Applying Student Development Theory to College Students' Spiritual Beliefs

Sharon L. Holmes, Barclay S. Roedder, Lamont A. Flowers[*]

This qualitative study sought to explore college students' spiritual beliefs in order to examine those beliefs and subsequent college experiences using student development theory. Data analysis revealed that peer and mentoring relationships were instrumental to students and shaped how students made meaning of their academic and social experiences in college. In addition, the study found that students relied heavily upon various institutional agents for assistance in learning more about and developing their spiritual beliefs in college.

Whether it is a conscious decision or not, many college students will embark upon a voyage of self-discovery and development as they proceed through the undergraduate experience. According to Rodgers (1990), student development is defined as "the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capacities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education" (p. 27). Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) posited that a student's development during college was contingent upon four major conditions. First, there had to be appropriate levels of challenge and support to facilitate the dissonance students experienced as they navigated the college environment. Second, a student must be involved in the campus community. Third, issues of marginality and mattering must be resolved. Fourth, students must feel validated through a process of confirmation and support.

For most college students, attending college initiated the process of separation from familial values, beliefs, and traditions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Thus, as college students explore their new surroundings, establish new friendships, question authority figures, and resolve identity crises, they come into a fuller understanding of who they are and what they believe about themselves, people, and the world around them. While there is significant concern for the fluctuating retention rate of first-year undergraduate students (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997), researchers and scholars believe that institutions could promote successful outcomes by

Sharon L. Holmes is an assistant professor in the Department of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL. Barclay S. Roedder is a graduate student in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies at The University of Alabama. Lamont A. Flowers is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy and Foundations and an associate director of the Institute of Higher Education in the College of Education at the University of Florida. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to slholmes@niu.edu.

fostering academic communities that engage students in developmental activities both inside and outside of the classroom environment (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

There is, however, a noticeable void in the student development research literature regarding the ways in which student development theories can be used to expand our understanding of students' spiritual beliefs in college. While the issue of spirituality and faith development has been explored in the literature to some extent (Fowler, 1986; Jablonski, 2001; Parks, 2000), most of the research and discussion has focused on faith development in college students. However, what is missing from this literature base is an exploratory study that seeks to understand ways in which students' spiritual beliefs influence their development in college. Toward that end, the purpose of this study was to understand how students' cognitive and psychosocial development interacts with their faith development. Additionally, this study sought to assist student affairs professionals in conceptualizing the use of student development theory more broadly across areas that impact student development, but may not normally be considered within the scope of our primary responsibilities.

Theoretical Considerations

Advancing Erik Erikson's (1950, 1980) ground-breaking work on identity development, Chickering (1969) proposed and later Chickering and Reisser (1993) revised seven vectors (developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity) to illustrate developmental issues that students encounter during the undergraduate experience and corresponding environmental conditions that influence developmental success. Since the initial introduction of the theory, the names and placement of the vectors have changed only slightly to incorporate new research findings. However, student development theorists and researchers still believe that students proceed through each vector in an ultimate attempt to formulate their identity, which can be defined as a multi-dimensional construct that represents a consolidation of internal and external factors that influence and inform who an individual is, and how he or she will relate to the larger society (Holmes, 1999). According to Chickering and Reisser, developing integrity, the seventh vector encompasses humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence. First, students move from a rigidly defined moralistic perspective to one that incorporates the views and interests of others around them into their value system. Next, they acknowledge the values held by others, but consciously decide and feel at liberty to establish their own value system based upon personal preferences. Finally, students learn how to balance self-interest with social responsibility. It is in this vector that students also confront issues related to peer and family preferences as they attempt to establish a belief system contingent upon their individual identities.

Chickering's (1969) initial theory has been well received within the student affairs community because the vectors provide meaningful specificity in understanding the developmental concerns of both male and female college students. Over the years, several researchers have contributed to the expansion and/or refinement of the theory (Miller & Winston, 1991; Reisser, 1995) in two primary ways: (a) developing assessment instruments based on the theory and/or testing the validity of various vectors (Barratt & Hood, 1997; Flowers, 2002; Hood & Johnson, 1997; Hood & Mines, 1997; Winston, Miller, & Cooper, 1999); and (b) examining the applicability of the theory for female college students (Greeley & Tinsley, 1988; Taub & McEwen, 1992) and students of color (Taub & McEwen, 1992). Other theorists – William Perry (1968, 1990) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) in particular – have also provided student affairs professionals and researchers alike with invaluable information regarding the thought processes college students undergo in order to develop their intellectual and ethical decision-making capabilities (Evans, et al., 1998; King, 1978).

Intellectual and Ethical Development

Perry (1968, 1990) developed a nine-position scheme to illustrate the evolving ways in which college students come to think about and take responsibility for what they know, believe, and value in the world. Perry's scheme utilized four primary categories (dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment) to explain how intellectual development occurs in college students. The first category, dualism, represents a way of thinking wherein students view the world in polar opposites such as right or wrong. No consideration is given to varying viewpoints, and authority figures are perceived to have the "right" answers. Transition from dualism into positions within multiplicity is facilitated by the realization that authority figures do not always have the right answer, and that there are often multiple perspectives to a situation. Students in this category have moved their reliance upon authority figures for knowledge acquisition to their peers and have begun to develop analytical skills. The student's growing need to support personal views and opinions promotes the transition into relativism. In this position, knowledge is judged on the basis of facts and evidence, is contextually situated, and must have relevancy to be valid. The final category encompasses the commitments students make toward relativism. It is in this position that students begin to make decisions based upon their individual worldviews. Commitment to relativism is made after students have had the opportunity to examine multiple perspectives and select the one that is most aligned to their identity and personal preferences. Two forms characterize commitment to relativism: area and style. Area refers to the social context in which decisions are made, such as career choice, religion, and relationships. Style refers to balancing conflicting pressures of reality, including, but not limited to time constraints, family pressures, and/or social obligations. Perry's scheme recognizes that every student will not progress through the positions at the same pace, nor have the same level of achievement.

The utility of Perry's theory to assess the developmental needs of today's undergraduate college student has received mixed reviews. Foremost, the sample group used to validate the positions in the scheme was composed primarily of

White males from a premier university environment (Perry, 1968). As a result, problems with generalizations to other students, both male and female in other institutional settings, would seem obvious, particularly since gender, race, and social class influence how students develop reasoning skills and ascribe meaning to their academic and life experiences (Anderson, 1988; Kuh, et al., 1991; Parks, 2000). Still, this apparent limitation has not deterred student affairs practitioners or other researchers from investigating the utility of the positions in Perry's scheme toward the development of undergraduate college students. Of particular interest has been research that has identified a strong correlation between intellectual and ethical development and religious (e.g., faith, spirituality, Christianity) development in college students (King, 1978; Meyer, 1977; Parks, 2000).

Female Intellectual and Ethical Development

Concerned that the theoretical propositions posited by Perry's scheme would not adequately address the intellectual and ethical developmental needs of female college students, Belenky et al. (1986) introduced a five-part epistemological model, referred to as "perspectives," to illustrate how women come to know and make meaning of their experiences. The underlying premise of the theory is that, unlike male students, women develop their intellectual and ethical capabilities through relationships, which may not always occur within the context of established social institutions. Belenky et al. used the metaphor of "voice" to characterize the varying perspectives and process that women experience during their voyage of intellectual and ethical development.

Silence is the first perspective in the Belenky et al. (1986) model. In this perspective, women lack any voice. They are described as obedient, powerless individuals who leave the responsibility of constructing meaning to the discretion of external authority figures. In received knowledge, the second perspective, women use listening as a form of knowledge acquisition. These women place great significance on the information derived from external authorities because they fail to associate knowledge production within themselves. Belenky et al. characterized this group as lacking self-confidence. The next perspective is subjective knowing. It is at this point that a woman realizes that the truth resides within her. This shift from external to internal value is very important for women and is typically spurred on by a failed male authority figure. Inherent in this developmental change is a search for the "true self." Procedural knowledge, the next perspective, involves learning and applying methods in order to receive and convey new knowledge. There can be two approaches to this perspective: separate knowing and connected knowing. Separate knowing consists of impersonal procedures for establishing truths such as reading and lecturing. On the other hand, connected knowing receives truth from personal experience, empathy, or care. The final stage in the model is termed constructed knowledge. This perspective integrates both emotions and thoughts, subjective and objective knowledge. Two basic insights are present in this stage. First, all knowledge is constructed. Second, the knower is an integral part of what is known. Once a woman completes this developmental process, she is able to listen to the voice of others without losing the ability to hear her own voice.

Research Methods

Guba and Lincoln (1982) have posited that inherent within the qualitative research paradigm is the understanding that people ascribe meaning and value to various events and situations based upon their social locations, and that multiple realities may exist even within the same environmental context for different people. Thus, a qualitative research design was selected and utilized in the present study because we were particularly interested in how each student experienced and ascribed meaning to his or her academic experiences. More specifically, a qualitative approach was selected because it allowed us to examine a student's individual experiences before looking across the group for similarities and differences.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at a large, traditionally White university located in an area commonly referred to as the "Deep South" region of the United States. The institution is steeped in Southern tradition, and football activities dominate the campus community during the fall semester. Most of the undergraduate students are from small communities located within the state, and attending the university provides the first opportunity for many of them to experience a city environment. Because the study sought to understand the experiences of a select group of students, the selection of participants was purposeful. We invited four students to participate in this study based on the following criteria: (a) they were traditional-age undergraduate students and (b) they identified themselves as being a "Christian" or "a person of faith" prior to college enrollment. Below is a more detailed description of the students who participated in the study. All of the participants in the study signed an informed consent form before they were allowed to participate in the study. As such, in the reporting of results, participant's real names have been replaced with fictitious names.

   Martha. Martha was a fourth year student at the time of the study. She is from a family of four and grew up in a small Southern town located in the same state as the institution. In her immediate family, practicing faith was central to everyone's everyday lifestyle. For the youth in the community, the local church served as the center of all religious and social activities. Martha revealed that while she attended a large public high school, the church permeated all other aspects of her life. She commented, "I guess you could say the church was the biggest part of my social life." She attended both Sunday morning and evening services and a regular Wednesday night youth group, which encompassed her "tight knit circle of friends." When deciding what to do for school holidays, trips with the other youth from her church took precedence over everything else. In contrast to these familial practices, Martha rarely attends church services as a college student, and does not know anyone in the local university church congregation. However, she does incorporate a personal "quiet time" into her daily activities, and she tries to attend the weekly Bible Study that is held in her sorority house. Activities in her sorority have taken the place of the church in her life. Involvement in the sorority has provided Martha with many new opportunities and social engagement. She noted,

> When I arrived on campus I experienced [culture] shock. I didn't drink alcohol at all in high school because my parents were really strict, and I had an early curfew. Nor did I know anybody who did [illegal] drugs in high school.

Martha exclaimed that she relented to the expectations of her new environment and has now temporarily abandoned her conservative upbringing in order to "fit in." She has since experimented with drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes and enjoys the dating opportunities that college provides. For Martha, "attending college has been a mix of eye opening experiences and struggles to make the right decisions." She said, "I feel like college is where you decide what you want to do, [and] where you decide what is right and wrong."

Ruth. Ruth was also a fourth year student, but opted to stay in college an extra year to concentrate on achieving some of her leadership goals. Ruth grew up in a Southern town located approximately six hours from where she attends college. She expressed that her family went to church every Sunday and Wednesday night.

> I was active in the youth group, and that was the best group for me to be around because it was very encouraging and they helped me stay in the Word [the Bible] and to live the most of a Christian life.

Ruth's definition of college is a separation from the rest of one's life. She described it as "four years of fun." This philosophy of having fun is demonstrated in how she viewed her church involvement during college. She has found little or no time to attend church while in college. For Ruth, involvement in church activity is not seen as "fun" and is therefore dispensable. But she still tries to find time to read her Bible and other religious literature on occasion. Ruth's college commitments include her sorority, the student government association, and a parent orientation group. In the future, she intends to find a church home and develop her social life around it. "I think when I graduate, I will get a routine again. I'll get up in the morning, exercise, go to work during the week, and go to church." Even though Ruth is heavily involved and enjoys the leadership activities at the university, she sometimes wonders if she should have chosen a smaller, private institution because of the social pressures. She also mentioned that she advises other students to "be wary of what path they start on [at the beginning of college] because that path will carry them through the remaining college years."

Peter. Peter is a criminal justice major, in his fourth year, who desires to begin working soon after. While he is not sure of the type of position he will pursue, he feels certain that his faith will affect any career decision he makes in the future. He was raised in a family of Presbyterians and, consistent with his upbringing, Peter continues to attend church services on a fairly regular basis as a college student. As he was growing up, he and his family attended church every Sunday and his parents enrolled him in a Christian high school so that he might gain a strong Christian foundation to build upon when he left home for college. As a student, he has consistently been involved in campus ministry. He noted that involvement in the ministry serves as his social network and support system and provides him opportunities for leadership development. Peter described entering

college as a "culture shock," like Ruth. For the first time, he was confronted with people who held different religious beliefs and social norms. He noted,

> Until I started college, I never had to "defend" my faith because everyone in my high school and social circle espoused his Presbyterian beliefs. It was taken for granted that everyone had the same religious beliefs and upheld the same moral values.

In hindsight, Peter believes that interacting with people who hold different beliefs has only served to make his faith stronger. He commented on the effects of this experience by saying, "I would not have thought that I would have grown so much, but I think that is what college life is all about, interacting with different people and growing."

Carter. After graduation, Carter expects to begin an engineering career as well as marry his college sweetheart. He describes himself as "a pretty confident person" and attributes this to his family upbringing. He grew up in a five-person household that was well "rooted" in a local church. His high school was affiliated with the same church organization and is where he and his family attended on Sundays. All of his social, sports, and club activities were developed through the church as well. As Carter put it, "Church was a major thing." In college, church has continued to be an integral part of his life. He attends service every Sunday, is very involved in a campus ministry, and participates in two small Bible study groups. However, Carter warns, "It is a mistake to stay in church all the time. You need to go out and experience the real world, work alongside people who have different beliefs." Carter's "real world" interactions have included class projects, teacher interactions, and job experiences. Overall, Carter reports to have consistently grown as a Christian throughout his college experience. He also looks forward to continuing this growth process for the rest of his life.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant was interviewed on three separate occasions. Each interview lasted 90 minutes. An open-ended interview guide was used; however, departures were allowed to explore unanticipated but relevant issues that the participants introduced during each session. To assess how the students defined "being a Christian" or a "person of faith," and the impact that pre-college influences might have on their college experiences, the first interview was devoted to exploring questions related to their faith, church, family background, religious beliefs, personal values, and high school experiences. Subsequent interviews were more structured and students were asked questions about their experiences, the impact of the college environment (e.g., peers, institutional agents, etc.) on their faith development, and whether or not they felt their faith had changed as a result of their being enrolled in college. The interviews were taped and transcribed for use in the data analysis process. As the interviews were being conducted, a journal was kept by the primary author to record the methodological procedures used in the study, the participants' actions, as well as researchers' thoughts about individual sessions. These notes were later incorporated into the data analysis. The participants were also given an opportunity

to clarify and/or correct errors, and offer comments regarding the narratives as they were developed.

The interview data were then analyzed using the processes of unitization and categorization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, the transcribed interviews were read and coded independently by the first and second authors of the study for accuracy. Codes were then read and categorized to create themes. The trustworthiness of the interview data was then determined by adhering to the standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this study, credibility was achieved by having each participant check the accuracy of his or her data. The purposive sampling method ensured transferability. Both dependability and confirmability were addressed through the audit trail recorded in the journal (Halpern, 1983).

Findings

The influence of peer relations and mentor relationships on students' spiritual beliefs and college experiences emerged as two central themes of the study. In both themes, it was apparent that gender was a significant factor in how the students expressed their faith within the context of the institutional setting.

Peer Relations

For many college students, college represents the first time they are given the freedom and autonomy to consciously decide who they would like to have as friends (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Thus, the selection of friends and acquaintances is important because of the influence peers have on social and personal decision-making. Growing up, a student's geographical location, educational experiences, and parental expectations work together to influence the student's social circles, but in college these influences are not present. Thus, students will either rely upon established patterns of behavior, select those consistent with the new environment, or create their own as they come to know and understand themselves better. Because most institutional settings are comprised of an eclectic mix of people, students are forced to make conscious decisions regarding whom they will associate with on a personal level. Depending on the choices made in forming these new alliances, a person's beliefs, habits, and social behaviors could be greatly effected, because in essence, decisions on peer relations also become decisions on life values, priorities, and ultimately identity characterization.

Analysis of the data revealed differences in how the women and men formed peer relations. All of the study's participants seemed to develop relationships quickly, but the men continued to seek out new relationships throughout their academic experience, while the women for the most part, retained the same group of friends over their four years of enrollment. Peter commented that his Christian faith caused him to be more outgoing during his college career. "I like to hang out with a lot of athletes and service-oriented groups. We don't all share the same views, but it is a way to get involved and a stepping point to share my beliefs." Carter added

"interacting with new people has forced me to analyze more in-depth the things that I am doing and saying [about my faith]." At the start of college, Peter and Carter formed social circles in order to incorporate and foster the religious values they developed in their upbringing. According to Perry (1968), this action places them in the lower quadrant of dualism. They are still relying on old forms of authority instead of inward commitments to decide what is right and wrong. Although each person had a large group of social acquaintances, both men looked to campus ministries when forming a core group of personal friends.

In contrast to their casual acquaintances, church-related friends became the group the male students relied upon most often for mental, emotional, and spiritual support. They desired to associate with people who shared their religious beliefs and values. This reinforces the concept of dualism as the predominant stage of development for Carter and Peter in that both selected to establish relationships with peers under the guidance of the church, which served as an "authority figure." Carter in particular, said he turned to a campus ministry to "surround [himself] with people, who had similar beliefs...we were all kind of experiencing the same thing, so that was really nice and helpful." Peter had close relationships with both believers and non-believers and sought out members of each group for support and acceptance of his faith. He attributes the respect he received from non-believers regarding his religious beliefs to the fact that he "worked on developing a relationship instead of just handing out the gospel." This branching out points Peter in the direction of multiplicity. It does not bother Peter that some friends disagree with his doctrine of faith, as long as they respect where he is centered. Peter does not hold judgment toward his acquaintances because of their varied religious beliefs, or lack thereof; he simply enjoys their time together and the opportunity to get to know different people. The supportive relationships Peter and Carter were able to establish assisted their being able to continue to enjoy and develop their religious practices and beliefs.

The women did not report having put as much thought into forming peer relations. Both chose to participate in campus sororities, and thereby allow the predominant group to determine their social circles for them. While sororities do not prohibit members from forming external friendships, the bond of unity that exists may preclude outside associations, especially for new pledges. Rush activities provided them with an immediate social circle (e.g., pledge sisters), and as a result they experienced an automatic sense of belonging and security, which ultimately created complacency in their forming relationships outside of their sorority groups. In their desire to belong and be accepted in the new environment, consideration was not given to whether or not their religious beliefs or values would be developed through the sorority organization, and now both Martha and Ruth reported feeling a distance between their religious beliefs and social practices. In relation to the Belenky et al. (1986) theory on women's ways of knowing, these women fall into the category of silence. They have chosen a social group without giving thought to their individual spiritual needs or values. In essence, they have silenced their personal desires, the voices of their parents, former pastors or priests, and upbringing in order to fit in as quickly as possible. Ruth commented on her

friendships by saying, "With some people, you don't even know if they are Christian. It may be months, [before] you find out that a person has a denomination that they affiliate with." Martha agrees with Ruth and indicates that questions regarding one's faith or spirituality are the last thing that a person may ask when developing a relationship. She explains, "I don't have any group on campus that I would say has been my [Christian] support for all of my four years."

Furthering the idea of silence, the women report that they do not feel comfortable discussing their faith or personal issues with their sorority sisters. Martha admitted to putting her faith behind other issues and that she only sometimes mentioned it when conferring with friends. This statement reinforces the concept of silence in women, but allows Martha to move into received knowing since she has learned from her sorority sisters that sharing her faith is an inappropriate behavior and has decided to concede to their expectations in order to fit into the group. Although she attributes the decision not to speak about her religious beliefs to her having a "private" personality, her sorority affiliation must be considered as a reason for her silence. Both women described their sororities as being filled with definite expectations of behavior, an overall sense of conformity, and a prevailing fear of being excluded. As a result, neither Martha nor Ruth has continued to openly practice their religious habits (e.g., going to church on a regular basis) while in college. It appears that for these women, being connected to a social group conflicts with their religious upbringing and has caused them to suspend their former value system in college. When discussing peer pressures that she encountered as a freshman, Martha said, "I could see how when you are a freshman, it could be very hard to say no when somebody tries to get you to do something, especially when everyone else is doing it." She also mentioned that as a senior she feels less pressure from both men and women to conform. This newfound ability to refuse peer pressure demonstrates a change in Martha from received knowing to subjective knowing. She has come to realize that her personal beliefs and values are derived from internal characteristics as well as the expectations of her social group, and is confident that what she believes is equally valid as everyone else's beliefs. Ruth agrees with her by explaining, "You get shunned [by peers] in a lot of areas because people don't like you to feel the peace that you feel when God is so prevalent in your life. People don't like for you to be happy." Ruth went so far as to say that after graduation, she intends to form a new group of friends through church involvement so that she may feel free to grow in her faith again.

Gender Differences in Faith Development

An important aspect of faith development is the confidence with which a person can feel open to express his or her religious beliefs. Although the men in this study experienced periods of doubt and questioning regarding their faith, they never experienced periods when they felt their faith needed to be silenced in order for them to fit in. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), the men seemed to have developed congruence between their individuality and those of the students around them. They recognized that others did not share their religious beliefs, but felt

confident with their personal choices, and thus were at liberty to express their religious views even in the midst of a diverse campus community. They also felt a social responsibility to share their faith in a non-confrontational manner with other students. The women, on the other hand, experienced significant periods of silence during their college years. Both Martha and Ruth expressed hesitancy in sharing their religious beliefs in social settings and with other students on campus. Ruth explained that in social situations she sometimes felt awkward living up to her faith because, "I am the type of person who likes to fit in…[and] in college people expect you to do certain things." According to Perry, Ruth might be placed in relativity. Although she believes what she feels about her faith is right, she also recognizes that the perceptions of others is important, and is willing to silence her beliefs to satisfy their social expectations in order to be accepted. The Belenky et al. (1986) theory would place Ruth in a transitional state between received and subjective knowing. She is torn between listening to the truths of others and trusting in herself to define what is appropriate behavior. Martha has had similar experiences while in college. She commented on the difference between her religious confidence in her freshman year versus her senior year. "It takes a strong person to not get caught-up in the traps that happen when you are a freshman, especially when you first join a sorority. But it's hard because of the things that go on here." While Martha says she only got "caught-up" in a few college pitfalls, she can still relate to the pressure to do what everybody else is doing instead of what she feels is right.

> I was brought up against sleeping with anybody before marriage, and I'm still that way. But that's all anybody talks about here. It's like people are out there having sex when they've only been out with somebody like three times.

Martha says the pressure to conform is much stronger for freshmen than seniors, "It's not like anybody is [going] to try to pressure you when you are a senior in college." Like Ruth, Martha can also be placed in Perry's transition between multiplicity and relativism. Although she has not completely succumbed to the social expectations of others, she has not rejected them either. According to Belenky et al., Martha would currently fall under the title of received knowing. She remains under the control of an outside authority figure – her sorority group.

Peter also experienced a silencing moment in college, but his experience was not because of the need to conform in peer relations. He used a classroom experience to illustrate a period when he felt the need to keep quiet about his faith. "This one professor for a class was blatantly atheist and he made me feel uncomfortable." Peter says his response to the professor was to avoid the situation, which meant he rarely attended the class. After reflecting on his reaction to the professor, Peter commented, "I handled it pretty poorly. I just didn't go to class, which is a pretty poor witness." The fact that Peter views the situation so differently now demonstrates his growth as a learner and a believer. Instead of fearing opposition like Perry's dualist learner might, Peter is now able to accept such challenges as an opportunity to share his faith. This response places him not just in multiplicity, but relativism. He is a relativistic learner because he can now handle the reasons behind his professor's comments that he interpreted as beliefs and would enjoy the opportunity to explain his beliefs as well. Carter did not report any instances that

challenged his beliefs. Thus, data revealed that the male students experienced far less developmental conflict because of their religious beliefs than did the female students.

The transition from home to college seemed to exert considerable pressures for Martha and Ruth. A crucial aspect of the transition was how the students handled their newfound independence. Although both the women and men were raised in conservative Christian households, each group responded differently to the various social pressures and opportunities that college life provided. Before entering college, neither the females nor the males drank alcohol. However, since enrolling in college, the females have become a part of a social scene dominated by college parties, bars, and social drinking. The decision to ignore previous practices places both women in a position of received knowing. With regard to drinking, they have adapted the philosophy that if everyone else is doing it, then it must be acceptable. Still, Ruth conveyed that she sometimes only pretends to drink so that she can avoid questions from friends about why she is "not getting drunk." Martha, on the other hand, indicated that she has abandoned her conservative upbringing and feels that her drinking habits do not affect her dedication to her Christian faith. The men have taken a different stance on social drinking while in college. They both made conscious decisions to remain close to their original views on drinking being illegal until the age of 21, and then only in moderation. Both admitted that they accept the decision of some of their peers to engage in social drinking, but prefer to hold "strong" to their beliefs, thereby demonstrating a relativistic way of knowing according to Perry. They took the time to explore how they felt about social drinking and can explain their decisions to other people. They understand that everyone will not share their convictions, but this dissention does not alter their beliefs. Again, the men seem to have less dependence on outside acceptance and rely more on inner peace and security, a quality that the women continue to strive to achieve.

Mentoring Relationships

Mentor relationships can be a great source of support and encouragement to traditional-age undergraduate students in many areas, even faith development (Love, 2001). This study revealed that the male students established mentor/mentee relationships with institutional agents (e.g., faculty, staff, and administrators) more easily than their female counterparts, and that the relationships were different. All of the students in the study identified older men as the persons they viewed as mentors or role models in the academic community.

Both Peter and Carter identified a leader of a popular campus ministry as their mentor. They indicated they enjoyed their relationships with him because he gave them an outlet to voice their concerns, debate issues, and explore their faith. Carter's mentor, John, serves more as his Christian counselor than academic or career advisor. Carter initiated the dialogue with him during a period of deep questioning of his faith and personal turmoil. He explains,

I had a very good conversation with John, who is also a minister, and he helped me get back to the basics of what it meant to be a Christian. He was very encouraging and said, "This is a very good sign that you are going through this, because it means that you are not just going through the motions of living day by day without really thinking about who you are as a Christian."

John has also helped Peter in his faith development. Peter indicated that he enjoys his conversations with John and meets with him at least once a week. He described these meetings as thought-provoking and helpful. "He listens. He talks, he throws out ideas. He is just always there." Peter elaborated on John's ability to challenge him to explore new ideas by saying, "I find it real helpful because whether I agree with them [John's suggestions] or not they lead me to explore new avenues and think about things I probably would not have considered before."

The women on the other hand, have not had similar experiences with institutional agents as the men. Martha could not think of a single person on- or off-campus that could be described as her mentor in college. Ruth indicated that she has only recently developed a relationship with a gentleman that is her mentor. She further added that she enjoys the security and comfort that he offers, and reported, "He understands who I am, the true me. He doesn't see the person who sometimes puts on a front for other people. He knows who I really am." She also indicated that the relationship between her and her mentor is not "really" based upon her spiritual beliefs. She primarily views him as "an honest and loyal person to turn to for professional and educational advice and encouragement." These narratives suggest a clear difference in how the women and men view their mentor relationships. Whereas Ruth relies on her mentor to validate her as a person and direct her professional plans, Carter and Peter rely on John, their mentor, to stimulate discussion. John supports Perry's level of transitional knowing in Peter and Carter by providing thought-provoking questions that encourage and reinforce their spiritual beliefs.

Discussion

Evans et al. (1998) insisted that "knowledge of student development theory enables student affairs professionals to proactively identify and address student needs, design programs, develop policies, and create healthy college environments that encourage positive growth in students" (p. 5). From this perspective, the student affairs practitioner would need to be cognizant of developmental issues that arise in the intellectual, affective, and behavioral domains. This research supports the notion that student affairs professionals can impact student development and that student development theories can and should be used more widely to understand how students grow and develop holistically during college.

Based on the results of the study, it is apparent that peer relations and institutional agents who served as mentors for the students had the most significant impact on how they continued to grow and develop in their faith during college than any other factor. It was also apparent that differences existed in how the women and men

experienced those relationships. The discussion of spiritual (e.g., faith) development was situated within the context of selected student development theories because inherent in the theoretical propositions is the assumption that students in their quest to establish identity and develop integrity will become more aware of what they believe about social institutions, themselves, and the larger world around them.

The men in the study seemed to move progressively toward the development of identity according to the stages in Perry's (1990) scheme and the seventh vector outlined by Chickering and Reisser (1993). Prior to college enrollment, consistent with their family upbringings, both men considered themselves to be very religious. Throughout adolescence and high school, both Peter and Carter accepted the religious practices and values their parents and priests or pastors conveyed to them without question. The small homogeneous communities where they grew up reinforced the notions of their faith and assisted them in living committed Christian lives according to the dictates of their individual denominations. As Peter and Carter began to develop relationships with other students on campus, they became aware that some of their peers did not share their value systems or religious beliefs, but were just as committed to their beliefs as they were. As a result, they each experienced periods of deep questioning, but did not stall in their spiritual development because their mentor helped them understand that questioning one's faith in relation to the beliefs of others is a natural part of coming to understand themselves as young men of faith. Therefore, they were able to resolve these issues and continue to develop relationships with people outside of their faith because they accepted the fact that multiple perspectives exist and that people should be allowed to make decisions based upon individual preference and worldview. Once they had an opportunity to explore, question, and evaluate the beliefs and values of others they were able to make a commitment based upon their personal values.

The women in the study also developed their identities consistent with Perry's (1990) scheme and with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory, but were also more inclined to proceed according to the perspectives of Belenky et al. (1986) because of their need to belong and be accepted. Their belonging needs superseded their desire or need to grow in their faith. Like the men, both Ruth and Martha grew up in Christian homes and were committed to their faith prior to college enrollment. Their parents and members of their small church-dominated communities provided examples of what was considered acceptable and responsible behavior for a person of faith. When the women enrolled in college these old patterns of behavior became secondary as they desired to be accepted by sororities who did not ascribe to the religious beliefs and personal values the women learned growing up.

Limitations of the Study

There are two major limitations in this study that should be taken into consideration. First, this research represents the experiences of four students, two women and two men. All of the students were in their fourth year of college at the time of the study, defined themselves as being a Christian since early childhood, were Southern by birth, from two-parent households whose socio-economic

indicators would define them as middle- to upper-middle class. The men were White non-Greek students. Similarly, the two women were White, but were heavily involved in Greek sororities. Second, the participants were only observed and interviewed at one point in their academic careers. Had we investigated the students' experiences over the course of their four-year enrollment, some findings might be different. Thus, generalizing the findings to all students in different institutional contexts would be inappropriate. Still, we believe our findings demonstrate how student development theories can be used to better understand the development of students' spiritual beliefs in college.

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