personal information through the online course environment made them feel uncomfortable to interact in a casual manner or perhaps the lack of time students described created a barrier. These findings suggest that it may not be enough to co-locate students in a residential community without further structure or opportunities to facilitate this interaction.

The individual stories and collective themes from this study should be considered within the growing research on college students' spirituality. This study advances our understanding of the individualized nature of spirituality and the motion and nuances students experience as they navigate their second year of college.

### **Implications**

Several key findings outlined in this study point to ways in which higher education can foster the spiritual development of college students and provide an educational experience that encourages their holistic development. I offer the following implications to be considered by higher education administrators, faculty and staff as they design and shape institutional policy, curriculum, and co-curricular/student services opportunities.

#### **Policy Implications**

Institutional policies and practices need to support students' development of meaningful and productive lives. I suggest the following policy implications that emerged from this study.

**Promote holistic education and student development as an integrated aspect of the undergraduate experience.** Colleges and universities need to clearly express and



support their commitment to a holistic undergraduate experience. At the broadest levels, this commitment needs to be evident in the mission, values and priorities of the institution and woven into the narratives of the institution's purpose and traditions. Structures, policies and budget allocations contribute to shaping undergraduate education and the commitment to holistic learning. This study demonstrated the multifaceted nature of the student experience revealing the ways in which student spirituality is interwoven in a sense of connectedness, purpose, wellbeing, and intra- and inter-personal development. Policies and practices that recognize these dimensions of students' lives and invite students' cognitive, affective and spiritual dimensions to their educational experience ensure that the institution is helping students develop to their fullest potential. Students in this study spoke little of their classroom experiences or mentors that invited, supported, or guided their development. This notable absence indicates fertile ground in which intentional policies and practices can be explored. Faculty, staff and students need to see and feel the institutional commitment to holistic education and student development not as an add-on but as an essential component of the undergraduate experience. Structures, policies, and practices that recognize and encourage the multidimensional nature of student learning and development provide the opportunity for a more transformational undergraduate experience.

**Use the language of purpose in the context of public institutions.** The language of spirituality and its close affiliation with religion often serves as a barrier for public institutions to foster spiritual development. Even with an expanded conceptualization of spirituality as used in this study, the overlap between spirituality and religion is too strong to realistically expect public institutions to promote spirituality in a

secular context. However, the opportunity for public institutions to encourage the exploration of life purpose, as evident from this study, can result in achieving similar developmental outcomes. Exploring life purpose asks students to participate in self-discovery in relation to a greater whole, a process that parallels and promotes spiritual development. Exploring life purpose can be integrated into the college experience through curricular offerings such as specific course offerings that address life purpose, co-curricular opportunities, student services and mentoring communities as described further in the following implications. A framing of spirituality as life purpose is one strategy that could advance a holistic education for students at public institutions.

**Promote experiences that encourage diversity and social responsibility.** In the context of public colleges and universities, promoting experiences that encourage diversity and social responsibility could contribute to students' spiritual development. The opportunity to be exposed to, interact with, and understand from differing worldviews could expand students' imagination of other ways of being. For many traditionally-aged college students, the exposure to differing cultures, values, beliefs and life models may be limited simply by virtue of their (in)experience in the world. The construction of a life purpose and individualized spirituality assumes a wealth of knowledge and information in which students can choose their path among a plethora of options. Students surrounded by similar worldviews often do not recognize the assumptions and guiding forces in which they live their life. The opportunity to engage in meaningful ways with others from outside their dominant paradigm can shed light on their own assumptions and culture. As students learn about other ways of being, they examine the differences, compare them to their own views and sometimes explore or test

adopting that view. Similarly, as students experience opportunities that encourage social responsibility, they are prompted to question, clarify and actualize their own understanding of their place in the world. Meaningful experiences that may promote spiritual development include study abroad that promotes deep immersion or cultural challenge to facilitate students' learning about themselves and other ways of being, community engagement that promotes mutually beneficial outcomes with people who have different lived experiences than students, and campus dialogues that promote constructive conversations around difficult and complex social issues. Creating guided opportunities for students to experience diversity and address their social responsibility could allow them to construct a more self-authored spirituality and reflective life framework.

**Create opportunities tailored to the second-year experience.** The second year of college reveals distinct themes from the first year and provides an opportunity to address unique developmental themes. During the first year of college, students focus on the transition into and through the campus experience, while the second year becomes a time to explore their sense of purpose, place and self-efficacy within college. Second year programming could provide opportunities for students to get back on track from academic or social challenges they encountered in their first year, engage students in questions of purpose as they make decisions about their academic major and career path, and promote wellbeing for students as they experience increased pressures, independence and “busyness” during their second year. These targeted offerings and interventions recognize the unique themes of the second year and could provide opportunities to enhance students' spirituality.

### **Create campus space and practices that encourage reflection and stillness.**

The pace of college life is challenging for many students to manage. They feel pulled in multiple directions and experience pressure to achieve, pay for college, get involved, and continually manage their next steps. Although it may not be possible to recommend slowing down the undergraduate experience, it is possible to create spaces that facilitate and encourage moments of stillness. In planning and developing the physical layout, campuses could pay attention to green spaces that promote a connection to nature or ensure quiet space within the density of the residence halls. The use of public art and creative design can encourage students to pause, reflect, or connect with the essence of community. Opportunities that cultivate gratitude in students' daily lives contribute to their sense of purpose and overall happiness. The college experience can model purposeful living by creating opportunities that interrupt the busyness and sometimes mindlessness of the daily routine and encourage students' connection to their inner and outer lives. Utilizing the space and design of campus with spiritual development in mind creates a context that nurtures moments of meaning, purpose and connectedness.

### **Curricular Implications**

The curricular and classroom experience cannot be ignored as an essential and powerful context in which to address holistic development. Educational research and the themes from this study provide the foundation for the following curricular implications.

**Provide a curriculum that is personal and relevant to students' lived experiences.** The students in the Living on Purpose course benefited both in their learning and their personal development. Students talked about how the course content was highly personal and applicable to their lives in markedly different ways from their

other courses. The ability to share their own experiences and perspectives and learn from their peers contributed to a personally relevant learning experience that was meaningful to students. Courses that offer subject matter and use teaching approaches in which students can bring their own lived experiences to the course content create powerful learning experiences. These types of courses should be offered at various times throughout the undergraduate experience in order to accompany students throughout their journey of becoming and developing purpose.

**Build community in the classroom to encourage engagement and connection.**

The classroom experience could enhance students' spirituality by applying pedagogical strategies that build community and allow connectedness to the course topics within and outside of the class. Faculty could do this by facilitating student introductions and sharing of personal stories. Assignments could be designed to highlight or incorporate student experiences or perspectives that prompt self-reflection and connection to the material. Students could share these stories in the class which allows them to learn from the lived experiences of their peers. Encouraging students to make connections to their peers in the classroom could promote greater engagement in the class and with the topic. These strategies also allow students to feel valued and acknowledged by others therefore promoting a sense of belonging and mattering. In addition, faculty could integrate pedagogy that encourages a deeper connection to the material through hands-on problem solving, real-world interaction and application, and personal narratives from individuals involved. Bridging the connection between learning and living could help students experience and apply the topic in various contexts. These strategies invite the subjective dimensions and provoke a deeper connection and purpose to the course material.

**Support the role of faculty as mentors.** The common experience of being human needs to be accessible in the learning environment. Faculty could promote opportunities to connect with students in ways that demonstrate their personal journey exploring questions of meaning, purpose and connectedness. Faculty could offer their own lived experiences that expand outside of the course topic. Students could benefit from hearing the process in which the faculty came to choose their career path, what aspects of their work they find meaningful, and the big questions they may wrestle with in their life. Being open or vulnerable with students in the classroom is needs to be done thoughtfully, but could allow students and faculty to be in the learning environment as co-travelers on a life journey.

**Encourage contemplative practices in the classroom.** Contemplative practices serve to calm the mind and provide an opportunity for students to be centered in the present moment. As evident from this study, students struggle with the busyness and pressures of college life. By integrating these practices into the classroom, students are given the opportunity to slow the pace of their college lives and learn the skills of mindfulness and reflection. Examples of contemplative practices that could be applied in the classroom include incorporating silence at the beginning of a class to still students' minds, using poetry, music or art as a tool to experience a reflective or affective perspective on a topic, or focusing on a simple object for an extended time to increase students' attention and invite new ways of seeing a common item. These contemplative and reflective techniques can be integrated into a range of disciplines in an effort to cultivate imaginative thinking, creativity and wellbeing. In this study, students described reflective and mindful moments as ways in which they experienced their spirituality.

Offering this option as a pedagogical strategy could invite students to connect to their spiritual selves in the classroom and encourage them to develop multiple ways of knowing beyond critical thinking.

**Create interdisciplinary opportunities that promote diverse perspective taking.** This study demonstrated that diverse experiences and perspectives allows students to enlarge their own world view and contributes to their expanded spirituality. Creating curricular opportunities that explore a topic from multiple perspectives rather than a singular discipline could help students develop a more complex and holistic understanding of the world. It could allow students to cultivate connective thinking that may be applied beyond the course in their own lives and in applying compassion and empathy in real-world problem solving. Students in this study spoke of the absence of spirituality in their classes, especially in the science majors. Classroom exercises could help students examine and if necessary reconcile their values and beliefs in relation to the diverse or conflicting paradigms they are encountering. Students could explore a current issue, such as climate change, from a scientific, economic, sociological, and philosophical view which collectively encompasses both objective and subjective perspectives on a singular topic. This type of technique helps students to shift their frame of reference and expand their notion of truth. Thematic courses in common or grand challenge curriculums are examples of interdisciplinary approaches that allow for diverse perspective taking.

**Utilize hybrid courses to address various learning styles.** The benefit of hybrid courses is that it offers a flexible format that appeals to and promotes diverse learning styles and student readiness. Reflective writing, online discussions, and in-

person activities offer an array of pedagogical strategies in which each student can experience their dominant learning style at some point in the class. This format allows students flexibility as to when they engage with the course content. Students could choose the conditions in which they connect with the class therefore contributing to their willingness and ability to learn. Traditional in-person classes require students to be prepared to engage at the time the class is scheduled regardless of their personal state of mind. The hybrid course allows students to come to the content at a time and place of their choosing and therefore create the opportunity for increased learner readiness. In-person components are necessary to provide a format for community building and relational pedagogical strategies. As this was a pilot course, future improvements were made to increase the in-person opportunities including a third in-person class, one-to-one meetings with the instructor and peer interviews. These additional components have resulted in stronger community building, peer interaction and opportunities to learn from diverse perspectives.

### **Co-Curricular/Student Services Implications**

Creating environments and opportunities that promote spiritual and student development can be effectively and intentionally integrated throughout co-curricular opportunities and student services.

**Connect students' greater purpose to their daily purpose.** Students in this study experienced a sense of purpose when they could point to activities that felt purposeful. Providing opportunities that align students' present experiences with their larger purpose allows students to find more meaning in their daily life. Recognizing that the college campus is the community context in which these students are currently living,



applying reciprocal community engagement values may help in offsetting the postponement of living on purpose. Rather than waiting to live out their life purpose of “helping people” or “making a difference” in the future, how can students actualize a purposeful life while attending college? One way in which this can be achieved is by encouraging opportunities in which students could give back to the campus community, make an impact on campus issues, or simply be needed for their unique talents or skills. The value of reciprocity are often applied to service-learning and community engagement opportunities but less so within the context of other opportunities on campus or the undergraduate experience as a whole. Students’ engagement on campus provides a context and opportunity for students to integrate their future ideas of becoming into their daily life of being. The college experience can model the reciprocal nature of meaningful community engagement within the boundaries of the campus context.

**Create intentional opportunities for reflection in co-curricular experiences.**

Opportunities for students to step back and reflect upon their classroom learning, real-world experiences and changing self allows them to witness and make meaning of their life motion. Co-curricular experiences such as community engagement, internships, leadership positions, or campus employment could be coupled with intentional opportunities that encourage students to reflect on their spirituality, sense of purpose and connectedness. These experiences could be designed to embed strategies that promote greater reflection such as journaling, mentoring, or group discussions. Embedding regular group meetings or online tools to accompany these engagement opportunities could allow students to come together to reflect on their experiences, learn from others and promote a sense of connectedness.

**Expand the conversation in academic advising and career counseling to include purpose.** Student services such as academic advising and career services provide a supportive environment in which to explore questions of meaning, purpose and connectedness. Academic advisers provide meaningful support to students as they journey through their college experience and could utilize the individual appointments as an opportunity to invite expanded conversations. The advising philosophy and model needs to be structured in such a way that advisers have time to go beyond transactional needs to engage in transformational conversations. Career services and others who work with students around major and career exploration could expand the conversation beyond major selection, job preparation and job placement to include students' values and beliefs relating to a meaningful life and their place in the world. Creating environments and opportunities that support holistic dialogue allow students to examine the unexamined and create a framework in which to continually reflect upon their emerging life. These practices transform a campus into a mentoring community that is invested in the holistic development of students.

### **Contextual Considerations**

Due to the context, methods and scope of the study design, there are several considerations to keep in mind. These considerations include the transferability of the findings, the language of spirituality, the limitations of the conceptual framework, the effect of participating in an on-going study, and my preconceived notions as a researcher.

As a case study, the findings of this study are bound by the context in which the phenomenon of spirituality was explored. This study was conducted at a large, research institution and therefore may not be applicable to students enrolled in other college

settings. The selection of participants was delimited to second-year students at the University of Minnesota who lived in the SYE House and self-selected to enroll in the Living on Purpose course. This purposeful selection of participants was designed to find participants who aligned with the conceptual framework but in doing so may have missed individuals with divergent conceptualizations of spirituality. Because students self-selected to live in the SYE House and registered for this course, they may have pre-dispositions that affected the outcomes of this study. The ability to apply these findings will rely on the judgment of others to interpret the fit or similarity of this study to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). This study attempted to provide enough thick descriptions of the phenomenon in order to allow others to interpret the findings appropriately in the context of their own work.

A second consideration relates to the use of the word spirituality. The language of spirituality evoked different meanings, associations, and emotions for students. The strong association of spirituality with religion made it difficult to explore spirituality as a unique construct. For some students, the word did not resonate at all and therefore other language had to be substituted to reflect the essence of the conceptual framework.

A third consideration relates to how the conceptual framework provided an overarching paradigm which guided the structure of this study. The intent of this framework was to leverage an expanded view of spirituality beyond the confines of religion. The study methodology included open-ended questions which allowed student responses to go beyond the conceptual framework. The data analysis was structured to recognize themes that fell outside of the scope of the conceptual framework. In addition, the design of this study privileged the concept of purpose over other constructs of

spirituality as data was collected throughout the semester from the purpose course. The interviews at the start and end of the semester provided the opportunity to explore other related concepts more fully to supplement and contextualize the focus on purpose.

Another consideration is to recognize the effect of participating in an ongoing study that intentionally asked about spirituality. The nature of the questions may have contributed to increased awareness of and new ways of thinking about students' spirituality in comparison to students who did not participate in the Living on Purpose course. The course assignments for students participating in the study did not seem noticeably different from students who did not participate in the study. However, a small number of students did make reference in the final interview to noticing their spirituality more since it was asked about in the first interview. I would argue that the questions of the study illuminated their existing beliefs and thoughts about spirituality rather than created new thoughts that did not exist otherwise.

Finally, understanding the possible influences imposed by my inherent bias as a researcher and role as course instructor and SYE House liaison. My bias as a researcher related to the topic of spirituality was mediated by bracketing my thoughts, associations, and emotions throughout the study. I kept a written journal throughout the study to continually recognize my own biases and ways in which my views were being challenged and shaped. I also kept analytical memos for each participant as well as an overall analytical memo documenting my perceptions and overall themes. On occasion, I did interact with students outside of the course and study parameters but these resulted in a stronger relationship and greater trust.

## **Future Research**

This study suggests several areas that warrant further research in an effort to expand our understanding and effectiveness of addressing students' spiritual development.

The findings from this study reinforce previous research confirming no agreed upon definition of spirituality. Current research findings relating to spirituality vary based on the conceptual framework that is being applied to the study design. The individualized and hermeneutic nature of this concept and its close association with religion creates a challenging condition for researchers to truly capture the essence of students' experiences with spirituality. This also poses challenges for education research overall as it strives to build a collective body of research in this area. Future research needs to employ various study designs and methods that account for the personal construction and emerging of spiritual paradigms. There is also a need for expanded research capturing diverse perspectives of spirituality. The dominant conceptual framework in the current research has been anchored in monotheism so student experiences grounded in other paradigms have not been captured as well in the existing research.

One of the primary themes that emerged from this study is the movement of spirituality in students' lives. The descriptions from this study hinted to the ways in which spirituality is woven within student development and intersects with the formation of self. Further research can explore the intersections of student development theory and spiritual development and the ways in which they inform each other. Specifically, this study indicated that self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001) and emerging and testing

adulthood (Parks, 2011) are relevant theories in which to explore spirituality. This study demonstrated the value of qualitative research that is conducted over time. Further research is needed that includes multiple in-depth data collection points in order to capture the complexity and multidimensional nature of this movement and to witness spirituality as it unfolds. This additional research can highlight the ways in which students experience spiritual growth and how and when these changes occur.

This study specifically focused on the second year of college as a time when questions of meaning, purpose and connectedness are active. Further research can specifically explore the unique milestones and developmental themes of the second year. Specifically, exploring the relationship between spirituality and academic major selection, career development, sense of belonging, or student engagement are just a few examples that can enhance policies and practices. In addition to the second year, further research could focus on different years of the college experience. Comparing themes that emerge from the second year to other college years may give insight into the salient and potentially differentiated matters that arise throughout the college experience. Additional insight into the ways in which spirituality informs the processes and timing of the college experience could enhance targeted practices within higher education.

This study was designed to travel with students as they explored purpose in their lives in the context of a class. The question remains as to the ways in which second-year students experience spirituality without the guidance of a course or in other structured settings. Further research is needed to explore the ways spirituality is experienced without intentional strategies or with various pedagogical strategies. Additional research is also needed to explore the lasting impact of courses that are similar in nature to the

Living on Purpose curriculum. Does the heightened consciousness of purpose and spirituality “stick” with students as they continue through their college career? Does it make an impact in their college experience or future decision making? Students in this study spoke to the value of the curriculum and ways in which it would shape their life moving forward. Additional research is needed to confirm if this intervention had a lasting impact.

### **Conclusion**

The recent discourse about the purpose of post-secondary education emphasizes college as a means to achieving students’ future career goals. Lost in the conversation is the role of higher education in preparing students for meaningful and productive lives in a democratic society. This responsibility requires a holistic educational experience that addresses the multidimensional aspects of students’ development. Acknowledging their spiritual selves as present in the learning environment is a dimension of holistic education that deserves further consideration. This study explored the ways in which students experience their spiritual selves during college, specifically during their second year. It is during that time that students are exploring questions of meaning and purpose as it relates to the vision of their future selves. Greater insight into their lived experiences of spirituality will deepen the capacity for educators to respond and nurture this process and create institutional efforts to enhance student development.

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## Appendix A

### STUDENT EMAIL INVITATION

Dear [student name],

The new academic year is almost here! I am excited that you are registered for the CSPH 3000: Living on Purpose course offered this fall.

**The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in the research study described below. After reading the following information, please let me know if you are interested!**

In addition to being the co-instructor for this course, I am also a PhD student at the University of Minnesota. For my dissertation I am conducting research that explores how second-year students experience a course on the topic of life purpose. I am interested in how students think about meaning and purpose in their lives and what college experiences affect their overall spiritual development. Based on what I find from you and other participants, I hope to share this study with other educators so that we can work to enhance students' sense of life purpose and holistic development as part of the college experience.

As a student enrolled in the Living on Purpose class, I invite you to participate in this study.

If you are willing to participate, your commitment will consist of two interviews with me including a 1 hour conversation prior to Sept. 8 and a 1/2 hour at the end of the semester. Also, I would ask that you allow me to use select assignments from CSPH 3000 after you have completed the course and access your student records that are typically available to instructors. You will receive a total of \$35 for participating in this study.

Be assured that your participation or decision to participate in this study will not affect your grade or participation in the Living on Purpose course or SYE House. While I will see your course assignments as an instructor during the semester, I will not begin to access them for purposes of scholarly analysis until after grades are submitted. If you agree to participate, your involvement in this study will be known only to me. I will make every attempt to ensure that no one else can attribute anything you say to you.

If you are willing to participate in this study, **please email me directly stating your interest**. Attached is a consent form with more information. If you have questions about this study, feel free to contact me at [REDACTED].

Thank you for considering this request!

Sincerely,

LeeAnn Melin

*Instructor, PhD Candidate in Higher Education*

## **Appendix B**

### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

#### **CONSENT FORM**

#### **Students' Experience of Spirituality in the Second Year**

You are invited to be in a research study exploring how second-year students think about and experience their spirituality. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a second-year student and enrolled in CSPH 3000: Living on Purpose: A student exploration of self, purpose, and community. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: LeeAnn Melin, Director of Undergraduate Student Initiatives in the Office of Undergraduate Education; PhD student in Higher Education, College of Education and Human Development.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore how students perceive and describe their spirituality during the second year of college and what college influences and experiences affect their spirituality. The results of this study will help faculty and staff gain a better understanding of how students experience their undergraduate experience.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Participate in a one-hour interview with me during the first week of fall semester. With your permission, this interview will be audio taped.
- Allow me to use the following assignments from the CSPH 3000 course for this study:
  - Online discussion responses
  - Final purpose project
- Allow me to access demographic information available to instructors.
- Participate in a brief interview or focus group towards the end of the semester. With your permission, this interaction will be audio taped.

If there are specific assignments from the course that you do not want to be used, you are free to contact LeeAnn Melin at any time during the study. The use of the course assignments for this study will not impact your grade for the course.

#### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study**

The study has the following risks:

The topic of this study may be personal and you may choose to respond to questions in ways that lead to self-disclosure. Participants may choose to not answer any question posed to them during the interviews. Because of the option to opt out, participation in this study provides minimum risk. Also, your responses and identity will remain strictly

confidential. Participation in this study will not affect your grades for the course, your participation in the SYE House or any aspect of their course or living learning experience. You may withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

The benefits to participation are:

Study participants may benefit from the type of questions posed throughout the study. Students may be asked to discuss and reflect upon their spirituality and most meaningful life goals in ways that prompt personal understanding and/or growth.

**Compensation:**

You will receive payment of \$10 immediately after the first interview. You will also receive a payment of \$20 after the last interview to be paid directly to participants immediately following the completion of the interview. There is no compensation for the use of course assignments.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report published from this research, no information will be used that might make it possible to identify you as a participant. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the [university] or the Second-year experience House. It will also not affect your grade in the CSPH 3000 course or relationship with the instructors of the course. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researchers conducting this study are: LeeAnn Melin.

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED].

Advisor's Name/Phone: Rebecca Ropers-Huilman.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C

### IRB APPROVAL

## UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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*Twin Cities Campus*

*Human Research Protection Program  
Office of the Vice President for Research*

*D528 Mayo Memorial Building  
420 Delaware Street S.E.  
MMC 820  
Minneapolis, MN 55455*

*Office: 612-626-5654*

*Fax: 612-626-6061*

*E-mail: [irb@umn.edu](mailto:irb@umn.edu) or [ibc@umn.edu](mailto:ibc@umn.edu)*

*Website: <http://research.umn.edu/subjects/>*

08/09/2013

LeeAnn J Melin  
Ofc of Undergraduate Educ  
Room 511 STSS  
222 Pleasant St SE  
Minneapolis, MN 55455

RE: "Students' Experience of Spirituality in the Second Year"  
IRB Code Number: **1308P40321**

Dear Dr. Melin:

The referenced study was reviewed by expedited review procedures and approved on August 8, 2013. If you have applied for a grant, this date is required for certification purposes as well as the Assurance of Compliance number which is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA 00004003). Approval for the study will expire one year from that date. A report form will be sent out two months before the expiration date.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of this study includes the consent form and recruitment e-mail, both received August 6, 2013.

The IRB would like to stress that subjects who go through the consent process are considered enrolled participants and are counted toward the total number of subjects, even if they have no further participation in the study. Please keep this in mind when calculating the number of subjects you request. This study is currently approved for 15 subjects. If you desire an increase in the number of approved subjects, you will need to make a formal request to the IRB.

The code number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

As the Principal Investigator of this project, you are required by federal regulations to inform the IRB of any proposed changes in your research that will affect human subjects. Changes should not be initiated until written IRB approval is received. Unanticipated

problems and adverse events should be reported to the IRB as they occur. Research projects are subject to continuing review and renewal. If you have any questions, call the IRB office at 612-626-5654.

On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success with your research.

Sincerely,

Christina Dobrovlny, CIP  
Research Compliance Supervisor  
CD/ks

CC: Rebecca Ropers-Huilman

## Appendix D

### INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL

*The interview began with general introductions, an overview of the study, and a review of the Consent Form.*

1. Why did you choose to live in the SYE House?
2. Why did you choose to sign up for the Living on Purpose course?
  - a. What do you hope to get out of this course?
3. Tell me about your first year at the U
4. Thinking about your first year in college,
  - a. Can you tell me about a time when you experienced something that was really meaningful? Why was this meaningful?
  - b. How about a time when you felt a strong sense of purpose?
    - i. When you felt a lack of purpose? How did you cope?
  - c. A time when you felt connected to something bigger than yourself?
5. Thinking about your life right now as you start into your second year, how would you describe your sense of meaning or purpose? Connected to others?
6. Thinking about your future goals,
  - a. What are you considering as a major? Career?
  - b. In what ways do you think about your life's meaning and purpose as you imagine what you want to do after graduation?
7. How do you define or describe what spirituality means to you?
8. Based on your description/definition, how do you experience this part of yourself?
9. What experiences or influences (events, people, history) have shaped how you think about your spirituality?
10. How do you experience your spirituality as part of your college experience?
  - a. When does it seem at the forefront of your experience and when does it seem distant?
11. What college experiences have influenced or affected how you think about your spirituality?
  - a. Prompts: Classes? Outside the classroom? Relationships on campus?
12. In what ways does the university's environment **encourage** or **discourage** you to explore and develop this part of you?

13. In what ways do you think about your spirituality differently now than when you started college?

14. What are your hopes for your second year of college?

*Interview wrap-up: thanks for participation, payment, reminder of interview at end of semester*

## Appendix E

### INTERVIEW 2 PROTOCOL

Second interview introduction: Review confidentiality

You are wrapping up the fall semester of your second year. How has it gone?

- What stands out as meaningful to you from this semester?
  - When we met in the fall, you had hoped your second year would be ... (use highlights from 1<sup>st</sup> interview). Was that your experience? Why or why not?
- General follow-ups

Tell me about your experience with the Living on Purpose course.

The course covered a lot of themes relating to purpose (show list below). Which of these stand out to you as being the most significant for you? In what ways?

What is Purpose?	Strengths
Happiness & Purpose	Passions – looking outside of yourself
Culture & Identity	Vulnerability/Risk Taking
Career & Major	Positivity
Ways of knowing	Big Questions Project
Values	

At the first in-person class, we had you stand next to one of the following descriptions that you felt best described you. Do you remember which one you chose? Why did you place yourself there? If you were to do this today, would it change?

I don't worry about purpose, I just live life doing things I am drawn to

I know exactly what my purpose is and work at it each day

I believe I have a purpose but have no idea what it is/how to find it

In what ways do you think about purpose differently now than from when you started the course?

When we met in the fall, we talked about the concept of spirituality (pull out highlights from previous interview). Have you thought any more about your spirituality (or term used last interview) this semester? In what ways? How have you experienced it as part of your college experience?

What is your current definition of spirituality? Has that changed over the semester? If so, talk about that.

What is your understanding of the relationship between spirituality and purpose?

Thinking about your life right now, how would you describe your sense of meaning or purpose?

## Appendix F

### ABBREVIATED COURSE SYLLABUS

#### **Living on Purpose: A Student Exploration of Self, Purpose, and Community**

##### **Course Description:**

Exploring our purpose in life means asking and answering the essential question, “What makes me want to get out of bed in the morning?” Purpose is that deepest belief within us where we have a strong sense of who we are, where we came from, and where we’re going. It is the ability to know yourself, know what you know, to reflect on it, and base your judgments, choices and actions on it.

Living on Purpose is a course designed to help students explore questions of meaning and purpose in college and in their lives. In this class, students will examine the context and meaning of their own lives, explore other peoples’ ways of living on purpose, and consider the big questions that shape their present and future. Through two, in-person classes, readings, reflections, experiential exercises, and assignments, the course will offer students time to define their own purpose at this time in their lives and to help build a framework to lead a purposeful life now and into the future.

##### **Learning Objectives:**

By the end of the course students will:

- Identify the central dimensions of a purposeful life, and articulate a personal sense of what makes life meaningful.
- Identify key strengths, values, passions, and influences that contribute to their sense of purpose
- Identify personal obstacles and areas of growth to living a more purposeful life
- Articulate the role of community within their understanding of personal purpose
- Create a personal purpose statement and supporting goals that reflect an understanding of class learning.
- Report a stronger sense of hope, purpose, and self-efficacy in their future university career and beyond
- Develop and demonstrate critical thinking and reflective thinking skills through course assignments and online discussions.

#### **Course Requirements and Assignments**

##### **In-Person Class Attendance (10%):**

Given the nature of this course topic, it is essential that the class participants develop a sense of community and common experience. Two required in-person class sessions will be held on September 8th from 3 to 8 p.m. and December 8th from 3 to 8 p.m. Attendance for the entire in-person class times is required. An In-Person Class Agreement form, available on the Moodle site, is to be completed by 4:30pm on Thursday, September 5th to confirm your attendance at the In-person class on Sunday, September 8th. If any student cannot meet the

attendance requirement, they may be asked to withdraw from the class. Please see the instructors for questions related to this policy.

### **Weekly Assignments (15%)**

As we explore each of the weekly themes, there will be individual assignments that relate to the topic. These assignments may be a reflective writing exercise, a guided worksheet, an online assessment and reflection, or an experiential activity. Each assignment will be worth either 10 or 20 points. Note, there are 10 assignments so there is not necessarily an assignment every week. Assignments are due by 11:55 pm on the Sunday of the week in which they are assigned.

### **Quizzes (10%)**

Throughout the semester there will be required readings or viewings assigned for each course topic. To demonstrate your understanding of the content, there is a 10 point quiz of mostly multiple choice and true/false questions to complete for most weeks. These quizzes are based on the readings or viewing of videos or whatever has been assigned for the week. It is important that you complete all the readings, viewings, etc., BEFORE you take the quiz. You have 2 minutes per question and 20 minutes overall to complete the quiz. You can attempt to take the quiz two times. A quiz must be completed by Sunday at 11:55pm of any given week.

We recognize that “purpose” is not a “one size fits all” topic and that some of the topics in this course do not mesh easily with a multiple choice or true/false quiz format. At times, we expect you to disagree or question an author or source for only you can determine such things as what makes you happy, what gives you meaning, or what helps you find purpose in your life. Whether you agree or disagree with the answer in a quiz, the quiz is our way of giving you points for doing the assigned work. Thus in all cases, the correct answers to the quiz questions will be found within the resources listed for that week.

### **Online Discussions (20%)**

Each week students will be expected to participate in an online discussion relating to the course topic of the week. Students will be assigned to a small online discussion group for the entire semester and are expected to post their response to the weekly question and also comment on another student's posting. Questions will be posted by Monday morning; your response to the question should be posted by midnight on Thursday (up to 3 points); your response to another student's posting should be completed by Sunday at midnight (up to 2 points).

The topic of “purpose”, defining it, developing it, working with it and living it, is inherently subjective and very personal as we relate our “study” of purpose to our lives. Living your life with purpose comes in as many forms as we are unique human beings. We encourage you to put on this lens of openness, curiosity, growing and learning with this topic as you interact with your peers. We welcome lively and respectful discourse in the Online Discussions as we all wrestle with the many course topics that bring up such different and sometimes very personal viewpoints, experiences, beliefs, and opinions.

### **Purpose Interview (10%)**

The goal of this assignment is to learn how other people define and live their purpose-filled lives. You will select a person to interview whom you believe to be living a meaningful and fulfilled life. This should be a person you judge to be living with vitality, purpose, passion, and whose life path you admire. They could be a current or former professor, a friend of the family, a neighbor, a high school or grade school teacher, an adviser, coach or mentor. You will be asked to write a 3-4-page paper reflecting on what you have learned from this person and how it relates to the themes of this class and your life. A detailed description of the project is on the Moodle site.

### **Big Question Group Project (15%)**

During the college years, students are often drawn to explore life's big questions. This project provides an opportunity for students to identify a big question and explore multiple perspectives and insights relating to this question. Groups will be formed based on the common interest of a question. The final project is a 30-minute presentation in which groups share their findings and facilitate class learning around this question. The Big Question group presentation will be due at our final in-person class on Sunday, December 8th. Details for this project are on the Moodle site.

### **Living on Purpose Capstone (Digital Narrative or Paper) (20%)**

The final project for the class will be a Living on Purpose Capstone. This 5-page paper or 3-5 minute digital narrative will serve as the capstone to the course and be comprised of a personal reflection that integrates a thoughtful analysis of course topics. A detailed description and set of instructions for the final paper or digital narrative will be available on the Moodle site. Note that this final project will only be viewed by the instructors of the course. If you are interested or willing to share your digital narrative or paper with a larger audience, permission to do so would be welcomed by the instructors.

## **Course Outline**

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### **PART 1: Exploring the Concept of Purpose**

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#### **Week 1 Class and Purpose Overview**

#### **IN-PERSON CLASS: SUNDAY, 3 to 8 p.m.**

Weekly Objectives:

- Identify where to find specific items from online course site
- Identify the course format
- Identify class expectations
- Describe definitions and dimensions of purpose including finding your purpose vs. living purposefully
- Get to know one another

#### **Week 2 A Meaningful Life**

Weekly Objectives:



- Identify aspects of life that are personally meaningful and contribute to a sense of purpose
- Recognize the difference between happiness and purpose

### **Week 3 The Pursuit of Happiness**

Weekly Objectives:

- Identify constructs and sources of happiness
- Recognize multiple perspectives on the sources of happiness
- Identify some of your personal sources of happiness and how they relate to the concept of purpose.

### **Week 4 Cultural Perspectives and Purpose**

Weekly Objectives:

- Identify multiple worldviews around purpose and identify at least two elements of your own views that may be culturally bound
- Discuss your own cultural and identity influences that have shaped your perception of purpose

### **Week 5 Finding Purpose in Work**

Weekly Objectives:

- Discuss the role of work in a meaningful life
- Describe the predominant cultural view in America regarding career and work
- Identify alternative ways in which others have conceptualized purpose in work

### **Week 6 Inner Ways of Knowing**

Weekly Objectives:

- Discuss multiple forms of intelligence including emotional and spiritual intelligence and the concept of flow
- Experience and/or appreciate contemplative practices as a source of self-knowledge
- Identify experiences and conditions that contribute to your experiencing moments of flow
- Discuss the connection between your inner ways of knowing and the concept of purpose.

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## **PART 2: EXPLORING YOUR PURPOSE**

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### **Week 7 Reflecting on Your Identity**

Weekly Objectives:

- Identify social identities and how they influence your core identity
- Articulate external influences

### **Week 8 Exploring Your Values**

Weekly Objectives:

- Discuss the role of values and their role in purpose
- Identify your personal values and their sources
- Assess how your personal values align with your behavior

### **Week 9 Exploring Your Strengths**

Weekly Objectives:

- Identify and learn about your 5 Talent Themes from the StrengthsFinder assessment
- Give examples of how your talent themes show up in your life.
- Articulate strategies to integrate your strengths into your daily life and future opportunities
- Articulate how knowing your strengths relates to purpose

### **Week 10 Living Outside of Ourselves**

Weekly Objectives:

- Articulate your personal passions and their sources
- Examine how living outside of ourselves contributes to life purpose
- Identify how your passions may inform your life purpose

### **Week 11 Exploring your Career as Your Passion**

Weekly Objectives:

- Discuss what motivates individuals in their work
- Identify the influences that shape your expectations and knowledge of careers
- Articulate a proposed major/career path and your motivation and influences relate to this choice

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## **Part 3: DEVELOPING YOUR PURPOSE**

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### **Week 12 Vulnerability/Risk Taking**

Weekly Objectives:

- Identify the meaning and value of vulnerability
- Identify personal barriers to finding and living on purpose
- Assess our self-compassion
- Define self-compassion and ways in which we can be more self-compassionate

### **Week 13 (Thanksgiving) Positivity and Gratitude**

Weekly Objectives:

- Discuss how positivity and gratitude can contribute to supporting purpose in one's life.
- Discuss how positivity and positive emotions affects human beings

### **Week 14 Building and Sustaining Your Purpose**

**IN-PERSON CLASS: SUNDAY, December 8th, 3:00 – 8:00 p.m.**

Weekly Objectives:

- Present Big Question projects
- Value multiple perspectives on a single question
- Participate in course capstone reflection activities
- Articulate your purpose

### **Week 15 Living on Purpose Capstone**

Weekly Objectives:

- Identify and articulate your dreams and goals for the future
- Develop a framework in which to guide a purposeful life