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The Impact of Faith Development on College Student Decision Making

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Eastern Illinois University

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The Impact of Faith Development on College Student Decision Making

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BY
Kaitlyn Christine Noah

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Masters of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2018

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER DATE THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER DATE
ABSTRACT

Utilizing qualitative methodology, participants’ process of faith development was analyzed to determine the impact that development has on their decision making processes in college. To accomplish this, individual interviews were conducted with four participants who came from a faith-based background and it was determined that faith development plays a significant role in each of their decision making processes while in college. Participants all adapted their faith in college to better align with their adult lifestyle. Recommendations were made to better help student affairs professionals understand the process of faith development and comprehend the ways this can affect their students’ identity development.

Keywords: faith development, decision making, identity development
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my loving parents, without whom I would not be completing my Masters. Thank you for working as long, hard, and tirelessly as you did throughout my entire life to ensure I was able to obtain higher education. Your sacrifices did not go unnoticed.

To my mother, the woman who embodies the definition of grace; you taught me to find my voice and not be afraid to use it. You taught me to never settle for anything less than my best and to always help others along the way. You taught me what being a strong woman means and exemplified to never compromise who I am, even if that means at times we stand alone. However, I know with you in my corner, I am never truly alone. Thank you for answering the thousands of phone calls to remind me that I am strong. You are my best friend, my role model and everything I aspire to be.

To my father, the man who constantly displayed what love is. You never let me forget how loved I am and never once let me feel alone in this process. Thank you for teaching me that life is an adventure and it is up to me to make it memorable. You taught me to be fearless and to face every obstacle head on, with strength and dignity. Without your embodiment of determination and steadfast commitment, I would not be where I am today. You taught me that fear is temporary and to never let it stop me from pursuing my dreams. Your ability to make any situation fun has taught me the definition of perspective. You are my absolute rock.

I love you both with everything I am. Thank you for your unwavering support for my dreams and faith that I can accomplish anything. I love you three.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

College is all about figuring out who you are, what you identify with, what your purpose in life is, and what impression you want to leave on this earth for the short time you are here. In a nutshell, college is about development and exploration. Student affairs professionals work to help develop students in several different dimensions, including personal development, academic development and even faith development. Student development can be seen in a multitude of ways, including identifying which major they want to study, what organizations they want to join, and what leadership opportunities will be best for them. If student affairs professionals look at how best to support students through these various forms of development, it seems logical to also look at our students’ faith development and analyze how best to support them through this process. James Fowler defined faith as “A generic feature of the human struggle to find and maintain meaning” (Burkhardt and Nathaniel, 1981, p. 90). If we use this definition, it can greatly help us improve understanding of our students and serve them better.

Along with multiple other influencers, faith and spiritual well-being have a large influence on motivators for students and how they respond to situations (Chan, Gardner, Itai, & Prashar, 2013). However, if that knowledge is applied to the stereotype that college students engage in dangerous activities during the beginning of college, the assumption would be that the connection between risky behavior and faith adherence would be highly intriguing (Haglund & Fehring, 2010). The analysis of how much their faith background had to do with their decision making process when choosing whether or
not to engage in said risky behavior, could help determine where they currently stand in their faith development.

Applying the stereotype of college students to the extent of which their faith influences their identity is what brings up the question of how much influence a student’s faith background has to do with their decision making in regards to risky behaviors. Are they holding back because their faith says not to engage in certain behaviors or because they think they would feel guilty? Or, are they engaging in certain behavior they otherwise wouldn’t have because they are no longer in a faith based home (Frykholm, 2008)?

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the influence students’ faith-based background has on their decision making. Evaluating the relationship between moral decision making and faith backgrounds of students is very beneficial for student affairs professionals because it allows unique insight to understanding some contributing factors in how students are influenced. Understanding the influencers behind students’ decision making process is a step in allowing student affairs professionals to be prepared and provide necessary resources. Having insight into the influencing factors behind why students engage in certain activities or why they hold various beliefs means student affairs professionals are able to help students understand and process their decision making. Additionally, this processing would allow student affairs professionals to come from a place of education, not judgment. Ultimately, regardless of where someone is serving within a university, they are there to serve students and keep them safe. Part of this means understanding their students’ development process while on their campus.
Research Questions

I aimed to determine how a student’s faith background influences their moral decision making while in college. I achieved this by answering the following questions:

1. How did your faith and/or beliefs before college change, if at all, once you started college?
2. How did your decision making process change, if at all, from high school to college?
3. How does your faith impact the way you make decisions?
4. How does your faith motivate and/or hinder you?

Assumptions

My hypothesis was that as students move away to college and are no longer under any obligation to uphold the values of their faith background that they grew up with, they start to question some of the ideals or morals they were taught to believe growing up. College is meant to open students’ eyes and broaden their world view, so as this process happens for students, my hypothesis was that they will have to wrestle with the fact that their faith background may not align with truths they now uphold. A hypothetical example of this would be: when a student first realizes that they can be an ally for the LGBTQ+ community and still be a faith-based individual. I believe these revelations will be the learning moments that truly make students’ faith grow and evolve. I hypothesized this based on the assumption that students want to make their faith their own and stretch it to fit their personal ideals in response to no longer conforming to what they were raised with. I believe students wish to be able to claim ownership over their belief system.
Significance of the Study

By understanding the benefits of a student claiming ownership over their faith and thinking critically about what they truly believe, I think we are better able to serve our students. As stated above, college is meant to broaden our students’ worldview and challenge their thought processes. If we can get them to think critically about some of the main motivational compasses, one of which in these students would be their faith, then we will be able to help them make better decisions when using their faith as a lens for decision making. Kart Taylor wrote, “Within student development scholarship, cognition also relates to moral reasoning given that students’ beliefs about right and wrong influence how they make meaning of experiences” (Taylor, 2016, p. 30). James Fowler has argued that faith is a core piece of someone’s identity. Thinking critically about how their faith helps make up their identity, we will see how influential their faith can be in their decision making process.

As student affairs professionals, we strive to help our students figure out who they are. As King stated, “A common educational goal in American higher education is to improve student learning for the purpose of preparing young adults for the professional, civic, and personal challenges of adult life” (King, 2004, p. 2). If part of that personal and civic development includes faith for some of our students, then we should be able to help those students navigate what that process may look like for them on our respective campuses. We can also align those students with organizations and campus resources they may be craving now that they are missing those outlets they received at home. The more we understand how their backgrounds motivate or influence them, the better we can serve them.
Identifying influences and motivating factors is also a way in which we can point out to students why they make certain decisions because often times when we challenge the students’ decision making process, that can likely be one of the first times they even realize why they make the decisions that they do. This is the assumption that students are not often aware of their own motivators, faith-based or not. In an article by Frykholm (2008) she speaks about how college students often go against what they are told to do as a means of rebellion. Multiple behaviors can be explained by this behavior, but it certainly supports the idea that students challenge the new freedom they have once they have left home. For some, that freedom may be whether or not to continue with their faith-based background, or how much influence it will hold in their college life.

**Limitations of Study**

A main limitation of this study will be the sensitive nature of the study itself. Asking students to open up and talk about not only their faith and beliefs, but their motivators and influences, may result in feelings of discomfort. To anticipate this limitation, the study only interviewed senior students, who talked about their college experiences. By doing this, the hope was that, not only will the students be more open about discussing their faith development experiences now that they are a bit older, they will also be more comfortable talking about them since they are more settled into their development journey. This is not to say that students’ faith does not continue to develop or evolve through upperclassmen years in college, but the hope is they are more comfortable in their process and everything is not quite as new to them at this point.

Another limitation could be the population I am focusing on. For this study, I focused on students who come from a faith-based background, specifically a Christian
faith background. Denomination was not a criterion for participants, but may help showcase some contrasting results in the data. I interviewed only students who came from an established faith-based background. Although this was necessary in order to narrow down the research, I thought it would be a limitation to not be able to compare what motivations and influencers are behind the decisions students who do not come from a faith-based background make. Alongside that, it may have potentially been a challenge to find participants who not only met my criteria and were willing to speak openly about such a personal topic, but also were willing to allow me to write about those experiences.

Understanding how best to approach these limitations was difficult. In an article by McGarry (2010) she suggested that the best way to approach research that involves sensitive topics is to outright confront the fact that you are aware the research is sensitive. He suggests confronting it and stating that you as the researcher are aware some of these things may be difficult to talk about and that you acknowledge it after the interview/research has been conducted. This helped the interviewee feel power and control through the interview and know that they could be honest with me. Finally, building a rapport with the participants was essential to making sure they answered openly and honestly. I made them feel comfortable with me; therefore will felt more comfortable with the interview in general.

Definitions of Terms

**Faith-based background.** Something that is believed especially with strong conviction; especially: a system of religious beliefs (Merriam-Webster, 2017).
Faith Development. Faith results from interactions and experiences that individuals have in the various components that make up their lives and unites these components so that they can feel their lives are “whole” (Fowler, 1981, p. 25).

Belief. A state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing (Merriam-Webster, 2017).

Summary

I believe, as student affairs professionals, we share a common goal; whether we work domestically or internationally, and regardless of institution classification, we all exist for one thing—to serve students. With this understanding, we want them to be their best selves; we want to build them up, protect them, and empower them to be ready to be productive members of their communities when they depart our schools. In order to help us better understand how we can aid students in their development process, this study looked at faith development. Specifically, this study examined how a student’s faith changes and evolves from high school to college and how those developments impacted the student’s decision making process. Knowing these markers of our students is not about stopping their development process or changing it, but ensuring we are providing them with as many tools as possible to help them accomplish their goals. Additionally, it gives the student affairs world an inside glance at faith development and will help us anticipate why some students engage in certain behaviors. The more we know about the process, the more we can help.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

This chapter provides a detailed look at the literature already existing within the framework of students' development process in relation to their faith-based background. This section will detail the terms of student development, and the historical background we have gone through to understand faith development in students the way we do now.

History of Faith Development

Faith development in college students, is a process that is different for every student. This process can start as young as infancy or could be introduced at any point through someone's life (Roehlkepartain, 2006). Theories on faith development start with James Fowler as far back as the 1970's. Fowler's theory is based on the following premise and includes the following stages. Roehlkepartain (2006) says it originates in Stage 0 – Primal, which usually takes place between infancy and age two. This is the safety stage, where you learn to trust your environment and learn what it means to feel safe. Stage 1 – Intuitive-Projective usually takes place between age three and seven. In this stage, you begin to start to remember things and are introduced to faith stories and practices. Stage 2 – Mythic-Literal occurs during elementary school and is the stage in which you are struggling to understand concepts of symbolism and metaphors and take the faith doctrines very literally. Stage 3 – Synthetic-Conventional, which happens from age twelve to young adulthood, is the stage at which you ignore things that do not match up with your faith since you are unable to justify it. Stage 4 – Individuate-Reflective occurs from mid-twenties through your thirties. During this stage, you start to take ownership of the faith and begin to pass it on to others (children). Stage 5 – Conjunctive
often takes place in mid-life. This stage is where conflict occurs and you struggle to justify reality of the unknown with your faith doctrine. Finally, stage 6 – Universalizing occurs at the end of life and is when you begin to see all things as connected and treat everyone and everything with great kindness (Roehlkepartain, 2006).

Roehlkepartain (2006) speaks of Fowler’s stages of faith development as something to be used to:

> Attempt to describe patterns of knowing and relating through assessing cognitive, moral, and other forms of development that constitute a person’s relationship to the transcendent or the Higher Being of a particular religious’ tradition and relationships with other humans, both inside and outside a person’s particular faith community (Roehlkepartain, 2006, p. 40).

Stephen Parker (2009) wrote an article titled, Faith Development Theory as a Context for Supervision of Spiritual and Religious Issues. This article was used to help make sense of Fowler’s faith development model and how it serves as a guide for supervision over faith-based individuals. When breaking down Fowler’s model, Parker states:

> He described faith as a universal human activity of meaning making; it is grounded in certain structures that shape how humans construe their world and interact with self and others. Fowler (1981) distinguished these structures (e.g., cognitive development, level of moral reasoning, locus of authority) from the contents of faith. This is, faith is not so much a set of beliefs as a way of knowing. Thus, for Fowler (1981), it is one’s way of construing experiences in the world through structures of faith, rather than the contents of faith, that determine one’s faith stage.
This working definition of Fowler's faith stages, showcases the importance of understanding that faith development is centered on both cognitive and moral development. According to Parker, faith is meant as a guiding force to justify the experiences one faces in their life and make sense of them in their own format. Justifying those experiences to align with their moral compass is what would be considered practicing their faith.

Rudolph (1990) wrote about the history of the American college campuses and the evolution we have undergone to get to the twenty-first century place of higher education. When looking at the history of college in general depicted in the book and that of the establishment of higher learning institutions, it shows almost all early institutions were founded in faith-based roots. Colleges in America were all mostly initiated as a means of educating the men of the clergy. Making men the only ones with access to education because, no higher education was available without connection to faith, and college was viewed as nothing more than a stepping stone to meet your future goals within the clergy (Rudolph, 1990).

The process of establishing colleges became known as the College Movement and took place only a handful of decades before the Civil War (Rudolph, 1990). Rudolph states, colleges were, “Undertaken in the same spirit as canal-building, cotton-grinning, farming, and gold-mining” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 48). As the College Movement progressed, it became more and more clear that they were only being built to help their affiliated faith. Rudolph stated, “All were touched by the American faith in tomorrow” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 48). Finally, the book goes on to talk about the motivation behind why colleges were founded, saying that:
As churches of the meek and the disinherited, the Methodist and Baptist persuasion had at first been able to get along without educated clergymen and educated laymen. But opportunity in the United States being what it was, no church could establish itself as a permanent refuge for the permanently meek and disinherited. American life did not work that way, and Baptists and Methodists discovered that they were at the very least candidates for rank in the middle reaches of society. With that discovery went the necessity of erecting colleges” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 57).

Churches and religious groups were using colleges as a means of bettering their societal standings; which was accomplished by founding institutions for their clergy to have the opportunity to receive higher education. Kramer (2008), talks about “The challenge for each campus community is to define student success so that the outcome can be more systemically fostered and monitored” (Kramer, 2008, p. 434). Kramer (2008) discussed the importance behind this intentionality of not regressing back to a place where colleges were off limits for certain groups of people, expressly women and lower socioeconomic class citizens.

**Faith and Sense of Belonging**

A sense of belonging is a basic human need; this was seen in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). Students are no different when talking about this basic human need. Strayhorn (2012), found that a “Sense of belonging is relational, and there’s a reciprocal quality to relationships that provide a sense of belonging. Each member benefits from the group and the group, in a sense, benefits from the contributions of each member (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Throughout Strayhorn’s work, sense of belonging is
defined as “Students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). This definition is identified as being used only when speaking in terms of college students, traditional or not, and belonging is referring to campus communities. Strayhorn’s research and theories on this concept stem from the idea that belonging is reciprocal. Meaning that, students who have found a sense of belonging with a particular campus climate or culture are more likely to invest within that community as a means of being thankful, but also as a way of feeling integrated into that community. Examples of those communities could be faith based groups around campus, whether they are affiliated with the institution or not. A common illustration of this concept would be when alumni donate back to their alma mater as a way of staying invested with a community that once helped them find their campus home.

Jenney (2012) conducted a longitudinal study, done to examine college students’ sense of belonging and character development. The study had 12,030 students that were spread between forty-six different schools nationwide. This was done to “Discover what activities and related goals and values best predict pro-social character development in college students including activities goals and values related to spirituality” (Jenney, 2012, p. 58). The study showed that students who have a desire to be connected to a certain group they feel close to and a place to belong is a large contributor of why students seek out their faith based backgrounds once in college. The study also suggested that it can be valuable to have friends who align with your needs or whatever you are searching for; meaning, if you are seeking a spiritual connection with a higher being, then
you will most likely value the friends who also consider themselves spiritual. (Jenney, 2012). This study also suggested that schools that do not have a connection to faith or spirituality should realize that “College years are a time of important spiritual exploration and development for students and want to identify and support a broad range of opportunities” (Jenney, 2012, p. 110). By exposing students to opportunities to get involved with a faith based community that perhaps they grew up with, that could be providing those students with a large piece of their identity structure.

Bryant (2008) addressed the spiritual struggle for students in college. Students may start to feel a disconnect for who they are when they struggle with things that were always part of their identity, but now that they are in a new environment some of those things may not reconcile anymore. Faith or spirituality is a great example of this. When students grow up with faith always being there, that may be a struggle when they go to college and need to decide if they want to keep that as part of their identity. When looking into spiritual struggles and some of the reasons behind why they happen, there is a study that analyzed the correlation between spiritually struggling and your college years. The study says “Spiritual struggles may be rooted in numerous causes, but they are most notably linked to difficult life circumstances” (Bryant, 2008, p. 2). One could interpret difficult life circumstances in several different ways; although the article does not give examples of the sources behind these struggles, it does define these struggles as “Events that unexpectedly threaten to shatter one’s customary state of being” (Bryant, 2008, p. 2). When entering college, students face the obstacles of finding new friends, reestablishing their identities, being independent, and battling homesickness, which could all serve as difficult life circumstances. The study continued to say that “44% of their
sample (5,550 students nationwide) experienced at least “a little bit” of distress related to religious or spiritual concerns, and approximately one quarter felt considerable distress surrounding these issues” (Bryant, 2008, p. 2). Unfortunately, Bryant’s (2008) research does not go into detail about what this distress was stemming from specifically, but it clearly portrays spiritual struggle as an area of stress for student populations.

Green and Hoffman (1989) conducted a study which showed that “One’s faith stage affects one’s evaluation of members of in-groups and out-groups” (Green, 1989, p. 251). The study was done with 160 students at a liberal arts college with a Protestant connection; surveys were sent out to determine students’ stages of faith when they perceived themselves to be in the in-group or the out-group. This relates to when people grow up with faith in their lives, where going to youth groups and community religious activities are what defines membership in the in-group. However, once students come to college, faith groups may not be the norm for deciding in-group identity and reconciling that difference may be challenging for students as their faith activities may now be considered out-group activities. Strayhorn’s (2012) idea that we all just want to belong is especially important for college students who want to have that sense of community as well.

**Faith and Spirituality’s Impact on Decision Making**

When examining faith and spirituality, they are not necessarily the same things. In Parker’s article he argued that “Faith is not reducible to any single structure” (as cited in Parker, 2010, p. 234) that means there is a need for structural integrity when analyzing Fowler’s claims pertaining to complexity of faith (Parker, 2010). With this understanding, it goes on to say “Faith has cognitive, affective, and relational
dimensions” (as cited in Parker, 2010, p. 234). This suggests that faith has a large impact on how students make decisions regarding their relationships and even ties back to the understanding of just wanting to belong and have a place of community.

Faith and spiritual development are different than other student development processes, such as personality development. Lunn (2009) described the purpose of his article was, “It takes a principle from the critical theory approach to examine the role of religion, spirituality and faith in development” (Lunn, 2009, p. 938). In this article, Lunn stated that “Religion has something qualitatively different to offer from secular development agencies, particularly in terms of empowering people; empowerment gives people personal dignity, self-worth and contentedness, which in turn bring hope and vision” (Lunn, 2009, p. 945). These concepts relate back to those basic concepts of wanting to belong and feeling part of something bigger than yourself. Empowerment also comes with some hesitations; there is also room for faith values to corrupt some of its followers. We can see this example in action when we begin to use our faith to isolate ourselves from the rest of society and use it as a means of division among people who do not have similar faith ideals (Lunn, 2009). This further develops the concepts of faith affecting moral decision making.

Genia’s (1990) study was conducted to showcase that the degree to which students adhere to their faith when making decisions completely depends on where they stand in their faith development process. For example, perhaps it is something they grew up with, but now are no longer interested in. However, they may miss their faith and wish they had an outlet to engage in their faith in their new setting. Or even, conceivably, they are beginning to question some of the principles they grew up with from their faith
that maybe do not seem quite right anymore. When evaluating how students justify moral decision making with their faith, Genia states “Moral decisions are made in accordance with civil law and socio-cultural norms when there are not in direct violation or the prescriptions or one’s religious code” (Genia, 1990, p. 92). This would suggest that if a student is actively still engaging in the faith they grew up with, then their doctrine and faith code would serve as an influence of the decisions that student would make. In contrast however, if a student is questioning their faith, they may no longer feel the same obligation to justify their decision making with their faith code or doctrine and therefore may engage in behaviors that would otherwise seem out of the norm for them.

Zhang (2013) shows in their study that decision making does not always have to deal with risky behavior decisions. It can also be talking about how our students perceive themselves and their mental health. Zhang’s study, it involved 124 college women who were surveyed to determine how spirituality affects college women’s body image and sense of self. The reporting found that “Religion and spiritual values seemed to confer some behavioral protection: those who described themselves as “spiritual” reported that they were less willing to use drastic measures like extended fasting or medications to control weight” (Zhang, 2013, p. 1244). This would suggest that spirituality or faith can provide a sense of fulfillment to some students and can be helpful in maintaining healthy lifestyles. One of the participants in Zhang’s study shared “My identity is in Christ and that is what matters most. I am happy with myself and what I look like, mainly because of my faith” (Zhang, 2013, p. 1245). Although not all students come from faith backgrounds, it can be a great source of encouragement to some students. Another element of support came from an article that quotes “Religiosity and spirituality have also
been associated with overall well-being in college populations" (Rennick et al., 2013, p. 305). That serves as added support that although faith may not be for everyone, it is a fundamental part of character development. Therefore, knowing how to support those who have this as part of their identity will overall help their development and satisfaction. Additionally, this goes back to supporting the notion that faith can provide the sense of belonging every individual strives to find according to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943).

Love (2001) expanded Fowler’s (1981) work as he speaks on the ways in which students develop their spirituality and how that helps them make sense of the world. In conclusion to Love’s article he makes the suggestion that “Student affairs staff need to explore faith development theory and the implications that stem from it for students on their campuses” (Love, 2001, p. 15). Colleges and universities already support students through development processes, such as career development and identity development in their college careers. Their faith development process is an equally important component in their overall development process according to Love (2001).

**Religious Higher Education Institutions**

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, public schools and institutions are not able to teach faith in the classroom (“American Civil Liberties Union,” 2017). However, if a student chooses to attend a religiously affiliated institution, then that student must acknowledge that those institutions are allowed to teach their corresponding doctrines as they see fit (“American Civil Liberties Union”, 2017). This means that religious schools may mandate religious education classes, participation in faith based small groups, and even attendance at services.
When choosing where to go to college, several things play into that decision, but for many students the faith based background of the institution is part of that decision. According to Bowman (2010), “Institutional type may also affect students’ perceptions of marginalization and spiritual development over time” (Bowman, 2010, p. 597). In the same study about determining spiritual gains, it was found that “Attending a Catholic school and attending a non-Catholic religiously affiliated school are both associated with greater gains in spiritual identification” (Bowman, 2010, p. 603). This study shows that spiritual gains and development can happen at both faith-based and non-faith-based institutions.

Chickering and Reisser (1973) explained student personality development and goes into how this process may play a key piece to the puzzle on why students choose which schools they do for higher education. Chickering stated, “There are wide differences in the characteristics of the students entering these diverse colleges; institutional means on the OPI (Omnibus Personality Inventory) span more than two standard deviations on several scales, and questionnaire data from other instruments reveal similarly striking diversity” (Chickering, 1973, p. 44). The OPI survey examined personality development in college students. The students are the diversity; the colleges do not change. Therefore, one student may be attracted to a school for one reason and another student may love the same school but for a very different reason. Student affairs professionals cannot assume that all students who come from a faith-based background will be drawn to faith-based institutions and similarly we cannot assume that students with no faith based background will be turned off by faith-based institutions.
When looking at the different types of schools out there for students to attend for their higher education, Knight (1950) took a deeper look at the benefits of faith-based higher education. When talking about faith education courses in faith-based schools, Knight stated:

Such courses often serve as a channel through which a student develops new religious insight and conviction. They provide an opportunity for the student to think through religious problems, clarify issues, and emerge with a more mature and more satisfying Christian faith (Knight, 1950, p. 159).

Reiterating that when it comes to college campuses and why students choose to attend certain institutions, professionals can never assume what motivates students to make those decisions.

Bryant (2011) conducted a study to analyze how college campuses provide a context that is open to all faith backgrounds and support that part of students’ lives. He did this by surveying 3,680 students across forty-six diverse schools nationwide. One of the main findings was “A college context that is open to student’s spiritual expressions appear to diminish struggling (indirectly curtailing ecumenical worldview), but ‘warm’ environments that encourage expression directly increase students’ capacity to understand and accept others of diverse perspectives” (Bryant, 2011, p. 454). Ultimately, that is what institutions are trying to produce—students who can engage in dialogue with people from all walks of life and aspects of diversity and can contribute to this society in a productive manner.

Baxter Magolda (2008) discussed the path to self-authorship in college students and for college students. Faith is part of this path, according to the theories of Baxter
Magolda (2008). A large part of self-authorship for some students is their faith walk. Magolda’s theory is made up of four stages that people pass through as they go from believing what they have been told, to learning to think for themselves and make their own choices in life. In the article, student affairs professionals are trying to determine the best way to support these students, but one of the challenges that they talk about is from participants speaking about diversity. The participants spoke about enjoying having diversity in other contexts, but also enjoys knowing that in regards to their faith community, everyone has a similar mindset (Bryant, 2011). This contributes to the challenges of higher education institutions that are related to faith because if the sameness is being promoted inside and outside of the classroom, then there is no diversity.

Students may be choosing faith-based institutions as a means of their moral decisions and behaviors. For example, the same participant from the article above (Bryant, 2008), when talking about the student body, said “We’re going to go do fun things that don’t jeopardize my beliefs [and we won’t] be involved in sinful activities or anything like that . . . Everyone shares the same belief, so, you know, they [activities] are going to be centered around that” (Bryant, 2011, p. 22). The hesitation with this comes from “Previous studies have shown that diverse ways of thinking and to diverse cultural experiences contributes to changes in faith structure for college students” (Powell, 2012, p. 179). This supports the concept of letting students be in charge of their own self-authorship, which includes their faith, according to Baxter Magolda. Again, demonstrating the importance of student affairs professionals being familiar with faith development and supporting students through that journey.
Theoretical Framework

Figure 1. Demonstrating Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Original five-stage model

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, first identified in his 1943 paper: A Theory of Human Motivation, helped showcase how feeling loved, having meaning, and having lasting relationships are part of our core physiological needs. Several studies from the literature review focus on students needing to feel a sense of belonging, such as the Jenney (2012) article who studied how spirituality plays a role in pro-social character development in college students. The article argued that overall students who are connected to spirituality in some way are more likely to have positive character development. This is relational to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs because it helps illustrate that a sense of community, such as a spiritual organization, can make a positive
impact on student’s lives. In addition, the B. B. M. & King (2004) book talks about how in the twenty-first century, higher education institutions have begun to be more intentional about looking at a student’s needs holistically, instead of only at their academic life. This book incorporates the need for students to be successful in all areas of their development. According to Maslow, we have very basic needs. Knowing how important they are to human development gives them credibility for why understanding faith development is so important for students. This will be useful in the research study because it will help identify that belonging is a basic human need for students and all aspects of that development, including their faith development, contribute to students feeling that sense of belonging.

*Figure 2. Illustrating James Fowler’s Faith Development Theory*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1:</th>
<th>Stage 4:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intuitive-Projective Faith</td>
<td>Individuate-Reflective Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Early Childhood)</td>
<td>(Late Adolescence, Early Adulthood)</td>
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</tbody>
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<th>Stage 2:</th>
<th>Stage 5:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mythical-Literal Faith</td>
<td>Conjunctive Faith</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Middle/Late Childhood)</td>
<td>(Middle Adulthood)</td>
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<th>Stage 3:</th>
<th>Stage 6:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Synthetic-Conventional Faith</td>
<td>Universalizing Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Early Adolescence)</td>
<td>(Middle and Late Adulthood)</td>
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Fowler developed his theory on religious development stages throughout the 1970’s. Fowler was one of the first to talk about faith development as a process. Fowler’s stages of faith development are a great tool to help illustrate the stages a student would likely transition through from high school to college. It helps showcase the things we value at different points in our lives and shows what we go through to make our faith’s something we identify and form for ourselves instead of something that has passed on from childhood influences. Fowler’s theory has its limitations as well though, one being that the lens this was crafted under was one of Christianity, as Fowler was a Christian minister. Additionally, Fowler looked at faith development through the course of a lifespan for an individual, whereas we often try to group it into something only occurring during young adulthood for our students (Andrade, 2014). For the research study this will be useful to identify which stage of faith development student participants are in and to conclude their observations on the importance of faith development during college.

Summary

This literature review covered the history surrounding faith development in students as they progress from high school to college and how that transition affects student affairs professionals. The review focuses on several past research studies and articles that have been published to showcase the literature that already exists around themes of: history of faith development, feeling a sense of belonging, faith and spirituality’s impact on decision making, and religious higher education institutions. The review shows how the literature is connected to existing theories and how further research would benefit theorists. It would help to provide some insights into some of the data gaps that exist in regards to student faith development from high school to college.
and how that affects their moral decision making. Chapter 3 will describe the methodology used to conduct the study.
Chapter 3

Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative approach for data collection and analysis. According to Merriam, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences” (Merriam, 2016, p. 15). Since the nature of this study involves such personal information, an interview forum was selected for this study, making the qualitative method the most appropriate.

Design of Study

I used a qualitative approach to conduct this research and collect data. Given that there were interviews and questioning of participants instead of surveys or questionnaires, a qualitative approach with transcriptions was selected. There were four semi-structured interviews that used participants in their fourth year at the selected four year, mid-sized, Midwestern institution. The participants were chosen based on their previous faith upbringings prior to college, who identify with the Christian faith. Interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed and finally coded.

Participants

Participants were senior students seeking a bachelor degree at a mid-sized Midwestern four-year state university. The participants were upperclassmen speaking about their undergraduate experiences thus far. This allowed them to speak about experiences they are not currently living, in comparison to interviewing freshman about experiences they are still new to. Additionally, the hope was that upperclassmen students would be more open to speaking about the sensitive nature of this research study. The participants were students who were raised with a faith-based background prior to
coming to college. Whether or not they are still practicing in that faith had no pertinence on the selection of participants. Pseudonyms were used to ensure privacy for the participants.

The first participant to be interviewed was Phil. Phil is a 21 year-old senior, male identifying student who identifies as Roman Catholic. William was the second interview to be conducted; William is a 21 year-old also a senior male identifying student. William however, identifies as Christian, but specifically as Pentecostal. Next, Sarah was interviewed. Sarah is a 21 year-old a senior, female identifying student who identifies as Christian, but more specifically Methodist. Finally, Emma was the last interview participant. Emma is a 22 year-old a senior, female identifying student, who identifies as Catholic.

1. Phil – Roman Catholic – Senior - Male - 21 years old
2. William – Pentecostal – Senior - Male – 21 years old
3. Sarah – Methodist – Senior - Female – 21 years old
4. Emma – Catholic – Senior –Female – 22 years old

I reached out to leaders of ministry liaison programs at the institution. This program pairs local ministers to on-campus residence halls to serve as an additional resource. I used these liaisons to help identify students who may be willing to participate in this study. One participant came from this method and that participant referred a friend of theirs who also served as a participant for the study. Additionally, I used staff members in the housing department who oversee undergraduate students to recommend potential participants. Two participants were found with this recruitment method. These
recruitment methods identified participants who were both active in their faith organization, but not necessarily a formal part of the campus faith organizations.

**Research Site**

The study took place at a midsized Midwestern four-year public institution. According to the census done in 2000, the town in which the institution resides has a population of 21,039 people. The university that was used for this research as of fall 2015, had a total undergraduate enrollment of 7,202. Within that enrollment there were 16 American Indian or Alaska Native, 73 Asian, 1,353 Black or African American, 441 Hispanic, 95 International, 168 multiple, 4 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific, 181 unknown and 4,871 White students (Student Demographics Fall, 2015). This means the institution is a predominantly white institution (PWI). The institution is also fairly traditional with age grouping, being that 4,740 students are between the ages of 18 and 21. There are 1,793 students between ages 22 and 29, 327 students between ages of 30 and 39, 202 students between ages 40 and 49 and 111 students between of 50 and 64 (Student Demographics Fall, 2015).

**Instruments**

The research study had four semi-structured interviews. These interviews were approximately an hour long and were audio recorded. At the start of the interview, there was a short questionnaire asking about demographic information (age, gender, sex, race, faith-based denomination, geographic origin in country, and class standing).

(See demographic and interview questions in Appendix A)

The interviews were recorded so that the participants had a chance to review the information and make sure they were comfortable with their answers, as well as to
provide any additional information that may have been left out. I transcribed all interviews, allowing any participant to revise or edit anything they may have said. Edits were added after they had the opportunity to member-check their interviews. No participant was required to review their interview, but they reserved the right to do so if they chose.

**Role of Researcher**

As the researcher, I am interested in studying this topic because I personally grew up in a faith based home. I grew up in a setting where every decision was made through the faith lens and I always felt the pressure of completely abiding to the cliché of the perfect Christian girl. Having a religious component was a large decision making factor for me in which college or university to attend. However, after moving away to school, I began to be challenged in my faith and wrestle with some of the ideas I had always been told were true. This completely altered my sense of belonging because I was no longer sure I belonged in the Christian community and furthermore, I was no longer sure I was welcome there. This became a large internal struggle for me while at school and through lots of questioning and soul searching, I eventually was able to be at peace with who I was, and what I believe to be true. Although that may no longer fit into my family’s mold of who they wanted me to be, it is nonetheless who I am. I chose this study because I want others to have a chance to talk about their faith development process and want student affairs professionals to be able to support students through these developments.

**Data Collection**

The study was done by conducting four semi-structured interviews of undergraduate students enrolled in their senior year. The interviews were done on a one-
on-one basis and were structured by interview questions. Interviews were conducted in an hour time frame. The individual interviews took place in private meeting rooms at the institution where the researcher works as a graduate assistant. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of the study and to ensure accuracy. The transcriptions were analyzed for connections to the research questions and that data was used for the research study. All participants were senior students seeking a bachelor’s degree at a mid-sized Midwestern four-year institution. There were demographic questions to help understand the participants more holistically. The questions were open-ended to encourage the participants to speak openly about their experiences.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was conducted by the researcher who used coding as a means of deciphering what the study actually revealed. Essentially, this means the researcher grouped together parallels of outcomes from the interviews and labeled them to assign meaning to the data. “Coding reflects our analytical ideas, but one should not confuse coding itself with the analytical work of developing conceptual schemes” (Coffey & Atkinson, 2013, p. 27). Once the interviews were conducted and the researcher could identify themes, then the researcher was able to assign codes to reflect certain competencies that the interviews revealed.

Treatment of Data

The gathered data will be saved by the researcher for three years per the institution’s IRB policy and backed up by a secondary method (USB drive), both methods being under password protection. The participants will be able to access their interview recordings if necessary, as this is their right, but it will also help eliminate
subjectivity. The notes taken during the interviews were also typed and stored into Microsoft Word. All data will be kept highly confidential and under password protection (given the sensitive nature of the study) and will be used to find conclusions from the research questions.

Summary

The methodology behind this research study included four interviews from participants who have previously come from a faith based background. There were no determining factors on kind of faith background, as long as there was Christian affiliation. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and then coded for analyzing of the data. Finally, the data will be kept for three years under password protection under two methods per the IRB policy of selected institution.
Chapter IV

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine how students’ faith changes during the transition from high school to college and if that faith plays a role in how students make decisions in their lives at college. This chapter focuses on reporting out the findings of themes that came forth from the four semi-structured interviews through qualitative analysis. A multitude of themes were identified and are organized by research question.

Research Question #1: How did your faith and/or beliefs before college change, if at all, once you started college?

Three themes were presented from this research question. Students discussed the change that occurred when they transitioned from high school to college, students discussed the role their faith upbringing plays in their faith development, and students discussed their feelings of obligation to physically attend church.

Faith Transition

All four participants spoke about their faith transition coming from high school to college. Phil, a senior male student who identifies with the Roman Catholic faith stated, “I definitely have grown up, I think, being in my household, I was just always timid of doing the wrong thing.” Phil went on to speak about how now that he is out of the house, his decisions are truly his own. He can no longer rely on his parents to make him go to church or value his faith. When speaking about what Phil is involved in on campus and the role faith plays in that, he said:

Not saying I moved away from it, but then I started getting into the theater program and I started getting into housing and I started doing all these things.
Then, I started doing stuff at church (getting involved in church beyond just attendance), that is where I started (simply attending, not being involved beyond that) because I think it was familiar. Phil spoke about how having a faith outlet here at school was helpful to feel more grounded and not so homesick.

When speaking about his transition of faith from high school to college, William stated, “When we begin to understand things, it begins to hold a lot of meaning to us.” William spoke about how it was not until he was out on his own at school, where he truly began to see the meaning in the faith he was brought up with. William worked towards becoming a minister in his church here at school and in doing this, he said, “It taught me a lot of discipline, which now helps me to wake up early and to pray, and to start my day.” This was in reference to William speaking about how he now uses his faith in his daily life to help guide him.

When speaking to Sarah about her transition and where she felt she was finding her sense of community, she spoke about the school marching band. She did not mention a faith community at all. When asked about that, she said:

Had I joined a church, I don’t think I would have done a lot of those things (party and sexual exploration) because I would’ve said, “I have to wait until marriage,” because that’s what I’m supposed to do. That freshman year was very different, especially from senior year of high school to freshman year of college, very different experiences.

Sarah spoke a lot about how her transition from high school to college brought a lot of new experiences for her, things she would not have encountered in her high school life.

Sarah stated:
When I got to college, I made new friends and I realized their whole lives weren't revolving around this faith based aspect and that I could do other things beside worry about the fact that I'm not hearing God say things to me specifically.

For Sarah this transition brought forth a sense of freedom she had not previously experienced. College was an eye opening experience about different people and different opinions, that during freshman year, Sarah found refreshing.

When Emma spoke about her transition to college from high school, she had a little bit different of a path. She stayed at home for a couple years and attended community college and then transferred here. She says that not much changed in her faith when she went to community college because she was still living at home and the expectation was that if you were living in the house, you were going to church. However, things changed when she started living on her own here at school:

So, I feel I'm getting more out of it, not more out of my time because it's still good to go to church, but I just have to actually understand it myself and put more thought into it than just sitting in a pew and listening to somebody talk.

Emma spoke about as a child she did not always connect with what was happening in the church. It was just what her family always did so she did not question it. When speaking about the transition to coming to school away from home and having to make the choice for herself whether or not to continue going to church, she said, "I probably saw the importance more when I got older." It seems to be a theme that each participant was not fully aware of the value faith had in their life until they had to decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to continue to be part of it. For example, in the case of Sarah,
she chose to take a break and explore other things, while William became more disciplined to incorporate faith into his daily life.

**Faith Upbringing**

Four out of four participants identified their faith upbringing or the role their faith played in their childhood growing up as a major contributing factor for how they view things now. When asked what role faith played in his life growing up, Phil said, “It played a big role, so faith was a big, is a big part for me. I actually, before going to school for theater and business, I was determined I was going to be a priest.” When asked if Phil still aspires to be a priest, he said he does not, and not because he does not admire it, but because he desires to have a family and to work in the theater industry, which are things he could not accomplish as a priest. While speaking about his faith upbringing though, Phil said, “It’s just, that is kind of where all of my morals come from.” This prompted the conversation of what those morals are and Phil declared, “Everybody has different morals, but it’s the rights and wrongs and how I can view things. It’s just my structure I guess.” Phil declared that his morals and his foundation for life come out of the faith upbringing he experienced.

When speaking to William about the role faith played in his life growing up, he said, “As a child you don’t understand the reason behind why you’re doing something until life begins and you begin to have that experience of life.” William was indicating that as a child you may experience faith, but until you have to make the decision to carry it on yourself, you do not fully understand the reason behind why your family did something until you experience other pieces of life that may challenge those things.
Sarah was asked the same question and she responded by saying, “My family was very Christian, very conservative, and I think it had a lot to do with my high school experience, especially dating and that kind of thing.” I asked Sarah what was meant by “dating and that kind of thing” and she said, “I knew if my parents didn’t approve of their (potential partner) moral standing, then it wasn’t going to fly.” Sarah spoke about how she never fully agreed with some of the rules she had growing up, but understood why they were in place. She also indicated that it was considered normal where she grew up because her town was all very conservative and she indicated that pretty much everyone was from the same Christian background.

When I spoke to Emma about how she grew up regarding her faith, she said, “I think it was kind of just how I was raised, and I never really thought anything different.” This correlates to what the other participants said about not questioning the faith as children and not really understanding that there were other ways of living life. Their view on life was limited to the faith background they were exposed to and when they each entered college and were on their own for the first time, this was something they had to wrestle with and learn to reconcile.

**Church Attendance**

When the participants were asked how faith plays a role in their lives now, three out of four of them, in some way or another spoke about the physical act of attending church services. When Phil was speaking about how the church was his first sense of community at college, I asked how he got involved and he replied:

Somebody shoulder tapped me, there was just somebody who was said, “hey what did you do at your church” and I said “this” (spoke about the ways he was
involved in his home church) and they said “oh, so you’d be great at this”
(examples of things to get involved with for this church) and it was sort of, you
should try it. That also keeps me grounded with my roots at home and doesn’t let
me just stray off and only focus on myself. I can focus on other people.

Here, Phil was speaking about how he was not necessarily actively looking to get
involved in the church here, but how once he was invited to become more involved, he
instantly felt more at home. This provided him with a sense of community and a
connection to home. Phil went on to speak about how at first he was apprehensive about
getting involved in the church here and said, “At first, it was, “well let me get
acclimated” and then it was, “no just try it” and I said “ok fine”.” This was something
Phil said he struggled with; devoting time back to the church and he admitted that it took
some coaxing, but he felt more grounded once he was more involved. Phil went on to
speak about how when he is stressed out or struggling with something, the faith is a
source of strength through this. Phil stated, “Then I go back to the roots, I pray about it,
I’ll go to church and then it all feels better. It’s just remembering to take the time.” The
time commitment was something every participant touched on, saying that church
attendance can sometimes be viewed as stressful because there are so many other things
on college students’ plates, but they all indicated that once they go, they feel relief from
other stressors in life.

Sarah spoke about faith in her college life as something that was a bit of an
awkward transition. When speaking about church attendance, Sarah said, “That was kind
of a transition for me, going from having to go to church every week to making the
decisions to not go to church every week and I think that’s kind of had an impact.” Sarah
said it was very challenging for her to find the reason to continue to go to church if there was no longer an obligation. She stated, “I always struggled in high school and when I got to college, I didn’t see the point, so I didn’t try so much.” Unlike the other participants, Sarah did not necessarily have the feelings of desire to continue to attend church now that it was her decision to make.

Emma spoke about the time commitment being the biggest struggle with attending church every week here at college. Although Emma identified this as a struggle, she said, “I still try to take a few minutes on Sunday morning and still read my devotional and reflect and if I do have time, I do try and still go to church, it’s just a little more difficult now.” This was something that Emma said was sort of her compromise with not always being able to physically attend church, so she does her best to make sure and devote some time to her faith on Sunday mornings. Time commitments and the difficulty to maintain a complex schedule was the biggest barrier each participant faced in regards to physical church attendance.

**Research Question #2: How did your decision making process change, if at all, from high school to college?**

Three themes were presented from this research question. Students discussed the feeling of ownership they have over their decisions, making decisions regarding sexual intimacy and making decisions regarding alcohol consumption and partying.

**Ownership over Decisions**

Each participant was asked about how their faith influences the way they make decisions, if it does at all, and three out of four of them spoke about having to take ownership over their decisions and decide for themselves how impactful their faith was.
going to be now that they were no longer at home. Phil spoke rather generically about his
decision-making being impacted by his faith by stating, “When, I’m making a decision, if it challenges my values and my beliefs, then I have to take more time.” Phil went on to
speak about how he does not necessarily consider his faith in every decision he makes, but when it is something that may be conflicting with his faith, then he takes the time to consider his options, before making a decision. An example that Phil provided was when he has to choose which shows to partake in, “Being in theater, I feel whether or not it (his faith) will influence specific shows I do, that is probably something that is, “probably shouldn’t do that (that specific show),” because of it challenging my faith.” When situations such as these arise, Phil chooses whether or not to engage in them based on how it aligns with his faith.

William however, spoke about his decisions being affected in every way with his faith. He said how in childhood, the decision to be involved in faith was not his own, but it was once he came to college. “In college, I knew that this was the place where I’d make the decision that I wanted to continue to be in my religion” and when referring to ownership over decisions in this section, this is what the three participants referred to – the commitment to continue their faith on their own accord, not out of familial pressures. When William was talking about his decision to continue his faith based on his own desires, he said:

In college, I made the decision, I want to have a relationship with God and it moved from not being in a religion, to being in a relationship. So, I’m not in a religion with God, I’m in a relationship.
William spoke about this relationship as something that influences every decision he makes because he is consistently talking to God, as if he was talking to a friend. This can be described by William stating, “Even now being here at school, every time I make a decision, it’s how it’s going to affect me, how is this going to hurt me.” William went on to discuss the relief he feels knowing he never has to make decisions alone and the feelings of content he experiences knowing he does not need to worry.

Sarah spoke about college being a liberating experience by knowing that she could make decisions now that would not fall back on her family’s reputation or their standards. When Sarah spoke about making decisions for herself in this regard, she focused on her reputation, by saying, “When I got to college, I could make decisions without it affecting how I was viewed (like it was) in high school.” Sarah emphasized the liberation she felt when her decisions in college no longer affected her association with the in-group because the in-group was not necessarily the religious circle. She compared it to how in high school she felt as though if she had made those decisions, it would have jeopardized her membership in the in-group (religious circle). When speaking about losing that feeling of obligation to make decisions a certain way and knowing that at college, she could make whatever decision she wanted without it affecting her faith reputation, she said:

Knowing that if someone doesn’t want to do something, that’s fine, if they don’t want to do it, but this is my life, I get to make my own choices and I get to suffer the consequences if I make a wrong choice. If I make a wrong choice, then that’s on me and that was my decision to make and I’m going to enjoy it because that’s what I want to do.
For Sarah, the ownership of making the decision whether or not to continue to incorporate faith into her collegiate life, was a liberating one. This decision freed her of a standard she never felt she fit into in high school and allowed her to make her own decisions based on her own desires, not based on what was considered “correct” by her faith teachings.

Sexual Decision Making

All four participants said their faith or past faith upbringing has impacted the way they make decisions regarding their sexual experiences or interactions. Each participant went into various degrees of depth about this topic, but each participant spoke the most about this area.

Three out of four participants declared they were saving themselves for marriage because they believed that was what they were supposed to do. Phil stated, “I don’t argue with people who do it (premarital sex), but I personally don’t do it, that’s just me.” Phil went on to talk about how that has not always been easy and it is something he has definitely struggled with, but he does believe it is the right choice for his life. William also spoke about struggling with this decision. He said, “I remember in 8th grade, I made a prayer “Lord if I keep myself until marriage,” I really need the help” and he went on to say, “Holding your virginity until marriage is difficult. But by God’s grace I’m still going (still a virgin) so thank God for that.” This led into a bigger conversation about spiritual struggles and William declared, “The one struggle that I had was that I was trying to make sure, that I really didn’t want to have sex with anyone.” He said this in a way of being certain that he wanted to save himself for marriage, not that he had not been attracted to anyone.
Sarah had a different opinion about sex. She spoke a lot about her parents and how when she was in the house, she had to follow their rules and that greatly influenced how she made these decisions in high school. When referring to her parents, she said, “They were very adamant about no sex before marriage. That was a big thing. They were fine with people, or boyfriends spending the night, but I had to sleep in my room and they slept in the basement.” Sarah went on to speak about how she felt in high school when these decisions were being made:

In the church camps that I went to and youth groups, it was a very, “save yourself for marriage, you have to wait for the person you want to be with for the rest of your life” and I always struggled with that a lot because I was a little more explorative I guess. So, I was not as willing to just do that, I didn’t have any desire to wait until marriage, but I knew that’s what I was supposed to do.

Speaking about this, I asked Sarah if she would have felt comfortable talking to her parents about that and she said, “No, definitely not. I’m still not really comfortable being able to say that. Especially, my parents don’t know a lot about my college life outside of academics.” Sarah continued to say:

Had I talked to my parents about that and said, “I don’t think I want to wait until marriage, that kind of stuff” I don’t think they would have accepted it, I think it would have been a bit of an issue actually.

Sarah spoke about how since she knew it was the family expectation and she did not think her family would react well to her not obliging those expectations, she just did what they expected of her. However, when Sarah started to reflect on how she felt during those high school years, she said:
It was always something I knew in the back of my head was not going to stick. I knew it wasn’t going to work. But I knew that if I was around the right people and with the right person, it could’ve happened. But I also knew at the same time, it’s not really what I wanted to do.

Sarah reflected on her high school relationship that continued into the beginning of college and she spoke about how they broke up due to the fact that she was now on her own and was able to explore things with a different level of freedom than she had in her house. This led Sarah to eventually end that relationship and when talking about that breakup, she said:

I guess in a way, it made me kind of loosen up in a way. A lot of my morals, I don’t want to say they disappeared completely by any means, but I think I just went through a very rebellious phase. After I broke up with my high school boyfriend, I said “well I’m single, I’m going to go stay the night at people’s houses” which I would not have done.

Sarah spoke about her feelings on those decisions or what her reactions were after that rebellious year and she claimed:

It made me calm down a lot quicker because, as much as I had an academically successful freshman year, I also got to see a lot of things that I hadn’t seen before and it was all at once. It was all a big rush of things I got to experience, of things I didn’t get to experience in high school. Between parties, drinking, meeting new people and friends and alcohol and sex and all of that. But, then when sophomore year hit, I kind of thought, “well, I’ve kind of done everything now.”
Finally, when speaking to Sarah about how all of these new experiences changed her perspectives, she spoke mainly about her future. She indicated that it would alter the way she raises her own family in regards to them making decisions about their sexual experiences and interactions. Sarah said:

That was my main struggle with wanting to be in a romantic relationship and never feeling comfortable talking to my parents about it. I would want my own children to feel very comfortable saying, “hey I think I want to, have sex with my boyfriend” and I would want to say to them, “ok, have you thought through how this can impact your life?” Rather than just being something like “oh you can’t do that.” I would much rather it be a very conversation based topic in the household.

Sarah was not the only participant who grew up with rules about romantic relationships that revolved around faith beliefs. Emma spoke about how in high school there were rules in their house about who could come over. Emma said, “When I was in high school there were things like, “oh you can’t be in your room with a boy” because we (parents) don’t want things to happen.” Emma then went on to talk about how that rule was more strictly enforced for her than it was for her twin brother. Emma stated: “For me, it was a very very strict rule. But then, for my brother they would just tell him not to do it, but then nothing would ever happen, if it did happen (if he broke the rule).” Emma spoke about how she believed this was the case because her brother “could be very moody” and sometimes her parents would give in to just avoid arguing with him. I did ask Emma if she would implement the same sort of rules in her future family, if she were to have one and she said, “I do feel like not having the opposite sex in your room, if they’re just friends, that’s different. But if, they’re dating or something, I would feel like that was a
good rule.” Emma thought that these rules were there to give a foundation and once they were out of the house, ultimately the decision to uphold them was theirs, but they had a good base to help them with those decisions.

**Alcohol/Party Scenes**

Two out of the four participants spoke about how their faith influences the way they make decisions regarding alcohol and/or partying. William was talking about how when he was trying to determine if he wanted to continue to practice his faith in college or not, he said:

I even had the mindset where, “I need to go to as many parties as I can so that one day I can say, Ok God, my life is totally yours”. The thing is, the more you do it, it just fills a void.

William spoke about a void being present in his life and how going to parties was only a temporary fix. For William, his faith was the only thing that was going to fill that void and make him feel content. William spoke about this temptation of partying as being a spiritual struggle, he said, “That right there was a huge struggle for me. Trying to stay away from that (partying) and alcohol as well. But at the end of the day, I was still dealing with that voice inside of me.” For William, this was the choice he made to continue to follow his faith practices and focus on growing that relationship. But not all the participants followed suit.

Sarah spoke about how in high school she was the president of a club about alcohol and substance resistance. She said that she enjoyed it in high school, but it was a liberating feeling in college because, “I would go to parties and I wasn’t afraid of being, “oh she’s the President of STAR,” So, I would go to a party and have fun.” Sarah
continued to speak about how she was happy she had those experiences as it allowed her to sort out for herself what choices she wanted to make. She did indicate that, she felt safer making decisions around alcohol because her family set a good example with it.

Sarah said:

I never saw them drinking alcohol, or anything, abusing any substances. My mom would have a glass of wine with dinner or my dad would have a beer watching football, but it was always healthy interactions with alcohol.

Having seen her parents partake in alcohol without abusing it, Sarah said made her more comfortable to explore it but also to know that she could do so safely.

**Research Question #3: How does your faith impact the way you make decisions?**

Three themes were presented from this research question. Students discussed the feelings of guilt they have encountered along with their faith reputation, the family influences they encounter and the future developments they believe faith will play in their lives.

**Guilt/Reputation/Image**

Four out of four participants talked about how they have experienced guilt, feared for their reputation or image and how sometimes these things have influenced decisions regarding their faith. Phil started off by saying, “Any time that I felt any sense of guilt and I would ask, should I do this, it was always, I can’t do this because it’s against my faith or against my morals or something.” This quote portrays how each participant indicated using their guilt as a decision making tool for whether or not they should do something. Image, or the reputation they gained from being part of a faith organization, also was touched on by each participant. William stated:
I went through that junior high school where I thought, oh people don’t like me for who I am so let me start to change, and so I started to curse, started to do things, and before you knew it my grades were suffocating. And then the one moment that really changed my life was my 8th grade graduation. I was sitting down, I remember the day, we were sitting at the auditorium, the graduation was going on and they called the national honor society kids to come up and it was about ten of them and I was thinking, “Wow, I’m supposed to be up there.”

William spoke about this moment being pivotal for him. He knew that this was the moment where he realized that he was not living up to his potential. He went on to describe how difficult it was to go back to caring about his grades and his reputation because he lost many friends from it and his image completely changed. William spoke about this struggle by saying:

All you want to do is fit in and if you are not fitting in, you feel like there’s something wrong with you and you want to change. And I looked around at the people around me and I was so focused at trying to fit in, that now I don’t stand out at all.

Similarly, to trying to fit in and not completely aligning with others around you, Sarah spoke about being excited to go to college and being able to shed that image of her high school self. She said, “When I got to college, I said to myself, I’m in a new environment, no one knows me here, I don’t have to uphold the same type of standards I had.” For Sarah, she spoke continuously about how her faith image growing up never really matched how she felt inside, so going to college and being able to shed that reputation, made her feel more like herself than she ever had. Through that development, Sarah said,
“It makes me realize, just because the majority of my peers think this way doesn’t mean I have to think that way.” Sarah acknowledged that working on her image is still a work in progress because she said:

I’m one person around my boyfriend, (current boyfriend) I’m another person around (long pause), not completely (a different person), there’s just a different side to me. They (high school friends) knew me as someone who I would think is almost completely different than who I am today in levels of self-confidence and levels of interest.

Sarah touched on her self-confidence during our conversation. She spoke about it having grown and moving into a positive direction because she now feels confident in making her own decisions and not having a fear of what those around her are going to say about it.

Finally, Emma started to talk about the feeling of guilt impacting the way she made decisions, by saying, “I try to remind myself, you need to be a good Christian and do good things and so I think I try, when I’m making big decisions, to keep that in mind.” The feeling of having to maintain the image of “as a Christian” was something all four participants said they think about when they make decisions.

Family Influences

All four participants spoke about their family being one of the major things that comes up when they are trying to make a decision. For example, Phil said, “The biggest struggle, thinking about changing my faith (changing denominations) and what results would come of that. My family would not be happy with that and I don’t know if I would be happy with that.” William also spoke about this struggle by saying, “When I was at
school and I was brought to a place of decision, I always thought, ok will my parents be mad?” This was something all of the participants said they had to cope with growing up and it was mostly more a decision of whether or not their parents would be upset with their decision rather than if the decision went against their faith. However, as they grew older, it became more of a question of if the decision aligned with faith, rather than their parents. Sarah portrayed this by saying, “I am at a point in life where I kind of have to choose, because as a child you sort of just go along with what your parents believe because you don’t have many options.” This was Sarah speaking about whether or not she will choose to continue to be faithful now that her choices do not go through her parents.

Emma spoke about this struggle too; however, she spoke about how she was now going to make her own decision regarding whether or not to continue her faith. Emma said, “Now, I do have the choice, my mom says, “you don’t have to be Catholic, you’re old enough to make your own decisions about your religion” so I guess it is my choice now.” All four participants have continued to be engaged in the faith they grew up in, however they have all altered it in some way or another. For example, Phil spoke about believing it is morally acceptable to be an ally for the LGBTQ+ community, but he still identifies as Catholic; this is not something he would have done in high school. None of them have continued to engage in their faith in the same exact ways they grew up with, but none of them have abandoned their faith either.

**Future Developments**

All four of the participants, when speaking about their future, included faith in that vision. Each one of them had various alterations that they would make from how
they were raised, but they each indicated that faith was going to be part of their future and as something they would use in raising any future family. When talking about how they see faith in their future, Phil said, “Post college, (faith is) not only going to affect how I choose a career, but how I live family life.” This was very similar to William, as he indicated, “I feel it’s (faith) really going to influence my future. I just got ordained as a minister, so I want to have a college campus, be a minister on a college campus one day.” Clearly, William was the most certain about keeping with his faith and is planning to become a minister within his faith. The other participants spoke instead about their faith as something that they desire, but not necessarily in the way that they were raised.

Speaking about faith in their future, Sarah said, “Having that kind of faith for my own family one day will probably be how it comes into play in my future.” Sarah spoke about her faith decisions now only affecting herself, so she does not worry about them so much, but she thinks she will focus more on it when she has a family for those decisions to affect. Emma also said she plans on implementing her faith in her future family. Emma stated, “I would want them (kids) to go to church, but I would want them (kids) to have the option.” Emma spoke about how when they are small, they will go to church since they can’t make that decision for themselves, but she wants her children as they grow up to decide for themselves if they choose to attend church. Emma also indicated that, “I would like a church that was a little bit more family oriented.” This came from her speaking about how growing up Catholic, she did not feel the kids had a place to go for themselves sometimes, so she would like to see her kids be able to go to a church that had “Sunday school” and other options for children and she felt that may help them be more invested at a younger age. Finally, Emma stated, “I’m not saying I am going to be
Catholic my whole life. The one thing that I don’t like about it, is that it’s not really family oriented.” So, for Emma she knows she wants to continue in faith, but maybe with some alterations. This was a theme among all four participants; they all saw faith as part of their future, but not necessarily as how they were raised with faith. They all identified various ways they would change their rules for their families regarding how faith will be implemented in their future households. An example of this, was Emma speaking about wanting her children to be encouraged to attend church, but ultimately leaving that decision up to them of whether or not they attend.

**Research Question #4: How does your faith motivate and/or hinder you?**

Two themes emerged from this research question. Students discussed the ways they felt their faith may have hindered them from doing something that they wanted to do and they discussed things that have helped or motivated their faith. These feelings of hindrance and motivation served as influencing forces behind the students’ decision making process when faced with choices through their collegiate experience.

**Struggles/Hindrance**

Each participant, addressed feeling like their faith has hindered them from doing something they wanted to do during their lives and each participant spoke about having experienced at least one spiritual struggle in their life. For example, William mentioned feeling that his faith hindered him from going out and partying and he went through a period of time where he resented missing out on those experiences. The first spiritual struggle that Phil addressed was how his faith views the LGBTQ+ community. Phil stated, “Homosexuality isn’t necessarily against the faith, but it’s not necessarily for the faith. But, I don’t see that as (pause), that’s just a human being human, I don’t see that as
wrong.” Phil went on to speak about how he does not typically voice this opinion in the church because he knows the viewpoint the church holds on this issue will not align with his particular viewpoint, which he described as:

I know people who have classified themselves as gay, or lesbian, or transgender, and in the Catholic Church that won’t fly, but why? It’s specifically a marriage thing and the church doesn’t support it, but I do and I don’t think they should tell them no, so that definitely was always (pause), that doesn’t make sense to me.

Phil, went on to talk about how he goes about personally justifying those things to himself and he said, “I personally don’t believe that they’re going to get condemned, that’s not how I think it works, so I guess that challenges the reality versus the religion.”

Phil further spoke about the difference between when he is vocal about things he does not fully agree with and when he vocalizes things he does agree with; Phil stated, “I thought I was doing a good thing (being an ally), but it’s challenging my life decision (being Catholic).” Those are the kinds of struggles that Phil declared finding most difficult to justify. Phil is presently dealing with this faith struggle of questioning when it is appropriate to be vocal about his feelings of where the faith doctrine falls short of what he views as human decency. This struggle for Phil would appear to be one of choosing to expose the hypocrisy of desiring to be an ally, but not being willing to speak on behalf of those communities in certain settings; therefore, is he an ally?

He clarified how he does this by saying, “If it goes against what I believe, then maybe I shouldn’t do it,” he was clear in stating that was for actions and not necessarily always for beliefs. Meaning, that if his beliefs are that the LGBTQ+ community will not be condemned, that is something he will keep to himself as he does not feel comfortable
voicing that opinion in the church setting. One example Phil provided was when he identified the largest contributing factor of whether or not he would speak up was whether or not his difference of opinion was with the faith teachings. Relating back to saying he would not vocalize how he views the LGBTQ+ community in the church because he knows the church does not agree with his views.

When William spoke about his spiritual struggles, he said he had to think more of the big picture, before he could put it into perspective. He did this by saying, “The question was raised in my head, “there has to be something more than this in this world.” I was not just put in this world to live and to die. There has to be a purpose.” William was speaking about how he first started having these struggles and said, “If there is a God, why is there good and evil, why can’t he just make everything good? At first I fought with those things.” William continued to speak about this progression by saying:

I feel at the end of the day I feel it’s not religion... I never understood until I gave myself completely, I didn’t want to at first, I really didn’t want to become a Christian because I felt it was going to be a hindrance.

William said that the progression of his attitude toward his faith was good for his relationship with God because, “Just like when you fail in life, failures are really beautiful. So, college made me strong, those struggles made me stronger and wiser.” William identified this as an example of a time he felt his faith was going to hold him back from various experiences he wanted to have. But after reflection, he found that by acting in accordance with his faith’s values, he was ultimately more satisfied with his decisions and actions.
This was similar to how Sarah spoke about her spiritual struggles. Sarah said, “Now as an adult, it’s kind of looking at it for yourself and making that decision and creation versus evolution has been a big one.” The concept of science and evolution versus the biblical grounds of creationism was the biggest struggle Sarah said she had to work through with her faith. She said that, “My entire freshman year is a spiritual struggle to be honest here,” and the concept of figuring out whether or not she believed in creationism began during her freshman year as well. She did however, say that, “The struggle has been more with trying to create that relationship with God that a lot of people experience and a lot of people have.” That struggle of comparing herself to other Christians was also something that Sarah admitted to having to continually deal with.

Finally, when talking about spiritual struggles, Emma said, “I still want to be a Christian, go to church and stuff. So, I would say just going and believing that everyone is going to heaven, you don’t have to be a Catholic to go to heaven.” Which again revisited the theme all the other participants spoke about—finding it challenging to justify what the faith says in conjunction with how they truly feel inside themselves.

**Motivate**

Lastly, all four participants spoke about how their faith has motivated their life. Phil summed up very well what all four participants said about knowing their faith is a source of positivity in their life by saying, “Keep pushing forward, you still have more to go for, so I feel that’s really what keeps me going every day.” This was a theme William also talked about by saying, “But then going to college, God just helped me out a lot. Going to (school’s name), I didn’t know where I was going to go and that’s where my faith really grew.” William continued to say that although faith can motivate you, you
still need to put in the work, "If I want to see a change. I personally need to change. It starts each and every morning, having that quiet time with God." Furthermore, William spoke about how he uses the faith to motivate himself, "The Bible to me is not guidelines to use for what to do and what not to do, it is just a way to learn more about God." William used this as a means of speaking about ways that he can use the Bible to build that relationship with God to in turn help make the world a better place. He said, "I began to focus more on myself and how I can change, how I can do better in the world."

Finally, William said that he uses prayer to help motivate decisions, by stating, "If I want to do anything, I pray about it and it's very, very important to me." All of these various methods were things spoken about that helped motivate the participants.

When Sarah spoke about how her faith motivates her decision making she said, "Well, first off, as a Christian, it's not my place to judge people." Sarah spoke about the true meaning of being Christian and how that is her true motivation when making decisions regarding her daily life. She stated:

If I'm truly Christian, it's not my place to put someone down for the choices they make or how they want to live their life. Because we all make many choices and we all decide how we want to live our life. So, as a Christian, the one strong thing that I have always held to, is if I'm Christian, then in order to do that I have to show unwavering love and support for all people, no matter what. Whenever I meet someone regardless of where they're at in life or what they're doing or the choices they make, I know I can be friendly with them. Being friendly and being friends are two different things, but I can always be friendly.
Sarah continued to speak about how she used her faith in those ways to motivate her to make sure she is spreading love and aligning with her personal definition of what a Christian is. Sarah continued to say, “I'm at a point in life right now, where I feel I can make decisions and for the most part they're not going to affect anyone but myself.” Sarah spoke about this as a way of justifying how she treats others because she knows it can affect them, but knows that her personal decisions only affect her. Finally, Emma stated, “If I’m in a stressful situation, I’ll just take a minute and pray, “can you show me what I’m supposed to be doing?” This is a final portrayal that faith is used by all participants as a means of not only helping make their decisions, but as a guide to the kind of impact they leave on this world.

Summary

Throughout this study, the research questions generated various common themes among the participants. For the first research question, it was shown that all four participants went through some sort of transition with their faith from high school to college. All of the participants reported that they are influenced by some of their past faith upbringings and how they make decisions regarding it now. Three out of four participants reported that they place a significance over physically attending church and they have shifted what that belief means now that they are not mandated to attend church by family pressures. For the second research question, three out of four participants reported having to go through a transition of taking ownership over their own decisions now that they were responsible for their faith for themselves. All four participants reported having their faith be a contributing factor when it came to making decisions regarding sexual exploration and encounters. Additionally, two out of four participants
spoke about their faith altering the way they make decisions regarding alcohol consumption and partying. For the third research question, all four participants said that the feelings of guilt and worrying about their reputation or image are factors that influence their faith decisions. Family was also reported as an influencing factor when making decisions about their faith. Furthermore, when thinking about their future, all four participants said they would be bringing their faith into their future lives. For the fourth and final research question, all four participants explained that their faith was both a motivating factor and at times a struggle or source of hindrance when making decisions in their life.
Chapter V

Discussion, Recommendations, Conclusion

This research used semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore the process of faith development that students from faith backgrounds go through and the impact it has on their decision making while at a mid-sized public Midwestern university. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the relationship between moral decision making and faith backgrounds of students and whether or not that faith background affected the way they made decisions while in college. Four participants with Christian backgrounds, but from different denominations were interviewed and asked the following research questions: (1) How did your faith and/or beliefs before college change, if at all, once you started college?; (2) How did your decision making process change, if at all, from high school to college?; (3) How does your faith impact the way you make decisions?; (4) How does your faith motivate and/or hinder you? This chapter discusses the results of this study, recommendations for student affairs professionals and finally, recommendations for further research.

Discussion

In Chapter IV, the four research questions were described and a multitude of themes were identified and analyzed from them. Four participants were interviewed and their responses to each of the stated above research questions were categorized into eleven different themes. The first research question (How did your faith and/or beliefs before college change, if at all, once you started college?) had three themes: faith transition from high school to college, faith upbringing or past, and faith attendance. Research question two (How did your decision making process change, if at all, from
high school to college?) had three themes arise as well: ownership over faith decisions, sexual decision making, and alcohol consumption and partying decision making.

Research question three (How does your faith impact the way you make decisions?) had three themes: guilt/reputation/image, family influences, and future faith developments.

Finally, research question four (How does your faith motivate and/or hinder you?) had only two themes emerge from it: struggles/hindrance in faith and motivators/helpers in faith.

**Faith Development during Transition (high school to college, upbringing, and attendance)**

Several different factors come into play when focusing on faith development in general. Theories on faith development start with James Fowler as far back as the 1970’s. Fowler’s theory is based on the premise that something lies in-between cognitive development and moral development. Out of that notion, came Fowler’s model of faith development, which include six various stages. Roehlkepartain (2006) did a continuation of Fowler’s theory to further examine its relevance on children and adolescences.

According to Roehlkepartain (2006), the theory originates in Stage 0 – Primal, Stage 1 – Intuitive-Projective, Stage 2 – Mythic-Literal, Stage 3 – Synthetic-Conventional, Stage 4 – Individuate-Reflective, Stage 5 – Conjunctive, Stage 6 – Universalizing (Roehlkepartain, 2006). Roehlkepartain (2006) described Fowler’s stages of faith development as a tool that can be used to better help understand the correlation that faith development has with moral and cognitive development. Additionally, he examined how relationships play a role in this model and are a source of influence/pressure.
Taking Roehlkepartain's definition into account with the participants in this study who were all senior standing students at a university, they were able to reflect on their personal faith development process from high school to college as one piece of their development, alongside their cognitive and moral developments. Having to choose for themselves and think consciously if they wanted to continue their faith during their college years was the first theme that came forth. Now that they were in college, they had to make a choice to how they wanted to incorporate their faith, if at all, into their collegiate lives.

According to Fowler's theory, the participants from this study would most likely be between Stage 3 and Stage 4. Stage 3 is the place where typically people are unable to justify pieces of their faith with their current beliefs. This was evident when the participant Phil spoke about struggling to justify his personal beliefs about the LGBTQ+ community with how his faith views that same community. Stage 4 is the place where you take ownership of your faith and begin to implement it into your life. This was evident with Emma talking about how she may not remain Catholic forever, but she knows she will remain in the Christian sector. This was a decision that may not align with her familial pressures, but was more in tune with her current feelings of what she desires from her faith.

One of the main things that influenced these decisions, such as Emma's, of remaining in their faith, was the faith upbringing that these participants experienced. While it was a qualification for the participants to come from a faith background, it was not a requirement for them to still be practicing their faith. It was incredibly telling that all four of the participants are still using their faith in their daily lives and plan to bring it
into their future. Although this was something that each participant said they would be doing, they all identified elements that they would alter when they raised their future families based on things they disliked about how faith was incorporated during their childhood. This is an example of how the students' cognitive and moral development pieces influenced their faith development. For example, Emma spoke about how she does not want to make her daughters feel guilty for using birth control because morally she does not view the use of birth control as wrong. Similarly, Sarah spoke about wanting to have open discussions regarding sexual decision making with her children. All participants agreed that the way they were raised provided them with a faith foundation that they all appreciated as it was still playing a key role in their life and how they made decisions.

Finally, the act of attending church was something all participants brought up during this conversation. Phil was the only participant who declared he still attends church each week and makes sure to prioritize his time at church over his various other time commitments. Meanwhile, the other three participants made comments about how they try to think about church or take time in a devotional (Emma) when they can’t physically attend church, but the other three all confessed that sometimes they have to put other things over the act of attending church on Sunday mornings.

Previous research about these faith developments spoke about people transitioning through these developments in general; there was nothing stated specifically for the college sector. Additionally, there was nothing stated about whether or not these stages are fluid, meaning one can move back and forth through the stages, which after this research study I would say they are; based on the findings that when a new moral
conflict arises, these stages have the potential to regress as that person determines how to justify that moral struggle with their faith. Church was one of the first things that was shifted around in the schedule when their lives became stressful or very busy. Yet at the same time, they all made the willing decision to continue practicing their faith even though they no longer have an obligation to maintain this practice; although familial pressure to do so may still be evident for most. This demonstrates that depending on the factors you experience in life; you can move fluidly through these stages of faith development.

**Change in Decision Making Process (ownership, sexual decisions, and alcohol/partying)**

Through the course of this study, it became clear that faith plays a pivotal role in how these participants make decisions. When evaluating how students justify moral decision making with their faith, Genia (1990) has an article that states, “Moral decisions are made in accordance with civil law and socio-cultural norms when they are not in direct violation or the prescriptions or one’s religious code” (Genia, 1990, p. 92). Expanding on this current research, according to this study, students did not always make decisions that aligned with their religious code or faith doctrine.

Looking at the four participants, all of them shed light on the fact that they consciously decided to bring their faith into their college lives. They were no longer held to strict obligations to maintain their faith upbringing because they are out of the house, but they all chose to still practice their faith. However, in taking this ownership of their decision to make their faith their own, they needed to make some changes in order to ensure it matched their personal set of morals. For example, when speaking about sexual
decision making, three out of four of them chose to abstain from premarital sex because they felt it was the right decision for them. However, Phil acknowledged that he was conscious about knowing that his decision may be right for him, but not for everyone. So he now believes, that if someone engages in premarital sex it does not mean that they can’t be faithful people. Sarah expressed a similar thought as she chose not to abstain from sexual encounters and she is still engaging in her faith practice because personally, she knew that her decision was something she did not feel the need to justify. Similarly, looking at alcohol consumption and partying, two out of the four participants spoke about how they choose not to engage in alcohol consumption and refrain from party situations, but they do not have an issue with people who choose differently.

Within this conversation, each of them made decisions for themselves that fell into their own comfort zone or moral compass range. However, they all made a point of acknowledging that the range is different for everyone and they do not judge other people who choose to make different decisions but still consider themselves faithful. Each person has to justify to themselves what they are comfortable with and what they consider to be in accordance with the faith. This may be an implication that this generation of students is choosing to look at their faith in a more individualized manner and not necessarily as a prescribed set of norms to which you have to conform.

Faith Impacting Decisions (guilt, family influences, and future developments)

Lunn (2009) studied how faith plays a role in decision making and found that, “Religion has something qualitatively different to offer from secular development agencies, particularly in terms of empowering people; empowerment gives people personal dignity, self-worth and contentedness, which in turn bring hope and vision”
When participants brought up the feelings of guilt or fearing for their reputation or image, it was correlated to their feelings of not being content. In order to maintain personal dignity while growing up, feelings of guilt influenced their decisions because it had direct implications to how they would be viewed in church. For example, Sarah spoke about how she wanted to be more sexually explorative in high school, but knew that it would ruin her reputation and the image her family had of her.

The notion of being concerned with their family’s opinions on them was very strong for all participants. For Emma, she spoke about her mother being the one in the family to push the faith onto her and her brother and was the person who made sure they were abiding by the faith. Yet for Phil, he spoke about how his family is still very close and their commonalities in faith is something that grounds them as a family. Phil said this allows him to feel close to his family even when he is away at school and that is something he relishes. Although they all spoke about their family influencing their faith in different ways, they all acknowledged that their family plays a role in how they make decisions about their faith.

In addition to family values, all four participants said their faith was something they would bring to their own future families. Although some participants were on the fence with what their faith life would look like exactly, such as Emma talking about leaving Catholicism, but remaining in a part of the Christian faith. The previous research helps explain why some of these themes take place, but the participants used for this study showcased that it goes back to the feeling of ownership of their faith and individualizing their relationship with that faith to justify what they’re personally
comfortable with. Those individualizations are influenced by factors from their faith-based upbringings, but they are ultimately chosen by the participant.

**Faith Motivation or Hindrance (struggles and motivators)**

Faith can be viewed as a means of motivation for decision making but it can also be viewed as a hindrance when trying to make decisions. During the process of decision making is also when spiritual struggles become more evident because sometimes the faith may say one thing, but the person may want to do something else. For example, William spoke about how he went through a spiritual struggle where he viewed his faith as a hindrance in his life because it was making him feel guilty for going to parties and consuming alcohol. However, as his relationship with his faith has developed, William now speaks about his faith as the primary thing that motivates him to get through the day. Similarly, Phil spoke about how his faith is the guiding factor in his life and how it motivates every decision he makes because he uses it as a moral compass.

Previous research in this area would say that similar to identity development, faith development can be a core piece of peoples' identity. That the faith component of identity contributes to the overall sense of well-being in a person. Rennick found that "Religiosity and spirituality have also been associated with overall well-being in college populations" (Rennick, 2013, p. 305). While this may not be the primary factor that dominates someone's well-being, it does indicate that a person's faith can influence their overall well-being. For example, Phil spoke about how his future career goals will be influenced by his faith because he has to make sure the specific industry he goes into will align with his faith, otherwise he declared he knows he will not thrive in that environment and likewise would not be fulfilled.
Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

Faith development plays an integral role in our students’ lives. While not every student will come from a faith based background, a number of them will. It is important to recognize the role that their faith plays in the development of their identity and decision making while in college. Whether or not their faith is something they choose to continue or practice when coming to college, it will be something they think about. They may no longer wish to attend church every week, but that will be a conscious decision they have to make and due to association of guilt with that decision, family influences and pressures to maintain an image they had growing up, that decision may not be an easy one. Beyond the decision of whether or not to attend church, these students are determining how they wish to express their faith, which can be a very difficult decision for many people as public expression of faith can bring a multitude of stereotypes and predispositions with it. Having to tell one’s family that they no longer practice their faith could be a very difficult conversation for some students. While not all students will be afraid to have those conversations, and some may choose to avoid them altogether, it is important to realize the magnitude of effects those choices can make.

1. Some students may come to college and wish to continue practicing their faith. This can raise several issues that can cause stress and anxiety for students. This may be the first time they have to walk into a church alone and try to determine if it is a place they can align themselves with morally. The student will now be in a position to determine how they align their morals with their faith teaching. Each participant in this study chose to remain involved with their faith, but they all had specific issues where they chose to disagree with their faith’s doctrine. Each of
those participants declared that those developments of determining what they wanted to believe and what they were going to continue to practice were very challenging and produced a great deal of transition and struggle. As student affairs professionals, we should be aware of these signals so that we can help intervene when we see a student struggling and offer support.

2. A person’s belief system is their guide to virtually everything they do; therefore, when we send our students out the door at graduation, we want to ensure we have taken every measure we can to help them develop that belief system to align with whatever moral developments they have grown into with every other component of their identity. This means actively engaging in these conversations with our students and remaining knowledgeable about faith identity as a core piece of identity development.

3. Regardless of whether or not individual student affairs professionals are faith practicing individuals it is imperative to be aware of these challenges facing many students and their repercussions for their development at the institution. As student affairs professionals, we may not be in a position to serve as a spiritual guide, a role more traditionally associated with faith leaders; however, having the awareness of the campus and surrounding community and where to refer these students is imperative. These referrals and knowledge of resources should be similar to the protocols used to refer a student in crisis to the counseling center. Individual professionals may not be trained sufficiently, but should know where to find students the necessary support. Faith serves as a core element of these students’ identity and that awareness should never be taken off the table.
Recommendations for Future Research

1. Conduct a similar study using participants from various faith backgrounds and furthermore, in a different geographical area. For instance, if the study was conducted in a more metropolitan area, there may be a higher tolerance for diverse faith organizations.

2. Conducting a quantitative study to examine the percentage of the campus population that identifies faith organizations as a primary motivator in their decision making. This would allow for greater understanding of how many of our students are dealing with these issues. Identifying the percentage nationally of students who come to college with a faith background may help portray how many students may face these struggles. Having this research may also contribute to reducing the stigmas around faith in education and allow more widespread information on this topic to be incorporated on a more mainstream level.

3. Every participant in this study spoke in depth about their faith influence in regards to sexual decision making. Look at the relationship that faith has with sexual intimacy. A quantitative study to determine how many faith-based students are sexually active and the correlation to their extent of sexual knowledge regarding anatomy and basic sexual health practices may help determine ways we can support these students through education. Additionally, for those who may not be sexually active, examine if they are making that decision on their own accord, or if there is a faith influence motivating that decision.

4. Examine the comfort levels and education levels about faith-based development of student affairs professionals in dealing with student issues associated with
faith. Identifying the source that causes this taboo to foster could be the key to breaking the stigma associated with these conversations.

Conclusion

This study utilized four semi-structured qualitative interviews to examine the relationship faith development from high school to college has on decision making of moral issues while in college. The study determined that faith plays an integral role in how students coming from a faith based background make decisions in college. The four research questions were described and a multitude of themes were identified and analyzed from them. From the four research questions asked, the following eleven themes evolved: faith transition from high school to college, faith upbringing or past, and faith attendance, ownership over faith decisions, sexual decision making, and alcohol consumption and partying decision making, guilt/reputation/image, family influences, and future faith developments, struggles/hindrance in faith and motivators/helpers in faith. These eleven themes showcased the various ways that faith serves as a determining factor when students make decisions about things such as sex and alcohol, for example. These themes emerged as a means of showcasing that faith development is no easy transition. Each participant identified their faith as a source of positivity in their life, but they also all identified areas where they greatly struggled with their faith and at times it served as an anxiety producing source in their life.

The process of faith development forces a student to identity what is important to them and what they are choosing to align with morally—no easy feat. One issue that arose in this study was issues associated with premarital sex. Each participant viewed that topic differently according to their own set of morals despite similar expectations.
from their faith upbringing. A decision such as that is complicated enough, but even more so when you realize there is potentially an entire audience of expectations influencing that decision. Those decisions could result in feelings of separation between the student and their family as each participant identified their family as a strong source of influence for making certain decisions. Therefore, understanding the anxiety and pressures that can come alongside a student going through this development is something we as a profession need to not only be aware of and take seriously, we need to know how to help them. This does not mean offering spiritual guidance, but it does mean knowing where to refer these students and how to make sure the stressors of these decisions are addressed and cared for.

Talking about faith should not be difficult for student affairs professions, no different than offering support for a student who is developing their ethnic or social identities. This aspect of student development is something that should be understood and supported by student affairs professionals through research, professional development, and training. Student affairs professionals across the globe are invested universally in one thing—student success. As this study has shown, faith development plays integrally into that success and knowing how to support them through faith struggles or find them an appropriate faith resource, could very well be the difference of success or struggle for our students.
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Appendix A

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE – The Impact of Faith Development on Student Decision Making in College

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your age?
2. What gender do you identify with?
3. What sex do you identify with?
4. What is your race?
5. What type of community are you from? (Rural, urban, or suburban)
6. What is your class standing?
7. What faith or spiritual organization did you grow up with?
   a. Denomination if applicable?

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your faith growing up and what role did it play in your life?
2. Tell me about your faith now, how does it influence you?
3. Growing up, in what ways, if at all, did you feel your faith background affected your decision making?
4. What behaviors from your faith would cause conflict with your belief system?
5. How do you feel your faith has changed, if at all before coming to college, to now?
6. How did your faith organization influence your college choice?
7. Where did you find your sense of community while at college?
a. If faith is not mentioned: I see you didn’t mention your faith, tell me more about that.

8. What was some ways you encountered spiritual struggle in college, if at all?
   a. Follow-up: How did that impact you?

9. How does your faith affect your decision making process now?

10. How do you see faith influencing your future?
Appendix B

Consent to Participate in Research

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

The Impact of Faith Development on Student Decision Making in College

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Katie Noah and Dr. Dena Kneiss from the office of College Student Development at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the influence first year students' faith-based background has on their decision making, practices, beliefs and experiences.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

These interviews will be approximately an hour long and will be recorded. At the start of the interview there will be demographic questions to help understand the participants more, but mainly to examine what parts of the country they came from. There will then be open-questions to allow the participants to speak openly about their experiences. The interviews will be recorded so that the participants will have a chance to review the information and make sure they are comfortable with their answers, as well as to provide any additional information that may have been left out, but they are not required to do so.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no risks associated with this study.

• POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The participants will not directly benefit from this study other than having a chance to tell their story. They will be contributing to the knowledge of how we currently understand student development.

• CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of:
The gathered data will be saved by the researcher for three years per the institution’s IRB policy and backed up by a secondary method (USB drive), both methods being under password protection. The participants will be able to access their interview recordings if necessary, as this is their right, but it will also help eliminate subjectivity. The notes taken during the interviews will also be typed and stored into Microsoft Word. All data will be kept highly confidential and under password protection (given the sensitive nature of the study) and will be used to find conclusions from the research questions.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Katie Noah  
Associate Resident Director – Lincoln Hall  
Kcnoah@eiu.edu  
217-581-7694

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Ave.  
Charleston, IL  61920  
Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
E-mail: euirb@www.eiu.edu
You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant Date

NOTE: Use the following signature line for minor/handicapped subjects only if applicable.

I hereby consent to the participation of _______________, a minor/subject in the investigation herein described. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my child's participation at any time.

Signature of Minor/Handicapped Subject's Parent or Guardian Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

Signature of Investigator Date