

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF GAY AND LESBIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS'

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AT RELIGIOUS HIGHER

EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Despite recent scholarly interest in college students' spirituality and spiritual development, as well as research indicating that students are interested in spirituality and have a strong desire to integrate spirituality into their lives, few researchers have addressed the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian college students. Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative approach, I explored the spiritual experiences of nine gay and lesbian college students at two religiously affiliated universities in the southwest region of the United States. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 23, with a mean of 21. There were five female, three male, and one gender queer participants. Seven participants identified as white, while the other two participants identified as Hispanic. I identified three major themes related to their lived experience of spirituality: (1) spiritual quest characterized by struggle and pain, (2) finding reconciliation and acceptance, and (3) the importance of support from the university, student groups, friends, and family. Implications for practice included the importance of establishing an official recognized student organization to support gay and lesbian students, creating spaces for personal reflection, meditation, prayer, and solitude as well as safe spaces, the need for educational and outreach programs for faculty, staff, and students, and an evaluation of institutional policies that might negatively impact gay and lesbian students. Suggestions for future research are discussed including the exploration of the impact that faculty members have on students' spiritual growth.

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# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF GAY AND LESBIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS' SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AT RELIGIOUS HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

## Introduction

Moral and spiritual development has always been an interest of American educators since the dawn of this country (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006; Love, 2001; Murphy, 2005). A renewed scholarly interest in the study of college students' spirituality and spiritual development began around 2000 with the publication of *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* by Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) and a series of studies by higher education scholars such as Alexander Astin, Jon Dalton, Patrick Love, among others (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006; Love, 1997, 2002; Stamm, 2006b; Tisdell, 2003). Most research reached the same conclusion that college students are very interested in spirituality and they desire to integrate spirituality into their lives through dialogue, reflection, and behavior (Astin et al., 2011; Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

A recent seven-year study conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles' Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) examined how students' spiritual qualities change during the college years and the role that college plays in facilitating spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011). Astin et al. developed measures of five spiritual qualities – equanimity, spiritual quest, ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview, and they identified key college experiences that contributed to students' spiritual growth within these five spiritual qualities. Astin et al. discovered that students who actively engaged in “inner work” demonstrated the greatest growth within the five spiritual qualities. This “inner work” includes self-reflection, contemplation, or meditation.

Among the 112,232 students surveyed by HERI, four in five indicated “having an interest in spirituality” and “believing in the sacredness of life” (Higher Education Research Institute, n.d., p. 4). Nearly half of the students identified seeking opportunities to help them grow spiritually as essential or very important. About 75% said they were “searching for meaning and purpose in life” (Higher Education Research Institute, p. 4) and that they discuss the meaning of life with friends.

Despite spirituality being a topic of significant interest in higher education, for the gay and lesbian population, spirituality may have been a painful issue presenting many challenges (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse, & Lastoria, 2013; Tan, 2005; Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean, & Brooke, 2009). Themes of conflict, contradiction, and contrast can be found throughout the literature on gay and lesbian spirituality (Bryant, Walker, & Luzader, 2012; Love, 1997; Love et al., 2005; Stevens, 2004). Many college students struggle to reconcile their spirituality with their sexuality (Bryant et al., 2012). Gay and lesbian students are the sexual minority and tend to be marginalized within many spiritual and religious contexts. However, many gay and lesbian students go to college searching for a place to develop their sexual identities alongside their spiritual and religious identities (Stratton et al., 2013).

Spirituality and spiritual development are important aspects of a student’s development in college (Astin et al., 2011). The inner work students do to explore spirituality and develop spiritual identity is a vital aspect of their identity development (Astin et al., 2011; Stamm, 2006b; Tisdell, 2003). The small amount of literature on gay and lesbian college students’ spirituality revealed an interconnectedness between sexual identity development and spiritual identity development (Kocet, Sanabria, Smith, 2011; Love, 1997; Love et al., 2005; Stevens, 2004;

Stratton et al, 2013). Although this connection exists, authors of recent studies noted that little research has been conducted to explore the connection and evaluate the experiences of gay and lesbian students (Bryant et al., 2012; Love et al., 2005; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Stratton et al, 2013; Tan, 2005; Yarhouse et al., 2009).

### *Purpose of the Study and Research Question*

The purpose of this study is to understand how gay and lesbian college students experience the two inner spiritual qualities identified by Astin et al. (2011), spiritual quest and equanimity, at Christian colleges and universities. In this study, I used a phenomenological qualitative approach in order to learn about the spiritual experience of gay and lesbian students from their perspective. The following research question served as a guide for the study: How do gay and lesbian college students at religious higher education institutions experience spirituality? This study is unique in that it was conducted at two Christian higher education institutions. The institutional setting at religious-affiliated institutions presents a unique landscape in which to explore the spiritual experience of gay and lesbian college students.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the measures of spiritual quest and equanimity developed by Astin et al. (2011) as well as D'Augelli's (1994a) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development. For the purpose of this study, I utilized the two internally directed qualities of spirituality, spiritual quest and equanimity, to investigate the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian college students. The literature pointed to gay and lesbian students' search for spirituality and meaning in life, as well as their desire to find meaning,

direction, and peace in times of hardship (Bryant et al., 2012; Kocet et al., 2011; Stratton et al., 2013; Tan, 2005; Yarhouse et al., 2009). In addition, the literature indicated that gay and lesbian students experience a significant amount of spiritual struggle (Bryant, 2003; Bryan & Astin, 2008; Love et al., 2005). Therefore, the internally directed measures of spiritual quest and equanimity provided the framework for creating the interview questions for this study. Spiritual quest addressed students' interest in "searching for meaning/purpose in life, finding answers to the mysteries in life, attaining inner harmony, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life" (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20). Equanimity referred to the extent that a student "feels at peace or is centered, is able to find meaning in times of hardship, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of his/her life" (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20).

D'Augelli's model is based on the concept of developmental plasticity. "Plasticity suggests that human functioning is highly responsive to environmental circumstances and to changes induced by physical and other biological factors" (D'Augelli, 1994a, p. 320). Given the nature of identity development in college and the influential aspects of the environment and policies, D'Augelli's model was a good fit for this study. The meaning making, relationship, and sociohistorical dimensions of D'Augelli's model fit well with the study of the intersection of sexual orientation and spirituality.

## Review of the Literature

Previous researchers demonstrated that spirituality, defined as a search for meaning and purpose, is important to college students (Astin et al., 2011; Dalton et al., 2006; Love, 2002; Love et al., 2005; Mayhew, 2004; Stamm, 2006a; Tisdell, 2003). In addition to spirituality being important, research showed that students experience spiritual growth and spiritual struggle

throughout their time in college (Astin et al., 2011; Bowman & Small, 2013; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Bryant et al., 2012; Fidler et al., 2009; Love, 2002; Tisdell, 2003). Unfortunately, little research existed that studied the spiritual experience of gay and lesbian students (Bryant et al., 2012; Love, 1997; Love et al., 2005; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Stratton et al, 2013; Tan, 2005; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Given their unique experiences and identities, gay and lesbian college students can provide insight into understanding how spiritual development occurs. A review of the literature revealed details of contrast, struggle, and search for spirituality among gay and lesbian students (Bryant et al., 2012; Love, 1997; Love et al., 2005; Stratton et al, 2013; Tan, 2005; Yarhouse et al., 2009).

To begin the review of literature related to spiritual development, I attempted to make a distinction between spirituality and religion. According to Speck (2007), “Religion denotes a set of precepts that must be affirmed; spirituality, on the other hand, does not carry the doctrinal baggage characteristic of religion and allows flexibility because nobody has to believe in a prescribed set of precepts” (p. 24). Spirituality, unlike religion, points to human beings’ interior and subjective lives (Astin et al., 2011). Many definitions of spirituality include an aspect of searching for meaning and purpose in one’s life (Astin et al.; Love et al., 2005). At its core, spirituality is about making meaning, seeking personal authenticity and wholeness, developing a sense of connectedness, exploring a relationship with a higher power, and honoring the sacred in one’s lives (Astin et al.; Love, 2002; Love et al., 2005; Tisdell, 2003). Astin et al. noted that many students view religion as the primary way to express their spirituality; while other students believe formal religion plays no role in their spirituality or spiritual expressions.

For the purpose of this study, I explored the construct of spirituality, which may or may not include religion, with gay and lesbian students. Research revealed that gay and lesbian

students experienced great struggles and hurt within the spiritual aspects of their lives (Love et al., 2005; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989; Stratton et al, 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009). The literature also supported that spirituality is a priority for some gay or lesbian students (de la Huerta, 1999; Stratton et al, 2013; Tan, 2005; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Although spirituality and religion are used interchangeably by many; others make a clear distinction between the two in the way they live. Therefore, I explored the concept of spirituality rather than religion because spirituality is a more universal, inclusive construct and is important to gay and lesbian individuals (Astin et al., 2011; O'Neill & Ritter, 1992; Stratton et al, 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009). For the purpose of this study, spirituality served as the primary, guiding construct. However, many students described their spiritual experiences through the lens of religion and religious expression.

The review of literature for this study is divided into five sections. These sections are spiritual development theories, spirituality and college students' experiences, spiritual struggle, sexual identity development theories, and the intersection of spirituality and sexual identity. Within each section, I address the relevance to higher education policies and practices.

### *Spiritual Development Theories*

Spiritual development theories were not given serious consideration within student affairs in the 1980s and 1990s (Love, 2002). In recent years, with the surge of interest in spirituality and spiritual development, many student affairs professionals started to look at two major spiritual development theories that have applications in student affairs practice (Cady, 2007; Evans et al., 2010; Love, 2001; Love, 2002). These two theories were developed by James Fowler (1981) and Sharon Daloz Parks (2000). In addition to these two theories, a recent longitudinal study on college student spirituality was conducted by the Higher Education

Research Institute (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). Astin et al.'s study provided researchers with a strong foundation for future research on the spiritual development of college students. To begin the literature review of spiritual development theories, I started with James Fowler's stages of faith development model (Fowler, 1981).

### Fowler's Stages of Faith Development

James Fowler studied how psychology, theology, and human development intersected (Fowler, 1981; Love, 2002). Fowler conducted research on stages of faith development. According to Fowler, faith transcended cultural, historical, and religious differences (Fowler; Broughton, 1986). Faith was deeper and more personal than religion and developed through cognitive processes and ways of knowing (Broughton).

Throughout his study of faith, Fowler (1981) identified one pre-stage and six stages of faith development. These stages are undifferentiated, intuitive-projective, mythic-literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective, conjunctive, and universalizing. Pre-stage and Stages 1 and 2 related to children. Stages 3 and 4, synthetic-conventional and individuative-reflective, correspond with traditional-aged college students (Fowler, 1981). In the synthetic-conventional faith stage, students are able to think abstractly but are influenced by numerous things such as family, school, peers, media, even religion. Faith is an important part of their identity and outlook; however, according to Fowler (1981), this is a conformist stage, in that individuals are extremely influenced by expectations and judgments of significant people in their lives. Transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 is characterized by an individual taking personal responsibility for his or her own commitments and lifestyle and by being defined as an individual rather than as part of a group. According to Fowler (1981), the individuative-

reflective stage has to do with the “capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology)” (p. 182). Identity and outlook are separated from the definitions of others and students begin to think and define these for themselves. These two stages, synthetic-conventional and individuative-reflective, are the two stages that traditional-aged college students will most likely present. It is rare for an individual to reach Stage 5, conjunctive faith, before mid-life (Fowler, 1981). Fowler’s sixth phase, universalizing faith, is rarely reached.

The primary criticism of Fowler’s theory is that of the research design and methodology (Broughton, 1986; Evans et al., 2010). Fowler’s sample was not ethnically or religiously diverse. Fowler even noted that the sample was “overwhelming white, largely Christian” (p. 317). In addition, many question an inherent gender bias in the interview process and theory because of the model’s lack of attention to affect and emotional development. Fowler (1981) and his research team did not run statistical significance or reliability tests on the sample. In later work conducted by Fowler, he did not conduct these tests on the sample either.

The linear, stage development aspects of Fowler’s theory have also been criticized (Stamm, 2006a; Tisdell, 2003). Critics argue that faith development, as an aspect of human development, is not linear (Tisdell, 2003). For example, an individual may be in an advance stage of development; however a crisis may cause the individual to fall back, or return to, an early stage of development.

Fowler’s research served as the foundation for much of the research conducted in spiritual development today (Fisler et al., 2009). Despite the critiques of Fowler’s Stages of Faith, this theory provides valuable information for student affairs professionals to more fully understand students’ development, particularly with respect to spirituality (Evans et al., 2010; Stamm, 2006a). Higher education professionals can use Fowler’s theory to gain insight into how

students construct knowledge and make meaning of their experiences (Evans et al., 2010; Tisdell, 2003).

### Parks' Faith Development Theory

In her book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, Parks (2000) defined faith as “the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience” (p. 7). Parks drew on the previous work of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Gilligan, Perry, Kegan, and Fowler to develop her theory of faith formation. She argued that young adulthood was missing from Fowler’s theory, which is a significant stage of development in which individuals are grappling with big questions related to purpose, vocation, and belonging.

Parks (2000) identified four periods of development—adolescent/conventional, young adult, tested adult, and mature adult. Within each period of development, Parks proposed three forms—forms of knowing (cognitive), forms of dependence (feeling and affective), and forms of community (social). Traditional-aged college students are primarily in the Young Adult period of development. Through the probing commitment form of knowing, students will be exploring different forms of truth, different roles, relationships, and lifestyles and how these fit into how the students make meaning of themselves and the world. Parks (2000) emphasized the difference between inner-dependence and independence. This is a shift of dependence, recognizing one’s inner self as a source of authority and object of care. For young adults, it is a fragile inner-dependence, not because it is weak, but simply because it is a new experience and might be vulnerable.

Young adults experience forms of community through mentoring communities. Parks (2000) emphasized the importance of these communities in allowing students to achieve their

full potential. Parks (2000) stated that a mentoring community offers students a place where they can feel a sense of belonging and that they are accepted for who they are.

Parks built upon Fowler's framework in order to formulate her theory (Parks, 2000). She took the cognitive dimensions of Fowler's theory, particularly within the young adult development period, and integrated affective and social aspects of development (Love, 2001; Love, 2002; Parks, 2000). The addition of the affective and social aspects of development made Parks' theory much more useful for studying "both the structures and the content of meaning making" (Love, 2002, p. 373).

Critics of Parks' work identified some of the same issues as with Fowler's Stages of Faith theory. One critique is the Christian worldview of Parks' theory. Her language and processes mainly focused on the Christian population. In addition, Parks' (2000) sample consisted of 10 males and 10 females. These participants were mainly white students that all attended the same private, Protestant, liberal arts university.

Despite the critiques of Fowler and Parks' theories, they represent the most extensive, thorough explorations of spiritual development to date (Stamm, 2006a). Therefore, these two theories can significantly enhance our understanding of student development and the way we work with college students. Understanding the process in which students search for meaning and purpose and strive for authenticity is an important aspect of higher education.

#### The National Study on College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose

In 2003, University of Southern California's Higher Education Research Institute began a seven-year longitudinal study called the National Study on College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose to examine how students' spiritual qualities change during the college

years and the role that college plays in facilitating spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011). Astin et al. developed and administered the College Student Beliefs and Values Survey (CSBV) in 2004 to 112,232 first-year students as an addendum to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey. After three years, Astin and his colleagues administered the CSBV survey to a follow-up group of students at 136 of the 236 original institutions that had participated in the 2004 survey. Overall, 14,527 completed surveys were received from 136 institutions. The data analysis from these surveys revealed results consistent with the results of the CSBV pilot survey of 2003. The patterns of consistency seen in the results gave Astin et al. great confidence that their measures of spirituality and religiousness carried wide application.

Based on the results of the CSBV, Astin et al. (2011) developed a theoretical framework of five spiritual qualities – spiritual quest, equanimity, ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview. The research team discovered that students actively engaged in “inner work” demonstrated the greatest growth within the five spiritual qualities. This “inner work” includes self-reflection, contemplation, or meditation (Astin et al., 2011).

Of the five qualities of spirituality that Astin et al. (2011) identified, two qualities were internally directed aspects of students’ spirituality. These internally directed qualities were spiritual quest and equanimity. Within Astin et al.’s survey instrument, spiritual quest consisted of nine items that measured the student’s “interest in searching for meaning/purpose in life, finding answers to the mysteries of life, attaining inner harmony, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20). The equanimity measure contained five items that addressed “the extent to which the student feels at peace or is centered, is able to find meaning in times of hardships, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of her/his life” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20).

## Spiritual Quest

As students embark on the journey through college, they have many dreams, expectations, and hopes. Students are often searching for answers to questions of a spiritual nature; questions such as who am I, what is the meaning of life, and what kind of person do I want to become (Astin et al., 2011). A student's spiritual quest can consist of searching for meaning, finding wholeness, developing integrity, and integrating cognitive, social, emotional and moral aspects of development. According to Astin et al., "How students perceive their position in the world, develop a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and seek inner harmony and self-awareness are all critical components of healthy identity development and mature psychological well-being" (p. 29).

## Equanimity

In the Astin et al.'s (2011) study, the equanimity scale consisted of five items. The first two items addressed an individual's sense of peace and centeredness as well as his or her ability to find meaning in times of hardship (Astin & Keen, 2006). The next three items measured an individual's feeling of optimism, calmness, and psychological well-being (Astin & Keen, 2006). The items that measured equanimity "appear to capture some of the qualities that one associates with higher states of consciousness: a sense of calm, peacefulness, centeredness, and perhaps most important, self-transcendence, the ability to rise above or move beyond the limits of personal experience" (Astin et al., 2011, p. 50).

The results from the National Study on College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose indicated that college students' sense of equanimity grows throughout college (Astin et al., 2011). Equanimity was enhanced or strengthened by students' participation in what Astin et

al. deemed “inner work” – activities such as meditation, self-reflection, and prayer. These activities allowed students the opportunity to learn how to pause and reframe, a critical process in the development of equanimity (Astin et al.; Astin & Keen, 2006). This is a “process whereby the self-aware individual is able to (1) recognize an intense emotional response to a negative life event, (2) pause and reframe the situation, and (3) channel the emotional energy in constructive ways” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 57).

While Astin’s et al.’s (2011) work provided insight into the way professionals work with college students, their study did not provide insights into the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian students. The researchers did not ask participants to identify sexual orientation nor did they investigate deeper into how gay or lesbian students experience the measures of spirituality. Therefore, it is unclear how a student’s sexual orientation can impact his or her spiritual development.

### *Spirituality and College Students’ Experiences*

In 2006, Kuh and Gonyea used data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) database to investigate the relationship between spirituality, liberal learning, and the college experience. The researchers looked at three measures of student engagement—spiritual practices, interactions with diverse peers, and deep learning which consisted of nine items. They also looked at perceptions of the campus environments and a variety of self-reported outcomes that NSSE asks students related to liberal education. They used these measures to help create a regression model for statistical analysis.

The results of Kuh and Gonyea’s (2006) study revealed that students involved in spiritual practices also participated in other college/campus activities. Varsity athletes represented an

exception to this finding, as they participated less in spirituality-enhancing activities than any other student group. Spirituality and liberal education were influenced most by institutional mission and campus culture as opposed to other institutional characteristics. Students at faith-based campuses engaged more in spiritual practices and developed more in this area; however, they were less engaged in deep learning activities and reported lower general education outcomes, compared to students at secular institutions.

It is interesting to note that students at faith-based institutions have fewer conversations with others who have different values or opinions. The researchers indicated that students attending faith-based institutions engage less in deep learning activities and that the campus climate tends to be limited in its range of beliefs. Kuh and Gonyea (2006) recommended that the spiritual experience for students at faith-based institutions be examined more comprehensively. This information and recommendation can inform the current study as this study was conducted at a faith-based college campus.

In their article about students' inward journeys, Dalton et al. (2006) emphasized why students' inner development should be incredibly important to higher education institutions. The authors noted that learning is connected to the emotional domain of students' lives and that the American tradition of higher education has always emphasized the importance of holistic development in college. Dalton et al. (2006) indicated that society expects universities to produce responsible citizens capable of living in a democratic society and universities should be accountable for the moral and ethical development of college students. Finally, students that report higher levels of spirituality also have higher levels of physical and psychological well-being.

In their article, Dalton et al. (2006) discussed the importance of spirituality and religion

to college students. The authors noted that while in college, students often report being on a spiritual quest to seek answers to big questions. These questions involve identity, destiny and calling, personal faith, wholeness, and mattering. In order to answer these questions, students will explore their spirituality and participate in various activities. This can be referred to as a spiritual search. Dalton et al. (2006) remarked that students could be experiencing their search within or outside the context of religion.

Dalton et al.'s (2006) article highlighted the importance of higher education's commitment to holistic education and development. They demonstrated the connectedness between a university environment and students' spiritual search. Dalton et al. stressed the importance of listening to students' voices and stories as a way to describe student spirituality. Students' experiences related to spirituality and the spiritual search are important aspects of my research study.

### *Spiritual Struggle*

Bryant and Astin (2008) investigated the factors correlated with spiritual struggle during college. The purpose of their study was to explore what personal characteristics, beliefs, experiences, or aspects of the college environment might lead to spiritual struggle in college students. Bryant and Astin (2008) also explored the consequences of spiritual struggle on students' self-esteem, well-being, psychological distress, and religious and spiritual tolerance and growth.

The results of Bryant and Astin's (2008) study revealed that spiritual struggle was positively associated with psychological distress and poor health. Spiritual struggle was also positively correlated with students' growth in tolerance; however students with spiritual

struggles had less personal, social, and intellectual confidence than their peers. Female students and students from non-majority faiths reported higher levels of spiritual struggle. Students that identified as being religiously engaged experienced less spiritual struggle than the average student. Students that identified God in more intimate, loving terms such as “beloved,” “protector,” or “part of me,” were less likely to struggle, whereas students that identified God in terms that are more disconnected such as “teacher,” “divine mystery,” or “universal spirit” were more likely to struggle spiritually.

From Bryant and Astin’s (2008) research, it is clear that issues related to spirituality and spiritual struggles are important to college students. Bryant and Astin investigated levels of spiritual struggle for female and non-majority faith students, which are more marginalized populations. It is interesting to note that these two groups reported higher levels of spiritual struggle. This concept of higher levels of spiritual struggle for minority or marginalized populations is an area that needs to be investigated in more detail. The authors also recommended using in-depth interviews in future research to study college students’ spiritual struggle.

Similar to Bryant and Astin’s (2008) work on spiritual struggle, Fisler, et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative study in which they studied how college seniors experienced and resolved spiritual struggles. Students experienced their spiritual struggles through three avenues – academics, external influences, and internal influences (Fisler et al., 2009). Academic activities influenced spiritual struggle among the majority of students. The external influences were people and the institution. People (friends, roommates, family members, counselors, ministers, and peers) served as support for or as roadblocks to the participants’ spiritual struggles. Internal processes such as reading books, intense emotions, conflicts, and the desire for the comfort of a

higher power also influenced participants' spiritual struggle.

Fisler et al. (2009) identified four ways that students reexamine their spiritual experience: (a) students will recommit to familiar spiritual traditions; (b) students will readjust their beliefs to integrate new perspectives; (c) students will blend old and new values to create a new spirituality; (d) students will lose their faith altogether. Fisler et al. noted that many students were still exploring their spirituality and they probably will for many years. The authors questioned Parks' sequential model of spiritual development, pointing out that spiritual development might lack "maturational sequence" and "defies the predictable developmental progression that is implied by current spiritual developmental theory" (Fisler et al., p. 270).

The results of Fisler et al.'s (2009) study offered insightful details into the lived experience of spiritual struggle for college students. However, for the results to be extrapolated to other students and institutions, it would be wise to replicate the study at different institutions (Fisler et al., 2009). Also, the participants in Fisler et al.'s study were not very diverse with respect to gender, race, or religious affiliation. The authors advised that future research be intentional about selecting diverse populations with respect to gender, age, race, and spiritual background, particularly religious minority groups. The three avenues of spiritual struggle that students identified – academics, external influence, and internal influences – can provide a framework for future investigations into students' spiritual experiences.

Continuing their investigation into students' spiritual struggles, Bryant et al. (2012) took a phenomenological approach to dig deeper into the meaning and dimensions of spiritual struggle. Bryant et al. utilized the epoche process of bracketing in order to make meaning of the data they collected. While this process presented challenges and tension, the researchers conducted the qualitative study with a heightened awareness of their own identities and did not

allow them to impact data collection.

Bryant et al. (2012) discovered that the essence of spiritual struggle could be summarized in one word – contrast. For all participants, their lived experience of spiritual struggle involved “deeply felt dualities in the most fundamental dimensions of human experience” (Bryant et al., p. 62). Participants experienced contrast between possible selves, contrast between self and others, and contrast in revelations made about the meaning of life and reality.

Four of the ten participants in Bryant et al.’s study identified as gay or lesbian. The authors noted the increased level of struggle for those participants navigating multiple identities, such as gay and lesbian individuals. Bryant et al. called for a more comprehensive investigation of spiritual struggle for marginalized populations like gay and lesbian students.

### *Sexual Identity Development Theories*

The first studies conducted to address same-sex attraction treated the issue as pathology and focused on finding a cure (Evans et al., 2010). The 1970’s marked a new way of thinking, as the attention shifted away from pathology and more to the development of gay or lesbian identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Evans et al., 2010). Stage models of gay and lesbian identity development, such as Cass’ model, were the focus of research in the 1970’s (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). As more researchers studied the development of non-heterosexual identity, it became clear that it was a fluid, complex process influenced by other identities (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Therefore, a human development model of sexual orientation development was developed.

#### Cass’ Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

In 1979, Cass (1979) developed a theoretical, linear, six-stage model of homosexual

identity formation. Cass' model is based on the assumption that identity is a development process and that the environment influences behavior and change (Cass). Cass (1979) identified six stages of development that individuals move through at their own pace. These stages included a cognitive component, the individual's perception of self, as well as an affective component, how the individual feels about his or her own and others' perceptions (Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984; Evans et al., 2010). At each stage of Cass' (1979) model, identity foreclosure may occur. Identity foreclosure takes place when an individual chooses to not develop any further.

The first stage of Cass' (1979) model is identity confusion and is characterized by the realization that one's behavior, feelings, or thoughts may be homosexual. Emotional incongruity exists. If the individual accepted the possibility of a homosexual identity, he or she will move to the second stage of the model, identity comparison. At this stage, incongruity exists between an individual's perception of self and behavior as well as how others view the individual. This incongruity can lead to feelings of alienation and not belonging. As an individual responds to these feelings of alienation, Cass (1979) indicated that he or she may approach the situation in four different ways. The first approach is when an individual responds positively to being different and accepts his or her identity and behavior as desirable. The individual attempts to pass as a heterosexual within social settings in order to avoid being confronted by other's negative opinions about homosexuality. The second approach is when an individual attempts to reduce incongruity by accepting the homosexual behavior but not accepting the homosexual self-image. An individual using this approach may also attempt to pass as a heterosexual in social settings. The third approach is when an individual accepts the self as homosexual and his or her behavior as having homosexual meaning; however, the individual believes the behavior component is undesirable due to strong social alienation. The fourth

approach occurs when an individual believes that the homosexual self and behavior are both undesirable and wants to change both; therefore, identity foreclosure occurs (Cass, 1979).

At Stage 3, identity tolerance, there is an increased commitment to being a homosexual (Cass, 1979). The individual tolerates, rather than accepts, his/her homosexual self. If identity foreclosure has not occurred by the end of Stage 3, the individual's commitment to a homosexual identity has increased to the point that the individual can say he/she is a homosexual (Cass, 1979).

Stage 4, identity acceptance, is characterized by increasing contact with other homosexuals and an acceptance, rather than tolerance, of a homosexual self-image (Cass, 1979). Tension still exists for individuals that want to fully legitimize their homosexuality, both privately and publicly. Passing as a heterosexual and compartmentalizing one's homosexual lifestyle is one way an individual may adapt at this stage. Individuals may also disclose their homosexual identities to trusted, significant heterosexuals in order to reduce incongruity (Cass, 1979).

Movement into Stage 5, identity pride, is characterized by an individual's awareness of the disconnect between his/her homosexual identity and society's acceptance of his/her identity (Cass, 1979). An individual at this stage will begin to have "fierce loyalty to homosexuals as a group, who are seen as important and creditable while heterosexuals have become discredited and devalued" (Cass, 1984, p. 152). There is a great sense of anger and pride that can develop into activism (Cass, 1979). An individual in stage five becomes freer to disclose his/her homosexual identity. Reactions to this disclosure can be negative or positive. Negative reactions can lead to identity foreclosure, while positive reactions can lead the individual into the final stage of homosexual identity formation, identity synthesis.

In the sixth stage of homosexual identity formation, Identity Synthesis, an individual no longer views the homosexual and heterosexual communities as dichotomized, and does not judge people simply based on sexual orientation (Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984; Evans et al., 2010). An individual is able to synthesize his/her homosexual identity with other identities. The individual's homosexual identity is no longer hidden; it is fully integrated into his/her life, revealing feelings of peace and stability (Cass, 1984).

Several critiques of Cass' model of homosexual identity formation exist (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000; Levine & Evans, 1991). Cass based her work on research done mainly with gay, white males. Many researchers have questioned the transferability of Cass' model to women, bisexuals, and people of color (Degges-White et al.; Evans et al., 2010). Cass' model indicated that sexual identity formation evolves in a linear fashion. However, research demonstrated that these rigid, linear models do not accurately describe the lived experience for many (Brown, 1995; Degges-White et al.; Evans & Broido, 1999; Kahn, 1991).

#### D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development

D'Augelli approached his study of sexual identity development from a human development perspective rather than using a linear model (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Evans et al., 2010; Stevens, 2004). D'Augelli (1994b) emphasized the importance of using the human development model as opposed to a stage model because a human development model underscores the effect that time has on the developmental process. Using the human development approach allows the researcher to study how an individual changes over time and in various situations. According to Bilodeau and Renn (2005), a human development model indicates that sexual orientation is fluid and can change over the course of person's lifetime. This growth is

connected to and shaped by the environment and biology.

Within the human development or life span model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity development, three interrelated variables existed (D'Augelli, 1994a; Evans et al., 2010; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005). These variables are personal subjectivities and actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections. D'Augelli identified six interactive identity processes that operated independently of one another. The six processes are exiting heterosexuality, developing a personal LGB identity, developing an LGB social identity, becoming an LGB offspring, developing an LGB intimacy status, and entering an LGB community (D'Augelli; Evans et al.).

Exiting heterosexuality is an ongoing process in which an individual recognizes that his/her feelings and attractions are no longer heterosexual. This process also involves disclosing to others that one is lesbian, gay, or bisexual (D'Augelli, 1994a). This process is ongoing throughout the life span, as an individual is consistently presented with the choice of whether or not to share his/her sexual identity with others. As an individual develops a personal LGB identity status (the second process), one must work through thoughts, feelings, desires, and previously held internalized myths in order to establish a unique meaning of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This process is accomplished in relationships with others. D'Augelli indicated that this is also an ongoing process and an individual's personal LGB identity will be continually updated based on his/her experiences.

The third process, developing a LGB social identity, is the process by which an individual develops a network of people who affirm his or her social LGB identity. This support network may include other homosexual individuals as well as affirming heterosexuals (D'Augelli, 1994a). The next process, becoming a LGB offspring, involves disclosing one's

sexual identity to parents and redefining the relationship. This process requires patience and education and involves family adaptations that take place over time as the family copes with this new information.

Due to the lack of representation of same-sex couples in society, as well as any pre-existing stereotypes the individual has about same-sex dating, developing a LGB intimacy status can be a complex process (D'Augelli, 1994a; Evans et al., 2010). According to D'Augelli, "The lack of cultural scripts directly applicable to lesbian/gay/bisexual people leads to ambiguity and uncertainty, but it also forces the emergence of personal, couple-specific, and community norms, which should be more personally adaptive" (p. 327). The sixth process identified by D'Augelli, entering a LGB community, is one to which an individual may never commit. This process entails community involvement such as social or political action, which a LGB individual may never be fully comfortable with; doing so may involve great risk for an individual's profession or home (D'Augelli; Evans et al.).

D'Augelli's model was supported in research conducted on the coming out process for students living in residence halls (Evans & Broido, 1999). The coming out process for these students was fluid and influenced by three areas identified by D'Augelli – personal subjectivities, interactions with others, and sociohistorical connections (Evans & Broido). When Evans and Broido studied the coming out process for college students in residence halls, personal meaning and behavior, relationships, social customs, culture, policies, and the environment impacted the process. Stevens (2004) confirmed D'Augelli's model of sexual identity development in that development is fluid (nonlinear) and influenced by individual and environmental factors.

Stage models of development have been criticized for ignoring the fluidity associated with human development (Love et al., 2005). Recognizing various aspects of an individual's

identity as interacting with one another through the developmental process presents a more accurate developmental model (Love et al.). D'Augelli's (1994a) model recognizes the personal, environmental, social, and historical aspects that can influence development. Therefore, D'Augelli's human development, or life-span model, for lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development is applicable to this study given the sociohistorical and environmental issues related to spirituality that are going to be explored.

### *The Intersection of Spirituality and Sexual Identity*

The research on gay and lesbian college students' spirituality is limited (Bryant, et al., 2012; Love et al., 2005; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Rockenbach, Riggers-Piehl, Garvey, Lo, & Mayhew, 2016). The studies that have been conducted revealed that gay and lesbian individuals struggle to develop a spiritual identity (Bryant et al.; Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Kocet et al., 2011; Love et al.; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Stratton et al, 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009). This struggle was characterized by individuals trying to reconcile their spirituality and the beliefs of their spiritual communities with their gay or lesbian identities.

#### Research on College Students

In 2005, Love et al. conducted a qualitative study exploring the experiences of gay and lesbian college students at two public research universities. "Participants discussed the challenges they faced, how they dealt with those experiences and challenges, and were asked to examine their spiritual identity development vis-à-vis their sexual orientation" (Love et al., 2005, p. 194). Love et al. noted the lack of research into the spiritual experiences and spiritual identity

development of gay and lesbian college students and indicated that they wanted to address this gap.

The participants were five gay men and seven lesbian undergraduate students from late teens to late twenties; 10 of the 12 participants were between the ages of 18 and 23 (Love et al., 2005). The students tended to be “out” on campus and most of them were interested in the topic of spirituality. Each student participated in an in-depth interview with two research interviewers. The data was analyzed using the unitizing and categorizing methods and a constant comparative method (Love et al.).

The students’ identities related to sexual orientation were well developed; however, their spiritual identities ranged widely (Love et al., 2005). Although the researchers took extraordinary measures to differentiate between spirituality and religion, most of the participants discussed these two constructs interchangeably. Love et al. noted that the findings addressed students’ interactions with different aspects of organized religion. The results were divided into three categories based on how the students’ spirituality was influenced by their involvement with organized religion. The three categories identified were reconciliation, nonreconciliation, and undeveloped spiritual identity.

“Reconciled students are those who embraced being both gay or lesbian and being a religious or spiritually grounded person” (Love et al., 2005, p. 199). These individuals were aware of the issues within their religion that oppress gay or lesbian people. These issues did not create any incongruence or dissonance for the reconciled students. Reconciled students described having a personal relationship with God or a higher power and indicated this relationship as being central to helping them reconcile who they were as sexual beings and who they were as spiritual beings.

Nonreconciled students either lived compartmentalized lives, a spiritually/religiously active life and a separate gay or lesbian life, or they struggled with the contradictions they were experiencing between their spiritual lives and communities and their gay or lesbian identities (Love et al., 2005). The students that had not compartmentalized their lives experienced struggles within both the religious and gay communities. Some nonreconciled participants indicated that their religious communities did not accept the students' gay or lesbian identities; while the gay or lesbian communities did not fully appreciate their spiritual struggles (Love et al.).

The last category identified affected two students with undeveloped spiritual identities (Love et al., 2005). These students either passively or actively rejected spiritual issues which led to their undeveloped spiritual identities. According to Love et al., these students "appeared to lack a purposeful approach to their spiritual development" (p. 202).

The process of reconciliation appeared not to be static, was not linear, and was similar with other identity development models (Love et al., 2005). For some participants coming out served as a stimulus for spiritual growth. Love et al. proposed that this may be due to the conflict between religious teachings and the individual's sexual orientation. This conflict may create dissonance and spiritual struggle. The authors indicated that this research supports the need for further research and development of nonlinear identity development models (Love et al.). Love et al. recognized the complexity of addressing the interaction of sexual orientation and spirituality, but noted there is a need to further explore this area as there is a significant void in the research.

The sample size in Love et al.'s (2005) study was small, consisting only of twelve students. The participants were divided fairly evenly for gender; however all the participants

were white. The participants were self-selected, so they were “out” as gay or lesbian. The results might have been different or more rich had the participants been ethnically diverse. In addition, the fact that the participants were “out” and comfortable with their sexual orientation could have impacted the way they experienced spirituality. Having a diversity in the participants with respect to level of sexual identity development and public disclosure of their identities might give insight into their spiritual struggle.

Love et al. (2005) provided great detail on sampling methodology and data analysis that can be utilized as a guide for the current research project. Love et al. worked to establish trustworthiness of the research process by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Love et al. developed credibility through extended interaction between the participants and researchers, peer debriefing, and member checks. Love et al. worked to establish transferability by provide a thorough description of the context of the study and how the results can be applied. Through data analysis and the development of an audit trail, dependability and confirmability were also established. The research methods utilized in Love et al.’s study were noteworthy and seemed to gain the trust of the participants, which is critical in qualitative studies.

In 1997, Love investigated the culture of sexual orientation at a small Catholic college located in the northeastern United States. Love (1997) conducted interviews with students, faculty, and administrators; he also observed six campus events: residence halls programs, campus-wide program, and meetings of the Student Against Homophobia. According to Love, the analysis resulted in a “picture of a culture that exhibited contradictions and paradoxes related to sexual orientation to the participants” (p. 385).

For the purpose of Love’s (1997) study, a contradiction referred to “aspects of the culture

that the participants perceived as denying each other or as being incongruous” (p. 385). Love identified three contradictions. First, the institution was seen as a service-oriented institution, focused on caring for others, and educating the whole student; however, “lesbian, gay, and bisexual students experienced hatred, pain, loneliness, anger, helplessness, rejection, and isolation” (Love, p. 386). A second contradiction was the uncritical acceptance of the church teaching on homosexuality. Love noted that many students willingly deviated from the church’s teachings related to premarital sex or birth control but blindly accepted the teachings on homosexuality. Some students even used the church’s teachings to justify their homophobia. Another contradiction Love identified was that the university stressed the importance of diversity and multiculturalism but avoided the topic of sexual orientation.

Love (1997) defined a paradox in this case as “aspects of the culture that, given assumptions about religion and religiously affiliated institutions, appear absurd, but are in fact true” (p. 385). The first paradox that emerged was the fact that support and allies for the gay community came from within campus ministry and the Department of Religious Studies. Another paradox that existed was that homosexual students or allies were strong Catholics and many said they felt that God called them to work on sexual orientation issues. These students were called reconciled Catholics. The third paradox Love identified was that “less overt homophobia meant a more dangerous climate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students” (p. 390). The students shared that less homophobia did not mean that homophobia did not exist; it just meant that it was not as obvious or overtly expressed. The students had to be more cautious because it was more difficult to identify their allies and people with homophobia. The final paradox Love identified was the fact that although the president and perhaps other institutional leaders supported the student alliance and their activities, it was impossible for them to act on

that support publicly. Love concluded the article with recommendations for possible cultural change and implications for practice within student affairs and religiously affiliated institutions.

Love (1997) focused on the culture of sexual orientation at a small religiously affiliated institution. His observations and findings provide great insight into the lived experience for gay and lesbian college students at religiously affiliated institutions. The contradictions Love identified can be used to inform future research on spirituality on college campuses. For example, why do these contradictions exist and why do people on campus think it is okay live in a contradictory state? These questions can provide me with a direction for conversations in this current study. The paradoxes Love identified can significantly impact the culture and a student's experience at an institution. These paradoxes warrant further investigation as well.

In 2011, Wentz and Wessel conducted a qualitative study in which they explored the conflict that exists for gay and lesbian college students who attend Christian colleges and universities. The authors indicated an identity conflict exists and is composed of two layers. The first layer of the conflict has to do with the "prevailing historical, cultural sentiment among Christianity regarding the issue of homosexuality" (Wentz & Wessel, p. 2). The second layer of the identity conflict pertains to higher education's commitment to the holistic growth and development of students, particularly within the student affairs profession. The intersection of these two layers and this identity conflict present interesting challenges for gay and lesbian students as well as student affairs professionals at Christian colleges and universities.

Wentz and Wessel (2011) identified three important areas within student affairs practice upon which this identity conflict impacts: "enrollment communications and decisions, institutional values and culture, and the student code of conduct" (p. 3). Students may not have

accepted a homosexual identity at the time of admission or when they make an enrollment decision. Students may be struggling with their sexual identities and be in a state of identity confusion. Students often develop their identities and make important identity decisions while they are in college. Wentz and Wessel (2011) indicated the importance of institutions clearly communicating policies, expectations, and institutional culture during the admission and enrollment process.

Institutional values and culture can significantly impact student development throughout college. In Wentz and Wessel's (2011) research, the gay and lesbian students they interviewed came from Christian backgrounds and their "processes of faith and sexual development occurred simultaneously throughout the college experiences" (p. 4). The authors noted the importance of balancing institutional culture with support for these students. It is important to recognize the significance of peer relationships and use these relationships to help gay and lesbian students develop.

The student code of conduct on Christian college campuses may present a unique issue by drawing a distinction between sexual identity and sexual behavior (Wentz & Wessel, 2011). This may also present challenges for student affairs administrators and gay or lesbian students. Wentz and Wessel concluded the article by indicating that future research should attempt to "contrast the experiences of various students on Christian college campuses" (Wentz & Wessel, 2011, p. 6). This type of research could be insightful in evaluating how these experiences impact student development as well as sexual identity development.

In 2009, Yarhouse et al. piloted a web-based survey of gay and lesbian students attending Christian colleges and universities. This research attempted to understand important events in sexual identity development and campus climate for gay and lesbian students that attend

religiously affiliated universities. One hundred and thirty five students from 3 universities responded to the survey.

The results of the survey revealed that the majority of students felt shame, fear, and confusion when asked about their emotional response to early experiences of same-sex attraction (Yarhouse et al., 2009). Moreover, disclosure of students' same-sex attraction was met more positively by peers than by family members. However, the campus climate was regarded as negative for students experiencing same-sex attraction. The statements of faith and official teachings of the institutions fostered a negative, inhospitable environment for gay and lesbian students. Participants also reported "derogatory and stereotyping speech" from students in informal settings (Yarhouse et al., 2009, p. 110). The participants rarely reported this language from faculty and staff. Students in this sample reported that their religion was helpful in holding them accountable to their beliefs and values (Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Participants of this study recommended that university place an emphasis on "demonstrating love and on talking more about homosexuality" (Yarhouse et al., 2009, p. 110). A suggested topic for further study was on institutional policies and how to create them to align with an institution's religious identity while cultivating a more positive campus climate for gay and lesbian students.

Within the sample of this study, 31 individuals denied same-sex attraction. This was a limitation of the study. In addition, the researchers did not conduct member checks of the results in order to maintain confidentiality. The survey was distributed to students at three universities. Sampling from a larger number of institutions would increase the generalizability of the findings (Yarhouse, et al., 2009).

Stratton et al. (2013) conducted a study on sexual minority students attending faith-based

colleges and universities. In this study the researchers surveyed 247 undergraduate students that self-identified as sexual minorities. These students attended 19 different Christian universities throughout the United States. Approximately 58% of the students were female and 42% were male. The students identified with various religious denominations including 21.2% Baptist, 14.7% non-denominational, 10.6% interdenominational, and 4.9% Assemblies of God, and 4.1% Evangelical Free. Approximately 15.5% of the respondents answered “other” and wrote in responses including atheist, agnostic, and still figuring it out.

The survey assessed sexual orientation using a scale to measure degree of other-sex and same-sex attraction (Stratton et al., 2013). The researchers also measured attitudes about same-sex attraction using attitudinal statements created specifically for this study. The Duke University Religiosity Index was used to measure church attendance, personal religious practices, and personal spirituality.

The results of the surveyed revealed that these participants displayed varying degrees of same-sex and opposite-sex attraction (Stratton et al., 2013). The responses to both same-sex and opposite-sex attraction ranged on a continuum of attraction. This suggested that the experience of sexual attraction for sexual minorities is very diverse. The sexual minority students in this study considered themselves highly religious. However, the more that a student reported having same-sex attraction, the lower level of intrinsic religiosity. Overall, sexual beliefs and religious/spiritual beliefs did not interact in this sample. The authors noted that these two constructs need to be further explored.

The researchers also asked participants how they identify both publically and privately. 78% reported a public heterosexual identity (Stratton et al., 2013). Privately, 3.8% identified as gay or lesbian, 9.7% as bisexual, and 8.9% as questioning. Students that reported low to

moderate levels of same-sex attraction also reported having a private heterosexual identity. Students that reported having high levels of same-sex attraction were more likely to privately identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This sample reported not engaging in same-sex behavior or relationships.

The sample in this study reported holding traditionally conservative beliefs across same-sex and opposite-sex attraction groups (Stratton et al., 2013). The students also indicated that their campuses held negative views of those who experience same-sex attractions. In addition, the students believed there were few resources on campus to support students with same-sex attractions.

Although the results of this study shed light on the experiences and attitudes of students experiencing same-sex attractions at faith-based institutions, very few respondents actually identified as gay or lesbian (Stratton et al., 2013). This limited the strength of the results. The sample of student came primarily from institutions in the Northeast and Midwest United States. Ensuring participation from more diverse institutions would strength generalizability of these results.

In his research on college students' sense of belonging, Strayhorn (2012) conducted a national study of gay men of color. Strayhorn used a constructivist qualitative approach to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants. This research revealed three key findings. Student participants described a strong desire to belong on campus and with their peers. They also revealed places on campus where they felt they did not belong. These unwelcoming spaces included residence halls, classrooms, restrooms, or professors' offices. The second key finding of Strayhorn's work indicated students were satisfied with their sense of belonging when they were involved on campus. Particularly relevant to the current study, Strayhorn's work

revealed that gay men of color found belonging and satisfaction when they were engaged in religious and spiritual activities, such as praying and attending church. However the majority of participants shared negative experiences with church members. The third finding confirmed Strayhorn's model of belonging in that participants developed a healthy sense of self and self-esteem once their needs to belong were met.

Strayhorn's (2012) research suggested that gay men of color have a strong need to belong. They find satisfaction with belonging by praying and being part of a faith community. These results support the need for the current study to explore how spirituality impacts diverse gay and lesbian college students' sense of self and well-being.

#### Mental Health and Social Work Professions

In 2001, Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, and Hecker addressed the challenges of being gay or lesbian and spiritual and/or religious. The authors discussed the context of spirituality and religion as being either intrinsically or extrinsically oriented. For individuals with an intrinsic religious/spiritual orientation, truth and value are placed on personal insight and individual experience (Barrett & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan et al., 2001). Individuals with an extrinsic religious/spiritual orientation believe in an external religious authority and that spiritual or religious truth is held by religious leaders, scriptures, and institutions (Buchanan et al.; Barrett & Barzan). Buchanan et al. (2001) also explained the context of sexual orientation and the coming-out process.

Within these two contexts – spirituality/religion and sexual orientation – the authors identified a struggle (Buchanan et al., 2001). This struggle forces gay and lesbian people to have to either choose between the two worlds or integrate the two worlds. “Gays and lesbians that

seek to integrate their homosexuality and spirituality will be rewarded with increased self-acceptance and increased mental health” (Buchanan et al., p. 440). Buchanan et al. described using a narrative perspective within the mental health profession to help explore and deconstruct the spiritual struggle that many gay and lesbian individuals experience.

Similar to the work of Buchanan et al. (2001), Kocet et al. (2011) identified an interconnectedness between spirituality and sexual identity that creates challenges for gay and lesbian individuals. Kocet et al. stressed the need for mental health professionals to understand the importance of spirituality to gay and lesbian clients, work with clients to explore unresolved feelings related to spiritual loss or rejection, integrate sexual identity with spiritual identity, and connect with community. This four-part counseling framework could also be applied to working with gay and lesbian college students.

Ritter and O’Neill (1989) described the loss gay and lesbian individuals experienced with respect to their spiritual journeys. Many gay men and lesbian women feel abandoned, marginalized, and oppressed, especially in terms of their faith journeys or traditional religion. Ritter and O’Neill challenged mental health professionals to change these losses into opportunities by recasting the negative images in order to achieve spiritual wholeness. It is crucial to appreciate the “sacredness of gay and lesbian people, the richness of their spiritual questing, and the opportunities for transformation” (Ritter & O’Neill, p. 13).

Tan (2005) conducted a survey of 93 gay and lesbian individuals to measure their level religious and existential well-being. Religious well-being referred to how someone relates to God. Existential well-being referred to an individual’s sense of life purpose and satisfaction. The questionnaire assessed the participants’ levels of spiritual well-being, self-esteem, internalized homophobia, and feelings of alienation. Participants were identified through gay and lesbian

organizations as well as support groups through churches in the Midwest. 75% of the respondents were male and their ages ranged from 18 to 57 years. Almost all the participants identified as European Americans.

The participants reported high levels of self-esteem, low levels of alienation, and did not hold much internalized homophobia (Tan, 2005). In general, the respondents reported both high levels of religious well-being and existential well-being. Participants that identified as Protestant or Catholic and attended religious services more frequently reported higher levels of religious well-being. Individuals that reported being diagnosed with depression reported lower levels of existential well-being.

The findings of this study suggested that gay and lesbian individuals who consider themselves to be moral and have a strong sense of their life's meaning and purpose are more likely to be well-adjusted (Tan, 2005). In addition, Tan noted that being well-adjusted did not necessitate being reconciled with a traditional religion. These findings suggested the importance of spirituality for gay and lesbian individuals. According to Tan (2005), spirituality is source of empowerment for individuals, is important to gay and lesbian individuals, and has the potential to "enhance self-esteem, authenticity, and openness" (p.142). It is important to note that participants of this study were primarily white males. Future research in this area should include a larger, more diverse sample of gay and lesbian individuals in order to more accurately represent this group.

These four studies within the mental health and social work professions (Buchanan et al., 2001; Kocet et al., 2011; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989; Tan, 2005) all pointed to the interconnectedness of one's spiritual and sexual identity. This research presented issues related to struggle and loss related to spirituality within the gay and lesbian population. This research

also pointed to the importance of spirituality and spiritual well-being for gay and lesbian individuals. This information can be used to enhance student affairs professionals' work with gay and lesbian college students.

### *Conclusion*

The research reviewed demonstrated that spirituality is important to college students (Astin et al., 2011). In addition, research showed that students experience spiritual growth and spiritual struggle throughout their time in college (Astin et al.; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Bryant et al., 2012; Fisler et al., 2009; Love, 2002; Tisdell, 2003). Unfortunately, the spiritual experience of gay and lesbian students has been minimally studied (Bryant, et al., 2012; Love et al., 2005; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Rockenbach, Riggers-Piehl, Garvey, Lo, & Mayhew, 2016). Given their unique experiences and identities, gay and lesbian college students can provide insight into understanding how spiritual development occurs. The literature revealed levels of contrast, struggle, and search for spirituality among gay and lesbian students (Bryant et al.; Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Kocet et al., 2011; Love et al.; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Stratton et al, 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009). This is an area that needs to be explored further to better understand how gay and lesbian students find meaning and purpose, reconcile the contrasts in their lives, and experience spirituality on college campuses.

### *Method*

In this study, I employed a qualitative methodology to investigate the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian college students. The experiential nature of spirituality for an individual lends itself to be explored from a qualitative perspective. In addition, the population I

chose to study is a group that has not been studied in detail and one whose voices have been silenced with respect to spirituality. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is conducted in order to explore a particular problem, study a population, or hear silenced voices. Within qualitative research, “we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices” (Creswell, p. 40). Therefore, I utilized qualitative methodology, specifically a phenomenological approach, for this study.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the spiritual experiences (spiritual quest and equanimity) of gay and lesbian college students at two religiously affiliated universities in the southwest United States. According to Creswell (2007), the phenomenological approach can be used to give meaning to the lived experience of a concept for a group of individuals. I chose to use phenomenology because this approach allowed me to carefully listen to the voices of the participants and give meaning to their lived experiences of spirituality. By using this approach, I attempted to describe the universal essence of spiritual experiences for gay and lesbian college students at private, religiously-affiliated universities (Creswell, 2007, 2009).

Moustakas (1994) identified four steps in the phenomenological process. First, is epoche or bracketing (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Wertz, 2005). Bracketing involves the researchers setting “aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2007, pp. 59-60). This approach requires the researcher to reflect on his or her own experiences, suspend assumptions, set aside biases, and empathetically enter the world of another (Wertz, 2005).

The next step in phenomenological data analysis involves phenomenological reduction. The researcher reviews the interview transcripts multiple times and highlights statements and quotes that provide insight into the lived experience of the phenomenon. Through a process

known as horizontalization, at first, every statement is given equal value (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Later, duplicate statements or statements that do not relate to the topic are deleted, leaving horizons. The researcher then groups these horizontal statements into clusters of meaning and themes. Using these themes, a detailed textural description of what the participants experienced is developed. The textural description “strives to understand the meaning and depth of the essence of the experience” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 355).

Next, the imaginative variation process involves the researcher developing structural descriptions to describe the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the researcher synthesizes both the textural and structural descriptions in order to describe a universal essence of the lived experience of the phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).

### *Participants*

For this phenomenological study, it is important that the participants experienced the phenomenon of spirituality and were able to describe their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). In this study, participants were recruited from two private, religiously affiliated institutions in the southwest region of the United States. Each institution enrolls less than 5000 undergraduate students. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling methods including snowball and criterion sampling. I identified participants that were self-identified gay or lesbian college students and had experienced spirituality or spiritual struggle. Using individuals who know people that would be information-rich cases, I continued to build the sample (Creswell, 2007). I emailed individuals and asked them to participate. I also attended a sexuality and gender acceptance student organization and recruited members of that organization to participate.

Eventually, nine students participated in this study. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 23. The mean age of the participants was 21. There were five female, three male, and one gender queer participants. Seven participants identified as white, while the other two participants identified as Hispanic. There were seven seniors, one junior, and one sophomore. Three students identified as Methodist, two as Episcopalian, two as non-denominational Christian, and one as Church of Christ. Each of these participants attended one of the two institutions in the study, self-identified as gay or lesbian, and indicated that he or she experienced spirituality in some way. Participants were compensated with a \$10.00 gift card to a local store. To protect the identity of each participant, pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

### *Institutional Context*

I conducted this study at two religious higher education institutions located in the southwest United States. Enrollment at these institutions ranged from 1000 to 5000 students. These two universities were each affiliated with a specific Christian religious denomination. Both universities identify Christian faith, leadership, and service as institutional values. The aspects of leadership and service at these schools is informed and shaped by Christian faith. In addition, both universities note the importance of relationships and a supportive environment as important components of their educational experiences.

### *Data Collection*

As the primary researcher, I bracketed my experiences throughout the study. I am a Caucasian, heterosexual female. I was born and raised in the Catholic Church. I remain a strong,

practicing Catholic. Within the context of my personal faith, I strongly believe in and respect the dignity and worth of all people. I do not believe a person's sexual orientation is a choice.

Therefore, I support gay and lesbian individuals involved in loving, committed, monogamous relationships. I am hopeful that someday there will be full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians into all denominations.

I entered into this study having the experience of working closely with gay and lesbian students at a religiously affiliated university. Throughout the study, I served as an administrator at one of the institutions the participants attended. Within this role, I worked closely with students. As an advisor and mentor for these students, I witnessed them experience a great deal of pain and struggle related to spirituality and their sexual identities. I observed students struggle with their sense of purpose, sense of belonging, self-acceptance, spirituality, and the concept of love. Many students I interacted with were conflicted about their beliefs and their sexuality. They were turned away or hurt by their families; while others were accepted by their families and felt loved. I witnessed a great deal of judgment—gay and lesbian students being judged for whom they are and the lifestyles they lead.

Prior to the study, I bracketed my experiences with the phenomenon of spirituality, attempting to remove my own perspectives and beliefs from the study. Throughout the data collection and data analysis processes, I took time to set aside my judgements and preconceived ideas related to spirituality. I journaled my thoughts and perspectives in order to reflect on my experiences and suspend my personal assumptions.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews with gay or lesbian students at the selected institutions. Each student participated in one interview that lasted approximately one hour to one and a half hours. I began each interview with structured questions designed to

establish rapport with the participant. These questions were introductory in nature, allowing the participant and me to get to know one another. Then, I used the following questions as a guide for further discussion within each interview:

- Please tell me about your experiences of being gay or lesbian within your family, group(s) of friends, university, and church (if you attend one).
- Tell me about your experience in general at your university.
- Tell me about your spiritual experience in relation to your sexual orientation.
- Describe how you handle times of hardship and challenges.

I allowed each participant to lead the interview in terms of his or her responses and amount of sharing. Participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent before participating in the study. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription and analysis.

Each interview question related directly to one of the internal measures of spirituality, either spiritual quest or equanimity (Astin et al., 2011). The internal qualities of spirituality provided a framework for identifying and describing the common themes the students experienced (Astin et al.). In addition, D'Augelli's (1994a) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development informed the interview questions as well as my understanding of the participants' lived experiences. D'Augelli's six interactive processes of development provided me with a framework for analyzing the experiences that the participants described.

### *Data Analysis*

Following each in-depth interview, I carefully listened to the audio recording and transcribed the detailed content and responses of each participant. In order to thoroughly understand and describe the participants' experiences, I carefully reviewed and analyzed the interview transcripts multiple times, highlighting significant quotes that directly related to the

lived experience of spirituality for gay and lesbian college students (Creswell, 2007; Wertz, 2005). I made notes in the margins of each transcript, which would later help me form initial codes or themes for the research. I created a document comprised of these quotes that illustrated the meaning of spirituality for each participant. Using horizontalization, I treated each statement as it had equal value. I read back through the statements looking for non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. These statements became the horizons or units of meaning. I evaluated each horizontal statement, phrase, and quote, grouping them into common themes (Moustakas, 1994). I repeated this process until the information became repetitive and no new themes were revealed. At this point, the information being shared by the participants was not adding new information to my understanding of the lived experience of spirituality for students. In the literature, this point is referred to as saturation (Creswell). I reached the point of saturation with nine participants.

Using these themes, I categorized the information into clusters of meaning. I developed a detailed textural description of the participants' experiences. Through these textural descriptions, I tried to understand the meaning and depth of the participants' experiences related to spirituality. I was then able to formulate a description of the participants lived experiences. I also utilized the themes and textural descriptions to develop structural descriptions. These structural descriptions helped describe how the environment effected the participants' experiences of spirituality (Creswell; Moustakas). Finally, these two descriptions, the lived experience (textural descriptions) and the context (structural descriptions), were combined in a composite description that presented the essence of spirituality for gay and lesbian college students at religious-affiliated higher education institutions (Creswell; Moustakas).

### *Trustworthiness*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that trustworthiness of a qualitative study must be established in order to evaluate the worth of the study. Trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research (Lincoln & Guba). In an attempt to establish credibility and determine accuracy, I conducted member checks with the participants (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I shared each participant's transcript with each respective participant. The participants were allowed the opportunity to make corrections and provide additional information they believed necessary or helpful.

In an attempt to achieve dependability, I maintained an audit trail throughout the data collection and data analysis processes (Hays & Singh, 2012). This audit trail included keeping a timeline of my research activities, participant contact information, informed consent forms, interview protocols and notes, transcriptions, drafts of my data analysis, and a reflective journal. The audit trail served a repository of the collected evidence, steps in data collection, and data analysis procedures. This was the record keeping component of the study.

I applied triangulation of investigators as way to establish credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Hays & Singh, 2012; Lincoln & Guba). Utilizing more than one investigator to review the data and confirm themes provided an additional level of reliability. The additional investigator I used to achieve triangulation was a faculty member in the field of social sciences at one of the selected institutions. During data analysis this additional investigator examined the transcripts, interpretations, themes, and conclusions for accuracy and consistency. This researcher provided feedback and offered me multiple ways to see the data. The faculty member signed a confidentiality agreement in order to serve as a reviewer of the data.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to understand how gay and lesbian college students experience the two inner spiritual qualities identified by Astin et al. (2011) – spiritual quest and equanimity at Christian colleges and universities. In my attempt to describe the lived experience of spirituality for gay and lesbian college students, I identified three themes: (1) spiritual quest characterized by struggle and pain, (2) finding reconciliation and acceptance, and (3) the importance of support from the university, student groups, friends, and family. Each of these themes is described in detail below.

### *Spiritual Quest Characterized by Struggle and Pain*

When asked to describe their spiritual experience in relation to their sexual orientation, all nine participants indicated they struggled with faith and spirituality at some point in their college experience. The students shared that often times the church, and the people within the church, were cruel. Participants said they experienced pain, anger, and hurt while trying to figure out where they fit and discover who they were. Francesca shared:

I was just really angry for a couple years. I was angry with everyone who was involved (in the situation). I felt betrayed a lot. And I lost my outlook, which was music, so it was really, really difficult to go to school every day and to try so hard for a school that had done that to me.

Jacques described a painful experience he encountered when a new youth pastor came to his church:

From the moment that he found out that I was gay, it was struggle to get along with him. He was really cruel to me about it all the time. He would like really try and make me feel guilty, not only for that, but for every other thing I thought about my faith and my faith journey. He essentially was trying to make me feel as though it wasn't sincere. That this is hindering my whole faith journey. And it really bothered me.

Seven participants said the suffering and struggle helped to shape them and transform

their faith journeys. Elliot described how accepting her sexuality strengthened her spirituality and prayer life. She said, "I think me accepting it has opened up a new avenue because when you're trying to repress yourself. If you're not being true to yourself, there's no way you can consciously be honest when you're praying." Elliot continued:

I really think coming out has helped me really accept who I am as a person and in turn I have developed a strong relationship with God and in turn, I am able to go inside myself in those difficult situations and pull out the positives in that.

Angelina described how her struggles at church helped her accept her identity:

Since coming to college, I don't really do a lot of church. Church is a very standoff-is point. I don't feel like there is a place where I could be myself and be comfortable. There is not a church where I could actually go in and be who I am.

Angelina went on to share about a difficult time she had being involved in a church:

I knew that it (church) was somewhere that I wasn't safe; I wasn't capable of being open. So because of that, I struggled a lot those 9 months with my faith and my sexuality and how they go together. And having to hide it. And through that whole struggle I think that's what really brought out the idea that it's okay.

Eight of the nine participants described their spiritual experiences as being mostly negative. They were told growing up that being gay was bad or wrong in the context of their faith. The students said they felt pressure to keep things quiet and to hide their gay identities. With respect to his sexual identity, Edward expressed, "I always felt very obligated to keep things quiet and just more on the side of silence. So it took a lot of courage to be able to talk with people." When describing her spiritual experiences, Francesca said, "Most of them, admittedly, have been negative. Like my realization that when I came out to myself that I was going to hell."

The participants noted that the things Christians say about sexuality and spirituality make it difficult to be a faithful gay person. Lizbeth said:

I had to stop and really look at what spirituality, what God would think of, or what people interpret God to think of those things. And for the most part, it was God hates gays. And I think that had put a halt to my spiritual growth because I felt like I can't believe in or

follow a God who would make someone this way and then not love them. Those were my feelings and at the time, I could not reconcile the two. So, at the time, I just gave up the spiritual part for a while.

The participants' experiences at Christian higher education institutions were mixed. The students described their experiences with their professors as positive. Each of the nine participants indicated that most of the professors validated them and their experiences. Elliot described coming out and the support of her professors, "It's actually been really comfortable for me to come out at the university. Much more so than just around town. And I think the professors are really good about it." However, eight participants also said that negativity came more from the students, rather than the professors and staff. The participants attributed this to a lack of education about these issues for the student population. For example, Lizbeth shared:

It surprised me that the students are the ones who, if at all, have a negative reaction toward the idea of the queer community. And I haven't had any bad experiences with professors. For the most part all of them seem to stick up for the students no matter what. The students that do have a negative reaction, again it either comes out of ignorance and they don't mean anything wrong, they just don't understand things.

For five participants, the spiritual experience at Christian higher education institutions was inconsistent. The policies at the university were not inclusive or accepting of gay identities; however, the actual experience with employees and students was accepting. This created an awkward, divided environment. For example, Gale shared, "There are a lot of older minded policies; very outdated philosophies. But the people who work there don't believe in them. They're kind of forced to support a structure they don't believe in, which I don't think is helpful." Gale went on to say, "I think the culture for sexual minorities, the infrastructure, is hostile, paired with people that are the opposite of hostile, that are very willing to accept and love. I think that makes for an awkward experience and very uneven." Another participant, Natasha, indicated:

One of the big things about the university is, I feel like the atmosphere and the front face of the university is very, very conservative Church of Christ and in reality almost everybody there is not. Most of the people are a lot less judgmental than you think they're going to be, or a lot less aggressively conservative than you think they're going to be.

### *Finding Reconciliation and Acceptance*

As noted previously, participants expressed that the struggle and pain they experienced transformed their faith journeys. Eight of the students said the suffering shaped and changed them. When asked how he handles challenges and hardships, Jacques said, “It has evolved extensively.” He went on to say:

Don't try to fight against suffering, because it's going to happen anyways. But kind of what I've been trying to do, trying to work on, trying to develop is something that I actually get from one of my favorite thinkers. Essentially, what he hopes that the individual can learn to do, is that they can learn to see their suffering in a new way. Instead of just trying to avoid it or pretend it's not there. But to recognize it and see it in a different way. Maybe learn to see it as beautiful because it's shaped you, it's changed you, it's created you. Even if it was hard, it offered you something in some way. And to try and learn to see that as beautiful because the suffering is not going to stop and it's not going to change. So you just have to learn how to cope.

Through the struggles they experienced, the participants were able to reconcile their spiritual beliefs with their gay identities, as well as come to a place of acceptance. For example, Elliot shared what she learned through her college experience:

The number one word that pops in my mind is just acceptance. I've learned both socially and through my faith just to accept myself and to accept other people because they can't change it. That's the number one thing that pops into my head. That and tolerance. I've learned a lot of tolerance.

Lizbeth indicated she struggled to reconcile her beliefs and her sexual identity. The university environment provided the space for her to wrestle with these challenges. Lizbeth described her experience:

I'm just trying to figure out what is truth and what resonates with me. Right now, I don't feel that God hates people; I think that Christians hate people, even though they're not

supposed to. I'm just trying to find this middle ground of spiritual belief and practice but also something that will encompass the things that are important to me that are LGBT issues and my identity.

In dealing with struggle and hardships, seven of the participants said they practiced various forms of spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, meditation, quiet reflection, and solitude.

When asked about how he dealt with hardships, Edward shared, "I've also learned the importance of spiritual disciplines to help me decide these things, or just any question I have; any decision I am trying to make. Or any wisdom I might have or might have to answer."

Edward went on to say, "I always go to God first, in prayer or in some solitude or just in some silence and just listening. I try to not get overly stressed." Angelina dealt with struggles and hardships through solitude and reflection. Angelina described her coping mechanism:

I love the lake. Not because it's awesome, because it's very quiet in the middle of crazy. I will go to the lake and sit on my trunk or the hood of my car and just sit and look at the stars if its night. If it's day, I'll count the cars that go by. It's a place for me that is very peaceful for me.

The participants also noted that finding their sense of belonging with others helped them find acceptance. They surrounded themselves with people that supported them. This allowed them to internalize their value and find hope from those who care about them. Each of the nine participants' support network was different; however, each network provided some degree of emotional or spiritual support. For example, Lizbeth, Natasha, Joyce, Edward, Gale, and Francesca were all actively involved in the gender acceptance organization at their university. This organization provided a group of friends and a support network for the participants. Lizbeth described her experience, "the group really was the highlight of the year and it just really tied everything together. It was where most of my friends came from and it was consistent." For Francesca, finding a welcoming and inclusive church gave her a sense of belonging and provided the space for her to find value and acceptance. Francesca provided a moving account of her

confirmation experience:

The seventh of January was when I was confirmed. It was probably one of the most meaningful things. The whole choir came out of the choir loft to lay hands on me because that's how they do it -- Episcopal tradition. And that's how I made my peace with God. Is that I found this one church and maybe not all Episcopal churches are like that. But this one church that showed me what it was to be a Christian, just accepted me with open arms when nobody else would. And still, it's the only place that I sang, so, it's really the only place that I felt at peace.

### *The Importance of Support*

Support for gay and lesbian students from the university, student organizations, and friends was a clear theme shared by all participants. Seven participants said it was important for the university to have a student organization or support group specifically for gay and lesbian students. Within this group, students were able to talk, share, feel safe, and feel at home. When talking about the student organization at his university, Gale indicated that the group, “has the potential to help immensely for a lot of people. A lot of these students are coming from very conservative backgrounds and they need education and support and they need to know there are other people like them.” Providing these groups helped to create an accepting environment and provided support for gay and lesbian students. Lizbeth shared about her experience with the student organization:

The minute I stepped into that group, it was just so refreshing to see all these people openly talking about sexuality. It wasn't a taboo thing. And thankfully, when I'm in that group of people who talk about the gay and lesbian issues, I don't think I've ever felt safer or more like myself or more free to be myself.

Lizbeth went on to describe how it felt to meet weekly with likeminded friends, “Just to feel safe and sort of at home, or better than at home.”

Sexuality and gender acceptance student organizations also provided a place for students to discuss important issues and learn from others. Natasha said the group provided:

...opportunities for people to really talk about things and not feel like they're going to get judged and really express whatever they're feeling and whatever they're struggling with in a situation that is very supportive, very educational and not just a place for people to rant, but a place for people to really get to know each other and get to know themselves.

Edward described his experience with the sexuality and gender acceptance organization as an important aspect of his time at the university. He shared:

It was a place that I could just talk to people about all these issues and also hear about other people who have had experience with the other letters in the LGBTQ alphabet. It was a good experience. It was a good conversation to have. I have learned a ton through them. It definitely has been a good experience for sure!

Having a safe environment at the university was also essential to all nine participants.

Angelina described the environment at her university as safe. She indicated that having this safe environment:

But the university especially is a place where it's safe. It's a safe environment to be in. It made it a lot easier to make that transition to who I am from who I appeared to be and who I should be to who I want to be and who I actually am. It made it a very easy transition.

Finding safe spaces and safe people was critical for the participants to be able to comfortably learn and grow. Francesca believed that having visibly identified safe zones or safe spaces is important for gay and lesbian students. She shared:

There's safe zones but you have to find them yourself, they're not marked with a big sign on the door. Dr. K was very helpful in just sitting down with me and just talking about my life. And it helps to know who the people are on campus that are okay to go to if you're an LGBTQ person. Because it's not always the counselor or upper administration, it's sometimes just the teachers that either have brother or because of their background are understanding or accepting of deviant sexualities. And you have to find those for yourself, sadly, on campus. I feel like the Safe Zone training and identifying who those individuals are would be helpful for people if they need someone to go to.

Every participant noted that it was critically important to have professors and staff that supported their experiences and were there to listen. For Angelina having professors that care about students was important. Angelina shared, "At the university, you are very much a person

that matters. Your professors care about you and they want to see you succeed. And that's a very positive role.” Jacques indicated how powerful it was to have faculty members that listened to him and supported him. Jacques shared:

To just have people in the faculty who would just be willing to sit there and listen. Like for example, Dr. W was always there to let me do that. There were so many times that I would just go to his office and I couldn't be angry anymore, where I'd just start crying. And he would just sit there and listen. That was really helpful, to have someone there to listen when you cry is really all you need.

Gale said when he decided to come out, he had very low expectations for people's recreations. However, “Teachers were so open. Immense support!” Lizbeth experienced a very positive, meaningful experience when a faculty member came to the sexuality and gender acceptance organization's meeting. Lizbeth described that moment:

She just validated our existence and for us to have a place in the Christian community. I thought it was interesting that she prayed for other people to have a heart. I didn't think that non-gay Christians thought that way, so it gave me hope.

While the participants stressed the importance of having someone to support gay and lesbian students, three students indicated the negative impact that professors had on their experiences. One participant shared how damaging it was for her when a faculty member told her in class that she chose to be gay. Angelina described the encounter:

I was told that I chose to be gay. That was a very standoffish point in the class and for the rest of that lecture I completely shut down, because it wasn't a choice to me. And for someone to sit there and tell me that I chose that and I chose the life I live and the hardships I face and the discrimination I face, that's not a life anyone would choose.

Eight of the nine participants expressed the importance of having a strong, accepting, supportive network of friends. These networks provided crucial support for participants in times of hardships. Natasha shared how caring people in her life helped her find hope in difficult times:

I kind of find myself relapsing into hope. I'll hit rock bottom and I'll just give up and I'll feel like nothing is ever going to get better. I'll try everything I can think of and nothing seems to help. And then, hope sneaks up on me from people who care about me.

The participants' friends also provided a sense of belonging when they were grappling with issues related to sexuality and spirituality. When asked what helps her through times of struggle,

Angelina said:

The friends I've made in my club, and the people I've met through my club are there for me. I know that no matter what's happening, I have that support. In all of this stuff, I have that support group that no matter what I have that support group that will do anything for me.

Francesca admitted that it is difficult for a gay or lesbian individual to feel comfortable on campus. However, she shared that her friends helped create an accepting environment. Francesca shared, "There is still a really long way to go before an LGBTQ person can feel at home on campus. But, in my own individual finding of friends, I've found a lot of just really accepting people." For Joyce, the friends she made at church provided this network of support and a safe environment for her and her partner:

But all my church friends are super supportive. They think we're adorable. The church that we go to is also super supportive of LGBT community. It's actually one of the places that they give out as safe places to go.

### *The Essence of Spirituality for Gay and Lesbian College Students*

The overall essence of spirituality for these participants involved moving through times of struggle, pain, and anger to find a sense of hope and a place of acceptance. The participants' experiences involved safe spaces in which they could engage in meaningful discussion, grapple with difficult issues, and be their true selves. The university setting provided the environment for these experiences. This environment was at times very supportive, while at other times divisive and painful. Overall, the participants described their lived experiences at the universities to involve struggle, but ultimately also finding a place of peace and acceptance.

## Discussion

Recall that the purpose of this study was to describe how gay and lesbian college students experience two inner spiritual qualities – spiritual quest and equanimity. Analyzing interview data from nine gay and lesbian college students, I identified three predominant themes: (1) spiritual quest characterized by struggle and pain, (2) finding reconciliation and acceptance, and (3) the importance of intentional support for gay and lesbian students from the university, student organizations, friends, and family. These three themes discovered in the current study confirmed previous research conducted by Bryant (2012), Love et al. (2005), Tan (2005), and Wentz & Wessel (2011).

Results from the current study suggested that gay and lesbian students experience spiritual quest characterized by struggle and pain. This corroborates previous findings that gay and lesbian college students experience pain, loneliness, fear, and anger in relation to their spiritual experiences (Love, 1997; Love et al., 2005; Yarhouse et al., 2009). For example, Jacques described experiencing a great deal of pain related to his spiritual experiences at church. Francesca and Angelina expressed anger related to the relationships and experiences they encountered.

Research conducted by Bryant and Astin (2008), Bryant et al. (2012), and Fisler et al. (2009) revealed details related to college students' spiritual struggle. While their research primarily focused on heterosexual students, it affirmed that most college students do experience spiritual struggle. The results of the current study confirmed Bryant and Astin, Bryant et al., and Fisler et al.'s research. All nine participants in the present study struggled with faith and spirituality at some point throughout college. However, their struggle had an added dimension related to their sexual identities. For example, several participants struggled with keeping their

faith while questioning their sexualities. In the context of their church environments, seven participants indicated they were not capable of being open with their sexual identities. This created an atmosphere where they did not feel comfortable and struggled with their involvement in church. This confirms previous findings that gay and lesbian students experience an increased level of spiritual struggle (Bryant et al.).

The university environment impacted the students' spiritual experiences and struggles. Five participants described their spiritual experiences at their institution as inconsistent. Similar to research conducted by Love (1997), Wentz and Wessel (2011), and Yarhouse et al. (2009), participants in the current study experienced conflict with respect to university policies and their lived experiences. Gale and Natasha described the lived experience for gay and lesbian students on campus as incongruent with institutional policies. The policies were not inclusive or accepting of gay identities; however, the actual experience at the university was accepting. This finding is consistent with that of Wentz and Wessel's work and affirmed the need for universities to find a balance between policies and students' lived experiences.

Secondly, participants in the current study found hope and reconciliation through experiencing spiritual struggles, engaging in student organizations, and participating in dialogue and identity exploration. Similar to Love et al. (2005), seven participants in the present study described how the struggle with their faith and sexuality transformed their spiritual journeys. Elliot shared that through her spiritual struggle, her sexual identity strengthened her spirituality and prayer life. Through this experience she was able to accept herself and find peace. Love et al.'s work highlighted the impact of the coming out process on students' level of spiritual struggle and growth. The current study supported Love et al.'s findings that gay and lesbian students' spirituality is impacted by their level of acceptance of their sexual identities.

Similar to the findings of Astin et al. (2011), eight participants in the present study experienced suffering and pain in their search for meaning and purpose. Consistent with Astin et al.'s work, this suffering and pain either halted or assisted their spiritual growth. Participants dealt with these struggles and hardships through practices of reflection, prayer, solitude, and dialogue with supportive peers and faculty members. Astin et al. found that students engaged in inner work such as prayer, reflection, and meditation experienced the greatest growth in the five spiritual qualities. The current study supported Astin et al.'s finding that when students experience spiritual struggle they utilize practices of inner spiritual work to grow and develop.

Consistent with previous research (Bryant et al., 2012; Love, 1997; Wentz & Wessel, 2011), the results of this study confirmed the need for space on college campus where gay and lesbian students can participate in dialogue and spiritual exploration. Sexuality and gender acceptance organizations provided this type of space. Edward, Natasha, Joyce, Gale, Francesca, and Lizbeth all described how significant their involvement in this type of student organization was for them to find acceptance and hope.

Finally, the results of the current study revealed the importance of intentional support for gay and lesbian students from the university, student organizations, friends, and family. Seven participants said it was important for the university to have a student organization or support group specifically for gay and lesbian students. It was critical for these organizations to be officially recognized by the university. For the students, having an official university organization provided validation of their identities and experiences. As noted in previous literature (Love, 1997; Love et al., 2005), it is important for universities to demonstrate caring and acceptance through their policies. Universities can do this by officially recognizing a sexual identity acceptance organization.

In addition to student organizations, participants shared that creating a supportive campus environment impacted their spiritual growth. Having a safe environment on campus was essential for all nine participants. This corroborated the previous findings of Stratton et al. (2013) and Yarhouse et al. 2009 that campus climate and resources at Christian universities influence sexual minority students' experiences.

Faculty members also played a key role in creating a welcoming environment for the participants to explore their faith in relation to their sexuality. This finding is similar to the research conducted by Astin et al. (2011) and Yarhouse et al. (2009). Faculty members were in the position to cultivate a classroom environment that was accepting of differences and welcomed dialogue. Astin et al. (2011) underscored the impact faculty have on students' spiritual quest. Faculty members also served as mentors for the participants. In times of struggle and hardships, the students turned to trusted faculty members for support and guidance. Contrary to faculty members' positive impact on gay and lesbian students, Yarhouse et al. highlighted the reality that individual students are less supportive. Participant responses in the current study affirmed Yarhouse et al.'s finding, noting that many students were homophobic and unwelcoming. Lizbeth described that most of the homophobia and negativity on campus came from the students.

Finding supportive and accepting peers helped create a network of care for participants. Eight participants expressed the importance of this supportive network of friends. They indicated that this network of peers provided participants with the space to openly discuss issues and find a sense of belonging. Strayhorn's (2012) work emphasized the importance of belonging on college students' development. The present study supported Strayhorn's findings that developing belonging in a college environment can positively impact students' growth.

In addition, having a strong group of supportive friends gave the participants a place where they could be themselves and grow spiritually. The importance of having supportive peers with whom students could engage in conversations related to meaning and purpose supported the findings of Astin et al.'s (2011) work. Astin et al. indicated that students have a desire to share their spiritual experiences with friends. Astin et al. also noted that students whom participate in discussions related to meaning and purpose with friends show a great growth in spiritual quest. In addition, these findings are consistent Strayhorn's (2012) work with college students' sense of belonging. Strayhorn suggested that students must first establish a sense of belonging before developing a healthy self-esteem. When the participants of this study felt as though they belonged, they felt more comfortable to be themselves and engage in meaningful conversations.

### *Implications*

Findings from this study have many implications. First, the participants in this study shared that it is important to have an officially recognized student organization for the support of gay and lesbian students. A recognized student organization validates the experiences of gay and lesbian students. It also provides students with connections and a group of individuals with whom to share their stories. In addition, a student group provides a safe space and support network for gay and lesbian students to explore their spiritual identities.

Students in this study managed hardships and dealt with challenges by seeking solitude, praying, and engaging in meditation and reflection. Therefore, it is important for universities to recognize the need for spaces on campus that allow for practices that enhance spiritual growth. In addition to meditation and reflection spaces, participants of the current study indicated that it is important to have designated safe spaces for gay and lesbian students. Visible safe spaces can

create a welcoming environment by helping gay and lesbian students feel safe and included in the community.

The current study showed that in order for gay and lesbian students to develop equanimity and a sense of purpose, they need a welcoming environment at the university. Therefore, it is important for universities to cultivate a community where all people are welcomed and included. This environment is established through supportive programs, faculty, staff, and peers. Participants in this study also indicated that college students need opportunities to learn about differences in safe environments where they can dialogue about difficult issues. Creating an environment that values differences and respects dialogue can help all students engage in difficult conversations and learn from their experiences.

The results of this study revealed that gay and lesbian students often experience inconsistency related to university policies and their lived experience. The policies at religious institutions painted the picture of an unwelcoming environment for gay and lesbian students. However, the lived experience was, for the most part, welcoming and inclusive.

### *Recommendations for Practice*

Based on the results of the study, I offer some practical and policy recommendations for consideration. The results of this study revealed the importance of having an officially recognized sexuality and gender acceptance student organization. With this in mind, religious-affiliated institutions might consider establishing this type of student organization for gay and lesbian students. In addition to a recognized student organization, it is important for universities to have identified safe spaces for gay and lesbian students. Developing a safe zone or safe space training program on Christian college campuses is an important step that can allow gay and

lesbian students to feel more welcome and safe. To that end, universities might consider providing willing faculty and staff members with safe zone training. Having visible signs or symbols of safe zones will help to foster a campus environment of inclusion for gay and lesbian students.

In order to create an environment that allows for spiritual growth and exploration, universities may want to consider creating spaces for personal reflection, meditation, prayer, and solitude that are inclusive of all students. Designating spaces for reflection and meditation can encourage and support these practices of spiritual growth. To create this type of environment, administrators might work with gay and lesbian students at each campus to develop a design and plan for these spaces. In addition to working with students, spiritual life staff members can provide guidance for creating meditation and reflection spaces.

It is important for universities to cultivate a community where all people are welcomed and included. To achieve this, universities might think about creating educational and outreach programs for faculty, staff, and students to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills related to supporting gay and lesbian students. Helping the entire university population understand the issues gay and lesbian students face can create opportunities for dialogue, understanding, and acceptance. These programs could consist of bringing expert speakers to campus or having campus role models and leaders speak to the importance and need for inclusion and support for the LGBT population. Providing students, faculty, and staff opportunities to dialogue about these important issues is important as well. Programs like Café Conversations or intentional dialogue training are designed to bring individuals together to constructively and peacefully dialogue across issues. These programs provide a comfortable space for individuals to discuss important issues that could be divisive.

In addition to educational programs, university administrators may want to review their current policies and procedures to evaluate if these might negatively impact gay and lesbian students' experiences. Participants in the current study indicated that university policies were inconsistent with their lived experiences. University administrators could possibly evaluate current policies, statements, and procedures that could negatively impact a gay or lesbian student's experience. Working together with campus religious leaders to evaluate current policies and to consider rewriting them to contain more welcoming and inclusive language could be helpful for cultivating a safe environment for gay and lesbian students.

#### *Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research*

The sensitive nature of the topics of spirituality and sexual orientation presented limitations to this study. Spirituality is a subjective, often times controversial and misunderstood topic. In addition, spirituality can be a sensitive subject for some individuals to discuss. Sexual orientation is also a very sensitive, controversial subject. Student participants found it difficult to share their experiences related to their sexual orientation and spiritual experiences.

The original goal for sample size in this study was to 20 to 25 participants. However, the sensitive, private nature of the topics made it challenging to recruit participants, resulting in a sample size of nine participants. Having a sample of nine participants limited the volume of responses received in this study. Lack of diversity in the sample was also a limitation. Of the nine participants in this study, seven were white and two were Hispanic. The sample was primarily white and lacked diversity with respect to having numerous races and ethnicities represented.

Another limitation of this research is related to the trustworthiness of the research

process. As the primary researcher in this study, I coded the data alone without using a coding team. This presented a limitation to the trustworthiness of the data as I did not have a team of researchers reaching consensus about the themes revealed in the study. In addition, this study was delimited to students' experiences at two private Christian universities.

In order to capture more students' experiences and stories, this type of study should be conducted on additional, diverse campuses. Understanding the lived experience of gay and lesbian students at other college campuses can help expand the current knowledge base and assist with developing stronger resources for students. In addition to conducting additional research at diverse campuses, future research examining the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian college students should be conducted using a more diverse sample. Intentionally diversifying the sample to include students representing multiple races, ethnicities, and religions will provide more in-depth insight into the lived experience of spirituality for different populations. Surveying more students at varied institutions would provide greater richness of data and help increase our understanding of their needs and issues impacting their success.

The students in the current study identified relationships with faculty members as having a positive impact on their experience. Further research should also be done to explore the impact of relationships with faculty members on students' spiritual growth. Additionally, more in-depth research should be conducted to explore the intersectionality of multiple identities – gay/lesbian identity and spiritual identity. Very little research exists to help student affairs practitioners understand how these two identities interact.

## Conclusion

I conducted this study with the hope of increasing the understanding of the lived

experience of spirituality for gay and lesbian college students enrolled in Christian higher education institutions. This research revealed that gay and lesbian college students experienced spiritual struggle, anger, and pain. Through personal meditation, reflection, prayer, and solitude, as well as engaging in meaningful dialogue and experiences with faculty and friends, these students were able to find hope and acceptance. The results of this study added to the limited knowledge about gay and lesbian students' spiritual growth and their search for meaning and purpose. The results also underscored the importance of peer groups, faculty support, safe spaces, and the university environment for gay and lesbian students' spiritual development.

It is my hope that the results of this study will encourage higher education professionals to strive to create environments that cultivate the spiritual growth and development of all college students. It is also my hope that future researchers will continue to study the important topic of spirituality of other marginalized college student populations. Meeting the spiritual needs of all students is critically important to their holistic development and pursuit of meaning and purpose.

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APPENDIX A  
INTRODUCTION

Previous research related to college students and religious development indicated that students' religiousness and religious activities significantly decreased during their time in college (Astin, 1993; Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Religiousness and religious activities were associated with church affiliation, attending religious services, practicing prayer, and a belief in God. Much of early research focused on students' religious development, but very little focused on students' spiritual development (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). In recent years, scholarly interest in the study of students' spirituality and spiritual development has increased (Astin et al., 2011; Stamm, 2006b; Tisdell, 2003). Researchers demonstrated an increase in college students' desire to integrate spirituality into their lives through dialogue, reflection, and behavior (Astin et al., 2011; Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

A recent seven-year study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) examined how students' spiritual qualities change during the college years and the role that college plays in facilitating spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011). Astin et al. developed measures of five spiritual qualities – equanimity, spiritual quest, ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview. They identified key college experiences that contribute to students' spiritual growth within these five spiritual qualities. The research team discovered that students actively engaged in “inner work” demonstrated the greatest growth within the five spiritual qualities. This “inner work” includes self-reflection, contemplation, or meditation.

Among the 112, 232 students surveyed by HERI in 2004 (Higher Education Research Institute, n.d.), four in five indicated “having an interest in spirituality” and “believing in the

sacredness of life.” Nearly half of the students identified seeking opportunities to help them grow spiritually as essential or very important. About 75% said that they were “searching for meaning and purpose in life” and that they discuss the meaning of life with friends.

Despite spirituality being a topic of research and significant interest in higher education, for the gay and lesbian population, spirituality has been a painful issue presenting many challenges (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). Themes of conflict, contradiction, and contrast can be found throughout the literature on gay and lesbian spirituality (Bryant, Walker, Luzader, 2012; Love, 1997; Love et al., 2005; Stevens, 2004). Many students struggle to reconcile their spirituality with their sexuality (Bryant et al., 2012). Gay and lesbian students are the minority and tend to be marginalized within many spiritual and religious contexts.

#### Statement of the Problem

Spirituality and spiritual development are important aspects of a student’s development in college (Astin et al., 2011). The inner work students do to explore spirituality and develop spiritual identity is a vital aspect of their identity development (Astin et al., 2011; Stamm, 2006b; Tisdell, 2003). The small amount of literature on gay and lesbian college student spirituality revealed an interconnectedness between sexual identity development and spiritual identity development (Kocet, Sanabria, Smith, 2011; Love, 1997; Love et al., 2005; Stevens, 2004). Although this connection exists, little research has been conducted to explore the connection and evaluate the experiences of gay and lesbian students (Bryant et al., 2012; Love et al., 2005).

Institutions of higher education have a commitment to developing the whole person. According to the Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Higher Education, 1949), “The concept of education is broadened to include attention to the students’ well-rounded

development—physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually—as well as intellectually” (p. 17). In many cases, however, spiritual lives of college students have been neglected. Dalton et al. (2006) cautioned institutions about “honoring the life of the mind while relegating the spiritual and religious concerns of students to the purely private domain” (p. 18). Student affairs professionals strive to serve all students in every aspect of their development. It has been noted in the literature that gay and lesbian students struggle spiritually because of their marginalized status within spiritual contexts (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Love et al., 2005). Therefore, a need exists to better understand the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian students in order to serve this population and meet their needs. This study will use qualitative methods to learn about gay and lesbian students’ spiritual experiences at a private, religious, liberal arts higher education institution.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to describe how gay and lesbian college students experience the two inner spiritual qualities identified by Astin et al. (2011) – spiritual quest and equanimity. In this study, I will use a phenomenological qualitative approach in order to learn about the spiritual experience of gay and lesbian students from their perspective. I hope to discover the meaning of the inner spiritual qualities of spiritual quest and equanimity from those who have experienced the phenomenon of spirituality (Creswell, 2007). The results of this study can have implications for those who work closely with college students.

## Theoretical Framework

There are two components of my theoretical framework. The first theory was developed by Astin et al. (2011) from their national study on college students' search for meaning and purpose. Astin et al. (2011) identified five spiritual measures. The first group of spiritual measures addressed internal aspects of students' spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011). These internal measures are spiritual quest and equanimity. Spiritual quest addressed students' interest in "searching for meaning/purpose in life, finding answers to the mysteries in life, attaining inner harmony, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life" (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20). Equanimity referred to the extent that a student "feels at peace or is centered, is able to find meaning in times of hardship, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of his/her life" (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20).

The second group of spiritual measures addressed more external aspects of students' spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011). These external measures are ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview. Ethic of caring can be defined as a student's "degree of commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, reducing pain and suffering in the world, promoting racial understanding, trying to change things that are unfair in the world, and making the world a better place" (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20). Charitable involvement is a "behavioral measure that includes activities such as participating in community service, donating money to charity, and helping friends with personal problems" (Astin et al., 2011, p. 21). The final spiritual measure is ecumenical worldview. Ecumenical worldview refers to the degree to which a student is interested in different religious traditions, seeks to understand other countries and cultures, feels a strong connection to all humanity, believes in the goodness of all people, accepts others as they are, and believes that all life is interconnected and that love is at the root of

all the great religions. (Astin et al., 2011, p. 21). For the purpose of this study, I will use spiritual quest and equanimity to learn about the inner spiritual journeys of the participants.

Astin et al. (2011) administered a survey called the College Student Beliefs and Values Survey (CSBV) in 2004 to 112,232 first-year students as an addendum to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey. After three years, Astin and his colleagues administered the CSBV survey to a follow-up group of students at 136 of the 236 original institutions that had participated in the 2004 survey. Overall, 14,527 completed surveys were received from 136 institutions. Upon analysis, the data revealed results consistent with the CSBV pilot survey of 2003. Astin et al. were confident in the patterns and measures of spirituality and religiousness. They indicated that these patterns of consistency gave them confidence that they were “dealing with measures that carried wide application” (p. 20).

D’Augelli’s (1994a) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development will serve as another piece of the theoretical framework guiding this study. D’Augelli (1994a) developed this model from a human development point of view. This type of model approaches sexual orientation as a fluid process, not a stage or linear model. D’Augelli’s (1994a) model takes into consideration the influence of personal subjectivities and actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections. Personal subjectivities and actions include how individuals make meaning of their experiences, how they create their sexual lives and feel about them, and an individual’s behavior patterns. Personal subjectivities and actions are influenced by and influence an individual’s interactive intimacies. Interactive intimacies include one’s parents, family, peers, and partnerships. These relationships influence how sexuality is developed and defined by an individual. The first two elements, personal subjectivities and actions and interactive intimacies, result from and are influenced by the third element, sociohistorical

connections. The social customs, policy, law, and cultural concepts that an individual experiences can significantly impact his or her identity development, particularly one's identity related to sexual orientation.

D'Augelli's (1994a) model is based on the concept of developmental plasticity. "Plasticity suggests that human functioning is highly responsive to environmental circumstances and to changes induced by physical and other biological factors" (D'Augelli, 1994a, p. 320). Given the nature of identity development in college and the influential aspects of the environment and policies, D'Augelli's model was a good fit for this study. The meaning making, relationship, and sociohistorical dimensions of D'Augelli's model fit well with the study of the intersection of sexual orientation and spirituality.

There are six interactive processes within D'Augelli's (1994a) model. These processes are (1) exiting heterosexual identity, (2) developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status, (3) developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity, (4) becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring, (5) developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status, and (6) entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community (D'Augelli, 1994a).

### Research Questions

This is a phenomenological study in which I will strive to describe and interpret the meaning of the lived experiences of spirituality for gay and lesbian college students (Creswell, 2007). The following research questions will serve as a guide for the study:

1. What are ways that gay and lesbian students develop a meaningful philosophy of life? (spiritual quest)
2. How do gay and lesbian students search for meaning and purpose in life? (spiritual quest)
3. How do gay and lesbian students try to attain inner harmony? (spiritual quest)

4. How do gay and lesbian students find meaning in times of hardship? (equanimity)
5. How do gay and lesbian students find peace and nurture a sense of calm in their lives?  
(equanimity)
6. How do gay and lesbian students feel about the direction in which their lives are headed?  
(equanimity)

#### Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is paramount as the results will provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of an often over-looked or under-studied population. Bryant et al. (2012) recommended that a “more in-depth exploration of the nature of spiritual struggles for marginalized and non-marginalized groups of students would be instructive” (p. 73). The authors continued the discussion on gay and lesbian students’ spiritual struggles by adding that “their narratives add weight to the pressing concern regarding reconciliation of spirituality and sexuality, but our understanding of this dynamic remains rather limited” (Bryant et al., 2012, p. 73). Dalton et al. (2006) posed that, “Any effort to describe student spirituality should also include some effort to listen to the voices of students as they describe their own purposes for engaging in the inward journey as well as the nature of their experiences” (p. 9).

In this study I will allow the marginalized population of gay and lesbian students to share their experiences and describe their spiritualities. It is my hope that these narratives give insight into the spiritual development of this population. The results of this study may deepen our understanding of the spiritual identity and experience of gay and lesbian college students. This knowledge can help inform the way student affairs professionals work with students throughout their search for meaning and purpose.

## Limitations and Delimitations

The sensitive nature of the topics of spirituality and sexual orientation present limitations to the study. Spirituality is a subjective, often times controversial and misunderstood topic. Spirituality also lends itself to being a sensitive topic. Sexual orientation is also a very sensitive, controversial subject. Student participants might find it difficult to share their experiences related to their sexual orientation and spiritual experiences. I will work hard to establish rapport with each participant and ensure confidentiality throughout the study. However, these issues might limit the progress of the study. In addition to the sensitive nature of the topics, this study was delimited to students' experiences at one institution.

## Organization of the Study

This research proposal is presented in three chapters. Chapter I includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, research questions, significance of the study, and limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter II presents a review of the literature covering spiritual development theories, spirituality and college students' experiences, sexual identity development theories, and the intersection of spirituality and sexual identity. Chapter III describes the methodology that will be used for this research study. It includes a description of phenomenological research methods, the selection of participants, institutional context, data collection and data analysis procedures.

APPENDIX B  
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of literature for this study is divided into five sections. These sections are spiritual development theories, spirituality and college students' experiences, spiritual struggle, sexual identity development theories, and the intersection of spirituality and sexual identity. Within each section, I will address the relevance to higher education policies and practices.

### Spiritual Development Theories

Spiritual development theories were not given serious consideration within student affairs in the 1980's and 1990's (Love, 2002). In recent years, with the surge of interest in spirituality and spiritual development, many student affairs professionals started to look at two major spiritual development theories that have applications in student affairs practice (Cady, 2007; Evans et al., 2010; Love, 2001; Love, 2002). These two theories were developed by James Fowler (1981) and Sharon Daloz Parks (2000). In addition to these two theories, a recent longitudinal study on college student spirituality was conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). Astin et al.'s study provided researchers with a strong foundation for future research on the spiritual development of college students.

It is important to make a distinction between spirituality and religion. According to Speck (2007), "Religion denotes a set of precepts that must be affirmed; spirituality, on the other hand, does not carry the doctrinal baggage characteristic of religion and allows flexibility because nobody has to believe in a prescribed set of precepts" (p. 24). Love (2002) indicated there are three fundamental elements essential to all religions. These elements are a quest for the ultimate, communicating to others by means of story and symbol, and finally, developing the religious experiences into doctrine or dogma. Astin et al. (2011) described religion as "involving

adherence to a set of faith-based beliefs (and related practices) concerning both the origins of the world and the nature of the entity or being that is believed to have created and govern the world” (p. 5). Key aspects of religion include being a member of a community of like-minded believers and participating in rituals or ceremonies within this community.

Spirituality, unlike religion, points to our interior, subjective lives (Astin et al., 2011). Many definitions of spirituality include an aspect of searching for meaning and purpose in one’s life (Astin et al., 2011; Love et al., 2005). At its core, spirituality is about making meaning, seeking personal authenticity and wholeness, developing a sense of connectedness, exploring a relationship with a higher power, and honoring the sacred in our lives (Astin et al., 2011; Love, 2002; Love et al., 2005; Tisdell, 2003).

For the purpose of this research study, I will explore the spirituality of gay and lesbian students. Ritter and O’Neill (1989) indicated that for gay and lesbian students, the topic of spirituality presents great challenges and pain. According to Love et al. (2005), many gay and lesbian students experienced pain and loss in the spiritual aspects of their lives. de la Huerta (1999) pointed out that spirituality is a priority for some gay or lesbian students. I chose to explore the concept of spirituality rather than religion because is a more broad, inclusive construct. Spirituality refers to our interior, subjective lives; it deals with our values, sense of who we are and how we make meaning of our lived experiences (Astin et al., 2011). Religion, on the other hand, involves adhering to a set of faith-based believes, being a member of a community of like-minded believers, and participation in rituals or ceremonies within the community (Astin et al., 2011). Spirituality is a broader, more widely experienced phenomenon. Therefore, I chose to study the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian students.

## Fowler's Stages of Faith Development

James Fowler studied how psychology, theology, and human development intersected (Love, 2002). Fowler conducted research on stages of faith development. According to Fowler, faith transcended cultural, historical, and religious differences (Broughton, 1986). Faith was deeper and more personal than religion and developed through cognitive processes and ways of knowing (Broughton, 1986).

Fowler and his research team conducted 359 interviews from 1972 to 1981 (Fowler, 1981). Participants ranged from three-and-a-half to eighty-four years old; men and women were equally represented; but the majority of the sample (97.8%) was white. The sample was primarily Christian, with only 3.6% from other, non-Christian orientations. Fowler used the term faith separate from religion. Fowler (1981) believed faith was a universal and relational construct and was highly connected to our identities.

Throughout his study of faith, Fowler (1981) identified one pre-stage and six stages of faith development. These stages are Undifferentiated, Intuitive-Projective, Mythic-Literal, Synthetic-Conventional, Individuative-Reflective, Conjunctive, and Universalizing. Within the pre-stage, called Undifferentiated faith, trust, courage, hope, and love merge together in an undifferentiated way. These are all influenced by the possibility of abandonment and inconsistencies in an infant's environment. The level of strength of trust, courage, hope, and love can provide the foundation for the later stages of faith development. Stage one, Intuitive-Projective faith, is characterized by fantasy and imagination. In this stage, images and feelings created by the imagination dominate a child's way of thinking, rather than self-reflection and rational thinking. As a child develops concrete ways of thinking, he or she moves to stage two, Mythic-Literal faith. This stage is characterized by "stories, beliefs and observances that

symbolize belonging to his or her community” (Fowler, 1981, p. 149). To children in this stage fairness, justice, and reciprocity are important.

Stages three and four, Synthetic-Conventional and Individuative-Reflective correspond with traditional-aged college students (Fowler, 1981). In the Synthetic-Conventional Faith stage, students are able to think abstractly but are influenced by numerous things such as family, school, peers, media, even religion. Faith is an important part of their identity and outlook; however, according to Fowler (1981), this is a conformist stage, in that individuals are extremely influenced by expectations and judgments of significant people in their lives. Transition from stage three to stage four is characterized by an individual taking personal responsibility for his or her own commitments and lifestyle and by being defined as an individual rather than as part of a group. According to Fowler (1981), the Individuative-Reflective stage has to do with the “capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology)” (p. 182). Identity and outlook are separated from the definitions of others and students begin to think and define these for themselves. These two stages, Synthetic-Conventional and Individuative-Reflective, are the two stages that traditional-aged college students will most likely present.

It is rare for an individual to reach stage five, Conjunctive faith, before mid-life (Fowler, 1981). Within the Conjunctive faith stage, an individual begins to realize the limits of logic and see life as a mystery. An individual in stage five accepts paradoxes and appreciates symbols, myths, and rituals. Fowler’s (1981) sixth phase, Universalizing faith, is rarely reached. Despite any threat to self, groups, or institutions, individuals within stage six become a “disciplined, activist incarnation—a making real and tangible—of imperatives of absolute love and justice” (Fowler, 1981, p. 200). Individuals in the Universalizing faith stage believe strongly in universal community and work diligently to achieve it. Fowler (1981) stated these individuals “have a

special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple, and yet somehow more fully human than the rest of us” (p. 201). Representatives of stage six include Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

There have been some criticisms of Fowler’s theory. A primary criticism of Fowler’s theory is that of the research design and methodology (Broughton, 1986; Evans et al., 2010). Fowler’s sample was not ethnically or religiously diverse. There were 359 participants and the sample is described as the following:

The respondents ranged from 3.5 to 84 years of age, with the largest number in the 21-30 age group. The majority (54.1%) of the respondents ranged in age from 13 to 40 years old. Males and females shared almost equal representation in the sample, but whites (97.8%) dominated the sample. There were more Protestants (45%) than Catholics (36.5%) or Jews (11.2%) in the sample, and only a small representation of Orthodox (3.6%) and other orientations (3.6%). (Fowler, 1981, pp. 315, 317)

Fowler even noted that the sample was “overwhelming white, largely Christian” (p. 317). The sample was evenly divided by gender; however, because Fowler also based his research on the work of male psychologist Piaget, researchers have questioned how applicable the theory is to women. Fowler reported higher scores for male subjects over female subjects (Broughton, 1986). Therefore, many question an inherent gender bias in the interview process and theory. In addition, Fowler (1981) and his research team did not run statistical significance or reliability tests on the sample. In later work conducted by Fowler, he did not conduct these tests on the sample either.

Another criticism of Fowler's work is the Christian bias of the sample. In addition to the majority of participants being Christian, critics question Fowler's personal influence on the research as a liberal Christian theologian (Stamm, 2006a). For example, Stage 6 of Fowler's theory is presented as the ideal; however, in his research, Fowler only identified one individual at Stage 6.

Fowler employed a cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal research design (Broughton, 1986). Critics of Fowler's theory question the use of this type of research design. Fowler and his team did not outline their research using a traditional framework. The lack of rationale for the development of interview questions and lack of explanation of the research design has been the source of many critiques (Broughton, 1986)

The linear, stage development aspects of Fowler's theory have also been criticized (Stamm, 2006a; Tisdell, 2003). Critics argue that faith development, as an aspect of human development, is not linear (Tisdell, 2003). For example, an individual may be in an advance stage of development; however a crisis may cause the individual to fall back, or return to, an early stage of development.

Stage six of Fowler's theory, Universalizing Faith, has also been heavily questioned (Broughton, 1986; Evans et al., 2010; Tisdell, 2003). The definition and existence of stage six has been criticized. In Fowler's theory, stage six was vaguely defined and did not truly account for the universality it claimed (Broughton, 1986). Fowler and his research team only identified one person that ever reached stage six. The other individuals identified as reaching stage six were not participants in the study; these individuals were identified as living lives similar to the description of stage six.

Despite the critiques of Fowler's Stages of Faith, this theory provides valuable information for student affairs professionals to more fully understand students' development, particularly with respect to spirituality (Evans et al., 2010; Stamm, 2006a). Higher education professionals can use Fowler's theory to gain insight into how students construct knowledge and make meaning of their experiences (Evans et al., 2010; Tisdell, 2003). Fowler's research served as the foundation for much of the research conducted in spiritual development today (Fisler et al., 2009). Making meaning of one's experiences is a critical aspect of higher education. Therefore, the insight offered by Fowler's stages of faith can be helpful for those working in higher education.

#### Parks' Faith Development Theory

Sharon Daloz Parks worked as a minister, teacher, counselor, and researcher on college campuses with students (Evans et al., 2010; Love, 2001). In her book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, Parks (2000) defined faith as "the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience" (p. 7). Parks drew on the previous work of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Gilligan, Perry, Kegan, and Fowler to develop her theory of faith formation. She argued that young adulthood was missing from Fowler's theory, which is a significant stage of development in which individuals are grappling with big questions related to purpose, vocation, and belonging.

Parks (2000) identified four periods of development—Adolescent/Conventional, Young Adult, Tested Adult, and Mature Adult. Within each period of development, Parks proposed three forms—forms of knowing (cognitive), forms of dependence (feeling and affective), and forms of community (social). Table 1 outlines Parks' (2000) periods of development and interacting components. Traditional-aged college students are primarily in the Young Adult

period of development. Through the probing commitment form of knowing, students will be exploring different forms of truth, different roles, relationships, and lifestyles and how these fit into how the students make meaning of themselves and the world. According to Parks (2000), this is a “serious, critically aware exploration of the adult world and the potential versions of the future that it offers, through which society’s vulnerability, strength, integrity, and possibilities are assessed” (p. 67-68). Parks (2000) emphasized the difference between inner-dependence and independence. This is a shift of dependence, recognizing one’s inner self as a source of authority and object of care. For young adults, it is a fragile inner-dependence, not because it is weak, but simply because it is a new experience and might be vulnerable.

Young adults experience forms of community through mentoring communities. Parks (2000) stressed the importance of these communities in allowing students to achieve their full potential. Parks (2000) stated that a mentoring community offers

a network of belonging in which young adults feel recognized as who they really are, and as who they are becoming. It offers both challenge and support and thus offers good company for both the emerging strength and the distinctive vulnerability of the young adult. (p. 95)

Table 1. Parks’ Periods of Faith Development  
(Parks, 2000, p. 91)

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

Parks built upon Fowler's framework in order to formulate her theory (Parks, 2000). She took the cognitive dimensions of Fowler's theory, particularly within the young adult development period, and integrated affective and social aspects of development (Love, 2001; Love, 2002; Parks, 2000). The addition of the affective and social aspects of development made Parks' theory much more useful for studying "both the structures and the content of meaning making" (Love, 2002, p. 373).

Critics of Parks' work identified some of the same issues as with Fowler's Stages of Faith theory. One critique is the Christian worldview of Parks' theory. Her language and processes mainly focused on the Christian population. In addition, Parks' (2000) sample consisted of ten males and ten females. These participants were mainly white students that all attended the same private, Protestant, liberal arts university.

Despite the critiques of Fowler and Parks' theories, they represent the most extensive, thorough explorations of spiritual development to date (Stamm, 2006a). Therefore, these two theories can significantly enhance our understanding of student development and the way we work with college students. Understanding the process in which students search for meaning and purpose and strive for authenticity is an important aspect of higher education.

#### The National Study on College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose

In 2003, UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute began a seven-year, longitudinal study, the National Study on College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose, that examined how students' spiritual qualities change during the college years and the role that college plays in facilitating spiritual development (Astin et al., 2011). Astin et al. (2011) administered a survey called the College Student Beliefs and Values Survey (CSBV) in 2004 to 112,232 first-year

students as an addendum to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey. After three years, Astin and his colleagues administered the CSBV survey to a follow-up group of students at 136 of the 236 original institutions that had participated in the 2004 survey. Overall, 14,527 completed surveys were received from 136 institutions. The data analysis from these surveys revealed results consistent with the results of the CSBV pilot survey of 2003. The patterns of consistency seen in the results gave Astin et al. (2011) great confidence that their measures of spirituality and religiousness carried wide application.

Based on the results of the CSBV, Astin et al. (2011) developed measures of five spiritual qualities – spiritual quest, equanimity, ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview. The research team discovered that students actively engaged in “inner work” demonstrated the greatest growth within the five spiritual qualities. This “inner work” includes self-reflection, contemplation, or meditation (Astin et al., 2011).

Of the five qualities of spirituality that Astin et al. (2011) identified, two qualities were internally directed aspects of students’ spirituality. These internally directed qualities were spiritual quest and equanimity. Within Astin et al.’s study, spiritual quest consisted of nine items that measured the student’s “interest in searching for meaning/purpose in life, finding answers to the mysteries of life, attaining inner harmony, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20). The equanimity measure contained five items that addressed “the extent to which the student feels at peace or is centered, is able to find meaning in times of hardships, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of her/his life” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 20).

The other three qualities of spirituality identified by Astin et al. (2011) are externally directed aspects. These qualities describe students’ connectedness and abilities to care for others.

The three external measures of spirituality are ethic of caring, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview. Ethic of care consisted was an eight-item measure that addressed a student's commitment to caring for and helping others, reducing pain and suffering, working to promote racial understanding, and a desire to make the world a better place. The charitable involvement measure included seven-items that included helping friends with problems, donating money, and participating in community service. Ecumenical worldview consisted of twelve-items designed to measure a student's interest in different religious traditions and the level which a student attempts to

understand other countries and cultures, feels a strong connection to all humanity, believes in the goodness of all people, accepts others as they are, and believes that all life is interconnected and that love is the root of all the great religions. (Astin, et al., 2011, p. 21).

### Spiritual Quest

As students embark on the journey through college, they have many dreams, expectations, and hopes. Students are often searching for answers to questions of a spiritual nature; questions such as who am I, what is the meaning of life, and what kind of person do I want to become (Astin et al., 2011). A student's spiritual quest can consists of searching for meaning, finding wholeness, developing integrity, and integrating cognitive, social, emotional and moral aspects of development. According to Astin et al. (2011), "How students perceive their position in the world, develop a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and seek inner harmony and self- awareness are all critical components of healthy identity development and mature psychological well-being" (p. 29).

Overall, students' level of spiritual quest increased from the freshmen to junior year (Astin et al., 2011). More junior versus freshmen rated the following life goals as either "very important" or "essential": "developing a meaningful philosophy of life, seeking beauty in my life, becoming a more loving person, and attaining inner harmony" (Astin et al., 2011, p. 31-32). Women scored higher than men on measures of spiritual quest. Spiritual quest was enhanced by faculty that encouraged students to explore questions of meaning and purpose. Students who spent more time doing homework and studying or participated in a community-service based course showed growth in the spiritual quest measure. Also, engaging in self-reflection, helping friends with personal problems, donating money to charity, and reading and discussing spiritual or religious material all had a positive effect on spiritual questing (Astin et al., 2011).

#### Equanimity

Within the Astin et al. (2011) study, the equanimity scale consisted of five items. The first two items addressed an individual's sense of peace and centeredness as well as his or her ability to find meaning in times of hardship (Astin et al., 2011; Astin & Keen, 2006). The next three items measured an individual's feeling of optimism, calmness, and psychological well-being (Astin et al., 2011; Astin & Keen, 2006). The items that measured equanimity "appear to capture some of the qualities that one associates with higher states of consciousness: a sense of calm, peacefulness, centeredness, and perhaps most important, self-transcendence, the ability to rise above or move beyond the limits of personal experience" (Astin et al., 2011, p. 50).

The results from the National Study on College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose indicated that college students' sense of equanimity grows throughout college (Astin et al., 2011). Equanimity was enhanced or strengthened by students' participation in what Astin et al. (2011) deemed "inner work" – activities such as meditation, self-reflection, and prayer. These

activities allowed students the opportunity to learn how to pause and reframe, a critical process in the development of equanimity (Astin et al., 2011; Astin & Keen, 2006). This is a “process whereby the self-aware individual is able to (1) recognize an intense emotional response to a negative life event, (2) pause and reframe the situation, and (3) channel the emotional energy in constructive ways” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 57). Equanimity was also strengthened when students participate in charitable activities, leadership training, student organizations, and group projects as part of a class (Astin et al., 2011). In addition to participating in these activities, how much students studied also positively impacted equanimity. Interestingly, playing video or computer games and majoring in engineering negatively influenced growth in equanimity (Astin et al., 2011).

#### Spiritual Growth and Outcomes of College

Astin et al. (2011) explored the impact of spiritual development on traditional outcomes of college such as intellectual/academic, personal/emotional, and attitudinal outcomes. Growth in the measures of equanimity positively impacted all traditional outcomes of college (Astin et al., 2011). According to Astin et al. (2011), “Growth in equanimity enhances students’ grade point average, leadership skills, psychological well-being, self-rated ability to get along with other races and cultures, and satisfaction with college” (p. 135). Growth in spiritual quest enhanced students’ intellectual self-esteem. However, students that showed positive growth in spiritual quest tended to show lower satisfaction with college and a have a lower sense of psychological well-being (Astin et al., 2011). The spiritual quest measure reflected students’

striving to attain inner harmony, become a more loving person, find meaning and purpose in life, and find answers to the mysteries of life, it may well be that engaging in such a search can at times prove to be frustrating and emotionally unsettling to a point where

psychological well-being and satisfaction are negatively affected (Astin et al., 2011, p. 124).

While it is clear these three spiritual development theories provide insight into the way professionals work with college students, the theories did not provide details about the spiritual experiences of different populations. For example, race, gender, or sexual orientation were not explored within the development of these theories. It is evident that spirituality and spiritual development are important to college students. Students have a desire for their spiritual development to be attended to, but it is unclear how various aspects of a student's identity can impact their spiritual development.

#### Spirituality and College Students' Experiences

In 2006, Kuh and Gonyea used data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) database to investigate the relationship between spirituality, liberal learning, and the college experience. The data they used consisted of 149,801 first-year (51%) and senior students (49%) from 461 four-year institutions. Ninety percent were full-time students and about 67% were female. Sixteen percent of the institutions were liberal arts colleges and 29 were faith-based institutions. Kuh and Gonyea (2006) looked at three measures of student engagement—spiritual practices, interactions with diverse peers, and deep learning which consisted of nine items. They also looked at perceptions of the campus environments and a variety of self-reported outcomes that NSSE asks students related to liberal education. Kuh and Gonyea used these measures to help create a regression model for statistical analysis.

The results of Kuh and Gonyea's (2006) study revealed that students involved in spiritual practices also participated in other college/campus activities. Varsity athletes represented an exception to this finding, as they participated less in spirituality-enhancing activities than any

other student group. Spirituality and liberal education were influenced most by institutional mission and campus culture as opposed to other institutional characteristics. Students at faith-based campuses engaged more in spiritual practices and gained more in this area; however, they were less engaged in deep learning activities and reported lower general education outcomes, compared to students at secular institutions.

Kuh and Gonyea (2006) remarked about the importance of spirituality today and the need for college campuses to answer the questions revealed from their findings. How can colleges make their campuses more supportive for students' spiritual experiences and to further the liberal education? How do private institutions balance religiosity and a liberal arts education? And what are some public institutions doing to create a welcoming environment for exploring spirituality that others are not?

This study utilized the NSSE data which is a reliable and trusted source of information on student engagement (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006). By using NSSE data, the researchers had access to a wealth of information from various institutions and students. The researchers could have done a deeper analysis of the data by comparing the answers of men and women, and among students of different races and ethnicities.

It is interesting to note that students at faith-based institutions have fewer conversations with others who have different values or opinions. The researchers indicated that students attending faith-based institutions engage less in deep learning activities and that the campus climate tends to be limited in its range of beliefs. Kuh and Gonyea (2006) recommended that the spiritual experience for students at faith-based institutions be examined more comprehensively. This information and recommendation can inform the current study as this study will be conducted at a faith-based college campus.

In their article about students' inward journeys, Dalton et al. (2006) emphasized why students' inner development should be incredibly important to higher education institutions. The authors noted that learning is connected to the emotional domain of students' lives and that the American tradition of higher education has always emphasized the importance of holistic development in college. Dalton et al. (2006) indicated that society expects universities to produce responsible citizens capable of living in a democratic society and universities should be accountable for the moral and ethical development of college students. Finally, students that report higher levels of spirituality also have higher levels of physical and psychological well-being.

In their article, Dalton et al. (2006) discussed the importance of spirituality and religion to college students. The authors noted that while in college, students often report being on a spiritual quest, seeking answers to big questions. These questions involve identity, destiny and calling, personal faith, wholeness, and mattering. In order to answer these questions, students will explore their spirituality and participate in various activities. This can be referred to as a spiritual search. Dalton et al. (2006) remarked that students could be experiencing their search within or outside the context of religion. Within religion, religious seekers could be identified as faith-centered or multi-religious seekers. Faith-centered seekers engaged in the search within the concept of their own faith tradition. Multi-religious seekers engaged in the search through experiencing different religions and interfaith dialogue. Secular seekers could be identified as mindfulness or wellness seekers. Mindfulness seekers are concerned with the inner search and self-awareness; wellness seekers are concerned with finding a more holistic, healthy, and integrated way of life. There is overlap between religious and secular seekers and these

experiences do not exist on their own. Dalton et al. (2006) also mentioned that spiritual search can occur in solitude or within a social environment.

Through their research, Dalton et al. (2006) provided intimate details about how college students described their spiritual searches (Dalton et al., 2006). The researchers also provided examples of what institutions are doing to respond to the trend to integrate spirituality into higher education. Their final recommendations revolved around the following areas—awareness and advocacy, creating supportive environments, designing educational programs, and faculty/staff development (Dalton et al., 2006).

Dalton et al.'s (2006) article highlighted the importance of higher education's commitment to holistic education and development. They demonstrated the connectedness between a university environment and students' spiritual search. Dalton et al. stressed the importance of listening to students' voices and stories as a way to describe student spirituality. Students' experiences related to spirituality and the spiritual search are important aspects of my research study. Dalton et al. (2006) could strengthen their study by providing more detailed information on the students they researched. For example, providing students' ages, genders, or ethnicities might offer a different perspective into their experience of spirituality.

### Spiritual Struggle

Bryant and Astin (2008) investigated the factors correlated with spiritual struggle during college. The purpose of their study was to explore what personal characteristics, beliefs, experiences, or aspects of the college environment might lead to spiritual struggle in college students. Bryant and Astin (2008) also explored the consequences of spiritual struggle on students' self-esteem, well-being, psychological distress, and religious and spiritual tolerance and growth. Bryant and Astin utilized the data obtained from the 2003 College Students' Beliefs

and Values (CSBV) survey. This questionnaire was mailed to students that had participated in the 2000 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey and the response rate was 32%. The researchers were able to weight the data using the entire mailed sample of 11,547, resulting in a final sample of 3,493 students. Fifty-three percent of the sample were female, representing six racial/ethnic groups. The students' religious preferences were as follows: 1% Islamic, 2% Jewish, 31% Roman Catholic, 48% Protestant Christian, 4% other, and 12% indicated no religious preference (2% did not select one of these options). There were 46 diverse institutions with respect to type and control. Bryant and Astin (2008) employed multivariate regression in their analysis and utilized Astin's Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) as their theoretical framework.

The results of Bryant and Astin's (2008) study revealed that spiritual struggle was positively associated with psychological distress and poor health. Spiritual struggle was also positively correlated with students' growth in tolerance; however students with spiritual struggles had less personal, social, and intellectual confidence than their peers. Female students and students from non-majority faiths reported higher levels of spiritual struggle. Students that identified as being religiously engaged experienced less spiritual struggle than the average student. Students that identified God in more intimate, loving terms such as "beloved," "protector," or "part of me," were less likely to struggle. Whereas students that identified God in terms that are more disconnected such as "teacher," "divine mystery," or "universal spirit" were more likely to struggle spiritually.

From Bryant and Astin's (2008) research, it is clear that issues related to spirituality and spiritual struggles are important to college students. Bryant and Astin investigated levels of spiritual struggle for female and non-majority faith students, which are more marginalized

populations. It is interesting to note that these two groups reported higher levels of spiritual struggle. This concept of higher levels of spiritual struggle for minority or marginalized populations is an area that needs to be investigated in more detail. I agree with the authors' recommendation to use in-depth interview in future research to study college students' spiritual struggle.

Similar to Bryant and Astin's (2008) work on spiritual struggle, Fisler, et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative study in which they studied how college seniors experienced and resolved spiritual struggles. Sixteen college seniors were selected via random email solicitation to participate in the study. These seniors attended a small, suburban, highly selective public institution in the southeast. The researchers conducted two interviews. The first was a semi-structured interview with previously developed questions. The second interview was used to check the information for accuracy and understanding. The research team utilized inductive analysis to identify common themes across all participants' responses.

Students experienced their spiritual struggles through three avenues – academics, external influences, and internal influences (Fisler et al., 2009). Academic activities influenced spiritual struggle among the majority of students. The external influences were people and the institution. People (friends, roommates, family members, counselors, ministers, and peers) served as support for or as roadblocks to the participants' spiritual struggles. Internal processes such as reading books, intense emotions, conflicts, and the desire for the comfort of a higher power also influenced participants' spiritual struggle.

Fisler et al. (2009) identified four ways that students reexamine their spiritual experience: (a) students will recommit to familiar spiritual traditions; (b) students will readjust their beliefs to integrate new perspectives; (c) students will blend old and new values to create a new

spirituality; (d) students will lose their faith altogether. Fisler et al. noted that many students were still exploring their spirituality and they probably will for many years. The authors questioned Parks' sequential model of spiritual development, pointing out that spiritual development might lack "maturational sequence" and "defies the predictable developmental progression that is implied by current spiritual developmental theory" (Fisler et al., p. 270).

The results of Fisler et al.'s (2009) study offered insightful details into the lived experience of spiritual struggle for college students. However, for the results to be extrapolated to other students and institutions, it would be wise to replicate the study at different institutions (Fisler et al., 2009). Also, the participants in Fisler et al.'s study were not very diverse with respect to gender, race, or religious affiliation. The authors advised that future research be intentional about selecting diverse populations with respect to gender, age, race, and spiritual background, particularly religious minority groups. The three avenues of spiritual struggle that students identified – academics, external influence, and internal influences – can provide a framework for future investigations into students' spiritual experiences.

Continuing their investigation into students' spiritual struggles, Bryant et al. (2012) took a phenomenological approach to dig deeper into the meaning and dimensions of spiritual struggle. Bryant et al. utilized the epoche process of bracketing in order to make meaning of the data they collected. While this process presented challenges and tension, the researchers conducted the qualitative study with a heightened awareness of their own identities and did not allow that to impact data collection.

Bryant et al. (2012) used purposeful sampling techniques to achieve diversity in their participants. They conducted two interviews with each participant and allowed participants to supplement the interviews through journaling and photography. The data were analyzed using

triangulation, member checks, epoche, and significant audit trails. Bryant et al. discovered that the essence of spiritual struggle could be summarized in one word – contrast. For all participants, their lived experience of spiritual struggle involved “deeply felt dualities in the most fundamental dimensions of human experience” (Bryant et al., p. 62). Participants experienced contrast between possible selves, contrast between self and others, and contrast in revelations made about the meaning of life and reality.

Four of the ten participants in Bryant et al.’s study identified as gay or lesbian. The authors noted the increased level of struggle for those participants navigating multiple identities, such as gay and lesbian individuals. Bryant et al. called for a more comprehensive investigation of spiritual struggle for marginalized populations like gay and lesbian students.

#### Sexual Identity Development Theories

The first studies conducted to address same-sex attraction treated the issue as pathology and focused on finding a cure (Evans et al., 2010). The 1970’s marked a new way of thinking, as the attention shifted away from pathology and more to the development of gay or lesbian identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Evans et al., 2010). Stage models of gay and lesbian identity development, such as Cass’ model, were the focus of research in the 1970’s (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). As more research was conducted on the development of non-heterosexual identity, it became clear that it was a fluid, complex process influenced by other identities (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Therefore, a human development model of sexual orientation development was developed.

#### Cass’ Model of Homosexual Identity Formation

In 1979, Cass (1979) developed a theoretical, linear, six-stage model of homosexual identity formation. According to Cass (1979), the model was “based on two broad assumptions:

(a) that identity is acquired through a developmental process; and (b) that locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environments” (p. 219). Cass (1979) identified six stages of development that individuals move through at their own pace. These stages included a cognitive component, the individual’s perception of self, as well as an affective component, how the individual feels about his or her own and others’ perceptions (Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984; Evans et al., 2010). At each stage of Cass’ (1979) model, identity foreclosure may occur. Identity foreclosure takes place when an individual chooses to not develop any further.

The first stage of Cass’ (1979) model is Identity Confusion and is characterized by the realization that one’s behavior, feelings, or thoughts may be homosexual. Emotional incongruency exists. An individual may resolve the confusion in three ways. First, the individual may accept the behavior, feelings, and thoughts and begin to change. Second, the individual may view the behavior, feelings, and thoughts as correct but undesirable and attempt to deny such information and inhibit homosexual behavior. Third, the individual may view the behavior as incorrect and undesirable, in which case the individual works to redefine him or herself as a heterosexual. At this point, identity foreclosure occurs (Cass, 1979).

If the individual accepted the possibility of a homosexual identity, he or she will move to the second stage of Cass’ (1979) model, Identity Comparison. At this stage, incongruency exists between an individual’s perception of self and behavior as well as how others view the individual. This incongruency can lead to feelings of alienation and not belonging. As an individual responds to these feelings of alienation, Cass (1979) indicated that he or she may approach the situation in four different ways. The first approach is when an individual responds positively to being different and accepts his or her identity and behavior as desirable. The

individual attempts to pass as a heterosexual within social settings in order to avoid being confronted by other's negative opinions about homosexuality. The second approach is when an individual attempts to reduce incongruency by accepting the homosexual behavior but not accepting the homosexual self-image. An individual using this approach may also attempt to pass as a heterosexual in social settings. The third approach is when an individual accepts the self as homosexual and his or her behavior as having homosexual meaning; however, the individual believes the behavior component is undesirable due to strong social alienation. The fourth approach occurs when an individual believes that the homosexual self and behavior are both undesirable and wants to change both; therefore, identity foreclosure occurs (Cass, 1979).

At stage three, Identity Tolerance, there is an increased commitment to being a homosexual (Cass, 1979). The individual tolerates, rather than accepts, his/her homosexual self. The individual seeks out contact with other homosexuals "in order to counter the felt isolation and alienation from others" (Cass, 1979, p. 229). The quality of the contact is critical at this stage. Positive contacts with the homosexual community will lead to a greater commitment to a homosexual self and behavior. Negative, unrewarding contacts may result in a "devaluation of the gay subculture" (Cass, 1979, p. 230) and the development of a negative identity. If identity foreclosure has not occurred by the end of stage three, the individual's commitment to a homosexual identity has increased to the point that the individual can say he/she is a homosexual (Cass, 1979).

Stage four, Identity Acceptance, is characterized by increasing contact with other homosexuals and an acceptance, rather than tolerance, of a homosexual self-image (Cass, 1979). Tension still exists for individuals that want to fully legitimize their homosexuality, both privately and publicly. Passing as a heterosexual and compartmentalizing one's homosexual

lifestyle is one way an individual may adapt at this stage. Individuals may also disclose their homosexual identities to trusted, significant heterosexuals in order to reduce incongruity (Cass, 1979).

Movement into stage five, Identity Pride, is characterized by an individual's awareness of the disconnect between his/her homosexual identity and society's acceptance of his/her identity (Cass, 1979). An individual at this stage will begin to have "fierce loyalty to homosexuals as a group, who are seen as important and creditable while heterosexuals have become discredited and devalued" (Cass, 1984, p. 152). There is a great sense of anger and pride that can develop into activism (Cass, 1979). An individual in stage five becomes freer to disclose his/her homosexual identity. Reactions to this disclosure can be negative or positive. Negative reactions can lead to identity foreclosure, while positive reactions can lead the individual into the final stage of homosexual identity formation, Identity Synthesis.

In the sixth stage of homosexual identity formation, Identity Synthesis, an individual no longer views the homosexual and heterosexual communities as dichotomized, and does not judge people simply based on sexual orientation (Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984; Evans et al., 2010). An individual is able to synthesize his/her homosexual identity with other identities; "individuals come to see themselves as people having many sides to their character, only one part of which is related to homosexuality" (Cass, 1984, p. 152). The individual's homosexual identity is no longer hidden; it is fully integrated into his/her life, revealing feelings of peace and stability (Cass, 1984).

Several critiques of Cass' model of homosexual identity formation exist (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000; Levine & Evans, 1991). Cass based her work on research done mainly with gay, white males. Many researchers have questioned the transferability of Cass' model to

women, bisexuals, or people of color (Degges-White et al.; Evans et al., 2010). Cass' model indicated that sexual identity formation evolves in a linear fashion. However, research demonstrated that these rigid, linear models do not accurately describe the lived experience for many (Brown, 1995; Degges-White et al.; Evans & Broido, 1999; Kahn, 1991)

#### D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development

Moving away from a rigid linear model to a more fluid, life span approach, D'Augelli studied sexual identity development from a human development view (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Evans et al., 2010; Stevens, 2004). D'Augelli (1994b) emphasized the importance of using the human development model as opposed to a stage model because it “stresses the impact of historical time on processes of development, whether the process is observed during an individual's life, over the lives of family members, within community, or in a culture” (p. 122). Using the human development approach allows the researcher to “discover variations between individuals as they move in time through social situations, community, culture, and history” (D'Augelli, 1994b, p. 122). According to Bilodeau and Renn (2005), this model “suggests that sexual orientation may be very fluid at certain times in the life span and more fixed at others and that human growth is intimately connect to and shaped by environmental and biological factors” (p. 28).

Within the human development or life span model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity development, three interrelated variables exist (D'Augelli, 1994a; Evans et al., 2010; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005). These variables are personal subjectivities and actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections. D'Augelli (1994a) identified six interactive identity processes that operated independently of one another. The six processes are exiting heterosexuality, developing a personal LGB identity, developing an LGB social identity,

becoming an LGB offspring, developing an LGB intimacy status, and entering an LGB community (D'Augelli, 1994a; Evans et al., 2010).

Exiting heterosexuality is an ongoing process in which an individual recognizes that his/her feelings and attractions are no longer heterosexual. This process also involves disclosing to others that one is lesbian, gay, or bisexual (D'Augelli, 1994a). This process is ongoing throughout the life span, as an individual is consistently presented with the choice of whether or not to share his/her sexual identity with others. As an individual develops a personal LGB identity status (the second process), one must work through thoughts, feelings, desires, and previously held internalized myths in order to establish a unique meaning of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual (D'Augelli, 1994a). This process is accomplished in relationships with others. These relationships and interactions serve to confirm thoughts and ideas about what it means to be a non-heterosexual (D'Augelli, 1994a; Evans et al., 2010). D'Augelli (1994a) indicated that this is also an ongoing process and an individual's personal LGB identity will be continually updated based on his/her experiences.

Developing a LGB social identity is the process by which an individual develops a network of people who affirm his or her social LGB identity. This support network may include other homosexual individuals as well as affirming heterosexuals (D'Augelli, 1994a). Developing this social identity can take time, as people's responses may change with circumstances (Evans et al., 2010). However, developing this social network is critically important to an individual's identity development (D'Augelli, 1994a).

Disclosing one's sexual identity to parents and redefining the relationship are characteristics of becoming a LGB offspring. This process requires patience and education and D'Augelli (1994a) suggested that much of the responsibility lies on the LGB offspring. This

process involves family adaptations that take place over time as the family copes with this new information.

Due to the lack of same-sex couples in society, as well as any pre-existing stereotypes the individual has about same-sex dating, developing a LGB intimacy status can be a complex process (D'Augelli, 1994a; Evans et al., 2010). According to D'Augelli (1994a), "The lack of cultural scripts directly applicable to lesbian/gay/bisexual people leads to ambiguity and uncertainty, but it also forces the emergence of personal, couple-specific, and community norms, which should be more personally adaptive" (p. 327). The sixth process identified by D'Augelli (1994a), entering a LGB community, is one to which an individual may never commit. This process entails community involvement such as social or political action, which a LGB individual may never be fully comfortable with; doing so may involve great risk for an individual's profession or home (D'Augelli, 1994a; Evans et al., 2010).

D'Augelli's model was supported in research conducted on the coming out process for students living in residence halls (Evans & Broido, 1999). The coming out process for these students was fluid and influenced by three areas identified by D'Augelli – personal subjectivities, interactions with others, and sociohistorical connections (Evans & Broido). When Evans and Broido studied the coming out process for college students in residence halls, personal meaning and behavior, relationships, social customs, culture, policies, and the environment impacted the process. Stevens (2004) confirmed D'Augelli's model of sexual identity development in that development is fluid (nonlinear) and influenced by individual and environmental factors.

Stage models of development have been criticized for ignoring the fluidity associated with human development (Love et al., 2005). Recognizing various aspects of an individual's identity as interacting with one another through the developmental process presents a more

accurate developmental model (Love et al., 2005). D'Augelli's model recognizes the personal, environmental, social, and historical aspects that can influence development. Therefore, D'Augelli's (1994a) human development, or life-span model, for lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development is applicable to this study given the sociohistorical and environmental issues related to spirituality that are going to be explored.

### The Intersection of Spirituality and Sexual Identity

#### College Students

In 2005, Love et al. (2005) conducted a qualitative study exploring the experiences of gay and lesbian college students at two public research universities. "Participants discussed the challenges they faced, how they dealt with those experiences and challenges, and were asked to examine their spiritual identity development vis-à-vis their sexual orientation" (Love et al., 2005, p. 194). Love et al. noted the lack of research into the spiritual experiences and spiritual identity development of gay and lesbian college students and indicated that they wanted to address this gap.

The participants were five gay men and seven lesbian undergraduate students from late teen to late twenties; ten of the twelve participants were between the ages of 18 and 23 (Love et al., 2005). The students tended to be "out" on campus and most of them were interested in the topic of spirituality. Each student participated in an in-depth interview with two research interviewers. The data was analyzed using the unitizing and categorizing methods and a constant comparative method (Love et al.).

The students' identities related to sexual orientation were well developed; however, their spiritual identities ranged widely (Love et al., 2005). Although the researchers took extraordinary measures to differentiate between spirituality and religion, most of the participants discussed

these two constructs interchangeably. Love et al. noted that the findings addressed students' interactions with different aspects of organized religion. The results were divided into three categories based on how the students' "sense of spirituality emerged or stalled from their experiences (or lack thereof) with organized religion" (Love et al., p. 198). The three categories identified were reconciliation, nonreconciliation, and undeveloped spiritual identity.

"Reconciled students are those who embraced being both gay or lesbian and being a religious or spiritually grounded person" (Love et al., 2005, p. 199). These individuals were aware of the issues within their religion that oppress gay or lesbian people. These issues did not create any incongruence or dissonance for the reconciled students. Reconciled students described having a personal relationship with God or a higher power and indicated this relationship as being central to helping them reconcile who they were as sexual beings and who they were as spiritual beings.

Nonreconciled students either lived compartmentalized lives, a spiritually/religiously active life and a separate gay or lesbian life, or they struggled with the contradictions they were experiencing between their spiritual lives and communities and their gay or lesbian identities (Love et al., 2005). The students that had not compartmentalized their lives experienced struggles within both the religious and gay communities. Some nonreconciled participants indicated that their religious communities did not accept the students' gay or lesbian identities; while the gay or lesbian communities did not fully appreciate their spiritual struggles (Love et al.).

The last category identified was two students with undeveloped spiritual identities (Love et al., 2005). These students either passively or actively rejected spiritual issues which led to

their undeveloped spiritual identities. According to Love et al., these students “appeared to lack a purposeful approach to their spiritual development” (p. 202).

The process of reconciliation appeared not to be static, was not linear, and was similar with other identity development models (Love et al., 2005). For some participants coming out served as a stimulus for spiritual growth. Love et al. proposed that this may be due to the conflict between religious teachings and the individual’s sexual orientation. This conflict may create dissonance and spiritual struggle. The authors indicated that this research supports the need for further research and development of nonlinear identity development models (Love et al.). Love et al. recognized the complexity of addressing the interaction of sexual orientation and spirituality, but noted there is a need to further explore this area as there is a significant void in the research.

The sample size in Love et al.’s (2005) study was small, consisting only of twelve students. The participants were divided fairly evenly for gender; however all the participants were white. The participants were self-selected, so they were “out” as gay or lesbian. The results might have been different or more rich had the participants been ethnically diverse. In addition, the fact that the participants were “out” and comfortable with their sexual orientation could have impacted the way they experienced spirituality. Having a diversity in the participants with respect to level of “outness” might give insight into their spiritual struggle.

Love et al. (2005) provided great detail on sampling methodology and data analysis that can be utilized as a guide for the current research project. Love et al. worked to establish trustworthiness of the research process by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was developed through extended interaction between the participants and researchers, peer debriefing, and member checks. Love et al. worked to establish

transferability by provide a thorough description of the context of the study and how the results can be applied. Through data analysis and the development of an audit trail, dependability and confirmability were also established. The research methods utilized in Love et al.'s study were noteworthy and seemed to gain the trust of the participants, which is critical in qualitative studies.

In 1997, Love investigated the culture of sexual orientation at a small Catholic college located in the northeastern United States. Love (1997) conducted interviews with students, faculty, and administrators; he also observed six campus events: residence halls programs, campus-wide program, and meetings of the Student Against Homophobia. According to Love, the analysis resulted in a "picture of a culture that exhibited contradictions and paradoxes related to sexual orientation to the participants" (p. 385).

For the purpose of Love's (1997) study, a contradiction referred to "aspects of the culture that the participants perceived as denying each other or as being incongruous" (p. 385). Love identified three contradictions. First, the institution was seen as a service-oriented institution, focused on caring for others, and educating the whole student; however, "lesbian, gay, and bisexual students experienced hatred, pain, loneliness, anger, helplessness, rejection, and isolation" (Love, p. 386). A second contradiction was the uncritical acceptance of the church teaching on homosexuality. Love noted that many students willingly deviated from the church's teachings related to premarital sex or birth control but blindly accepted the teachings on homosexuality. Some students even used the church's teachings to justify their homophobia. Another contradiction Love identified was that the university stressed the importance of diversity and multiculturalism but avoided the topic of sexual orientation.

Love (1997) defined a paradox in this case as “aspects of the culture that, given assumptions about religion and religiously affiliated institutions, appear absurd, but are in fact true” (p. 385). The first paradox that emerged was the fact that support and allies for the gay community came from within campus ministry and the Department of Religious Studies. Another paradox that existed was that homosexual students or allies were strong Catholics and many said they felt that God called them to work on sexual orientation issues. These students were called reconciled Catholics. The third paradox Love identified was that “less overt homophobia meant a more dangerous climate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students” (p. 390). The students shared that less homophobia did not mean that homophobia did not exist; it just meant that it was not as obvious or overtly expressed. The students had to be more cautious because it was more difficult to identify their allies and people who were homophobes. The final paradox Love identified was the fact that although the president and perhaps other institutional leaders supported the student alliance and their activities, it was impossible for them to act on that support publicly. Love concluded the article with recommendations for possible cultural change and implications for practice within student affairs and religiously affiliated institutions.

Love (1997) focused on the culture of sexual orientation at a small religiously affiliated institution. His observations and findings provide great insight into the lived experience for gay and lesbian college students at religiously affiliated institutions. The contradictions Love identified can be used to inform future research on spirituality on college campuses. For example, why do these contradictions exist and why do people on campus think it is okay live in a contradictory state? These questions can provide me with a direction for conversations in this current study. The paradoxes Love identified can significantly impact the culture and a student’s experience at an institution. These paradoxes warrant further investigation as well.

In 2011, Wentz and Wessel conducted a qualitative study in which they explored the conflict that exists for gay and lesbian college students who attend Christian colleges and universities. The authors indicated an identity conflict exists and is composed of two layers. The first layer of the conflict has to do with the “prevailing historical, cultural sentiment among Christianity regarding the issue of homosexuality” (Wentz & Wessel, p. 2). The second layer of the identity conflict pertains to higher education’s commitment to the holistic growth and development of students, particularly within the student affairs profession. The intersection of these two layers and this identity conflict present interesting challenges for gay and lesbian students as well as student affairs professionals at Christian colleges and universities.

Wentz and Wessel (2011) identified three important areas within student affairs practice that this identity conflict has an impact: “enrollment communications and decisions, institutional values and culture, and the student code of conduct” (p. 3). Students may not have accepted a homosexual identity at the time of admission or when they make an enrollment decision. Students may be struggling with their sexual identities and be in a state of identity confusion. Students often develop their identities and make important identity decisions while they are in college. Wentz and Wessel (2011) indicated the importance of institutions clearly communicating policies, expectations, and institutional culture during the admission and enrollment process.

Institutional values and culture can significantly impact student development throughout college. In the research that Wentz and Wessel (2011) conducted, the gay and lesbian students they interviewed came from Christian backgrounds and their “processes of faith and sexual development occurred simultaneously throughout the college experiences” (p. 4). The authors noted the importance of balancing institutional culture with support for these students. It is

important to recognize the significance of peer relationships and use these relationships to help gay and lesbian students develop.

The student code of conduct on Christian college campuses may present a unique issue by drawing a distinction between sexual identity and sexual behavior (Wentz & Wessel, 2011). This may also present challenges for student affairs administrators and gay or lesbian students. Wentz and Wessel concluded the article by indicating that future research should attempt to “contrast the experiences of various students on Christian college campuses” (Wentz & Wessel, 2011, p. 6). This type of research could be insightful in evaluating how these experiences impact student development as well as sexual identity development.

#### Mental Health Profession

In 2001, Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, and Hecker wrote an article addressing the challenges of being gay or lesbian and spiritual and/or religious. The authors discussed the context of spirituality and religion as being either intrinsically or extrinsically oriented. For individuals with an intrinsic religious/spiritual orientation, truth and value are placed on personal insight and individual experience (Barrett & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan et al., 2001). Individuals with an extrinsic religious/spiritual orientation believe in an external religious authority and that spiritual or religious truth is held by religious leaders, scriptures, and institutions (Buchanan et al.; Barrett & Barzan). Buchanan et al. (2001) also explained the context of sexual orientation and the coming-out process.

Within these two contexts – spirituality/religion and sexual orientation – the authors identified a struggle (Buchanan et al., 2001). This struggle forces gay and lesbian people to have to either choose between the two worlds or integrate the two worlds. “Gays and lesbians that seek to integrate their homosexuality and spirituality will be rewarded with increase self-

acceptance and increased mental health” (Buchanan et al., p. 440). Buchanan et al. described using a narrative perspective within the mental health profession to help explore and deconstruct the spiritual struggle that many gay and lesbian individuals experience.

Similar to the work of Buchanan et al. (2001), Kocet et al. (2011) identified an interconnectedness between spirituality and sexual identity that creates challenges for individuals. Kocet et al. stressed the need for mental health professionals to understand the importance of spirituality, work with clients to explore unresolved feelings related to spiritual loss or rejection, integrate sexual identity with spiritual identity, and connect with community. This four-part counseling framework could also be applied to working with gay and lesbian college students.

Ritter and O’Neill (1989) described the loss gay and lesbian individuals experienced with respect to their spiritual journeys. Many gay men and lesbian women feel abandoned, marginalized, and oppressed, especially in terms of their faith journeys or traditional religion. Ritter and O’Neill challenged mental health professionals to change these losses into opportunities by recasting the negative images in order to achieve spiritual wholeness. It is crucial to appreciate the “sacredness of gay and lesbian people, the richness of their spiritual questing, and the opportunities for transformation” (Ritter & O’Neill, p. 13).

These three studies within the mental health profession (Buchanan et al., 2001; Kocet et al., 2011; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989) all pointed to the interconnectedness of one’s spiritual and sexual identity. This research presented issues related to struggle and loss related to spirituality within the gay and lesbian population. This information can be used to enhance student affairs professionals’ work with gay and lesbian college students.

## Conclusion

Research demonstrated that spirituality is important to college students (Astin et al., 2011). In addition to spirituality being important, research showed that students experience spiritual growth and spiritual struggle throughout their time in college (Astin et al.; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Bryant et al., 2012; Fisler et al., 2009; Love, 2002; Tisdell, 2003). Unfortunately, the spiritual experience of gay and lesbian students has been minimally studied (Bryant et al.; Love, 1997; Love et al., 2005). Given their unique experiences and identities, gay and lesbian college students can provide insight into understanding how spiritual development occurs. The literature reveals details of contrast, struggle, and search for spirituality among gay and lesbian students. This is an area that needs to be explored further to better understand how gay and lesbian students find meaning and purpose, reconcile the contrasts in their lives, and experience spirituality on college campuses.

APPENDIX C

METHOD

In this research study I will employ qualitative methodology to investigate the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian college students. The experiential nature of spirituality for an individual lends itself to be explored from a qualitative perspective. In addition, the population I have chosen to study is a group that has not been studied in detail and one whose voices have been silenced with respect to spirituality. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is conducted in order to explore a particular problem, study a population, or hear silenced voices. Within qualitative research, “we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Therefore, qualitative methodology, specifically a phenomenological approach, will be utilized for this study.

The purpose of this phenomenological study will be to describe the spiritual experiences (spiritual quest and equanimity) of gay and lesbian college students at a small, religiously affiliated, liberal arts university in the southwest United States. “A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). As a phenomenological study, I will attempt to describe the universal essence of spiritual experiences for gay and lesbian college students at a private, religiously-affiliated university (Creswell, 2007, 2009).

Within the phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry some philosophical underpinnings exist. First, phenomenology is the study of lived, conscious experiences (Creswell, 2007). The existence of something is related to a person’s consciousness of it. Second, the phenomenological approach requires the suspension of judgment and freedom from suppositions (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). It is critical for first person descriptions of life

experiences to be told without the researcher's thoughts getting in the way. Finally, the phenomenological approach is girded with the philosophical assumption that the researcher will attempt to describe, but not analyze or explain, the subjects' life experiences (Creswell, 2007).

### Bracketing

A unique characteristic of phenomenological research is *epoche* or bracketing (Creswell, 2007; Wertz, 2005). Bracketing involves the researchers setting "aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell, 2007, pp. 59-60). This approach requires the researcher to reflect on his or her own experiences, suspend assumptions, set aside biases, and empathetically enter the world of another (Wertz, 2005).

As the primary researcher conducting this study, I believe it is important to bracket my experiences before I begin the study. I am a Caucasian, heterosexual female. I was born and raised in the Catholic Church. I remain a strong, practicing Catholic. Within the context of my personal faith, I strongly believe in and respect the dignity of all people. I do not believe a person's sexual orientation is a choice. Therefore, I support gay and lesbian individuals involved in loving, committed, monogamous relationships. I am hopeful that someday there will be full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians into all denominations.

I enter into this study having the experience of working closely with gay and lesbian students at a religiously affiliated university. I currently serve as a student affairs administrator at religious higher education institution. Within this role, I work closely with students. As an advisor and mentor for these students, I witnessed them experience a great deal of pain and struggle related to spirituality and their sexual identities. I observed students struggle with their sense of purpose, sense of belonging, self-acceptance, spirituality, and the concept of love. Many

students I interacted with are conflicted about their beliefs and their sexuality. They have been turned away or hurt by their families; while others have been accepted by their families and feel loved. I witnessed a great deal of judgment – gay and lesbian students being judged for whom they are and the lifestyles they lead.

My personal spirituality and beliefs about sexual orientation within the context of spirituality, as well as the experiences I've had working with gay and lesbian students, led me to select this particular research topic. It will be difficult to disconnect my beliefs from the study; however, I made every effort to recognize my beliefs and experiences and how they may affect the results of the study.

### Participants

The population of interest for this phenomenological study is gay and lesbian college students between the ages of 18 to 23 at private, religious affiliated higher education institutions. This age range fits within the theoretical framework of Parks' (2000) and Astin's et al. (2011) models. The population sample will be self-identified gay or lesbian college students that attend a private, liberal arts, religiously affiliated university in the southwest United States. The participants will be between the ages of 18 to 23 and range from freshmen to seniors at the institution. The goal is to obtain 20 to 25 gay or lesbian students to participate in this study (Creswell, 2007).

For this phenomenological study, it is important that the participants have experienced the phenomenon of spirituality and are able to describe their lived experience (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, in recruiting participants I will use purposeful sampling methods including snowball and criterion sampling. First, I will identify participants that are gay or lesbian and have experienced spirituality or spiritual struggle. Using people who know people that would be

information-rich cases, I will continue to build the sample to the desired size of 20 to 25 participants (Creswell, 2007). Participants will be compensated with a \$10.00 gift card to a local store.

It is imperative to protect the privacy of each participant (Creswell, 2009). I am committed to maintaining the confidentiality of the participants' personal information and the results of their interviews throughout the study and beyond. To protect the identity of each participant, pseudonyms will be used from the beginning and through completion of the study. I will use the pseudonyms when reporting all interview results, recording transcripts, and at all times throughout the study.

#### Institutional Context

The institution for this study is a Christian, liberal arts institution with an enrollment of approximately 1500 students. The institution offers bachelor's degrees in fine arts, humanities, social and natural sciences, business, education, and nursing and is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Approximately 40% of the student population lives on campus. Between thirty-five and 40% of the student population participate in NCAA Division III intercollegiate athletics. Currently, there is a recognized student organization on campus that promotes awareness of issues related to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (GLBTQ) communities; provides support for GLBTQ individuals; provides opportunities for conversation and dialogue; and encourages acceptance and self-pride. When this student organization formed in 2010, there was quite a bit of controversy. The institution was divided between the individuals that supported an alliance for gay and straight individuals to promote awareness and dialogue about GLBTQ issues and those

that did not support the group. As the organization continued to develop, opposition has dissipated and support remains strong.

The religious denominational doctrine related to homosexuality is not directly reflected in the policies of the selected institution. There are no policies within the institution's student code of conduct that prohibit same sex relationships. However, the denominational doctrine does inform practice and decisions made at the institution.

#### Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews will be conducted with gay or lesbian students at the selected institution (Creswell, 2007). One interview will be conducted with each participant. I anticipate each interview to last approximately one hour to one and a half hours. The interview will begin with structured questions designed to establish rapport with the participant. Then, the following questions will serve as a guide for further discussion within each interview:

- Please tell me about your experiences of being gay or lesbian within your family, group(s) of friends, university, and church (if you attend one).
- Tell me about your experience in general at your university.
- Tell me about your spiritual experience in relation to your sexual orientation.
- Describe how you handle times of hardship and challenges.

Depending on the participant and his or her desire to share information, I will follow the script in Appendix A or allow the participant to provide more detail about his or her experiences. I will allow the participant to lead the interview in terms of his or her responses and amount of sharing. An audio recording of each interview will be taken and transcribed (Creswell, 2007).

It is critical for participants to be fully informed regarding the purpose of the study and their privacy respected at all times (Moustakas, 1994). Participants will be asked to read and sign an informed consent before participating in the study. The informed consent, which can be found in Appendix B, contains the following criterion identified by Seidman (2006):

The right to know the purpose of the study and the use of the results. The right to know how the study will be performed and how much time will be required to participate. The right to confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy. The right to ask any question of the researcher at any time in the process. The right to withdraw without any negative recourse. The right to refuse to answer any question and to review all answers. The right to the researcher's contacts' information. (p. 64)

#### Data Analysis

In order to thoroughly describe the participants' experiences, I will go analyze the interview transcripts and highlight the significant phrases and sentences that directly relate to the lived experience of spirituality for gay and lesbian college students (Creswell, 2007; Wertz, 2005). Next, I will evaluate these quotes and phrases, in order to identify themes and categorize the information into clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2007; Wertz, 2005). Using these themes, I will then formulate a description of the participants lived experiences. The themes will also be used to "write a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 62). Finally, these two descriptions, the lived experience and the context, will be combined in a composite description that presents the essence of spirituality for gay and lesbian college students (Creswell, 2007).

In an attempt establish credibility and determine accuracy, I will use the member checking technique (Creswell, 2007, 2009). Member checking will be done by taking the final

report, descriptions, themes, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants to check for accuracy. Another reliability procedure I would like to employ is triangulation (Creswell, 2007, 2009). Utilizing more than one investigator to review the data and confirm themes will provide an additional level of reliability. The additional investigator I will use to achieve triangulation is a faculty member in the field of social sciences at the selected institution. The faculty member will sign a confidentiality agreement in order to serve as a reviewer of the data. The participants' pseudonyms will be used throughout the entire study to protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality.

APPENDIX D  
INFORMED CONSENT

University of North Texas Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Notice

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

**Title of Study:** A Phenomenological Analysis of Gay and Lesbian College Students'

Spiritual Experiences at a Religious Liberal Arts Institution

**Student Investigator:** Vanessa Roberts Bryan, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Counseling and Higher Education, **Supervising Investigator:** Dr. P. Daniel Chen

**Purpose of the Study:** You are being asked to participate in a research study which involves exploring how gay and lesbian college students experience spirituality. The intent of the study is to understand how gay and lesbian college students interpret and experience spirituality.

**Study Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in one face-to-face interview that will take about one hour to 1.5 hours of your time. The interview will be audio-recorded. After the interview takes place, you will also be asked to review the notes from the interview to confirm accuracy. This will take about an hour of your time. The total time commitment for this study may be 2.5 hours.

**Foreseeable Risks:** The potential risks involved in this study are minimal, though you will be asked questions about your sexuality, spirituality, and overall well-being that may be sensitive.

At the end of the study, the researcher will provide you with a list of on-campus resources should you want to discuss any issues or topics that are covered during your participation in the study.

**Benefits to the Subjects or Others:** This study is not expected to be of any direct benefit to you, but I hope to learn more about the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian college students. This knowledge may provide insight into how university personnel work with gay and lesbian students in their search for meaning and purpose.

**Compensation for Participants:** You will receive a as compensation for your participation a \$10.00 gift card to Target Payment is conditioned upon completion of the interview and interview transcript review.

**Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records:** Every effort will be made to respect the participants' privacy and protect their identities in this study. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the participants' identities throughout the entire study and stored data will reflect the use of these pseudonyms. Consent forms, the only identifying information, will be stored separate and apart from all other data. If you agree to be audio-taped, these tapes will be kept separately and only heard by the transcriber. As required by Federal IRB regulations, collected data will be securely maintained for three years. The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the study, you may contact *Vanessa Roberts Bryan* at [vanessaroberts@my.unt.edu](mailto:vanessaroberts@my.unt.edu) or *Dr. P. Daniel Chen* at [Daniel.Chen@unt.edu](mailto:Daniel.Chen@unt.edu).

**Review for the Protection of Participants:** This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

### **Research Participants' Rights:**

Your participation in the survey confirms that you have read all of the above and that you agree to all of the following:

- *Vanessa Roberts Bryan* has explained the study to you and you have had an opportunity to contact him/her with any questions about the study. You have been informed of the possible benefits and the potential risks of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty

or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.

- You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
- You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
- You understand you may print a copy of this form for your records.

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Printed Name of Participant

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Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX E  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

## Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by me today. As you know, I am conducting a study about the spiritual experiences of gay and lesbian college students. There are no set questions for this interview. I have some general questions that may serve as a guide for us, but most importantly, I want to know your experiences.

To get started:

### Part 1: Introduction and Demographic Information

1. Tell me about yourself
  - a. Probes: age, race, gender, educational background, religious affiliation, hometown, major, socio-economic status/income level, where you're currently living

### Part 2: Experiences

2. Tell me about your experiences of being gay or lesbian with your family, group(s) of friends, university, and church (if you attend one).
3. Tell me about your experience at the university overall.
4. Tell me about your spiritual experience(s) in relation to your sexual orientation.
5. Describe how you handle times of hardships and challenges.

Thank you for your assistance.

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