

University of San Diego

Digital USD

---

Dissertations

Theses and Dissertations

---

2008-05-01

## The Role of Residential Learning Communities in the Faith Development of First Year College Students

Dayanne Izmirian PhD  
*University of San Diego*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

---

### Digital USD Citation

Izmirian, Dayanne PhD, "The Role of Residential Learning Communities in the Faith Development of First Year College Students" (2008). *Dissertations*. 788.

<https://digital.sandiego.edu/dissertations/788>

This Dissertation: Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact [digital@sandiego.edu](mailto:digital@sandiego.edu).

**THE ROLE OF RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN THE FAITH  
DEVELOPMENT OF FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS**

By

DAYANNE IZMIRIAN

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
University of San Diego

May 2008

Dissertation Committee

Kenneth Gonzalez, PhD  
Mary Woods Scherr, PhD  
Elizabeth Walsh, RSCJ, PhD

© Copyright by Dayanne Izmirian 2008  
All rights reserved

## ABSTRACT

Although student development theories have recognized the complex processes of identity development, they have not adequately addressed the development of the spiritual self. Rather than given separate consideration, spiritual development is often discussed in the context of other aspects of development, such as the cognitive. Consequently, student affairs practitioners have not been adequately trained to address, facilitate, nor support the spiritual development of college students.

One approach that has been proposed for facilitating the faith development of college students is Residential Learning Communities. Unfortunately, the assertion that Residential Learning Communities are a promising method of facilitating faith development in college students is not supported by research-based evidence.

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the impact of Residential Learning Communities on the spiritual and faith development of first-year college students at a faith-based institution. The following research question guided the data analysis: What are the components and characteristics of a faith-based residential learning community that facilitates faith development in first-year college students?

Qualitative techniques were employed for this study, specifically, case study methods. The case was one residential learning community in a first year residence hall at a faith-based institution. The time period for the study was one academic year. The study utilized data from three different sources: field observations, documents, and individual interviews in both the fall and spring semesters.

Findings suggested that the spiritual development of college students was a result of formal time for reflection and strong mentoring relationships. These two components helped shape a unique culture characterized by a strong sense of connectedness, respect for differences and an emphasis on learning not only about faith and spirituality, but community living as well.

This study provides a description of how and why spiritual and faith development occurred in a co-curricular, residential setting and provides data on how student affairs practitioners can be more intentional about creating such contexts.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful husband,  
Chad Izmirian who provided me unwavering support,  
encouragement and unconditional love

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first need to acknowledge the participants in this study. The students, Resident Minister and Resident Assistant were always open and welcoming. I was blessed that these wonderful students and staff took time out of their busy schedules to speak with me and I learned so much from each and every one of them.

I would like to acknowledge Ken Gonzalez, my chair. Your knowledge of student development theory and work in the community was instrumental to this final product. I also appreciated the care and understanding you always showed as we struggled together in balancing personal and professional life.

Thank you to Mary Scherr for offering a course on leadership and spirituality and inspiring me to explore spirituality and faith as academic topics.

Thank you to Sr. Betsy for your great attention to detail, especially as it relates to grammar and hyphens. I so appreciate your friendship and mentorship these past few years.

I need to acknowledge all of my family, friends, teachers and colleagues who have supported me. There are those who support me from a distance, including our family in Denver, northern California and the east coast. Thank

you Mom, Dad and Leanna for being so available by phone and helping me find perspective when needed.

At USD, I would like to thank my teachers and colleagues who made my doctoral experience so wonderful. There are many at USD who provided me support and encouragement. Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Cheryl Getz, Dr. Tricia Bertram-Gallant, Mark Peters, Rhett Buttle and Tammi Ammons. I would also like to thank all of the wonderful Residential Life staff with whom I have worked the last nine years. I truly enjoy working with each of you on a daily basis.

Finally, I need to acknowledge my husband and our two sons, Aram and Bennett. This work took me away from them quite a bit, especially in the last year. Chad, I appreciate all you did to make sure I completed my degree. You truly make me a better person.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Definition of Terms.....	4
The Problem Under Study.....	6
Statement of the Problem.....	9
Purpose of the Study.....	10
Research Question.....	10
Limitations of the Study.....	10
Significance of the Study.....	11
2. OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	
Chapter Overview.....	13
Definitions of Religion, Faith and Spirituality.....	13
Overview of Faith and Spiritual Development Theories .....	18
James Fowler.....	18
Daniel Helminiak.....	19
College Student Faith and Spiritual Development Theories.....	21
Sharon Daloz Parks.....	21
Patrick Love.....	23
Current Literature and Research.....	24
Faith and Spirituality.....	24
Authenticity, Amplification and Transformation.....	27
Transformational Education.....	28
The Case for Further Research.....	29
Chapter Summary.....	32
3. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	
Background.....	34
Qualitative Research.....	34
Qualitative Techniques.....	35
Case Study Approach.....	37
Context of the Case.....	40
Research Design.....	41
Interview Selection and Purposeful	

Sampling.....	42
Transcriptions.....	44
Demographics of the Interviews.....	44
Data Analysis.....	45
Role of Researcher.....	47
4. DESCRIPTION OF THE RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY.....	49
Description of the Group Meetings.....	49
Rituals.....	51
Time Boundaries.....	53
Informal Interactions.....	54
Chapter Summary.....	54
5. FINDINGS.....	56
Chapter Overview.....	56
Components.....	56
Formal Gatherings.....	57
Mentoring Community.....	62
Formal Mentors.....	62
Positive Peer Pressure and Accountability.....	65
Culture and Characteristics.....	65
Unique Culture.....	65
Strong Sense of Connectedness and values.....	66
Respect for Differences.....	69
Learning.....	70
Learning about Community living.....	71
Making Meaning and Finding Purpose.....	72
Personal Growth.....	73
Chapter Summary.....	76
6. STUDY OVERVIEW.....	78
The Problem Under Study.....	78
Purpose of the Study.....	79
Research Question.....	80
Methodology.....	80
Findings.....	81
Implications for practice.....	81
Transformational Education.....	82
Unique Components of this Program.....	84
Importance of assignments and choice.....	85
Importance of Physical Space.....	87
Role of Authority.....	87
Diversity.....	88
Institutional Amplification.....	89
Student Affairs professionals'	

development.....90  
Implications for research.....91  
Summary.....93

REFERENCES.....95

Appendix

A. Letter of Introduction.....103  
B. Fall Interview Questions.....105  
C. Spring Interview Questions.....106

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

We are living in an unprecedented time, one in which the world is changing rapidly. Especially since the events of September 11, 2001; people in the United States have lost their sense of security and came to realize that they needed more to sustain them through the fear and ambiguity inherent in modern times. People began to search for greater meaning and higher purpose in their lives. This quest for meaning and higher purpose is evidenced in the surge of interest in faith and spirituality in popular culture (Astin, 2005). Throughout the world, people seem to be yearning for connection, community, meaning, values, and wholeness, all of which are important aspects of spirituality (Daloz Parks, 2000).

The increased interest in spirituality in both business and education is evidenced in several professional organizations, including the formation of spirituality interest groups. In 1999, the Academy of Management approved of a new interest group on "management, religion, and spirituality" (Cavanaugh, 1999). A National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) knowledge community focusing on spirituality was formed the

same year. A knowledge community is a network of NASPA members who share an interest in a common theme. The Institute for Students in Transition added spirituality as one of the essential learning outcomes for first-year students in 2006 (Gardner & Barefoot, 2006).

The subject of spirituality also is a theme in business management and higher education literature, including an entire issue of the *Journal of Change Management* (2003) devoted to the topic of spirituality in organizations. Recently, even the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) noted the importance of this topic, by devoting the Spring 2007 issue of *Liberal Education* to the idea of "Big Questions" in the Academy. The theme of this edition of *Liberal Education* is the importance of spiritual questions, such as meaning and purpose, having a place in the liberal arts curriculum.

Although spirituality, faith, and religion have attracted a considerable amount of attention in the last decade within higher education, literature on the subject of faith development is found mostly in the form of commentary rather than in empirical studies. However, some research has been conducted within the last five years (Chickering, 2006). There is a growing trend toward treating faith and spirituality as important academic

considerations. For example, two major research studies are being conducted at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA. The first is a national, longitudinal quantitative project surveying college students about their beliefs and values. The second is a qualitative study, which examines faculty members who incorporate spirituality into their teaching. In both of these studies, the preliminary findings suggest that college students and faculty are very interested in developing a sense of spirituality (Johnson, 2004, Lindholm, 2005). The Higher Education Research Institute will publish results of their studies annually (Johnson, 2004, Lindholm, 2005).

One of the leading student development theorists, Arthur Chickering, recently released a new book about spirituality and authenticity in higher education. In an interview regarding the purpose of the book, Chickering stated:

The evidence is quite clear that students are concerned with spirituality, purpose, meaning, and authenticity as it relates to their lives. We've been getting that testimony from the people we meet in many contexts. The Templeton Foundation is supporting a national survey that is being conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. The project, run by Alexander and Helen Astin, did a pilot survey this past fall that proved especially fruitful. It turned up impressive results that showed 70 to 80 percent of students indicating that a

spiritual quest and search for meaning is very important to them. This trend was observed across many institutional types (*Higher Education Newsletter*, January 2004).

Arthur Chickering also noted in another interview that the topic of spiritual development will continue to grow as an object for continued inquiry and research, and will become a significant component of student development theory (*Higher Education Newsletter*, January 2003).

#### Definition of Terms

This is not a study about religion, a shared system of beliefs, principles or doctrines related to the worship of a supernatural governor of the universe (Berger, 1967). Religion is not the focus, since religious beliefs can often be divisive and exclusive in the current context of fundamentalism that exists in the world. In the United States, religion plays a strong role in partisan politics and the strong divisions within our nation. However, it is important to note that the context for this study is a religious-based, Roman Catholic, institution.

Western spirituality is seen as a quest, a journey, and a search for meaning, wholeness, and purpose. Spirituality is commonly regarded as an individual phenomenon with a belief in some form of higher creational force or supreme being (Jagers & Smith, 1996). Faith and Religion are defined similarly, but usually occur in

community rather than as an individual phenomenon (Fowler, 1981).

The focus of this study is spirituality and faith. They are being used as they tend to be more inclusive terms. In addition to being more inclusive, the terms faith and spirituality also denote process and growth. Whereas religion is often seen as unchanging and does not usually denote development, rather it is based on tradition and set rules. Spirituality is commonly regarded as an individual phenomenon with a belief in some form of higher creational force or supreme being (Jagers & Smith, 1996). Faith is similar to spirituality and is defined as a process of meaning-making and seeking connections between all the disparate elements of human existence (Daloz Parks, 2000).

The difference between faith and spirituality is that spirituality is often an individual phenomenon, while faith is most often experienced and developed in community. Spirituality is a process of learning to turn inward, which can be developed within faith communities; however, membership in a faith community is not necessary for someone to develop spiritually. For purposes of this study, the terms faith and spirituality will be used interchangeably. This is because both the individual



student's spirituality and faith development will be studied within the context of a community whose articulated purpose is to facilitate growth in the spiritual lives of the participants.

Residential Learning Communities are programs that involve undergraduate students who live together in a residence hall. These participants partake in academic and/or extracurricular programming designed especially for them (*National Study of Living-Learning Programs*, 2005). There are several types of programs and themes, and students are grouped together by interest or common courses. The most common Residential Learning Communities are run solely by Student Affairs professionals.

#### The Problem Under Study

The *Student Personnel Point of View*, a philosophical document that guides the Student Affairs profession, stated that "the concept of education is broadened to include attention to the student's well- rounded development, physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually, as well as intellectually" (American Council on Education, p. 1). This holistic model, upon which much student affairs' programming has been based, includes spirituality as an important dimension of the overall well being of college students.

Although student development theories have recognized the complex processes of defining oneself, they often do not address the development of the spiritual self (Lee, 2002). Higher education researchers have largely neglected the spiritual development of college students in both practice and research. With few notable exceptions (Love, 2002), higher education has shied away from using the vernacular of spirituality. Instead, higher education and student affairs divisions have addressed students' search for meaning, values, and connection through a focus on building community, civic and moral learning, values education, educating for character, and service learning (Love, 2002). Most developmental theorists who write about spiritual development connect it with other aspects of development. For example, spirituality is viewed as one way people construct knowledge and meaning, and so it is often thought of as an important component of cognitive development, rather than given separate consideration.

Student affairs professionals often view faith development in college students as an important and essential consideration, but it is mostly neglected in the literature on student development (Love, 2002). Although spirituality and faith are articulated as important in the writings and commentary of some of the leading thinkers in

higher education, such as Parker Palmer (1993) and Alexander Astin (2005), this interest is not commonly supported with research and empirical studies. Such research is especially necessary at religious-based institutions, where faith and spiritual development are clearly stated as priorities within the institution's mission statement. However, for the most part, student affairs professionals do not know how to effectively facilitate spiritual development.

Within the literature, one approach that has been proposed for facilitating faith development is Residential Learning Communities (Love, 2001, Daloz-Parks, 2000). Residential Learning Communities are comprised of groups of students living together in a residence hall. Residents are grouped by a common interest or common course, and the living area includes peer mentors and a high level of faculty involvement. Residential Learning Communities are often noted as exemplary programs due to their focus on community, common interest, and a strong sense of connectedness among the members, all of which are noted as important aspects of spiritual and faith development. Research on Residential Learning Communities (*National Study of Living-Learning Programs*, 2005) suggests positive effects on academic achievement and positive influence on

making healthy choices, such as avoiding drugs and alcohol. Research also shows that a high level of spiritual well-being is correlated with these same healthy choices (Adams, 2000). Unfortunately, the assertion that Residential Learning Communities are a promising method of facilitating faith development in college students is not supported by empirical studies and no research-based evidence exists. The field of Student Affairs is still without studies on the role of Residential Learning Communities in the development of faith within college students.

#### Statement of the Problem

This study focuses on the role of Residential Learning Communities in first year college students' faith and spiritual development at a faith-based institution. Within the faith development literature there is much mention of best practices including Residential Learning Communities. Although extensive research has been conducted on the academic and social impact of Residential Learning Communities, there have been no studies on how Residential Learning Communities impact the faith development of college students. This study is intended to fill this gap in the literature.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study to explore and describe the impact of Residential Learning Communities on the spiritual and faith development of first-year college students at a religious institution. It also provides a description of this particular experience that has implications for student affairs practice and research.

### Research Question

The following research question guided the data analysis:

1. What are the components and characteristics of a faith-based residential learning community that facilitates faith development in first-year college students?

For purposes of this study, components are defined as: 'a part of something, usually some thing bigger' (*MSN Encarta Dictionary, 2007*). Characteristics are defined as a 'defining feature' (*MSN Encarta Dictionary, 2007*).

### Limitations of the Study

This is a study of the faith development of college students, and the students under observation are of special cases (Patton, 2000). These students are special cases,

because they chose a faith-based environment and were involved in their faith community while in high school. Therefore, there may be some concern about the application of the results of the study to all residence life programs.

There are a few considerations recommended in the literature on "the movement from local to global" a term Hamel uses regarding generalizability with case studies (p. 35). The greater the amount of detail, the greater the generalizability will be. Stake (1995) calls this 'naturalistic generalization". He states that "full and thorough knowledge of one particular", allows one to see similarities in other contexts. A study can be macroscopic in nature if it is in-depth enough to offer descriptions that explain properties noticed in society at large. For example, in this study, there is enough detail to enable other colleges and universities to find similarities with what they observe at their own institutions. Therefore, some of the attributes can be adapted for other residence life programs.

#### Significance of the Study

Arthur Chickering makes a case for qualitative research on faith development in college, and states "only qualitative data gets to a level of human detail that helps us understand how diverse individuals are actually

influenced" (p.224). This study leads to such an understanding. It adds more depth to what student affairs practitioners know about spiritual and faith development in college students and contributes a new understanding of how residential living can influence spiritual growth.

This study is an attempt to observe, understand, and name students' perceptions and experiences of faith and spiritual development and what practitioners can do to intentionally facilitate spiritual growth in residential settings.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Chapter Overview

This review of the literature begins with a focus on how religion, spirituality, and faith are defined in the literature and how they are used for this study. The next portion provides an overview of the theories of the two most well known writers on adult faith development, James Fowler (1981) and Daniel Helminiak (1987). The next section focuses specifically on college student faith development theorists, Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) and Patrick Love (2001, 2003). This is followed by a section focusing on current literature related to spirituality, faith, and religion in Higher education. The review of the literature also includes studies related to the First-Year College Student Experience and Residential Learning Communities, along with an overview of the latest research on effective learning environments. This research provides an important conceptual framework for Residential Learning Communities and this case study in particular.

#### Definitions of Religion, Faith and Spirituality

This study was conducted at a religious-based institution, and the Catholic religion provides a context for the study; however, as previously stated, this is not a



study about religion, but rather faith and spirituality. For purposes of this study, faith is seen as separate from religion, as it is often a more inclusive term.

In an attempt to identify the fundamental characteristics of religion and spirituality as conceptualized by current scholars and in current research, Peter Hill, Kenneth Pergament, Ralph Hood, Michael McCullough, James Swyers, David Larson and Brian Zinnbauer (2000) undertook a comprehensive analysis on these two phenomena from a number of disciplines. They found definite overlaps between the terms and determined that "given our limited understanding of contemporary religion and spirituality, it is perhaps premature to insist on a single comprehensive definition of either term" (Hill et al, 2000, p.52). In Arthur Chickering's work (2006) he outlines Hill and other's conclusions about the differences between religion and spirituality:

1. Religion and Spirituality are both understood by individuals to include "subjective feelings, thoughts and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred".
2. Religion is distinguished from spirituality in that it may include a search for nonsacred goals, such as social identity, affiliation, health and wellness,

within a context that has at its primary goal the facilitation of the search for the sacred, for example membership in a church.

3. Religion involves the means and methods, such as ritual or other prescribed behaviors, through which the sacred is validated by and receives support from a recognized group. Spirituality in contrast may not require external validation (p.48).

Hill and others did not attempt to define the term faith in their work, and since the publication of their study, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the current political climate of fundamentalism have caused religion to be seen as a more divisive term. As Chickering notes "definitions of religion have become narrower and less inclusive" (p.47) in current times.

Religion is also defined in the literature as a shared system of beliefs, principles or doctrines related to the worship of a supernatural governor of the universe. It includes a fixed worldview and belief system (Berger, 1973). Religion provides an inner framework for moral meanings, values, and purpose (Lee, 2002). Routine and pragmatic demonstrations of spirituality reflect the manifestations of formal theological beliefs and activities of individuals who share a group identity. In *Religion on*

*Campus* (Cherry, DeBerg, Porterfield, 2002) David Palmer has noted that all religions include three basic elements. The first, at the core of religion, is the experience of our quest for the "ultimate". Second, the core religious experiences are then expressed and communicated by means of a story. Third, reflection on religious experiences is articulated in philosophical terms in the form of doctrine and dogma. Religion is often seen as "completed, fixed, and handed down" (p. 8).

The Christian religion provides a context for this study, but as previously mentioned, the real focus of the study is on faith and spirituality within a Catholic institution. Spirituality is seen as a quest, a journey, something that is incomplete. Spirituality is a search for meaning, wholeness, and purpose, which is experienced as the sense of being connected with one's complete self, others, the entire universe, and a higher power. Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) defined spirituality as a personal search for meaning, transcendence, wholeness, purpose, and "apprehension of the spirit" as the animating essence at the core of life. She also proposes that spiritual development involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity and developing greater connectedness to self and others. It involves moving from external

definitions of self to internal ones and finally to divine definitions of self. Spiritual development is critical for the development of an identity that is impervious to external criticism and hostility (Love & Talbot, 1999).

Faith, similar to spirituality, is defined as a process of meaning-making (Daloz Parks, 2000). It involves making sense out of the activities of life and seeking patterns and relations out of the disparate elements of human living. Faith is a social phenomenon that deals with an understanding of our relationships with others. The most well-known faith development theorist, James Fowler (1981), stated that faith is people's ultimate support when other things they depend on in their lives collapse around them. Faith enables one to find meaning in the world and in one's life; it is about making a commitment to what is known and living in a way that is informed by that commitment. The difference between faith and spirituality is that spirituality is an individual phenomenon, while faith is a phenomenon that occurs in community.

As noted, for purposes of this study the two terms will be used interchangeably. This study has demonstrated that students developed both spiritually, as they learned to turn inward and focus on the sacred, and in their faith development. They learned to find meaning in the world and

discern their own personal values, while learning about their role in community life as well.

#### Overview of Faith and Spirituality Development Theories

There are few theorists who have studied and attempted to define spiritual and faith development. They include James Fowler (1981) and Daniel Helminiak (1987). James Fowler, the most well-known, developed a stage theory of faith development. Many writers (Helminiak, 1987, Daloz Parks, 2000 Love, 2003) draw on Fowler's work, but focus on spiritual development at particular points in the life cycle. Other researchers use his work, along with cognitive development theories, as the basis for their theories.

#### *James Fowler*

Fowler (1981) proposed four stages of faith development that are linear in nature. College students tend to be in stages three and four, the synthetic-conventional faith stage and the intuitive-reflective faith stage. The synthetic-conventional faith stage takes place in late childhood and beyond. Within this stage individuals have multiple perspectives in terms of identity and values. They have values, commitments, and relationships that are central to identity and worth. Of special importance is the inclusion of others and intimacy.

The Intuitive- Reflective faith stage takes place in young adulthood and beyond. Individuals take personal responsibility for their commitments, beliefs, and values and engage in a critical examination of those beliefs and values. Questions of identity occur apart from previously defining connections, and there is considerable concern about whether altering relationships of dependence will mean ending relationships. Individuals also learn not to rely so much on the roles they play: who they are, is not defined by being a daughter, by having an occupation or profession, or by their circle of friends.

Fowler (1981) saw a deep connection between faith and identity. He began by acknowledging that each human being has many triads or centers of value and meaning. People live their lives in a dynamic field of forces that pull them in many different directions, and they are faced with the challenge of making meaning in their lives by composing some kind of order, unity, and coherence in the force fields of their lives. Fowler found that faith-identity patterns are clearly progressive and hierarchical.

*Daniel Helminiak*

Daniel Helminiak (1987) focused much of his work on understanding the relationships among spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social aspects of human

development. He outlined a five-stage model. The last three stages represent spiritual development, which Helminiak believes is only possible as an adult. He claims that spiritual development is not possible for traditional college-age students.

Helminiak (1987) calls the first stage the Conformist stage; the second stage the Conscientious-Conformist. The third stage-Conscientious-is characterized by the achievement of significantly structuring one's self according to one's own understanding of things, by optimism over one's newly accepted sense of responsibility for oneself and one's world, and by a rather unbending commitment to one's principles. In the fourth, Compassionate stage, individuals learn to surrender some of the world they have constructed. Their commitments are no less intense, but they are more realistic, more nuanced, and more supported by deeply felt and complex emotion. The final stage is the Cosmic Stage. Here an individual experiences an on-going actualization of potentials, capacities, and talents and develops a strong sense of vocation and calling. This stage is characterized by individual unity, integration, and peacefulness.

## Overview of College Student Faith Development Theories

*Sharon Daloz Parks*

As previously stated, some of the faith development literature states that college students aren't really capable of a spiritual life, that only older adults are capable of a faith-filled life (Helminiak, 1987, Fowler, 1981). Other work shows that college students are capable of faith development, and for some, spirituality is a very important aspect of their lives. Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) is one of the main advocates of being intentional about the faith development of college students. Daloz Parks' research on college students showed that they are capable of developing as spiritual beings. She proposed a new stage in adulthood, that of the 'young adult'.

Arthur Chickering (1969) writing about identity development placed an emphasis on the mentoring relationship as paramount to student success. He wrote that the qualities of a mentoring relationship include accessibility, genuineness, and understanding the diverse needs of students. His mentoring relationships are mentor and mentee. Daloz Parks took this relationship a step further. She challenged colleges to create 'mentoring communities' (p.95). These communities offer a network of belonging in which young adults feel recognized as who they



really are and as who they are becoming. She noted that mentoring communities offer both challenge and support and thus offer good company for both the emerging strength and the distinctive vulnerability of young adults. Daloz Parks found that mentoring communities are essential for the faith development of young adult college students.

Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) based her work on both Helminiak and Fowler, along with cognitive- development theorists, including Perry and Piaget. She proposed a four-stage model of development. Parks described the developmental processes in a way that addressed the cognitive, affective, and social aspects of faith development. Through her structure one can view both the structures and the content of meaning-making. She outlines four stages: Adolescent/ Conventional, Young Adult, (where the most important element is the emergence of a critical self-awareness- a self-conscious and self-aware self), Tested Adult, and Mature Adult.

Each stage has three components. They are 'forms of knowing'; this is the relationship of self to authority. The next component is 'forms of dependence, including affective aspects of faith development: how people feel, with a focus on relationships through which they discover and change their views of knowledge and faith. The third

component is 'forms of community', which is the desire for agency and autonomy vs. the desire for belonging, connection, and intimacy.

*Patrick Love*

Patrick Love in *The Journal of College Student Development* provided an analysis of the three spiritual development theorists, Parks, Fowler, and Helminiak and compared them to traditional cognitive development theorists. Love revealed commonalities between the three sets of theories and the unique understanding that spiritual development adds to student development. Love outlined Fowler, Helminiak and Daloz Parks theories and placed them in a table comparing them to cognitive theories.

Love's work reinforces the relationship of spiritual development theories and traditional development theories, especially cognitive-structural theories. Both sets of theories are focused on the ways in which people make meaning of the world they live in and the experiences they have. Love says:

Parks and Fowler have both contributed ways of viewing issues of the spirit as involved in the developmental experiences of all people, not just those who choose to practice a religion or who participate in non-traditional spiritual practices (p. 12).

Love and Guthrie (2002) described a concept they label "The Great Accommodation". This is the accommodation of cognitive structures in which a person transitions from seeing the world as ultimately knowable to seeing the world as complex, ambiguous, and not completely knowable. Love and Guthrie claimed that at the point of the "great accommodation" the spiritual development of college students begins. Daloz Parks (2000) discussed a similar notion, that of "Shipwrecks". These occur when an individual's worldview is found to be untrustworthy. He or She struggles to make sense of competing authorities, of a growing sense of self-awareness and self-authority, and of multiple communities experienced. At these points human beings develop cognitively and spiritually.

#### Current Literature and Research

##### *Faith and Spirituality*

Much of the research argues that spirituality is teachable and manageable, and that mentors are important. Spirituality is affected by leadership and teaching and can be greatly impacted by external forces (Cannister, 1999, Astin, 2004). Therefore, there has been some work done on the role of faculty in spiritual development. There is also a common theme in the literature that shows that spirituality can positively affect desired behaviors, such

as service and lessen undesirable behaviors, including binge- drinking (Temkin & Evans, 1998). There is also data that shows religiously involved students display higher standards of academic integrity (Sutton & Hubbell, 1995 in Temkin & Evans); they adjust to college better (Low & Handal, 1995, in Temkin & Evans); they have healthier patterns of social drinking (Lo & Globetti, 1993, in Temkin & Evans, Adams & Bezner, 2000, Drabbs, Stewart, 2001), and are generally more likely to be involved in volunteer community service organizations (Gorman, et al, 1994, in Temkin & Evans). There is also a great deal of research that focuses on the idea of vocation (Royce-Davis, 2000, Stewart, 2001). This has become an especially important topic with Lilly grants funding comprehensive vocation development programs on many college campuses.

Although much research has been done on college student development, and in particular first-year college students, there has been little research on the faith or spiritual development of college students. The little research that has been completed on the faith development of college students has been mostly through survey instruments and is outlined in table or statistical form. An example of this is the Higher Education Research Institute's study of student spirituality, a nation-wide

quantitative study. This study found that even though college seems to bring a decrease in religious activity, student interest in spirituality is strong. In this study 75 percent of students agreed that to some extent they were searching for meaning and purpose in their lives, and that 60 percent thought it was very important to integrate spirituality into their lives (2004).

I found two qualitative studies that are notable and helped inform this study. One is the published results of interviews from the Dordt College (Sioux Center, Iowa) campus in the *National Resource Center for Students in Transition sophomore monograph* (2000) and an unpublished dissertation by Deborah Cady (2006).

Bussemma (1999) investigates not only identity development, but also faith development exhibited by students there. He found that most incoming students exhibit what Fowler (1981) would term the synthetic-conventional stage, characterized by religious beliefs that largely conform to the beliefs of others- similar to Kohlberg's (1985) conventional level of morality. This indicates that first year students studied at Dordt have not yet adequately analyzed alternative religious ideologies. They do not exhibit a more thoughtful approach to their faith that is the product of deep personal

searching, growth, and struggle; rather they hold to a socially defined faith that reflects their ideological environment. Likewise, most first-year students can be characterized as having a foreclosed status in identity formation, meaning they tend to accept unquestionably the expectations of their own parents and have not explored their own set of beliefs and vocational choices. Bussemma's study was longitudinal and included interviews upon graduation. He found that most of the first-year students did not move to a different level of development during their college years (Boivin, Fountain & Bayard, p.14).

Deborah Cady interviewed students at both a Catholic and secular institution and found that conversation with peers was very important for faith formation. She also found that Catholic universities had more inclusive values, which allowed students at the Catholic institution the ability to discuss issues concerning religion, faith, and spirituality more easily. Cady also discussed that spiritual mentors were more visible at the Catholic University than the secular institution. (*Women in Higher Education Newsletter*, April 2006).

*Authenticity, Amplification and Transformation*

A recent and very important publication is *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality* by Arthur Chickering, Jon

Dalton, and Liesa Stamm (2006). In this work the authors outline a broad historical perspective of the topic, make a strong argument for why spirituality deserves a central place in higher education, outline best practices, and offer practical advice on how to enhance discussion and the practice of authenticity in higher education. They introduce the important terms "institutional amplification" and "personal authenticity" (xiii). Institutional amplification is not transformation, but rather includes acknowledging the work already being done in the area of spirituality and building on already successful efforts. Personal authenticity includes addressing key developmental issues and allowing all who work or study at an institution to sharpen their sense of calling, values, and purpose (xiii).

#### *Transformational Education*

Transformational Education is a call to go beyond an exclusive focus on teaching students academic disciplinary content. It calls for experiences designed to move students intentionally into the realm of establishing mentoring relationships with an authority figure and their peers. It calls for the creation of learning environments in which the student's whole person is shaped as he or she interacts with authorities and other students in the

process of meaning-making in the college experience. Such education is shaped by four major features: 1) character development or education of the whole person, 2) scaffolding or providing an appropriate balance of challenge and support, 3) praxis being changed by doing and 4) mentoring (Boivin, Fountain & Bayard, p.10).

Praxis is a concept from sociology suggesting that we are changed by doing and practicing (Campolo, 1984). That is we engage in behaviors that lead to life experiences, those experiences shape our feelings and attitudes about our world and ourselves. Our beliefs come about as we make sense of our experiences and behaviors in contrast to the traditional educational model where we must change beliefs through knowledge in order to change behavior and experience. The most powerful type of experience within the praxis of human development is the human relationship. This is why mentoring within the context of service learning, volunteerism or engagement in an on-campus learning community, is so vital. As college students emerge through transitional challenges, they trust authorities and look for companionship (Daloz Parks, 2000).

#### The Case for Further Research

Knowing that individual college students are interested in the topics of faith and spirituality, and



that there is a call within higher education for transformation and/or amplification, makes it more apparent that more research needs to be done on the topics of faith and spirituality. What is especially lacking is qualitative data: rich, thick description that goes into depth about how college students experience and/or integrate spirituality into their lives. Statistics and tables tell part of the story and qualitative research allows student voices to emerge.

The research on the First Year Experience and Residence Life emphasizes the importance of the first year and how it influences the persistence of those entering college to obtain a degree (Gardner, 1996). *Student Development in the First College Year: A Primer for College Educators* (Skipper, T.L., 2005) provides an excellent overview of all the relevant developmental theories.

There is also some research on Residential Learning Communities (*National Study of Living-Learning Programs*, 2005), but all the research has an emphasis on academic success: learning and GPA, and the importance of RLCs in the reduction of undesirable behaviors: drugs, alcohol, and personal distress.

One of the most notable studies is the *National Study of Living-Learning Programs* (2005), which began in 2002 and

ended in 2006. This study looked at thirty-four different institutions in depth, using survey and statistical analysis. The findings showed Residential Learning Communities positively affecting GPAs, cognitive development, and critical thinking skills, along with a decrease in binge drinking, and a decrease in drug use. The study groups living- learning programs into fourteen theme-type programs. Nowhere in the study is faith development mentioned or are religious or spiritual activities mentioned as important activities undertaken within the community.

The literature also outlines many examples of exemplary programs and best practices for higher education. All of these best practices encourage spiritual development through strong communities, opportunities for mentoring, and opportunities to discuss the "shipwrecks" or "great accommodations" that occur. Residential Learning Communities are prominent within the list of best practices (Lindholm, 2007). What is lacking in the literature and research is in-depth analysis and assessment of these recommended practices and how they influence the spiritual development of college students.

Astin's Person- Environment Theory provides an important framework for this study on Residential Learning

Communities. This theory states that student affairs cannot control the inputs- previously acquired attitudes- that students bring with them to college. However, once they enter a university, student affairs professionals can provide developmental environments that will provide the most optimal outcomes. It is up to a college or university to determine what outcomes are desired, and then ensure that the environments are providing appropriate levels of challenge and support to meet these outcomes.

Daloz Parks would call these types of intentional environments a mentoring community. In his book *A Hidden Wholeness* (2004), Parker Palmer says that in this culture we know how to create invitational spaces for the intellect, will and emotions, but that we know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to show up. Ideally in Residence Life at a religious based institution, transformational education, which includes holistic development, and a strong focus on relationships is taking place in the residence halls- a place where there is soul. This study provides one example in which this is the case.

#### Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have summarized the key constructs and research that helped frame this study on faith development in a residential community context. The review

of the literature summarizes how religion, spirituality, and faith are defined in the literature and summarizes the current literature related to spirituality, faith, and religion in higher education. This chapter connects the research on faith and spirituality to current studies regarding the First Year College Student Experience and Residential Learning Communities. Faith development needs to occur in an environment based on holistic education, and cannot be assumed to be taking place as part of developing students intellectually and socially. Rather, opportunities for students to talk about faith in an inclusive way should be offered intentionally as part of a liberal education. This study attempts to provide some information on how that may occur in residential settings.

## CHAPTER 3

### DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### Background

The aim of my research is to identify and understand experiences of first-year college students living in a particular Residential Learning Community and provide rich, thick description about their faith and spiritual development within this environment. To accomplish this, I employed qualitative research methods. Qualitative methods are appropriate in this context given that they facilitate the understanding of individuals' language, actions, feelings, motivations, judgments, beliefs and the meaning individuals give to subjective experiences. Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information that increases the depth of understanding about a particular topic (Patton, 1990).

#### Qualitative Research

Merriam (1998) describes qualitative research as " an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible. Qualitative researchers seek to discern meaning from participants' point of view" (Merriam, p. 6). In contrast with quantitative research, which attempts to

test a pre-existing theory through the establishment of a formal experimental design, qualitative research is inductive in nature. Investigators often attempt to generate concepts or theory from their data (Merriam, p. 7). This is not to say that qualitative researchers begin a study without a formal research design, but they often do not have a specific theory in mind that they are trying to support or counter. In examining particular phenomena, which can include physical settings (e.g. a residence hall), qualitative research uses a variety of data gathering techniques. These can include interviews, fieldwork, and document analysis. This study includes all three types of data.

#### *Qualitative Techniques*

A brief description of several qualitative methods will provide the necessary backdrop for my choice of methodology. Merriam divides qualitative inquiry into five subfields, which include 1) basic qualitative study, 2) ethnography, 3) phenomenology, 4) grounded theory, and 5) case study.

Basic or generic qualitative research has qualities of general research, with the exception that researchers using this approach generally do not seek to develop a theory from their data. They simply seek to understand a

phenomenon, a process or the perspectives of those involved.

Ethnography is common in anthropology, as investigators are often studying a culture or society. Ethnography refers not only to the methods of collecting data, which predominantly include field work and a great deal of participant observation, but also to the final written account of the study- an ethnography is completed based upon the data.

Phenomenology emphasizes the essence or structure of an experience (Merriam, p. 15). All qualitative research incorporates phenomenological principles to a degree through the emphasis on interpretation; only specific studies use specific phenomenological techniques. Researchers following this approach discard any previous understanding or beliefs about the phenomenon under investigation, so as not to impede the process of discerning the essence of the experience. Through examining multiple instances of the phenomenon under investigation, the researcher can then piece together the meaning.

Researchers employing a grounded theory approach specifically attempt to develop a theory from their data. As the name of the approach indicates; the researcher seeks

to ground their theory in the data (Merriam, p. 17). The types of theories produced by this technique are usually only relevant to the phenomenon under study. The theories generally do not apply to a level beyond that of the individual study.

#### Case Study Approach

To reach an understanding of the proposed research question, the approach best suited for this study was a case study. A case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances (Stake, 1995). In order to qualify as a case, the phenomenon under investigation must be "intrinsically bounded", in that there is a "limit to the number of people who could be interviewed and a finite amount of time for observations" (Merriam, p. 27-28). A case may be simple or complex; it can range from a study of one individual to a particular program, to a policy. However to qualify as a case, it must adhere to the "bounded" limitations. In this study, the case is one faith-based residential learning community in a first year residence hall at a religious based institution. The time period is one academic year.

This study was a case study utilizing data from three different sources: field observations, documents, and



individual interviews. Interviews consist of open-ended questions to gather knowledge about people's experiences, feelings, and opinions. Fieldwork observations include field notes that detail descriptions of behaviors, actions, conversations, and community processes. Documents are written material from the program being studied (Patton, 2000).

The history of case study begins with the work of Bronislaw Malinowski, Frederic Le Play, and members of the Chicago School (Hamel, 1993). Malinowski's fieldwork gave rise to modern anthropology, as he catalogued every detail of the societies he would study. Not only did he record behaviors and rituals, he also attempted to understand the meaning the members of the society attributed to their own patterns of behavior (Hamel, 1993). The meaning that members assign to their own behavior can only be understood through the words they use in describing their own actions. Frederic Le Play is considered the father of modern sociological fieldwork. His method presumes that society cannot be studied as a single entity or unit; rather the focus must be on one key part (Hamel, 1993). This approach requires on-site studies, with observation and information meticulously collected.

The Chicago School was very influential in the formation of sociology in the United States, and was the first important forum for qualitative methodology in sociology. The case study was the approach of choice for early sociological studies in the United States at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. At this time, the aim was understanding the integration of ecological resources within cities in order to understand social problems (Hamel, 1993). The Chicago School was the first to note that the role of the researcher must be considered whenever case study approaches are utilized.

In his discussion of case studies, Stake (1994) identifies three approaches that researchers often use in carrying out their analysis. An intrinsic case study only focuses on the specific case at hand and does not attempt to generalize. Conversely, an instrumental case study attempts to build theories from data obtained through the analysis of a single case. In a collective case study, multiple cases are examined in order to understand a particular phenomenon on a larger scale. Since I attempt to make some general conclusions about the impact residential living can have on the faith development of college students based on this one case, this is an instrumental case study.

### Context of the Case

The university under study has campus ministry sponsored Residential Learning Communities within each of the residential areas. Each of these communities has a spiritual development philosophy, and a live-in University Ministry leader. Numbers of participants in these programs vary, as students usually must apply to live in the RLCs and the numbers of applications vary by year. The RLCs are smaller communities, usually 10-35 members clustered together within the larger residential areas.

The programs have been in existence for ten years, and there are no data-driven studies of how these programs affect retention, academics, or the overall quality of the residential experience. Anecdotally, residence life professionals have noted that students in these communities seem to have fewer roommate problems and there are fewer discipline issues in these residential living areas.

I chose one Residential Learning Community to study because this particular RLC has some unique traits. It is the only first-year RLC where students do not need to complete an application to live in the area. Rather, the students living there have demonstrated a strong interest in faith and spiritual development while in high school, and were awarded a special scholarship for their previous

church leadership. Students are then invited to live in the community as a condition of the scholarship award. Thirty to forty students are awarded this scholarship annually. They did not need to apply for the RLC, although several did complete an RLC application before receiving the invitation to live together as scholarship recipients.

Another unique aspect of this particular RLC is that there has been a consistent leader for this community. The Resident Minister for this area has lived in the residence halls since the start of the campus ministry Residential Learning Communities. The ministry leader and a student leader (Resident Assistant) held weekly meetings with the group and there was a great deal of informal interaction due to the living arrangement. However, there was no requirement to attend meetings or be involved in the community, once they moved into the hall.

#### Research Design

The case study was conducted over the course of one academic year, September through May. As stated, the case study involved three sources of data collection. The first source is documents from the Residential Learning Community. Students did not need to apply to live in this particular Residential Learning Community; however, several had applied to live in Ministry RLCs before receipt of the

scholarship and invitation to live together. I collected their applications and analyzed their written responses for themes. At the end of the year, I also collected the applications of those who were applying to live for a second year in an upper-class faith based RLC and analyzed these written responses also. The second source of data is fieldwork observations. I attended weekly meetings and programs sponsored by the particular community. During the observations, I took detailed notes, and analyzed them immediately after the meeting for greater reliability (Hamel, 1993).

#### *Interview Selection and Purposeful Sampling*

In the early fall and late spring semester, I completed interviews with a purposeful sample of ten students from the Residential Learning Community. I chose to interview ten students, since I was unable to interview all the participants in the interest of time. The ten students were selected purposefully and randomly, by first inviting the twelve to fifteen students who participated consistently to interview with me. The twelve to fifteen students were asked to volunteer for two interviews. I invited students in person at two weekly meetings in October and e-mailed those students who expressed interest. The first ten to volunteer were interviewed in the fall.

These interviews lasted about thirty to forty-five minutes. Only eight students returned for spring interviews. Spring interviews lasted about an hour. The two who did not choose to interview a second time did not respond to my e-mails or phone calls, so I can only speculate as to the reasons why they did not interview again. The two who chose not to interview in the spring did, however, remain active participants in the RLC and I observed and interacted with them at weekly meetings.

This type of purposeful sampling ensured that all had an opportunity to participate, not just the extroverted students who tend to be the first to volunteer. As noted by Patton (1990):

No rule of thumb exists to tell a researcher precisely how to focus a qualitative study. The extent to which a research study is broad or narrow depends on purposes, the resources available, the time available and the interests of those involved (p.228).

So, even though there are no rules about the number of participants, 10 interviews were conducted, so as to provide sufficient individual conversations. The information gathered was enough to adequately describe the experiences I was observing from fieldwork and document analysis.

### *Transcriptions*

The one-hour interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The interviews took place on campus at a neutral, convenient location. Interviews were transcribed within one week of the interview in order to ensure validity. The interview transcriptions were given to the participants to check their answers and to see if they would like to add or clarify anything; every participant returned the transcript with some minor changes in the fall. No one chose to do so in the spring, as all stated they were too busy.

The interview transcriptions will be kept through the students' graduation date of May 2008. The transcriptions, along with the applications, are kept in a locked home office and saved electronically in a password-protected file.

### Demographics of the Interviews

Four of the interview participants were female and six were male. Eight students self-identified as white and two identified as chicana/o. Five of the participants were from Southern California and lived within driving distance of the campus; two participants were from the east coast; two were from Northern California, and one student was from the mid west. All ten participants identified themselves

as Roman Catholic. Three of the participants had completed an application to live in a ministry-based Residential Learning community, before entering the university. The other seven had not been interested in Residential Learning Communities until they were specifically invited by the University Minister in charge of the program to live together, based on their scholarship award. All ten students interviewed had a strong religious background and were very involved with their churches while in high school. All of them were active in community service both in school and church settings during high school.

The RLC group was a smaller community placed together in the middle of a floor that was not totally comprised of members of the RLC. There were approximately 20 students in the RLC and 60 on the entire floor. Students who attended the meetings did not have to live in the RLC to participate in this more formal aspect of the RLC. The ten students I interviewed both lived in the RLC grouping and participated regularly in the weekly meetings. The RLC group interacted with the rest of the members of their floor, but were also bound very tightly by the way they were placed near each other in the residential area and how they interacted during weekly meetings.



### Data Analysis

Data analysis following a case study approach is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions, as well as final compilations (Stake, 1995). Stake also argued all of the observations must be taken apart and put back together in thematic schemes. For this particular case, the analysis of the interview and observation data was processed by content analysis to identify the patterns of experiences of the participant (Patton, 2000). As Merriam (1998) notes, devising categories is an intuitive process informed by the study's purpose and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves.

I coded the data carefully searching for themes that emerged, and translated the data into coding categories, based on the original research questions. I began this study with three research questions, wondering about whether or not spirituality and faith were developed within this RLC. As the themes emerged, it was apparent that a great deal of holistic development was occurring and therefore the three research questions became one that helped best frame the experiences I observed. The question is:

What are the components and characteristics of a faith-based residential learning community that

facilitates faith development in first-year college students?

#### Role of Researcher

In case study approaches, the researcher is a participant-observer. The observer becomes integrated into the populations being studied, through regular contact over a period of time (Stake, 1995). I was a participant in the group's activities, while observing them and attempting to describe their experiences in the Residential Learning Community.

In my professional role and role as researcher there may be some concern for bias in the study. However, these were first year students and as I was on administrative leave, they did not know me in my professional role, but rather as a graduate student. I did disclose my professional role, but it had no effect on the group dynamic. The only student who knew me in another capacity was the Resident Assistant (RA), and I met with her twice a semester to check in and make sure we were managing this potential conflict. It was very important that she not feel evaluated in any way. I also checked assumptions I was making with both her and the Resident Minister throughout the year.

My familiarity and experience with the content was a strength as I attempted to make sense of the lived experience of these students in a residential learning community.

## Chapter 4

### DESCRIPTION OF THE RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

#### Description of the Group Meetings

An important aspect of the RLC experience was the formal interaction these students had with each other. This formal time was the weekly meetings, which took place Wednesday evenings after the Wednesday night mass in the residential home of the campus minister. I became a regular participant in these meetings. There was a great deal of shared leadership and authority within the group, as each week participants took turns being the designated authorities and leading the group. Meetings took place in the Resident Minister's apartment, which is located on the floor where the residents live. When I first joined the group, I was uncomfortable with how participants made themselves at home in the Resident Minister's apartment. They often entered the meeting space without knocking, settled into their seats or made their way into the kitchen for pizza. By the third meeting, I enjoyed the relaxed, laid back atmosphere of the group. Because the formal authorities, the Resident Assistant and Resident Minister, did not take a strong authoritative role within the group, there was a welcoming and open environment.

The Resident Assistant facilitated the first meeting in the fall and set the tone for how all other meetings were conducted throughout the year. After that initial gathering, each week, a member volunteered to be the leader for the following week. As the volunteer leader, that person started the formal part of the meeting when they felt the group was ready and led the guided discussion.

There was a core group of 12-15 students who were there every week, but otherwise participation varied and group size varied as well. Students who stopped in more infrequently were friends of those who participated regularly and came to the meetings with their friends. Some of these visitors did not even live in the hall; however, all were first-year students at the university. The number of students living in the RLC was 20, and the total floor had 60 first-year students living there.

Each meeting began with refreshments and unstructured conversation that evolved naturally within the group. The conversation always varied, and was characterized by a great deal of laughter. Everyone in the group was somehow included in the discussion and humor. There were no inside jokes that were not explained to the entire group, so that everyone could share in the moment. This is an unusual group dynamic, especially since membership varied weekly.

The freshman retreat was held in November, and I expected that there would be some inside jokes from those few who had participated in the retreat. I expected this, since the weekend retreat is held off campus, and is an intense bonding experience. Even though inside jokes, and nicknames did exist after the retreat, the group dynamic did not shift, as everyone was included, and the humor and jokes were explained.

There were never any assigned seats, and group members fought over the couch, rather than having to sit on the floor. This set a tone for participants to arrive earlier than the start time, so as to get the perceived best seats on the couch.

### *Rituals*

The formal part of the meeting began with the volunteer leader for the evening lighting a candle and commencing the first activity. In this activity participants would share the best (high) part of their week and the worst (low) part of their week. Twice while I was there music was used to begin the formal part of the meeting. After the opening activity, the gospel for the upcoming Sunday's mass was read and discussed, with the leader for the evening choosing which questions from the weekly written discussion guide the group would dialogue

about. The final activity was prayer, with each group member invited, but not expected, to pray aloud. During the final prayer everyone held hands, and prayer proceeded in a circle. The squeezing of the hand to a person's right noted that one was passing the prayer on, whether one had spoken aloud or not.

During the fall, prayer was very "me-focused", with participants praying aloud for good grades and praying about other stressors in their own lives, such as roommate or relationships trouble. However, in the spring semester, while grades were still a main focus, prayer shifted towards the external, meaning that world events and issues were mentioned as well. Throughout the fall semester, the focus of the prayers shifted from roommate and relationship issues to grades and stress. Even during prayer, humor was evident and used as an important tool. Throughout the year, the gospel discussion and prayers mostly stayed very "me" centered. I definitely witnessed the "college bubble" that happens to college freshmen when their adjustment issues consume them, and they forget there is an outside world. They often skirted "tougher" topics that the Resident Minister would bring forward, such as diversity and inclusion, justice, and the war in Iraq. When such topics were raised, they did not vocalize as much, if at all.

At each meeting, each participant was given a guide, which had the gospel reading for the upcoming Sunday Mass and questions about the gospel they could take with him or her. The guide also included action items, which challenged the students to participate in something for that week. Examples of action items included prayer groups, acts of reconciliation, and service. These were noted, but there was never any accountability or sharing of how these items were implemented in participants' lives.

#### *Time Boundaries*

There was a strong commitment to maintaining time boundaries at the end of the meeting; however, there was no strict beginning time for either arrival to the meeting place or the beginning of the rituals. It depended on the designated authority for the evening. However, the meetings always ended at exactly the same time, which kept the group comfortable and diminished their anxiety about schoolwork and other concerns. Once someone arrived at the meeting, he or she knew exactly when he or she would leave. Often, participants socialized after the end of the meeting, but it was their choice and depended on their schedules.

The Resident Assistant was always the ending timekeeper and always signaled the volunteer leader to



finish the gospel discussion and begin the ending prayers. How this acknowledgment occurred differed, whether spoken or in the form of a nod of the head, but participants looked to the Resident Assistant to fulfill this role. The start of the formal ritual part of the meeting varied, but there was always at least twenty minutes for formal discussion. All participants noted the importance of the formal meetings during the interviews.

#### *Informal Interactions*

I took part in the formal meetings, but based on information provided in the interviews, informal interactions were just as important. Informal interactions were those spontaneous, unplanned discussions or activities when community building still took place. These interactions were facilitated by the open environment and sense of belonging evident in the group. I did not participate in any of them, but heard about them in the interviews.

#### Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a description of the Residential Learning Community I studied. This included a detailed description of the weekly meetings I attended during one academic year, in order to provide a context for

the findings and conclusions outlined in the rest of the chapters.

## Chapter 5 FINDINGS

### Chapter Overview

The findings are organized to answer the research question: what are the components and characteristics of a faith based residential learning community that facilitates faith development in first-year college students? Components are defined as the parts of the greater whole, and characteristics are the defining features of that greater whole, in this case the Residential Learning Community (*MSN Encarta Dictionary, 2007*).

The components of the RLC included formal gathering times, when opportunities were provided for reflection as well as the hearing and sharing of personal stories and a strong focus on mentoring. In this particular environment, mentoring was not only provided by the formal leadership, the student and ministry authority figures; but also students mentored each other in positive ways, resulting in an environment of positive peer pressure. The gathering times and mentoring community facilitated an environment that provided the proper amount of support and challenge for the normal first year adjustment issues these students were facing.

The components helped facilitate a unique culture within the RLC, characterized by a strong sense of

connectedness based on similar values, respect for individual differences, and a focus on learning about faith and community living. This unique culture was not found everywhere else on campus and provided these students a sense of belonging and safe forum to make meaning and find purpose in their daily lives.

The RLC experience led to a great deal of personal growth in these students, most notably an increase in self-authorship (Baxter-Magolda, 1999). By the end of the year these students exhibited greater comfort with ambiguity as they discerned meaning and purpose in their daily lives. This greater comfort with ambiguity led them to be less judgmental of others. This will be explained later in the chapter.

### Components

#### *Formal Gatherings- Reflection and Sharing of Stories*

This particular RLC provided students opportunities to slow down and relax on a weekly basis. As noted in the interviews, this important contemplative time helped them keep their experiences in perspective and shape how they were making sense of the adjustment issues they were facing. Students commented that they valued the opportunity for reflection and found great worth in hearing and telling their stories. The second step, after actual

participation in an experiential education project, in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle is reflection. Reflection is the necessary intervening activity that converts input into meaningful working knowledge that can be tested in other experiences (Chickering, 2007).

As noted by one student in the fall semester about the reflection time provided by the RLC weekly meetings:

It's in the middle of the week and it's at 10:00 at night. You're calming down from the day, it's the middle of the week and it's a time for me to reflect on what's going on during the week. And a time to take a step back, relax and kind of rekindle my faith a little bit. During the week it gets so hectic and you get so caught up and sometimes you lose track of God and what you should be doing. So, with the RLC it puts it into perspective for me kind of what I should be thinking about and not forgetting anything.

During this important reflection time, RLC participants had an opportunity to hear from others and this helped normalize the adjustment issues they were facing in their very busy first year. These adjustment issues included fitting in, academics, and struggling with moving toward independence, while also forming new relationships and learning about interdependence. They were working toward relying less on authority figures, specifically their parents. One student discussed how hearing what was happening in the lives of other students helped normalize the experiences all were facing:

I guess it's just interesting to hear what people say. You interpret things one way and then they will interpret it in the complete opposite way and that makes sense. I guess it's just broadening perspectives on how you view life in general too because it puts everything into perspective, what everyone else has gone through. In the beginning we always do highs and lows, we always talk about what's been going on throughout the week. You realize that oh my life seems hectic but I guess that's just life in general. Everybody is going to have hard times and good times and it's just where you are at life at that point during the week.

The RLC experience added to their overall college experience and assisted in their adjustment to the larger campus climate context as well. Although the students in this RLC were involved elsewhere on campus, they often did not find a place to be authentic and real with others as they did in their living community. As one student noted:

I don't think I would like it here at all if I wasn't in RLC. I like my classes at USD and I like the place, it's beautiful, and I like everyone I've met through University Ministry stuff but other than that I don't like the people here. They are a lot more superficial and shallow than I expected. So I think if I hadn't met people through University Ministry I'd still hate it here. Yes, it's enough to keep me here. As long as you have enough support.

This student experienced the RLC gatherings as a place to find much needed support as they learned to fit in to a new campus environment which they were not always finding congruent with their own personal values.

The theme of academics, specifically getting good grades and determining a major, dominated the fall interviews as the main topics for these residents. As some participants mentioned concerning their goals for the fall semester, they said the following:

Get good grades, get to know the school and this area very well- get to know the system, to know where everything is, how to succeed at USD, be on my own.

Get good grades. Make the adjustment to college and figure out what I need to do to get good grades.

Students were also trying to determine their major and realizing this decision could affect their future career goals:

[I want to do well] With my classes to get decent grades. Just enjoy life. My goals would be to figure out what I'm supposed to be doing and to get a good degree that I can make a good base with and hopefully go to higher education, grad school. Just make a good base for my life. Everything is kind of up in the air right now. I either want to major in history and go on to law school. Or I really like my psychology class this semester so I'm going to take another psychology class next semester and see if that's what I want to do. I really do like working with kids and I've always liked the idea of being a school counselor.

In the spring, emphasis shifted more to relationship issues and getting along with others, especially their roommates. Grades were still noted as important, but did

not dominate the conversation. The formal reflection time in the RLCs gave them pause to think through these issues and an opportunity to speak with their peers about these issues in a deeper, more authentic way. As one student shared with me upon reflecting on how they had grown during their time in the RLC, 'To not share with others is to completely block out a part that you need to grow in a spiritual way'. They were so grateful for the opportunity to share with others in the RLC and knew this was helping them not only get through their first year, but actually assisting them with personal development and deeper learning.

As students interacted with their peers, they learned new perspectives and made sense of their experiences. As noted by one RLC participant:

But mostly it's the few people you live around because they are around you everyday and they know what you are going through pretty much. They see what you are going through. If you're struggling they will know it and they can always help you out. I guess that's what's cool because RLC always did that. It was just time to hang out and talk about stuff. You know like oh, that sucks, I'm going through that too, I know what you're feeling. It's like I'm not the only person, everyone's going through that, I'm not special. Everybody had to move on campus and adjust, it's horrible but you have to do it. In the end your friends and your roommates and all your neighbors, they are the ones that help you adjust.



This student found comfort in knowing his/her peers were confronting some of the same issues, and they were assisting each other through these normal developmental struggles.

### *Mentoring Community*

Mentoring took place in many dimensions within the RLC. There were the formal mentors, the ministry leader, along with the student leader. Mentoring also took place in the form of positive peer pressure that group members had on each other. There was a level of accountability within the group, but also as they learned from each other, and influenced each other, they made different and healthier lifestyle choices.

### *Formal Mentors*

An important aspect of the RLC community was the relationship the students had with the University Ministry leader, a Roman Catholic Priest, and the Student Leader, a senior female who had lived in the RLC. Both of the leaders set the tone for the RLC experience by developing a strong sense of community. The leaders fostered this community tone by providing food at meetings, extending personal invitations to attend RLC events, and emphasizing humor and congeniality, while getting to know the students on an individual basis. They brought their authentic

selves to the group and therefore, participants felt free to bring their authentic selves to the group as well.

Several students noted the importance of the personal invite from the designated authorities in their choice to attend meetings. The first few weeks of school, they were tentative about joining any sort of group, especially a religious one. However, because the RA on the floor personally invited them, they felt more compelled to attend. This is one example of the influence the formal leaders provided just by making personal connections.

The formal authorities were very intentional about making sure there was shared leadership within the group members. Participants took turns facilitating the discussion each week. The Resident Minister provided the readings and questions, but each volunteer had an opportunity to determine how the meeting would proceed. The Resident Minister was also excellent at participating in the discussion by also sharing personal stories, and being deferential when sharing his insights not from an authoritative perspective, but also from the perspective of a fellow human being learning along with the students.

#### *Positive Peer Pressure and Accountability*

The RLC environment provided support for these students, yet also challenged them to grow and learn. An

example of this could be noted in their attendance at weekly meetings. Even though the meetings were not mandatory, there was a level of accountability within the group. In the interviews students discussed how if they were not there, members would question them later as to where they were. I also noted students calling each other on their cell phones as the meeting began to see if they would be attending that evening's meeting. In the words of one student describing the students' expectations of each other when it came to attendance:

You see [community members] walking in the hall and ask, "Hey are you going to be there tonight?" and then if they aren't there you ask, "Hey where were you last night?" They [community members] expect you to be there.

Participants influenced each other in positive ways, including making healthier lifestyle choices. They admitted that there was less alcohol than in the rest of their residence hall; they didn't "party" as much as evidenced by comments from the interviews:

I think it's [the RLC experience] really helped a lot. I know of other people their first year in college with the freedom they come in and go crazy. With the RLC it kind of keeps you grounded.

By Wednesday nights everyone is starting to roll towards the weekend. It's a mid-week check. The community is really inviting too. Pretty much college weekends are meant to go out and have a good time and it kind of gives you a little check up before you go out and do all that. I haven't

been as religious going to Mass here, it's usually every other week or so but usually Sundays to give you a post check to see if you did all the right things over the weekend. Obviously I'll admit it I have my weakness for fun too, I haven't been great, outstanding, or whatever but it definitely gives you a little check up of where you are.

These components let to a unique culture with certain characteristics that helped students develop in their faith and spirituality. The next part of the chapter will describe the culture and characteristics of the RLC.

### Culture and Characteristics

#### *Unique Culture*

As Daloz Parks notes, "a culture is composed of the forms of life by which a people cultivate a sense of meaning, thus giving shape and significance to their experience" (p.206, 2000). She quotes Michael Meade who describes culture as having a mysterious core, composed of values and worth that nourish 'essential hungers' (p.207, 2000). The 'hungers' these first year students were facing were for a strong sense of connectedness with others and companionship for their first year journey. The RLC community had this mysterious core, as the students were intentionally placed together based on a similar value base. As one participant noted in his or her application:

If I am chosen to be an RLC resident, it will allow me to meet more students to begin with, who

have many things in common with myself. I am very interested in what others have to teach me and helping to plan events so that we can grow and learn about each other and our faith as well.

The components of the RLC resulted in this unique culture, which was characterized by a strong sense of connectedness based on similar values, respect for differences, a focus on learning about faith and community living, and a search for meaning and purpose in their daily lives. These factors led to developmental gains and personal growth in these students on all levels, including faith and spirituality.

*Strong sense of connectedness based on similar values*

Students felt connected to the University, to the RLC, and to each other. They were able to establish friendships and a strong sense of community. They felt known in the RLC community and knew others in the group well. The participants also noted a strong sense of belonging, and this was expressed even in the first semester. As one student noted in the fall:

It was so great to meet everyone and see all our differences, I feel so comfortable. We all know each other and hang out together. It is awesome to know so many people on campus already. I was nervous because my roommates knew each other before, but it has not been an issue. I connect with one because they are an art major and the other through sports.

Another student expressed the sense of connectedness in this way:

It's given me a good sense of belonging. I wasn't worried about not fitting in, I was a local. I came in first week- orientation week. A lot of people didn't go to orientation activities so I spent the first week meeting people, cruising down to the beach with them, taking them to see San Diego.

I noted in meetings how comfortable the students were with each other. They truly seemed to enjoy each other's company and presence at the meetings, even though group membership often shifted and members had disparate interests, activities, and peer groups outside of the weekly meeting time.

The weekly meetings were not the only manifestation of strong community. There were also all the informal interactions, the spontaneous, unplanned discussions or activities through which community building still took place. These interactions were facilitated by the open environment and sense of belonging evident in the group. I did not participate in any of them, but heard about them in the interviews:

I am a very social person and I play the role of connecting people to each other, I talk to everybody. My roommates are quieter. I am able to find commonalities with everyone, even though we all have so many differences- east coast people... I've been able to bring some people home with me, even a local resident had never

been to my hometown and some members had never seen a beach.

The sense of connectedness stemmed from a real and perceived similarity in faith and values. The foundation for this common value base was that these students were placed together based on a scholarship given to them for leadership in their faith community before attending college. Congruent with Michael Meade's definition of culture as having a mysterious core, these inherent values contributed to the unique culture of the RLC. As one student noted:

Just having the faith community. I love people in the church; it's always a good community. I like surrounding myself with people with the same kind of values and faith as me.

Another participant noted:

With everyone having similar faith levels/beliefs it encourages me to think more about my faith because everyone around me is doing it. You don't feel self-conscious about it like if you were living anywhere else where you may be the only one on your floor doing it. Everyone on our floor is doing their own little bit so you don't feel out of place, it just feels comfortable.

Students found companionship for their first year with others in the group. This companionship extended outside of the RLC. They knew they had peers they could count on and who would encourage them throughout the year. In the words of one of the students discussing the role they

played in the group and how they worked to be a positive influence on others:

Just trying to be what people are for me. That's basically it. I know that faith is a lot of what you see in others. When I see God, I see God in other people especially in friends and family. At a place like this where everyone is new just having someone who is grounded that can just help you out every once in a while. It's really good to have and I'm fortunate to have friends like that and hopefully my friends feel fortunate to have a friend with me in that.

*Respect for differences*

Students commented in interviews that there was a great respect for individual differences within the RLC.

I guess it's just interesting to hear what people say. You interpret things one way and then they will interpret it in the complete opposite way and that makes sense. I guess it's just broadening perspectives on how you view life in general too because it puts everything into perspective, what everyone else has gone through.

The storytelling aspect of the RLC experience helped students learn from each other's experiences and made them appreciate the broad range of perspectives people bring to campus.

Another participant noted how they learned from the different perspectives and experiences:

After a while it just broadened my views of what everyone else thinks. Just like broadened my views of God, what other people think of God too.



Diversity of opinions on faith was well respected in the group, even though all came from the same Catholic background.

One participant discussed how conversations could take place openly because confidentiality was respected:

It's helped me become more of an honest person and it's boosted my confidence a little because you can say whatever and no one is going to take offense to what you say. Nothing comes out of that room. I hope that it will make me a stronger person. You don't have to worry about what anyone else thinks about you. Sometimes I feel like I get judged by the girls that dress up every single day that look so beautiful to go to class.

Participants in the RLC could be authentic with each other, a condition that led to spiritual growth, as they were comfortable struggling with questions of faith and purpose together (Chickering, 2006).

### *Learning*

Participants in this particular RLC mentioned how much they were learning about faith, themselves, and living in community. As one participant noted about their reason for staying in the RLC for the spring semester:

Obviously to learn more about who I am as a person, my faith, what role God has for me in life, and becoming closer with God and all the kids who are in the program.

These students learned about their faith through discussion with each other about the gospel. Through

hearing their peers' perspectives, they gained insight and thought of their faith in new ways.

I gain insights from hearing what everyone else has to say. I am able to get more involved in the mass.

I like the gospel that we do; I like how it's short. We read it, we interpret it, it takes 20 minutes and you get a lot out of it. A lot of people say some really incredible things that I know I didn't even read into.

One participant noted how they learned to define their personal faith and belief system:

I think faith is knowing that there is a purpose to life. It's knowing that there is a reason we are here and a reason to keep living. And even when we are not here on Earth that we are going to be somewhere where we are totally and completely loved.

#### *Learning about Community Living*

Participants in this RLC also learned a great deal about living in community. This is an important skill to have, especially in a time when community seems to be on the decline in American society. Putnam (2000) conducted a thorough review of the concept of community in America, and he noted a decline in organizational participation since the 1960's. Putnam attributed this to the rise in individual ability and, therefore, the lack of need or dependence upon others to give the individual what is needed. In the applications students noted that they were

searching for this kind of community experience. As one participant noted:

To me being an active member of a community means getting involved in the activities around you. It means actively engaging in community events and giving something back. We take so much for granted nowadays, it is refreshing and enlightening to do something for the community, to get involved and meet new people.

This expectation was met and students learned a great deal about community life. One participant noted how much he or she was learning about community living explicitly:

I have learned a great deal from the other members of the group. It helps to have a strong community; you learn to live in community, which will be a great skill for life.

#### *Making Meaning and Finding Purpose*

Robert Connor (2007) discusses how students need to learn how to struggle with the 'Big Questions' of meaning and value. He asserts that when students are provided opportunities to ponder these questions, it enriches their entire college experience (p.11). First-year students in this RLC were struggling with these questions and mentioned how the RLC experience and discussion enhanced their overall sense of meaning and purpose in their first year of college.

I like being involved. I feel like when I'm involved it gives more meaning to my life. It allows me to share with other people who want to

be there. It helps me to grow in my life with God.

One student discussed what they were learning about themselves and their purpose while in the RLC:

And why you're here and what's the purpose for you. And what's your purpose or what's your relationship with God. What defines you as an individual?

The questions these students were struggling with have no easy answers, but the point is not to find or provide answers, but rather facilitate an environment in which students can wrestle with these questions of meaning and purpose. As these students found meaning and purpose, it led them to a more examined life whereby holistic learning and personal growth took place.

#### Personal Growth

As students struggled to find meaning and purpose, they became less judgmental, an example of what Love and Guthrie (2002) called the Great Accommodation. This is the point when people begin to realize the world is complex and ambiguous. These students were also struggling with their relationship with authority, specifically their reliance on their parents. This is consistent with the literature on self-authorship: the ability to construct one's own ideas, make informed decisions with and without others, and take

responsibility for one's actions can occur during the college years (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Most traditional age students generally lack self-authorship, largely because of their stage of intellectual development. (Baxter Magolda, 1999). RLC participants were already beginning to move toward self-authorship, especially as it pertained to their decisions about religion.

These students talked about the role of their parents and being able to make choices on their own rather than just because their family expected it. This included their decision to attend religious services:

Going to church every Sunday didn't have any passion to it because it was expected. So it wasn't like "Yea, let's go to church!" It was just kind of like "Come on, we're going." There was no option to it. Now that I'm in college, I'm on my own and it's all my own decision. I think it makes a big difference when I choose to go rather than when the family is going so lets go.

And it wasn't just their decision about attending religious services, but even their beliefs were being examined as they heard different thoughts and opinions:

I guess it [the value of weekly meetings] is to hear other people's perspectives on religion. Your beliefs are influenced by your parents so it's cool to see how other people view things.

These participants discussed how being in the RLC and getting to know each other not only encouraged them to make

healthy choices, but also made them less judgmental about other people. One student expressed it in this way:

I'm the kind of person who goes off of first impressions. But I've learned that living in this that I can't do that anymore. I need to really get to know people before I decide what I think about them.

Overall development increased, not just faith development. As students reflected on their RLC experience, they noted the following about how they had changed as they led a more examined life:

I definitely have a more mature view of my spirituality and my faith. I don't necessarily feel too different about it, but it's just kind of a more, it almost feels like I have a more objective view of my faith and just kind of I can understand it more. I don't know, it's like the RLC gave me a chance to step back and look and see what I was doing. So then I can kind of understand it and change things around a little bit, just to try to shape it a little better.

One participant even discussed how his/her peers saw a change in them:

I think my peers see a change from first to second semester with me being more spiritual and dedicated and going to different things. I have a bible right next to my nightstand, it just doesn't sit there, I read it before I go to bed, one thing I wanted to do first semester. I guess the question about the faith. I wanted to do all these things and I thought I was a good spiritual person. But it's until you actually go to the bible studies and learn something out of it not just go. Until you read the bible on your own, or just go to church, or do service or do whatever you need to do to get connected spiritually. Putting in an action actually doing it for yourself because it's different for

everyone.

As this student noted, spirituality wasn't just a private practice anymore, but rather it was a part of their everyday lived experience.

#### Chapter Summary

These first-year students were provided opportunities for contemplation and reflection, along with a mentoring community that facilitated maturation and transformation. This intentional environment provided the participants ample time to look deeper at their life, connect with each other and learn and develop in profound ways. They learned to struggle with 'Big Questions' (Daloz Parks, 2000) and find their purpose not just within the university setting, but also in the greater global community of which they are a part. As Daloz Parks (2000) notes, the central developmental task of the college years for students is to make sense of the world and find their place in it. These first-year students were well on their way in beginning that process, due to the components and characteristics of this RLC experience. In the words of one student as they explained their reasons for applying to live in an RLC for a second year:

I always enjoy listening to others opinions and insights about the bible. I like to bring my own experiences to the group to create friendship and bonds. The RLC has been such a great experience

this year; I think it will be fantastic to be a part of next year also.



## Chapter 6 DISCUSSION

### Study Overview

#### *The Problem Under Study*

Most student affairs' efforts have been based on a holistic model of learning, that includes spirituality as an important dimension of the overall well being of college students. Although student development theories have recognized the complex processes of defining oneself, they often have not addressed the development of the spiritual self (Lee, 2002). Higher education researchers have largely neglected the spiritual development of college students in both practice and research. Spiritual development is often connected with other aspects of development. For example, spirituality is viewed as one way people construct knowledge and meaning, and so it is often thought of as an important component of cognitive development, rather than given separate consideration.

Within the literature, one approach that is often proposed for facilitating faith development is Residential Learning Communities (Love, 2001, Daloz-Parks, 2000). Residential Learning Communities are often noted as exemplary programs due to their focus on community, common interest, and a strong sense of connectedness among the members. These aspects are all noted as important for

spiritual and faith development in college students. Research on Residential Learning Communities (*National Study of Living-Learning Programs*, 2005) suggests positive effects on academic achievement and positive influence on making healthy choices, such as avoiding drugs and alcohol. Research also shows that a high level of spiritual well-being is correlated with these same healthy choices (Adams, 2000). Unfortunately, the field of Student Affairs is still without studies on the role of Residential Learning Communities in the development of faith within college students.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

This study focuses on the role of Residential Learning Communities in first-year college students' faith and spiritual development at a faith-based institution. Within the faith development literature there is much mention of best practices including Residential Learning Communities. Although extensive research has been conducted on the academic and social impact of Residential Learning Communities, there have been no studies on how Residential Learning Communities impact the faith development of college students. This study is intended to fill this gap in the literature. It explores the impact of Residential Learning Communities on the spiritual and faith development

of first-year college students at a religious institution and provides a description of this particular experience.

#### *Research Question*

The following research question guided the data analysis:

What are the components and characteristics of a faith-based residential learning community that facilitates faith development in first-year college students?

#### *Methodology*

To reach an understanding of the proposed research question, the approach best suited for this study is a case study. A case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances (Stake, 1995). In this study, the case is one faith-based residential learning community in a first-year residence hall at a religious based institution. The time period was one academic year from September to May. This study utilized data from three different sources: field observations, documents, and individual interviews. The field observations included attendance at weekly group meetings, the documents were the applications, and interviews were conducted in both the fall and spring semesters.

### *Findings*

Findings suggested that students developed spiritually due to the formal time for reflection provided, as well as a strong focus on mentoring. These components helped shape a unique culture characterized by a strong sense of connectedness, respect for differences and an emphasis on learning not only about faith and spirituality, but community living as well. Transformational education occurred within this context, as students developed holistically and made great gains in self-authorship and their comfort with ambiguity.

### Implications for Practice

The living-learning program under study provides a model for how residence life professionals can intentionally develop environments with components and characteristics that facilitate spiritual growth and faith development. In the particular RLC under study, faith and spiritual development did occur. This was intentional as the campus ministry department runs the program, and the theme of the program is faith formation. However, within the RLC context, these students developed holistically, not just spiritually, and therefore this is also a good example of a model in which transformational

education can occur. Transformational education occurred, because all four elements as outlined in the literature (Boivin, 2000) were present, along with regular opportunities for reflection. Other considerations for practice include the importance of choice versus assignments when students select their room spaces as well as the importance of the physical space in facilitating residential learning. There are also implications for residential life professionals as they consider their roles as authority figures, and how to foster a community that respects diversity. Assertions can be made regarding institutional amplification as well as the importance of student affairs professionals paying attention to their own spiritual development.

#### *Transformational Education*

All four elements of transformational education, as outlined in the literature (Boivin, 2000), were present including a focus on holistic education, scaffolding, which is the proper balance of challenge and support, praxis, which is a strong focus on interpersonal relationships, and opportunities for mentoring.

Holistic education was occurring as discussions took place that included learning about faith and community in a co-curricular setting. Even though the main theme of

discussion was faith, the conversations that took place covered a wide range of topics, from academics to relationships. Students were given the opportunity to wrestle with 'Big Questions' of meaning and purpose.

Scaffolding was provided; the balance was tipped in favor of more support and less challenge, which is very appropriate for first-year students. These first-year students were able to rely on each other, and were somewhat sheltered from the outside community, in which they often felt discomfort. Also, they were able to be with people they knew to have similar values, and this provided a buffer as they encountered others without known similarities. Each individual felt valued in the group and because of the comfort level, each was able to be authentic and fully immersed in the experience of the RLC.

Praxis was present in the form of a strong sense of community and belonging, but was specifically based on participants hearing and telling their stories in structured and unstructured moments. As students engaged each other in very meaningful ways, they were changed by hearing about others' experiences and getting feedback on the personal stories they chose to share. They were encountering the 'other' in a structured and

unthreatening way that led to great personal growth and development.

Mentoring was present across many levels, from the formal authorities to the peers themselves. Students looked up to the formal authorities, and looked to them as experts, but did not expect them to give all the answers. There was also a great deal of positive peer pressure as the students mentored and learned from each other. This RLC experience was a true example of a mentoring community as framed by Sharon Daloz Parks (2000). Such an experience gave students good company in their search for answers to the 'Big Questions' of meaning and purpose. As they wrestled with these big questions and found tolerance for ambiguity, transformational education occurred.

*Unique components of this program*

What was truly unique and special about the RLC experience was the opportunities provided for reflection on a weekly basis. In a busy college environment, students don't often take the time to just be there for each other and share their thoughts and feelings. There is such a focus on academics and learning about subject matter that the focus on self and personal development can either get completely ignored or isolated from what

is occurring in the classroom. The reflection time built into this RLC experience assisted students in integrating all of the aspects of their learning in the first year of college. These students were discovering for themselves how faith and spirituality shaped the perspectives they were bringing into the educational setting. Therefore, they were discovering purpose and making sense of their experiences through this important time for reflection. There was genuine contemplation in the midst of action, providing these students much needed time for their interior lives.

*Importance of assignments and choice within the residential environment*

Within residence life, there could be different ways of having students choose or be assigned to thematic learning communities. As noted in the literature (Lindholm, 2005), and from the interviews, students often shy away from experiences that are perceived to be religious. For example, in this particular RLC, only three of the participants had actually applied to be in a Ministry Hall. The others had been assigned because of their scholarship. The three that applied had a much more articulate way of speaking about their values and faith in the fall interviews. They intentionally chose to attend



RLC meetings to be with people who would deepen their faith. The seven who did not intentionally choose to live in an RLC were also deepening their faith because of the people living around them. The end result was the same for all the students interviewed, whether intentionally chosen or not. All these students experienced a great deal of growth because the environment and experience supported that growth.

This idea fits with Astin's person-environment theory- if intentional environments are provided, the outcomes can be the same, regardless of the inputs and individuals involved. However, in this case there was some level of controlling the inputs. Due to the scholarship, there was some baseline level of commonality in the experiences that these students were bringing to the community. It was not just random placement. The implication for Housing and Residence Life professionals is to determine if there is a better way to assign students, based on theme choices or values, rather than just the physical layout of the building. Perhaps there is some combination of both that could help facilitate transformational education through intentional placement.

### *Importance of Physical Space*

The physical space also plays an important role in the tone of the environment and experience. In this particular RLC, there was a comfortable common area in which to hang out. The physical space facilitated a great deal of informal interaction, but also had enough private common space to allow for confidential discussions. The struggle in university settings is how to offer such open spaces, while also maintaining an emphasis on safety. College officials will need to engage in open discussions about how best to foster community, while also maintaining safety. The two concepts do not have to be mutually exclusive on a campus.

### *Role of Authority*

After observing the RA and Resident Minister, I realize that residence life staff members could be more intentional about the authoritative aspect of the roles professionals and paraprofessionals (student leaders) play in developing community. It seems that these students made great gains in self-authorship (Baxter-Magolda, 1999) as they learned to look to authorities for guidance, rather than relying on them to take care of everything or provide answers. In this living-learning community, there was a great deal of shared leadership and self-guided learning.

As the authorities stepped back from their roles, students themselves took up the role of monitoring each other and taking leadership for their residential experience. The staff did not pretend to be experts and were deferential and often asked students for answers. This was done in such a way as to maintain respect, but to allow students to take responsibility for their own experiences within the residence halls, and grow and develop within the RLC context. This lessening of traditional authority roles assisted in developing strong communities, which in turn led to a great deal of personal growth.

#### *Diversity*

The students in this RLC felt valued, and therefore they valued others. They were explicit about discussing how they had learned to value different perspectives and see things from multiple points of view. This is an essential skill in today's global society.

All of these students, however, came from a similar faith background. An interesting challenge for practitioners would be how to facilitate these discussions across faith traditions as well. The respect for differences, noted in this study, stemmed from students finding commonalities and having common understanding. Residential experiences in communities with greater

differences could still be facilitated with an initial emphasis on finding common ground. In first year areas, this common ground is the normal adjustment issues all first-year students are facing. The components noted in this community could still be developed intentionally with students who have a wide variety of backgrounds.

*Institutional amplification*

A fair amount of student affairs programs, and in particular residence life programs, have various models in place to facilitate transformational education. As Chickering, Dalton and Stamm (2006) assert, creating contexts for holistic development that includes spiritual development as an important component does not necessarily mean an entire overhaul of existing programs. Rather, they make a case for amplification: highlighting and improving what is already there in intentional ways (2006).

In order to make such decisions about what is working well and how to enhance those programs, institutions need to place a strong emphasis on qualitative and quantitative assessment and not just evaluation. Student affairs practitioners in partnership with other campus departments could make an effort to really assess current efforts in an integrated way. Decisions about staffing structures, theme halls, and educational contexts could be based upon

measuring and assessing the effectiveness of a certain program.

Using this program as an example, there are no formal learning outcomes for the program, except to ensure students have an opportunity to develop their faith in a strong community context. This is indeed happening, and knowing specifically how it is happening could aid in programmatic decisions. Care could be taken to develop integrated learning outcomes for the first year, and RLCs could then be designed to facilitate these outcomes. Once agreed upon learning outcomes are decided, assessment of various models could be completed and institutional amplification as defined in *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education (2006)* could take place. *The spiritual development of student affairs professionals*

Care could be taken by student affairs professionals to spend time on their interior lives, in order to facilitate holistic development in their students. There is an emphasis on busyness and productivity in current campus settings that can be detrimental to true effectiveness in fostering transformational education that includes spirituality as an important component. Student affairs professionals need to build reflection into their daily professional and personal practice. Such role

modeling could provide an example to the rest of the campus community about healthy ways of being present to students and mentoring others.

#### Implications for research

For researchers, this study is an example of what can happen when time is taken to describe and highlight 'ineffable outcomes'. Ineffable outcomes are those that are "incapable of being expressed in words" (Chickering, 2006). In this study, I attempt to name these ineffable outcomes: the growth I witnessed over the course of working with these students for one academic year.

This study is also an attempt to do research within the context of faith and spirituality, of which there are sometimes no agreed upon definitions, nor is there a clear vocabulary. This may prove helpful for others who choose to undertake such studies, and it may add to the growing body of work on discerning meaning and reaching consensus on definitions for the various terms regarding spirituality and faith.

There are also many ideas for furthering the research on faith and spiritual development stemming from this study. One area that I did not explore is why as group membership shifted, the group dynamic did not change. I also feel further study could be done on the role of the

Resident Minister as a faculty member. Is it essential that the group leader be teaching a course for there to be a fully integrated experience? There is also a need for further research on how students define religion, faith, and spirituality. I also see a need for longitudinal studies, in order to see how students change over the course of their entire college education.

Another area for further consideration is the idea of vocation, finding work you are called to do, rather than just taking a job. There is a whole body of literature on this subject. Further studies could be conducted on this topic and how faith formation plays such an important role in college graduates who find a vocation. This would be a good topic for a longitudinal study, tracking first-year faith-based RLC students through graduation, and seeing how faith and spirituality are (or are not) informing their career choices.

Further studies could also be conducted on diverse faith traditions. This study, and the majority of research I found, has been done within the context of Christianity. Eastern traditions are also rich with the idea of mindfulness and contemplation. Studies could be conducted on faith and spirituality across religious and non-religious traditions and backgrounds.

## Summary

Students bring faith and spirituality to campus as an aspect of their lives, but are often cautious about discussing it with peers. Previous research suggests that peer conversations are taking place on campus, but are found happening in pockets and mostly in religious sponsored clubs and organizations. Many entering college students report that they are actively engaged in a spiritual quest; nearly half indicate that they consider it essential or very important to seek opportunities to help themselves grow spiritually (Lindholm, 2007). Colleges need to structure opportunities for peer conversations and spiritual growth to occur. As Jon Dalton noted in *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Education (2006)*, student affairs educators have an especially rich legacy of concern for holistic education, and the significant contributions to the softer aspects of undergraduate student development should not be overlooked. Student affairs educators have played key roles in facilitating student development in this realm and should continue to do so.

The RLC studied in this research is a good example of how Student affairs professionals can provide such a context that allows for faith and spiritual development. The data



outlines and describes how this occurs, and therefore has implications for practitioners and researchers alike, as the components and characteristics can be adapted across institutional settings. This study also is an attempt to wrestle with terms that lack solid, agreed upon definitions and to describe ineffable outcomes. Such a study will prove valuable as more efforts are made to integrate spirituality into campus life, and as dialogue around these issues continues on individual college campuses and at the national level. One way to support these efforts and inform these discussions is by providing information about the spiritual dimensions of students' lives. This research does that and also provides ideas for co-curricular programming that can help facilitate student growth.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, C. (1994). "How can My Faith be so different":  
*The Emergence of Religious Identity in College Women.*  
(ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 375724).
- Astin, A. (1993). *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited.* San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.
- Astin, A., & Astin, H. (1999). *Meaning and Spirituality in the Lives of College Faculty: A Study of Values, Authenticity and Stress.* Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California- Los Angeles.
- Astin, A.W., Astin, H., Lindholm J.A., Bryant, A.N., Claderon, S. & Szelyenyi, K. (2005). *The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose.* Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California- Los Angeles.
- Beaudoin, T. (2000). *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Quest of Generation X.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Berger, P. (1967). *Social Construction of Reality.* New York: Anchor Books.
- Boivin, M., Fountain, G., & Bayard, B. (2000). *Meeting the Challenges of the Sophomore Year.* In L.A. Schreiner & J. Pattengale. (Eds.), *Visible solutions for*

*Invisible students: Helping Sophomores Succeed*

(Monograph No 31) (pp.1-19). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First- Year Experience and Students in Transition.

Bradley, J. & Kauanui, S. (2003). Comparing Spirituality on Three southern California college campuses. *The Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 16, 448-462.

Bussema, K.E. (1999). Who am I? Whose am I?: Identity and Faith in the College Years. *Research in Christian Higher Education*, 6, 1-33.

Cady, D. (2006). Peer Conversations Matter in Spiritual Development. *Women in Higher Education*, Spring, 22-24.

Campolo, T. (1984). Praxis: The Revolutionary new principle for crisis counseling. *Youth Worker*, Spring, 48-51.

Cannister, M. (1999). Mentoring and the Spiritual Well-Being of Late Adolescents. *Adolescence* 34 (136) 769-79.

Cavanaugh, G. (1999). Spirituality for Managers: Context and Critique. *The Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12, 186-199.

- Cherry, C., DeBerg B. & Porterfield A. (2001). *Religion on Campus*. Chapel Hill, NC: the University of North Carolina Press.
- Chickering, A.W. (1969). *Education and Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.
- Chickering, A.W., Dalton, J.C., & Stamm, L. (2006). *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*. Jossey Bass: San Francisco.
- Collins, J.R., Hurst J.C. & Jacobsen, J.K. (1987). The Blind Spot Extended: Spirituality. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 28(3), 274-76.
- Connor, R.W. (2007). Watching Charlotte Climb. *Liberal Education* 93 (2) 6-13.
- Constantine, M (2002) Religious Participation, Spirituality and Coping Among African-American College Students. *Journal of College Student Development* 43 (5) 22-38.
- Daloz, Parks S. (2000). *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey- Bass.
- Fowler, J. (1981). *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publisher.
- Gardner, J., (1996). Reflections on the First- Year Residential Experience. *Residence Life Programs and*

*the First Year Experience*. National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience & Students in Transition: University of South Carolina.

- Hamel, J. (1993). *Case Study Methods*: Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Helminiak, D.A. (1987). *Spiritual Development: An Interdisciplinary Study*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.
- Helminiak, D.A. (1996) *The Human Core of Spirituality: Mind as Psyche and Spirit*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Hill, P.C., Pargemant, K.I., Hood, R.W., McCulloch, M.E., Sawyer, J.P., Larson, D.B., & Zinnbauer, B.J. (2000). Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points of commonality, points of departure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 30 (1), 51-77.
- Jagers, R., & Smith, P. (1996). Further Examination of the Spirituality Scale. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 22, 429-442.
- Johnson, T., Kristeller, J. & Sheets, V. (2004). *Study on Religiousness and Spirituality in College Students*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California.
- King, P., & Kitchener, K. (1994). *Developing Reflective Judgment: Understanding and promoting intellectual*

- growth and critical thinking in adolescents and adults.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Kohlberg, L. (1985). *The Psychology of Moral Development.* San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential Learning.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Konz, G. & Ryan, F. (1999). Maintaining an organizational spirituality: no easy task. *The Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12, 200-210.
- Lee, J. (2002). Changing Worlds, Changing Selves: The Experience of Religious Self Among Catholic Collegians. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43 (3), 82-95.
- Lindholm, J., Astin, H., Astin, A. (2004). *Spirituality and the Professoriate: A National Study of Faculty Attitudes, Experiences and Behaviors.* Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Lindholm, J. (2007). Spirituality in the Academy: Reintegrating Our Lives and the Lives of Our Students. *About Campus*, 12 (4), 10-17.
- Love, P. (2001). Spirituality and student development: Theoretical connections. In M. Jablonski (Ed.), *The implications of student spirituality for student*

- affairs practice, *New Directions for Student Services*, 95, 7-16, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Love, P. (2002). Comparing Spiritual Development and Cognitive Development. *Journal of College Student Development* 43 (3).
- Love, P.G. & Talbot, D. (1999). Defining Spiritual Development: A missing consideration of student affairs. *NASPA Journal*, 37 (1) 361-375.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Higher Education*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
- MSN Encarta Dictionary*, definitions retrieved October 16, 2007.
- National Study of Living Learning Programs (2005).  
Sponsored by the Association of College and University Housing Officers.
- Newmann, L. (2005). *Faith and freshman*. Unpublished Dissertation. Vanderbilt University.
- Palmer, P. (1993). *To Know as we are Known*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, P. (2004). *A Hidden Wholeness*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.
- Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

- Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rendon, L. Academics of the heart. *About Campus*, 5 (3), 3-5.
- Royce-Davis, J. & Stewart, M. (2000) Addressing the Relationships between career development and spirituality when working with college students (ERIC Digest Reproduction Service Number ED 452444).
- Schafer, W. (1997) Religiosity, Spirituality, and Personal Distress among College students. *Journal of College Student Development* 38 (6) 633-44.
- Skipper, T.L. (2005). *Student development in the first college year: A primer for college educators*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stewart, C. (2001). The Influence of Spirituality on Substance Abuse of College Students. *Journal of Drug Education* 31(4), 343-51.
- Temikin, L., & Evans, J. (1998). Religion on Campus: Suggestions for Cooperation between student affairs



and campus-based religious organizations. *NASPA Journal* 36(1) 61-77.

Tisdell, Elizabeth, J. (2001). *Spirituality in Adult and Higher Education*. Jossey Bass: San Francisco.

Wuthnow, R. (1998). *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950's*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Appendix A

Consent to Participate in Research Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Dayanne Izmirian, doctoral student in the Leadership Studies Program in the School of Education at the University of San Diego and Director of Residence Life at the University of San Diego, is conducting a study of faith development in first year students living in a University Ministry RLC. The title of the study is "The Role of Residential Learning Communities in the Faith and Spiritual Development of First -Year College Students". Below are the conditions under which participants in the study will be evaluated:

1. Participants will be asked to share their reflections on their faith development during their first year of college.
2. Efforts will be taken to keep the identities of the participants confidential. For example, pseudonyms will be used for the participants and the residence hall in which the RLC is located. However, those involved directly with the RLC may be able to identify participants. Therefore, confidentiality cannot be totally guaranteed, even though every effort will be made to provide it.
3. Interviews will be recorded and the recordings will be transcribed. Tapes, transcriptions and research artifacts will be kept in a cabinet in a locked office and/or on a password-protected computer. Data will be destroyed five years after the study has been completed.
4. Interviews will be arranged for a place and time that is convenient to the participants so that they do not distract the participants from their studies.
5. Participation in the study is completely voluntary. Participants can withdraw from the study at any time. Data collected prior to the withdrawal will not be used unless a participant agrees to let it be used.
6. If participants have questions or concerns at any point, they are encouraged to contact Dayanne Izmirian (619-260-7656 or [dizmirian@sandiego.edu](mailto:dizmirian@sandiego.edu) or her faculty advisor, Dr. Kenneth Gonzalez (619-260-7546 or [kennethg@sandiego.edu](mailto:kennethg@sandiego.edu)).
7. The information collected will be used in Dayanne Izmirian's doctoral dissertation and, possibly, in other writing that develops from this project.
8. There is no agreement, written or verbal, beyond that which is expressed in this consent form.

I, the undersigned, understand the above conditions and give my consent to my voluntary participation in the research that has been described.

Signature of the Interviewee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name:

\_\_\_\_\_

Address:

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B  
Fall Questions

**Fall Questions**

1. Demographic questions- hometown, age, race, religion
2. What kind of faith community did you belong to before attending USD?
3. What was your level of involvement within that community? Please explain.
4. What are your goals for your first year at USD/ your college career/ post college?
5. What values are important to you that helped in determining those goals?
6. Who are your role models and why?
7. Why do you choose to attend RLC meetings and be involved?
8. Could you describe some of your first experiences in the RLC?
9. What role do you think you play in the group?
10. What do you expect to gain from the RLC experience?
11. What is the best part of living in the RLC?
12. How has this experience shaped your first -year experience so far?

Appendix C  
Spring Questions

## Spring Questions

1. What did you expect to gain from the RLC experience?
2. Have your expectations been met, why or why not?
3. Can you tell me about some experiences living in the RLC this year that have been most meaningful to your faith development or spirituality?
4. How have you grown spiritually while participating in the RLC?
5. Have your values and goals changed during your freshman year?
6. Who or what was most important in shaping (or not shaping) these changes?
7. Have you had experiences outside of the RLC that have led to spiritual growth? If so, can you tell me about them?
8. How do you define spirituality?
9. How do you talk with your peers about your spiritual life? Is the experience in the RLC different from outside of the RLC? Why or why not?
10. How have peer relationships affected your spiritual development?
11. How do you think you have influenced others' spiritual growth and development?
12. When is spirituality most significant/ prominent for you?
13. Any final thoughts/ comments?