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Thriving to Survive: Examining Spirituality as a Strategy for Coping and Perseverance Among Christian College Students at an Urban Public College

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Thriving to Survive: Examining Spirituality as a Strategy for Coping and Perseverance Among Christian College Students at an Urban Public College

Abstract

Low college graduation rates continue to be a great concern for institutions of higher education. There is a need to examine and employ strategies that will help students cope, persevere, and graduate. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions of Christian college students to determine if they identify spirituality as a mechanism to help them cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college. Social cognition (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and student involvement (Astin, 1984) provided the theoretical framework. Five research questions guided the study. Eight students participated in a one on one in-depth face to face interview. Twelve interview questions were presented to each student. The researcher extracted rich data from the interviews that provided substantial evidence to support the study. The results from the study indicated the student's definition of spirituality is directly related to their beliefs, values, and practices. God, prayer, and reading the Bible underscored the principles of their faith. Findings indicated the student's faith was cultivated by their family, friends, and church family. Interacting with other Christian students at the college provided additional support the students indicated they needed to cope and persevere in college. Based on the findings from this study further research into the lived experiences and perceptions of underrepresented minorities, Christians and non-Christian students, and male students would provide valuable insight into this emerging phenomenon. Perhaps, spirituality is a strategy that may help to increase the graduation rates for college students and institutions of higher education.

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Thriving to Survive: Examining Spirituality as a Strategy for Coping and Perseverance
Among Christian College Students at an Urban Public College

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my heavenly father who sustained me through the passing of my mom as well as other challenges that I faced while trying to complete my dissertation journey. I give all the glory to God who is the supreme source of my faith. I thank God for surrounding me with love, peace, joy, and strength during the most difficult time of my life. If it had not been for my faith in God I would not have made it.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my mom, Lucy C. Faniel. My heart and soul aches in pain as I reflect on the day I started on this journey. When I started, I was excited about accomplishing another goal that would make my mother proud of me. That excitement soon turned into despair. I lost my biggest fan, cheerleader and supporter - my mom. She fought a good fight. I watched her live a life of selflessness, integrity, love, holiness, dedication, and faithfulness to God. She showed me how to serve God with my body, soul, and spirit.

My mother's life was filled with physical ailments. Yet, she worked hard by providing health care to those who couldn't care for themselves. She was always thinking about the physical and spiritual well-being of others. I am so grateful to God that my mom lived a life that showed me how to be a positive and productive citizen. She showed me how to "hold on to God's unchanging hand." Her legacy will live on through me, my children, and the generations to follow as well as the many lives she touched. To my 3 sons, thank you for all your support. I love each of you very dearly.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who has provided any type of support and or words of encouragement to help me persevere to this point. To my dissertation committee members, Cohort 6, my church family, York College - CUNY colleagues, students who participated in the study, and my dear friends (you know who you are) - I thank you all! To God Be the Glory!!!

Biographical Sketch

Theresa A. Curry is currently the director for the TRIO programs at York College City University of New York. Ms. Curry started her higher education pursuits at Thomas Nelson Community College in Newport News, VA in 1996. She transferred to Adelphi University upon her return to New York in 1998 and continued there until 2000, graduating with a Bachelors of Arts in Social Sciences and Human Behavior in 2001. Ms. Curry attended Adelphi University from 2000 to 2003 and graduated with a Masters of Social Work in 2003. She has worked in the field of social work and education for almost three decades. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2014 and began her doctoral studies in the Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Curry pursued her research in examining spirituality as a strategy for coping and perseverance among Christian college students at an urban public college under the direction of Dr. Shelley Jallow and Dr. Carol J. Alleyne and received the Ed.D. degree in 2017.

Abstract

Low college graduation rates continue to be a great concern for institutions of higher education. There is a need to examine and employ strategies that will help students cope, persevere, and graduate. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions of Christian college students to determine if they identify spirituality as a mechanism to help them cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college. Social cognition (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and student involvement (Astin, 1984) provided the theoretical framework. Five research questions guided the study. Eight students participated in a one on one in-depth face to face interview. Twelve interview questions were presented to each student. The researcher extracted rich data from the interviews that provided substantial evidence to support the study. The results from the study indicated the student's definition of spirituality is directly related to their beliefs, values, and practices. God, prayer, and reading the Bible underscored the principles of their faith. Findings indicated the student's faith was cultivated by their family, friends, and church family. Interacting with other Christian students at the college provided additional support the students indicated they needed to cope and persevere in college. Based on the findings from this study further research into the lived experiences and perceptions of underrepresented minorities, Christians and non-Christian students, and male students would provide valuable insight into this emerging phenomenon. Perhaps, spirituality is a strategy that may help to increase the graduation rates for college students and institutions of higher education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Satisfying the requirements to achieve a 4-year undergraduate degree can be stressful, challenging, and yet a rewarding experience (Schreiner, 2013). Some students may finish their undergraduate degree in 4 years, while some students may require additional time. There are several reasons why some students may require additional time, including academic, social, and economic disadvantages, lack of family support, working full or part time, financial debts and obligations, family obligations, personal attitudes and behaviors, and disabilities that limit ability (Capra, 2009, Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, 2010). Disadvantages, disparities, depression, distractions, and disappointments can decrease a student's desire and ability to persevere in college (Schreiner, 2013). Some students may lose hope and cannot cope so they drop out of college. There are supportive services available to students in higher education to seek help as needed with personal and social challenges (Engle & Tinto, 2008, Jordan, 2007). However, some personal, social, and economic challenges and stressors cannot be addressed by traditional methods (Chaplot, Cooper, Johnstone, & Karandjeff, 2015).

Supportive services have increased significantly in higher education over the past four decades to help students succeed academically (Tinto, 2012). Students now have access to counseling, financial assistance, mentoring, student activities and other social-emotional supports to increase their ability to persevere and graduate (Jordan, 2007). However, poor retention and graduation rates continue to be a great concern for college administrators (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Despite the efforts to increase and improve

supportive services, there remains a need to ascertain how we can help students cope, persevere, and graduate. Astin, A., Astin, H., and Lindholm (2011) suggest cultivating spirituality in higher education will help enable students to respond to the many stresses and tensions of our rapidly changing society and to move forward with a sense of meaning and purpose. Schreiner (2013) recommends employing a holistic view of student success through the concept of thriving in college. According to Schreiner (2010), thriving is defined as being “fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally in the college experience.” If we are to increase the overall college graduation rates in the United States there remains a need for institutions of higher education to recognize and consider strategies that college students may employ to help them thrive and survive their college experience to successfully graduate.

Problem Statement

There is a need for additional resources and alternative methods to help students cope with academic, social, and personal challenges while they are in college. An alternative method such as spirituality, is surfacing on college campuses across the country as an important aspect of students’ lives (Astin et al., 2011). More research is needed from the student’s perspective to explain why spirituality is important.

Understanding how spirituality may aid in their ability to cope with the challenges in colleges may reveal another method to help students graduate. According to Engle and Tinto (2008), “It is in our shared national interest to act now to increase the number of students who not only enter college, but more importantly earn their degrees, particularly bachelor’s degrees” (p. 2). According to Engle and Tinto (2008), “low-income, first-generation students who started in public, four-year institutions were three times more

likely to leave after the first-year compared to their most advantaged peers, 12 to 4 percent respectively” (p. 11). Now that college has become more accessible, especially for underrepresented and underprivileged students, there is a need for institutions of higher education to consider all factors that may hinder a students’ ability to cope with the challenges and stressors of college (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

According to a report released by the Department of Education (DOE), the national attainment rate needs to increase by 50% from its current level by 2020 to restore the United States back to being the global leader in college graduates with an associate’s degree or higher (Ed.gov, 2012). In the same report, 2009 – 2010 data revealed 39.3% of college students between the ages of 25 – 34 completed a postsecondary degree. This warranted a request by former president Barack Obama for institutions of higher education to increase the number of degree-holders to 60% by the end of the decade (Ed.gov, 2012). However, with only 54.8% of the fall 2010 cohort graduating within 6 years instead of 4 years, regaining the position of global leader with college graduates by 2020 is highly improbable (Lumina Foundation, 2015, Shapiro et al., 2016).

The national graduation rates for the fall 2010 cohort showed a slight increase of 1.9% from the fall 2009 cohort (Shapiro et al., 2016). In contrast, college enrollment has decreased for the past 3 years (Shapiro et al., 2016). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2016) report, the estimated total college enrollment for academic year 2014 was 19, 619,733, academic year 2015 was 19,280,473, and academic year 2016 was 19,010,459. Over this 3-year period, college enrollment decreased by approximately 609,274 students. Enrollment decreased primarily among 4-year for-profit

institutions, 4-year private nonprofit, and 2-year public institutions. However, 4-year public institutions showed a slight increase in college enrollment (Shapiro et al., 2016). As such, improving the graduation rates overall is imperative for the students who are enrolling into college and the institutions in which they attend (Engle & Tinto, 2008). If we are to increase graduation rates and regain global leadership in producing college graduates, we need to examine and employ strategies that will help students cope, persevere, and graduate (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Low graduation rates have been a concern for college administrators. Empirical research has yielded several reasons for the low graduation rates, such as academic, financial, and social stressors (Engle, 2012). Researchers like, Engle and Tinto (2008), indicate students fail to complete their college degree due to poor academic performance, low income, and social stressors are more likely to discontinue their education. Several changes in supportive services resulted from the research to address academic, social and financial needs of college students. Counseling services, financial assistance, free tutoring, mentoring, and student activities are some of the changes institutions of higher education have implemented to support students who want to complete a college degree (Jordan, 2007). However, there remains a need to examine how some students cope, persevere, and graduate despite the challenges and stressors they encountered. According to Pargament (2013), “Spiritual coping methods offer support when other sources of support are hard to find, ultimate explanations when life seems incomprehensible, and a sense of control when the world seems out of control” (p. 276). Perhaps, a closer examination into the lived experiences of students who employ spirituality to cope in

college will help to provide additional information for institutions of higher education to reconsider to what extent they will embrace the concept.

Theoretical Rationale

Three theories will build the framework for this study: social cognition (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and student involvement (Astin, 1984). Each concept has key elements that may help to substantiate the development of this research. Bandura (1977, 1986) and Astin (1984) are notable researchers who have added valuable information to their areas of expertise.

Social cognitive theory. Albert Bandura (1988), is a prominent psychologist who developed the social cognitive theory. The basis of this theory is centered on determining and predicting how people learn and develop behavior in reaction to their environment. Bandura asserted, humans are agents, who have the ability to think, process, organize, reflect, regulate, and imitate modeled behaviors that will yield desired results. He expanded his theory by indicating that personal influences, behaviors, and environmental experiences interact and operate in what is characterized as triadic reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1988). This means each experience that a person has creates a thought that is mentally stored for learning which may generate an immediate or delayed replication based on the observation of other modeled behavior whether good or bad (Bandura, 1988). The college environment plays an important role in the intellectual and social development of students. Students may cope and persevere in college or choose to drop out if the environment is not conducive to their academic and social learning. According to Bandura's social cognition theory (2001), environmental factors play a key role in how we learn, think, and behave.

Student involvement theory. Although, Astin and Bandura conducted different studies, social cognition and student involvement theories share similar concepts. Both theorists indicate environmental events and experiences are influential components of the learning process which helps to motivate and regulate personal beliefs and behaviors (Astin, 1984, Bandura, 2001). The student involvement theory underscores the need for institutions of higher education to provide an environment that will cause students to want to invest and be involved physically and psychosocially in academic and social activities (Astin, 1984). The environment can have a positive or negative effect on the development and desire of students to become involved academically as well as involved in student activities on the campus (Astin, 1984, Bandura, 2001). Based on Astin's et al. (2005, 2011) work with college students he asserted the need for students to feel connected and accepted in the college environment to invest quantitative and qualitative time. Astin (1984) placed an emphasis on the college environment and experience as vital to shaping the outcome of the student. Interactions with students, staff, and faculty also play a vital role in how a student will respond to the environment and their level of commitment and engagement (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This can affect their decision to stay or discontinue in college.

Self-efficacy. Bandura extended his social cognitive theory by introducing the concepts of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is predicated on having the belief and self-confidence in one's ability to accomplish a desired goal or performance (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura (2001), "Economic conditions, socioeconomic status, and educational and family structures affect behavior largely through their impact on people's aspirations, sense of efficacy, personal standards, affective states, and other self-

regulatory influences, rather than directly” (p. 15). The college environment can be challenging and have a negative effect on the students due to the rigorous demands of academia (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Unexpected circumstances in life can compound the stressors in life decreasing the ability and desire of students to cope in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Principles of self-efficacy will be used to examine if, why and how Christian students employ spirituality as a method to help them cope and persevere towards graduation at a 4-year urban public college. Self-efficacy underlies the concepts of social cognition and student involvement. How and what a person believes can affect their ability and desire to pursue and persevere (Bandura, 1977).

Social cognition, self-efficacy, and student involvement provides a framework for understanding how students learn, develop and reciprocate modeled behaviors that may or may not help them to succeed in college (Astin, 1984, Bandura, 1977, 1986). The theories provide an explanation for how environmental factors influence behavior. The core of spirituality embraces the concepts of social cognition, self-efficacy, and student involvement. Miller (2015) suggests,

In the first decade of life, the child advances through a process of integrating his or her spiritual ‘knowing’ with other developing capabilities, including cognition, physical, social, and emotional development, all which are shaped by interactions with parents, faculty, peers, and community. (p. 4)

Social cognition, self-efficacy, and student involvement have interrelating principles that can work independently and dependently (Astin, 1984, Bandura, 1977, 1986). Each theory underlines the basis for how students learn, think, and behave. However, each theory is reliant on each other to become operational agents to produce the desired

behavior of what a person learn and believe (Bandura, 1986). As such, Miller (2015) purports, “Spirituality links the brain, mind, and body” (p. 26).

The college environment plays an important role in the development of students who are questing for purpose and meaning (Astin et al., 2011). Astin et al (2005) expanded his student involvement theory by examining spirituality among college students. He suggested that institutions of higher education could enhance the inner lives of college students by cultivating spirituality in the college environment (Astin et al., 2005, 2011). Researchers (Astin et al., 2011, Miller, 2015, Moberg, 2010) confirm spirituality can have a positive impact on one’s ability to transform and transcend academically, mentally, and physically. Spirituality may be the strategy that can enhance the ability of college students to cope and persevere through challenges and stressors while attending college. Students need additional methods that will help them complete their undergraduate degree. Spirituality is an additional resource that needs further examination to understand how it may be beneficial for students as well as institutions of higher education.

Statement of Purpose

Excelling in college can be stressful, increasing the probability of dropping out, due to academic, personal, and social challenges (Murff, 2005). Utilizing strategies that will help students to cope and persevere in college is an action that institutions of higher education may need to rethink in their efforts to increase academic success (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the perceptions of Christian college students to ascertain if spirituality is a strategy that helps them to cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college. Examining the lived experiences of Christian college students who

have persisted past their first year of college will help the researcher to determine if spirituality is a strategy that students use to overcome challenges to cope and persevere in college. Developing and implementing methods to help students manage the complexities of academic, social and personal stressors and challenges is vital to the overall progression of students in higher education.

Spirituality is resurging and gaining attention with empirical evidence to support the cultivation of spirituality in higher education (Astin et al., 2011). This researcher hopes to extract additional information that will add to the growing body of research. For the past 10 years the literature on spirituality in higher education has increased significantly (Waggoner, 2016). Astin and his team of researchers have conducted extensive research and collected data to understand the spiritual life of college students (Astin et al., 2005, Astin et al., 2011). Astin's research postulates cultivating spirituality in higher education as a method for helping students succeed academically, personally and socially. However, more input is needed from the students' perspective. Providing an opportunity for students to share their thoughts, beliefs and experiences about spirituality in higher education may add a valuable voice to the existing literature.

The researcher will provide a voice for Christian college students. Although, Christians are characterized as a religious group, the primary purpose is to ascertain how this group of college students copes with stressors while trying to accomplish their goal of graduating. The decision to conduct a phenomenological study with Christians rests upon the fact that the establishment of institutions of higher education in the United States began with a spiritual foundation (Geiger, 2014, Waggoner, 2016). Christian students are more likely to lean on their spiritual beliefs and values due to their religious association (Bryant, 2011).

Research suggests students who identify as having spiritual beliefs are more likely to connect socially, develop personally, and have a better view of themselves and their surroundings (Astin et al., 2011). Social cognition, self-efficacy, and student involvement will provide the lens for this researcher to gain insight into the students' perceptions. Conducting the study among students in a Christian Club at a 4-year urban public college may reveal methods for institutions of higher education to consider in their efforts to increase academic success. A closer examination of spirituality from the students' perception may provide more insight into how students can utilize spirituality to cope and persevere in college to graduate with their undergraduate degree.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this research:

1. How do Christian students define spirituality?
2. How do Christian students describe the connection between their spirituality and self-efficacy in college?
3. How do Christian students describe how they handle academic, personal, and social obligations?
4. How do Christian students describe the relationship between their spirituality and their college success?
5. How do Christian students describe how their college experience has supported or hindered the expression of their spirituality?

Potential Significance of the Study

The US is struggling to increase the graduation rates for the fall 2010 cohort of students (Shapiro et al., 2016). Colleges and universities have implemented various

programs and services over the years to address the declining graduation rates (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Spirituality is resurfacing as a strategy for coping during difficult times and developing a better sense of purpose in life (Astin et al., 2011). Although researchers continue to discuss spirituality in higher education, little has been done to apply the practical applications of spirituality to aid and support academic success (Astin et al., 2011). The aim of this research is to hear the voices of Christian college students who employ spirituality as a strategy for coping and persevering at a 4-year urban public college.

This study may provide insight into how Christian college students who attend a 4-year urban public college employ spirituality in their efforts to contend with a myriad of challenges and stressors in the college environment. Research indicates spirituality plays a role in increasing a student's ability to cope with challenges and persevere (Astin et al., 2011). Understanding how students develop the ability to cope through challenges in life is crucial to developing policies, procedures, and best practices for academic success. Moberg (2010) found, "Biological research provides supportive evidence that spirituality is a built-in biological component of human nature" (p. 109). The humanistic psychological approach supports the employment of spirituality as a method for moving toward self-actualization (Klepper & Bruce, 2013). However, the college experience focuses more on developing students academically and intellectually (Braskamp, 2007).

Developing strategies to incorporate spirituality in the college environment may provide the support students need to achieve their academic and professional goals. The results from this study may provide valuable information that institutions of higher education may use to develop spiritual pedagogies and additional supportive services that

will undergird the efforts of college students to successfully graduate. Public institutions of higher education must consider strategies that do not challenge the First Amendment clause to the United States Constitution prohibiting public institutions from being intrusive and requiring any specific religious practice (Dreisbach, 2006). Finding ways to embrace personal beliefs and practices among students and faculty without being offensive to those who do not believe and practice the same will require much thought and consideration. Miller (2009) indicated, authentic and transparent interaction between students and faculty increases spiritual connectedness. Incorporating spirituality in the classroom may be another way to engage and involve students as well as increase their desire to cope and persevere in college to complete their undergraduate degree.

According to Walker and McPhail (2009), “New voices are beginning to sound the clarion, to restore spirituality to academics” (p. 344). Developing the ability to cope through adversity builds mental and physical strength through the application of spirituality to face challenges internally and externally (Cady, 2007, Kim & Esquivel, 2011). Chickering (2006) noted, “I believed that a renewed commitment to recognizing and honoring spirituality in the academy is essential if we are to succeed in providing higher education that integrated intellect and spirit” (p. 17). A review of the existing literature revealed there is a lack of qualitative phenomenological studies on spirituality in higher education. Conducting a qualitative phenomenological study with Christian students attending an urban public college will give voice to their lived experiences. This will help to provide insight into how the students cope and persevere through adversities while attending college. The information received from the study may add value to the existing literature. As more research continues to emerge to examine spirituality in

higher education, hopefully the voices of Christian college students attending an urban public college will be contributing factors to the new strategies, policies and services to be implemented.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions helped to clarify and connect conceptions throughout this research study.

Cohort. A group of students entering college during the same semester, such as fall 2016, established for tracking graduation rates (Shapiro et al., 2015).

Coping skills. Mental or emotional methods used to resolve or reduce stress (Carver et al., 1989).

Christians. Christians are individuals who believe in the teachings and principles of the Holy Bible, salvation through Jesus Christ, and sharing the good news with others (Bryant, 2011).

Evangelize. Evangelize is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to every human being to convert them by the divine power of the Spirit of God (Elwell, 1997).

Perseverance. Having the ability to accomplish long term goals despite the challenges and stressful events that one may face (Smith, Epstein, Ortiz, Christopher, & Tooley, 2013).

Persistence. Persistence is returning to college from the previous fall semester to the following fall semester at any institution. (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Retention. Retention is returning to college from the previous fall semester to the following fall semester at the same institution. (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Social cognitive theory. How people learn and develop behavior as an immediate or delayed reaction to their environment (Bandura, 1986).

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is belief and confidence in self to accomplish a desired goal (Bandura, 1977).

Spirituality. An inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and a guiding force or energy. The word we give to this higher power might be God, nature, spirit, universe, the creator, or other words that represent a divine presence (Miller, 2015).

Student involvement. The amount of physical and psychological energy students devotes to their academic experience (Astin, 1984).

Summary

Our nation is struggling to increase more than 50 % of students who enroll each academic year (Shapiro et al., 2015). Students need alternatives within education to help them thrive in college (Schreiner, 2013). According to Chickering, Dalton, and Auerbach (2006),

When the communal life of the campus is welcoming, inclusive, celebrative, and open to diverse experiences and perspectives, including authenticity, spirituality, and the search for meaning and purpose, it provides an emotional infrastructure for the challenges and conflicts of college life. (p. 165)

Utilizing spirituality as a coping mechanism may help students in a variety of ways, such as; academically, economically, intellectually, mentally, morally, physically, and socially. Students who are academically underprepared, have low income, and social stressors will more likely contend with challenges that their counterparts with more resources and financial support will not have to experience (Astin & Oseguera, 2005, Engle & Tinto, 2008, Kim & Esquivel, 2011). This study examined the perceptions of Christian college students to ascertain how spirituality may have helped them to cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college.

The details of this dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter 2 provides a review of the existing literature on spirituality in higher education as it relates to social cognition, self-efficacy, and student involvement, coping skills and college students. Chapter 3 follows with a detailed description of the research design methodology the researcher used to conduct the study, which includes the research context, research context, data collection instruments, and data analysis procedure. Chapter 4 provides a brief review of the data analysis, demographics of the participants, their responses to the interview questions, and the findings from the study. The study concludes with Chapter 5, which entails a further discussion of the implications, limitations, recommendations and summary.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Review of the existing research indicates there is a national crisis with college students failing to complete their undergraduate degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Since the 1960s, the opportunity to attend college has increased significantly for students from various backgrounds (Tinto, 2012). Policies and practices in higher education have changed in an effort to assist students with their academic needs. The changes have yet to yield the results needed to increase graduation rates (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Students who have disadvantages are more likely to drop out of college before graduating (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Engle and Tinto (2008) offer several risk factors that increases the probability of students dropping out of college, such as; being older students, single parent, disabled, dependent children, work full or part time, low income, language barrier, and academically unprepared for college. Due to the risk factors, they may also require more time to complete their undergraduate degree. The complexities of academic, economic, and personal circumstances may impede on their ability to cope and persevere towards graduating within 4 years (Engle & Tinto, 2008). As a result, some students may require 6 years or more to complete their undergraduate degree (Shapiro et al., 2016).

Spirituality is rapidly emerging as a best practice model in academia, mental health, physical health, and psychology. The research of Miller (2015) and Moberg (2010) have added to the evidential and quantifiable effects of spirituality on human

nature. In fact, growing evidence continues to emerge underscoring spirituality as a reliable strategy for coping during stressful and difficult times, gaining strength for success and developing a better sense of meaning and purpose for life (Astin et al., 2011). Stress multiplied by uncertainty due to uncontrollable circumstances, such as; the lack of finances, academic deficiencies, poor socialization, family responsibilities, and commuting, debilitates the ability to continue in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The ability to cope with stress is unique and predetermined by individual beliefs, values, and practices (Khan, 2013). This study examined the lived experiences of Christian college students to ascertain how spirituality may have helped them to persevere at a 4-year urban public college. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the existing literature on spirituality in higher education, social cognition, self-efficacy, student involvement, coping skills, and college students. The purpose is to gain an understanding on the variables, and how they interconnect, as well as the limitations, and recommendations for best practices in the higher education environment. This researcher utilized Bandura's (1986) social cognitive and self efficacy (1977) theories, in addition to Astin's (1984) student involvement theory to build the framework for this study.

Review of the Literature

Spirituality in higher education. The first colleges established in the United States originated on religious principles. The core of higher education during that time was to develop students academically, personally, and spiritually (Geiger, 2014). Students received the fundamentals of religion to help them to develop spiritually. It is important to note the original concept of "spirituality" springs from the Christian Bible and the attributes of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (McClendon, 2012). The meaning of spirituality from a

Christian perspective has evolved over centuries from having a sacred biblical reference to a more general term that implies a quest to find his or her inner self (Astin et al., 2005). According to McClendon (2012), the definition of spirituality is indefinable because spirituality can mean whatever a person wants.

McClendon (2012) asserts, the secularization of spirituality has reduced the original biblical meaning to now be referred to as intelligence and rational pursuits of mankind's purposes. However, the perpetual declining graduations rates in our country calls for a need to explore strategies not only to increase intelligence, but also to increase the ability of college students to cope and persevere in college. Chickering (2006) indicated, it is important for institutions of higher education to revive, recognize, and reverence spirituality as an effective tool for integrating the intellect and spirit. Increasing the ability of students to cope with stressors in college through the application of spirituality serves to build mental and physical strength to face challenges internally and externally (Cady, 2007, Kim & Esquivel, 2011). Astin et al. (2011) emphasized, cultivating spirituality serves to increase a student's ability to cope with challenges.

Developing students academically has taken over as the primary reason for higher education. Little attention is placed on understanding how college students regard spirituality, the role it plays in their lives, and how colleges and universities can be more effective in facilitating students' spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011). Astin (1984, 2005, 2011), a distinguished educator and scholar, is a major contributor to the existing research on student involvement and cultivating spirituality among college students. His initial research on student involvement theory (1984), highlighted the importance of students being physically and psychosocially involved in their academic experience. He

suggested there are five basic elements for students to involve themselves into the college environment, such as; willingness to invest of self, investment in student activities, quantitative and qualitative investment of time to school assignments, and faculty-student interactions. However, he indicated colleges and universities also have a responsibility to develop and design policies and practices that will cause the students to become involved (Astin, 1984). Astin suggested that colleges and universities should focus on the interior development as well as the exterior development. Spirituality among college students became a focal point for his research as 71% of the students who participated in his initial study indicated they “gain strength by trusting in a higher power” (Astin et al., 2005). This information underscored the basis for Astin’s research as he continued to examine and contribute to this emerging phenomenon of spirituality among college students.

Astin et al. (2005) conducted a national study on the spiritual life of college students. The purpose was to measure the extent of spirituality and religion in the lives of college students, and to recommend strategies colleges and universities could use more effectively. Astin (2011) asserted, spirituality is an essential part of students’ lives so colleges and universities should do more to cultivate it for students to explore and express their quest for spirituality. Astin (2004) emphasizes, although we have improved in the areas of science medicine, technology, and commerce, we have overlooked values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding. Astin et al. (2005) examined the spiritual life of undergraduate students by conducting a longitudinal study in 2003 across the country in 46 colleges and universities. They administered a College Students’ Beliefs and Values (CSBV) questionnaire to 3,680 first time, full time freshman students. They wanted to gain an understanding on the role

spirituality play in the lives of college students, such as their beliefs and values, meaning and purpose, spiritual practices, spiritual qualities, academic and personal development, and any support or the lack thereof in their undergraduate experience. The questionnaire combined 12 scales to measure spirituality, spirituality quest, equanimity, religious commitment, religious engagement, religious/social conservatism, religious skepticism, religious struggle, charitable involvement, compassionate self-concept, ethics of caring, and ecumenical worldview (Astin et al., 2005).

Results from the initial study and follow up study indicated students viewed spirituality as an integral part of their life. Information from the study also revealed freshmen occasionally felt uncertain, doubtful, angry, and insecure in their spiritual and religious views. Students believed it is very important for higher education institutions to provide a learning environment that encourages personal expressions of spirituality (Astin et al., 2005). The study indicated students are not only seeking a higher education, but they are seeking a deeper meaning to their lives. They are looking for ways to cultivate their inner selves as they try to coexist in their community and society. The results from this study further supports the notion college students do value spirituality as a part of their internal and external development. However, participants for this study were predominately White (76%) students, which gives little voice to the perception and experiences of underrepresented minorities and spirituality (Astin et al., 2005).

Kane and Jacobs (2010) utilized an exploratory study to ascertain the importance of spiritual and religious beliefs/values among university students. The researchers wanted to examine which religious and spiritual beliefs, behaviors and practices were most important to the students and how they were influenced and affected by other

beliefs such as; physical and psychological health, successfulness living, religious observances, conflict between science and religion/spirituality, accommodation of various lifestyles, and frequency of religious/spiritual expressions (Kane & Jacobs, 2010, p. 51). Although Kane and Jacobs (2010) focused their study on both religious and spiritual beliefs/values of university students, their research is revelatory to understanding why cultivating spirituality is an important concept for higher education to consider in their efforts to help students to cope with the stressors of college to persevere towards graduation.

One important aspect of spirituality and religion are the practices people integrate in their daily lives. Some people may employ their spirituality through daily prayers and mediation to a supreme being, belief in the power within themselves, performing acts of kindness to others, congregating with like-minded people with the same values, and some might believe in following the empirical evidence of science to find answers and relief to the daily challenges and obstacles they face in life. Minorities are more likely to rely on their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices to cope with the stresses in life (Kane & Jacobs, 2010). Kane and Jacobs (2010) acknowledged, although there is an existing body of research on religious and spiritual beliefs among college students, gaining more perceptions from underrepresented minorities would be helpful. Only 41.9 % of the students in their study identified themselves as being other than European American. Again, this leaves a gap in the research due to the small percentage of underrepresented minorities who participated in their research.

Students enrolled in criminal justice and social work courses at a South Florida university were selected through an anonymous survey. Most of the students were

enrolled in social work courses (49%) and criminology/criminal justice majors (33.3%), and 17.7% of the students were enrolled in public administration, psychology, and sociology courses. Kane and Jacob (2010) conducted their research by extracting predictors of spiritual and religious beliefs from their literature review to formulate an instrument for their assessment. Categories were developed to identify how students cultivate and develop their religious and or spiritual dependency. They examined the student's perceptions to assess how important their religious and/or spiritual beliefs are to coping and overcoming problems with physical and psychological health, successful living, religious observances, conflict between science and religion/spirituality, accommodation of various lifestyles, and frequency of religious/spiritual expression. A five point Likert scale was employed to indicate the student's level of agreement, with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree.

Results from the survey indicated students were more likely to agree religious and spiritual beliefs were important in their lives and instrumental in helping them deal with difficult situations (Kane & Jacob, 2010). Overall, the finding from this study supports the emerging phenomenon of spirituality among college students and the dependency of their beliefs and practices to overcome challenges and obstacles to complete their undergraduate degree. Participants in this study were students aspiring to become human service professionals who indicated they do value their religious and or spiritual beliefs. This study reflected the perceptions of students enrolled in human service courses. The same survey could have different results from students enrolled in scientific related courses. The major challenge to cultivating and developing spirituality in the college

environment is convincing school administration to embrace spirituality as a strategy for supporting student success (Kane & Jacob, 2010).

Social cognition. The Vygotsky (1978) sociocultural theory connects the learning process with cultural and social influences. The basis for this theory suggests our social surroundings affect and influence both cognitive and psychosocial development.

Vygotsky (1978) suggested a child's cultural development appears on the social level through interaction with parents, siblings and teachers eventually internalizing into an individual intellectual experience. This underscores Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory as it relates to environmental factors influencing the learning process, which in turn affects behavior. The development of spiritual and /or religious beliefs, practices, and values usually starts in the home and or surrounding community.

Oman, Thoresen, Park, Shaver, Hood, and Plante (2009) conducted a study examining the environmental factors and behavioral models that influenced "spirituality" in the lives of college students. Their aim was to understand how does one become spiritual? They wanted to examine, what qualities of spirituality are viewed as important to the students, such as; recognition of the specific spiritual models in the students' lives, the specific spiritual models associated within the student's environment; and can spiritual modeling in various environments be a reliable and valid method to measure how one becomes spiritual? The theoretical framework used for the research originated from the Oman and Thoresen's (2003) spiritual modeling theory and Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Both theories indicate our environments, as well as how we relate to ourselves and others, play a significant role in helping us to learn and reproduce beliefs, values and behaviors (Bandura, 1986, Oman & Thoresen, 2003). Bandura's

(1986) social cognitive theory provides support for this study as the researcher aims to understand how college students in a Christian Club view spirituality as a coping skill.

Oman et al. (2009) conducted the study using the Spiritual Modeling Inventory of Life Environments (SMILE) survey at three large public universities in California, Connecticut, Tennessee and one smaller religious private university in California. Participants in this study were recruited from the psychology department. Students were informed the study was about spirituality and religion and the ability to cope with health and emotional issues and behaviors (Oman et al., 2009). A total sample of 1,010 students completed the survey. Surveys were administered online using SPSS predictive analytics software. They presented the SMILE survey in three major parts to ascertain the following questions: What spiritual qualities do students view as important? Who do students identify as spiritual models in their everyday environment? How are the spiritual models perceived within various environments? Open ended questions were presented to the students to assess the following; spiritual identity, beliefs/practices, ultimate concerns, family spiritual models, organization spiritual models, school spiritual models, prominent models the students identify with pre 1900 and post 1900 periods, other social environment influences and survey feedback. Oman et al. (2009) indicated, “one major purpose of the SMILE’s introductory section was to give substance to the term “spirituality” (ultimate concerns) by suggesting virtues as possible key qualities for cultivating spirituality” (p. 437). The results of the study validated the reliability of the SMILE’s survey in examining the spiritual models and their influence on perceptions, demographics, and other factors for college students. Responses from the surveys showed students conceptualization of spirituality will vary based on their social learning

environments and the exemplars for which they integrate with and create emotional connectedness.

Noted responses from the students indicated they viewed qualities of spirituality as; compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, patience, fairness, persistence, courage, self-control, discernment, fairness, truthfulness, and love which are all similarly important. These are qualities identified as contributing factors to internal development. External influences, spiritual models, and qualities were identified more among females. Most of the students named someone from their family as a spiritual role model, such as mother, father or grandmother. Clergy, friends, Jesus, and other prominent spiritual models were named as having a significant influence on students. Overall family, religious organizations, schools, and prominent people (before and after 1900) provided the social learning environment for students to develop externally (Oman et al., 2009).

The results from the SMILE survey underscored Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory by indicating how the role models in the student's environment influenced their own spiritual beliefs and behaviors (Oman et al., 2009). The spiritual modeling concept places the spiritual development of college students in the social learning environment of family, school, and religious organization. One of the recommendations that resulted from this study suggested a qualitative approach could have been a better method for capturing the perceptions of students and their views of spiritual methods. The gap in the research indicated the SMILE survey needs to be refined and tailored for other age groups, ethnic groups, cultural groups, non US students, and specific religious groups (Oman et al., 2009, p. 449). Gaining more understanding of the pedagogical similarities and differences of spiritual models who serve as religious

leaders was also recommended. Oman and Thoresen (2003) suggests, more information is needed to create a spiritual model that would be personally and culturally sensitive as a best practice in the areas of psychology, health, and education. According to Bandura (2001), “The impact of modelling on beliefs about one’s capabilities is greatly increased by perceived similarity to the models” (p. 276). Embracing the concept of spiritual models in the college environment to support students in their efforts to cope with the stressors of college may add to an increase in students successfully completing college. Astin (2004) posits, if we would allow spirituality to become a fundamental part of our higher education institutions it would help to increase our appreciation and understanding of each other, our students, and our institutions.

Bandura (1986) merged the behaviorist and social learning theories to present the social cognitive theory acknowledging the human ability to think, learn and regulate actions, and responses to the environment as a reciprocal causation. Similarly, Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory suggests cognitive development is contingent on social interactions and surrounding environments. Creating a learning environment where students can evolve mentally and spiritually may increase their ability to cope with the complexities of life as critical thinkers and positive problem solvers with good morals (King, 1947). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is noted in history as a distinguished nonviolence leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient. He learned firsthand how to be a critical thinker and positive problem solver from this social, cultural and educational environment. He was raised in the church and subsequently attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, both built on religious/spiritual principles. His environments provided the fundamental influence for his spiritual development, which he would grow

up to replicate. King (1956) also indicated Mahatma Gandhi as his model for nonviolence leadership. Gandhi's display of competence in complex and challenging circumstances had a major impact on Dr. King's cognition. King observed and stored Gandhi's modelled behavior of nonviolence. He would go on to become a national leader, inspiring movements for equal rights and justice for all in a nonviolent way, much like his model, Mahatma Gandhi.

Bandura (1988) presents the social cognitive theory as learning by observing others, and triadic reciprocal determinism. The notion of his theory suggests modelled behavior that is observed has a direct influence on our learning and is then stored and processed for delayed or immediate replication. In 1961, Bandura conducted an experiment by making a film with an adult modelling aggressive behavior by beating a Bobo doll. The film was shown to a group of preschool children. When given the opportunity to be with the Bobo doll the children adopted the same aggressive behavior. This experiment underscored the social learning theory and supported Bandura's argument that individual personal factors affect behavior, behavior affect the environment, and the environment affects individual personal factors - which he called triadic reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1988). Overall, each variable creates a thought that is mentally stored for learning which may generate an immediate or delayed replication based on the observation of other modelled behavior whether good or bad (Bandura, 1978). Bandura indicates that models can be people, characters or images. The observer will most likely imitate models who display competence, power, and relevance to develop their own skill.

According to Bandura (1988), our cognition and personal factors, behaviors, and environmental events interact, as interdependent factors influencing each other bidirectional. In other words, we mentally process what we observe, which can influence our behavior, and increase our ability to construct what we have learned for a specific goal. Bandura acknowledges that we live in a constant state of progression with new innovations, technology, and social influences that affect our self-regulation and self-efficacy which increases our ability to become products or producers in our environment (Pajares, 2002).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., became a product and producer based on what he learned from his live and symbolic models. According to Bandura (1977), a symbolic model can be a real or fictional character. His live models were most likely his family, church family, Mahatma Gandhi, and his interactions with colleagues and faculty at Morehouse College. His symbolic model was his belief in God. Each model, live and symbolic, had a spiritual connotation. King was profoundly affected by his live and symbolic models which was evident by his course of action. Pajares (2002) suggests people tend to model qualities they admire to imitate for their own trajectory in life. Attention most likely would be placed on models who exemplify power, prestige, and competence. As a product of his environment, King internalized the modelled behavior of Gandhi which increased his ability to proceed with his own desired goal. Dr. King had the strength and support of his religious and spiritual beliefs that enabled him to cope with the adversities he encountered to leave an unforgettable impact on our nation. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was affected by the conditions in his environment, which could have been a stimulus for his actions, as some behaviorist theorist might suggest.

Self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) asserts, both self-efficacy and self-regulation serve to increase our abilities and competencies. Self-efficacy and self-regulation allows a person to perceive and understand obstacles, adversities and stresses in a way that will activate his or her critical thinking or problem solving skills to cope and persevere in college. However, there are limitations that could misalign the reciprocal causation. The lack of belief, low self-esteem, self-doubt, mental, and physical challenges are determinants that could have a diverse effect on one's ability to cope and engage the challenge proactively instead of reactively. Bandura (2001) posits, "Success requires not only skills but also strong self-beliefs in one's capabilities to exercise control over events to accomplish desired goals" (p. 279).

Developing the ability to cope and persevere through stressors is critical to students successfully completing their undergraduate degrees. Hans Selye (1950), a notable scientist and doctor, built the theoretical framework for general adaptation syndrome. According to Selye (1936), stress is the "non-specific response of the body to any demand for changes." His research helped to explain the biological, physical, and psychological effects of stress. As he expanded his research, from a medical perspective in this area, empirical evidence supported the notion that stress induces hormonal autonomic responses to stress which can cause internal illnesses. Stress can weaken the ability to persevere towards a goal due to physical, emotional, and mental effects (Murff, 2005, Selye, 1936).

Murff (2005) examines the impact of stress on college students as a reason why some students are unable to successfully complete college. Students contend with

multiple academic demands and deadlines in college which can be compounded by financial, personal, and social stressors. According to Murff (2005),

First, students have to make significant adjustments to college life. Second, because of the pressure of studies, there is strain placed on interpersonal relationships. Third, housing arrangements and changes in lifestyle contribute to stress experienced by college students. In addition, students in college experience stress related to academic requirements, support systems, and ineffective coping skills. (p. 103)

Stress is a debilitating element in life that can derail students' desire to continue their educational journey. Developing coping skills to counteract the efforts of stress is paramount to students successfully completing their undergraduate degree. Having the belief and self-confidence in the ability to accomplish a desired goal or performance will help students to develop a healthy mindset and outlook for their internal and external surroundings (Bandura, 2001).

Khan (2013) investigated the variables of academic self-efficacy, coping, and academic performance in college. The pilot study examined the variables in the college setting to ascertain if they operated independently or interdependently. Participants were recruited at a public university in the Northwestern part of the US. Of 66 students, 17 were males and 49 were females. Less than 14% identified as an underrepresented student with the remaining participants being Caucasian. Students completed an online questionnaire assessing each variable. The results indicated students who used coping methods with a desired goal in mind were more successful with completing college. Whereas, students who had high stress levels had lower grade point averages. The

purpose of the pilot study was to ascertain the characteristics of students who performed well. Another interesting result indicated students who did well reported the use of the spiritual beliefs to cope and succeed.

Karris and Craighead (2012) conducted a study to examine the differences in character among United States college students. The purpose of the study was to measure character strengths among college students. Maslow's (1943) humanistic psychology theory provided the framework for the study. They employed the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths introduced by the Values in Action (VIA) Institute and the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths Scales developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The VIA Institute developed a list of 24 character strengths: "forgiveness, fairness, leadership, citizenship, kindness, human/playfulness, social/personal intelligence, perspective, spirituality/religiousness, gratitude, intimacy, love of learning, appreciate of beauty, curiosity, creativity, perseverance, self-control/self-regulation, hope/optimism, zest, prudence, judgment, modesty/humility, honesty/integrity, and bravery/valor" (Karris & Craighead, 2012, p. 70). The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths Scales (VIA-IS) measures the 24 character strengths with a 240 item face valid self-report questionnaire, 10 for each character strength (Karris & Craighead, 2012). This list of 24 character strengths relates to the Maslow's (1965) list of B-values for self-actualization.

Students who volunteered and gave their consent as samples in the study were enrolled in psychology classes at the University of Colorado at Boulder. A total of 759 students received partial credits for their participation. Majority of the participants were Caucasian (86.6%) and the remaining students consisted of various minorities, Asian

American/Pacific Islanders, Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans and others (13.4%); with African Americans representing only 0.3% of the 13.4% minorities.

Students completed the 240 questions based on which character best described themselves in rank order. The Likert-style scale was set up as 1 = least likely to 5 = most likely. It took one 1 and 15 minutes for the students to complete the questionnaire measuring demographic information, happiness and well-being, various mental health constructs and the Values in Action Inventory of Strength (VIA-IS) (Karris & Craighead, 2012, p. 74).

The means and standard deviation for most and least character strengths endorsed by the students were calculated by SAS and SPSS. The character strengths were tested to identify gender differences in answers. A multiple regression analyses identified differences based on ethnicity, relationship status and work status. Both males (52%) and females (48%) equally agreed on character strengths “most like me” were humor, love, kindness, integrity, and social intelligence. The “least like me” character strengths were modesty/humility, self-regulation, spirituality, love of learning, and prudence. Females selected and identified more with kindness, love, gratitude, forgiveness, appreciation of beauty and excellence, prudence, fairness, and leadership as their character strengths. Males scored higher on creativity, bravery, and self-regulation (Karris & Craighead, 2012). Students who indicated they were in relationships endorsed significantly higher with character strengths of love, gratitude and hope. Interestingly, Non-Caucasian students only represented 13.4% of the participants who endorsed spirituality at the highest level. Students who were in relationships endorsed character strengths of love, gratitude and hope. The results from this study indicated students do possess character

strengths, primarily in the areas of humor, love, kindness, integrity, and social intelligence (Karris & Craighead, 2012).

This study provided a thorough examination of character strengths employing the VIA-IS scale which required the students to manually answer the questions. However, the study was limited to one college, a self-reported questionnaire, and majority of the students who completed the assessment were Caucasians. Overall, the study does not represent the diversity in the United States and students from other countries. Karris and Craighead (2012) suggested, a mixed method strategy, including observations, clinical interviews, and longitudinal study could have added to the convergent validation. Lastly, the study did not yield a plausible definition for what is considered good character. One small yet significant finding in this study indicated spirituality as a character strength for the minority students. Previous studies also indicated spirituality as an important aspect in the lives of college students (Astin et al., 2005, Johnstone, McCormack, Yoon and Smith, 2012, Kane & Jacobs, 2010, Oman et al., 2009). Majority of the studies examining spirituality and college students were conducted at colleges and universities where majority of the participants were Caucasians.

Patton and McClure (2009) examined spirituality through the lens of African American women attending college at predominately White institutions in the Midwest. Their research provided insight into the lived experiences of 14 African American women, a population usually overlooked, marginalized, and misrepresented (Patton & McClure, 2009). The study was conducted at a large research institution and a midsize religious institution. Participants in the study identified themselves as Christians who believe in a higher power which they refer to as God and spirituality being an essential

part of their college experience. The students were recruited from several student organizations at the institutions. The researchers, also African Americans, reflected on their own undergraduate experience to examine “how African American women used spirituality as a means to deal with challenges and find success within the college setting” (p. 42).

Using a faith development theory from a Black feminist viewpoint, the study gave an opportunity for the students to share how their spirituality was developed or hindered at the predominately White college. This study is one of the few studies that examines the spiritual growth and development of African American women who successfully cope with stressors and challenges as a college student. Several themes emerged from the findings to indicate the students relied on the spiritual foundation embedded in them prior to their college enrollment. Although, the college environment did not provide support for their spiritual development, they could draw from what they had been taught. Based on the students’ perception, the culture on the college campuses did not provide a familiar environment for their spiritual expressions or development nor did the environment seek to be inclusive to their spiritual needs. Despite the lack of support and other challenges the students faced at the college, the factors that helped them to cope and persevere was their beliefs, values, and practices founded upon their spirituality. Although, the study was limited to 14 African American women the research gave voice to students who have a personal perspective that can add to the growing body of research on spirituality among college students. As more research continues to emerge, hopefully institutions of higher education will begin to be more inclusive to the spiritual needs of all students to aid in their academic, personal and social growth, and development.

Student involvement. The ACT Policy Report (2004) investigated the non-academic and academic factors that affect college retention rates at 4-year colleges. The grade point averages and postsecondary readiness scores identified possible indicators for students who would most likely dropout of college. Results from the ACT study, underscores existing research on the theories of social cognition (1986), self-efficacy (1977), social integration (1988), sociocultural (1978), and student involvement (1984). The findings support the notion that students who integrate with others and get involved with campus cultural will more than likely become motivated, developing more self-confidence, more commitment, resulting in an increase in academic performance (Lotkowski, Robbins & Neoth, 2004). Whereas, students who master course content but fail to develop adequate academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, and social support and involvement may still be at risk of dropping out.

Students, especially underrepresented minorities, have disadvantages that may affect their basic needs and ability to continue their educational goals (Engle & Tinto, 2008). However, institutions of higher learning are primarily concerned with grade point averages, persistence, and retention, and graduation rates as an indicator of a student's ability to succeed (Schreiner, 2013). Too often students enroll into college unsure of their major, or they change their major after the first year or second year in college. Many students are searching for their purpose and trying to decide on a career or vocation. Low income and social disadvantages compounded by academic deficiencies lowers the probability of completing their undergraduate degree (Astin & Oseguera, 2005, Engle & Tinto, 2008, Kim & Esquivel, 2011).

Schreiner (2013) offers a different perspective by offering five factors of thriving in college, which she indicated as engaged learning, diverse citizenship, social connectedness, positive perspective, and academic determination. The concept of thriving in college are indicative of students engaging in the learning environment, invested in their educational goals, manage their time and effort, social connectedness, positive perspective, and committed to making a difference in their surroundings. This concept derived from the results of a cross-section study conducted with college students throughout colleges/universities in the United States, Canada, and Australia (Schreiner, 2013). The Thriving Quotient online survey consisted of 25 questions to ascertain the measurement of students' success based on a psychological, sense of community, spirituality, level of campus involvement, and student satisfaction with faculty, peers, learning, advising, and many other campus experiences.

The results from the study indicated the quality of experiences students had on their campus was a predictor for students successfully completing their undergraduate degree. Although, there are other indicators which can be considered as determining factors for students thriving in college, ethnicity resulted as a significant factor. For example, African American students attending predominately White colleges and universities may find it hard to assimilate into the environment due to a lack of diversity and failure to identify with the culture on the campus. Spirituality was indicated as a source for thriving primarily among Latinos, African Americans, and Asian students (Karris & Craighead, 2012, Schreiner, 2013). The results indicated spirituality served as a coping mechanism, quest for life, and interactions with like-minded students. According to Schreiner (2013), students need to be involved in activities that will

enhance their ability to cope and persevere in college. Braskamp (2007) asserted, providing opportunities for students to engage in activities, groups, programs, and workshops reinforcing spiritual beliefs and values on the college campus will more than likely result in continuous growth and development, commitment and coping skills. Whereas, Gold (2013) suggests, spirituality is the basic element for human growth and potential.

Chapter Summary

Chickering (2006) argues, while institutions of higher education places majority of the focus on academia and professional preparation, solely focusing on external factors can adversely affect the opportunity to help student develop mentally, socially, and spiritually. He argued the need for colleges and universities to provide opportunities for students to develop purpose, meaning, identity, and spiritual growth in students. Studies presented in this literature review present different views on spirituality, college students, and coping skills. A significant number of students in the studies indicated they indeed have spiritual and or religious beliefs, practices, and values. The studies also indicated some students rely on their spirituality and or religious beliefs to handle challenges, obstacles, and other stresses, which may impede on their ability to succeed in college.

Colleges and universities generally have various resources for students to employ if needed, such as; advisors, counseling and health services, and mentors. Creating a campus environment where students can engage, encourage and employ their spirituality individually and collectively may be an additional method for supporting students in their efforts to cope and successfully complete their undergraduate degree. The literature reviewed for this research provides supporting evidence that college students view

spirituality as an important aspect of their lives and the role it plays in their efforts to cope in college. Themes in the literature review seem to indicate spirituality develops in students before they enter college (Miller, 2015). Modelled behaviors of spirituality have a lingering impact on students as they enter college. Replications of the spiritual models can increase belief in oneself and the ability to cope through adversities (Bandura, 1988, Chickering, 2006, Pajares, 2002). Thriving as a college student creates a connection that strengthens character, coping skills, and commitment through interactions, learning experiences and observations. Yet there remains a need to understand how Christian college students view spirituality as a strategy for coping and persevering while attending a 4-year urban public college.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenological approach is the best way to examine lived experiences. The researcher used this approach to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of Christian college students. The purpose was to examine the perceptions of Christian college students to ascertain if spirituality is a strategy that helps them to cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college. Studying the views of Christian college students allowed the researcher to gain valuable insight. The study revealed how Christian college students utilize spirituality to help them cope with the rigorous demands and requirements of college life. Utilizing a qualitative method to examine the perceptions of Christian college students provided an opportunity for them to voice how they employ spirituality during difficult times while trying to complete their undergraduate degree. This chapter provides a detailed description for how the research design was developed, the context and rationale of the research, and the criteria for how the participants were selected for the study. The research methodology described in this chapter also includes the data collection instruments and analysis of the data procedures.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this research study to gain a better understanding of how students may use spirituality as a coping technique to persevere in college.

1. How do Christian students define spirituality?

2. How do Christian students describe the connection between their spirituality and self-efficacy in college?
3. How do Christian students describe how they handle academic, personal, and social obligations?
4. How do Christian students describe the relationship between their spirituality and their college success?
5. How do Christian students describe how their college experience has supported or hindered the expression of their spirituality?

Research Context

The City University of New York (CUNY) is the largest urban public university in the United States (City University of New York, 2016). There are 11 senior colleges, seven community colleges, six comprehensive colleges – 24 colleges located across the five boroughs of New York City in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island, Queens (City University of New York, 2016). Records indicate there were 169,935 full-time students and 104,422 part-time students, totaling 274,357 students enrolled in 2015 (City University of New York, 2016). The student population consisted of 0.3% American Indian/Alaska Native, 20.3% Asian/Pacific Islander, 26.2% Black, 31.4% Hispanic, and 21.8 % White. More than half of the students were females at 57%; 26.6% of the population was 25 or older, 34.2% attended part time, 36.2% were born outside of the US, 44.5% had a native language other than English; 58.3% were PELL Grant recipients; and 42.2% were first generation students (City University of New York, 2016).

The US Department of Education provides financial subsidies to college students who do not have the financial resources to pay for their college education. Pell grants are available for students who have income that fall below the federal poverty guideline levels. The grant is provided to assist students who are primarily working on a 2-year or 4-year degree or enrolled in a career related school. The grant originated in 1972 as the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant, later renamed after Claiborne Pell, a former Rhode Island Senator in 1980 (Pellinstitute.org, 2017). Students eligible for the grant have a maximum of 6 years to complete their undergraduate degree or professional certificate, which is also contingent upon maintaining a good academic standing (Pellinstitute.org, 2017). More than 50% of the student population enrolled in the City University of New York receives a Federal Pell Grant subsidy (City University of New York, 2016).

This study was conducted at one of the 11 senior colleges in the borough of Queens. York College is in the central section of South Jamaica, Queens. Queens is the most ethnically diverse borough in the City of New York (York College, 2016). It is also the largest county in land area square miles within the five boroughs of New York City (US Census Bureau, 2010). A total of 8,511 students enrolled at York College for the fall 2015 semester, with 8,446 of students enrolled as undergraduates (York College, 2016). The enrollment is ethnically diverse comprising students from 121 different countries of birth, speaking more than 87 native languages. Students demographics for the fall 2015 cohort consisted of 1.0% American Indian/Alaska Native, 27.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 42.9% Black, 21.8% Hispanic, 7.2% White (York College, 2016). Women make up most of the student population at 65.3% and men at 34.7%. The CUNY York Office of Institutional Research and Assessment reports the fall 2009 cohort full time, first-time

freshmen student enrollment at 1,021 with a 4-year graduation rate at 4.9% and the 6-year graduation rate at 26.7%. Seventy-six percent of the full time, first time undergraduate students were Federal Pell Grant recipients (York College, 2016).

The college offers several student activities on the campus for social development and interaction. As a part of the Student Development Division, the Student Activities Department offers various clubs to encourage student involvement. One of the clubs is the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. Christian students meet at a designated location on a weekly basis. Members in the group are ethnically diverse, enrolled in different majors, on different grade levels, and have different religious affiliations. The commonality in the group is their belief in God and the biblical teachings of Jesus Christ. They meet weekly for prayer, Bible studies, worship, and spiritual support. This club is an offspring of a larger organization that provides support on college campuses for students who are Christians.

The InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club connects to a larger international organization founded by Christian students at the Cambridge University, in England during the 1870s. The organization expanded to other colleges throughout Canada. The first campus ministry in the United States started in 1941. As of 2016-2017, the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club had 1,015 chapters on 687 campuses in the US (InterVarsity, 2017). The objective of the organization is to evangelize the Gospel of Jesus Christ through love, stewardship and spiritual discipline on college campuses (InterVarsity, 2017).

Research Participants

The researcher recruited members from the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club to participate in this study. The club was established at York College in 2014. Prior to the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club, a smaller group of Christian students assembled each week on the college campus for support. As of the fall 2016 semester, the club had 27 members. Students in the club represented the diverse student population at the college, ranging from Asian, West Indian, Latino, African American, White, and Native American. The ages of the students ranged from 18–35. Their grade levels ranged from freshmen to seniors. The members in the group identified with various religious denominations, such as Pentecostal, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Evangelical, Church of God in Christ, and one student identified as an atheist. Atheists are individuals who have a lack of belief in gods (Saler & Ziegler, 2011).

Each religion, excluding the atheist, represented in the group evolved from Protestantism. The Reformation Movement, during the 16th century, against the Roman Catholic Church gave birth to this sect of Christianity (Bainton, Nelson, Spalding, Chadwick, & Marty, 2016). Opposing views of the Papacy, Biblical doctrine and the interpretations, church leadership and practices gave rise to religious wars and pluralism throughout Europe and America. As dissensions continued to plague the Roman Catholic Church, other religions emerged with opposing views under the auspices of Protestantism. Although the groups that have evolved from Protestantism may have different practices they were founded by core beliefs in the Holy Bible, the doctrines of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, the divinity of Jesus, his death, and resurrection for salvation, and spreading the good news of grace and mercy for all mankind (Bainton et

al., 2016). As such, the religions represented by the students in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club provided a good sample for the researcher to examine based on spirituality being an important aspect of the collective religions.

The selection criteria for participants in this study required members to be active in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. This helped the researcher to work with a purposively selected sample of students who identify with some type of spirituality. Additional requirements for participation in the study included the completion of 30 credits and being recognized by the university as a sophomore. According to Tinto (2012), college drop outs usually occur after the first year experience. Students who have completed their first year of college demonstrate a minimal level of academic success and persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Based on the 27 students currently in the group only 10-12 sophomores, juniors, and seniors were eligible to participate in the study. Juniors and seniors were the primary target for this study as their persistence and pending graduation provided in-depth information for the researcher to answer the research questions. Although, the number of students in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club does not reflect the total undergraduate student population, selecting this convenience sample of students was reasonable for a phenomenological study based on the recommendations indicated by Creswell (2014). One on one, face to face interviews were conducted with students in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club who met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. This allowed the researcher to examine the lived experiences of students to ascertain to what extent spirituality has served as a strategy for coping and persevering in college. Selecting a small sample size number of students at an urban public college to

participate in this study addressed two specific gaps in the literature review, qualitative studies and underrepresented minorities. In this study, the researcher focused on underrepresented minorities who were primarily Christian African American students and their perceptions of spirituality. The study provided a voice to their perceptions on spirituality and how they utilize it to help them cope and persevere at an urban public college. Interviewing a small sample size number of students allowed the researcher to provide enough time for each student to respond to the questions and feel comfortable. Giving a voice to their perception provided information that will contribute to the emerging phenomenon of spirituality and the role it plays among college students who are underrepresented minorities.

To proceed with the study the researcher submitted a request to the Institutional Review Board at CUNY York College requesting permission to conduct the study with the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. Appendix A is a copy of the letter that was submitted requesting permission to conduct the study. After permission was received from CUNY York College, the researcher then requested permission from the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. When the approval letter was received from St. John Fisher College IRB, the researcher attended an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club meeting to introduce the study. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and how their participation would contribute to the emerging research on spirituality as a strategy for coping and perseverance for college students. Students were given the criteria for participation. They were asked to contact the researcher if they were interested. Participation in the study was highlighted as being on a volunteer basis and could be discontinued at any time. Additionally, their

participation or non-participation nor any content of responses would not influence current or future services available to the students.

According to Creswell (2014), five-25 participants should be included in a phenomenological study. The goal was to recruit seven-10 individuals from the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. However, the researcher interviewed eight students who agreed to participate in the study and showed up for the interview. Students who expressed their interest in participating in the study received a demographic survey to complete and return to the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of the following information; gender, age, number of college credits, major, race/ethnicity, college enrollment date as a freshman, anticipated date of graduation, and religion. Appendix B is an example of the survey. This survey was used by the researcher to select the students who met the criteria to participate in the study. Fowler (2014) stated, “It is essential, however, that the researcher be able to find out the probability of selections for each individual selected” (p.17). Thirteen students returned the questionnaire. Only 12 students met the criteria. The researcher contacted the students who met the criteria to verify their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher informed the students they would be participating in a 45 minute to 1 hour in-depth, face to face informal, semi-structured interview. An interview was scheduled with each student who agreed to participate.

An interview was scheduled with the student with the understanding that he or she could discontinue at any time. The researcher reviewed the purpose of study; risks and benefits of participating in the study; method used to protect their confidentiality; and reiterated that he or she can withdraw from the study at any time. In accordance to the

Institutional Review Board standards the researcher utilized all precaution to minimize any undue stress for students who volunteered to participate in the study. Appropriate referrals were readily available for students if they began to experience any emotional, psychological, and or physical stress as result of their participation in the study, if needed. The researcher reiterated to each student that their participation or non-participation nor any content of responses would influence current or future services available to the students. Each student was given a consent form to review and sign. See Appendix C for a copy of the form. After the consent form was signed and returned, the researcher expressed her appreciation to each student for his or her willingness to participate in the study. Each student was informed that a \$25 gift card would be given to compensate for his or her time, travel and participation when the researcher has successfully completed the study.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher used in-depth face to face interviews with semi structured questions to collect data for this study. The interview questions were developed to ascertain how Christian students learned to cope with academic, personal and social challenges and, stressors and yet persevere in college. The theories of social cognition (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and student involvement (Astin, 1984) provided the framework to build each question. The questions addressed environmental factors, behaviors, and beliefs which were directly and indirectly related to spirituality and coping skills. Secondary questions were followed by the primary questions to clarify responses from the students. Each question provided an opportunity for the students to express themselves based on their own thoughts and lived experiences.

Prior to the interviews being conducted with the students, the researcher conducted a field study to test the questions. According to Creswell (2014), “This testing is important to establish the content validity of scores on an instrument and to improve questions, format, and scales” (p. 161). The researcher requested the assistance of three Christians to field test the questions. Based on their knowledge of spirituality and former experience as a college student they provided feedback that helped the researcher to strengthen the trustworthiness and quality of the questions. Results from the field testing were noted and recommendations applied accordingly.

Interviews. The researcher secured a private room on campus to ensure comfort and confidentiality for the interviews. Students selected for the interviews were invited to participate in a 45 minute to 1 hour semi structured interview conducive to their schedules. The researcher worked with the student to avoid any disruptions to their classes or other personal responsibilities. As each interview started the researcher asked the student to sign the consent form. Students were reminded that if they began to experience any emotional, psychological, and or physical stress as a result of their participation in the study, they may discontinue their participation at any time. This information was provided in the Interview Protocol (See Appendix D).

To capture sufficient data during the interviews the researcher utilized handwritten notes. Permission to record the interview was also requested. The researcher explained to the student that recording the interview helps to capture everything that is said and to ensure an accurate interpretation of their comments. Creswell (2013), recommends using a digital recorder as a reliable and trustworthy source to validate and identify emerging themes, patterns, and categories from the

collected data. Students were informed that a transcribed copy of the interview would be provided for their review to ensure an accurate reflection of thoughts and comments during the interview. Each student was given the option to edit and or confirm accuracy of the data. They were asked to return their response within 72 hours. The researcher assured each student that the recorded tapes and notes would be stored and locked in a secured cabinet for at least 3 years.

The researcher explained to each student that the only individuals who would initially have access to the data are a transcriptionist, two analysts, and the researcher. As such, a transcriber was employed to convert the recordings into a text format. The analysts were educated professionals with experience in content analysis and summarizing data based on themes and patterns. Their assistance helped the researcher to assure accuracy and trustworthiness of the data. The transcriptionist and analysts would not have access to the student's names. The researcher continued to explain that additional safeguards would be applied by removing names and replacing them with numerical codes. Every effort was made by the researcher to conceal their identity. This would ensure anonymity during and after the study. Furthermore, the researcher assured each student that the recorded tapes and notes would be stored and locked in a secured cabinet for at least 3 years.

The researcher asked the students if they had any questions or concerns about how the data would be handled. Each student responded by saying no. To make sure the students felt at ease, the researcher questioned how the students felt and their willingness to move forward, and offered them a bottle of water before the interview started. The researcher then proceeded with the interview protocol and questions.

The researcher designed 12 semi-structured open-ended questions to extract information to answer the research questions. See Appendix E for the interview questions. Appendix F provides a listing of the theories, research questions, and interview questions and how they correspond. The researcher utilized the table as a guide for organizing and analyzing the data. According to Brinkman and Kvale (2015), “One research question can be investigated through several interview questions, thus obtaining rich and varied information by approaching a topic from several angles. And one interview question might provide answers to several research questions” (p. 159). Creswell (2013) suggested, “Take the significant statements and then group them into larger units of information, called “meaning units” or themes” (p. 193).

Twelve questions were presented to each student to examine their perceptions of spirituality, coping, and persevering. Each interview question was connected to a research question that was underscored by one of the three theories used for this study. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) stated, “Different psychological theories lead to different emphases on emotion, experiences, and behavior – as well as on the temporal dimension of past, present, and future” (p. 133). The researcher examined the responses to the interview questions through the lens of the social cognition (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and student involvement (Astin, 1984) theories. This allowed the researcher to analyze Christian college students’ past experiences and present behaviors and how they corresponded with spirituality and the ability to cope and persevere while attending an urban public college. The researcher examined their lived experiences to understand how the students’ environment, beliefs, and behaviors contributed to their spiritual development. The responses from the participants in the study helped the

researcher to gain information that will add to the existing literature on the emerging phenomenon of spirituality among college students. Likewise, gaining information on how the college environment can hinder or support a students' ability to cope and persevere in college is crucial to establishing recommendations for future research.

According to Bandura (1977),

Although social persuasion alone may have definite limitations as a means of creating an enduring sense of personal efficacy, it can contribute to the successes achieved through corrective performance. That is, people who are socially persuaded that they possess the capabilities to master difficult situations are provided with provisional aids for effective action are likely to mobilize greater effort than those who received only the performance aids. (p. 198)

The researcher wanted to extract pertinent information about spirituality from the interviews to add to the emerging phenomenon. Understanding what helps some students to cope and persevere in college may help to provide a model for other students who have similar beliefs and values.

Data Analysis

Twelve interviews were initially scheduled with students from the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. However, only eight students met with the researcher. One student informed the researcher that he was sick and would not be able to participate in the study. The researcher wished him well and expressed her appreciation for his consideration. Two phone calls were made to reschedule interviews with the remaining three students who missed their appointments. The researcher left a phone message for each student requesting that he or she call back to reschedule the appointment. After

waiting for 72 hours for the three students to respond the researcher decided to proceed and conclude the study with the eight students who did show up for the interview. Eight students provided a good sample size number of underrepresented minorities who were members of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club enrolled at an urban public college. They were willing to share their lived experiences as it relates to this study.

The researcher secured a private office to conduct the interviews. Each student was greeted and welcomed as they arrived at the office. After each student was seated, the researcher thanked each one for showing up for the interview. The interview protocol was read to each participant. The researcher verbally requested permission from each student to use a digital recorder to help capture the contents of the interview. Utilizing a digital recorder provided additional support for the researcher to clarify and verify the accuracy of the contents received during the interviews. Obtaining accurate information from the students during the interviews was vital to the credibility of this study. The researcher wanted to protect the voices and lived experiences of the students.

After the interviews concluded with the students, the researcher employed the services of a transcriptionist. The recordings were transcribed and converted into a text format. The researcher then forwarded a copy of the transcribed notes to each student to review contents of the interview for accuracy. Students were asked to review the transcripts and send back any corrections, if needed, within 72 hours. To protect the rights of the students the researcher did not proceed with the coding of the transcripts until the students had time to review and respond as requested. One student responded with a request to make one correction to her response. The correction was made as requested. Moving forward the data was then sent to two analysts to analyze the

transcripts independently to develop categories and themes. Creswell (2014) recommends this approach to help cross check the codes, decrease inaccuracies, ensure reliability, and strengthen the validity and integrity of the research. The results from the researcher and two analysts were compared for recurring themes, patterns, similarities, and differences to strengthen the validation of the study.

The researcher utilized inductive thematic analysis to analyze the data. Initially the researcher had planned to utilize MAXDQA, a qualitative data analysis software. However, the researcher decided to analyze the data manually. Braun and Clarke (2013) purports, thematic analysis is a way to code the data and extract information that is relevant and important for answering the research questions. The data was organized and coded manually by the researcher to identify significant and unique statements, words, and quotes as indicated in each interview by the students. This approach was applied to each interview and each question repeatedly. The researcher developed categories based on the recurring themes highlighted in each interview question to determine if they corresponded with the research questions. According to Creswell (2013), “The process of coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (p. 184).

The researcher also utilized a triangulation method to analyze the data. According to Guion, Diehl, and McDonald (2002), “Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives.” Two analysts were employed by the researcher to analyze the data to provide an objective point of view and test for

contradictions or inconsistencies that may have resulted in the findings. Fusch and Ness (2015) indicated, “Triangulation of data can result in sometimes contradictory and inconsistent results.” The analysts coded the data based on their own individual approach without receiving any instructions from the researcher. This approach allowed the researcher to control biases and ensure trustworthiness and accuracy of the data. Analyst number one used an inductive approach to note the number of instances and group them into themes and categories with Microsoft Excel software. Analyst number two used an inductive approach with descriptive coding to find metaphors, noticing co-occurring words, finding repetition, and noticing similarities and differences with Microsoft Excel Software (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The researcher reviewed the findings of the analysts to gain a deeper understanding and meaning of the data based on the different perspectives to determine how the information relates to the purpose of this study.

According to Creswell (2013), “How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research” (p. 215). Interpreting the interviews accurately based on the responses and perceptions of the students is paramount to the accuracy and trustworthiness of this study. Although, the researcher is an employee at the college as well as a Christian, allowing the voices of the students to speak for themselves is imperative for carrying out this study in an ethical and neutral manner. Creswell (2013) indicated, demonstrating restraint and objectivity during the interviews and analyzation of the data is crucial to the reliability and outcome of the research. All efforts were placed on hearing and giving voice to the perceptions of Christian students who employ spirituality as a strategy for coping and persevering at a 4-year urban public college.

A large proportion of students who graduate from urban high schools are more likely to be underprepared academically for the rigorous demands of college, have limited income and family support, and are most likely to attend an urban public college (Jordan, 2007). Providing an opportunity for Christian college students who are attending an urban public college to share their thoughts on spirituality and how they utilize it to help them to cope and persevere in college may help to develop policies that will welcome the use of spirituality in higher education. As more information continues to emerge on spirituality and college students, perhaps institutions of higher education will begin to consider this phenomenon as an alternative strategy that may help college students to succeed.

Summary

Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach for this study provided an opportunity for the researcher to conduct one on one, face to face interviews. The researcher wanted to examine spirituality as a strategy for coping and perseverance among Christian students attending an urban public college. Interviewing Christian college students helped the researcher to ascertain how spirituality is viewed from their perception. The students provided rich data for the researcher to analyze. Each of the interview questions allowed the researcher to extract information to examine the students lived experiences through the lens of the theoretical framework used for this study. The data revealed personal, social, and environmental factors that were underscored by the theories of social cognition, student involvement, and self-efficacy. Utilizing an inductive analysis in addition to a thematic analysis helped the researcher to reduce the data to significant and recurring themes. According to Thomas (2006), “The primary

purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies.” This approach allowed the researcher to code the data without a predetermined theory. The researcher then reviewed the data to establish links between the recurring patterns, themes, and categories to correspond them to the research questions. According to Thomas (2006), “The general inductive approach provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings.” Triangulating the data helped the researcher to ensure trustworthiness of the findings from the data.

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth explanation of the findings that resulted from the data. The findings will show how the interview questions corresponded to the research questions. Research question 1 was grouped with interview questions 1 through 3. Research question 2 was grouped with interview questions 3 through 4. Research question 3 was grouped with interview question 5. Research question 4 was grouped with interview question 6. Lastly, research question 5 was grouped with interview questions 7 through 12. This approach helped the researcher to provide clarity for how the interview questions and research questions related to the development of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions of Christian college students to ascertain if spirituality is a strategy that helps them to cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college. The spiritual life of college students is an emerging phenomenon. Leading researchers, such as; Astin et al. (2011), Braskamp (2007), Bryant (2008), Cady (2007), Chickering (2006), and Miller (2009) have presented substantial evidence to support spirituality as an important role in the lives of college students. Research on the spiritual life of college students continues to emerge and evolve providing more reasons for this concept to be examined. Researchers like, Astin (2004) and Astin et al. (2001, 2005), has contributed an extensive amount of research asserting how spirituality is a valuable resource for helping college students to develop. Spirituality has also garnered the attention of scientists. Miller (2015) declares, “Science now tells us that this spiritual faculty is inborn, fundamental to the human constitution, central in our physiology and psychology. Spirituality links brain, mind, and body” (p. 26). Moberg (2010), concurs there is biological evidence to support spirituality as a built-in biological component of human nature. Astin et al. (2011) asserts, spirituality has a positive impact on a student’s ability to cope with challenges and persevere. This researcher built on this concept to ascertain if spirituality is a strategy for coping and persevering among Christian college students attending an urban public

college. Conducting a qualitative phenomenological study gave voice to the perceptions of the Christian college students who participated in this research.

Researchers like, Engle and Tinto (2008), indicate students fail to complete their college degree due to poor academic performance, low income, and social stressors. Despite the efforts that has been made to increase supportive services to help students successfully complete their undergraduate degree, increasing college graduation rates continue to be a perplexing problem that has yet to be resolved (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This research focused on the lived experience and perceptions of Christian college students to ascertain if spirituality is a strategy that helped them to cope with stressors and persevere at a 4-year urban public college. When the first colleges were established in the United States, the core of higher education was to help the students develop academically, personally, and spiritually (Geiger, 2014). Religion provided the framework for the student's spiritual development. This researcher wanted to examine if Christian college students utilize spirituality to help them cope and persevere academically and personally. Understanding how Christian college students utilize spirituality to help them cope and persevere is important to the development of this study. According to Miller (2015), spirituality is:

An inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and a guiding force or energy. The word we give to this higher power might be God, nature, spirit, universe, the creator, or other words that represent a divine presence. (p. 6)

This definition aligns more closely to the original concept of spirituality. Christians associate spirituality with the Holy Bible which refers to the attributes and teachings of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (McClendon, 2012). Utilizing this definition of

spirituality to underscore the perceptions of Christian college students helped this researcher to create a frame for studying a select group of college students and how they have excelled academically.

Conducting a qualitative phenomenological study was the ideal approach for the researcher to use to examine the lived experiences of Christian college students to ascertain if spirituality is a strategy that helps them to cope with stressors and persevere at a 4-year urban public college (Creswell, 2013). The study was conducted at York College City University of New York, an urban public college located in New York. Permission was received from the college for the researcher to conduct the study with students in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. The club provides an opportunity for Christian students who believe in God and the biblical teachings of Jesus Christ to meet on a weekly basis at the college for prayer, Bible studies, worship, and spiritual support. Members in the club who met the criteria to participate in the study provided a convenient sample for the researcher to extract rich data to answer the research questions. Face to face interviews provided an opportunity for the researcher to engage the students and delve into their lived experiences.

According to Astin et al. (2011), the utilization of spirituality in higher education could be a way to increase students successfully completing college. Astin et al. (2005) has provided extensive research to examine the spiritual life of college students. His aim was to understand how college students view spirituality, the role it plays in their lives, and how colleges and universities can be more effective in facilitating students' spiritual development (Astin et al., 2005). To gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Christian college students, the researcher used an inductive thematic

analysis (TA) approach to analyze the data collected from the study. This helped the researcher to code the data and extract relevant information to answer the research questions. The researcher read and reread each transcript to identify unique statements, quotes, and patterns. According to Clarke and Braun (2017), “TA can be used to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices; ‘experiential’ research which seeks to understand what participants’ think, feel, and do.” The researcher used the thematic analysis to examine how the students think, feel, and behave by utilizing spirituality as a strategy to help them to cope and persevere in college. Ascertaining the who, what, when, why, and how the students’ spiritual beliefs, values, and practices were shaped and developed, provided rich data for the researcher to answer the research questions. This chapter provided a review of the research questions, data analysis and major findings, and a brief description of the participants. The responses from the participants provided an explanation for how the findings addressed each research question.

Research Questions

Five questions were developed to examine if spirituality is utilized as a strategy for coping and persevering through challenges and stressors for Christian college students at an urban public college.

1. How do Christian students define spirituality?
2. How do Christian students describe the connection between their spirituality and self-efficacy in college?
3. How do Christian students describe how they handle academic, personal, and social obligations?

4. How do Christian students describe the relationship between their spirituality and their college success?
5. How do Christian students describe how their college experience has supported or hindered the expression of their spirituality?

Data Analysis and Findings

The following information will provide an overview of the process used for analyzing the data and the findings. Analyzing the findings from multiple perspectives provided an opportunity for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the data in relation to the study (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2002). The researcher used a data driven method to identify patterns and significant themes within and across the lived experiences and perceptions Christian students who participated in the study (Clarke & Braun, 2017, Creswell, 2013, Thomas, 2006). Two analysts helped the researcher to triangulate the data to ensure trustworthiness and validity of the data. Analyzing the data, independently, allowed the researcher and analysts to identify patterns and themes based on their own perspectives to conceptualize the data.

The researcher reviewed and compared the findings from the analysts to ascertain the significance of the results. Guion (2002) indicated, "If the findings from the different evaluators arrive at the same conclusion, then validity has been established. If the conclusions differ substantially, then further study is warranted to uncover the "true" and "certain" finding." The findings were substantiated by the student's responses to the interview questions as they related to the research questions.

The researcher conducted the interviews at the college during the month of May 2017. Seven females and one male were interviewed. The group demographics

consisted of six students who identified themselves as of African descent, one identified as Western Caribbean, and one Latino. Five students were within the age range of 17-21. Three were within the age range of 22-26. However, all the students were over the age of 18, and did not require parental consent to participate in the study. The selected majors of the participants varied accordingly: interdisciplinary studies, economics, music, biology, childhood education, computer science and nursing. Table 4.1 is a demographic summary of the students who participated.

Table 4.1

Demographic Data for Participants

Student	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Grade Level	Religion	Major
001	Female	20	African American	Sophomore	Pentecostal	Interdisciplinary
002	Female	22	African American	Junior	Pentecostal	Economics
003	Male	22	African American	Senior	Non Denom	Music
004	Female	19	African American	Sophomore	Pentecostal	Biology
005	Female	20	Other	Junior	Pentecostal	Childhood Ed.
006	Female	19	W. Caribbean	Sophomore	Pentecostal	Computer Sci
007	Female	21	Latino	Senior	Other*	Biology
008	Female	22	African American	Senior	Pentecostal	Nursing

Note. *005 – Other denotes multi-ethnicity. *007 - Other denotes non-denomination – but Christian.

As the data reflects, the majority of the participants were females. There were three additional males in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club who met the criteria. They initially expressed their interest in participating in the study. However, they did not respond to the researchers request to reschedule the interview. The following responses are an accurate reflection of what was said by the students who did participate in the study. In an effort to maintain the integrity of the data, the researcher did not make any changes to the grammar or sentence structure.

The Participants

Student 001 is a 20-year-old, African American female, identifying with the Pentecostal Apostolic denomination. She is currently a sophomore, majoring in interdisciplinary studies, expecting to graduate in 2019. This student was raised in Jamaica, West Indies. She indicated her aunt played a role in influencing her beliefs.

Student 002 is a 22-year old, African American female, identifying Pentecostal as her denomination. She is currently a junior, majoring in economics, expecting to graduate in 2018. This student was raised in Ghana, Africa. She grew up in a boarding school. Her spiritual beliefs were influenced by a teacher at the boarding school. She grew up in a non-religious home.

Student 003 is a 22-year old, African American male, identifying as non-denominational. He is currently a senior, majoring in music, expecting to graduate in 2018. This student was raised in a Christian home. He indicated his parents and grandparents influenced his beliefs.

Student 004 is a 19-year old, African American female, identifying with the Pentecostal denomination. She is currently a sophomore, majoring in biology, expecting

to graduate in 2020. This student was raised in Haiti. She indicated her mom influenced her beliefs.

Student 005 is a 20-year old female who identified her ethnicity as other. She indicated Pentecostal as her denomination. She is currently a junior, majoring in childhood education, expecting to graduate in 2018. This student was raised in a Christian home. She indicated her parents influenced her beliefs.

Student 006 is a 19-year old, West Caribbean female, identifying with the Pentecostal denomination. She is currently a sophomore, majoring in computer science, expecting to graduate in 2019. This student was introduced to her faith as a teenager. Going to church influenced her beliefs.

Student 007 is a 21-year old, Latino female, identifying other as her denomination. She is currently a senior, majoring in biology, expecting to graduate in 2017. This student was raised in the church. She indicated her mom influenced her beliefs.

Student 008 is a 22-year old, African American female, identifying with the Pentecostal denomination. She is currently a senior who is a nursing student, expecting to graduate in 2017. This student was raised in church. She indicated her mom influenced her beliefs.

Responses from the Participants

Social cognition theory. Bandura's (1986) social cognition theory provided the lens for the researcher to gain insight into how the students developed their association to spirituality. The researcher wanted to ascertain the basis of what the students think and believe about spirituality and how it affects their behavior. The open-ended questions

allowed the researcher to view the environmental factors that influenced and or modelled behaviors that influenced what the students have come to define and know about spirituality. Bandura (1986) posits, “Modelling is the first step in developing competencies.” Interview questions 1 through 3 were developed to answer research question 1.

Research question 1. How do Christian students define spirituality?

Major findings. The purpose of research question 1 was to gain an understanding on how Christian students define spirituality. Interview questions 1, 2, and 3, were designed to extract information to answer research question 2. The researcher and analysts identified different, but similar themes, to interview questions 1, 2, and 3. Analyzing the data from the different perspectives provided an opportunity for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the data. A closer examination and comparison of the themes and subthemes revealed several important findings.

The link between the findings for interview question 1, as noted by the researcher and analysts, relates to the influence and support the students have received from family, friends, and other pertinent people. The support from family, friends, and other pertinent people has had some type of influence in shaping the spiritual development of the students who participated in the study.

In reviewing the students’ responses to interview question 1, the emergent theme centered on their social environments as having the most influence on how they became Christians. Family emerged as the primary model for influencing how students learn, think, and believe. Social cognitive (Bandura, 1986) underscored the environmental factors students reported. Family, school, and religious organizations provided

behavioral models for the students to observe, learn and eventually reciprocate the behavior (Bandura, 1986). The first analyst identified support as an emerging theme as it relates to connecting with others, being a part of the Christian Club, the college's resources and the overall support of their friends and family are key findings that emerged from the data. The second analyst identified several themes, such as; faith, demographics, experience, mental health, and relationships as emergent themes.

Although the overarching themes presented by the researcher and analysts were different, the concepts interrelate significantly. Miller (2015) indicated the first decade of a child's life involves integrating their spiritual knowing as well as cognition, physical, social, and emotional development, which is shaped by parents, faculty, peers, and community. This supports the notion that faith, demographics, experience, mental health, and relationships, are developed by the support and connections that students have with their family, spiritual leaders, friends, and other social interactions.

Referring to God was a pattern among the comments that emerged as the theme for interview question 2. There was a cross reference of comments among the students that referred to the Bible, faith, and belief. However, in reviewing the students' comments about how they describe their faith, there was a strong relationship to the definition of spirituality used by the researcher for this study. According to Miller (2015), spirituality is defined as having "An inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and a guiding force or energy" (p. 6).

The first analyst identified Christian literacy as a theme. Whereas, analyst number two identified faith as the theme. The themes for both analysts correspond with the researcher's theme as it relates to the student's indication of their faith in God which

is shaped and developed by what they learn from reading the Bible. The students noted their beliefs, experiences, guidance, influence, relationships, and spirituality are connected to God, which is the basis for how they describe their faith.

Findings for interview question 3 indicated prayer, reading the Bible, following the teachings of the Bible, and going to church are common practices that strengthen their beliefs and values. The first analyst identified the power of prayer as a theme for interview question 3. The second analyst noted faith, experiences, and values as themes. However, prayer was identified as a subtheme by the second analyst. The researcher noted prayer and the Bible as themes. Both the researcher and first analyst agreed by indicating prayer as an overarching theme. The themes offered by analyst number two centered on how the students developed their beliefs, values, and practices as a Christian. However, the students indicated prayer and reading the Bible are key elements that help them to substantiate their faith, experiences, and values.

The themes and subthemes noted for interview question 3 also connect with themes and subthemes for interview questions 1 and 2. Although the researcher and analysts highlighted slightly different themes, a review of the subthemes revealed key points the students made in their responses to address the research question.

Overall, the findings from the researcher and analysts show agreement in noting that the student's definition of spirituality is linked to their belief in God. Additional findings suggest the student's spiritual development, personal experiences, beliefs, values, practices, and connections with others, underscores their definition of spirituality. Table 4.2 provides a visual display of the themes and subthemes that emerged for interview questions 1, 2, and 3 as indicated by the researcher and analysts. Following

Table 4.2, you will find responses from the students for the interview questions. The interview questions were developed to answer research question 1.

Table 4.2

Research Question 1. Emergent Themes

	Themes	Sub-themes
Researcher		Parents, spiritual leaders, teacher, home, church
Interview Q1.	Family, God	Bible, belief, relationship, life changing, support
Interview Q2.	prayer, Bible	Reading the Bible, going to church, and Holy Spirit.
Interview Q3		
Analyst 1.		Connecting with others, being a part of the
Interview	Support	Christian Club, the college's resources and the
Q.1.		overall support of their friends and family.
	Christian literacy	Used what they learned from the Bible to educate
Interview Q2.		others and be able to speak about specific
	Power of prayer	scriptures.
Interview Q3.		Praying for the better good, praying with others,
		connecting and speaking with God.
Analyst 2.		
Interview Q.1	Faith,	Age of acceptance, age of awareness, beliefs,
	demographics,	change of location, connectivity, convictions,
	experience, mental	emotion, experience, family, guidance, interest, lost
	health, relationships	connection, Origin of birth, prayer, relationships,
Interview Q2.	Faith	spirituality, struggle, values.
		Beliefs, experience, faith, guidance, influence,
Interview Q3.	Faith, experience,	relationship, spirituality.
	and values	Beliefs, connectivity, experience. faith, guidance,
		messages, practices, prayer, spiritual relationship,
		trust, and values.

Interview question 1. Interview question 1 asked the students to describe in detail how they became a Christian? Seven out of eight students shared similar experiences indicating they were influenced by their parents or family members as a child. However, student 002 indicated that she had a male role model who was a teacher that influenced her beliefs while growing up in a boarding school in Ghana, Africa. She stated, “Through different testimonies that he shared, and how his journey has been in life until he became a Christian, and I got convinced that Jesus is the Savior, and then got baptized,

and then I became Christian.” She credits her school environment for helping to develop her faith. Her teachers served as role models who influenced her beliefs. Whereas, student 003 stated, “I grew into it. I’ve been taught by my parents, my grandparents, and my church. I went to a Christian school for majority of my life, so I was pretty much born into it.” This student acknowledges his family as being the contributors to his spiritual beliefs. Similarly, student 005 stated, “So I grew up in the church and basically was taught that and then I chose for myself around the age of like nine that I wanted to be saved and like I enjoyed it.”

Student 004 provided an in-depth explanation of how she became a Christian. She grew up in Haiti. Her mom raised her in the church. She indicated her relationship with God evolved in 2013 when she visited a Haitian church in New York. From that point she said God began to change her life. She stated,

I know that God existed. He sent his son Jesus to die for humanity. But I never had a relationship with God. When I become to understand having a relationship with God, it’s a big difference when you believe the word. And still now, God is teaching me how to live for him.

Interview question 2. Interview question 2 asked the students how would they describe their faith to someone who wants to know about it. The purpose of this question was to have the students explain the basis of their beliefs. Student 007 stated,

How would I explain it? I wouldn't know how to explain it. It's just something greater. Something that you cannot have enough words to explain, because it's something so big. Faith is like believing in God and really seeing if he's there or

not. Just following the Bible, believing everything that's in there. And believing in Jesus.

This response epitomized the overarching theme that emerged from the interview question. Seven out of eight students made a reference to God as they expressed their thoughts. Student 008 stated, “There’s not much to worry about if you have God. I mean, you will worry but I normally give everything to God and I know He’s going to see me through it.” Student 004 said, “Faith actually comes from hearing the word of God. So to me, you can have a relationship with God.” Student 001 shared her response to this question from a different angle. She stated, “The basis of anything in my life would have to be based on what the Bible says, because the Bible is like the constitution of life to a Christian.” She also said studying the Bible helped her to learn about God, which increased her understanding.

Student 002 is the only student who did not grow up in a Christian home. Her response to this question was based on her experiences in board school. She said, “Because I didn’t come from a religious home, I became so curious, because I saw these Christians go about life, and see life in a very joyful and pleasant way.” Student 005 said, “I would try to like explain who God is, like know what I know about who God is according to the Bible and maybe tell them about like the gospel.” In the latter part of her response to this question, she stated, okay, I believe in Jesus Christ and I believe that God sent Him, who is His son, to die on the cross for us so that we can be able to live and have life and it was only through Him that we’re able to do that.”

Interview question 3. Interview question 3 asked the students to give me some examples of their beliefs, values, and practices as a Christian? This question was

designed to examine how Christian students engage spirituality. Six out of eight students mention prayer repeatedly throughout the interview. All of the students mentioned reading and following the teachings of the Bible as an essential practice of their faith. Student 003 indicated, “The core of our faith is understanding that Jesus Christ, who was God the son, who’s the second person in that whole Trinity came down to be the ultimate sacrifice for man.” His practices involve going to church and reading his Bible. Student 008 shared her perceptiveness by stating,

I believe in the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. I believe that they all have different functions. I believe that the Holy Spirit is within me, that I have the Holy Spirit. That Jesus died and He left the Holy Spirit as a helper for me.

She also mentioned that she prays to God and reads the Bible. Student 004 also echoed the same sentiments as student 008. She stated,

The Holy Ghost is God in a different form to me. Actually, the Holy Spirit, I believe in the trinity. The Trinity, the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. I believe in the Holy Ghost as the one who consoles your soul when you feel weak.”

Student 001 provided an in-depth example of how her belief in God, in addition to prayer and reading the Bible helped her through a difficult time in her life. She stated that at an earlier part of her life she felt insecure and worthless. She credits a teacher from her Bible study class who spoke words of encouragement from the Bible to help her overcome those self-defeating thoughts. From that point in her life to now she has come to appreciate who she is by being consistent with prayer and believing in God.

Student 006 expounds on her beliefs, values, and practices, by emphasizing that she reads the Bible even if it just one passage. She meditates on it, because it speaks to

her. She emphasized that prayer is essential. The Bible says to pray continually. She said prayer is one of the key things to a Christian lifestyle. Student 007 also, emphasized prayer as being very important in addition to putting God as the center of your life.

Self-efficacy theory. Bandura (1977) self-efficacy theory provided the lens for the researcher to gain insight into the methods that Christian students employ to succeed in college. The basis of self-efficacy is that a person's belief in their ability helps them to accomplish a goal. Bandura (1977) posits belief is developed by observing others who have mastered the task. Immediate or delayed replication of the observed behavior or influences will give the individual power to persevere and produce the desired goal. The researcher wanted to examine the influences that contribute to the student's ability to cope and persevere in college. Interview questions 3 and 4 were designed to illicit information to answer research question 2. Interview question 5 was intended to answer research question 3. Interview question 6 was constructed to answer research question 4. However, the interview questions for this study provided answers that addressed more than one research question. This allowed the researcher to obtain a rich and varied response from several angles to answer the research questions (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015).

Research question 2. How do Christian students describe the connection between their spirituality and self-efficacy in college?

Major findings. The aim for research question 2 was to ascertain if spirituality has an impact on a student's ability to accomplish their goal to graduate. Christian literacy and the power of prayer were identified as emergent themes by analyst number one. The second analyst noted faith, experience, and values as emergent themes. The

researcher identified the Bible as the emergent theme for interview question 3. The findings noted by the researcher and analysts are slightly different, but there are connotations that interconnect the emergent themes. The student's faith, experience, and values are developed by reading the Bible and prayer.

The researcher identified God as the emergent theme for interview question 4. Analyst number one noted support and Christian literacy. Analyst number two noted faith, spirituality, experience, and direction as themes. The link between the themes identified by the researcher and analysts indicate that despite the struggles the students experience their strength is built on the foundation of their faith which also gives them guidance. All of the students made a reference to God, Holy Ghost, and reading the Bible as the source of strength.

A few of the students made specific comments, which is evident by the themes and subthemes noted by the researcher and analysts, to indicate how their belief in God, reading the Bible, prayer, and their connection with other Christians helps them to believe and achieve their desired goals. Table 4.3 provides a visual display of the themes and subthemes that emerged for interview questions 3 and 4 as indicated by the researcher and analysts. Following Table 4.3, you will find responses from the students for the interview questions. The interview questions were developed to answer research question 2.

Table 4.3

Research Question 2. Emergent Themes

	Themes	Sub-themes
Researcher 1. Interview Q. 3. Interview Q. 4.	Bible and God	Bible, prayer, spiritual leader, self worth God, Holy Ghost, counsel, and guidance.
Analyst 1. Interview Q. 3 Interview Q. 4.	Christian literacy Power of prayer Support Christian literacy	Used what they learned from the Bible to educate others and be able to speak about specific scriptures. Praying for the better good, praying with others, connecting and speaking with God. Connecting with others, being a part of the Christian Club, the college's resources and the overall support of their friends and family. Used what they learned from the Bible to educate others and be able to speak about specific scriptures.
Analyst 2. Interview Q. 3 Interview Q. 4	Faith, experience, and values Faith, spirituality, experience, and direction	Beliefs, connectivity, experience, faith, guidance, messages, practices, prayer, spiritual relationship, trust. values. Beliefs, faith, goals, guidance, prayer, struggle, and trust.

Interview question 3. Interview question 3 asked the students to give some examples of their beliefs, values, and practices as a Christian. Two out of eight students made specific comments that described the connection between their spirituality and self-efficacy. Student 001 stated, “Sometimes I used to feel not very valuable, not worth much.” She heard a scripture in Sunday school class that changed her attitude about herself. She said the Sunday school teacher looked directly at her in her eyes and said “your value is more than rubies.” This caused the student to realize what the Bible said about her value, and that it is not something that she should give up so easily. Whereas, student 006 said, “Prayer is definitely needed. It’s important. It’s not just you’re praying for good things to happen. But you’re praying for your growth spiritually, and asking

God to just elevate you.” Belief in God seems to be the foundation for building their self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) indicates, the satisfactions people get from what they do are determined by the standards against which they measure their accomplishment. The remaining students responded to this question by indicating their faith as belief in God and reading the Bible,

Interview question 4. Interview question 4 asked the students to describe what gives them strength and guidance to achieve their desired goals? The responses from the students were consistent, specific, and to the point. Seven out of eight students referred to God and or the Holy Spirit, prayer, and reading the Bible as the source of their strength and guidance to achieve desired goals. Student 007 said her belief in God gives her strength and guidance. Student 004 responded firmly by saying, “God is my strength. He’s the one who guides my steps.” Similarly, student 005 indicated, I think the only thing that can give me strength is God. She said, “Every situation I take it on by praying about it first because you need to have that guidance and the only one that can do that is God.”

Student 006 declared the simplest answer is the Holy Spirit. “I would say the Holy Spirit give me strength and guidance every day. He is the director of my life, and the author of my life.” Student 001 also referred to the Holy Ghost as being the source of her strength and guidance. She provided an example of how the Holy Ghost has strengthened and guided her. She said, “I remember last semester I became really, really overwhelmed. It was one of those weeks where I didn’t really stop to pray. I started to talk to God. I felt the Holy Ghost come over me. I felt refreshed and strength to continue that week.” Whereas, student 008 pondered for a few minutes before she answered the

question. Then she said, “strength and guidance - well my faith in God 100% gives me that in addition to praying to God.” Student 002 emphasized, “reading the Bible and mediating on it, praying, and getting Godly counsel from more experienced people.” She said she likes to go to an elderly person that she could trust, especially of the Christian faith, and then seek guidance on what to do in a present circumstance or situation.

Research question 3. How do Christian students describe how they handle academic, personal, and social obligations?

Major findings. The purpose of research question 3 was to have the students share the methods they use to handle the stressors and challenges they face as a college students. As a result of reviewing the data the researcher and analyst number one identified support as the overarching theme for interview question 5. All of the students indicated how their faith supports them in their efforts to handle academic, personal, and social obligations. The support they referred to was their faith in God, prayer, reading the Bible, family and friends, and the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. Analyst number two was more descriptive in her induction to note themes and subthemes that related to the overall experiences students shared during the interviews. The linkage between the themes and subthemes noted by the researcher and analysts is the connections that the students indicated they have or have established to support them during difficult times. Table 4.3 provides a visual display of the themes and subthemes that emerged for interview question 5 as indicated by the researcher and analysts. Following Table 4.3, you will find responses from the students for the interview question. The interview question was developed to answer research question 3.

Table 4.4

Research Question 3. Emergent Themes

	Themes	Sub-themes
Researcher 1. Interview Q. 5	Support	Comfort, direction, guidance, prayer, connections.
Analyst 1. Interview Q. 5	Support	Connecting with others, being a part of the Christian Club, the college's resources and the overall support of their friends and family.
	Power of prayer	Praying for the better good, praying with others, connecting and speaking with God.
Analyst 2. Interview Q. 5	Faith, experience, values	Age of acceptance, beliefs, change of location, college experience, connectivity, encouragement, faith, family, fear, focus, goals, lost connection, obedience, origin of birth, prayer, recommendation, referral, relationships, spirituality, struggle.

Interview question 5. Question 5 asked the students to tell how their faith helped them during your freshman year of college? All of the students indicated how their faith has supported them during their freshman year of college. Student 002 shared her experience by recalling how she had heard a lot of stories about what happens in college. This concerned her because she didn't want to lose her faith or disturb her walk with God. She wanted to avoid pressure from friends and stay away from bad company. She looked for a religious club that would help her stay focus. Joining the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club provided the support that she needed.

Student 003 and student 005 went to private schools for their primary education. They both were apprehensive about attending a public college. Student 003 said going to a public school was a new chapter in his life where he was surrounded by all these different people from different backgrounds. He was unsure about how he would assimilate in a diverse culture. Finding friends to bond with was one of his concerns. He

stated that he prayed, “Lord, please help me get through this first-year.” His primary goal was to learn.

Student 005 indicated that she attended private schools for her elementary and high school education. Although she did attend a public elementary school for a couple years she indicated that she had bad experiences in both public and private schools. In the private schools, most of the students were Hindu which became a conflict with her Christian beliefs. Eventually, her parents found a Christian private school which made her feel more comfortable. However, due to her previous experiences in public school she was apprehensive and scared about attending a public college. Initially when she started the college, she said to herself, “I’m just going to come here, get my work done and get out.” Her sister who had previously attended the same college told her about the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. Joining the club helped her to make connections with friends. She says her faith and prayer helped her to connect with the group. She also said the club helped her to build her spiritual life.

Student 001 and student 004 transferred from another college. Student 004 wanted to surround herself with people that believed in God. She prayed to find a Christian club. One day at the college she met another Christian at the school who invited her to the club. She indicated she was so happy to find other students who loved God. They shared their testimonies and encouraged one another. Being in the club has really inspired her.

Student 001 recalled her freshman year as being very stressful. She said, “it was difficult.” She admits to not praying as much as she should. She felt there was not balance in her life. She felt frustrated. She said, “I cried regularly.” This caused her to

pray more. As she prayed she began to feel better. She said, “A lady from my church reached out to me and suggested that I transfer to a school that is closer.” She adhered to the advice. Now she feels much better.

Student 006 also expressed how she was worried during her second semester because she started taking classes towards her major. She said she was not good at math. She prayed to God for help to succeed academically and as a person. She continued to pray throughout the semester even though she was still worried about her grades. She studied hard and prayed hard. When the semester was over she got all A’s and made the dean’s list.

Student 007 and student 008 mentioned prayer repeatedly in their response to the question. Student 008 indicated prayer helped her during her freshman year. She admits to being distracted when she started college. However, she grew up in a Christian home. She knew to pray, which is how she managed to survive her freshman year.

Student 008 contributed prayer to helping her as well. However, she felt being obedient to her mother is important. Going to school is important. Working hard is important. She believes that God is the one who helps her handle her academic, personal, and social obligations.

Research question 4. How do Christian students describe the relationship between their spirituality and their college success?

Major findings. The purpose of research question 4 was to ascertain if the students believe their spirituality has anything to do with their college success. Based on a review of the student’s responses the researcher noted prayer, reading the Bible, and faith as the themes that emerged out of the data according to what the students indicated. Analyst

number one indicated support and prayer as themes based on the sub-themes of prayer, connecting with others, being a part of the Christian Club, the college’s resources, the overall support of their friends and family, prayer, and connecting with God. Analyst number two identified faith, experience, location, and encouragement as themes based on descriptive sub-themes as detailed in Table 4.5. A closer examination of the themes and subthemes revealed there is sufficient evidence in the data to answer the research question. Although, the researcher and analysts offer different perspectives on the themes and subthemes, there is a connection among them that underscores the beliefs, values, and practices described the students.

Table 4.5 provides a visual display of the themes and subthemes that emerged for interview question 6 as noted by the researcher and analysts. Following Table 4.5, you will find responses from the students for the interview question. The interview question was developed to answer research question 4.

Table 4.5

Research Question 4. Emergent Themes

	Themes	Sub-themes
Researcher 1. Interview Q. 6	Prayer, reading the Bible, faith	Prayer, spiritual guidance, and reading the Bible.
Analyst 1. Interview Q. 6	Support Power of prayer	Connecting with others, being a part of the Christian Club, the college’s resources and the overall support of their friends and family. Praying for the better good, praying with others, connecting and speaking with God.
External Analyst 2. Interview Q. 6	Faith, experience, location, encouragement	Balance, beliefs, college experience, confidence, connectivity, family relationships, low grades, opportunity, perseverance, spirituality, and struggle.

Student 001 had a similar challenge. She reported taking four classes during the fall 2015 semester. She admits that she didn't believe that she could handle the full course load. She wanted to drop out, but she knew she couldn't. She believed that it is important to overcome obstacles, and situations to improve social economic issues. However, she stopped going to classes and didn't do her homework. When she received her grades, she realized that her GPA was below 2.0. She was placed on academic probation. As a result, she couldn't go to school the next semester. Her financial aid was affected by her poor grades. She was out of school for 3 months. During the time that she was out of school she prayed a lot. She also volunteered at her church. She had a talk with her pastor. He advised her on how to get back on track. He encouraged her. He told her that she is a brilliant and smart girl. She said, I didn't believe it, but because he believed what he was saying so much about me, it encouraged me on the inside. I really did feel like, "Okay I want to go back now." I wanted to show that I can actually do it. I wanted to prove it to myself. According to the student this is how she overcame her feeling of wanting to drop out of college.

As a transfer student, student 007 found it really hard to transfer from a 2-year college to a 4-year college. She struggled for two semesters last year. She reports being able to overcome her struggles with the support of her family and her faith. Whereas, student 006 shared how she felt like college was not for her plenty of times. Most recently, when she started a new job she was finding it hard to balance school, studying, and her social life. She wanted to give up. She considered other option such as online classes. The challenges made her want to find an easy way out. However, she acknowledges God's word for reminding her to not give up. She says, "But I remember

God just reminding me there's really no shortcuts you can take, and that he has a plan, and we should be able to execute that plan, and just doing it with the same mindset." She continued to say, "He gave me all the, I guess you could say the determination and ambition to get through that."

Student 005 had personal reasons that caused her to feel like college was not for her. She explained how she lost a close aunt and her grandmother within 4 months. Both occurred during final exams and right before major holidays. She felt overwhelmed due to the family, school, and church obligations. She managed to overcome those feelings by praying, listening to worship music, and playing the piano. Consequently, there was no disruption to her classes.

There were a few students who indicated they never felt like college was not for them. Students 003, 004, and 008 had similar responses. Student 008 stated that she never felt like college was not for her. She admits there was a time that things were a little stressful. She said, "I think it is just persevering and pushing through it." Her belief rests on knowing God has a purpose for her. She does not want to stop with a bachelor's degree, but she also wants to pursue her master's degree.

Whereas, student 004 also shared how she realizes college is very tough. She acknowledges financial aid as an issue that can cause stress. However, she said she thank God for school every day. I love school. She asserted,

Sometimes, it's hard. It's really hard; especially when you owe money. And you cannot register for classes. It's hard. It's Hard. Especially when your professors, they hating upon you. And you got to make sure you pass this class. I know I got some F's too. But yeah, I'm still striving to, to make it.

Social involvement. Astin's (1984) student involvement theory argues the need for institutions of higher education to provide an environment for students to feel connected. Interactions with students, staff and faculty plays a vital role in how students will respond to the environment and their level of commitment and engagement (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This can affect their decision to stay or discontinue in college. Astin's (1984) suggests providing an engaging environment where students feel connected and accepted will most likely cause them to get involved physically and psychosocially in academic and social activities. Astin's (1984) placed an emphasis on the college environment and experience as essential to shaping the students' decision to continuing at the college.

The researcher utilized the lens of the social involvement theory as a frame to view the perceptions of Christian college students as they relate to this study. Interview questions 7 through 12 (see Appendix F for interview questions) were designed to answer research question 5. Gaining an in-depth understanding of the student's involvement at the college, their overall college experience, and if their spiritual beliefs, values, and practices aided them in their ability to cope and persevere in college helped the researcher to ascertain if there is substantial evidence to support this study.

Research question 5. How do Christian students describe how their college experience has supported or hindered the expression of their spirituality?

Major findings. The intent of research question 5 was to have the students share their personal experiences as a Christian in a college environment. Interview questions 7 through 12 centered on the student's involvement at the college and their overall college experience. The findings for each interview question as noted by the researcher and

analysts merged at several points. The researcher identified family, God, prayer and the Bible as emergent themes deriving from the student's responses to interview questions 7 through 12. Analyst number one identified support, power of prayer, Christian literacy, and the Bible. Analyst number two noted faith, experience, and spirituality. A closer examination of the themes and subthemes, identified by the researcher and analyst number one, revealed that Christian students employ their beliefs, values, and practices of spirituality in their efforts to succeed in college.

Additional findings uncovered by the themes and subthemes indicated the students contribute their involvement in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club as a support system where they can connect with other Christian students who have the same beliefs, values, and practices. This allows them to invest their time in activities such as; prayer and reading the Bible. The students reported being involved in the club and having the support from other Christians at the college helps them to further their understanding and desire to be a Christian. Astin's (1984) student involvement theory suggests that students who feel connected and accepted in the college environment will more than likely get involved by investing their time and energy in academic and social activities, which can cause them to want to continue at the college.

A review of the student's responses to the interview questions 7 through 12 suggest that their spiritual beliefs, values, and practices helps them to cope and persevere through stressors and challenges to cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college. The students were very candid about their personal experiences as a college student. Several of the students provided examples of the stressors and challenges they faced as they are trying to complete their 4-year undergraduate degree. The student's responses to

the interview questions provided rich data for the researcher and analysts to identify themes and subthemes that differed in some instances, but interconnected to give voice to the students' lived experiences.

Table 4.6 provides a visual display of the themes and subthemes that emerged for interview questions 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12. Following Table 4.6, you will find responses from the students for the interview questions. The interview questions were designed to answer research question 5.

Table 4.6

Research Question 5 Emergent Themes

	Themes	Sub-themes
Researcher Interview Q. 7 ↓ Interview Q. 12	Family, God, prayer, Bible	Parents, spiritual leaders, teacher, home, church Bible, belief, relationships, life changing, support reading the Bible, going to church, and Holy Spirit.
Analyst 1. Interview Q. 7 ↓ Interview Q. 12	Support, power of prayer, Christian literacy, Bible	Connecting with others, being a part of the Christian Club, the college's resources and the overall support of their friends and family. Praying for the better good, praying with others, connecting and speaking with God. Used what they learned from the Bible to educate others and be able to speak about specific scriptures. Read the Bible, used values and beliefs from Bible, studied the Bible with others.
Analyst 2. Interview Q. 7 ↓ Interview Q. 12	Faith, experience, spirituality.	Assistance, beliefs, college experience, comfort ability, connectivity, diversity, empathy, encouraged, experience, focus, guidance, inspiration, leadership, opportunity, participation, patience, practice faith, prayer, pressure, recommendation, relationships, religious freedom, spirituality, struggle, support, uncompromising, unity, and values.

Interview question 7. How do you feel about being a member of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club at the college? All the students responded positively when they shared their thoughts about being a member of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

Club. A few of the students referred to the club as a place where they can go at the college and interact with people of the same faith. Astin's (1984) student involvement theory suggests colleges should provide engaging environments where students will want to get involved physically and psychosocially in academic and social activities.

Student 002 response to this question epitomizes the collective sentiments of the students who participated in this study. She said, "I have a community of people of the same faith that really helps me, and check on me." She goes on to say, we pray together. This helps us to focus on our walk with God. She feels praying together helps to avoid negative influences in the college environment. Student 007 said it's good to know there are young people that also follow the Christian way. It feels like having another family in the college that understands your point of view and your values, your way of thinking. All the students described how praying, read the Bible, and worshipping together help to encourage one another. Student 001 said, "It's good to be around people that are like-minded. They have a communal purpose and it's encouraging to be a part of something like that, because sometimes you can feel so alone."

"It's an honor to be in the club." This was stated by student 004 and 006. Student 006 has been in the club for 2 years. She was a freshman when she first joined the club. She described how excited she was when she found the Christian club on the college website. When she went to visit the club meeting, she felt completely welcomed. She said everything that they did, from fellowship, worship, and prayer, it felt like you had people by your side. I saw people changing spiritually. In her final response to the question she said it is great being in the club, and serving as a leader for the club too.

Happy is the word that a couple of the students used to express how they feel about being a member of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. Student 008 has served as president, vice president, and secretary of the club. She indicated how being a part of the club helps to redirect their focus back to God. She spoke from the point of how students in the club can get distracted with all the exams and papers. She said, “Gathering together despite the heavy workload that we have for the purpose of God, I think it’s amazing. I’m happy to be a part of the club.” Student 003 stated, “I’m very happy that I willed myself to check out the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club.” He had heard about the club, but he was doing other things. When he decided to visit the club, they were in the middle of Bible study. He indicated that he was able to learn some things in the Bible study and share his wisdom as well. He concluded his response to the question by stating, “They are my acquaintances, right now, but I’m working towards friendships.

Whereas, student 005 said, I made all my friendships in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. She said, “I’m able to look up to them and ask them questions and go to them for guidance.” Student 004 said being in the club inspires her a lot. She expressed how it’s a blessing and honor to be in the club. She describes the students in the group as prayer warriors. She stated, “When I see that somebody who loves to pray I am going to connect to you. They love to pray. I love to pray.”

Interview question 8. What are some of the club activities you find most fulfilling or helpful? Astin (1984) argues the importance of students being physically and psychosocially involved in their academic experience. Students who participated in this study described how the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club provides an opportunity

for them to be involved in activities that they find helpful and fulfilling. Prayer, Bible study, evangelizing, and playing games like Bible trivia emerged as the activities the students find most fulfilling and helpful. Prayer was mentioned the most by the students as being one of activities they find most helpful and fulfilling. Bible study was the next activity that they find helpful and fulfilling. The club activities provide an opportunity for the students to connect and interact with one another also on a personal level. Student 002 said she likes coming together and sharing our personal experiences, difficulties, challenges with each other. Then we pray for one another and offer help to each other. She gave an example for when a member in the club offered to help her last semester. She was struggling with a paper. While sharing her concerns about the paper with the young lady in the club, Student 002 said, she offered to help when I needed help.

Praying together allows the students to connect with one another. Student 004 said she finds, "Prayer, praying with a partner, and praying with others" as most fulfilling. Student 007 response was similar. She mentioned that she likes what they call a prayer walk. They go around praying in different areas of the college. This also gave them an opportunity to talk to other people at the college about Jesus and invite them to the club. Student 005 also said she likes praying together in pairs. She likes to go out and evangelize, which is to talk to other people about Jesus Christ (Elwell, 1997).

Several of the students mentioned how they like to evangelize on the college campus. The club organizes various events to share their faith and connect with other students. Student 006 described how they also have prayer groups on the campus and pass out pamphlets about the gospel of Jesus Christ. She indicated that they give out

fliers and cards with their contact information. This is a method they use to connect with other students on the campus and invite them to the club.

Student 003 found another club activity besides prayer and evangelizing to be helpful and fulfilling. His response was Bible study. He said, “I’ve honestly been slacking in my Bible reading, so it felt as if I was on a plateau. I wasn’t growing. It’s one thing to be in a relationship with God, but it’s another thing to be in a relationship with God and grow. The Bible studies helped me to practicality and applicability, applying it to my whole life and sharing with others.

A few of the students mentioned how they liked participating in the fun activities of the club, such as playing games like Bible trivia and having a movie day. Student 005 says it causes them to get to know each a little more. Student 001 mentioned that the club has a fun day at the end of the semester where they bring food representing the various cultures in the club, and they plan games together. They pray and have fun. Although the students focus on their faith, they also find time to have fun and share their faith.

Interview question 9. Can you tell me if being a Christian on campus has impacted your college experience? If so, can you give some examples of how you were impacted? According to Astin et al. (2011), spirituality has a positive impact on a student’s ability to cope and persevere through challenges. This question extracted information from the students that gave the researcher additional insight into their challenges. The students shared their experiences and how their faith impacted their ability to cope and persevere. Some of the students reported social challenges, while other reported academic challenges. Student 007 reported how her faith helped her to

develop socially and personally. She said she was not good at making friends. However, being a part of the Christian club allowed her to have friends in college who she could talk to. She also mentioned how being a Christian helps her maintain academic honesty.

Social development was echoed by student 003. He said the friendships that he made at the college are the best that he has had. He explained that although they are not Christians, they understand that he is not willing to compromise his faith. Student 006 indicated her social life was impacted. She described how she would usually isolate herself. She wouldn't talk to anybody. She would go to class, and then go straight home. Now instead of being afraid to talk to people, she is more open and able to talk to more people. She was impacted by meeting other students on the campus and finding out they or someone in their family is a Christian.

Student 004 was impacted by seeing different people at the college who come from different parts of the world and know that God exist. She stated, "It causes me to believe in God more. Their testimonies inspire me to not really focus on the problems that I have, but to focus on God." She admits that it's hard to be a Christian, but at the same time you are sharing joy with other people. Whereas, student 001 and student 002 believes being a Christian has helped them to avoid the negative behavior and temptation that they see at the college and in the community. Both students explained how their faith has compelled them to uphold their values. Student 001 recounted how some of her friends have acclimated into the culture at the college. She admits that it's so tempting to just want to fit in and do what everyone else is doing. However, being a Christian has helped her to maintain her values. Student 002, indicated that as a young girl, she sees people her age who are doing something different, especially negatively, in the

community, such as; smoking, attitude in class, being disrespectful to the professors and the elderly. She acknowledges that reading the Bible and being a part of the Christian club helps her to focus on how to behave as a Christian. She said, “So as a Christian, it has really helped me focus on my studies, on talking to people, on behaving well in school and outside of school.”

Some of the students contribute their faith with helping them academically. Student 008 stated, “Because of my prayer life I don’t get as nervous as my classmates. I don’t get anxious right before the exam. I know I’m going to get through it.” She believes that God directed her to the Christian club. She says going to the club every week helps to alleviate stress. As well as participating in small prayer groups at the school. Student 005 shared the same sentiments. She indicated last semester she was stress out because she was taking a very important class for her major. She had to take a final and complete a big project. Her professor got sick and was absent for weeks. She said, “I was sitting there, going crazy. I didn’t know what to study. I started listening to my devotional app. I began to feel relax.” She took the test answering the questions with what she did know. She ended up getting an A in the class. The teacher told the student that she got an A because of the effort that she made in the class. The student said, “I knew that it had to be God.” She contributes prayer, worship, and listening to devotion music and messages as having an impacted on her college experience.

Interview question 10. What do you recommend to incoming freshmen about being successful during their first year of college? The students for this study were interviewed separately. However, majority of the students responded unanimously in recommending incoming freshmen to seek out counsel to help them during their first year

of college. Student 001 said, “Don’t try to do everything on your own.” This aligned with the recommendation given by student 006. She said, “I feel they should be open to whatever the school has to offer, clubs, study groups, just be open to it and don’t isolate yourself like I did from other people.” Student 003 advised the freshmen to choose their friends wisely. He said, “As you continue to learn about yourself, learning about what you want to do in life, find people that will accompany you in that goal. Find people who will support you because you can’t make it by yourself.” He continued to say that in order for one to be successful, they need a team. They need support systems. They need strength. As a freshman, vet your friends; stay focused on the task at hand. College is not a race, it’s a journey.

Student 007 stated, “Know what steps to follow and who to ask for help.” She advised the incoming students to get good grades and get involved in extracurricular activities. Most of the students in the study also suggested that freshmen should join clubs. Student 002 offered several recommendations for freshmen to be successful. She advised them to join clubs in school, network and talk with other people on campus, look for various departments that are available on campus, get involved in the class discussions and answer questions, interact with the professors in class and go their office hours as much as you can. Her recommendations are quintessence elements of the student involvement theory. Students who invest their time and efforts in the college environment and activities are more likely to persist academically (Astin, 1984, Braskamp, 2007, Schreiner, 2013). Several of the students suggested that the incoming freshmen join the InterVarsity Christian Fellow Club. Student 004 said, “Participate in the Christian club. Whether they believe in God or not. Just come to visit. Maybe they

will be touch by the experience.” Meeting friends emerged as another benefit that the freshmen could receive from joining the clubs. Student 005 noted that freshmen worry about meeting friends. She said invite them to the Christian club and did other students who participated in the study.

Student 008 put more emphasis on prayer. She advised the incoming freshmen students to pray before they do anything. She stated, “Pray before you study, pray before you take that exam, before you hand in that essay. Prayer works.” She also added that they should manage their time well and join activities like the Christian club, which helps to reduce some stress. It also helps to redirect your focus to God.

Interview question 11. What do you think about students practicing their faith on campus? Overall, there was an agreement with how the students felt about students practicing their faith on campus. The response from student 003 reflects the collective thoughts relayed by the other students to this question. He stated, “I have no problem with people, with other practicing their faith on campus whatever it may be.” Student 007 expressed the same sentiments by saying “I think it’s very good that you can feel free here to practice your faith without being judged or persecuted.” Student 002 stated, “I think it really helps. It really helps, because you are not alone. You’re part of a community that shares the same faith as you.” She shared an example of how she felt very timid and nervous about sharing the Word of God. Being in the club helped her to come out of her comfort zone. Going out with the club in small groups to evangelize helped her to gradually build confidence and trust.

The students fully support the opportunity to practicing their faith on campus. However, several of the students see it as an opportunity to share their faith with other

students. Student 005 sees it as an opportunity to evangelize to other students and invite them to the club. She explained how the club goes out and evangelize and get people to not just come to club, but they have been able to pray with them and converted them to the Christianity. Student 004 stated, “God...places us Christians in this college to inspire other people.” She explained how the views and behaviors of Christian college students can be an example to other college students. This statement was underscored by the response of Student 001. She said, “You never know how what you’re practicing influence them. You never know who’s looking and how what you doing is impacting someone.”

Several of the students shared their observations for how the Muslim students practice their faith at the college. Student 001 said the Muslim students are unified. They have a prayer corner designated for the Muslim students. She has seen it grow. She said, “I feel like its expanding because they’re unified. So even though they’re a different religion from us, there’s something to be learned from it.” Student 006 echoed the same thoughts. She said, “We have the freedom to practice religion; even if you’re Christian. You see the Muslim club upstairs. They freely worship. I think we have the right to practice whatever belief we have.”

Student 008 asserted the fact that she believes in Jesus Christ. She suggests that whatever your faith system is that gets you through the school year and school day, then stick with what you believe in and hold on to it because at the end of the day, that’s what you have. All of the students agreed in their responses that students should be able to practice their faith on campus regardless of their beliefs.

Interview question 12. What do you want the college administration to know about ways they could help incoming freshmen to be successful in their first year of college?

A review of the data revealed a unanimous appeal from the students requesting that more support be given to incoming freshmen students. Student 001 said, “It’s really hard for a lot of students; especially if they’re coming from a background that doesn’t have a lot of experience.” She used the example of students who are the first ones in their family to go to college. She suggested that patience is needed when dealing with incoming freshmen. During her response to the question she described how she didn’t receive any sympathy when she came to the college. She recalled how she had to deal with impatient attitudes from the staff which made it more stressful. She said, “I didn’t want to feel like a bother to anyone, but I needed to know the information that they had. One department telling you one thing and another department telling you another thing, it made me confused.”

Several of the students suggested that the administrators should start a mentoring program. Student 003 said freshmen are still kids when they come to college. He suggested the freshmen should be nurtured and mentored. Student 008 suggested providing a workshop or maybe a class to show freshman how to manage their time. She said the nursing program have a mentoring program where the incoming nursing students pair with someone who has been in the nursing program for a year. The mentors show the incoming students ways to study for exams or how to manage their time. She suggested this same method be applied to the incoming freshman. She added that pairing them with a senior or mentor can help guide them through college for their first year.

Student 005 offered a similar suggestion because of his initial experience as an incoming freshman. He said, “I didn’t gain any friendship through the new student orientation.” He suggested grouping majors together or people who have any idea of what they want to do. His thought for the recommendation was maybe the students could make relationships or exchange phone numbers. He suggested conducting activities related to majors or games to break the ice to meet other people at the new student orientation.

Additional suggestions from the students included providing support for academic life, counseling, and self-development classes. Student 002 stressed the need for college administrators to help students develop socially. She believes this will help students build their confidence on the campus. She said some people don’t feel comfortable talking to people. Student 004 said to communicate with the freshman and be supportive. Student 006 suggested providing sessions to give tips on how to be successful and execute your goals. She said, “I know a lot of people come into college, and they’re completely lost. They have no guidelines.” She acknowledged that going to the college was intimidating for her. She said that college students need more guidance.

Utilizing mentors to provide advice and assistance to incoming freshmen was suggested by Student 007. She stressed the need for students to be informed about every program that is available on the campus. She recalled how it took her a while before she discovered the Christian club. The suggestions and recommendations offered by the students involved implementing activities that are underscored by social cognition, student involvement, and self-efficacy.

Astin (1984) cited the need for students to feel connected to the college environment to invest physically and psychosocially in academic and social activities. As such,

interview questions 7 through 12 were designed to extract information to ascertain how Christian students describe how their college experience has supported or hindered the expression of their spirituality? Each question was underscored by Astin's (1984) student involvement theory with the purpose of ascertaining the perceptions of Christian students who employ spirituality in their efforts to cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college.

Summary of Results

Chapter 4 provided an in-depth description of the study. The aim of the researcher was to give an opportunity to Christian students, who attend a 4-year urban public college, to share their perceptions about spirituality. The results will add to the existing literature on the emerging phenomenon of spirituality in higher education, but from the viewpoint of students who are Christians attending an urban public college. Five research questions helped to guide this study. This chapter provided a thorough discussion of the data analysis and findings, the participants, and responses from each participant. Eight students from the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club provided a convenient sample for the researcher to conduct the study. The students agreed to participate in an in-depth face to face interview. Results from the data provided sufficient evidence for the researcher to gain an understanding into how Christian students view spirituality as it relates to coping and persevering in college.

The researcher used an inductive thematic analysis to examine how the students think, feel, and do as it relates to utilizing spirituality as a strategy to help them to cope and persevere in college. Thomas (2006) stated, "The general inductive approach provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings." Whereas, Braun and Clarke (2013)

indicate, thematic analysis helps to extract recurring experiences revealed in the data. The researcher recruited the help of two analysts who cross examined the data. Utilizing a triangulation method to cross examine the data from multiple perspectives helped the researcher to ensure trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings. This approach was important to establishing validity of the findings and removing any biases of the researcher who works as a staff member at the college and identifies with the Christian faith. The researcher and analysts used an inductive approach with their analytical method to carefully review the data to identify recurring thoughts and significant words. The words were grouped into patterns and categories. The categories were reduced and developed into themes and subthemes.

Findings indicated the overarching themes uniting the thoughts of the students who participated in the study are their belief in God. The majority of the students identified themselves as being affiliated with the Pentecostal religion or closely related. Boone (2017) asserts,

Both worship and hermeneutics in the Pentecostal faith tradition emphasize engagement with the Spirit. Certainly, the broader Christian community exhibits a concern for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in Christian living. Yet, Pentecostals seek an engagement with the Spirit in both worship and Bible interpretation that is distinctive within the Christian community. (p. 100)

There was a consensus and a connection with how they defined spirituality. Their definition of spirituality was underscored by the definition used for this study. Miller (2015) defines spirituality as:

An inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and a guiding

force or energy. The word we give to this higher power might be God, nature, spirit, universe, the creator, or other words that represent a divine presence. (p. 6)

Findings indicated God is the guiding force that the students described as their source of spirituality. The use of spirituality resonated throughout the interviews. Many of the students identified family members, teachers, and spiritual leaders as the role models who have impacted their spiritual development. Personal, social and environmental factors played a role in how the students learn, think, and behave as indicated by the social cognition theory (Bandura, 1988). Belief in God, prayer, reading the Bible, worship, and finding support from family, church, spirituality leaders, and the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club emerged as overarching themes from the data. Chapter 5 provides a further discussion into the implications of the findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research related to the findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Finding ways to increase the number of students who successfully complete their undergraduate degree is essential if we are to increase the overall college graduation rates in the United States (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Low graduation rates are causing great concern for college administrators. There remains a need to explore additional resources and alternative methods to help college students cope with academic, social, and personal stressors. Spirituality is a phenomenon re-emerging on college campuses across the country (Astin et al., 2011). The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of Christian college students to ascertain if spirituality is a strategy that helps them to cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college. Previous studies have revealed spirituality is an important aspect in the lives of college students (Astin et al., 2005, Johnstone, et al., 2012, Kane & Jacobs, 2010, Oman et al., 2009).

The aim of this researcher was to hear the voices of Christian college students who engage their spirituality to help them cope and persevere in college. The gap in literature revealed a lack of qualitative studies focusing on Christian college students who have shared their perceptions on how they utilize spirituality to help them cope and persevere in college. According to Engel and Tinto (2008), underrepresented minorities are more likely to have disadvantages that may affect their basic needs and ability to continue their educational goals. Disadvantaged low-income, first-generation students who attend 4-year public institutions are three times more likely to leave after their first-

year compared to their most advantaged peers (Engel & Tinto, 2008). Sharing the perceptions of Christian college students and how they employ spirituality to help them cope and persevere may provide valuable information for institutions of higher education to consider in their efforts to increase the number of students successfully completing their undergraduate degree. Utilizing a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to give a voice to Christian college students who attend a 4-year urban public college.

Implications of Findings

The implications for this study indicate a need for institutions of higher education to support spirituality as an alternate method for increasing the number of students who successfully complete their undergraduate degree. The students who participated in this study provided sufficient evidence to substantiate how their spirituality has helped them cope and persevere in college. All the students shared personal in-depth experiences revealing rich data for the researcher to review and compare with other analysts to examine the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. The findings from this study were similar to the studies (Astin et al., 2011, Karris and Craighead, 2012, Khan, 2013, Patton and McClure, 2009) noted in Chapter 3. This study aligns with the various studies noted in the literature review as it relates to spirituality being a vital aspect in the lives of college students and how they utilize their faith to find strength and guidance to cope and persevere.

Social cognition (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and student involvement (Astin, 1984) provided the theoretical framework for this study. Five research questions were developed to ascertain if Christian students utilize spirituality

and how they use it to help them cope through stressors and challenges to persevere at an urban public college.

1. How do Christian students define spirituality?
2. How do Christian students describe the connection between their spirituality and self-efficacy in college?
3. How do Christian students describe how they handle academic, personal, and social obligations?
4. How do Christian students describe the relationship between their spirituality and their college success?
5. How do Christian students describe how their college experience has supported or hindered the expression of their spirituality?

Twelve semi-structured questions were designed by the researcher to extract the underlining principles of the students' spiritual development and to focus on their experiences and perception as they relate to the research questions. Eight students provided a convenient sample of Christian students who are members in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club. Each student participated in an in-depth face to face interview. The interviews provided rich data for the researcher and two analysts to code and analyze.

Guion, Diehl, and McDonald (2002) stated, "Triangulation is the way in which one explores different levels and perspectives of the same phenomenon." Two analysts were employed to triangulate the data for trustworthiness and accuracy. Utilizing a triangulation method helped control biases the researcher brings to the study. This method was used due to the positionality of the researcher who also identify as a

Christian. According to Creswell (2013), demonstrating restraint and objectivity while analyzing the data is crucial to the ensuring reliability and trustworthiness of the research. The researcher reviewed the themes and sub themes indicated by the analysts to identify and compare similarities and inconsistencies. Significant themes and sub themes provided reliable information for the researcher to substantiate the study.

Conducting a phenomenological study allowed the researcher to gain insight into how Christian college students utilize spirituality to cope with the rigorous demands of academia in addition to their everyday responsibilities. Pargament (2013) suggests, spiritual coping provides support when life seems challenging and out of control. Utilizing a qualitative approach provided an opportunity for Christian students attending an urban public college to tell their story and share their experiences. The findings from this study revealed several influences that impacted the spiritual lives of the college students who participated in this study. This chapter presents the implications of the findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations to be considered for future research.

Implications for Research Question 1

1. How do Christian students define spirituality?

The purpose of the research question 1 was to gain an understanding on how Christian students define spirituality. Interview questions 1, 2, and 3 were designed to extract information on how the students became a Christian and how they describe their faith. God, prayer, reading the Bible, family, support, faith, and the Holy Spirit emerged repeatedly in the student's responses for interview questions 1, 2, and 3. Pargament (2013) indicated people take different pathways to maintain their spiritual practices,

knowledge, experiences, and relationships with the sacred, such as rituals, yoga, Bible study, scientific inquiry, meditation, listening to music, and church involvement.

Believing in God emerged as the core of their definition for spirituality.

The responses from interview question 1 indicate that students are more likely to persist in an environment that supports their spiritual development and helps them to connect with others who have the same beliefs, values, and practices. The social cognition (Bandura, 1984) theory provided the lens for which the researcher used to understand how the students developed their definition of spirituality. Bandura (1988) asserts, personal factors, behaviors, and environmental experiences are mentally stored for learning which may generate an immediate or delayed replication of behavior. Family members, teachers, and spiritual leaders were identified as the initial role models who helped to shape the student's beliefs, values, and practices.

A review of the findings also indicated the beliefs of the students who participated in the study were developed prior to them entering college. The students commented on their spiritual identity, beliefs, practices, ultimate concerns, family spiritual models, organization spiritual models, school spiritual models, and other social environmental influences. Moreover, students specified various role models who exemplified and or influenced their beliefs, values, and practices, such as parents, teachers and spiritual leaders. This information corresponded with the findings in the study presented by Oman et al. (2009) in Chapter 3. The study utilized a Spiritual Modeling Inventory of Life Environments (SMILE) survey to examine spiritual models and their influence on perceptions, demographics and other factors for college students (Oman et al. (2009). The results from the surveys showed students perception of spirituality will vary based on

their social learning environments and the role models they integrate with as well as emotional connectedness.

Vygotsky (1978) sociocultural theory suggested a child's cultural development emerges through social interaction with parents, siblings, and teachers, eventually internalizing into an individual intellectual experience. The findings from this study verified that the students' personal and social environments impacted their beliefs. All the students expressed their belief in God. The majority of the students described their faith as having a relationship with God, who is loving and serves as a guiding force. The description of their faith corresponded with the definition of spirituality that underscores this study. Miller (2015) defines spirituality as an inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving, and a guiding force or energy. The word we give to this higher power might be God, nature, spirit, universe, the creator, or other words that represent a divine presence (Miller, 2015).

The responses from interview question number 1 are consistent with the social cognition theory (Bandura, 1984), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and the concepts of spiritual modeling (Oman et al., 2009). The students who participated in this study indicated their definition of spirituality was developed by their parents and spirituality leaders as well as other faith related experiences they had prior to entering college. They now reciprocate what they have learned from their role model. Understanding how Christian college students develop, define, and employ spirituality is crucial to knowing how to implement and expand opportunities for students to engage their spirituality in institutions of higher education.

Implications for Research Question 2

2. How do Christian students describe the connection between their spirituality and self-efficacy in college?

The aim for research question 2 was to ascertain if spirituality has an impact on a student's ability to accomplish their goal to graduate. Interview questions 3 and 4 allowed the researcher to gain insight into their beliefs, values, and practices as a Christian, and the strength and guidance they utilize to achieve their desired goals. Bandura (1977) self-efficacy theory provided the lens for the researcher to ascertain how spirituality impacts their ability to accomplish a desired goal or performance.

The responses from this question implies a need for institutions of higher education to recognize that incorporating spirituality in the college environment can be beneficial to students by increasing their ability to accomplish a desired goal. Belief in God, reading the Bible, prayer, support, and faith emerged as overarching themes for research question 2. The students contributed their faith in God for helping them overcome various academic, personal and social stressors, and challenges. Contending with poor social and economic conditions and a lack of sufficient educational and family support can have an adverse impact on student's aspirations, self-efficacy, and personal standards (Bandura, 2001). Low self-esteem was reported by one student as having an adverse impact on her ability to cope with personal stressors. She indicated that she overcame those feelings by receiving spiritual counseling and praying.

Overall, there was a consensus from the students, for interview questions 3 and 4, indicating that they relied on God and what they referred to as the Holy Ghost to give them strength and guidance every day. In terms of the Holy Ghost, Student 006 said, "He

is the director of my life, and the author of my life.” The Holy Ghost is also known as the Holy Spirit. Both terms are used interchangeably as the spiritual force of God. Nel (2015), states, “The Spirit-Word directs the everyday life and witnessing of believers and the church, and leads them in all truth. Scripture provides the means to test and direct the daily specific guidance that the church and individuals purport to experience from the Spirit, and provides boundaries.”

Khan (2013) examined the variables of academic self-efficacy, coping, and academic performance in college. One of the findings that resulted from his study indicated students who did well reported the use of the spiritual beliefs to cope and succeed. The implications from this study also suggest having a belief in God, praying, in addition to reading the Bible are strong motivational factors for self-efficacy, which enhances their ability to achieve a desired goal. Reading the Bible emerged as a source for strength and guidance for the students. The findings from analyst one and analyst two intersected to also reveal that Christian students describe the connection between their spirituality and self-efficacy on the principles of what they have learned by reading the Bible. Their beliefs, values, and practices are underscored by their faith.

Previous studies (Astin et al., 2011, Karris and Craighead, 2012, Khan, 2013, Patton and McClure, 2009) noted by the researcher in Chapter 3 support the notion that spirituality provides strength and guidance to accomplish a desired goal. The findings of this study align with the findings of the noted studies as the students indicated their faith provides strength and guidance for them to accomplish their desired goals. Patton and McClure (2009) examined spirituality through the lens of African American women to ascertain how they utilized spirituality to deal with challenges and find success within the

college setting. The findings indicated that the students relied on their beliefs, values, and practices related to their faith to give the strength to cope in college. Astin et al., (2005), conducted a study that revealed 71% of the students indicated they “gain strength by trusting in a higher power.” The themes and sub-themes noted by the researcher and analysts correspond to provide sufficient evidence that the Christian students who participated in this study have a well-developed definition of spirituality that underscores their beliefs, values, and practices.

Implications for Research Question 3

3. How do Christian students describe how they handle academic, personal, and social obligations?

The purpose of research question 3 was to have the students share the methods they use to handle the stressors and challenges they face as a college students. Interview question 5 asked the students to tell how their faith helped them during their freshman year of college. Bandura (1977) self-efficacy theory provided the lens for the researcher to ascertain how students handle academic, personal, and social obligations.

The findings from this question indicate Christian college students find strength to handle their academic, personal, and social obligations by engaging their spiritual beliefs. The implications indicate a need for institutions of higher education to recognize spirituality as an important aspect that not only helps the spirit, but also the intellect. Support, prayer, and faith were the primary themes that emerged from the data as indicated by the researcher and analysts. Analyst number one identified support and prayer as the primary themes for research question 5. This corresponded with the themes offered by analyst number two. Prayer was reported by the students as an important

element of their faith. The students indicated they are able to handle their various obligations because of the support they receive from the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club, their family, and friends.

According to Selye (1950), stress can have a debilitating effect biologically, physically, and psychologically. Further complications of stress can cause internal illnesses (Murff, 2005 & Selye, 1950). The majority of the students mentioned they prayed to God for help to handle their academic, personal, and social obligations. Faith and prayer were also identified as reasons for how the students were able to handle their obligations. Several students shared examples of the academic, personal, and social obligations that caused them stress while attending college. For example, student 001 recalled her freshman year as being very stressful. Student 006 worried during her second semester because she was taking major classes. Several students indicated that joining the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club provided the support and strength they needed to cope and persevere in college. A few of the students indicated that assimilating in the college environment can be intimidating and challenging for incoming students. They said support from other students who share the same faith can provide a connection for the students to cope and persevere in the college environment.

The implications from this study support the findings presented by Astin's (1984) student involvement theory. He indicated higher education institution should focus on the interior development as well as the exterior development of students. Embracing alternative methods to help students to develop the ability to handle the rigorous demands of academic, personal, and social obligations can help them to survive in college. Students who participated in this study provided substantial evidence to support spirituality as an effective strategy for coping and perseverance. Chickering (2006)

argues the need for institutions of higher education to recognize spirituality as an effective tool for integrating the intellect and spirit to help college students succeed. The implications from this research agree with the recommendations presented by Schreiner (2013). She suggested students need to be involved in college activities that will enhance their ability to thrive in college. This research also underscores the notions presented by Braskamp (2007). He suggested, opportunities need to be provided on the campus for students to engage in activities that will reinforce spiritual beliefs and values supporting their continuous growth and development, commitment, and coping skills

Implications for Research Question 4

4. How do Christian students describe the relationship between their spirituality and their college success?

The purpose of research question 4 was to ascertain if the students believe their spirituality has anything to do with their college success. Interview question 6 asked the students if there were any times within the last year they thought college was not for them. If so, please explain why and how they overcame the feeling? Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory provided the lens for the researcher to understand how students relate their spirituality to their college success.

The implications from this study indicate prayer, reading the Bible, family, friends, spiritual leaders, and connecting with other students and staff at the college are key elements that can help Christian students to succeed in college. There is a need for institutions of higher education to recognize these key elements as vital components that may increase the number of students who successfully complete their undergraduate degree. Students who participated in this study indicated more support is needed on the

college campus. The researcher noted prayer, reading the Bible, and faith as the overarching themes. The analysts noted support, prayer, faith, experience, location, and encouragement as themes for interview question 6. The analysts' themes corresponded with the themes presented by the researcher. Based on the themes and subthemes that resulted from the data, we found that the elements of the student's beliefs, values, and practices were connected to their spirituality and their college success. The findings in this study agree with the study presented by Patton and McClure (2009) in Chapter 3. Their study examined the perceptions of African American women attending a predominately White college. The culture on the college campuses was not conducive to their spiritual expressions or development and did not support their spiritual needs. The findings indicated the students were able to cope, persevere, and succeed because of their beliefs, values, and practices founded upon their spirituality, despite the lack of support and other challenges they faced at the college.

Schreiner (2013), indicated academic, personal, and financial stressors can decrease a student's desire and ability to persevere in college. Stress was noted by several students who shared examples of the stressors that caused them to feel like college was not for them. Academic stressors caused student 002 to become discouraged during her freshman year. She felt very overwhelmed. She had thoughts of dropping out of college. Student 001 also felt like dropping out of college due to academic stressors. At one point, she stopped going to classes and didn't do her homework. This behavior eventually affected her GPA and her financial aid. She was academically dismissed for 3 months. Both students reported utilizing prayer to overcome their despondency. Prayer,

reading the Bible, and their faith were reported by the students as methods they used to overcome their feelings of dropping out of college.

Analyst number one indicated support and prayer as themes based on the sub-themes of prayer, connecting with others, being a part of the Christian Club, the college's resources, the overall support of their friends and family, praying for the better good, praying with others, connecting and speaking with God. Analyst number two noted faith, experience, location, encouragement as themes based on the sub-themes of balance, beliefs, college experience, confidence, connectivity, family relationships, low grades, opportunity, perseverance, spirituality, struggle. The themes and sub-themes are significant factors that emerged from the data to reveal a relationship between the students utilizing their spirituality to support their college success. These are factors that should be considered when finding ways to help students succeed.

Implications for Research Question 5

5. How do Christian students describe how their college experience has supported or hindered the expression of their spirituality?

The purpose of research question 5 was to have the students share their personal experiences as a Christian in a college environment. Interview questions 7 through 12 focused on the student's overall college experience as it relates to; being a member of the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship Club at the college, club activities they find most fulfilling or helpful, how being a Christian on campus impacted their college experience, recommendations for incoming freshmen about being successful during their first year of college, students practicing their faith on campus, and what they wanted the college administration to know about ways they could help incoming freshmen to be successful

in their first year of college. Astin's (1984) social involvement theory provided the lens for the researcher to gain insight and understanding for how students felt about their connection and involvement in the college environment.

The implications indicate institutions of higher education need to provide an environment as well as opportunities for students to assimilate and feel connected on the college campus. This research agrees with the recommendation of Chickering, Dalton, and Auerbach (2006). They suggested that having a communal life on the college campus where students feel welcome, connected and appreciated, in addition to providing experiences such as authenticity, spirituality, and the search for meaning and purpose, an emotional infrastructure can be established to help students with the challenges and conflicts of college life. Participants in this study suggested incoming freshmen should seek help with navigating the college environment, join clubs and other college activities, make friends with classmates, and pray as a way to cope and persevere in college.

Based on the results of interview questions 7 through 12, students indicated they were happy that they have a club at the college where they can go to connect with people of the same faith. All the students described how the club provides support for their spiritual growth. The club activities they find most fulfilling are praying together, worshipping together, reading the Bible, and evangelizing to other students on the campus. Congregating together at the campus on a weekly basis allows the students to encourage each other by sharing their stressors and successes. One student stated "It's good to be around people that are like-minded. They have a communal purpose and it's encouraging to be a part of something like that, because sometimes you can feel so

alone.” Students reported gaining meaningful relationships that have developed into friendships with members who are in the club.

Students reported that their faith has helped them to develop academically, socially, and personally. Various examples were given by the students to describe how being a Christian on campus has impacted their college experience. The various reasons entailed helping them to alleviate stress, maintain their values, behave as a Christian, maintain academic honesty, being calm before taking exams, and connecting with others. Astin et al. (2011) indicated, spirituality has a positive impact on a student’s ability to cope and persevere through challenges. Likewise, Lotkowski et al. (2004) suggests, students who get involved with the campus culture will more than likely be motivated, developing more self- confidence, more commitment, resulting in an increase in academic performance.

Based on their own experiences students who participated in this study recommended incoming freshmen to seek out help for their academic and personal needs. Several fundamental recommendations were offered to increase academic success. Student 002 recommended, getting involved on the college campus, networking with other people, looking for various departments that are available on campus, getting involved in the class discussions and answer questions, interacting with the professors in class, and going their office hours as much as possible. Engle and Tinto (2008), pointed out interactions with students, staff and faculty is very important to how a student will engage, commit, and integrate into the college environment. Students who participated in the study recommended getting involved in school activities, such as clubs and study groups. Additional recommendations included incoming freshman to not isolate

themselves, but choose friends wisely and stay focused. Several students recommended prayer and joining the Christian club.

The InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club allows the students to interact with other Christian students at the college. Students in the club seem to have made a connection with each other through their faith. They have developed friendships that extend beyond the club activities. Each of the students expressed an appreciation for having this type of support at the college. As such, they also agree that all students should be able to practice their faith on the campus. Some of the comments made by the students indicated they are happy to be able to practice their faith without being judged or persecuted. Other comments included that it really helps, because you are not alone. Some students referred to other religions, such as, Muslims, that they observe at the college. They noted the unity that they see in the group and how they have grown. One student said that although they are a different religion there is something to be learned by the way they practice together. All the students agree that they have the right to practice whatever belief they have. This is supported at the college.

As the college provides opportunities for the students to practice their faith in the club additional support was strongly advised by the students who participated in this study. Implications indicate a need for mentoring programs that will pair freshmen students with someone who can provide guidance during their first year of college. The students indicated that freshmen need to be nurtured and mentored. One student suggested grouping students together according to their majors and also students who are not sure of their majors to help them to navigate the college environment. This was recommended as a way to help students who are still deciding on a major. Another

suggestion was to develop activities at new student orientation events to start the engagement process for students to meet other students. Astin (1984) cited the need for students to feel connected to the college environment to invest physically and psychosocially in academic and social activities. Implications suggest a need for college administrators to communicate more with freshmen and provide classes that will support students academically and personally. Although, Christian students apply their faith to help them cope and persevere in college there remains a need for college administrators to consider how the academic and social supportive services are delivered.

The data resulted in varying themes as indicated by the researchers. The themes merged at various viewpoints. Overall, the themes for interview questions 7 through 12, noted by the researchers are identical to the themes that emerged throughout the study as they relate to God, prayer, reading the Bible, support of family and friends, faith, and spirituality. Analyst number one identified support, prayer, and Christian literacy as emergent themes. This is based on the students connecting with others, being a part of the Christian Club, the college's resources and the overall support of their friends and family. Prayer was identified due to the number of students who indicated they pray to God for help, they pray with others, and they believe their prayer connects them to God. Reading the Bible was noted for how it helps to increase Christian literacy and values, enabling them to educate others and speak about specific scriptures. Similarly, analyst number two identified faith, experience, and spirituality as themes. The students shared their various academic, personal, and social experiences providing insight into their spirituality related to their faith. Students reported how their faith in God has supported them through their struggles in college.

The implications for this study suggest that spirituality is a strategy that Christian college students utilize to help them cope and persevere academically, personally, and socially. The beliefs, values, and practices reported by the students are underscored by their belief in God, reading the Bible, prayer, and the continuous support from their family and friends. The data in this study has been thoroughly analyzed by a triangulation approach to ensure trustworthiness and accuracy. The results revealed recurring themes that implies spirituality is a strategy that reinforces the ability to cope and persevere through stressors and challenges. Students in this study have shared their lived experiences through their own perceptions. The implications from this study provides a qualitative viewpoint on the emerging phenomenon of spirituality in higher education based on the perceptions of Christian college students who attend a 4-year urban public college

Limitations

Several limitations resulted from this research. The study was conducted at one college located in a large urban area of New York. A small convenient sample of students participated in the study compared to the larger population of students enrolled at the college. However, eight students provided a sufficient sample for the researcher to proceed with the study. A larger sample of students would have provided a better representation of the club membership and college enrollment.

Other limitations included only one male student participating in the study. More input from males could have given more voice to their perceptions. Likewise, Christians were the only students who shared their thoughts on spirituality. Majority of students

who participated in the study identified with the Pentecostal religion. Students with a different faith or religion could have provided additional viewpoints.

Recommendations

The basis of this study was to examine the perceptions of Christian college students to ascertain if spirituality is a strategy that is used for coping and persevering at a 4-year urban public college. Based on the findings from this study the researcher makes the following recommendations to institutions of higher education.

- Provide opportunities for faculty, staff and students to have panel discussions about how spirituality is viewed and utilized by various faiths.
- Implement strategies and incorporate opportunities for faculty and staff to increase their understanding on the benefits of utilizing spirituality to accomplish a desired goal.
- Expand opportunities for students to embrace their spirituality in the college environment.

Recommendations for Further Study

Future researchers can expand this study by continuing to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of Christian students who attend urban public colleges. Engle and Tinto (2008) suggest, students who attend an urban public college are more likely to contend with stressors and challenges due to academic, personal, and social deficits. Interviewing a larger number of Christian students can add more validation to the findings of this study and or extract additional information that this study may have missed. This study can also be improved by examining the perceptions of non-Christian students who identify with different religions. This will provide an opportunity to gain

insight into how other college students handle stressors and challenges to cope and persevere in college. This research can also be expanded with a larger random sample size of college students who meet a selection criterion for participating in a phenomenological study. This will allow a larger sample of the student population to be given a chance to participate in the study and share their lived experiences and perceptions as it relates to spirituality in higher education.

This researcher noted a gap in the literature review as it relates to qualitative studies designed to gain the lived experiences of African American college students and spirituality. Ascertaining the lived experiences and perceptions of a larger number of African American college students, both Christians and non-Christians can add more validation to the findings of this study and or extract additional information that this study may have missed.

This research was limited to one male participant. Future researchers may want to consider focusing on the perceptions of male students. This will provide more insight into how male college students view spirituality and if they employ any aspects of spirituality to help them cope and persevere in college. Lastly, this researcher recommends that both college students and college administrators consider ways to organize a panel discussion that would assemble different faiths and religions together to discuss their similarities and differences. The purpose would be to bring the students and staff together to discuss ways that we can coexist together and embrace our different faiths, yet respect and appreciate our similarities. This would hopefully help us to all learn how to cope and persist together through the challenges we face in life.

Conclusion

Although college enrollment is increasing in the United State, graduation rates are not increasing equally (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Implementing strategies to increase academic success is crucial to increasing graduation rates. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of Christian college students to ascertain if spirituality is a strategy that helps them to cope and persevere at a 4-year urban public college. Interviewing Christian college students to ascertain how they engage spirituality allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding into their beliefs, values, and practices. Further examination of the data provided insight into how their spirituality helps them to cope and persevere in college.

The theories of social cognition, student involvement, and self-efficacy provided the foundation for study. The data collection process provided an opportunity for the researcher to obtain rich data to analyze. Students were very open during the interviews. They were passionate and adamant as they shared their experiences as a college student. A triangulation method was used to ensure trustworthiness, accuracy and integrity of the data collected. The analysts provided a different perspective on the data. The themes and subthemes identified by the researcher and analysts intersected on several angles to reveal a connotation that validated the findings.

The findings in the study support the notion of spirituality as a strategy for coping and perseverance among Christian students attending an urban public college. Studies (Astin et al., 2005, Astin et al., 2011, Chickering, 2006, Kane & Jacobs, 2010, Oman et al., 2009) noted in Chapter 3, presented qualitative and quantitative evidence indicating spirituality as a vital aspect in the lives of college students. Astin et al. (2011) indicated,

there is growing evidence underscoring spirituality as a reliable strategy for coping during stressful and difficult times that provides strength for success. The students in this study exemplified how spirituality helps them to cope and persevere as a college student. The implications for this study indicate spirituality is a strategy that should be considered as an alternative method for supporting college students. As research continues to emerge on this phenomenon and students are given the opportunity to voice their perceptions perhaps institutions of higher education will find additional ways, other than clubs, to assimilate spirituality in the college environment. In regard to the findings of this study, the researcher will end with a quote that was previously noted in Chapter 3. Chickering (2006) said, "I believed that a renewed commitment to recognizing and honoring spirituality in the academy is essential if we are to succeed in providing higher education that integrated intellect and spirit" (p. 17).

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Appendix A

Letter Requesting Permission to Conduct Research

Date

Dear Ms/Mr

My name is Theresa Curry. I am currently a student in the Executive Leadership Doctoral Program at Saint John's Fisher College. My dissertation committee consists of Dr. Shelley Jallow and Dr. Carol J. Alleyne.

The proposed topic of my research is, Thriving to Survive: A Phenomenological Study Examining Spirituality as a Strategy for Coping and Perseverance among Christian College Students. The objective of my study is to 1. Ascertain how Christian college student employ spirituality as coping technique for persisting in college; and 2. Gain insight from Christian college student's perceptions to add to the existing research on spirituality in higher education.

I hereby seek your permission to conduct the study at CUNY York College. In accordance to the Institutional Review Board standards I will utilize all precaution to ensure there are not risk involved to the research participants.

If you have any further questions or need additional information, please feel free to contact me at the above number. Your permission to conduct this study would be greatly appreciated.

Truly,

Theresa Curry
Ed.D. Candidate
St. John Fisher College

Appendix B
Demographic Survey

1. Gender
 Male Female

2. Age
 17 – 21 22 – 26 27 – 31
 32-37 38-42 43-47 48 & older

3. Ethnicity
 White African American Eastern Caribbean
 Western Caribbean Latino Asian
 Pacific Islander Other

4. College enrollment date as a freshman: _____

5. Grade level
 Sophomore Junior Senior

6. Number of credits
 0 – 33 34 – 62 63 – 90 90 – 120

7. Religion (Christian denominations)
 Catholic Protestant Pentecostal
 Baptist Jehovah Witness
Other _____

8. Major _____

9. Anticipated date of graduation: _____

Student code 001

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study and/or if you experience any physical or emotional discomfort, you can contact Jill Rathbun by phone at 585.385.8012 or by email at: irb@sjfc.edu.

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Theresa Curry. Thank you for joining me today and volunteering to participate in this study. As I previously shared with you when we first met I am currently a student in the Executive Leadership doctoral program at St. John Fisher College. I'm conducting a study to examine spirituality as a coping skill among Christian college students. My study has been reviewed by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board to ensure compliance with Human Subjects Research. The purpose of the study is to understand how spirituality may help some students to cope and persevere in college.

I assure you that the information you share in this interview will be confidential. Your name will not be associated with the study. A numerical code will be assigned to conceal your real name. The information you share will only be used specifically for this study. The only persons who will have access to this information are the transcriber, two analysts, myself, and you the student. The transcriber will convert the digital recording into a text format. The two analysts will help to code the results from the transcripts.

The interview will take one hour. I will ask you 12 questions related to your experience as a college student. I want to hear your experiences. This interview is about you so please feel free to express your thoughts. There is no threat, harm or detriment associated with this research and you may discontinue your participation at any time.

As you are talking I will be taking notes and recording the interview because I want to make sure that I capture every word. Your input in this study is very important

so I don't want to miss anything. Please remember you may end the interview at any time if you do not want to continue with the questions.

Before we proceed with the interview do you have any questions? I would like to thank you in advance for your willingness to participate in the study.

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Position of Interviewee:

1. Please describe in detail how you became a Christian?
2. How would you describe your faith to someone who wants to know about it?
3. Can you please give me some examples of your beliefs, values, and practices as a Christian?
4. Please describe what gives you strength and guidance to achieve your desired goals?
5. Can you please tell me how your faith helped you during your freshman year of college?
6. Were there any times within the last year you thought college may not be for you? If so, please explain why and how you overcame the feeling?
7. How do you feel about being a member of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club at the college?
8. What are some of the club activities you find most fulfilling or helpful?
9. Can you tell me if being a Christian on campus has impacted your college experience? If so, can you give some examples of how you were impacted?
10. What do you recommend to incoming freshmen about being successful during their first year of college?

11. What do you think about students practicing their faith on campus?
12. What do you want the college administration to know about ways they could help incoming freshmen to be successful in their first year of college?

I have finished with my questions. Your responses have been very helpful. I truly appreciate your time and willingness to participate in this study. To make sure that I have captured your thoughts correctly I will provide a copy of my notes for your review. Now that we have concluded our interview would you like to ask me any questions? If you have any questions, concerns, or comments after this interview concludes, please feel to contact me. Thank you for coming and have a great day.

Appendix F

Interview Questions/Research Questions/Theory Alignment

Theories	Research Questions (RQ)	Interview questions
<p>Social Cognition <i>(learns, thinks, beliefs, and behaviors modelled by environment)</i> Bandura, 1986</p>	<p>1. How do Christian students define spirituality?</p>	<p>1. Please describe in detail how you became a Christian? RQ1</p> <p>2. How would you describe your faith to someone who wants to know about it? RQ1</p> <p>3. Can you please give me some examples of your beliefs, values, and practices as a Christian? RQ1, RQ2</p>
<p>Self-efficacy <i>(Belief and confidence in self to accomplish a desired goal)</i> Bandura, 1977</p>	<p>2. How do Christian students describe the connection between their spirituality and self-efficacy in college?</p> <p>3. How do Christian students describe how they handle academic, personal, and social obligations?</p> <p>4. How do Christian students describe the relationship between their spirituality and their college success?</p>	<p>4. Please describe what gives you strength and guidance to achieve your desired goals? RQ2</p> <p>5. Can you please tell me how your faith helped you during your freshman year of college? RQ3</p> <p>6. Were there any times within the last year you thought college may not be for you? If so, please explain why and how you overcame the feeling? R4</p>
<p>Social Involvement <i>(Students need to feel connected to the environment to invest physically and psychosocially in academic and social activities)</i> Astin, 1984</p>	<p>5. How do Christian students describe how their college experience has supported or hindered the expression of their spirituality?</p> <p>One interview question might provide answers to several research questions. (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 159)</p>	<p>7. How do you feel about being a member of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Club at the college? RQ5</p> <p>8. What are some of the club activities you find most fulfilling or helpful? RQ5</p> <p>9. Can you tell me if being a Christian on campus has impacted your college experience? If so, can you give some examples of how you were impacted? RQ5</p> <p>10. What do you recommend to incoming freshmen about being successful during their first year of college? RQ5</p> <p>11. What do you think about students practicing their faith on campus? RQ5</p> <p>12. What do you want the college administration to know about ways they could help incoming freshmen to be successful in their first year of college? RQ5</p>