I AM, THEREFORE I LEAD: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF SPIRITUALITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND LEADERSHIP IDENTITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of Texas A&M University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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This study explored spirituality and its influence on the authenticity and leadership identity of African American collegiate women leaders at a large, public university in the Southwest. While there has been an increase in the study of spirituality in higher education specifically in college students, more needs to be done to understand African American female students as a subset population. This study shed light on the lived experiences of these participants to situate faculty and staff to better support students as they journey to be whole, authentic, leaders. It examines how eleven African American undergraduate women understand, experience, and express their spirituality. Results indicate that these students experienced and expressed their spirituality as the core of their very being and Christianity was central to their understanding and expression of their spirituality. Additionally, this study examines the role spirituality has on African American women leaders’ authenticity. Results revealed that participants perceived spirituality as an influence on their self-cultivation, self-identity, self-acceptance, and self-confidence. Each of these themes impacted their perceived development of a more authentic self. Lastly, this study explores how African American undergraduate women perceive the role of their spirituality in the development of their leadership identity. Results illustrate that African American women leaders in this study perceive their spirituality to have played a significant role in the development of their leadership identity by helping them to understand and be confident in who they are, which in turn gave them confidence as leaders in college.
DEDICATION

“All glory to Him who alone is God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord. All glory, majesty, power, and authority are His before all time, and in the present and beyond all time! Amen.” (Jude 1:25, New Living Translation) As Hannah dedicated Samuel back to You, so too do I dedicate this work back to You, my Lord and Savior. You have done “exceedingly abundantly above all I could have asked or imagined” through this process. Thank you for always showing Yourself faithful. May You get the glory out of this work and out of my life both now and forever.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It has been said individuals must first know and understand themselves in order to effectively lead and motivate others (Maher, 1992; Kim & Sax, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Roberts, 2007; George, 2015). Recognizing the importance of leadership, colleges and universities have made it a goal to develop students as leaders so they may become contributing members of society (Astin & Astin, 2000; Gehrke, 2008; Yasuno, 2004; Parks, 2008). Continuing to focus on the leadership development of college students in higher education is important as students grow and develop tremendously during their college years. Aside from getting an education, the college years are a time for them to explore, evaluate, and understand who they are, what they value, and who they will chose to be outside of the values of which they know to come from their parents.

Over the years, in the student affairs profession there has been a distinct focus on college students’ development as whole students. College student development theories have been designed to help educators better understand the development process of college students and to equip them to better guide and support their students. However, for years there has been a missing element from the student, the students’ spiritual development (Love & Talbot, 1999). Because of this, in recent years there has been an increase in the exploration of students’ spiritual development, recognizing it too plays a factor in their development as whole individuals.
Closely related and tied to student development, authenticity has also been associated with spirituality. Love and Talbot (1999) posited an individual’s quest for authenticity, wholeness, and genuineness was a part of the process of spiritual development, and “seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness involves the process of developing a sense of self that is unitary (as opposed to fragmented), consistent, congruent with our actions and beliefs, and true to our sense of self” (p. 364). Authenticity relates to both spirituality and leadership in that it is involved in both the process and product of spiritual development, and that it is an important quality to have as a leader.

Still, little is known about the extent to which students’ spiritual exploration impacts their development. It is perhaps worth exploring more closely the influences that students’ spiritual exploration have on how they (a) understand and make sense of their spiritual identity, (b) make sense of themselves; and (c) see themselves as leaders as a result. While a growing amount of research has been conducted to explore cultivating the spirit of students in college (Astin, Astin, & Lindhom, 2011), a number of areas have yet to be explored extensively. This study attempted to bring to light a few of those areas. Spirituality, authenticity, and leadership identity among African American women in college was explored to shed more light on how these three areas impact their lives.
Literature Review

Spirituality and Spiritual Development

Higher education has not typically addressed the area of spirituality in discussions about college students, especially among students of color and specifically African American students. Love and Talbot (1999) asserted that the discussion of spirituality and spiritual development is often avoided in higher education because of the terms are often associated with religion. However, they advocated for the intentional inclusion of spirituality and spiritual development in student affairs. They posited that not addressing these terms in student affairs research excludes a vibrant part of who a student is and perceives him or herself to be in the context of pursuing a “higher education.” “By failing to address students’ spiritual development in practice and research we are ignoring an important aspect of their development” (p. 154). They also address the difficulty of defining these terms in such a way that research and practice can benefit from what some have deemed “taboo,” especially in public institutions of higher education.

When discussing spirituality and faith development in higher education, it is important to explore the two seminal works of James Fowler (1981) and Sharon Parks (1986, 2000, 2008). Both introduced models in an attempt to understand faith development. James Fowler (1981) introduced a stage-based development model that described how an individual develops their faith over their lifetime. Fowler’s model presented 6 stages of faith development, (a) Intuitive-Projective Faith, (b) Mythic-Literal
Faith, (c) Synthetic-Conventional Faith, (d) Individuate-Reflective Faith, (e) Conjunctive Faith, and (f) Universalizing Faith.

The Intuitive-Projective Faith stage takes place during childhood where the child asks questions. She/He uses symbols and their unrestrained imaginations to make sense of their understanding of faith and the world around them. The Mythic-Literal Faith stage, the second stage, takes place during the school years where the student can more clearly make a distinction between what is real and imagined and more readily seeks evidence for the information they are given. During this stage, stories, drama, and symbols are the manner through which students make meaning and find coherence in their experiences and understandings. The Synthetic-Conventional Faith stage, the third stage, comes about during adolescence and is indicative of the student adhering to a set of values, beliefs, and ideals that are socially accepted and held by significant others. However, the student has not “objectified [them] for examination and in a sense is unaware of having [them]” (p. 173). The fourth stage, Individuative-Reflective Faith, is marked by the development of faith, self-identity, and a conscious view of the world apart from others. Taking place during young adulthood, “stage 4’s ascendant strength has to do with its capacity for critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology)” (p. 182).

The fifth stage, Conjunctive Faith, the individual is open to experience new depths of faith, spirituality, and self. In the sixth and final stage, Universalizing Faith, the individual transcends the paradox of having reached a deeper sense of faith and self
while operating in an unchanged world and is characteristic of love, compassion, and justice for the sake of humanity and community.

Parks (2000) extended the work of Fowler and introduced a faith development model with four stages that specifically targets the college student population. The four stages include (a) Adolescent/Conventional, (b) Emerging Adult, (c) Tested Adult, and (d) Mature Adult.

While there are few commonly accepted definitions of faith and spiritual development (Mayhew, 2004, Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014 ), Love and Talbot (1999) offered an ideology to address the importance of not only defining the concepts but making them applicable to the needs of developing college/university students. They begin by noting that past research has explored concepts that embrace the issue of spirituality. For example, Maslow’s (1971) use of self-actualization as self-transcendence is often used synonymously with the term spirituality. He asserted that one’s spiritual life was “part of the human essence…It is a part of the real self, of one’s identity, of one’s inner core…of full humanness” (p. 324). He believed that the integration of practices with one’s work toward self-actualization was complemented by spiritual development.

Further, the work of Chickering and Reisser (1993), also explored the ideal of the development of integrity with concepts that occur not only in the context of religion, but as they closely relate to spirituality. Additionally, several researchers have associated one’s social consciousness as it relates to altruism, social and political tolerance, and the
support of social justice in a race-conscious society to be closely tied to spirituality
(Boykin, 1983; Carter 2008a; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

For the purposes of this study, it is important to share Love and Talbot’s (2005) definition of spirituality through its development, for supporting student development, in higher education. They asserted that spirituality and its development are interrelated as:

1. Internal processes that seek personal authenticity
2. Processes that continually transcend one’s current locus of centricity
3. Greater connectedness of self and others through relationships and union with community
4. Derivation for meaning, purpose and direction in one’s life
5. Increasing openness to exploring relationships with intangible and pervasive power or essence that exist beyond human existence and rational knowing (p. 155-156).

For the purposes of this study, Donahoo and Caffey’s (2010) definition of spirituality was used to guide the development of this study. They defined spirituality as, “the more general desire and process of making meaning of life, identifying an individual’s purpose and place in the world, and the quest for a holistic definition of self, while also establishing a relationship with the sacred” (p. 82). They studied African American college students and the impact of spirituality, religion, and church attendance.

**African American Culture and Spirituality**

These defining concepts of spiritual development, in association with student development, are important to understanding how African American culture was
inextricably tied to the exploration of spirituality of the African American women who participated in the present study. African Americans have historically been forced into negative perceptions of who they are because they live in a race-conscious society (Carter, 2008b). While much of the research on critical racial consciousness among African American students occurs at the PreK-12 level, the hope has been that a critical mass of those students would become college students because of the community’s desire to improve the educational and social economic status among African Americans (Dantley, 2005; Carter, 2008a; Carter, 2008b). The need to develop a critical race consciousness has been pioneered in the academic literature since W.E.B. DuBois (1903) and Carter G. Woodson (1933) explored a double consciousness among African American people and the need to effectively educate African American children through the teaching of knowledge affirming the contributions and worth of African American people.

W.E.B. DuBois

DuBois (1903) argued that a double consciousness, an attempt to function successfully in a race conscious society as an American and as a Negro (African American) was a consciousness that battled with itself on a consistent basis. In the *Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois explored the “color line” as the pervasive problem of the 20th century in America. He advocated for the education of African Americans as thinkers and leaders from an intellectual perspective. His series of essays in this book shared the reality of a dual identity experienced by people of African descent living in America.
He explored how one lives with a Black and an American identity, while highlighting the difficulty in each identity complimenting the other, especially as one lived in a society that had recently abolished slavery. 20th century African Americans were also deeply immersed in a segregated society replete in racial bias and discrimination. As an advocate for the effective education of African American learners, in 1906, DuBois said:

We want our children educated… We want the national government to step in and wipe out illiteracy in the South. Either the United States will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States… And when we call for education we mean real education… Education is the development of power and ideal. We want our children trained as intelligent human beings should be, … They have a right to know, to think, to aspire.

This quote was the fifth demand he made at an important meeting of an African American protest group of scholars and professionals (The Niagara Movement), he organized in 1905. These demands became a precursor to the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. His advocacy became a foundational philosophy Carter G. Woodson embraced when he continued DuBois’ legacy by creating the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) in 1915.
Carter G. Woodson

In 1933, Carter wrote and published *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, a groundbreaking text that challenged the African American community to address issues of lowered motivation in education. African Americans were encouraged to take on the responsibility of a systematic and culturally enriched love of self, through education. He believed African Americans were being indoctrinated in an oppressive system that justified slavery, lynching, and self-hatred. He believed that "miseducation" was the norm of a system that did not respect the contributions and integrity of people of African descent living in America. He was keenly interested in the mindset of African Americans and advocated for empowerment through education. He has become known as the Father of African American history. The knowledge of self and self-worth is richly associated with the authenticity and integrity of one’s self worth. He wrote:

> When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. (p. 44)

Carter advocated for a critical race consciousness that nurtured self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-ideal, in a cultural context.

Nurturing the development of a critical race consciousness in African American adolescents is one way to pass on the counter narrative that Perry (2003) speaks about. Perry posits that these narratives—oral and
written—depict the historical significance of education for freedom that has long been central to the identity formation of Blacks as intellectuals.

(p. 24)


African American culture has developed as a result of patterned belief systems and orientations that are based on West African ethos (most people of African descent were brought from to this region of Africa) and the cultural patterns that have since been merged and manifested in contemporary African American culture (Boykin, 1983). Boykin identified nine dimensions of African American culture:

1. Spirituality – An approach to life that is vitalistic. “It means conducting oneself in a manner consistent with the possibility that the nonobservable and nonmaterial have governing powers in the everyday affairs of people (p. 344).

2. Harmony – …one sees oneself as, and in turn acts as though one were, inextricably linked to one’s surroundings (p. 344). An individual has a goal of being versatile and embedded in a stylistic, harmonious existence in one’s family and community.

3. Movement – a “shorthand designation for the interwoven mosaic of movement, music, dance, percussiveness, and rhythm personified by the musical beat” (p. 345).
4. Verve – a propensity for an energetic, intense, stimulating and lively context to living and learning that often manifests itself in strategic multitasking.

5. Affect – the “integration of feelings with thoughts and actions, such that it would be difficult to engage in an activity if one’s feelings toward the activity ran counter to such engagement” (p. 344). Emotional expressiveness is of great importance.

6. Communalism – a focus on the social interdependence of people. “One acts in accordance with the notion that duty to one’s social group is more important than individual privileges and rights’ (p. 344).

7. Expressive Individualism – “…the cultivating of a unique or distinctive personality or essence and putting one’s own personal brand on an activity, a concern with style more than with being correct or efficient” (p. 344).

8. Orality – knowledge is accessed through the use of aural modes of communication while one relies on oral expression to communicate feelings and meaning.

9. Social Time Perspective – Time is a social phenomenon not bound to clocks and calendars. This dimension is often understood as a thought process that celebrates that time begins when the participants arrive rather than one being defined by a reliance on schedule times for community engagement.

Boykin’s dimensions do not advocate the development of stereotypes or a static manifestation of how one knows and comes to be. Culturally informed perceptions are the result of dynamic processes based on how one is socialized and how one interacts in
one’s respective communities of interaction. African American cultural ethos, include foci which examine patterns of socialization. This study highlights the dimension of spirituality, as it relates to African American college aged women, as a part of that process. Where appropriate, the other eight dimensions were associated in the analysis of perception data, with the interpretation of spirituality and the multifaceted interactions initiated and experienced by the informants in this study.

**Spirituality in African American Women**

African American women are known to be innately spiritual. This is said to be attributed to African Americans need to maintain and lean on a strong foundation of hope and faith through a long history of slavery endured in the United States. Milner (2006) explained further saying, African Americans “had to be spiritual beings and in touch with their spiritual selves to survive the hate, turmoil, racism and destruction of their masters” (p. 373). African American women have used spirituality to cope.

Patton & McClure (2009) conducted a study that explored fourteen African American collegiate women and the role of spirituality in their college experiences. Specifically, the focus of their study was the role of spirituality as a foundation of strength for African American women in college. Witherspoon & Taylor (2010) examined the Relio-spirituality of African American educational administrators. For those administrators, spirituality served as a source of strength in the face of oppression while serving as Pre-K-12 administrators. The sparse literature on the role of spirituality among African American female college-aged students was believed to be an informative way to better understand cultural and spiritual identity development among
African American students who served as leaders at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) of higher learning.

**Problem Statement**

As one dimension of African American culture, spirituality has been noted as a powerful socialized tenet important to African American identity development. However, little empirical research exists surrounding the study of spirituality and leadership identity development in college students. While some qualitative (Yasuna, 2004, 2008; Doherty, 2011) and quantitative (Gehrke, 2008; Bryant & Astin, 2008) research has been conducted, still, little is known about the search for meaning and purpose, and the role it plays in the development of collegiate student leadership identity and authenticity. Further, an even smaller amount of studies exist that focus specifically on African American collegiate women leaders and their spirituality and leadership identity. Such foci has the potential to shed light on how to better support African American college student leaders who are in pursuit of a higher education.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore African American students’ spirituality the role it plays in the development of a more authentic self, and its impact on how students see themselves as leaders. Exploring this population’s search for meaning and purpose and how it intersects with the development of their leadership identity can help give student affairs professionals and faculty insight into this area of students’ lives. It could potentially help these professional develop techniques that can better support students as they earn a degree at a PWI.
**Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do African American women leaders understand, express, and experience their spirituality?
2. How do African American women leaders perceive the role of their spirituality in the development of a more authentic self?
3. How do African American women leaders perceive the role of their spirituality in the formation and development of their leadership identity?

**Significance of Study**

This study will add to existing literature on spirituality and its impact on the education of African American female college students at PWIs. This study will also increase the understanding of spirituality as a complex and significant phenomenon central to the development of African American women and college students.

**Methods**

The theoretical perspective that guided this study and the selection of the methodologies employed was Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a theoretical tradition that focuses on interpretation as understanding, and asserts that interpretations can never be absolute, but must remain purely an interpretation (Schwandt, 2000). “Hermeneutics is concerned with the understanding and interpretation of our being in the world and how our different ways of being in the world are connected to our understanding of things” (Kakkori, 2009, p. 26). It posits that the meaning of something largely depends on both the cultural context of its origin, and the cultural context of which it is being interpreted.
(Patton, 2002). In Philosophical Hermeneutics, understanding is lived (Schwandt, 2000) and it seeks to understand more deeply the process of understanding itself (Madison, 1991). Furthermore, Thomas A. Schwandt (2000) explains that in Hermeneutics, …the act of interpreting (of “taking something as something”), sociohistorically inherited bias or prejudice is not regarded as a characteristic or attribute that an interpreter must strive to get rid of or manage in order to come to a “clear” understanding. To believe this is possible is to assume that the traditions and associated prejudgments that shape our efforts to understand are easily under our control and can be set aside. (p.194)

Guided by this theoretical perspective, a qualitative research approach was used, employing Hermeneutic Phenomenology as the method to explore college student spirituality among African American females. The qualitative research approach is based on the view that individuals construct their reality through their interaction with the social world around them and seek to understand the meaning derived from their constructed realities (Merriam, 1998). “It is assumed that meaning is embedded in people’s experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator’s own perceptions” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). In this type of research, the researcher seeks to study individuals in their “natural setting” in order to make sense of a particular phenomenon and its associated meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative research designs are characteristic of being flexible and emergent and allow the researcher the flexibility to respond to and make decisions on changes that arise as the
study proceeds (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). The phenomenon of spirituality is neither easily defined, nor easily quantifiable. Exploring students’ spirituality using this type of research approach allowed the researcher to explore the topic of spirituality and make the necessary adjustments as the themes emerged.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology was the methodology employed to explore how African American women leaders experience and express their spirituality and its impact on their authenticity and leadership identity. Hermeneutic Phenomenology is focused on understanding the subjective experience (Kafle, 2011). As its name reflects, it borrows from the basic tenets of both traditional philosophies. As a methodology, it seeks to produce “rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals who are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively” (Smith, 1997, p. 80). The use of this methodology allowed for the exploration of the lived experiences of African American undergraduate women leaders’ through their lens in spirituality. It allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning derived from participants’ respective experiences, coupled with the researcher’s lived experiences.

**Data Setting**

This study took place at a large, public PWI, located in the Southwest. While the institution has an enrollment of more than 60,000 students, 34.2% of students enrolled represent people of color, while 3.6% are Black. Additionally, 48.04% of the student population are women. Originally established as a land-grant institution, the university did not open its doors to women and African American students until 1963. In the 55
years since the integration of the university, the enrollment of African American students has remained constant and growth has not been significant, especially when compared to the growing Latinx American (23.4%) and Asian American (7.1%) student populations.

**Data Sources**

Purposeful sampling, a sampling strategy most appropriate for qualitative research, was employed given its assumption that the researcher must identify cases from which they can learn the most as they seek to gain a deeper level of insight (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, the researcher utilized purposeful sampling to gather information-rich cases to explore the phenomenon of spirituality among African American collegiate women leaders (Patton, 2015). Given the personal nature of spirituality, as an extra layer of protection, participants were identified, initially contacted, and selected using gatekeepers. Gatekeepers were Student Affairs administrators who served as advisors of student organizations. They were asked via email (Appendix A) to identify potential student participants who met the criteria of being someone who (a) is a junior or senior, (b) identifies as an African American woman, (c) is actively involved in their organization, and (d) would agree to answer questions regarding their spirituality and leadership identity. Administrators then identified participants who fit the criteria and supplied the researcher with the contact information of students who both fit the criteria and were interested in participating in the study. The researcher emailed an official invitation (Appendix B) to perspective participants in the study, using the contact information supplied by the gatekeepers.
After students agreed to participate in the study via email, individual, one-on-one meetings were set up with potential participants to brief them on the study. They were then asked to complete paperwork to solidify their official participation in the study. During the meetings, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and reviewed the participant informed consent form (Appendix C). Participants signed informed consent forms (Appendix D) and reviewed and signed photo release forms (Appendix E) associated with the study. Additionally, each participant completed a demographic survey (Appendix F) and was given instructions (Appendix G) on how to capture and submit photos, along with additional written reflections to supplement the interviews that would be conducted as a part of the study.

Eleven undergraduate African American women were selected and participated in this study. A specific religion was not identified at the onset of this study. Potential participants were told that the purpose of the study was to explore their perceptions of spirituality. All participants in this study either identified as Christian or communicated Christianity was a large part of their upbringing. Each shared how Christianity influenced their spiritual identity. Because of the participants’ espoused Christian influence, participants in this study were given pseudonyms that reflected biblical women or Christian principles that were reflective of their journeys as told through the process of this study. The following is a brief introduction and background of each participant in this study.
Martha

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it”

(Proverbs 22:6, King James Version).

Martha, a 21-year-old junior, Allied Health major, identified as an African American female. Martha was from a mid-sized city in the southwest and a first generation college student. Martha considers herself a spiritual person and identified as a Christian. She was raised in a two-parent home and described faith as the foundation of her family. She described spirituality as something an individual believes in and considers his or her source of a higher power. However, she also expressed that spirituality and religion are two different things. At first, Martha seemed to oscillate between two schools of thought surrounding her idea of spirituality. The first school of thought was based on what she was taught in her collegiate spirituality course. The other school of thought highlighted the spiritual and biblical foundation with which she was raised to know and understand. She discussed struggling to balance the practical and the spiritual ideologies in her life.

In the biblical text, Martha, along with her sister and brother, Mary and Lazarus, had a special bond with Jesus. For example, Martha cared for Him, served Him, and even cried out to Him for help in times of distress. Martha’s life depicted both a spiritual and practical side. Martha’s love for Jesus was expressed in multiple ways, but most notably through her service to Him. Though Martha, in this study sometimes struggled to balance the practical with the spiritual, like Martha in the Bible, her love and devotion to Christ overshadowed that struggle.
Deborah

“Being confident in this, that He who has begun a good work in me will bring it to completion” (Philippians 1:6).

Deborah, was a 22-year-old senior, Economics major. She identified as a Black African female. Deborah was originally from a West African country and immigrated with her immediate family to a Southwest state in the United States when she was in the fourth grade. Since then, while Deborah has maintained connections to her African culture, she has also embraced the African American culture as one facet of her identity with which she strongly identifies. Along with the exploration and continuous cultivation of herself and spirituality, Deborah has immersed herself in the exploration of the African and African American culture, which she calls the African diaspora. Wise beyond her years, she feels a personal responsibility to take up the banner on behalf of the Black community and carry on the legacy of former national Black leaders and intellectuals such as W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, James Baldwin, and Malcolm X, to name a few.

Deborah in Old Testament (Judges 4) times was known as a wise patriot, judge, leader and protector of the people of Israel. She was a passionate defender of the people of God raised up to lead God’s people out of bondage. In this study, as Deborah elaborated on her spirituality and experiences that impacted her leadership and spiritual identity, she made clear her passion for God. Her passion and boldness for God and her community mirrored that of Deborah in the biblical text.
Mary

“Though He may slay me, yet I will him trust Him...” (Job 13:15)

Mary, a 21-year-old, junior and Food Science major, identified as a Black female. Impacted by Hurricane Katrina, Mary and her family left their home. They were uprooted and sought shelter in a city, in a border state. Up until the time of her family’s displacement, Mary had been raised in the church. Still, Mary expressed not really feeling a real connection with God until she arrived at her new home when her family joined a new church following Hurricane Katrina. Mary described a number of tragedies she endured in addition to Hurricane Katrina, including her parents’ divorce and her mother’s battle with cancer and subsequent passing. Still, Mary attributed her strength and endurance to her faith, in the midst of such calamity and heartbreak.

In the Bible, Mary, the mother of Jesus, had a heart for God, maintained hope and faith, was willing to be used as a vessel to bring about His will and completely surrendered to Him. Like her biblical namesake, Mary had radical faith and communicated her trust in God and dependence on Him through the life she lived. Mary was the epitome of the scripture above (Job 13:15) in that, even though she endured several tragedies, including the loss of her mother and the loss of her home, she never lost faith and continued to trust God to sustain her.
“Let your light so shine to all men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in.” (Matthew 5:16)

Sarah, a 21-year-old, junior and Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences major identified as African American. Sarah was raised by her mother in a single parent home. Sarah believes spirituality to be your connection with a higher power and being centered in one’s self in that divine power. Sarah considers herself Christian and attributes her understanding about spirituality to her upbringing in the church. For Sarah, Christianity and faith were both the foundation of her family and an aspect of the African American church that has been passed down from generation to generation. Sarah expressed while continuing to journey through her faith and spiritual, she sometimes struggled with holding on to faith because she saw herself as an analytical person who liked to have answers and know why. Though she has yet to master it, she saw faith as a muscle she was continuing to work out and strengthen.

Sarah in biblical times, also struggled with doubt and faith because she desperately wanted a child but was barren. Sarah was the wife of Abraham, whom God had given a promise. Despite Sarah’s struggle with doubt, God blessed her and her husband to conceive and have the child to which he promised Abraham. Sarah in this study, most reflected the essence of Sarah in the Bible because she admitted that she struggled with doubt at times but still believed in Jesus and held onto her faith.
Esther

“…And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14)

Esther, a 21-year-old, senior, Biomedical Sciences major, identified as a Black female. She lived in a two parent Christian home, though from Esther’s vantage point, one parent appeared more devout than the other in practice and the other appeared to straddle the fence. Esther described her mom as Eunice, a female depicted in the Bible, who was married to a husband of Greek descent, but maintained her devotion to God. Esther believed spirituality was connected to her faith and considered herself a Christian.

Esther, in biblical times, was a woman of courage who stepped out on faith, went against protocol and allowed herself to be used by God to save her people. Additionally, reflective of the scripture, in Esther 4:4, Esther had a passion for her community and felt a responsibility toward her community. For perhaps, she has been placed in a position of responsibility “for such a time as this.”

Hannah

“…The prayers of the righteous available much.” (James 5:16)

Hannah is a 20-year-old, senior, Chemical Engineering major who identifies as a Black African female. Hannah was raised in a two-parent home. She is a Christian and believes spirituality to be a personal connection with God and through that connection how He governs her life and gives her purpose. Hannah attributes her understanding of spirituality to that fact that she was brought up in a Christian church and attended a Baptist boarding school during her teenage years. However, she expressed that her faith
did not truly become her own until she had a personal encounter with God. She had a
defining moment when an incident occurred when her father was shot, and she thought
he was going to die. Her biggest testimony today is to have seen him survive through
that tragedy and she attributes that to God. She prayed, saw God move on her behalf and
answer her prayers.

Hannah in biblical times, was known as a woman of prayer who fervently cried
out to God in prayer for a child when she was barren and unable to have children. When
God answered Hannah by allowing her to have a child, she dedicated her child back to
the Lord (1 Samuel). Hannah reflected the spirit and essence of Hannah in biblical
times, in that she was able to pray and see that God answered her prayers.

**Hope**

“I pray that God, the source of hope will fill you completely with joy and peace because
you trust in Him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the
Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

Hope, a 22-year-old senior, Communications major, identified as a Black female.
She was raised in a single parent home. Growing up, Hope’s mom struggled to continue
to make going to church a priority after the divorce from her husband, because of the
burden of having to work and provide for her family. Still, Hope’s extended family made
sure she went to church and exposed her to a Christian foundation from variety of
denominations. Still, Hope expressed that she did not have an opportunity to ask a lot of
questions about her religion while growing up. In the environment she grew up in, it was
considered taboo to question the faith. When she did ask questions, she did not feel as
though she received many answers. College was the time she used to explore her faith and spirituality. While Hope welcomed and accepted the Christian principles that influenced her spiritual identity, she considered herself to be spiritual and searching.

Hope is mentioned in the Bible 129 times in 121 verses in the Bible. Hope is one of the key tenants in the life of a Christian in that we do not always have all of the answers, but we can remain hopeful that we are connected with the One who does. In the midst of the questions and the continued exploration, Hope remained confident and hopeful as she traversed her life and explored her spirituality.

**Ruth**

“But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” (Luke 5:16)

Ruth is a 19-year-old, junior, International Studies and Spanish major who identified as a Black Latina female. She is a Christian who believed spirituality to encompass the Holy Spirit and her walk with the Lord in how He guides her through life. Ruth grew up in a single parent home. Ruth explained that when her parents divorced her mom had a hard time handling it. Because of this, Ruth took on the burden of holding her family together. Ruth became exhausted when trying to juggle family, school, and relationships and felt she had neglected her spiritual life. As a result, she stepped out of her comfort zone to travel to another country to slow down and get have a change of pace.

Ruth in biblical text was loyal, faithful, courageous and willing to leave the familiar and was blessed because of it (Ruth 1-4). In this study, Ruth showed her ability to be attentive to her inner self. She recognized the need to take a moment and slow
down. She showed courage when she stepped out of her comfort zone and traveled to another country. In doing so, she found her center again. In her own words, she “found God.”

**Magdalene**

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Magdalene is a 22-year-old, senior, Agricultural Communications and Journalism major who identifies as a Black female. She explained a difficult childhood during which she experienced her parents divorced. Her mom disconnected as she struggled with the hurt and pain of the divorce leaving Magdalene to have to step up help provide care and support for her brother. Throughout her time in college, Magdalene discussed having been in a relationship where her boyfriend was abusive. She leaned on her relationship with God to get through that situation and recognized the value of herself.

In the Bible, Mary Magdalene was known as a woman who had many issues but was delivered and forever changed when she came into contact with Jesus Christ. She was known as a faithful follower of Christ with a heartfelt devotion to Him and His teachings. Magdalene, in this study, reflected the essence of her biblical namesake because she not only had a heart for Christ, but also had many obstacles in her life from which she believed Christ delivered her.
Mary-Beth

“My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

Mary-Beth is a 20-year-old, senior, Sociology major who identified as an African American female. Mary-Beth was raised in church and had family in ministry. She was a Christian and believed spirituality was being in tune with the Holy Spirit. Mary-Beth’s life story so far and as told through this study reflected a heartfelt desire to die to her own wants and desires so she could understand and live out the will of God. In other words, she desired to decrease so that Christ could increase (John 3:30) in her life as she continued to develop her relationship with Him.

In biblical times, Mary of Bethany, who was the sister of Martha and Lazarus, was a close friend of Jesus. She dearly loved Him and was well known for sitting at the feet of Jesus as an expression of her love, reverence, and worship of Him. Mary-Beth in this study, most reflected the essence of Mary of Bethany in the Bible because she displayed a clear reverence and devotion to developing a relationship with Christ.

Faith

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.”

(Hebrews 11:1)

Faith, a 21-year-old, junior, Biology major, who identities as an African American female. Faith believed spirituality to be equivalent to her connection with God the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Faith too was raised in the church
with a long line of family member who served in ministry. For instance, her older brother severed as the Pastor of her church. Faith has endured her share of difficulties in life. She lost both of her parents at an early age and discussed her struggle with dealing with issues of isolation. Through faith and the support network she had surrounding her, she was able to make it through those difficult times. She expressed that her spiritual life would not be complete without her faith and belief in God.

A key tenet in Christianity is faith. As the scripture above (Hebrews 11:1) reflects, faith is believing even when you cannot see. In this study, Faith both exhibited faith in how she lived and traversed various obstacles in her life and verbally expressed the importance of faith as a key foundation in her life.

**Data Collection**

Two interconnected data collection strategies were used to gather data, semi-structured interviews and photovoice. Interviews are the most common data collection strategy used in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). The researcher conducted two, one-one-one interviews with each participant, using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix H). Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to use a structured list of questions and gave the researcher the flexibility needed to respond to the participants as new topics emerged. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half in duration and were audio recorded. “Photovoice is a method that enables women to control the photographic process in order to express, reflect and communicate their everyday lives” (Wang, 1999, p. 186). Photovoice was used as an additional data collection strategy to allow participants another format to reflect and
communicate their spirituality and its impact on their development, authenticity and leadership identity. Participants submitted photos to depict their understandings of spirituality, authenticity, and leadership identity respectively. Along with their photos, participants submitted written reflections that detailed their photo selection and expounded on their understanding of the topic.

**Data Analysis**

In the data analysis process the researcher prepares the data and makes meaning of the data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and transcripts (Appendix I) were created for analysis. The hermeneutic circle of analysis, also known as the hermeneutic cycle, was used to analyze the data collected. The hermeneutic cycle of analysis entails the researcher scouring the data in a process that requires them to go back and forth over the data comparing parts to the whole through rigorous reading, reflective writing, and interpretation (Kafle, 2011).

To facilitate this process the researcher used open, axial coding to construct categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, the researcher read over each transcript and thematically color coded each transcript by hand. An Excel spreadsheet was created to store first and second round themes created. Following a review and discussion during peer debriefing meetings and guided by the research questions, themes and subthemes were created surrounding spirituality, spirituality and authenticity, and spirituality and leadership identity.
**Trustworthiness**

“All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness is the standard by which researchers can ensure an appropriate amount of rigor has been applied to their study. Trustworthiness was established by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established by using member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation. Transferability was established using thick, rich descriptions. The researcher maintained an audit trail and a reflexive journal to establish both confirmability and dependability.

**Researcher’s Positionality**

In qualitative research, the primary instrument for data collection and analysis is the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher is the most appropriate instrument for qualitative research given that the research process is interpretive, emergent, inductive and ultimately seeks to understand the nature and essence of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a human instrument, the researcher is best able to attend to the needs and nature of the qualitative research process as the researcher can be flexible and can appropriately respond to the participants and data as the process evolves and topics emerge. The following is an overview of my background as the researcher.

I identify as an African American female, protestant Christian; though my Christian faith is what is most salient. It is the center of who I am and the foundation of my identity, life, and purpose. I come from a family with a strong spiritual foundation
that was imbedded in the culture of my family and community. My father was a deacon in the church and I had extended family who served in various capacities in the church such as musician, minister, and teacher, to name a few. As a result, I spent the majority of my childhood in church and often attended multiple services throughout the week. I was baptized when I was in the third grade.

Though I went to a predominantly African American church, I attended predominantly White primary and secondary schools where I was often the only African American child in my grade. Still, my family took great effort in making sure I understood and celebrated my culture. For instance, in addition to making sure I was connected to an African American church, I remember my uncle would bring my siblings and me books and Talented Tenth t-shirts as a way to teach us about W.E.B. DuBois and highlight other African American men and women and their contributions to society. I remember sitting in the living room in my home watching my dad guide my older sister, cousins, and neighbor kids to develop a proposal and constitution to create an African American Student Union at the high school in which they attended at the time.

My undergraduate institution, too, had a disproportionate representation of students of color. I went to a land grant, public, Predominantly White Institution (PWI). I was involved on campus in various ways, as a member of the universities gospel choir, as a resident assistant in residence life, and as the president of my historically Black sorority, to name a few. Though involved on campus, I struggled with my spiritual and racial identity and sense of self during my time in college. I remember feeling like I was
not “Black” enough for the Black people and not “White” enough for the White people. In the same vein, I also felt out of place in my friend circles as I appeared to be the “church girl” of the group.

Aside from the normal phone calls and occasional, periodic visits home during the holiday, I experienced a lack of mentorship and a disconnection from spiritual and familial foundation. Being away from home and disconnected from my foundation caused a sense of division within. I did not attend church services regularly during this time, however, I did attend church when I visited my family on some weekends. During this time, I constantly felt an inner turmoil, and never fully settled within myself.

The turning point is the time in which I began to come into my own, and find my identity…my voice. I guess one could call it finding myself. This turning point came as a result of recognizing who I was in relation to my relationship with Jesus Christ. I felt this was important to include because this represents a sort of awakening that has taken place in my life. I finally began to recognize God’s presence in my life. I was re-baptized during the summer when I began my Ph.D. and because of this I have a whole new outlook on life and understanding of who I am. My decision to be baptized a second time had more to with a personal recommitment to living a life in alignment with God, and less to do with no longer being saved.

While I am still a work in progress, I did not begin to love myself until I began to truly understand my identity in Christ. I began to embrace my two-toned lips, the bow in my legs, the curve in my back and the slant in my eyes. I began to love me, my
personality, my quirks, my faults, my everything. I realized that God made me as a unique individual and He loved all of me.

As I began to understand who I was in Christ, I began take on the role of a full time professional Student Affairs practitioner at a PWI. As I began to work with students, I came to realize that my own experiences and struggle with my spirituality, identity, and leadership during my college years was problematic to me. I came to know that my spirituality was closely tied to my Christianity. Additionally, I recognized the limited amount of support networks in place to support me during this time. This realization led me to want to explore how other African American women in college were experiencing and traversing this time in their lives. I became passionate about studying how the role of spirituality impacted the lives and development of African American college aged women at a PWI.

**Dissertation Format**

This dissertation is organized in the journal article format. This format included three articles, which address the three research questions posed in this study. The journal articles follow the format as outlined by the *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*. Each article respectively illuminates the phenomenon of (a) spirituality, (b) authenticity, and (c) leadership identity, as expressed by participants in this study. A depth of spirituality is the common theme across each article and seamlessly interlinks each article together. The first article addressed research question one:

How do African American female student leaders understand, experience, and express their spirituality?
The researcher explored African American college aged women leaders and their lived experiences as it related to their spirituality. The second article addressed the second research question:

How do African American women female leaders perceive the role of their spirituality in the development of their authenticity?

The researcher explored African American women’s spirituality and authenticity.

Finally, the third article addressed research question three:

How do African American female leaders perceive the role of their spirituality in the formation and development of their leadership identity?

The researcher explored how African American women leaders perceive the influence their spirituality had on how they see themselves as leaders.

**Definition of Terms**

The following are definitions of terms that were referenced throughout the study.

**African American:** African American refers to participants of African descent who identify with the African American experience. Participants used African American and Black interchangeably in this study.

**Authenticity:** Authenticity is the “developmental process whereby individuals explore, discover, accept, and behave in accordance with their true selves” (Goldman, 2006) (as cited in Pisarik & Larson, 2011, p. 84).

**Identity:** Identity is “the sense of a continuous self” (Komives, et al., 2006, p. 401).

**Leaders:** Participants were identified as student leaders in this study if they were
actively involved in a program or student organization on campus or in the community.

**Leadership Identity Development:** The processes an individual go through to develop a leadership identity (Komives, et al., 2005)

**Photovoice:** Typically a participatory action research method used to empower women to take part in the research process through the use of photographs to express and communicate their experiences (Wang, 1999). Photovoice was used as a collection method in this research study.

**Predominantly White Institutions:** Collegiate institutions in which student enrollment typically encompasses 50% or more of White students in relation to other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

**Religion:** “An organized community of faith” (Tisdell, 2008, p. 28).

**Spirituality:** The more general desire and process of making meaning of life, identifying an individual’s purpose and place in the world, and the quest for a holistic definition of self, while also establishing a relationship with the sacred (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010, p. 82)

**Spiritual development:** Spiritual development is described by Love and Talbot (1999) in five propositions:

1) Spiritual development involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development (p. 364).

2) Spiritual development involves the process of continually transcending one’s current locus of centricity (p. 365).
3) Spiritual development involves developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community (p. 365).

4) Spiritual development involves deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life (p. 366).

5) Spiritual development involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing (p. 367).
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CHAPTER II
“IN HIM, I LIVE, MOVE, AND HAVE MY BEING”: EXPLORING THE SPIRITUALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

Introduction

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience” (Blanchard, 1999, p. 92). Spirituality is said to be central in the lives of African Americans. Spirituality continues to be a growing topic of interest in higher education (Astin & Astin, 2010). While higher education, student affairs, and student development theory have long placed a profound emphasis on the need to develop the whole student, spirituality was one aspect of students’ identity that had not been explored.

Literature Review

Spirituality

Spirituality is a complex, abstract phenomenon that is often difficult to grasp and as such difficult to define (Love & Talbot, 1999, 2005). A number of researchers have made an attempt to identify and define spirituality. Sherry Hoppe (2005) defined spirituality as “the search for depth and meaning in our entire being” (p. 84). Chavez (2001) explains spirituality as the “sense of myself as a whole, authentic, human being living in connection and communion with those around me” (p.69). Though an effort
has been made to conceptualize spirituality, faith, and religion, as working definitions, there are still differences in definitions across the board and no one definition has been accepted across the board. However, Love and Talbot’s (1999, 2005) conception of spirituality does well to outline key components of spiritual development that could encompass a wide range of belief systems. They stated spirituality and development are interconnected in concurrent processes and proposed the following propositions as they relate to spiritual development involves:

1. An internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development.
2. The process of continually transcending one’s current locus of centricity.
3. Developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community.
4. Deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life.
5. An increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational knowing (p. 155-156).

Finally, for the purposes of this study, Donahoo and Caffey (2010) definition will be used. They (2010) described spirituality as “The more general desire and process of making meaning of life, identifying an individual’s purpose and place in the world, and the quest for a holistic definition of self, while also establishing a relationship with the sacred” (p. 82).
Faith and Spiritual Development

In his book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, James W. Fowler (1981) presented a faith development model. Fowler identified six stages of faith: a) Intuitive-Projective Faith (Early childhood); b) Mythical-Literal Faith (School Years); c) Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence); d) Individuative-Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood); e) Conjunctive Faith (Mid-life and Beyond); and f) Universalizing Faith. His model is one of the first models that sought to understand the faith development process in an adult’s lifetime. Parks (2000) built on the work of Fowler (1981) and introduced a faith development model which comprised four stages of development for college students. The first stage, Adolescent/Conventional, is characterized by an individual with dualistic thinking who makes meaning by depending on figures who are in positions of authority. In the second stage, Emerging Adult, individuals journeyed through the process of fragile inner-dependence where they became more confident in their own voices as they come to the realization that meaning is relative. The Tested Adult, the third stage consists of individuals who have traversed probing commitment through numerous lived experiences. As a result, the individual developed confident inner-dependence. In other words, the individual developed the ability to see the world through trust and faith. The fourth and final stage, Mature Adult, consisted of individuals depend their level of confidence.

Additionally, both James W. Fowler (1981) and Sharon D. Parks (2000) discussed a faith-identity typology that includes three forms of faith, polytheism, henotheism, and radical monotheism. Polytheistic faith is characterized by an individual
who may have many gods or find many sources from which they gain power and value (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Henothetic faith, is characterized by an individual who is devoted or committed to one single god, cause, or center (Parks, 2000). However, this faith is unable to sustain the individual in the face of tragedy or loss. Radical monotheistic faith was described as a form of faith that surpassed and sustained the individual though every experience the individual encountered (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000).

**Spirituality and African American Culture**

Donahoo and Caffey (2010) sought to “ascertain what particular benefits college students gain from their religious and spiritual involvement (p. 79). They analyzed survey responses of 25 African American (18 women, seven males) college students. The responses from these informants were taken from a larger study. The students attended two small rural public universities in the Southeast and Midwest. The researchers sought to assess the perceived interest or need for support as it relates to spiritual and religious needs of students when public universities, which are forbidden by the United States Constitution to either prohibit or promote the practice of religion (p.80).

As a result of their analysis, they concluded that African Americans professed religious and spirituality beliefs and needs. They asserted that public universities can provide support for African American students who desire such support in the college setting without violating the legal mandate of the separation of church and state. Further, Donahoo (2011) looked specifically at definitions of spirituality of the 17 African American females in the Donahoo and Caffey (2010) study. She then looked at
their perceptions of the relationship between spiritual and academic development. She concluded that the experiences and perceptions of these women highlight the need for more opportunities to pursue spiritual development while enrolled in college (p. 85).

**African Americans Spirituality and Racial Identity**

African American college students often experience racial identity and spirituality development simultaneously (Sanchez & Carter, 2005). Sanchez and Carter (2005) found that a deep exploration of racial identity development among African American men often led them “to retreat away from the religion associated with the life they had before working towards a new racialized self” (p. 84). African American women, on the other hand, used

…Their spiritual beliefs to help explore and construct their new racial identities, but relied less on spirituality or religion to cope with race once they constructed an acceptable racial identity suggesting that students do not readily blend their intrinsic views of race and religion (p. 84).

**Spirituality and African American Women**

Generally, African American women are known to be inherently spiritual. The need to maintain this type of inherent spirituality can be attributed to African Americans need to maintain and lean on a strong foundation of hope and faith due to a lengthy period of being in bondage through slavery. African American women have used spirituality to cope with hate, turmoil, and racism (Milner, 2006).

There is very little literature on the role of spirituality among African American female college-aged students. This research is an informative way to better understand
cultural and spiritual development as it relates to authenticity of African American students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) of higher learning.

The purpose of this study was to explore the spirituality of African American undergraduate women leaders. More specifically, the study sought to answer the research questions: How do African American women leaders understand, express, and experience their spirituality? What influenced their understandings and expressions of their spiritual identity?

**Methods**

This study used a qualitative approach to study eleven African American women leaders and their spirituality. Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology was employed and guided by the theoretical perspective of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is concerned with understanding and interpretation. The theoretical perspective calls for both the participants’ interpretations of their lived experiences and the researcher’s interpretations to be taken into account throughout the research process. Hermeneutic phenomenology is most appropriate for this study as the research seeks to understand both the lived experience of the participants and how they themselves understand and interpret those experiences.

**Data Sources and Sampling**

Consistent with qualitative research, purposeful sampling is a sampling strategy that allows the researcher to select information rich cases to study and gain in-depth understanding (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Intensity sampling, a purposive sampling strategy was employed for this study. In intensity sampling, the sample consists of
“information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely)” (Patton, 2002, p. 234). Eleven African American women leaders in student organizations who were juniors or seniors were identified as participants for this study. For the purpose of this study, participants were considered leaders if they were actively involved on campus.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and photovoice. Two, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Additionally, through photovoice, participants submitted photos with a written reflection for each. Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and created into transcripts to be analyzed. Participants’ photo submissions and their accompanying written reflections were reviewed and analyzed.

Participants

Participants in this study were undergraduate women and identified as African American. When asked to specifically identify their race and/or ethnicity, four participants identified as African American, four identified as Black, two identified as African Black, and one identified as Black Latina. Though the race and ethnicity with which the participants identified varied, all participants closely identified with the African American experience and thus self-selected to participate in this study. Participants used the terms African American and Black interchangeably to discuss the African American experience.
Data Setting

Student participants all attended a large, public, land-grant university. Historically an all men’s college, the institution allowed women and African Americans to attend the institution in the 1960s. The university currently has a student enrollment of 60,435 students, 51,232 of which are undergraduate students. Of the total enrolled students 23.8% (15,744) reported being people of color (i.e. Hispanic, Black, or American Indian) and 3% are Black.

Data Analysis

The hermeneutic circle of analysis was used to analyze the data collected. The hermeneutic circle (Patton, 2002) of analysis is an analytic process that involves gaining understanding by “relating parts to wholes, and wholes to parts” (p. 497) through a circular process in an attempt to extrapolate meaning from a text.

Trustworthiness

Triangulation, member checks, and peer debriefing were used to establish credibility. Triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), or the collection and interpretation of different sources of information, was reached by gathering data through interviews, photo submissions, and written reflections from the participants. Member checks were conducted by allowing the participants the opportunity to review and verify the transcripts of the interviews as well as review findings (Erlandson, et al., 1993, Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Peer debriefing was also employed to gain an outside perspective and to provide feedback. Though generalizability is not a goal of qualitative studies, transferability is important and was reached by providing thick, rich description of the
findings (Erlandson, et al, 1993). Both dependability and confirmability are important and were ensured by maintaining an audit trail. The audit trail consisted of detailed notes and records of procedures which took place throughout the process along with reflexive journaling. To respect and protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were used in place of participants’ real names.

Results

The spirituality of eleven participants was explored to identify how they understood, experienced, and expressed their spirituality. Through careful analysis of interview transcripts and the pictorial representations accompanied with written reflections of their own spirituality, five themes emerged to provide deeper insight into the spiritual dimensions of African American undergraduate female leaders. Participants expressed their spirituality as (a) a connection with a higher power, (b) steeped in Christianity, (c) the essence of their being, (d) the source of guidance, comfort, and strength, and (e) an ongoing journey of faith and growth. Table 1 outlines the themes and subthemes and their corresponding sources.
Table 1

Themes and Subthemes with Sources for Spirituality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Source of Themes &amp; Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality as a Connection with a Higher Power</td>
<td>Connection w/Higher Source</td>
<td>Martha, Sarah, Esther, Hannah, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inner Spirit/Inner Guide</td>
<td>Deborah, Mary, Ruth, Mary-Beth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality/Faith/Religion Interconnected</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Mary, Esther, Mary-Beth, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality as Steeped in Christianity</td>
<td>Cultural and Familial Upbringing</td>
<td>Martha, Mary, Sarah, Esther, Hannah, Hope, Ruth, Mary-Beth, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Encounters</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Mary, Sarah, Esther, Hannah, Ruth, Magdalene, Mary-Beth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relational Influences</td>
<td>Deborah, Mary, Sarah, Esther, Hope, Ruth, Magdalene, Mary-Beth, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality as the Essence of Their Being</td>
<td>Core of Identity</td>
<td>Martha, Mary, Sarah, Esther, Mary-Beth, Ruth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Steeped in His Word and Led by His Spirit</td>
<td>Deborah, Mary, Sarah, Esther, Ruth, Mary-Beth, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dependence on God</td>
<td>Deborah, Mary, Sarah, Hannah, Ruth, Magdalene, Mary-Beth, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality as the Source of Comfort, Strength, &amp; Guide</td>
<td>Frames Experiences</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Mary, Sarah, Esther, Hannah, Hope, Ruth, Magdalene, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frames the World</td>
<td>Deborah, Hope, Ruth, Magdalene, Mary-Beth,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality as an Ongoing Journey of Faith &amp; Growth</td>
<td>Faith In the Unseen</td>
<td>Esther, Sarah, Hannah, Ruth, Magdalene, Faith,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Surrendered Life</td>
<td>Sarah, Hannah, Magdalene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Continuous Process</td>
<td>Deborah, Martha, Esther, Hannah, Hope</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following is a presentation of those themes. Selected photos will be used as appropriate to better illustrate the findings. Findings should be understood as descriptive and not prescriptive. Their voices determined the interpretations.

**Spirituality as a Connection with a Higher Power**

Overall, participants articulated their understanding of spirituality as believing in, being in tune with, and connected with a higher source of power. Table 2 lists the participants’ personal definitions of spirituality.

### Table 2

*Participants’ Personal Definitions of Spirituality*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>“Spirituality is basically…what you believe in and what you believe to be like your higher source of power”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>“I would define spirituality as a lifelong daily quest to cultivate a spirit…a greater spirit and a greater character within yourself”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>“When I think of spirituality, I think of the Holy Spirit. I’m a Christian, and so I tend to think of like wanting the Holy Spirit, when I pray, I pray that the Holy Spirit would lead me, would lead my spirit to do things.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>“Spirituality to me is…having a connection with some higher source of power or greater force than man can readily like describe or attain or try to…experiment and create a conclusion to define. So being centered in one’s self and in that divine power…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>“I identify as Christian, and specifically as Church of Christ… I think that spirituality and religion can be interchangeable. Because whenever you’re a spiritual being, I think that you recognize that there’s a God, that he is over everything and all things, and I think that there is one God.”</td>
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Table 2

Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>“I think spirituality to me is a connection, a personal connection with, for me God…it’s just something greater than us…I believe each and everything is governed by that one God…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>“So to me, I feel like I grew up in the church with my Pentecostal great-grandmother. And then my mom was like Baptist, but then the people on my father’s side of the family went to like the AME church, so it’s kind of like everybody was everywhere. My grandfather, before he passed away, was Catholic. So I really have like a mixture of I guess”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>“I feel like spirituality is a combination between I guess your religious views as well as I guess what you might pick up from within like I guess modern society”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magdalene</td>
<td>“I would describe spirituality as something that is specific to you. Definitely something that is positive, and something used to motivate you, and kind of a fundamental foundation for everything that you go through in life, or that you aspire.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary-Beth</td>
<td>“Spirituality to me is oneness with God and His Spirit. I was raised in the church, my dad is a preacher, and my mom is a minister of music, my grandfather a pastor of my church.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>“Spirituality is kinda your connection to God – for me, God, our Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost. And pretty much with that connection, how you live.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sarah, who is a 21-year-old junior, described her spirituality as a divine power that is beyond man’s ability to fully grasp or comprehend. She described it as “having a connection with some higher power or greater force than man can readily like describe or attain or try to, I don’t know, experiment and create a conclusion to define.” Others described their spirituality as not only a belief in God but also the resulting influence He has on their lives. For instance, Esther, a 21-year-old senior, saw spirituality as “seeking
to be in tune with who you believe to be God, and how his role in your life is displayed in other aspects of your life.” Along the same lines, Hannah, a 20-year-old senior, described spirituality as a personal connection with the one true God who governs all.

I think spirituality to me is a connection, a personal connect with, for me, God. In general, I think it’s just something greater than us, and just a, a place that what we do, I believe each and everything is governed by that one God that’s able to give us hope, able to take us further in life, and just gives a purpose for waking up every day, I guess.

In addition to recognizing their spirituality as a belief in God as their higher power, participants further explicated their spirituality as an inner spirit within them that provides day to day guidance and direction. Deborah, a 22-year-senior, viewed, spirituality as “more of an inner guide, a spirit that’s within us, like our spirits.” Others more directly identified the Holy Spirit as their direct connection and inner guide that dwells within and guides them as they live. For instance, Mary, a 21-year-old junior, exclaimed,

I would say for me, when I think of spirituality, I think of the Holy Spirit.
I’m a Christian, and so I tend to think of like wanting the Holy Spirit. When I pray, I pray that the Holy Spirit would lead me, would lead my spirit to do things.

Similarly, Faith, who is a 21 year junior, described her spirituality as “your connection to God – for me, God, our heavenly father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost. And pretty much with that connection, how you live.”
When discussing spirituality, faith, and religion as a belief system, most participants acknowledged the subtle differences in the three terms but expressed from their vantage point, as Christians, they believed the three terms were closely tied and interconnected one with the other. When Martha, a 21-year-old junior, discussed her understanding of faith, spirituality, and religion, she explained,

I always have a religion because I am Christian, I do kind of feel as though at times, the spirituality, the faith, religion and so forth, they all kind of intertwine and kind of like connect with one another.

Mary acknowledged that others who do not have the same faith base as she has may view faith and spirituality as separate. However, in her opinion, they cannot be separated. She explained, “your spirit is like who you are, and then your faith kinda like drives what you do, it affects your spirit. What you believe in will affect your day-to-day activities.”

**Spirituality as Steeped in Christianity**

Participants in this study expressed their spirituality as steeped in, made up of, and heavily influenced by Christianity. Their spiritual understanding and subsequent spiritual identity and development were largely influenced by their Cultural and Familial Upbringing, Personal Encounters, and Relational Influences.

*Cultural and Familial Upbringing*

All eleven participants mentioned their spiritual identity was influenced by Christianity as a result of being brought up and raised in the Christian church. They gave accounts of having a mother or grandmother take them to church every Sunday and
sometimes multiple days a week. It was a part of the family identity, norm, and culture. As a case in point, Sarah says,

I’ve just been raised in the church all my life. God has always been the foundation of our family, and encouragement is always found through him, and it’s always supported, it’s really been the support and continuous, I guess, thriving of our family. Whenever we go through hard times, we always depend on him for comfort and for, I don’t know, just relief in we know that our faith in God is what makes . . . what gets us through these hard times.

Of the eleven participants, nine identified Christianity as not merely an influence on their spiritual identity, but the core of it. Though they were raised in the church as a part of the norm for their families, as they have gotten older, they still hold strong to their Christian identity and belief system. Two of the eleven participants, Deborah and Hope, described their spiritual identity as open. While they are still exploring and open to other spiritual and religious influences, they acknowledged Christianity as a major influence on their spiritual identity as a result of their upbringing. As such, they cannot help but to accept and pull from the Christian principles that have been embedded in and have become a part of who they are. Deborah illustrates this saying, “it begins a lot with sort of how I see myself from my socialization in Christianity – I have to sort of draw from that, unfortunately, and fortunately (laughs) at the same time.” Hope, a 22-year-old senior, explained her spiritual identity as,
…I’m kind of a mixture of things. I think I pull the best from whatever I might like. So if I’m really down with how various sects of Christianity might practice different things or what they say or their teachings and stuff like that, then I’ll take that from there. Or you know, I think I’m interested in . . . I mean I grew up within Christianity just in general. And I find a lot of their teachings fascinating, but also because that’s how I grew up, that’s how I was raised, so it’s kinda engrained in what I do.

Additionally, participants saw Christianity as a familial norm that was an extension of the African American culture and community. As such, they saw Christianity as not only a part of their family identity, but also attributed it to their cultural identity as well. Martha articulates the sentiment well.

I guess with the culture piece, I think it’s kind of the norm for African-Americans to kind of be brought up in a church household…. I do think that as far as being African American…it even goes back into slavery time and things like that, the African American culture were the ones who prayed, who believed in God because they had hard times. I feel as though from slavery within our culture until now, it’s still that…it’s like a strong piece of that family household, you know. To be Christian and to go to church, believe in God and pray and stuff like that because of how we were brought from now until then. That’s been an essential piece for our culture.
**Personal Encounters**

Participants acknowledged that as a child being raised in the church, they often attended church because it was what they were taught and instructed by their parents to do. It became almost routine with no real personal connection or ownership of their faith. However, the majority expressed having had a personal encounter with God and as a result of that encounter, the faith they were taught became their own. Esther expressed asking God for help through prayer when she found herself struggling with isolation during high school. Her prayer was that God would remove the isolation from her life and God answered her prayer. This was a very personal experience with God that Esther believes impacted her spirituality and helped her to feel a personal connection with the God who cares for her and answers her prayers.

And I think that had that prayer not been answered, that I would’ve been a totally different spiritual person. I think that . . . because I know that prayer works based off of that, though I still struggle with trusting prayer, but I think had that prayer not been answered, then I probably would not have even trusted in God as much. You know, like I think that I would’ve known that he would’ve existed, but I would’ve felt very distant from him. And so I think that that’s one of the ways in which my spirituality has been impacted.

**Relational Influences**

Participants identified their mothers, grandparents, pastors, mentors, and peers as individuals who have had a significant impact on their spiritual development. These
individuals served as exemplars of faith in the flesh. They lived out their faith before them and confirmed to the participants the presence of God in others around them. Participants often looked to those individuals as inspirations and examples to follow in how to live a life of commitment and faith to God. Mary described studying her mother before she died and watching how she lived as she battled cancer and yet still managed to impact those around her through her faith. She attributes her own level of spirituality and development to her mother.

And my mother herself was such a spiritual person, so I feel like that’s really honestly where I get it from. I think one of her friends said it best, that I got a spiritual inheritance. So not just studying the word, but just also studying her, watching how she dealt with people, the way people would respond to her was amazing. And I think it was part of her spirit, she just had like a God-fearing, God-loving spirit, and people can see that. Even when she was in the hospital, she would have like I think a doctor she didn’t even know randomly came in and was like ‘I can feel the power or spirit in this room, I can feel God here, I can feel God’s presence.’

Magdalene, a 22-year-old senior, described how her grandmother, too, battled cancer and served as her source of encouragement right up until the day she died. Unbeknownst to Magdalene, during her battle with cancer, her grandmother would still find ways to be there for her. Trying to hide her own physical pain and struggles to breathe, her grandmother would leave voicemails sharing her wisdom and
encouragement to her. She showed her undying commitment and care for others during her own personal struggle. Magdalene explained,

And so I think that’s what made it a lot better, because even though she was like dying every day, she still could talk to me and tell me like “you need to make sure you’re going to church, you need to make sure that even if your Mom can’t talk to you, like still pray for her” and things like that. And so I know like God has to be some type of God if people can do that and give their all like up until the end.

Witnessing her grandmother’s actions in this way impacted Magdalene’s spirituality and belief in God. For Magdalene, her grandmother’s act of love, faith, and sacrifice up until the day she died reinforced her own faith in God.

**Spirituality as the Essence of Their Being**

Ten of the eleven participants in this study articulated their spirituality as the essence of their being. [Essence meaning the central foundation of who they are as individuals.] As such, they expressed their spirituality and faith in God as the core of their identity that was steeped in the word of God and filled with and led by the Holy Spirit, thus they had a dependence on God that was critical and necessary. Their spirituality through their faith was the lens through which they saw themselves.

**The Core of Identity**

Six participants expressed their identity as being tied to their spirituality. They described the core of who they are as indispensable and inseparable from the God who created them. Esther explained this saying,
And honestly like going back to spirituality, I think like if you’re talking about spiritual beings, then it’s kinda like who the essence of you are, like once you strip away everything physical, it’s like all your experiences culminate into like this energy, I guess you could describe it, and that energy is basically like the essence of who you are, like goodness, truthfulness, honesty, perseverance, like all those different characteristics like pours into you from these experiences. And it creates the essence of who you are in your . . . and it also creates your spiritual being as well. And I think that like connecting that back to God, he helped shape those experiences and gives those experiences to you to create that spiritual being.

As another case in point, when Mary-Beth, a 20-year-old senior, was asked how she understands and makes sense of herself she replied, “I don’t try to understand myself – I try to understand Him in me, is probably the best way to say it.” She further explained saying,

I am indebted . . . I am a slave to Christ. And yeah, that’s pretty much who I am, so whatever he says, that’s pretty much what I’ll do. I mean sometimes slaves are disobedient, let’s make that clear, but that’s who I am.

*Steeped in His Word and Led by His Spirit*

Seven participants in this study, Deborah, Mary, Sarah, Esther, Ruth, Mary-Beth, and Faith, saw the Bible as the foundation of their spirituality. The Bible was one facet
or tool that allowed them to stay connected to God, know His will, and know who they are in Him. Like food is to the physical body, so the Bible was to their spirit, a form of spiritual food or sustenance for their inner being.

They emphasized the importance of reading and studying His Word with the intention to nourish their spirit. For instance, when asked to submit a photo that represented her interpretation of spirituality, Mary-Beth submitted a photo of an open Bible and explained in her written reflection her reason for submitting a depiction of a Bible. Figure 1, by Ehrman Photographic/Shutterstock.com, is an example of Mary-Beth’s submission.

![Photo of an open Bible](https://example.com/image1.jpg)

*Figure 1. Example of Mary-Beth’s Photo submission depicting spirituality. Photo by Ehrman Photographic/Shutterstock.com [ca. 2018]. Reprinted with permission*

She said, “I chose this photo to represent spirituality because I believe it is the foundation of it.” She discussed the importance of feeding the Spirit within her and said doing so, helps her to “walk with Him and be led by Him.”

Furthermore, throughout the interviews, Esther spoke often about a battle she experienced between what she called her two selves, her physical self and her spiritual
self. She further illustrated how, as the foundation of her spirituality, the Bible helped her stay in tune with her true inner being as a child of God. She said,

And so I think like reading my Bible helps me stay in tune with my other self, the one that knows that, you know, my physicalness is going to die, but like who [Esther] is, the essence of who [Esther] is, which is her spiritual being, is gonna live on. So I read the Bible to remind myself of who I am.

These 7 women leaders expressed how important it was to them to be led and guided by the Spirit; meaning, it was important for them to acknowledge and listen to the Holy Spirit that lived within them. They wanted to be sure their actions were in alignment with what God’s will was for their lives as outlined in the Word. They leaned on the Holy Spirit to give them guidance and direction on what they should do and how they should act.

Mary explained that when she is in the middle of handling a situation or trying to figure out how to handle herself in the midst of difficult or upsetting situations, she would stop to reflect and think about how the Holy Spirit is guiding her to act. She explained,

Sometimes when I want to be angry, I’ll say okay, you know, that’s not what the Holy Spirit is leading my spirit to do – that’s not, you know, that’s not from God, whether it’s to not do something, or to do something even…You know, so just that inner voice – like I said, I try not to just listen to my own self – it’s I like to be led by like a higher power, so being, I keep
saying being led by the Holy Spirit to guide my spirit on what I should do, how I should live, just every aspect, how I interact with people.

The word of God and the Spirit of God within them both inspired them and empowered them to live a life that was in alignment with the Word. Participants emphasized the importance of taking the lessons they learned from reading the Bible and applying those lessons to their lives. Mary said, “It’s not just doing the scripture reading and the going to church and the praying – it’s living it too.” It was important that their lives were a reflection of the Word and their belief system. Sarah explained saying,

I guess being a Christian and being . . . having foundation in my morals and ethics that come from my religion, I guess I find myself wanting to reflect and uphold those ethics in a manner where people can look at me and say . . . not just like I mean from my religion or my faith, but say she is a good person, period. And people can see okay, how is she so different, how does she have this way about her, and I can say it’s because of my faith, and it’s because of what I’ve gone through with my faith and grown in my faith.

*Dependence on God*

**Maintaining the Connection.** The majority of participants described their spirituality as not merely a connection with God but a realization of a true and necessary dependence on God as the one who both gives them life and sustains their life. Their ultimate goal was to build a personal relationship with Christ and maintain that connection on a daily basis through prayer and studying the Bible. Mary-Beth describes
developing a personal relationship with Christ as “just trying to get to know Him and allow Him to get to know you, and like your deepest parts in a very intimate way. So I mean you kinda build it like the way you would build it with your friends or with your family or whatever.” When describing the importance of maintaining her connection with God she said, “the only way that we can abide in Him and He in us is if we feed His Spirit within us with His word.”

**Experiencing the Drift.** Participants reported experiencing turmoil or an inner distress when they did not maintain their communion with God through prayer, studying the Bible, and regularly attending church services. For instance, Mary explained having had a hard time her freshman year being away from home and struggling to maintain her normal spiritual practices and the impact she felt as a result. She explained, “…it seems the further I’m away from either God or, you know, my religion or anything else like that, I immediately see the impact.” Magdalene further illustrated the impact of her drifting from God.

Like whenever I miss like a Sunday or something, and I don’t hear that or don’t like read a few scriptures, my world, it tumbles down fast. So I know like you can’t . . . there’s not a day that I can miss, or a day that I cannot pray. Because whenever something goes wrong, I automatically [think] like ‘girl, you forgot to pray’ (laughs). So I definitely tie it into that.

**Feeling the Tug.** Though participants reported that they typically felt the impact of “drifting” from God, they expressed seeing how faithful God was in that He would
always find a way to bring them back to Him and get them back on the right path. He would remind them that He is still there for them. For instance, Sarah explained,

And I don’t know, every time that I tend to stray away, or I feel lonely, or grieved, or any kind of inner [turmoil]. . . I feel like God always puts me back on the track toward him or just saying like “recognize that I’m here for you and that I’m here to help you.”

Mary also experienced this and explained how God would give her an unexplainable “tugging on [her] heart” when she felt herself slipping away from Him. She explained the tugging as her conscience and inner voice pulling on her to remind her to pray or to stop complaining. She explained, “I consider it to be God, I feel like that’s God’s way of talking to me, you know.” She explained further,

And I know in the back of my head that okay, it’s probably because I’m not connected with God, I haven’t been praying, I’ve been separated. So mostly usually that’s what it is, you know, I’ll be feeling frustrated or sad or angry, and I’ll kinda just feel that tugging, back of my mind, back in my heart.

After obeying the inner voice and tug, she ended up getting her answer to the problem with which she was struggling and expressed coming to the realization that had she been in tune with God she would have gotten her answer a long time ago. However, she expressed her gratitude that God would always bring her back to herself. Mary explained, “So and I love God cause (sic) He, no matter how far I may drift apart, he always will kinda tug me back, no matter how far I may go...”
Spirituality as a Source of Guidance, Comfort, and Strength

Participants expressed their spirituality as their source of guidance, comfort, and strength. Their spirituality was the lens through which they often viewed and made sense of their experiences and the world around them. As such, their spirituality and faith in God was expressed as a way to cope with trials experienced in life. Participants illustrated how God would guide them both in everyday decisions and in the midst of the various trials in which they encountered.

Participants found themselves struggling with various trials related to spiritual, personal, and relational matters. Their spirituality helped frame those experiences. As a case in point, Sarah described a spiritual matter in which she struggled to learn to operate in faith. She found that she often struggled in that area because she is a logical, analytical person who just desired to have definite answers and proof. She acknowledged that was not how faith operated and expressed a desire to grow in that area.

But it’s like you have to learn to grow in that aspect, and so that’s just my struggle right now, that’s my muscle I’m trying to work out. But it hasn’t ever deterred me from my relationship with God, but it’s just one thing that I’m trying to journey on, and see how I’m [going to], I don’t know, figure that out.

Mary explained how she often tried to make sense of the various trials she had been faced with in her life. She and her family were hurricane Katrina survivors and had to relocate to another state. Shortly after that, her parents divorced and then her mother
began a battle with cancer. Mary described how she used the Word of God as strength and a reference point for examples of how others handled such tragedies.

And so just through that, so like when you, through reading the Bible, studying the Bible, and seeing how Jesus or other people handled situations, it kinda (sic) affects how you, you know, even . . . like so for example, my mother going through her sickness, she’s reminded of Job when he went through his many trials, but he stuck through it, he never wavered from his faith. Just little things like that, you can always apply it back to what you’ve learned and been taught.

Even when her mom passed away in the prior semester from when this study took place, Mary attributed her ability to remain strong in the midst of such heartbreak to the Holy Spirit inside of her.

So I kind of used the strong spirit I already had in me, like I said, I wasn’t angry, I wasn’t . . . it was just happening, and I accepted it, and I . . . like I said, I’m not perfectly fine, but I know . . . I didn’t even . . . some people still don’t even know, like my organization, I just kept going with all my duties, business as usual, didn’t skip any class, went to class, did my work, ended up having like a great semester last semester, academic-wise. So that’s one thing that just . . . just praying through that and working through that, you know, kept me strong, and I!ow it was the spirit, like you know, the Holy Spirit that kept me strong. Because like I said, so many other people told me they would not have been able to do it, and that really is a
strong force that’s able to hold you, you know, through things like that.

You know, it’s not something you can just do on your own.

When making sense of the death of both her mother and father, Faith explained that she was able to accept and come to a better understanding of their passing when she attended a Bible study and heard the person teaching explain that,

God takes things and people away from us for certain reasons. And I could be . . . have went through that so that I can encourage someone else, or for any other reason. And it's not just for me to be hurt or for me to hurt, but to make me stronger and come closer to him, if you will.

Participants also described dealing with various personal issues like isolation, depression, feelings of inadequacy, etc. Again, they identified their spirituality as often times the only foundation on which they could lean to get through those issues. Deborah illustrated this when she said, “. . . as I’ve grown over the years, I’ve struggled a lot with depression, and so I think that’s where faith and spirituality comes in, just because it’s a positive reminder, it’s a light in the darkness.”

Though each participant struggled with various matters, they viewed most matters through their spiritual lens and saw them as spiritual issues. When dealing with her own bouts with feelings of inadequacy, Esther explained seeing those issues as spiritual issues rather than societal issues.

Like some people can see it as societal issues like inadequacy, low self-esteem, da-da-da, you know. Like you hear a lot of commercials where that’s what people are struggling with, and it’s viewed as a societal
problem. But for me, it’s a spiritual problem because if I don’t recognize that God created me with this body, with this mind, with these experiences for a certain reason, and that like what he creates is perfect, then I really just don’t know who God is, you know what I’m saying? So for me, that was a spiritual struggle for me, like learning to trust what God creates, and learning to trust experiences that God gives Me.

**Spirituality as an Ongoing Journey of Faith and Growth**

Participants described their spirituality as an ongoing journey of faith, growth, and development. Subthemes emerged as participants described their spirituality as a faith in the unseen, a continuous process, and a surrendered life.

*A Faith in the Unseen*

Participants described faith as a core component of their spirituality. For instance, one participant, Faith said, “I guess I feel like my spiritual life would not be complete if I didn’t have faith, because I have to believe that God, although I cannot see him, is there for me and hearing me when I’m praying…” While participants acknowledged how critical faith is in their lives, they also acknowledged it as one of the more difficult components of their walk with God. This was mostly attributed to not being able to immediately see or know in detail the plans that God had for them. They described their spirituality as a journey of faith while living day by day with what felt like “blindfolds.”

They discussed having to walk by faith while not always knowing their full purpose or not knowing immediately the right decisions to make. Ruth, a 19-year-old
junior, discussed her fear of the unknown surrounding decisions she had to make on whether or not to graduate early or study abroad. However, in the midst of the unknown, she was able to be at peace knowing that God was in control. For instance, she explained,

Spirituality and just like my faith allows me to I guess walk peacefully, knowing that at the end of the day I’m going to end up where I need to be.

And it is nothing but the knowledge that there’s a plan for me.

Participants were able to rest and have an inner peace knowing they were in God’s hands and he would work their situations out. They admitted, that walking in the unknown is difficult, and though they cannot see God in the physical world, they cannot help but know and see the impact of his presence and love in their lives. It was their faith in that respect that gave them peace in the midst of the unknown. Magdalene illustrated this best through her photo submission depicting her thoughts about spirituality and her journey of faith. Figure 2, by George Rudy/Shutterstock.com, exemplified Magdalene’s submission.

*Figure 2.* Example of Magdalene’s photo submission depicting spirituality. Photo by George Rudy/Shutterstock.com [ca. 2018]. Reprinted with permission.
Magdalene’s photo depicted a man standing behind a woman while covering her eyes with his hands. Magdalene related this picture to how she felt at times as she traversed her life and faith. Her written reflection explained,

When transitioning from my old life to a new type of life, I had to know that God would make a way out of no way. Sometimes I felt like he had held my hand in the light for so long and walked beside me and then just took me to the darkest tunnel, let go of my hand and said ‘follow me.’ Hebrews 11:1 says, ‘Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, but the evidence of things not seen.’ This image represents my struggle through each phase in my life: having faith, walking with him to losing faith and losing my [spiritual] sight, but needing him, not knowing where to find him, to the stage I am in now, TRUSTING him, even when I can’t see or understand his plans.

_A Surrendered Life_

Participants explained a part of their journey of faith is learning to live a life that is surrendered to God. They expressed a realization of the need to trust that “everything happens for a reason” and God would cause His plans to happen according to His will and in His own appointed time. Sarah explained this sentiment when she said,

I can try my hardest to plan something out in my life or say I’m [going to] do this, I’m [going to] be like this, but it’s never going to happen the way I want it, or it’s never going to happen when I want it. So, I just put my faith in trying to uphold myself as a Christ-fearing, Christ-loving person
and recognize that he is molding me in the way that he wants to, and he’s
directing me in my path.

Hannah also described spirituality in terms of surrender and humility. To depict
her understanding of spirituality, Hannah submitted a picture of a kneeling lion, which to
her, appeared to be praying. Figure 3, by Mike Newman/Shutterstock.com, exemplified
the essence of Hannah’s photo submission.

![Kneeling Lion](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

*Figure 3. Example of Hannah’s photo submission depicting spirituality.*

Hannah described spirituality as humbling ourselves before a sovereign God and
staying connected to Him through prayer. In her written reflection, she wrote,

The lion seems to be kneeling and looking up to some things greater;
something that has an amazing power/authority and is capable of rendering
the usually fierce animal on its knees filled with awe. The lion seems
amazed at the beauty of whatever it is looking at…In the same light, I think
spirituality is looking up to God (our creator)... I think spirituality has no
rules; but however, spirituality is coming to the realization of who we are because of the creator (GOD). It is humbling ourselves, loving others and [living] selflessly.

A Continuous Process

Participants in this study described their spirituality as a continuous, ongoing process of growth and development. They admitted they were works in progress. Some participants identified specific areas in their lives where they desired growth. For instance, Esther identified an area in which she desired to grow when she said, “so I think that one way that I would like to show my spirituality in my life is to be more prayerful and more trusting of prayer.” Martha expressed the same sentiment of desiring growth when she said, “…I still have room for growth. I definitely don’t feel as though, you know, I’m the best of me. But I know that I can get there, I will continue to get there, I will continue to grow.” Deborah not only described her spirituality as lifelong journey, but also shared her belief that her spirituality was the lens through which she was able to see her need for growth. She explained, “Yeah, it helps me see myself as a work in progress, and because it’s a journey and sort of a lifelong quest, I’m not sure I’ll ever completely get there.” Deborah poignantly illustrated this through her photo submission and the accompanied written reflection.

The image provided depicts an unpaved, unmarked road in a rural countryside deep in the heart of Africa. When I look at the picture, I feel a peaceful energy beyond the physical world; it’s a spiritual life force that fills my soul with love, joy, and contentment. I believe this image is a
metaphorical representation of spirituality because there is no beginning nor an end to the journey. Spirituality is a state of perpetual personal transformation, in accordance with self-knowledge and the courage to explore deep matters of the heart (even the ugly parts). A true spiritual journey is an intentional quest to discover the interconnectedness of life, which is felt through a sense of aliveness.

**Reflective Analysis**

In alignment with Hermeneutics, the following is a brief reflective analysis of the findings. A combination of Donahoo (2011) Donahoo and Caffey (2010), Fowler (1981), Parks’ (2000) works and the researcher’s interpretation will be used to analyze and make meaning of the findings. Donahoo and Caffey’s (2010) conception of spirituality involved the process of meaning making as an individual finds their place in the world, seeks purpose, and journeys to define themselves fully. This is an exact reflection of the participants in this study both in how they defined their own personal understandings of faith and in how the major themes reflected and aligned with their definition.

A faith-identity typology, which consisted of three forms of faith, polytheism, henotheism, and radical monotheism were discussed by Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000). As it relates to this study, participants aligned most with the form of faith-identity typology characterized as radical monotheism. Radical monotheistic faith, is a form of faith that is able to sustain all situations or circumstances an individual may face (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Further this faith was not only beyond the individual, but was one that saturates and sustains the individual’s very being (Parks, 2000). Parks
(2000) explained, “To speak of God as the gift of faith is to seek to name an orienting consciousness that is both transcendent and immanent, both ultimate and intimate” (p. 23). Indicative of monotheistic faith, the African American females in this study, maintained a trust and commitment to one God as higher power, with whom they maintained a personal connection and looked to as their strength, comforter, and guide.

Discussion

This study sought to explore and answer the question, “How do African American collegiate women experience, understand, and express their spirituality?” The following is a brief discussion in relation to the themes identified in this study.

Spirituality as a Connection with a Higher Power and Steeped in Christianity

(Theme One and Two).

Participants in this study expressed spirituality as a part of their culture that had been passed down and reinforced by the participants’ familial and community units. This is consistent with Boykin’s (1983) work who identified spirituality as one of nine dimensions of African American culture. Spirituality is embedded in the African American culture. Communalism, another dimension of culture identified by Boykin (1983) falls in line with the notion that participants’ spirituality was influenced by their family and community units. Often times, it was the African American Christian church that served not only as the spiritual foundation for African Americans, but also as the foundation of the Black community. Perhaps this is indicative of the finding that nine of eleven participants in this study identified as Christian and all participants’ expressed their understanding and expression of spirituality was largely influenced by Christianity.
While the participants in this study associated their spirituality with their religion, the majority of the participants were aware of the somewhat negative connotation towards the word “religion” and “religious.” Even if they consider themselves to be connected to a specific Christian denomination, they made sure to emphasize the importance of their relationship with Christ rather than their need to mindlessly adhere to a set of rules. These findings are contrary to the current trend in literature which report that while college students are more engaged in spiritual practices, they are strongly opposed to religion, and their engagement in religious practices are declining (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Parks, 2000). For instance, Stewart (2002) reported in her study of black students and the role of faith in the development of their integrated identities, participants described their spirituality as resistant to organized religious and corporate worship. Participants in her study resisted organized forms of religion because they were forced to go to church as children (Stewart, 2002). Similar to Stewart’s (2002) study, all eleven participants in this study reported they, too, grew up in the church. However, nine of eleven of the participants reported they had a personal encounter with God that helped them to know Jesus for themselves. Participants no longer felt they were simply carrying on the faith of their parents of which they had no real connection. Their faith became their own.

**Spirituality as the Essence of Their Being and the Source of Comfort, Strength, and Guide (Theme Three and Four).**

Spirituality serves manifold purposes in African Americans’ lives (). In this study, participants expressed spirituality served both as the core of who they were as
individuals and the way in which they traversed life events. However, when students left home for college, they were distanced from their families and churches. As a result, students reported they struggled with maintaining their regular religious and spiritual practices and therefore, often experienced inner turmoil. When participants are struggling or at low points, they lean and depend more on their foundation.

Therefore, participants in this study used spirituality as a coping mechanism when dealing with life events (isolation, depression, death, etc.)

**Spirituality as an Ongoing Journey of Faith and Growth (Theme Five).**

The findings suggest the participants in this study are grappling with and exploring their spirituality. This finding is supported by the literature which posit that spirituality is indeed an aspect of students’ lives with which they are grappling with during the college years (Astin & Astin, 2006).

**Implications and Recommendations**

Participants in this study communicated spirituality to be an integral part of who they were as individuals. Participants shared they experienced significant struggle with maintaining their spiritual practices. There is a disconnect for students who are faith driven and leave home and a need to we bridge the gap. Maslow’s (1971) hierarchy of needs describes a basic level of needs for an individual. Just as food is critical basic need for the physical body, so too is spiritual food (i.e. spiritual practices, prayer, reflection, meditation, etc.) critical to the spiritual self for the faith driven student and perhaps for all students. This implies a need for more support in connecting with resources that will
help the faith driven student to maintain some resemblance of their foundation as they attend college.

Furthermore, participants in this study indicated that participating in this study was the first time they reflected on and articulated their spirituality and its connection with who they are. This suggests a need for more opportunities for students to reflect specifically on matters of the spirit.

**Recommendations for Practice**

**Formalized Support:** Staff should recognize spirituality as an integral and salient identity of students. As such, student Affairs administrators and staff should formalize the support and resources to support this aspect of college student identity. Similar to departments that have been created to support various student identities on campuses (i.e. women, multicultural services, LGBT, etc.) recognizing this integral part of students development, administrators should formalize their support and create an office or center that is tasked with providing support and resources for students who are exploring and developing their spiritual selves (i.e. center for spiritual and reflective services).

**Physical Space:** Staff should identify or create quiet rooms or prayer rooms throughout campus for students to go so that they are able to detach from technology and the busyness of their lives to pray, meditate, or reflect.

**Staff:** Because Public universities have to maintain the separation of church and state, instead of having full time, paid ministers or clergy on campus, some campuses have a campus ministries association that is made up of a volunteer network of clergy
from a wide variety of denominations who provide spiritual guidance to students. I did a brief search of this institution’s volunteer campus ministries association and found the African American community was neither represented in the clergy or the churches listed. Student Affairs administrators should work with their campus ministries associations to ensure clergy have staff who are representative or reflective of the university demographic, historically underrepresented population, namely the Black and African American population.

**Resources:** Staff should provide a list of local churches with numbers and locations that are representative of the various faiths, religions, and denominations located in the community. For example, larger campuses have church brochures that can be provided.

**Recommendation for Research**

Additional studies in different contexts like an HBCU and community colleges. Are there differences or similarities in how students explore spirituality or their search for meaning and purpose? Are the support and resources needed for students in different contexts similar or different? Moreover, additional studies on African American female students who do not have the same Christian worldview may prove helpful to understand this population and better equip faculty, staff, and administrators provide more effective support.
Conclusion

This study explored the question of “how eleven African American undergraduate female leaders understood, experienced, and expressed their spirituality?” While answering the research question, participants in this study further confirmed the notion that African American women are spiritual beings. This notion is reflected through the scripture, Acts 17:28 (New International Version) and in the title of this article which exclaims, “For in Him I live move and have my being.” African American women leaders in this study understood and expressed their spirituality as not just a way to cope and handle the various life events in which they faced. Their spirituality and relationship with God was both a source of comfort and inextricably apart of who they were as individuals (Witherspoon & Taylor, 2010). This study added to the current literature on college student spiritual exploration, specifically African American women leaders. It further reinforces Astin, Astin, and Lindholm’s (2011) call to faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education to support and cultivate the spirit of college age students.
References


Rudy, G. [ca. 2018]. Example of Magdalene’s photo submission depicting spirituality.


CHAPTER III
FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE: EXPLORING
SPIRITUALITY AND AUTHENTICITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
AT A PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTION

Introduction

“Spirituality is a dynamic expression of who we are, truly. It gives shape and is shaped by who we really are at our deepest level” (Hindman, 2002, p. 168). The college years are a prime time for students to grapple with and explore their spiritual identities (Himdman, 2002). One component of spirituality is authenticity (Astin, 2000; Love & Talbot, 1999). Society now calls for authentic leaders. “The concept of authenticity has its roots in Greek philosophy (“To thine own self be true”)” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 319). Authenticity appears to be both a part of the process and the outcome of spirituality. This study sought to explore the role of spirituality in the development of authenticity as an outcome as expressed by African American women leaders.

Literature Review

Spirituality

Holistic student development has been recognized as an important component to the purpose of higher education and the central to the work of the student affairs practitioner. However, until recently, spirituality was one aspect that was void in college student development theories, research, and practice. Recognizing this gap, over the last
forty years, there has been an increase in the study and exploration of spirituality as a critical aspect of the growth and development college students.

**Student Development Theory**

*Seven Vectors*

Arthur W. Chickering introduced a model in 1969 that described students’ development and then published an updated version of the model with Linda Resisser in 1993. Chickering and Reisser (1993) describe students’ development through seven developmental stages called the seven vectors. The first of the vectors, *Developing Competence*, describes the three main competencies that are developed during the college years, physical and manual competence, intellectual competence, and interpersonal competence. *Managing Emotions*, the second vector in the model, describes the process an individual goes through as they recognize various emotions in themselves and develop healthy ways to handle those emotions. The third vector involves the development of emotional and instrumental independence as well as the acknowledgement of the need for interdependence and is called *Moving through Autonomy toward Interdependence*. Naturally, once an individual recognizes and accepts interdependence, they are then capable of *Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships*, the fourth vector. In this vector (1993), students develop a tolerance and appreciation of differences and an increased capacity to engage in intimate relationships. *Establishing Identity*, the fifth vector, involves developing a comfort with physical attributes, sexual orientation and a greater sense of self. The sixth vector, *Developing Purpose*, involves an individual purposefully developing goals and clarifying aspirations
and includes three components a) Vocational plans and aspirations, b) Personal Interests, and c) Interpersonal and family commitments. Finally, Developing Integrity, the seventh vector, involves the development of three characteristics, humanizing value; personalizing value; and developing congruence. Chickering and Reisser’s (1999) work are considered as seminal to the understanding of development as it pertains to identity in college students.

Black Identity Theory

Black Identity Theory or Nigrescence Theory is a process that is multistage and describes the stages of becoming black. This model focuses on the levels of identity development that Black people share. Cross developed the model of Nigrescence in 1971 and a revised version in 1991. Due to the numerous research studies conducted, the 1991 version of the model incorporates the importance of race in and culture involved in their everyday lives.

The 1991 Nigrescence model developed by Cross is summarized below:

1. Pre-Encounter- Some black people place low importance on blackness, many times they have achieved a strong identity that is grounded in something that may be different from race. Other black people may internalize racist notions about Black people.

2. Encounter- The event or events that lead a person to conclude that he or she needs to change in the direction of greater, cultural self-awareness and racial self-acceptance. (p. 264)
3. Immersion-Emersion-The transition stage is in which the old and emergent identities struggle for the dominance. (p. 264)

4. Internalization- During this stage a person shows high salience for race and culture. (p. 264)

**Spirituality and African American Culture**

Living in a race-conscious society, African Americans have been forced in negative perceptions due their identity. According to (Banks-Wallace; Parks, 2004), spirituality has played an imperative role in the lives of African Americans. Due to the need to cope with daily stressors in their lives, spiritual beliefs have helped African Americans in their daily lives. Spirituality amongst African Americans has been a part of traditions as well as traditions rooted within the communities.

African American culture as it relates to spirituality was developed based upon a belief system which centered around West African and the cultural patterns that have since been merged and manifested in contemporary African American culture (Boykin, 1983). Boykin identified nine dimensions of African American culture in which many African Americans subscribe to: these dimensions are centered around spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, orality, and social time perspective.

1. Spirituality – An approach to life that is vitalistic. “It means conducting oneself in a manner consistent with the possibility that the nonobservable and nonmaterial have governing powers in the everyday affairs of people (p. 344)."
2. Harmony – …one sees oneself as, and in turn acts as though one were, inextricably linked to one’s surroundings (p. 344). An individual has a goal of being versatile and embedded in a stylistic, harmonious existence in one’s family and community.

3. Movement – a “shorthand designation for the interwoven mosaic of movement, vmusic, dance, percussiveness, and rhythm personified by the musical beat” (p. 345).

4. Verve – a propensity for an energetic, intense, stimulating and lively context to living and learning that often manifests itself in strategic multitasking.

5. Affect – the “integration of feelings with thoughts and actions, such that it would be difficult to engage in an activity if one’s feelings toward the activity ran counter to such engagement” (p. 344). Emotional expressiveness is of great importance.

6. Communalism – a focus on the social interdependence of people. “One acts in accordance with the notion that duty to one’s social group is more important that individual privileges and rights’ (p. 344).

7. Expressive Individualism – “…the cultivating of a unique or distinctive personality or essence and putting one’s own personal brand on an activity, a concern with style more than with being correct or efficient” (p. 344).

8. Orality – knowledge is accessed through the use of aural modes of communication while one relies on oral expression to communicate feelings and meaning.
9. Social Time Perspective – Time is a social phenomenon not bound to clocks and calendars. This dimension is often understood as a thought process that celebrates that time begins when the participants arrive rather than one being defined by a reliance on schedule times for community engagement.

In this regard, Boykin’s dimensions are in alignment with their cultural perceptions and aims to help one identifies how he or she is socialized within their own community. Patterns of socialization within the African American community is imperative within the cultural ethos. This study highlights the dimension of spirituality as it relates to African American college aged women, as a part of that process.

**Methods**

This qualitative approach was utilized to study how eleven African American undergraduate women perceived the role of their spirituality in the development of their authenticity. Given the complex nature of the phenomena of spirituality and identity development, the researcher employed hermeneutic phenomenology (Kakkori, 2009) as the methodology for this study which guided the selection and use of data sources, data collection, and data analysis strategies.

The collegiate institution in this study was geographically located in the Southwest and is a region in the United States typically referred to as the “Bible Belt.” It is a large, public Predominantly White Institution. The institution annually enrolls more than 60,000 students. Less than 35% of those students represent people of color, while 3.6% are Black. Women make up 48.4% of the student population. Women and African
Americans were admitted into the institution for the first time in the 1960s, though the institution itself had been in existence since the late 1800s.

**Data Sources and Sampling**

Purposive, intensity sampling was utilized to identify a sample population from which to gather data. Due to the sensitive and often personal nature of spirituality, participants for this study were identified and selected through the use of gatekeepers. These gatekeepers were student affairs staff who had both access to potential participants and a working relationship with the students in having served as their student organization advisors or program coordinators of programs in which the students participated. Staff were asked to nominate and contact potential participants who fit the criteria of being classified as junior or seniors, were actively involved in their organizations, identified as an African American woman, and felt comfortable discussing and articulating their spirituality and leadership identity. Staff identified potential participants amongst their students that fit the criteria, spoke with their students regarding the potential to participate in the study, and forwarded the researcher the contact information of the students who indicated interest in participating in the study.

**Participants**

Eleven African American women leaders participated in this study. Table 3 shows the demographic characteristics of each participant.
Participants’ Demographic Characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Allied Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>[African] Black</td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Food Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Biomedical Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>African (Black)</td>
<td>Chemical Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Black Latina</td>
<td>International Studies &amp; Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magdalene</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Agricultural Communications and Journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary-Beth</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note, though participants in this study identified as a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds (i.e. African American, Black, Black African, Black Latino, etc.), participants self-selected to participate in this study as they all commonly identified with the African American experience. Participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 22 years-old. There were six seniors and five juniors.
Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher used semi-structured interviews and photovoice to collect data. One-on-one, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Each participant participated in two interviews which lasted about an hour and a half. Additionally, participants submitted photos with a written reflection for each through a strategy called, photovoice. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and created into transcripts. Participants’ photo submissions and their accompanying written reflections were reviewed and analyzed.

The researcher analyzed data through the hermeneutic circle of analysis. Patton (2002) described the hermeneutic circle of analysis as an analytic process that involves gaining understanding by “relating parts to wholes, and wholes to parts” (p. 497) through a continuous process in an attempt to gain meaning from a text.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintained trustworthiness was important and could be established by ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this study, member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation were used to establish credibility. The researcher established transferability by using thick, rich descriptions. An audit trail and a reflexive journal was maintained by the researcher to establish both confirmability and dependability.

Results

This study explored eleven African American women leaders and their perceptions of how their spirituality has impacted the development of a more authentic
self. Findings indicate that participants in this study believed their spirituality influenced their (a) self-cultivation, (b) self-identity, (c) self-acceptance, and (d) self-confidence.

Table 4 outlines the themes accompanied by their sources.

Table 4

*Themes and Subthemes with Sources for Spirituality and Authenticity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Subthemes</th>
<th>Source of Themes and Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Cultivation</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Sarah, Esther, Hannah Mary-Beth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Understanding</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Mary, Esther, Hannah, Hope, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>Esther, Hannah, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Acceptance</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Sarah, Esther, Hope, Ruth, Magdalene, Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Confidence</td>
<td>Martha, Mary, Sarah, Ruth, Magdalene</td>
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</table>

**Self-Cultivation**

Six participants in the study explained their spirituality influenced their self-cultivation. Self-cultivation in terms of authenticity was expressed through self-awareness, self-evaluation and a desire for self-growth. Participants in the study understood authenticity as, being “real,” “genuine,” “true to self,” and “true to one’s spirit.” When thinking about authenticity, the participants in this study considered themselves authentic but admitted they had more work to do in terms of personal growth and development. They admitted they are still getting to know themselves. Mary’s photo
submission (Figure 4), a self-portrait by Ashley Austin, depicts this sentiment as she expressed,

I know I am not perfect and I do not pretend to be anything I am not. I believe in always being honest and fully embracing who I am. I am confident in myself and proud to be a spiritual, strong, black, female leader.

Figure 4. Mary’s photo submission depicting authenticity. A self-portrait by Ashley Austin [ca. 2015]. Reprinted with permission.

Mary acknowledged that she was not perfect and yet still fully embraced herself and saw herself as authentic.

Another case in point, Esther’s photo submission of a silhouette of herself depicted this sentiment as well as she expressed, “this photo was submitted because at the time I was learning to appreciate myself and enjoying my natural hair. I viewed myself as authentic in this picture and beautiful.” In the midst of still getting to know
herself and learning to appreciate herself in every aspect of her beauty, she saw herself as authentic.

Esther explained her strides toward self-awareness as she described her finally beginning to get to know who the real Esther is and who the real Esther wants to be. She was not only aware but now striving toward who she wanted to be. For Esther her knowledge and awareness of herself and ability to articulate that awareness was a display of authenticity. For instance, she explained,

…whenever you can like pinpoint in yourself like who you are and be able to articulate that to someone else, and also to be able to show that in your actions the first time, then I think that you’re being authentic to yourself.

Deborah expressed spirituality itself as a lifelong daily quest to cultivate your spiritual self. She explained, to her, “it is an intentional attitude towards inner self cultivation.” According to participants, a part of being authentic is knowing and being true to self. Participants recognized the connection between spirituality and authenticity in that they found that inherent in spirituality, as Deborah posited, is self-cultivation. A part of cultivating oneself is evaluating oneself. Participants in this study were challenged to evaluate themselves through their spirituality. Their spirituality often helped them see their own flaws, strengths, and weaknesses. Deborah articulated this well when she said,

I think it’s helped me understand a lot about myself, because the more I struggle with my faith, or the more I struggle with life, the more I realize how much more work I have to do, and sort of how much more I have to

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cultivate myself, and how much more I need God to continue to mold me into a person of character, to his workmanship. So yeah, I think just by being spiritual, it shows me all my like faults at the same time, and shows me how much I fall short. And I think that’s good then, because without that, then I wouldn’t be able to make changes and to continue to develop, whether it’s professionally or just as an individual.

Participants expressed the importance of congruence and wanted their mind, soul, spirit reflected in their actions. Often times, they used the Bible itself as a mirror to see if their life reflected their true selves or who they desired to reflect. Hannah expressed her belief in congruence as a part of authenticity when she said, “I believe authenticity is being able to be free and open with who we are. It’s being able to have our mind, soul and spirit reflected in the things we say and our way of life.”

**Self-Identity**

*Self-Understanding*

Seven participants in this study described the influence spirituality had on their self-identity. For participants, spirituality is the lens through which they gained self-understanding. Through this lens, their spirituality, shapes who they are, including their values, character, and beliefs. Participants also expressed spirituality as a sacred place where they could be in tune with and find their center.

Hannah described her belief that her authenticity or who she is, her character, and what she values developed directly from her spirituality. Her “heart to serve” and belief
that she has a responsibility to help others has developed from her spirituality and become a part of who she is as a person.

Mary believed a person’s authenticity was indicative of their level of spiritual maturity. She explained, “when you have reached a level, like I said, a level of spirituality, a spiritual maturity, you are honest with yourself, you’re genuine, you’re authentic, what people see is what they get.” Mary further explained her belief that individuals can be authentic and genuine when they have come to terms with themselves and have reached a level of peace from within. This in turn, helps the individual to not be afraid to be who they really are without the need to hide or put on a façade.

Another perspective Mary shared was having been told she is “a child of God” by her family. Knowing that God, as her Heavenly Father, created her, gave her confidence in knowing who she is in Him. That confidence in knowing who she is in Him allows her to be authentic. She explained, “the spirit kinda guides you and lets you know who you are so you can be authentic.”

Another aspect of identity is cultural and racial identity. Spirituality helped some participants make sense of their Black identity and of the cultural and racial issues they encountered. Deborah explained the strength she believed she got from her spirituality when she thought about herself in the midst of what appeared to be a “global struggle for people of African heritage.” She further explained when she said,

And I think for me, coming from a lower-middle-class family, and sort of being across the ocean from my entire family, just sort of all the emotional baggage that comes with that has really . . . it’s I’ve been encouraged and
inspired just to sort of see, to draw strength from my global diasporic family. And that has a lot to do with my spirituality, because it impacts how I see myself as someone that’s also on a journey to write their own story of dignity and glory, amidst all of my life experiences.

Hope explained how her spirituality has helped her to be more accepting of herself in the midst of a world where the media, television, and society as a whole does not always depict nor reflect back who she is as an African American in a positive manner. Hope explained further,

You definitely don’t see dark-hued African Americans on television and stuff like that. You don’t see African Americans with like kinky hair or like, you know, anything like that. So I guess just being spiritual or religious in all those ways that they tie together, it’s definitely allowed me to see myself even if the world doesn’t necessarily see me, or they don’t highlight me on the mediums that they use to highlight everybody else.

Participants also identified their mothers and grandmothers as spiritual role models to whom they looked to as examples of what it meant to be authentic, strong, Black women. They saw their mothers as the foundation of their families and homes. Esther echoed this sentiment when she explained, “I also believe that women are one of the most precious embodiments of spirituality because they are typically the directors of the household and they help to instill values in the children in those households.” Additionally, participants often described their grandmothers and the generation that had come before them with a sense of admiration and respect for them for their sacrifices and
level of wisdom with which they possessed. Martha explained the admiration she had for her grandmother who she believed paved the way for children to follow. Her grandmother was the ultimate example of an authentic woman. Martha explained,

She modeled what was expected from us and how we should portray our culture to the world. To me, she was the true definition of what it meant to be authentic as a woman, mother, wife, grandmother and all the titles she wore while being an African-American.

*Sense of Purpose*

Spirituality is the lens through which three participants (Esther, Hannah, and Faith) found their meaning and purpose. They often sought God through prayer to ask for guidance, direction, and understanding of what His purpose was for their lives. Through Him, some participants felt they found calling and understood what they were purposed by Him to do. They expressed that innately, the very fact that God had created them and put them here on earth, automatically assures them they were created for a purpose. Esther explained all humans have imperfections. But despite those imperfections, every human being was “created for a purpose, like every single feeling that you have, every single deformity that you think you have, it was placed there in your life for a reason.”

Hannah acquires her calling from her spirituality. She explained that through the teachings derived from her faith, she is called to help. She explained further, “…we’re called to serve, we’re called to bless others just as we are blessed again.”
Through prayer, reflection, and staying in tune with God, Faith expressed how she was able to find and know her purpose. The more she talked to God and asked Him, the more He would divinely orchestrate opportunities for her to recognize her purpose and what she believed His will was for her life. She explained,

He allowed me to hear this or allowed me to see this or go through this because this is what my purpose is. And I feel like Him allowing me just to help people, like my friends, or strangers, just small things every now and then is what kind of made me shift to wanting to help people pro bono or whatever. And I mean it took me some time to realize it, but with just continuously asking him and staying in line with him, you know, what is it that I should be doing, please lead me, show me, guide me.

Self-Acceptance

Eight participants explained their ability to accept and love themselves was attributed to the influence often felt by their familial unit. With the familial unit being the foundation from which their spirituality derived (see Chapter I), participants believed their spirituality too, impacted their self-acceptance. Ruth described the impact her mother had on her confidence and ability to accept and appreciate herself as she was. She explained,

. . . there wasn’t a day that didn’t go by where she was like “your curly hair is beautiful, you’re caramel-colored skin is absolutely gorgeous. It’s like the sun kissed you,” is what she would say. So she always, even though
she like didn’t know what to do with my hair, she never . . . you know, but she always, always made me feel beautiful.

Participants also expressed how their families attempted to prepare them for the reality of the world in which they lived. For example, as she grew up, Ruth remembered specific times when her mother would sit her down on the couch and explain, “Ruth, people will always expect less from you. You will have to always kill them with kindness, and you will have to work twice as hard as everyone to be seen as the same quality person.”

The more participants developed in their black identity and understanding of self in the context of their identities, the more they began to understand, accept, and love themselves. Deborah illustrated this point as she explained the photo she submitted as her description of authenticity. Her picture by Nnedinkpa Ekeogbede and illustrated in Figure 5, was a self-portrait of her in front of her family home in Nigeria which she had been away from since she was nine years old.

![Figure 5](image.png)

*Figure 5.* Deborah’s photo submission depicting authenticity. A self-portrait by Nnedinkpa Ekeogbede [ca. 2015]. Reprinted with permission.
Though she used to be ashamed of her village, on this pilgrimage, she began to let go of her shame associated with her African heritage.

She explained, “Authenticity requires a great degree of self-awareness. The moment I came to terms with my existence as a child of Africa, theories about blackness were no longer dehumanizing – if anything they became empowering.”

Sarah shared a similar sentiment and described her growth in her own Black identity. She believed her black identity was impacted as she learned more about the real systemic obstacles effecting the Black community. She explained,

…I realize the systematic structures in our society that, you know, hold back African American people from aggression. And I realize that these stereotypes that I try to, I guess, live past are not necessarily brought upon by ourselves, but the society that we live in. And that the beauty and the history of black people is just hidden, and I guess I learned to recognize and love myself.

When participants discussed authenticity and the self, they often spoke of not only accepting themselves, but extending to their acceptance of self to self-love. A true authentic woman is one who has a love and appreciation for self. Participants spoke of struggling with this aspect of identity and authenticity. Ruth described the moment when she became fed up with herself for looking at a picture of herself and while reviewing the picture, she caught herself tearing herself apart and being critical of every feature or flaw she could find. In her written reflection, Ruth wrote,
There aren’t enough women who love themselves holistically, and I no longer choose to entertain the self deprecation (sic) the world so highly encourages. I want to love myself fully, flaws and all so that through the way I live my life, I can show those around me that there are more important things than outwards beauty and that just like everyone is imperfect, we all have things that are worthy of admiration. After all, I do believe we were created by a God that doesn’t make mistakes.

Ruth ultimately recognized herself as a child of God who was created for a purpose. Other participants also spoke of learning to love themselves as God loves them. Sarah discussed her thought process of how she came to accept herself, flaws and all.

I think just knowing that God made me who I am. There’s no reason I should change because I am his masterpiece, and he created me in this way for a reason. And to alter from that is just . . . it’s not being purposeful to his plan for me. And so knowing that God created me and my flaws and my good traits and characteristics for a reason, then I know that I must accept them because it’s for a reason. And I stick to that belief very genuinely, and I think that allows me to be authentic.

Perhaps Magdalene submitted the most poignant photo and written reflection to describe her representation of authenticity. Her photo depicted an African American woman hugging herself. Figure 6, by Shukrin_Son/Shutterstock.com, exemplifies the essence of Magdalene’s photo submission.
Magdalene wrote, “I am ENOUGH. Our first love and our last love is SELF-love. You cannot be authentic or true to yourself if you do not truly love yourself.”

**Self-Confidence**

Five participants, Martha, Mary, Sarah, Ruth, and Magdalene, believed their spirituality gave them more confidence. In their eyes, their spirituality helped them to better understand themselves and in doing so, gave them more confidence. Participants also believed just being in tune with God and connected with Him gave them peace and confidence. Perhaps for these participants, when they are in tune with God and connected with Him as their sustainer, the inner self is not divided. Magdalene had a similar experience and explained, “I think when I started feeling like more of a connection to God, it made me like just [happier] and comfortable with myself because I knew the things that I was accomplishing was what he wanted for me.” Mary perceived she was both true to herself and confident in herself. She, too, attributed her confidence to “being in tune with God.”
When describing spirituality’s impact on her self-understanding and self-confidence, Martha posited,

I think what my spirituality…it’s given me more of a confidence within myself, if that kind of makes sense. Because like I said, I have the things that I believe in, that I practice every day, that I value, that are real, that are important to me. So all these things make up me.

Discussion

Self-Cultivation and Self-Identity (Theme One and Two)

The findings indicate spirituality is the lens through which participants see and understand themselves and their multiple identities. This notion is consistent with the Dafina Stewart’s (2009) work which found participants to understand their identity through the lens of their spirituality. Additionally, the findings showed the connection of their spirituality to cultural identity. Participants expressed how their spirituality was important in helping them make sense of their cultural identity, particularly as people of African heritage trying to make sense of their black identity in a society that has not always supported or celebrated their identity as people of African descent.

Self-Acceptance and Self-Confidence (Theme Three and Four)

“I am ENOUGH. Our first love and our last love is SELF-love.”

Spirituality is a coping mechanism in how participants traverse identity and self-acceptance in the midst of social racial and discrimination issues. Additionally, the Black family is both the source of spiritual foundation and source of positive
reinforcement of self-love and positive self-image in the participants. A. Wade Boykin’s (1983) work supports and undergirds this notion.

**Implications and Recommendations**

**Implications**

Participants consistently identified Black females as both their spiritual role model and the foundation upon which their family stands. Findings in this study imply there is a spiritual, cultural, and familial influence on African American college aged women leaders and how they develop and see themselves as authentic. The familial foundation from which they gained their spiritual influence and insight, is the same familial foundation that reinforced and encouraged positive self-image in the young women. With this in mind, it is imperative that faculty, staff, and administrators provide the necessary supports to undergird this student population while they are in college and away from home.

**Recommendations for Practice**

**Provide Resources.** Student Affairs staff should provide resources to African American students to provide support. One example could be a complete list of resources that identify local African American churches who have active young adult ministries. This resource list should be provided to students as a potential informational leaflet and a way students have information that allows them to connect to a faith community of peers.

Additionally, a list of self-help books on exploring self should be provided to assist young ladies in exploring who they are. Suggested books include, Amy Cuddy’s

**Create Partnerships.** Staff should contact local African American churches and look for creative ways to partner to ensure students are properly supported and have an avenue to connect with additional support networks in the community should they choose.

**Model the Way.** Faculty and staff should model the way for students and make spiritual reflection and exploration a regular part of their own personal lives and professional practice.

**Prepare Staff.** Faculty should add spirituality and student spiritual exploration to Student Affairs graduate preparation programs as another aspect of college student identity development. This can prepare staff to support students in this area of their student development.

**Recommendations for Research**

Further studies should be conducted at a university with a different context or setting outside of the “Bible Belt”. Additionally, more studies should be conducted to explore spirituality amongst other demographics to see the intersectionality of spirituality and other identities.
Conclusion

Reflective of the Psalm 139:14, which exclaims, “I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well,” participants expressed their spirituality helped them to develop a more authentic self. Faculty, staff, and administrators must take it upon themselves to provide the necessary supports as African American female leaders grapple with and develop their spirituality. In doing so, this student demographic may be better able to develop a more, continuous, whole, and authentic self.
References


Austin, A. [ca. 2015]. Mary’s photo submission depicting authenticity. [A self-portrait of Mary].


Ekeogbede, N. [ca. 2015]. Deborah’s photo submission depicting authenticity. [A self-portrait of Deborah].


CHAPTER IV

I PRESS TOWARD THE MARK: EXPLORING SPIRITUALITY AND LEADERSHIP IDENTITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

Introduction

Leadership development has long been a focus of student affairs and higher education (Astin & Astin, 2000). Spirituality and numerous tenants of leadership in African American collegiate women have been identified as topics of great significance within the African American community (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Both leadership and spiritual identities have been used to help develop the whole student in their intersecting identities (Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2008). However, little work has been done to address spirituality and leadership identity among African American collegiate women at Predominantly White Institutions of higher learning.

Eleven undergraduate African American women participated in a series of interviews, and photovoice reflections to explore their perceptions of spirituality and leadership. These young women attended a large southwestern land grant university serving over 60,000 undergraduate and graduate students. 3.6% of the undergraduate population was African American in 2017. Campus climate surveys conducted yearly, consistent document the feelings of alienation and the importance of African American students wanting to be a vibrant part of the education process. As a result, this study
sought out African American leaders in student organizations, to explore their perceptions of leadership identity and spirituality development.

**Literature Review**

The following brief literature review covers the areas of leadership identity, authenticity, spirituality and leadership among African American women. The literature was not used to direct the study (Creswell, 2003); but rather to give preliminary insight into topics relevant to the study, especially as it relates to collegiate African American exploring spirituality and its impact on their leadership identity and development

**Leadership Identity**

Very little literature exists surrounding college students’ leadership identity and the nature of its development. However, Susan Komives (2005) led a team of researchers in a grounded theory study to explore the process that students go through as they develop their leadership identity. A six stage process outlined as: a) Awareness, b) Exploration/Engagement, c) Leader Identified, d) Leadership Differentiated, e) Generativity, and f) Integration/Synthesis, resulted from the study. *Awareness* is the first stage in the theory where students first begin to realize that there are leaders present in the world. It is during this stage that they see those leaders as outside of themselves. The second stage in the process was *Exploration/Engagement*. It is the time when students began to engage in various activities with groups for the relationships associated with those activities and not for leadership positions. *Leader Identified*, the third stage, is the leader centric stage where students believed that there was only one leader in the group
who did leadership while all others were followers. In this stage, students were more intentional about their involvement in groups and the roles in which they held.

The fourth stage, Leadership Differentiated, involved students coming to the realization that leadership was not just for the positional leader but was a process that involved the entire group. Generativity, the fifth stage in the process, students began to connect deeper meaning to their involvements motivated by their own beliefs and values. Students also began to support and develop the younger group members in their organizations. In the final stage in the process, Integration/Synthesis, students showed an increase in confidence and a concern for operating in both integrity and congruence.

Komives, et al (2005) also identified developmental influences, developing self, group influences, changing view of self, and broadening view of leadership as categories that interact with one another as students made their way through each identity stage. “Developing self interacted with group influences to shape the student’s changing view of self with others. This changing view of self in relation to others shaped the student’s broadening view of what leadership is and created a leadership identity” (Komives, et al., 2005, p. 596).

The Leadership Identity Development (LID) Model (Komives, Long, Owen, & Mainella, 2006), was developed from the initial grounded theory of Leadership Identity. The LID model presents the stages introduced in the initial grounded theory study and further illustrates how the categories interact across each stage. The model has been widely used throughout the field of Student Affairs to inform the knowledge of student
affairs practitioners regarding how college students begin to understand themselves and see themselves as leaders.

**Leadership Identity Development (LID) Model Theoretical Underpinnings**

The Leadership Identity Development (LID) Model was developed and presented as a result of a grounded theory study conducted by (Komives et. al, 2005). The model, along with theoretical underpinnings, explored how student leaders, who espoused a relational leadership philosophy, developed their leadership identities. While not explicit, few leadership theories and concepts could serve to reinforce or underpin this model. In addition to leadership theories and concepts, several student development theories influenced the development of the leadership identity model. Komives et al. (2009) encouraged scholars and practitioners to integrate other student development theories with the Leadership Identity Development Model and allow those theories to inform their knowledge about student development in the context of leadership identity. They acknowledged that further work could better inform the field if a more diverse researcher and informant pool were used in the development of more authentic engagement along with the LID model. Further, Day’s (2000) work on leader development and Authentic Leadership Development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), highlight this potential. Following is a brief review of their theories and their potential relationship to the LID Model.

David Day (2000) introduced the concept of leader versus leadership development. He gave light to the idea that there are different levels of development when it comes to leadership, and the development that happens on the individual leader
level (intrapersonal), and development that happens on the leadership level (interpersonal). While Day’s work began to put a focus on those differences in development, for years after, nothing existed that gave light to the actual process that an individual goes through to develop and understand their leadership identity from a culturally enriched context. Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, and McKee (2014) asserted that leadership development was a “multilevel focus means that intrapersonal and interpersonal processes are central to leadership development over time” (p. 64). However, those studies provided little insight as to how cultural contexts were impacted by leadership.

Avolio, Gardner, et al., (2004) described leaders who are authentic as not only possessing a profound awareness of their own thoughts and actions, but they are also aware of their own and others’ values and strengths, among other attributes. Further, Avolio and Gardner (2005) explained that “the concept of authenticity has its roots in Greek philosophy, “To thine own self be true” (p. 319). It is distinctly related to an awareness of identity and an understanding of self so one can to be true to self and consequently impact others. Authentic leadership development and LID are closely related in that both are complex processes that an individual may go through to develop self-awareness as it relates to leadership. For the purposes of the present study, cultural context (Boykin, 1983; Irvine, 2003) provided another level in this multifaceted matrix to address leadership and African American collegiate women through a Womanist lens.
Leadership and African American Women

There has been little research conducted on African American women’s leadership in higher education, however, the research that has been published has focused on faculty, student affairs or administrators (Henry, 2010). Generally, the experiences of African American women college students, has not been reflected with a dearth of literature focusing on leadership research. Historically, African American women’s leadership has emerged from (a) the social construction of Black families and community and (b) women-centered networks and mothering (Domingue, 2015).

Domingue (2015), contended that within these familial networks, African American women operated in a dual-gender system. In this regard, women were separated from men and they gathered in women only spaces. In these spaces African American women held their own power structures, leadership abilities and formulated processes to make decisions. Within these women-centered networks and mothering, these women were able to formulate bonds and companionship.

These types of leadership experiences were also prevalent before, during and after the “Jim Crow” period in which desegregation and disenfranchisement laws existed in the Southern part of the United States of America. To date, African American women in leadership continue to work formally and informally within similar structures, as well as those that reflect some of the tenants of Black Womanism. Many African American women have adapted “Black Womanism, which is a philosophy that celebrates Black roots, the ideals of Black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom”
To this effect, African American women are attempting to create wholeness in regard to self, others, and their leadership.

**Spirituality and Leadership**

While research surrounding the connection between leadership and spirituality has been scarce, several strides have been made to get a deeper understanding about the connections. For instance, Gehrke (2008) conducted a quantitative study seeking to understand the relationship between college students’ search for meaning, purpose and leadership. Results from his study suggested that “leadership development and spiritual development may be more closely related than previously suggested by the seeming lack of a spiritual component in many college student leadership development programs” (Gehrke, 2008, p. 356). While he does not go as far to suggest that the development of one leads to the development of the other, he does acknowledge that the two constructs have some relation. By exploring spirituality and leadership development, this study will help to bring more insight to the nature of their relationship and how faculty and staff alike can be intentional about creating useful tools and environments to support students in their development.

**Methods**

This study utilized a qualitative approach to explore how African American undergraduate women perceived the role of their spirituality in the development of their leadership identity. The study sought to bring light to the lived experiences of the participants, specifically in the area of spirituality and its impact on participants’ perceived leadership identity development. Hermeneutic Phenomenology was employed
as the methodology and was most appropriate given its concern with both the understanding and interpretation of both the participants and researcher and the phenomenon being explored. As the researcher, I sought to explore this topic given my own experiences with spiritual development and the lack of support at the collegiate level as I journeyed through the process.

Participants

Martha – 21, a junior Allied Heath major, was involved in multiple student organizations and served in different capacities in those organizations including as executive leader, general member, and mentor. Martha chose to get involved in order to enhance her leadership skills, serve the community, and gain knowledge that would be assistive in her future career. She was a Christian and identified as African American.

Deborah – 22, a senior Economics major, was involved in two student organizations. She joined one organization associated with her major as a general member for the opportunity to network with classmates and get exposure to corporate opportunities. The other organization was a predominantly Black organization whose goal was to provide education and awareness surrounding issues affecting Black students on campus. Now a student leader in the organization, she initially joined this organization as she was seeking community and desired to engage with other Black students. Deborah considers herself as a spiritual individual with Christian influences and identifies as Black African.

Mary – 21, a junior Food Science major, was involved in two student organizations on campus as a peer facilitator of diversity education and a member on the
leadership team for an organization that addresses issues concerned with the African American community, respectively. She joined these organizations because she truly believed in the importance of diversity and wanted to be involved in work to advance the rights of people of color. She was a Christian and identified as Black.

Sarah – 21, a junior Wildlife and Fishery Sciences major, was actively involved in one staff sponsored program as a student leader and two student organizations on campus. She served on the executive leadership team in each of her organizations and initially joined to both develop herself and sharpen her leadership skills. She was a Christian and identified as African American.

Esther – 21, a senior Biomedical Sciences major was involved in two student organizations on campus, one which explored and addressed issues impacting the Black community and the other associated with her career field. She served as the chief student leader of one organization and a general member in the other. She joined her student organizations with a desire to have a sense of belonging, to be educated on issues impacting the Black community, and to support and connect with other people of color who would be going into the same professional field. She was a Christian and identified as Black.

Hannah – 20, a senior Chemical Engineering major and was involved in two organizations where she served as student ambassador, one student organization, where she chaired one of the event committees, and one staff sponsored leadership program. Hannah chose to get involved in order to grow as a leader, learn from others, and assist other incoming students. She was a Christian and identified as African Black.
Hope – 22, a senior Communication major was involved in three student organizations and one staff sponsored leadership program where she held various positions from general member to vice-president. One organization was a historically Black sorority, while another was the national council that governs the historically Black student organizations on campus. The third student organization with which Hope is involved was an academic organization associated with her college major. She joined the student organizations because she wanted to be an active participant and leader in the Black community and desired to further develop her leadership skills while in college. Hope considered herself as spiritual and searching while acknowledging Christian influence and identified as Black.

Ruth – 19, a junior with an International Studies and Spanish double major was involved in three student organizations and one student conference where she was a general member and a delegate. Ruth initially joined the student organizations because she had a desire for community. She was a Christian and identified as Black Latino.

Magdalene – 22, a senior Agricultural Communications and Journalism major was involved in three student organizations on campus, one being a historically Black sorority and its governing council. The other was the collegiate gospel choir on campus. Magdalene was had leadership positions in both her sorority and the choir. She joined the as a Christian and identified as Black.

Mary-Beth – 20, was a senior Sociology major and was involved in two student organizations on campus where she held leadership positions in both organizations.
One organization was the college gospel choir and the other was a professional development organization that served the interest of pre-service teachers. Mary-Beth initially decided to get involved on campus because she did not have anything else to do with her time. She is a Christian and identifies as African American.

*Faith* – 21, a junior Biology major and was involved in two student organizations with leadership positions in each. One organization was tasked with exploring and addressing issues affecting the Black community and the other is the college gospel choir. Faith joined the aforementioned organization because she had previously been involved with the organization and wanted to continue her involvement at the collegiate level. She joined the gospel choir because it reminded her of home and her involvement with her youth choir. Faith was a Christian and identified as African American.

**Setting**

As a large, public, PWI, the institution in this study had an enrollment of more than 60,000 students. It is geographically located in the Southwest, where it is known to be located in the “Bible Belt” region of the United States. People of Color made up 34.2% of the student population; 3.6% of undergraduate students were African American. Of the total population, women made up 48.04% of the student population. Though in existence since 1876, women were admitted into the institution for the first time in 1963, while African Americans were admitted into the institution for the first time in the 1964.
**Procedure and Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews and Photovoice were employed to gather data. The researcher met with each participant three times during a semester. The first meeting was purposed to give the participants an overview of the study, give instructions for participation, and collect informed consent forms. The final meetings consisted of two, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each participant which lasted approximately 90 minutes. The researcher used Photovoice as a data collection method and instructed participants to submit photos that depict their understanding of spirituality, authenticity, and leadership identity. Additionally, participants were asked to provide written reflection with their photos that would interpret the meaning of the photo chosen. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and created into transcripts. All data collected were reviewed and analyzed including the participant’s interview transcripts, photos, and written reflections.

Data were analyzed using the hermeneutic circle of analysis in which the researcher used a combination of reading, reflective writing and interpretation to gather meaning (Laverty, 2003; Kafle, 2011). The process involves going back and forth between all and portions of the data continuously to gain understanding and meaning from the text (Patton, 2015).

**Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure validity and reliability of this research study, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were established to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation were used to establish credibility. The use of thick, rich description was used in the presentation of the findings in order to establish transferability. The
researcher kept a reflexive journal through the duration of the study along with a well-established audit trail to ensure both confirmability and dependability.

**Results**

This study examined African American undergraduate women leaders’ spirituality and their perceived impact on how they see themselves as leaders. Transcripts of the 11 participants were analyzed along with pictorial submissions with written reflections from nine of the eleven participants. Results revealed three themes. Participants perceived their spirituality to have (a) impacted their confidence as leaders, (b) influenced their motivations as leaders, and (c) guided their actions as leaders. The following is a presentation of results. Table 5 lists the themes and subthemes and their associated sources.

Table 5

*Themes and Subthemes with Sources for Spirituality and Leadership Identity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Subthemes</th>
<th>Source of Themes &amp; Subthemes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impacted Their Confidence</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Mary, Esther, Hope, Ruth, Faith,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influenced Actions</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Mary, Sarah, Esther, Hope,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Magdalene, Mary-Beth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influenced Motivations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding Purpose</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Mary, Sarah, Hannah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defying Gravity</td>
<td>Martha, Deborah, Mary, Sarah, Hannah, Hope,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Magdalene</td>
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</table>
Confidence (Impacted their Confidence)

Participants indicated their spirituality influenced their confidence as leaders. Participants attributed their growth in understanding of self to the influence of their spirituality. Having a sense of an authentic self and understanding of who they are and what they valued helped them to be more confident as leaders. When discussing her thoughts on authenticity and leadership, Faith reiterated her definition of authenticity as “raw or being yourself.” She further explained, “I feel like [authenticity] just allowed me to be myself as a leader, and to not try and take someone else’s leadership style and make it mine.” Martha expressed this sentiment and discussed her growth in knowing and accepting who she was as a person and all of her identities was critical in her evolution as a leader in college. She asserted once she came to college, she more so recognized herself as an African American woman, and as such, she had to become true to herself as an African American woman. She further expounded on this thought when she said,

Especially with the individuals I’m surrounded with here [in college], I had to be true to where I came from, true to my background, my culture, my race, and all those things that make up who I am as an individual, and have that shine and just show throughout like my character and personality. So I feel like I couldn’t have, you know, grown to be this leader, or I couldn’t have really acknowledged my Black identity if I didn’t become true to who I am, no matter my skin color, my qualities, characteristics, all that jazz.
Like I had to like realize all of that to just have evolved into, you know, this leader, evolved into this African American leader here on campus.

Spirituality also impacted the confidence of participants by being the lens through which they understood themselves not only as a person but as a child of God. For some participants, knowing that they are backed by God as a higher power gave them confidence to lead. Mary used her biblical base to remind her as a Christian she can be confident in God and therefore confident in herself. She expounded and expressed that as a Christian she was taught, “…that through Christ, I can do anything. God strengthens me, and I feel like again, that’s just reinforcing giving you confidence as a person, confidence as a Christian. So hey, I can do anything.” She expounded on how she related that biblical teaching to her leadership to be confident when she said,

So you don’t . . . you may not be as afraid to take that leadership position or to . . . you just have more confidence as a leader overall because you know you have a higher power behind you guiding you, that if you may falter, may be lost, you can always go to God, go to that higher power and say Lord, I need you, I need your strength, or right now I need your help, and he reassures you through some type of way, he’ll give you a message, and he’ll give you like that sort of peace that reassures you, and then you have that confidence to lead. So I feel like that’s a big deal, a big part of it, I would say, knowing that you’re backed by a higher power.

Esther, too, pulled from her biblical tool box to help her recognize that as a Christian and as a leader, she did not have to be afraid, but was called to be confident. She explained,
I think that that itself, like there’s a scripture where it’s like God did not give you like a spirit of timidity or whatnot. I think one of the things that that scripture is just telling you is just to be confident, like there is no reason why you shouldn’t be confident. Because like all of us walking around, we’re humans, all of us are imperfect, like all of us think differently.

Guidance (Steered their Actions)

Participants perceived spirituality to have influenced their actions as leaders. Specifically, their spirituality served as a guide for their actions and interactions with others. Mary-Beth explained her spirituality has impacted her as a leader by not only making her more humble as a leader but also served as the “foundation for really every decision that I make.” Mary explains that as a leader who is also a Christian, you cannot help but be influenced by your biblical foundation in the way you lead. She explained,

But the big one I feel like is the main commandment, love others as you would love yourself, as God commands us. What’s the word? Just you would treat others in a way, like I said, you would treat yourself. You would encourage others, you would be less likely to put others down. Just your overall spirit and everything would be more welcoming.

Along the same lines, Deborah explained how she tries to live out her spirituality and belief in the way she treats people. She shared that she tries to both treat people “with reverence and [see] them for the God that’s within them, and sort of you know, as . . . yeah, as someone that’s just as significant as I am.”
Motivation (Influenced their Motivations)

Participants in this study believed their spirituality influenced their motivations as leaders. Through their spirituality, participants found their purpose for leadership and felt motivated and empowered to rise above institutional and societal obstacles that would have otherwise held them back from excelling, leading, and supporting their communities.

Finding Purpose

It was through their spirituality that participants often understood their meaning and purpose in life. In doing so, some felt a sense of calling to help and serve others. They felt an innate sense of responsibility to those around them that stemmed from their spirituality and who they saw themselves as Christians. It was that calling to serve that motivated them to lead. Their spirituality and what they believed about who they were in Christ motivated them to want to be examples for others to follow. Hannah explained this saying,

I think that from my beliefs or from my spiritual life, I believe that I have responsibilities, like I mentioned yesterday, to help others and to serve when I can, and to be humble, and like I feel like I have a call in that sense. And so again, that goes back to servant leadership, because I see myself as having to step in to help when I can, and having to step in when people need me. And so I guess that’s where I get my leadership character from.

Martha, too, found her purpose and motivation to lead through her spirituality. She explained that through her faith, she believed God put her and everyone else here on
earth for a specific reason and a specific purpose. She used the knowledge of knowing
she was created for a purpose as a “source of motivation to be [a] positive individual”
for others no matter her surroundings. She explained further saying,

I wanna be that one who inspires others, who motivates others, and kinda
just is that role model of what it means to be a leader, no matter where you
are, and no matter where you come from too. So I definitely feel like that’s
played a role in my leadership development, because like I said, it’s like
my pusher, it’s like my motivation just to keep doing what I’m doing, and
continue to get better and better at it over the course of the years.

*Defying Gravity*

Faith and spirituality gave participants the strength to defy the gravity unjustly
imposed on them by society. In other words, participants’ faith gave them the strength to
rise above the often invisible yet ever present social injustices, and negative stereotypes
associated with the Black community that threatened to hold them back on a daily basis.

While discussing their spirituality, identity, and leadership, participants
processed the current state of racial tensions in society. They reminisced on the history
of the struggle for equality for African Americans and discussed the current
controversies surrounding the deaths of young Black men who were unarmed and killed
by police officers, namely, Freddie Gray and Trayvon Martin, to name a few. They
reflected on how those tensions affected their understandings of self and motivations to
lead. Hannah discussed her feelings about the current state of race relations and said,
the picture doesn’t really paint us as heroes, or the media doesn’t paint us as heroes. But I think that I feel proud to be, in cases like this, I feel proud to be, you know, Black. And in my heart, I still feel like it’s injustice, it’s the continuation of what our ancestors had to go through. And it just makes me know that we have to keep working hard.

Deborah discussed the current struggles for equality associated with the Black community and her sense of responsibility to lead and engage in the struggle. She expressed being challenged by the generation who had come before her to step into leadership for her community.

Yeah, like it I mean just comes back to Black leaders, the ones before us, and so just really understanding how their lives, they struggled to create a better future for us that live in today’s day and age. And I think with that knowledge, I’m aware of, you know, 100 years from now or 50 years from now, there will be a new generation that is fighting the same, but a different battle.

Deborah desired to live up to the legacy of those who had come before as they passed the “torch” of leadership. This impacted her leadership identity. In this case, she expressed, she could not help but be a leader. She likened it to running a race at a track meet and said, “I think, it’s sort of you know like running the race of life, running the race of time, like a track meet, you know? [You] sort of don’t have an option when someone passes you the baton.”
Along the same lines, participants expressed working hard to defy the negative stereotypes of the portrayal of African Americans in the media and society as a whole. They desired to defy the odds and fight past obstacles to achieve more than what was expected of them in a society where participants did not always feel valued. Furthermore, participants reported being raised and taught to expect to have to work twice as hard as anyone else in a society that does not always see them as equal. For instance, Magdalene said, “my mom instilled in me like okay, you know, like you just gotta work ten times harder than the next person.” Mary described a similar encounter with her dad when she said, “one thing my dad would always tell me, you know, like “you’re coming into this world with two strikes, you’re Black, and you’re female,” you know.” With this sentiment in mind, participants were motivated to operate in excellence and rise to leadership specifically on behalf of their communities. Perhaps this is why several participants’ pictorial representations of leadership included photos of graduation day, a cap and gown, a staircase with an individual reaching back to pull another individual up the stairs, and one of the participants giving her younger sister a piggy back ride. Participants saw one aspect of leadership as achievement in the face of obstacles. Often those successes were not just for the individual who achieved the accomplishment, but an achievement on behalf of their communities and for the purpose of leadership in order to both be an example and blaze trails for those who would follow.

Ruth illustrated the sentiment of defying gravity as an extension of leadership for the community in her photo submission (Figure 7) by Brianna Bonilla, which depicted her idea of leadership.
The submission was a photo of a piece of art that displayed a group of astronauts standing on raised columns and was taken outside a museum in a neighborhood in Berlin. Ruth described her interpretation of the image and wrote, “I think that with this piece of art, the artist wanted to inspire people of the community to challenge their circumstances, defy the statistics and be courageous in the pursuit of their callings.”

Mary discussed the challenge of having to work twice as hard as others and its effect on how she sees herself and black women as leaders.

So I feel like even from the beginning, Black females have always kinda [had] to work twice as hard. So it kinda like forces you to be a leader, when sometimes you don’t have any other option but to be a leader. So I feel like that has . . . that generated the whole idea of like the strong Black woman, because you were strong because you had to be, you had to work hard to
prove yourself, who you are. And again, I feel like that trait has been passed down through many generations.

Though most expressed they are leaders because they have to be, they often attributed their ability to endure and achieve despite challenges to their faith. It was their mothers and grandmothers who often served as leadership figures and examples of how to live out their leadership through faith and dependence on God. This also impacted participants’ leadership identity and motivations. Deborah expressed this sentiment when she posited, “moms are superheroes.” She discussed witnessing her mom live out her faith while she struggled to make ends meet. She worked long hours on night shifts and maintained a difficult schedule to support her family. She explained,

The faith that I see her exude is, in itself, empowering. To be at such a desperate and low point in life, but always still has a positive attitude, and she always still continues to remind us all, you know, like what’s important, sort of setting your eyes on things that, you know, are not of this world. And I think that’s had a very powerful impact in my life, just to see someone that can have faith in the midst of so much trouble.

Mary had a similar experience and described witnessing her mother operate as a leader in the face of obstacles. She saw her mother as a strong Black female leader and now sees those same characteristics in herself as an extension of who her mother was.

As a case in point, Mary’s photo submission (Figure 8) by Ashley Austin, depicting leadership was that of her late mother.
She explained her submission further when she wrote,

This picture was taken on Mother’s Day 2014 while she was in the middle of an intense fight with cancer. I believe much of my leadership ability can be attributed to the example she set forth for me. I would call her the epitome of a strong Black woman; she’s had to overcome many setbacks in life, but she came out of each struggle stronger than before. She was a leader at home operating basically as a single mother, a leader in our church, a leader at her job, and a leader in our community. I could talk for hours just on how amazing of a leader she was in all those roles. Observing my mother succeed at being a leader has prompted [me] to look up to her and try to follow her amazing example.
Mary attributed the strength she often saw displayed in the Black woman in general as well as the strength of her own mother and grandmother to their spirituality, biblical foundation, and faith. She explained,

And it’s connecting spirituality to that, they don’t . . . I don’t ever see them say “I’m just strong because of everything I went through.” They attribute it to “because God has me, because I have a higher power that’s looking out for me that protects me.” And they always attribute that to how they’ve been able to be so strong, how what has helped them to develop into becoming stronger and being leaders themselves…I’ve seen them just be totally dedicated to the life in Christ, and they attribute that to them being able to be who they are and being able to be strong, being able to be . . . to influence others and be leaders.

Seeing her mother defy the gravity that could have otherwise held her back in the life she lived and rise to leadership leaning on the strength of her God, motivated Mary to do the same.

**Discussion**

**Spirituality Impacted Confidence (Theme One)**

In this study, participants indicated their spirituality impacted their confidence. In His book, *Deeper Learning in Leadership*, Dennis Roberts (2007) defines leadership as “conviction in action” (p. 96). He contends that for individuals to effectively practice leadership, they must engage in inner work and
self-reflection that will help them identify a source of power that will sustain the commitments, actions, and interactions with others.

**Spirituality Impacted Actions (Theme Two)**

In article one (see Chapter II) participants expressed spirituality as the frame from which they viewed the world around them. That same frame and core is what they draw from to guide their interactions with others.

**Spirituality Impacted Motivations (Theme Three)**

Participants used their spiritual lens to identify adult spiritual figures as leadership figures after which to model or pattern their behavior. For instance, when discussing her understanding of leadership Ruth identified Jesus as her leadership model when she said, “though this model is directly taken from my faith, I think that Jesus and his unconditional, sacrificial love for the world are a pretty solid leadership model universally. It’s about empowering the people who give you power.” This is consistent with the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives, 2005) in that participants identified and looked authority figures as examples of leadership. One important distinction to note is because of their faith driven spiritual lens, they often identity leadership figures that embodied the spiritual principles of which they aspired.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Implications of this research suggest the need for students, specifically African American collegiate women at Predominantly White Institutions, to engage with faculty and staff that reflect who they are. It is important for these students to not only hear they
can succeed, but see others who look like them who are successful. In doing so, they may be better able to relate, connect, and feel supported by the university.

**Recommendations for Practice**

**Make Connections.** Staff should help African American students make connections. Staff should recommended to include female staff mentors in leadership programs that reflect the African American population. Additionally, staff should make a list of African American females who are pastors and co-pastors of their respective churches in the local community. Connecting student with those who both reflect who they are and serve as example of leadership in the community could support and empower students.

**Make Space.** Faculty and staff should also make space for spiritual exploration and reflection as components of curriculum in leadership programs and topics covered in leadership courses.

**Recommendations for Research**

Further research should be conducted that includes student participants that did not self-select to participate in the study knowing spirituality would be discussed and explored. This could include a study of a leadership course or an African American women’s organization. Additionally, because of the innate component of reflection and introspection built in the meaning-making process, further research should be conducted to explore whether or not students who engage in the search for meaning and purpose and spiritual exploration, religiously affiliated or not, are more likely to be further along in their leadership identity development.
Conclusion

Challenges due to racial and gendered components have impacted many African American collegians (Robinson-Wood et al, 2015). These challenges are consistent with the components found amongst these students. Many of the students modeled the characteristics of black womanism through their quests for equality for black lives in the present as well as the past. Although many of the participants modeled the behavior consistent with womanism, they have also been participants and participated as leaders in other programs which provided them with various leadership opportunities.

Finally, the study found participants believed spirituality to be the catalyst for leadership identity development to occur. Participants’ spirituality helped them to get to know themselves, find their voices and ultimately, be more confident in themselves as leaders. Philippians 4:13 (New King James Version) says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” This scripture best illustrates the sentiment the participants in this study expressed in that as long as they understood who they were in Christ, they felt confident and saw themselves as leaders. This sentiment should further imbue the importance of faculty, staff, and administrators to ensure the proper support networks are in place to support African American women leaders in their spiritual exploration, so they may have the opportunity to thrive.
References


Austin, A. [ca. 2014]. Mary’s photo submission depicting leadership. [Photo of Mary’s late mother].


Bonilla, B. [ca. 2018]. Ruth’s photo submission depicting leadership. [Photo of astronauts].


CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore spirituality and its influence on the authenticity and leadership identity of African American collegiate women leaders at a large, public, Predominantly White Institution. The guiding research questions were

(a) How do African American female student leaders experience, understand, and express their spirituality?

(b) How do African American women female leaders perceive the role of their spirituality in the development of their authenticity?

(c) How do African American female leaders perceive the role of their spirituality in the formation and development of their leadership identity?

The goal of this study was to bring further understanding of the lived experiences of the African American female collegiate student leader and to give voice to their spiritual experiences and the impact those experiences have on their development. Insights from this study can bring awareness to leadership educators and student affairs staff that may equip them to support their students through their spiritual and leadership development.

The first Article examined how African American undergraduate women understood, experienced, and expressed their spirituality. Results indicated these students experienced and expressed their spirituality as the core of their very being and Christianity was central to their understanding and expression of their spirituality.
The second article examined spirituality and the perceived role it had on African American women leaders’ authenticity. Results revealed participants’ belief that their spirituality impacted the development of their authenticity. Specifically, their spirituality influenced their self-cultivation, self-identity, self-acceptance, and self-confidence.

The third article explored how African American undergraduate women perceive the role of their spirituality in the development of their leadership identity. Results illustrated that African American women leaders in this study perceived their spirituality to have helped them to be more confident as leaders by helping them to better understand themselves and be confident in who they are as individuals.

Conclusions

Earlier work in the limited examination of spirituality development among African American female college students (Donahoo, 2011; Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Sanchez and Carter, 2005) were confirmed in the present study. The women in both studies talked about their importance of the spirituality and their religious beliefs. However, the eleven participants in the present study demonstrated a keen ability in blending their intrinsic views of racial identity and spirituality at a PWI. In fact, they asserted that their spirituality assisted them in coping with the micro aggressions that were often a part of their “other” status at the university. They shared examples of being treated or feeling different because of their race by other students and university professionals:

**Hannah** – “But then my classes at [college], I was probably I guess…almost every class, actually maybe every class – that one girl, you know, and that one spot. And
so I mean it just I guess made me more aware, I think over time, more aware of the fact that I’m different.” (Int. 2, p. 6)

*Martha* – “I was definitely the minority, and I definitely saw that when I got to [college]. And I did experience on a couple occasions some racial comments, kinda got a couple of looks as to why I was here at this school, so I did experience some of that.” (Int. 2, p. 11)

*Mary* – “I never truly felt completely welcome as a whole here.” (Int. 2, p. 18)

*Faith* – “…When I went to talk to a certain advisor, before I had even gotten my first grades back, he…questioned me with what I wanted to do. And so I started to feel like I wasn’t worth, or good enough…” (Int. 2, p. 7)

Their spiritual and racial identity fueled and supported their persistence. Though they were challenged by establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging, their strong spiritual and racial identity fortified that persistence.

The eleven informants in this study believed their spirituality played a major role in helping them to know themselves, be confident in themselves, and see themselves as leaders. We have students who are hurting, a nation that is hurting, and a world that is hurting. We must support our students in becoming truly whole, thriving individuals who are equipped to positively impact our communities, our nation, and our world. Perhaps it starts with equipping African American women like the ones in this study with the resources and space needed to develop as full whole individuals who have a true sense of a continuous self.
The more the participants spoke about their spirituality, the more they seemed to have had a better grasp on how they understood, articulated and lived out their faith and spirituality. The collection of data (i.e. interviews, photovoices, written reflections) took place over the course of one academic semester. Each encounter provided these young ladies the opportunity to deepen their reflections as they thought and discussed spirituality. For instance, in her first interview, Martha considered spirituality and religion as two separate entities (Int.1, p. 1). However, when submitting her artifacts following the last interview, she confidently expresses her belief that her spirituality, religion, and faith intertwine to make up all of who she is as a woman.

Each of these women shared that no one had ever asked them to discuss their perceptions of spirituality. They had never taken the opportunity to discuss spirituality, religion or their roles as leaders as result of the connective potential of each. This process allowed them to purposely think about who they were as spiritual, religious, cultural, and intellectual beings.

Each of the young ladies talked about their historic frequency of church attendance and the consistent dialogue in their families about their faith. However, once they were away from home, only two of them were attending church on a regular basis while attending school. At least two of them participated in Bible study groups with classmates or peers on campus. In the midst of a disconnection with attending a church, each of them talked about the importance of spirituality, faith, and a love for God. Most important, they each used their spirituality to support their leadership from culturally enriched tenets and ties to a womanist and culturally informed context (Boykin, 1983;
Irvine, 2003; Ogunyemi, 2006) perspective. They acknowledged and asserted their racial consciousness, cultural pride, commitment to education, and desire to be effective leaders.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Whether they are going it alone or utilizing familial or university support networks, this population is grappling with their spiritual identities. While they acknowledged the importance and existence of spirituality in their lives, they also acknowledged that the “struggle is real” on a daily basis, especially in the context of a PWI. While each informant was proud to be a student at the university, they understood deeply that their multifaceted identities (as exemplified in their voices throughout this study) compelled them to be more impactful and effective for themselves and their fellow peers. This was one of the reasons why leadership was so important to them. As a result, it is very important that student affairs professionals be made aware of those struggles and take the opportunity to provide support important to address their concerns. Recommendations can be found below.

**Article One: Spirituality**

*Recommendations for Practice*

**Formalized Support**: recognize spirituality as an integral and salient identity of students. Student Affairs administrators and staff should formalize the support and resources to support this aspect of college students identity. Similar to departments that have been created to support various student identities on campuses (i.e. women, multicultural services, LGBT, etc.) recognizing this integral part of students
development, administrators should formalize their support and create an office or center that is tasked with providing support and resources for students who are exploring and developing their spiritual selves (i.e. center for spiritual and reflective services).

**Physical Space:** Identify or create quiet rooms or prayer rooms throughout campus for students to go so that they are able to detach from technology and the busyness of their lives to pray, meditate, or reflect.

**Staff:** Because Public universities have to maintain the separation of church and state, instead of having full time, paid ministers or clergy on campus, some campuses have a campus ministries association that is made up of a volunteer network of clergy from a wide variety of denominations who provide spiritual guidance to students. I did a brief search of this institution’s volunteer campus ministries association and found the African American community was neither represented in the clergy or the churches listed. Student Affairs administrators should work with their campus ministries associations to ensure clergy have staff who are representative or reflective of the university demographic, historically underrepresented population, namely the Black and African American population.

**Resources:** Staff should provide a list of local churches with numbers and locations that are representative of the various faiths, religions, and denominations located in the community. For example, larger campuses have church brochures that can be provided.
Recommendations for Research

Additional studies in different contexts like an HBCU and community colleges. Are there differences or similarities in how students explore spirituality or their search for meaning and purpose? Are the support and resources needed for students in different contexts similar or different? Moreover, additional studies on African American female students who do not have the same Christian worldview may prove helpful to understand this population and better equip faculty, staff, and administrators provide more effective support.

Article Two: Spirituality and Authenticity

Recommendations for Practice

Provide Resources. Student Affairs staff should provide resources to African American students to provide support. One example could be a complete list of resources that identify local African American churches who have active young adult ministries. This resource list should be provided to students as a potential informational leaflet and a way students have information that allows them to connect to a faith community of peers.

Additionally, a list of self-help books on exploring self should be provided to assist young ladies in exploring who they are. Suggested books include, Amy Cuddy’s book on Presence, Bishop T. D. Jakes’ book, Woman, Thou Art Loosed!: Healing the Wounds of the Past, and Cindy Trimm’s books, The 40 Day Soul Fast: Your Journey to Authentic Living and Prevail: Discover Your Strength in Hard Places.
Create Partnerships. Staff should contact local African American churches and look for creative ways to partner to ensure students are properly supported and have an avenue to connect with additional support networks in the community should they choose.

Model the Way. Faculty and staff should model the way for students and make spiritual reflection and exploration a regular part of their own personal lives and professional practice.

Prepare Staff. Faculty should add spirituality and student spiritual exploration to Student Affairs graduate preparation programs as another aspect of college student identity development. This can prepare staff to support students in this area of their student development.

Recommendations for Research

Further studies should be conducted at a university with a different context or setting outside of the “Bible Belt”. Additionally, more studies should be conducted to explore spirituality amongst other demographics to see the intersectionality of spirituality and other identities.

Article Three: Spirituality and Leadership Identity

Recommendations for Practice

Make Connections. Staff should help African American students make connections. Staff should recommended to include female staff mentors in leadership programs that reflect the African American population. Additionally, staff should make a list of African American females who are pastors and co-pastors of their respective
churches in the local community. Connecting student with those who both reflect who they are and serve as example of leadership in the community could support and empower students.

**Make Space.** Faculty and staff should also make space for spiritual exploration and reflection as components of curriculum in leadership programs and topics covered in leadership courses.

**Recommendations for Research**

Further research should be conducted that includes student participants that did not self-select to participate in the study knowing spirituality would be discussed and explored. This could include a study of a leadership course or an African American women’s organization. Additionally, because of the innate component of reflection and introspection built in the meaning-making process, further research should be conducted to explore whether or not students who engage in the search for meaning and purpose and spiritual exploration, religiously affiliated or not, are more likely to be further along in their leadership identity development.

**Endnote**

I close with a series of notes to my informants. I want to thank them for allowing me into their spiritual worlds and teaching me to think deeply about them as African American women and as spiritual leaders who served their organization willingly and strategically.
A Note to Participants

Martha. You share a love for God and a desire to serve. Through the telling of your story, you expressed a gratitude for your accomplishments and a willingness and desire to serve others and give back to the generation that will follow. I am inspired by your passion to pour into others as an expression of gratitude and love to God for the opportunities that have been afforded to you. Your continued exploration of your spirituality and growth in faith as told through your story has reminded me to take heart in knowing we always have our foundation...a God who is faithful. While there is a place for the practical in showing our love for Jesus through service to Him and others, we must never forget the importance of balancing the practical with the spiritual and recognize the significance of simply resting in relationship. Resting in His presence is both an act of surrender and an expression of love. Your words helped me better understand this.

Deborah. Your passion for God and the exploration and continued cultivation of self was inspiring. In the Bible, (Judges 4), your namesake also, had a confidence and heart to lead and stand up on behalf of others. You have challenged me to continue to think about the legacy I am both living and leaving behind for others to follow. You have reminded me to think more intentionally about how I am pouring into my community and giving voice to those around me, who otherwise may not have the voice or opportunity to share or be heard. Thank you for sharing your passion, your heart, and your story.
Mary. You are the epitome of grace, strength and faith. Your blind faith and willingness to be used as a vessel to do God’s will was an inspiration. Your love for your mother and desire to carry on the legacy of leadership in the home, church, and community is admirable. In your words, you acknowledged the awareness that your mother also left you a spiritual inheritance. My hope for you is that you will continue to find rest and strength in that knowledge, for with that spiritual inheritance, you will be forever rich beyond measure. Hold fast to it.

Sarah. You are a woman of faith, passion and zeal. You described faith as a muscle you are yet growing. Muscles require nourishment and exercise. A muscle will not grow if one is not intentional about its development. You shared an enthusiasm and excited in the growing process that I found invigorating. Thank you for challenging yourself and me. You have reminded me to remember that our faith is something we will continue to grow and develop. While we are all works in progress, if we stand on the faith we have, that is enough to sustain us for the present time.

Esther. You are a woman of courage and passion. You have a wonderful ability to know when and how to fight your battles and to stand strong in your value system that is anchored in Christ. You reminded me that leadership can be lonely. Leadership is service and leadership is sacrifice. You reminded me that “to whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 12:48). With the responsibility entrusted to us, we must stay attentive to God’s will and purpose, for “who knows that [we] have come to [our] position, for such a time as this? (Esther 4:14). Though leadership can be a lonely road,
as we surrender our will to the will of God, we can have faith that He will go before us to bring His will to fruition.

**Hannah.** The name Hannah means grace and favor. You shared with me your graceful elegance as an African American young woman. You are a woman of prayer. Your life and the experiences you have shared of how you and your family leaned on prayer and saw God move on your behalf, is a testimony and reminder that prayer changes things. Thank you for sharing your story, with grace and excellence. Your leadership skills are being fueled by that grace and I truly believe you will be favored in His will for your life.

**Hope.** I appreciate your desire to find your own truth and your courage to continue to explore and pursue it. The word hope appears in the Bible 129 times. It is a reminder that we all must know what we believe, why we believe it, and the importance of trusting in that belief. My hope for you is that you will continue to search for the truth until you can grab ahold to it and never let go. For John 8:32 says, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

**Ruth.** I admire your passion for life and the exploration of the world around you. Your willingness to recognize how the busyness of life can often cause internal turmoil, a divided self, and the need to steal away to find your center, reminds me to not get so caught up in the tasks of life that I forget the beauty in being still. The biblical Ruth was loyal. She said to her mother-in–law, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God (Ruth 1:16). Your present loyalty to remaining faithful
and your adventurous nature allowed you to step out of your comfort zone and as a result, in your own words, you found God. Thank you for your willingness to share and teach.

**Magdalene.** “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven” (Matthew 5:16, KJV). I am inspired by your light, strength and perseverance in the face of challenge. I applaud your determination to stay the course and operate in and pursue excellence with no apologies. It is a reminder to never dim my light so that others may feel comfortable around me. Marianne Williamson (1992) said, “there is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you…we were all born to make manifest the Glory of God that is within us” (p. 190-191). You are a living example of what God can do in the life a person who truly surrenders and trusts Him.

**Mary-Beth.** You are a beautiful representation of what it means to balance humility and boldness. I admire your confidence and willingness to be an unapologetically, unashamed child of God. At the same time, your relentless quest to surrender and die to self that God may reign in and through you, reminds me of John the Baptist, who was known to have been radical for Christ. He came to pave the way and prepare hearts to receive Jesus and His message before His arrival. When the time came, John expressed, “He must become greater, I must become less” (John 3:30). John knew the importance of making room in His heart, and decreasing so that Christ could fulfill His purpose and get the glory. Thank you for reminding me that there is something freeing and yet empowering about admitting our weaknesses and exercising our
complete dependence on Him. For “[Christ’s] power is made perfect in our weaknesses…For when [we] are weak, then [we] are strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

**Faith.** Faith takes courage and surrender, hope and trust. Despite the many challenges you have faced, it is your faith that has carried you thus far. Thank you for being a living reminder that, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

**A Final Reflection**

Thinking about spirituality as a coping mechanism, as indicated by the participants in this study, spirituality is both a positive coping mechanism and the core of who they are. Their spirituality is who they are and the means by which they traverse life and understand themselves and the world. When that is out of whack, they experience turmoil. Perhaps, indicative of campus counseling centers, universities are seeing an increase in numbers of students struggling with anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide, especially as they attempt to become a part of “community.”

This is even more poignant for African American women at PWIs. An increase in student suicides on campus, is a sign that there is a level of support in traversing life issues and pressures that some students are lacking, particularly at public universities who, as government agencies, must be careful not to take on a specific religious advocacy. However, there is a need across the general college population for promoting and establishing a sense of belonging as students learn to live away from home while attending large universities.

In our quest to create an inclusive welcoming environment and maintain the separation of “church and state,” have we somehow left our students of faith out to dry?
Is there a way to better balance ensuring an inclusive environment, while also appropriately providing space, resources and support to religious, spiritual, or faith-based driven students?

Is spiritual support the job of a student affairs practitioner? Are student affairs practitioners equipped to support our students spiritually? Perhaps not, the answer is debatable. However, can student affairs staff, faculty, and administrators create space and support networks to provide students with support that is pertinent to their survival and ability to thrive in the college environment? I would argue that we can. Like the spiritual journeys our students are on, the answer is not black and white. Perhaps this is a call to faculty, staff, and higher education administrators alike, to go beyond acknowledging the spiritual side of our students and go beyond researching and exploration of the spirituality and faith in students, and move to action…putting the support networks and helps in place that are imperative for our students to truly thrive, particularly our students of color.

The eleven women who participated in this study, allowed me to explore the intersection of spirituality, authenticity and leadership identity development as African American women leaders at a Predominantly White Institution. The African proverb Ubuntu, which states, “I am because we are, because we are, I am,” is a sentiment that was echoed in this study through the lived experiences told by the participants. It is a reminder of the value and importance of a communal and collective society. As it relates to their leadership, participants explored who they were through the lens of spirituality, and taught me, I am, therefore I lead.
References


Dear “Colleague”,

My name is Tia Crawford and I am a candidate for my PhD in Organizational Leadership in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications here at Texas A&M University. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation. My research focuses on the exploration of spirituality and leadership identity in college student leaders, specifically African American women leaders.

I am soliciting your support in identifying potential candidates to participate in my research study to gain a greater understanding of the intersection of spirituality, authenticity, and leadership identity in African American women leaders. The study entails 2 to 3 interviews which would each last an hour to an hour and a half in duration. Can you identify students that meet the criteria of being a junior or senior, identify as an African American woman, is actively involved in your organization and to the best of your knowledge could answer questions regarding their leadership identity? Upon identifying students that meet these requirements, please give them my contact information below if they are interested in participating.

It is important for you to know that the student leaders that you recommend for this research project may participate solely on a voluntary basis and their identities and information will be protected and kept confidential. This information will be thoroughly explained to them. As the researcher, I, along with my dissertation committee, will be the only one(s) to see the information they provide.

Thank you in advance for your assistance. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be happy to address your questions or provide further clarification.

Respectfully,

Tia

Tia L. Crawford
Candidate for Doctor of Philosophy
tcrawford@gmail.com
979-220-4521
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Dear “Potential Student Participant”,

My name is Tia Crawford and I am a candidate for my PhD in Organizational Leadership in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications here at Texas A&M University. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation. My research focuses on the exploration of spirituality and leadership identity in college student leaders, specifically African American women leaders.

Again, the purpose of this study is to understand the role that spirituality has on the leadership identity and authenticity of African American women leaders. You have been identified as someone who meets the criteria of being a junior or senior, identify as an African American woman, is actively involved in your organization and could potentially answer questions regarding your leadership identity and provide insight to the study. Because of this you are invited to participate in this study. The study entails 2 to 3 interviews which would each last an hour to an hour and a half in duration.

If you are interested in participating in this study and believe you meet the requirements, please contact me at tia@tamu.edu or 979-862-2514 by ___“date”______. I would be happy to provide you with more information or answer any questions you may have. Thank you in advance!

Thanks and Gig’em!

Tia

Tia L. Crawford
Candidate for Doctor of Philosophy
tia@tamu.edu
APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: I AM, THEREFORE I LEAD: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF SPIRITUALITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND LEADERSHIP IDENTITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS

You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Katia L. Crawford, a researcher from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have.

Why Is This Study Being Done?
The purpose of this study is to understand the role that spirituality has on the leadership identity and authenticity of African American women leaders.

Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?
You are being asked to be in this study because you have been identified as an African American female student leader between the ages of 18 to 25.

How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?
Approximately 150 people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study locally.

What Are the Alternatives to being in this study?
The alternative to being in the study is not to participate.

What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?
You will be asked to participate in one-on-one interviews. Additionally, you will be asked to submit photos or other artistic artifacts that symbolizes for you the topics of spirituality, authenticity, and leadership identity with a brief description. Your participation in this study will last up to 3 to 9 months and includes 2 to 3 interviews and a potential final meeting to review, debrief, and ensure accuracy.

Example Procedure for Visits:
Interviews will last about an hour to an hour and a half. During the interviews we will review the consent form and give you an opportunity to ask questions and get clarification. I will then ask you a series of questions related to the focus of the study and give you an opportunity respond as you see fit.

You may be removed from the study by the investigator for these reasons:
• If you become pregnant or imprisoned.

If you leave the study early, you may be asked to complete the following activities:
• Submit photos identified or taken during the course of the study.
Will Photos, Video or Audio Recordings Be Made Of Me during the Study?
The researchers will make an audio recording during the study to ensure the research has accurately documented the participant’s interviews. If you do not give permission for the audio recording to be obtained, you cannot participate in this study.

Are There Any Risks To Me?
The things that you will be doing are no more/greater than risks that you would come across in everyday life. Risks associated with the study are potential emotional discomfort when answering questions regarding your spirituality and emotional discomfort caused in the event a breach of privacy or confidentiality occurs.

Although the researchers have tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions/procedures that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

Will There Be Any Costs To Me?
Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?
You will not be paid for being in this study.

Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?
The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only, Dr. Chanda Elbert, Principal investigator and myself, Katia Crawford, doctoral researcher will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in locked file cabinet; computer files protected with a password. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

Information about you and related to this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

Who may I Contact for More Information?
You may contact the Principal Investigator, Chanda Elbert, Ph.D., to tell her about a concern or complaint about this research at 979-458-2699 or celbert@tamu.edu. You may also contact the Protocol Director, Katia Crawford, M.S. at 979-220-4521 or tia@tamu.edu.
APPENDIX D

PHOTOS/ARTIFACTS RELEASE FORM

As explained in the consent form, as a part of this research study, you will be asked to submit photos or other artistic artifacts that symbolize for you the topics of spirituality, authenticity, and leadership identity along with a brief description. Upon final analysis of the data gathered, some of the photos or artifacts that you submit may be used in the final report, presented at conferences and educational presentations, or published in a journal or other media outlets for scholarly or educational purposes.

I hereby grant permission to the rights of the photos, images, and/or artifacts that I submit for this research study. I understand the images I submit may be edited, copied, exhibited, published or distributed for scholarly purposes. I understand that I will not be receive payment or any other compensation in connection with the use of these photos, images, and artifacts.

I understand that I will be consulted about the use of the photos/artifacts submitted for any purpose other than outlined in this form. I understand that my face will not be published without my prior consent.

There is no time limit on the validity of this release nor is there any geographic limitation on where these materials may be used.

This release applies to the photos, images, artistic artifacts collected as part of this research study.

I understand that if I take or apprehend a photo of a third party for submission, I must first ask permission of the individual and submit a completed third party release form with the individual’s signature.

By signing this form I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to be bound thereby. I hereby release any and all claims against any person or organization utilizing this material for research and educational purposes.

__________________________________________________________
Name (Print)

__________________________________________________________
Email Address

__________________________________________________________
Phone Number

__________________________________________________________
Signature Date

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APPENDIX E

THIRD PARTY PHOTO/ARTIFACTS RELEASE FORM

As a part of a research study, this individual has been asked to submit photos or other artistic artifacts that symbolize for them the topics of spirituality, authenticity, and leadership identity. You are being asked to either have a photo taken of you or to give permission for submittal of a photo or artifact of which you have rights. Upon final analysis of the data gathered in this research study, some of the photos or artifacts submitted may be used in the final report, presented at conferences and educational presentations, or published in a journal or other media outlets for scholarly or educational purposes.

By granting permission for the use of such materials, in addition to the above, I authorize, consent, and understand the following:

I hereby grant permission to the rights of the photos, images, and/or artifacts submitted for this research study. I understand the images I submit may be edited, copied, exhibited, published or distributed for scholarly purposes. I understand that I will not be receive payment or any other compensation in connection with the use of these photos, images, and artifacts.

I understand that I will be consulted about the use of the photos/artifacts submitted for any purpose other than outlined in this form. I understand that my face will not be published without my prior consent.

There is no time limit on the validity of this release nor is there any geographic limitation on where these materials may be used.

This release applies to the photos, images, artistic artifacts collected as part of this research study.

By signing this form I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to be bound thereby. I hereby release any and all claims against any person or organization utilizing this material for research and educational purposes.

__________________________________________________________
Name (Print)

__________________________________________________________
Email Address

__________________________________________________________
Phone Number

__________________________________________________________
Signature

Date
APPENDIX F

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Name: _____________________________  Gender: _____________________________

Classification: ____________________  Major: _____________________________

Age: ______________________________  Race/Ethnicity: ______________________

In what student organizations are you involved?

Why did you join?

What role do you have in the organization?
APPENDIX G

PHOTO/ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION REFLECTION:

Please submit a photo or an artistic representation of what spirituality, authenticity, leadership identity, and your journey towards wholeness mean to you along with a brief description of each.

Example guided reflection questions are below:

- Describe the image or artifact that you have submitted. What is it?
- Why did you submit it?
- How does this photo represent how you see spirituality, authenticity, and leadership identity? Explain.
APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview/Reflection Summary Overview:

Initial Briefing: The initial briefing will explain the project, provide an informed consent, and administer the demographic survey.

Photo/Artistic Representation with reflection will be assigned.

Interview One: Interview one will explore how the student views and experiences their spirituality. How has their spiritual influenced how the students have found meaning and purpose in their lives?

Interview Two and/or Three (if needed):

The next interview will explore how students see themselves as leaders and the perceived role that their spirituality has played in the development of their leadership identity.

Conclusion: Final Member Check

Note: This is a general guide.
Initial Briefing:

Initial interview briefing steps adapted from LID Interview Protocol (Komives, S., 2001)

1. Thank you for agreeing to be in the study. Tell them who you are.

2. Discuss the process. Explain that you may refer to them by their first name as you go through the interview but you will ask them to choose a made-up name in the study later.

3. Give them the informed consent form. Read it and explain it.

4. Ask if they have any questions. If not, have the participant sign the form. Give them a copy to keep for their records.

5. Explain you will be taping the interviews and taking notes so you have a record and can understand their ideas. (Reiterate what was already discussed in the consent form.)

6. Tell them you will be sharing a copy of the transcript of each interview if they would like to read it to expand or correct anything

7. Give them the demographic survey to complete

General Guide:
(Spirituality)
Interview Questions:

• How would you describe spirituality?

• Would you consider yourself a spiritual person? What has impacted your perception of spirituality?

• Have you encountered any spiritual struggle? If so, how have you traversed those struggles?

• What experiences, events, or persons have influenced your spiritual development?

• How has your culture and background (i.e. race, gender, ses, etc.) impacted your spirituality, if at all? Vice versa?
**Spirituality & Leadership Identity**

Interview Questions:

- How would you describe leadership?

- Who would you consider important leadership figures in your life? Why? What impact have they had on you?

- Would you consider yourself as a leader? What impacted your perception on how you see yourself as a leader?

- How has your spirituality/spiritual identity influenced your development as a leader?

- How has your spirituality/spiritual identity influenced how you see yourself as a leader?

**Spirituality & Authenticity** – If needed

Interview Questions:

- How would you describe authenticity?

- How has your spiritual identity influenced your ability to be authentic?

- How has your spirituality influenced your ability to make sense of and understand yourself?

**Photo/Artistic Representation Reflection:**

The participants will be asked to submit a photo or an artistic representation of various topics that surround what spirituality or wholeness means to them, authenticity, leadership identity, and their journey towards wholeness.
APPENDIX I

SELECT EXCERPTS FROM PARTICIPANT TRANSCRIPTS

Participant #6 (Interview 1, p.4-6)

Tia: So you feel like you seek him, and him meaning God, or your higher power, you seek him most when you . . .

Participant: Looking for something, or like, you know, I mean it’s . . .

Tia: No, it’s okay. But you know, I think . . . yeah, so like in seeking him the most, you’ve realized that you do so when you have some of the bigger problems or bigger issues that are going on.

Participant: Yeah.

Tia: Gotcha, okay. And you’ve touched on this just a little bit – I do have it down as a question, so I’ll still go ahead and ask it, just in case there’s something else that comes up. But have you ever encountered any spiritual struggle? And if so, how have you traversed those struggles, so how have you gotten through those?

Participant: Well, I think this again one of those questions that I feel like we have to kind of define what spirituality is and what religion is. Because if you said religion, then I can easily think about like religious struggles. But spirituality-wise, I think, I don’t know, probably it’s really drawing that line between spirituality and religion. I think that’s where my biggest struggle has been.

Tia: So you believe there’s a difference between the two?

Participant: Yeah, I think that, you know, like religion to me, I see it more as practices and like, you know, doctrines, I see more as a doctrine and like theology and stuff like that. And then spirituality or Christianity – well Christianity is a religion, but spirituality is more of that connection with God and just that connection, something higher than us, bigger than the creator. And like it’s more of the connection – yeah, that’s how I see it. And so let’s see – my struggle, yeah, is probably drawing the line between the two, and also kind of really thinking about what’s important to me. I think that at the end of the day, like I know for sure that spirituality in connection with God is more important than, you know, following a set of rules and following a set of like doctrines and teachings.
Tia: That’s cool. So what experiences, events, or persons have influenced your spiritual development over time?

Participant: I think that one of the biggest, I’ll say, because I was in a Baptist boarding school for 5 years from about the age of I think 10 to 15, yeah, 5 years, 15-16ish. And so I think that being there was really where I, you know, learned about the teaching and learned about, you know, God and learned about just . . . I mean learning about scripture and hearing about people’s experiences, people 14:10__________ every day, like every Sunday after service people will say things that happened to them over the break, in the family. And it was just amazing to see how people prayed and things happened, and you know, just day after day hearing people’s stories. I think that was where I personally grew to learn, you know, about God and like really open my eyes and want to know more. At home, we went to church, I think up to about that age, we went to church, but I mean it wasn’t really . . . I wasn’t . . . I mean I went because I had to kind of like, you know, it was a thing that we did. And then after that, yeah, I think that actually during my 5 years of boarding school, I think the first year, that was when I was 10, my dad got shot, and so he . . . you know, it was a crazy experience. And so I think I remember feeling like having all this emotion, like I knew in the movies, when someone got shot, they died, and so in my mind it was like he was gonna die. And so just to see him recover from that, just those see, and so that was my testimony. And up to today, that’s been like probably my biggest testimony, just to see him survive through all of that. And like I said, one of the biggest troubles I’ve had is, you know, being drawing close to God when I need him. And then when things get better, I mean somehow I just find myself like, you know, I still praise like God, thank you, but you know, you just kind of . . . things are okay. And so I think after I think 2-3 years after that, things were okay until the 5th year, again he had a complication with surgery from the 5 years ago, and he almost died, so that again was like a revival moment for me. And so I think that his life has been my biggest testimony, and just knowing how like, you know, knowing that there’s someone out there who cares for me, who takes care of me, who sees things. And so yeah, I think that. Yeah, I think that probably my like where I got to really take that decision to find my God and find the connection was during my 5 years at boarding school.

Tia: Alright. So how has your culture and background impacted your spirituality, if at all? So thinking of things like race, gender, socioeconomic status, or anything that you would consider your culture and background, how has any of those impacted your spirituality?

Participant: Okay, let me try to see how I can phrase this. I think that one again, probably what I said before, that just growing up in a family where we went to church, just knowing
that there’s a God, I think that was where like family background, I just kind of grew up into it somehow. Second, I think that growing up in Cameroon, I mean it’s . . . because even like things like, for example, what happened to my dad, I feel like . . . I mean it does happen elsewhere, but just the insecurity in Cameroon, and the level that we are at, I feel like you know, just kinda always carried me and just kind of made me know that, you know, if not today, maybe tomorrow someone is gonna die, or like something is gonna happen, or you know, like there’s just that . . . there’s always kind of that fear. And also I think on the other side, just being grateful. I think that growing up there as well, you know, it’s a third world country, it’s tough in general, but being on the upper end, I think that that was something that today, day after day, I’m just going through – I think I’m just really grateful for it, being able to . . . like even now, like everything that happens, like being able to have my parents pay for school, send my sister and I to study in the states and pay for everything. I think that it’s just, you know, at the same . . . like I feel like I’m grateful to them, but they won’t be able to provide and so that’s just kind of how, you know, like I don’t know . . . let’s see what else.

**Tia:** Would you consider things like gender or your race or anything like that having played any kind of a role in your spirituality as well?

**Participant:** Not really. I mean I feel like for race, I don’t really see . . . I guess also just because, I don’t know, maybe where I start off my journey, it was more for monorace culture and so it’s . . . so I don’t really see the connection. For gender . . .

**Tia:** Before you move on, you said you don’t necessarily see race as playing as significant as an impact in your spirituality, the role, because kind of where you grew up, you said it’s more of a monorace, is that what you said?

**Participant:** Yeah, I meant basically just one race.
Participant #5 (Interview 2, p. 15-17)

Tia: You did, good deal. A couple others surrounding kind of that leadership piece. Pulling it back into, now looking at that spirituality piece, and so these questions are similar, so I’m gonna ask you both of them, and then you can go at it how you’d like. How has your spirituality, spiritual identity influenced your development as a leader? And then how has your spirituality or spiritual identity influenced how you see yourself as a leader?

Participant: Okay. well . .

Tia: If at all.

Participant: Oh, it definitely has. I definitely think that it influenced the way I talk. And also you know, I mentioned earlier about like with some people, I see them as being like calm and appropriately situations calmly, I think that that ties into being like peaceful as well. So whenever you’re a leader, like people are gonna disappoint you, and that’s okay. And honestly, like you’re gonna disappoint people as well. And so I think like one of the things that I told my staff at the very beginning of the year is that we’re all like super-new, we’re all like super-kinda-headstrong, and we need to learn how to be patient with each other. Like if we don’t learn anything else, we really need to learn how to be patient with each other. And I think as a leader, you encounter a lot of different people, and everyone on staff, like most people on staff, they are super-sensitive, include myself, I’m sensitive too, you know. And so I think like whenever you have a group of sensitive people, you really have to learn how to be patient with each other, and that patience meaning like not necessarily assuming things. Like I feel like whenever you have patience with a person, then your communication with them enhances, like the effectiveness of your communication enhances. And so for me, just thinking about like those fruits of the spirit, like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, all of the . . . I can’t remember all of them though, but I think that like patience and love and like those are like two big themes for me this year, just because like we’re all super-headstrong, we all don’t really listen that well, and we all just kind of like are busy, we are really busy. And so whenever you have those things tied together, communication like really sucks. And so I think like us just learning to be patient with each other could enhance, and did enhance, because it’s like you come up, and you are wanting some information from someone. And so that conversation may be a really hard conversation to have because it’s like you ask the question a certain way, and that person doesn’t understand, and so you have to like rephrase the question. Or either you have to know with certain people to ask multiple questions to get the full picture, and so just like being patient with each other. Like I think God was definitely telling me like hey, you gotta learn some patience, otherwise, you’re gonna be so frustrated with like the people that you’re working with, and honestly, frustrated for no reason. Because at the end of the day, like yes, you’re here to like you’re here to educate the campus and enrich other people’s lives. But if in your quest to enrich people, you forget that like you’re a citizen of another like a different world really, then really, you’re not enriching
anyone’s lives. Because like I feel like I have like two dual purposes, like especially like with the organization I am . . . one of the things that I made sure to stress whenever I was talking to people about like different issues, is that like I’m black, and I’m a person, just like you’re a person. But also like I’m gonna show you brotherly love because like my identity reaches down like the same amount as the fact that I’m black, you understand what I’m saying? Like I’m gonna show you brotherly love, because first off, I’m Christian, and then secondly I’m black, and that’s what I expect of you, so I’m gonna show you that as well. And so I think that just like patience and brotherly love is something that I was forced to learn and forced to exhibit to other people. And then what was the second question?

**Tia:** How has your spirituality and/or spiritual identity influenced how you see yourself as a leader?

**Participant:** I think that that itself, like there’s a scripture where it’s like God did not give you like a spirit of timidity or whatnot. I think one of the things that that scripture is just telling you is just to be confident, like there is no reason why you shouldn’t be confident. Because like all of us walking around, we’re humans, all of us are imperfect, like all of us think differently. And it’s not a bad thing that we think differently, and there are different things that like . . . if there’s nothing else in this world that can unify us, whether that’s race, whether that’s religion, I think that people can identify with like this value of unity cross-culturally. And as a Christian, unity is something that you are taught to have. Be peaceful, be loving, be kind, be unified with your Christian brothers. And then in turn you’ll be able to show that unity to someone else, even if they’re not showing it to you. And so I think people can see that cross-culturally. And that’s definitely something that like me and my exec staff talked about this year, like if we can’t be unified over anything else . . . like for me at least, that what’s I told them, if I can’t be unified with you over anything else, like if I can’t be unified with you over how we’re gonna stop people from shooting us and everything, I’m gonna be unified over you because I value your life, because as a Christian I’m called to value people’s lives. And so I think like my spirituality definitely influenced me to say hey, like we’re all humans, and there is really none of us are better than the next person. And so there’s no reason why I shouldn’t be confident, and with my confidence I should be able to speak up. And people are gonna be watching me, and so I need to show this brotherly love and I need to show this patience, something that leaders possess anyway.
Participant #3 (Interview 1, p. 3-7)

Tia: Okay. So you mentioned like with some of your other friends, they may not be at the same spiritual level, so you feel really that connection and being on one accord with your friend. Would you consider yourself . . . well it sounds like just in what you mentioned, that you would consider yourself a spiritual person then. So what, how, . . . I guess I’m trying to figure out how to ask this question, to go a little bit deeper in maybe what has impacted your perception of your own spirituality. So based on your actions and realizing that you have recognized that maybe other people may not be on the same spiritual level. What has impacted like how you see yourself as spiritual, if that makes sense.

Participant: I would say my mother. Like I wasn’t always that way – like I said before, when I used to live in New Orleans, I used to hate church, hate anything, hate praying, hate doing all those kind of things. But like you know, when Katrina happened, that was like a big life-morphing event, and like I said, even into coming here to Texas and staying here in Texas. And that’s when you know, me and my mom and my sister, we found a church, and this church, really that’s what changed, or that’s when I started . . . I went from hating to go to church to loving to go to church. Really being in the word, I think that was like the most thing, like we would have family Bible studies, you know, going further than just praying, to actually like sit down and study the word, like with your close family members. I don’t know, it just did something. Like I don’t even know how to describe it, it’s just like spiritual, it’s almost . . . it’s so . . . it’s almost like it’s almost hard to define, it’s just you know what I mean?

Tia: Mmhm.

Participant: And so just through that, so like when you reading the Bible, studying the bible, and seeing how Jesus or other people handled situations, it kinda affects how you, you know, even . . . like so for example, my mother going through her sickness, she’s reminded of Job when he went through his many trials, but he stuck through it, he never wavered from his faith. Just little things like that, you can always apply it back to what you’ve learned and been taught. And my mother herself was such a spiritual person, so I feel like that’s really honestly where I get it from. I think one of her friends said it best, that I got a spiritual inheritance. So not just studying the word, but just also studying her, watching how she dealt with people, the way people would respond to her was amazing. And I think it was part of her spirit, she just had like a God-fearing, God-loving spirit, and people can see that. Even when she was in the hospital, she would have like I think a doctor she didn’t even know randomly came in and was like “I can feel the
power or spirit in this room, I can feel God here, I can feel God’s presence.” Like it’s almost hard to describe like, you know what I mean? It’s hard to put in words. So yeah, so definitely my mother has, and also my grandmother, she’s the same way, on my dad’s side. She’s always sending me scripture, things like that. And it’s not just doing the scripture reading and the going to church and the praying – it’s living it too. I feel like that’s the difference – it’s really of taking those things you learn and applying it to your life to where it kinda changes who you are as a person, like it changes your spirit. So the way you deal with things, you know, while one person might get jealous of this, you know in your heart, oh I’ve learned, you know, God has different blessings for me, I’m gonna be happy for that person. Just every little facet of life you view differently.

**Tia:** Awesome. So I mean that’s great, like when you say it’s hard to explain, it definitely is a difficult topic, but I think you’ve done an awesome job. So when you think about like some of the . . . when you think about like your spiritual growth, is what it sounds like you’re saying, what have been some of the things that you’ve encountered that have impacted your spiritual growth?

**Participant:** Negatively or positively?

**Tia:** Either way. So I’ll the question like this – how have you encountered any spiritual struggle? And if so, how have you traversed those struggles? And struggle can be however you interpret that. So it could be what has been your journey to grow and develop, and so how has it impacted you through that journey, if that makes sense.

**Participant:** Okay. Big impact, like I said, well it seems the further I’m away from either God or, you know, my religion or anything else like that, I immediately see the impact. Like for example, freshman year, 12:15__________, you know, because it was always kinda hard being away here at college, away from your home and your normal habits. So like I said, I mentioned like back at home, we would always have like family Bible studies with my mother and everything. Freshman year of college, I did a good job on my own, you know, keeping that up, like still reading my Bible every night, praying, meditating, doing all those things. But like this year is a perfect example, because I’ve been so busy, I let myself get distracted, and I stopped almost praying altogether because I would just like fall asleep, stop reading my word. And until Easter Sunday, I actually hadn’t been to church in like a few months. And I could see the impact, you know what I mean, just different things, like for example, I might cuss more (laughs). Even how I interact with people, I’m not as friendly as I might be, as I used to be. I even like had an encounter with a friend, and I kinda like snapped at them, and then I realized, and I was like you know what, I apologize, I’m sorry, I wasn’t always like this, but I’ve let, you know, like negative
energy kinda come into my life and affect my spirit, basically. So I feel like when you’re not constantly feeding your spirit with positive things, positive people, positive energy, like things like that, you allow negative energy to kinda come in and, you know, affect your spirit. And it will show outwardly – it will show 13:55__________ every aspect, you know, the things you do, what you say, how you interact with others. So I’ve definitely seen that, so I’m like really trying . . . I even like I’m actually fasting this week, just because I was like I really have to get back on track, you know, I was like I feel so kinda lost right now, and I know that’s . . . I didn’t used to feel like this, you know. I don’t even like really feel happy anymore – I remember when I used to be like happy all the time just from the joy of being in the Lord, like and being connected. Like it’s hard to explain, but it does give you, it does something, like I said, and I see the clear difference when I am not constantly feeding myself with those positive things to feed my spirit. And friends also can have an impact, like I mentioned, like last year actually my two closest friends here were both not Christian – one is Muslim, and one, she’s an Indian faith called Rebecca. So things like praying for each other or going to church are not important to them, so they were always pulling me away, “oh, let’s go do this.” Where I’m like “oh no, maybe I do not need to party until 5:00 in the morning on Saturday, because I need to be able to get up for church.” You know, so I definitely felt a pull away from that. And even like certain things with talking to them and asking for advice, or how they would handle things, is not how I would handle things. And this year, rooming with my best friend, my roommate, like things are so different, you know what I mean? She encourages me to remember to pray or remember to go to church or to . . . just the overall, someone’s just overall demeanor and how they act can have an impact on your spirit and the way you act. You know, so even like little things with just who you surround yourself with is a huge impact. So I was even thankful for that, actually to be rooming with her, especially it’s like because I’ve been dealing with going through the loss of my mother, which is very hard. And so having those people around you to feed you with positive energy and vibes is crucial, you know, because like I said . . . even like I said, here lately I’ve . . . sometimes I let like negative energy kinda overcome me. And I can be like bitter and irritable, and then . . . like I said, that’s what I had told you about the encounter I had with a friend, and I’m like this is not who I am, I’m not a bitter irritable person who snaps and gets mad over silly things. I was like that’s a spiritual flaw, you know what I mean, I’ve let negative energy come and impact me, when normally I wouldn’t have done that. So spiritually is definitely something that needs to always be monitored, because many things can impact it, both negatively and positively.

Tia: And you touched on this just a little bit, but when you find yourself, you know, encountering a particular spiritual struggle, that you would perceive as a spiritual struggle,
how have you traversed that struggle? So how have you . . . what was it that helped you to get through that or whatnot, if that makes sense?

**Participant:** Let’s see . . .

**Tia:** Deleted

**Participant:** I guess just a lot of times, I’ll get a tugging on my heart. Like I said, it’s just so hard to explain spiritual things because it’s like I said, it’s just kinda innate like who you are. So whenever I feel myself kinda drifting too far, like my conscience will just kinda pull on me and be like, you know, Ashley, you know you need to stop doing this, or you need to pray more to like, you know, you’ve been complaining about this and this and frustrated. And I know in the back of my head that okay, it’s probably because I’m not connected with God, I haven’t been praying, I’ve been separated. So mostly usually that’s what it is, you know, I’ll be feeling frustrated or sad or angry, and I’ll kinda just feel that tugging, back of my mind, back in my heart.

**Tia:** That tugging or that conscience that you’re speaking of, what is that, like what is that tugging for you?

**Tia:** I don’t know if there’s a source, when you say “my conscience will tell me or I feel that tugging” where is that coming from?

**Participant:** I consider it to be God, I feel like that’s God’s way of talking to me, you know. And even like my mom would always say, and consequently, if I will feel like that, they’re like you know what, let me open my Bible or let me . . . my grandmother gives me these Upper Words, they’re like daily devotional things. And I’ll open it up, and the story or the day whatever would be like directly linked to what I’ve been struggling with. And it’s like I get an immediate answer, you know what I mean? So it’s like an unexplainable like a tugging, yes, from . . . I feel like it’s God speaking to me, and he, through that, he will pull me in and remind me it’ll lead me to do something, like I said, whether it’s to call somebody or to read this, look this up, and then I’ll sure enough, I might get the answer what I’ve been struggling with or what I’ve been, you know, and that reminds me, okay, and it like brings me back, okay, this is what I need to be doing. And I probably would’ve gotten this answer a long time ago if I would’ve just been in tune with God, you know. So 20:25__________ no matter how far I may drift apart, he always will kinda tug me back, no matter how far I may go, and kinda like re-equalibrize, you know, myself.
Participant 1 (Interview 1, p. 1-4)

Interviewer: Umm, soo, would you consider yourself as a spiritual person? And if so, how do you live that out? How does your life reflect your spirituality, if at all?

Participant: So umm I definitely consider myself being a spiritual person. I try to be positive, umm in everything that I do in my life. If there is some things that are weighing me down, like I’m stress or something like that, I kind like pull away. Like I have a time to myself where I like, meditate. So I just kind of like step away from the situation and be like in my own space and my own bubble. I’m to myself where I can uplift myself. I can bring myself back to that positive light…back to the things that make me happy…keeping me like grounded, in a sense.

So, just always staying positive…for me like I said, it’s meditating…taking a deeper look into the things that are going on in my life. Am I doing everything that’s making me happy? Am I doing everything that keeping me uplifted and positive…everything that’s just keeping me where I want to be as an individual? Making sure that I’m at my optimal self.

Interviewer: So some of the activities that you would do to maintain your level of spirituality and connection with being your fullest person would be like meditation…

Participant: Um hmm.

Interviewer: Anything else?

Participant: Yes, meditation and just like I said earlier, pulling myself away from others to have that me time, that personal time. Because I feel like when I do that, it gives me a lot of time to reflect on maybe the things that drove me to this point where I’m not in a happy state. So just pulling myself back from that and taking the time for myself to recuperate. And then also another thing for me, too, is music. It really calms me. I like a lot of like old school type of music, like old school R&B. And also I do listen to gospel music too. So just things that have that happy place or happy tune or something like nice and mellow…it really like clears my head. So those are some things that I do. I definitely have to be in a room by myself too, that like my thing. Usually by myself in my room, with the lights off, listening to music. Usually that’s where I’m at.

Interviewer: Ok. What has impacted your perception of spirituality?

Participant: I had this Spirituality of Health class this last semester. And it really showed me the difference between spirituality and religion. So, a lot people feel as though you have to be a part of a certain religion to have a certain type of spirituality. And once I got in that class and my professor broke it down to me, I realize, like yeah okay, I am a Christian but I view spirituality as something different and something
separate from my religion of being a Christian. So that kind of really opened my eyes as to the difference between the two and how I can see how other people can be spiritual and not identify with a certain religion. So just being in that class and breaking it down from the theories that we went through and the different models that he gave us, it really showed me the definition of the two. Because growing up, I thought it was all one in the same. I thought you couldn’t have one without the other. But like seeing that and applying the things that I learned in that class with how I am as a college student, I can see, like okay this is the difference. Like I can have this and not be a certain type of religion.

**Interviewer:** So you did identify yourself as a Christian. In what ways would you say, or how would you define faith?

**Participant:** Faith is something that you strongly believe in. I feel like faith is definitely something that you believe in. Regardless of what is going on in your world or in your life, or whatever situation that you’re going through, it’s like having faith, that component that keeps you motivated throughout whatever the situation maybe. So I feel like, faith is like believing in a higher source or a higher purpose, a higher meaning in life. It’s just that word is a strong component piece. Faith is like the most important thing, like the number one thing.

**Interviewer:** So which would you say has impacted you more; your spirituality or your faith?

**Participant:** Overall I do feel as though my faith has impacted me more. And I just feel as though the spirituality that I have grown to know in my college years has just played another role with impacting my faith more. So faith is the most important thing. My faith is what I have grown up on from childhood until now. Faith is what like my mom and grandparents and stuff like that has taught me to believe in. Like that should be one of my morals, one of my values. And I just feel like, yeah, that is the most important thing, but they both like help each other. Spirituality came in, to me like knowing my spirituality has helped me increase my faith.

**Interviewer:** So you’re saying that they are connected in some ways.

**Participant:** Umm Hmm

**Interviewer:** There’s a difference, but in a way there are some connections. Because one has helped the other is what I heard from you.

**Participant:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Have you encountered any spiritual struggle? If so, how have you traversed those struggles?
Participant: I guess this would be for any college student, kind of when you have a sense of just, it’s so much, it’s so much pressure and just like being overwhelmed and it seems like your meditation is not helping, the music’s not helping, the stuff that you usually do to bring you back to that calm state, your umm highest spiritual state. Just sometimes those things happen in your college career and sometimes those things are just so so so much where it seems like nothing that you usually do brings you back down from that stress level is happening. And I feel like that is probably going to happen a couple more times. I feel that is going to happen a couple more times until I graduate, but I feel like that is kind of like normal for like any college student.

And I know sometimes for me it’s when I have like numerous exams in one week or like on top of assignments, homework, organizations, and all the other stuff like that when I just feel like, oh my God, this is like, I have five days to do like five hundred things. So I feel like, like I said, I feel like that can happen with any college student. That has happen to me a couple of times where it’s just like, ok this is not working. I can’t meditate and I feel like that’s not working right now. My music, I don’t even have time to listen to music because I have to do this stuff. So you know, just like normal college things. You know?

Interviewer: Yes. Normal things I think both in college and in life that people find that become difficult. I guess for me my question is, how have you traversed that? So when you get to those moments when that meditation, or listening to music, or whatever is not as effective, how do you get through those moments?

Participant: I think at that point in time, of course like I always pray and stuff like that, but I think that’s when I lean more from spirituality into my religion with being a Christian. So that’s when I go more towards, okay my meditation is not working, my music is not working, so let me get down on my knees and pray. So let me have a moment where I’m in my room, I’m by myself, and I’m talking out loud to God. Or even for too, my dad, he is a deacon. So sometimes I’ll call him. Daddy, this is what’s going on, can we pray right quick. You know so I think it’s when I transform from my activities that I do with my spirituality towards the activities that I do with, that are based on my religion of being a Christian. So, I always pray. I’m not saying I just pray at one time. But I think I lean more from those into this one because now it’s like okay, my usual things right now aren’t working so let me step up my process to release my stress. So I lean more towards those activities to help alleviate those struggles that I am not overcoming at the time. Does that make sense?