

GAY, LESBIAN, AND BISEXUAL SPIRITUALITY:  
AN INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

With college students becoming more interested in the spiritual dimensions of their lives (Astin, 2004; Lindholm, 2007), gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students may have a harder time finding the support to navigate their spiritual selves. Because of this, the intersection of spiritual identity and GLB identity was investigated. Specifically, this study sought to see if students' GLB identities affect their spiritual identities, if their spiritual identities affect their GLB identities, and if there was a connection and intersection between the two. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight students.

This study showed that there could be a relationship between the formation of GLB and spiritual identity. Themes from the interviews were (a) intrapersonal identity, (b) judgments, (c) life changing crises, and (d) moving from independence to interdependence. Additionally, the interviews were connected to Parks' (2000) model of young adult faith formation and Fassinger's (1998) model of sexual minority identity formation. This research's findings offer implications for student affairs and higher educational practice with GLB and spiritual students, as well as potential for further research on spiritual GLB students.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Introduction**

According to recent research, college students have now, more than ever, been searching for answers to the big questions of spirituality (Astin, 2004; Lindholm, 2007; Love, 2001; Love & Talbot, 1999; Miller, 2010; Parks, 1986, 2000). Within the past two decades, numerous authors (e.g. Fowler, 1984; Parks, 1986, 2000) have explored spiritual development theory and many more have conducted research to see how students explore the major questions of “Who am I?” “What do I believe in?” and “What is my purpose in life?” (Hindman, 2002; Lindholm, 2007; Parks, 2000). As much as this research has been useful for student affairs practitioners to assist students in their spiritual search, it is insufficient and inapplicable for all student populations. One such population that may need more attention with their spiritual lives is the gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) community.

Historically, GLB-identified individuals have been persecuted by mainstream religions, including numerous sects of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (DuMontier, 2000; Levine & Love, 2000). This often causes a schism within their identities, forcing them to choose one or the other.

For LGB students, the choice appears to be between denying who they are and what they are feeling in order to remain good and upright, or exploring their sexuality and risk being labeled “intrinsically disordered” or sinful, thereby risking the loss of one’s

relationship with God and disconnection from the community. (Levine & Love, 2000, p. 93)

Therefore, students feel compelled to pick between two aspects of who they are.

GLB students may feel that they want to express both identities and have to choose between the parts of their entire identity. Thus, they can be encouraged to explore and find themselves within both the spiritual and sexual orientation arenas. This may allow for more complete and personal development because both aspects of their personalities are important and integral parts of the students as whole individuals.

A brief overview of the major issues in spirituality and GLB issues, including definitions of key terms, follows. A more complete review of the literature is explored in Chapter Two.

### **Spirituality**

To support this study, a clear definition of what spirituality and religion mean must be established. From this, a relationship can be drawn between the two concepts. An explanation of why spirituality is becoming a major issue for students and how student affairs professionals are able to assist them in defining themselves, making meaning, finding purpose in their lives, and answering life's big questions (Parks, 2000) is also required.

**Definitions of spirituality and religion.** Spirituality has been one of the most difficult terms to define for scholars. This is because it means so many different things to different populations of people. In other languages, the words for "spirit" have numerous meanings, including breath, wind, life, soul, and dynamic force (Hindman, 2002).

For some people, spirituality is about "intrapyschic concerns about matters of faith, purpose, and meaning in life" (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 2), while others see it as "cultivating [the] inner self, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and striving to determine what

[people] think and feel about the many issues confronting them and their communities” (Lindholm, 2007, p. 10). Spirituality can encompass “the interior of human existence, the affective (as opposed to the logical) human experience, and aspects of the human experience that are hard to define or difficult to talk about” (Gehrke, 2008, p. 351) as well as create and celebrate “depth, meaning, mystery, moral purpose, transcendence, wholeness, intuition, vulnerability, tenderness, courage, the capacity to love, and the apprehension of spirit (or Spirit) as the animating essence at the core of life” (Parks, 2000, p. 16). In sum, “spirituality can be that which enables us to become real” (Hindman, 2002, p. 169).

Love and Talbot (1999) attempted to create a uniform definition of what spirituality means. They created a five-part definition, which explained spirituality and spiritual development as “an interrelated process of seeking self-knowledge and centeredness, transcending one’s current locus of centrality, being open to and embracing community, recognizing an essence or pervasive power beyond human existence, and having that sense of spirit pervade one’s life” (Love & Talbot, 1999, p. 367).

This definition was echoed by Estanek (2006) when she noted an understanding of spirituality based on five core components and themes: spiritual development, spirituality as a critique, spirituality as an empty container for individual meaning making, spiritual common ground, and quasi-religion. Estanek’s definition allows for a greater diversity of spiritual and religious backgrounds and gives a “practical approach to appreciating, supporting, engaging, and challenging the diversity of spiritual expression” (p. 6).

For the purpose of this study, spirituality was defined most closely with Estanek’s (2006) explanation. This means that spirituality was considered as a developmental process for making sense of one’s world, building relationships with others and/or a higher power, and filling an

“empty container,” meaning individuals’ spirituality was constructed personally and was considered “without specific meaning until they are filled” (Estanek, 2006, p. 4), or created, by the individual.

In contrast to these ideas, religion is more strictly and rigidly defined. For one, religion is a communal and institutional experience (Fisler et al., 2009). It is a community-based, social expression of faith that allows people to make meaning and deal with uncertainty with the support of a group. “Religion provides a sense of community, of belonging, and of intimacy with others” (Stamm, 2006, p. 41). Thus, religion involves multiple people, whereas spirituality is more individualized.

Secondly, religion is a more formal process. Religions have “self-contained set[s] of beliefs” (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993, p. 5). They tend to need external validation and support to keep people invested and involved in these communities (Stamm, 2006). Religion “involves the means and methods, such as ritual or other prescribed behaviors” (Stamm, 2006, p. 48) to help provide meaning to the lives of those invested in it. Thus, it explains life’s rules and gives guidance on how followers of that religion are supposed to live their lives.

Religion, then, is an external means of faith support. It relies heavily on cultural artifacts, such as socially constructed traditions, physically tangible rituals, and symbolic representations of its ideals (Stamm, 2006; Tisdell, 2003). Moreover, these cultural ideas unite people within that faith tradition. However, religion does not guarantee spirituality and spiritual development.

Spirituality and religion have a unique relationship. It is possible to have one without the other or express both. “Religion may be an expression of spirituality, but it is possible for a person to be spiritual without adhering to a particular religion and to practice a religion without

an accompanying sense of spirituality” (Fisler et al., 2009, p. 259). However, most organized religions attempt to develop both the religious and the spiritual (Tisdell, 2003).

**Students’ spiritual struggles and desires.** According to recent research, students want their university experience to develop the spiritual aspects of their lives (Lindholm, 2007).

“Today’s incoming students place significant personal emphasis on matters related to the interior dimensions of their lives. . . . They generally have high expectations for the role that the college or university should play in their emotional and spiritual development” (Lindholm, 2007, p. 10).

This means that students are coming to the college or university wanting to be developed in more ways than just intellectually and occupationally; they are looking to grow in their spirituality and become more faithful. “They want to attend to beliefs and values; to become more ethical; to make a difference in society; and to gain a better sense of who they are, and what they are to do and to be” (Hindman, 2002, p. 172).

However, according to Hindman (2002), students’ lives have become fragmented and compartmentalized. A student may have to balance his or her academic life, social life, a job (or jobs), and family. These have led to the “splintered” lives (Hindman, 2002) that are lacking meaning and purpose. Thus, they are struggling to integrate the various parts of their complex and multifaceted lives. These issues are immensely personal as well as incredibly complex.

Spiritual struggles, by and large, are not intellectual puzzles that can be neatly solved. There are a variety of challenges that can be seen as spiritual, some of which lend themselves to definitive resolution and others that persist and influence multiple aspects of a person’s life. (Fisler et al., 2009, p. 268)

It is understandable that students are having trouble becoming spiritual and making meaning in their lives.

Student spiritual struggles are compounded by the secular environment of public higher education. The academic community of American colleges and universities has viewed spirituality and religious issues as highly-charged, intrusively intimate and personal, and taboo topics (Lindholm, 2007). Even though the first colleges and universities were founded as religious institutions (Dalton, 2006; Thelin, 2003), this disconnection of spirituality and academic life has become the status quo over the past two centuries at public institutions of higher education in the United States (Thelin, 2003), keeping a complete separation of church and state to mirror the secular government that sponsors and funds them (Jablonski, 2001). This division occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, when ideals of scientific research and creating intellectuals became more valuable than the development of the spirit and the heart in addition to the mind (Thelin, 2003). Thus, the scientific and research-driven colleges and universities were able to “provide the practical knowledge to succeed in life” (Jablonski, 2001, p. 1) and did not have to develop programs for the spiritual aspect of their students’ lives. Furthermore, in the mid-twentieth century, universities shifted toward “a more secular, legalistic, and entrepreneurial orientation. . . . Concern for the ‘whole student’ remained an educational ideal, but, in practice, students were given almost unlimited freedom in personal and social matters” (Dalton, 2006, p. 167).

So, for nearly two centuries, American public higher education attempted to keep spiritual and religious issues separate from academic achievements (Jablonski, 2001). However, within the last two decades, spirituality has become more of a focus within student affairs practice.

There has been resurgence in spiritual exploration and religion. . . . Many students are coming to college as believers in some faith; participating in practices such as community

service, meditation, or yoga; and seeking answers to questions about purpose, mission, and values. (Jablonski, 2001, pp. 2-3)

This is an essential shift to support the students who desire to become more spiritual (Astin, 2004; Dalton, 2006; Fislser et al., 2009; Lindholm, 2007; Tisdell, 2003) and answer the big questions in their lives (Hindman, 2002; Parks, 2000).

### **Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students**

As stated above, most students struggle with the spiritual dimension of their lives. Many find refuge in organized religion. However, students who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual do not always have the opportunity to do so. There is little research on GLB students and how they view the spiritual dimensions of their lives. Within this section, religious views of the GLB community will be discussed as well as GLB students' need for support in campus life.

**Religious view of the GLB community.** Many mainstream religions are unsupportive of, and sometimes hostile toward, GLB persons (de la Huerta, 1999). These feelings are especially prevalent in Evangelical and Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, and Islam. Many point to the Bible as saying that God condemns homosexuality, which is why these religions are so intolerant of the GLB community.

“There are very clear and consistent beliefs about homosexuality at many Bible colleges and fundamentalist schools—it is a choice, it is wrong, it is immoral, and the Bible specifies homosexuality is a sin” (Levine & Love, 2000, p. 93). Many Biblical references are cited to forbid homosexual behaviors; three most often used include Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, and Romans 1:27. Each of these verses explains how God looks down upon the gay community: “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it [is] abomination” (King James Version, Leviticus 18:22); “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have



committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood [shall be] upon them” (King James Version, Leviticus 20:13); “Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet” (King James Version, Romans 1:27). There are numerous other passages that reinforce this anti-gay sentiment and fuel discriminatory attitudes toward the GLB community.

However, the meanings of these passages have changed over time. “Historical-critical study of the Bible often reverses some long-standing interpretations and raises very serious questions about religion and society” (Helminiak, 1994, p. 26). Thus, the Bible may not be saying what is exactly written, as the translation and interpretation has changed and evolved over time (Helminiak, 1994). Because many churches and congregations read the Bible at a literal level, they do not want to accept that their views may not be in line with a more interpretive scripture (Helminiak, 1994).

Through the literal reading of the Bible, many religiously affiliated groups proclaim active hate and discrimination on GLB people because God does not look kindly on them; the most infamous being the Westboro Baptist Church and its proclamation that “God hates fags” (Westboro Baptist Church, 2010). However, by looking at the Bible through Helminiak’s (1994) historical-critical lens, one can see that this stance cannot necessarily be true because the Bible does not directly say that God is opposed to homosexuality.

Understood on its own terms, the Bible was not addressing our current questions about sexual ethics. . . . The Bible takes no direct stand on the morality of homogenital acts as such nor on the morality of gay and lesbian relationships. (Helminiak, 1994, pp. 107-108)

Therefore, there is no proof that “God hates fags” (Westboro Baptist Church, 2010)—which implies that it is the people who have a hatred of homosexuality and are homophobic.

**Support for GLB students on campus.** GLB students face a number of issues on campus that are unique to them. Often, sexual orientation identity is an ignored or overlooked issue on campuses. According to research, GLB students may be “unaware that there may be supportive and understanding people in the counseling center, in residence life, in campus ministry, or on the faculty” (Levine & Love, 2000, p. 94). In addition, GLB groups may be available for students to talk about issues that they are facing on campus.

It is important for student affairs professionals to be able to reach out to GLB students to help them work through both the issues of being a sexual orientation minority in a heterosexist world (de la Huerta, 1999) as well as the spiritual issues that are affecting students while they are in college (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Levine & Love, 2000).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to learn about how GLB students develop spiritually and express their spiritual lives.

First, connections were made between spiritual development theory and GLB identity development theory. Student affairs professionals may use this knowledge to learn how best to support this population of students in times of spiritual and/or identity crisis. Moreover, they may learn how GLB students view their place in the world, and how they form both their GLB and spiritual identities. This can be in conflict between who one is (a GLB person) and who others want one to be (i.e., what the Church demands of members; de la Huerta, 1999; DuMontier, 2000).

Second, the student participants were afforded the opportunity to critically examine their own development both in spiritual dimensions as well as sexual orientation dimensions. This may have allowed the participant to have a better understanding of him- or herself. Because these are identities that are often in conflict, the participant may not have had another outlet to explore this intersection of identity.

### **Research Questions**

The study focused on students who identify as GLB and how they view their spiritual lives. Research addressed the following questions:

1. How do GLB students describe their spiritual development?
2. How do GLB students perceive the role of spirituality in their decisions to publicly express a GLB identity?
3. How do GLB students perceive the role of their sexual orientation on their spiritual development and expression?

The study took a qualitative approach to answering the research questions, using interviews and the constant comparative method of data analysis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Review of Literature**

There is a limited amount of research on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities intersecting with spiritual identities. To explore this intersection, I have examined spirituality and GLB identity formation separately; then, I reviewed literature which explains intersecting identities. Finally, I examined the literature that is available on GLB persons and spirituality and have extrapolated intersectional identity theory to the current problem.

### **Spirituality in College**

What is spirituality? Why do students struggle and wrestle with their faith and spirituality? How is it possible to assist students to develop spiritually without forcing religion on them? How does spirituality and spiritual development affect a student and his or her development? Why should student affairs professionals care about student spirituality?

Student affairs scholars have pondered these questions especially over the last 20 years. The spiritual issues that are present from students attempting to find answers to these are overlooked or looked past because they are immensely personal (Lindholm, 2007). They have been seen by many in higher education, especially at public institutions, as highly-charged or taboo topics.

The disconnection of spirituality and academic life has been the status quo for the past two centuries at public institutions of higher education in the United States (Thelin, 2003). This division occurred when ideals of scientific research and creating intellectuals became more

valuable than the development of the spirit and of the heart in addition to the mind (Thelin, 2003). However, recent research has shown a major shift away from the complete secularism that has driven the intellectualism of the university. A study at the University of California, Los Angeles showed that today's students are "searching for deeper meaning in their lives, looking for ways to cultivate their inner self, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and striving to determine what they think and feel about the many issues confronting them" (Lindholm, 2007, p. 10). In essence, students desire to explore multiple facets of their personal spirituality and spiritual philosophies.

Unfortunately, even as students develop a yearning for a new understanding of their spirituality and desire to explore it, public colleges and universities have been resistant to support spiritual endeavors. This is not entirely unexpected in the field of higher education; the academy does not want go against the norm of separation of church and state, and it wants to keep itself "empirical, positivistic, objective, [and] 'value-free'" (Love & Talbot, 1999, p. 362). Therefore, university programs do not do much, if anything, to assist the students with spiritual issues or the development of personal values and beliefs (Lindholm, 2007).

In contrast to academic affairs, the field of student affairs has a commitment and responsibility to developing the whole student (Jablonski, 2001; Love & Talbot, 1999). This includes the spiritual dimensions of students' lives. Student affairs personnel should know how and be able to support students through their spiritual conflicts. By working with students in spiritual conflicts and crises, student affairs professionals can develop students on a deeper level, which will lead to a more responsible and understanding student body.

**Spiritual development as student development.** The profession of student affairs has a commitment to the holistic development of students (Jablonski, 2001; Love & Talbot, 1999;

Seifert & Holman-Harmon, 2009), which includes the spiritual dimension (i.e., personal values and beliefs systems). This development is essential for the fullest understanding of the student as a human being who is working through life's challenges (Love & Talbot, 1999).

Spirituality and spiritual development are often misunderstood words, as there is no widely accepted definition for either. Love and Talbot (1999) cited numerous potential definitions for spirituality, including: "communication with God, a movement toward union with God, a focus on ultimate concerns and meanings of life, and belief in a force greater than oneself" (p. 363). Others see spirituality as "a search for meaning, transcendence, wholeness, purpose" (Love, 2001, p. 8), "an encounter with otherness" (Palmer, 1998, as cited in Dalton, 2001, p. 17), "that which makes one breathe, or to that in life worth breathing for" (Strange, 2001, p. 58) and the "search for [one's] own answers to the 'big questions'" (Seifert & Holman-Harmon, 2009, p. 14), such as the questions "Who am I?" and "What is my purpose in life?"

Because of the vastness of the definition of spirituality, scholars have cultivated many different theories on how people develop spiritually, especially during the college years; two are explored here.

***Fowler's theory of faith formation.*** Fowler's (1981) use of the word "faith" is not to be confused with religion. In fact, for Fowler, faith can be considered synonymous to spirituality. This is because he defines faith as "our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations in our lives. Faith is a person's way of him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose" (Fowler, 1981, p. 4).

Fowler's (1981) theory of faith formation is heavily influenced by psychological and psychosocial development theories put forth by Piaget, Erikson, and Levinson. He proposed seven stages regarding faith and faith formation that occur throughout a lifetime:

Undifferentiated faith, Intuitive-Projective faith, Mythic-Literal faith, Synthetic-Conventional faith, Individuative-Reflective faith, Conjunctive faith, and Universalizing faith. Each of these stages has an optimal corresponding timeline. However, the timeline is often just suggested, as people can become comfortably stagnant in some stages. “Many young adults, for a variety of reasons, do *not* enter a faith stage transition [between Synthetic-Conventional and Individuative-Reflective]. . . . For some adults Synthetic-Conventional faith becomes a stable equilibrated, lifelong structural style” (Fowler, 1981, pp. 112, 114).

When traditional-age students come to college, they are most likely in the Synthetic-Conventional stage of faith development, the third stage of the model. This stage is characterized by a desire to conform and fit in, mirror others’ actions in faith, and utilize a tacit system of knowing (Fowler, 1981). This tacit system is “the part of my knowing that plays a role in guiding and shaping my choices, but of which I can give no account” (Fowler, 1981, p. 161). Thus, students believe in their faith because they feel that they have to, but they do not know why they believe it. Moreover, people conform to the expectation and judgments of others, in particular authority figures (e.g., parents or leaders within a faith tradition). Conformity forces the students to keep their true beliefs, feelings, values, and questions about faith to themselves (Fowler, 1981). This can become a comfortable place for some students as it allows students to accept the faith they were given without questioning it.

While some people remain in the Synthetic-Conventional stage of faith development, Fowler (1981) urged further development. He argued that young adulthood should be a time to focus on the fourth stage: Individuative-Reflective faith. “It is significant when persons at Stage 3 encounter and respond to situations or contexts that lead to critical reflection on their tacit value systems. Under such circumstances, they begin the transition to Stage 4’s *explicit* system”

(Fowler, 1981, p. 162). This stage is shown by a rejection of the group-constructed identity and the formation of a self-identity and a personalized worldview (Fowler, 1981). Self-identity formation requires critical and reflective thought on why one believes what he or she believes. In addition to this, the view on the validity of authority must be changed from an external force to an internal voice (Fowler, 1981). Thus, the student takes more control over his or her spiritual life and synthesizes his or her own beliefs without relying on others to give him or her “correct answers.”

***Parks’s theory of young adult faith development.*** Parks (2000) expanded on Fowler’s theory, specifically explaining the developmental issues and processes of the young adult. Her work focused on the transitional issues of adolescence to mature adult faith, which includes traditional-age college students (Love, 2001; Parks, 2000). Parks postulated that there is another stage in faith development: young adult, which is between Fowler’s Synthetic-Conventional and Individuative-Reflective stages. There are three components to her faith development model: forms of knowing, forms of dependence, and forms of community (Parks, 2000). These three pieces acknowledge the various parts of the complexity of faith development: forms of knowing refer to the knowledge base and other cognitive aspects of faith; forms of dependence are the emotional parts of faith; and forms of community are the social implications of faith (Parks, 2000).

During the young adult stage, Parks (2000) proposed that the student will be involved in probing commitment, a form of knowing. Students are aware that they must make choices, take action, and shape their own future (Parks, 2000). She explained that during this time the “individual makes and learns from tentative commitments” (Love, 2001, p. 12). The tentativeness for commitment is furthered by the form of dependence for this stage: fragile inner-



dependence. The student is learning that he or she is becoming autonomous and is learning to trust in his or her own beliefs and convictions (Parks, 2000). The third component, forms of community, requires growth from self-awareness from experience in a supportive group environment. The community “offers a network of belonging. . . . It offers both challenge and support and thus offers good company for both the emerging strength and the distinctive vulnerability of the young adult” (Parks, 2000, p. 95).

There are five periods of development within the forms of knowing. These forms explain how the student thinks about his or her faith. Parks postulated that students start in a position where they trust authorities, which mirrors Perry’s (1970) dualistic level of cognitive development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Love, 2001; Parks, 1986, 2000). From this stage, students will realize that their trusted authorities do not have all the answers. “As Authorities conflict or fail, awareness dawns that the human mind can compose many perceptions of reality and does not simply receive reality ‘as it is’” (Parks, 2000, p. 57). Parks called this unqualified relativism and it coincides with Perry’s relativism level of cognitive development. Afterward, students progress through a commitment to relativism, which has two sub-levels: probing, which includes tentative and short-term commitments; and tested, during which commitments become more secure and stable (Parks, 1986, 2000). Finally, students enter convictional commitment, which allows the student to reconcile others’ perspectives while still being able to understand and articulate their own beliefs (Parks, 1986, 2000).

The second part of the theory, forms of dependence, explains how students feel about their faith (Parks, 2000). Similar to the forms of knowing, there are four parallel periods within the forms of dependence: (a) dependence and counterdependence follows along with the authority-bound and unqualified relativism stages; (b) fragile inner dependence is a reflection of

probing commitment; (c) confident inner dependence works just like tested commitment; and (d) interdependence is parallel to convictional commitment (Parks, 1986, 2000). These positions within the forms of dependence allow for “observing and describing the affective dimensions of the development of faith” (Parks, 2000, p. 73).

Finally, forms of community assess the students’ external support systems in regards to their faith. This incorporates the “influence of the interpersonal, social, and cultural context on one’s development” of faith (Love, 2001, p. 9). These positions also run parallel to both the forms of knowing and the forms of dependence. Students move from defining themselves within a specific community through exploratory and tentative community groups to seeking like-minded people and creating their own community (Parks, 1986, 2000).

Through Parks’s (2000) theory, one can see how college students are perfect candidates for spiritual questioning and struggle. They also have the resources on campus to assist through these conflicts and crises, especially community in the forms of student groups or residence hall floors and in friends as well as student affairs professionals.

**Student spiritual struggle.** Students are coming to campus with more interest in the spiritual aspects of their lives (Fisler et al., 2009; Lindholm, 2007). The traditional ideas of academics and education do not foster spiritual development. “While many of the great literary and philosophical traditions that constitute the core of a liberal education are grounded in the maxim, ‘know thyself,’ the development of self awareness receives very little attention in our schools and colleges” (Astin, 2004, p. 4). Because of this juxtaposition, students often do not know where to turn for answers to their existential questions (Lindholm, 2007). Therefore, students often struggle in the spiritual realm of their lives.

These struggles have been linked to difficult circumstances, including “confusion about beliefs and values, loss of a relationship, sexual assault, homesickness, and suicidal thoughts and feelings” (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 2). Moreover, these struggles often include questioning one’s faith tradition or lack thereof, examining one’s beliefs and values, and scrutinizing one’s meaning and purpose in life (Fisler et al., 2009). These struggles are apparent especially during the college years because of the stimulation of identity formation during this time and the role spirituality plays in it (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009; Fowler, 1981).

In a 2008 study, Bryant and Astin hypothesized several ideas regarding student spiritual struggles. First, they proposed that people with identities that have been oppressed by the majority culture (“i.e., being female, a person of color, a religious minority, or a person from a low socioeconomic background” [Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 7]) would have a greater chance of struggling spiritually. They also expected that (a) religiously engaged students would be less likely to struggle, (b) student vulnerability and experience with diversity would increase the likelihood of struggles, (c) compassionate individuals and those with social justice orientations may struggle more because of the contrast of good works that they participate in and the injustices of the world, (d) certain conceptions of a higher power would correlate highly with struggling, and (e) struggles would relate to low levels of psychological wellness (Bryant & Astin, 2008).

Some of Bryant and Astin’s (2008) findings were consistent with their hypotheses. They found that students who identified as a religious minority were more likely to experience struggles; similar results were seen among the sexes, with women struggling slightly more with their spirituality than men (Bryant & Astin, 2008). They further found that religiously engaged students tended to have fewer spiritual struggles because of their faith-oriented support systems.

Openness to diverse ideas and lifestyles also positively correlated with spiritual struggles (Bryant & Astin, 2008). This openness was achieved through “being on a spiritual quest; discussing religion/spirituality with friends; and discussing politics” (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 14). Bryant and Astin were proven correct to hypothesize that students who perceive a higher power as being “mysterious” or “unknown” were more apt to struggle than those who saw the higher power as “beloved” or “part of me.” Their final hypothesis also proved true, as struggles were associated with psychological distress—even accounting for demographic characteristics, institutional variables, students going to counseling, and hours spent on schoolwork, spiritual struggles were positively correlated with poor psychological health (Bryant & Astin, 2008).

However, Bryant and Astin’s (2008) other hypothesis conflicted with the findings. They found students’ compassion and vulnerability levels did not function as they had predicted. “We found minimal evidence for this hypothesis in that . . . having a compassionate self-concept and engaging in charitable efforts did not relate in expected ways to struggling spirituality” (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 22).

By identifying the correlates of spiritual struggles, Bryant and Astin’s (2008) study provides a foundation for understanding Fisler et al.’s (2009) examination of how students reconcile their spiritual struggles. Fisler et al. found three primary means through which students deal with their spiritual questions as well as four typical resolutions of student spiritual conflict.

The most predominant technique of working through spiritual struggle were academics and academic discussion. “Academic activities . . . provided students with opportunities to question, learn, and grow in their spirituality” (Fisler et al., 2009, p. 262). These developmental opportunities supported self-exploration and allowed the students to think critically about their

beliefs and learn from the opposing viewpoints that were presented in the classroom (Fisler et al., 2009).

A second way for students to navigate the spiritual dimension of their lives was through relying on external factors for challenge and support. External factors can include “people, organizations, the campus environment, and organized religion” (Fisler et al., 2009, p. 263) and are used to help the student make meaning out of his or her life. These factors were able to challenge the students to learn why they believe what they believe while also supporting them through their struggles and helping the students “feel spiritually grounded and/or connected with others with similar values” (Fisler et al., 2009, p. 264).

Thirdly, students found it useful to work through the spiritual turmoil by searching for answers from within themselves (Fisler et al., 2009). Through looking inwardly, the students were able to explore their emotional reactions to the spiritual crisis.

Most students also stated they felt intense emotions during their path to resolving spiritual conflict. Their emotions ranged from elation to desperation, guilt, fear, and anger. . . . Most students coped with spiritual dilemmas and their accompanying emotions by keeping their thoughts to themselves and taking the time to reflect. (Fisler et al., 2009, p. 264)

With time spent reflecting on the crisis, especially the emotional aspects, the students were able to come to a fuller understanding of what their individual spirituality meant to them (Fisler et al., 2009).

After the students experienced a spiritual identity crisis, they resolved it in one of four ways: recommitting to their faith, readjusting their faith, blending spiritual ideals, or losing the faith (Fisler et al., 2009). Recommitting meant that the student went back to his or her initial

faith tradition after the period of questioning; readjusting was explained as the student still believing most of his or her initial faith, but making some shift to incorporate other aspects of other spiritual traditions; blending required the student to mix the old faith with other faith traditions to synthesize a new, individual spiritual identity; and losing faith meant that the student did not believe in anything (Fisler et al., 2009).

These studies show that today's college students can be involved in numerous struggles with their spiritual identity development. The struggles can manifest themselves in crises and are often resolved by the students with assistance from other individuals on campus as well as through individual reflection.

**Spirituality summary.** Student affairs professions have a profound impact on the spiritual development of students. This can be achieved through integrating Fowler's (1981) and Parks's (2000) theories into their interaction with students. Applying these theories to students' spiritual issues allows practitioners to promote students' holistic development.

Why should student affairs worry about developing the spiritual dimension of their students' lives? "There are critical implications of struggling spiritually that are intimately tied to students' sense of well-being and adjustment to the adult world" (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 23). Working with students on their spiritual issues helps them to find what they truly believe and why they believe what they truly believe.

However, student affairs practitioners also need to realize that spiritual development is a life-long and immensely personal process. Not all students will be progressing at the same rate; this can be due to any number of factors, including other social identities interacting with that of spirituality. One such example of a potential conflict in spirituality is the formation and acceptance of a GLB identity.

## **Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students in College**

How does one learn about being a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person? How does one find support in this heterosexist society? How do individuals learn to accept and socially identify themselves as GLB persons? How do these individuals development into members of a GLB community? What processes for GLB development occur during the college years?

Similarly to spirituality questions, student affairs practitioners have been looking for ways to assist students who identify as sexual orientation minorities. These are often seen through theoretical lenses, which can be extended to campus life and activities (Evans et al., 2010).

**GLB identity development.** Numerous theories have been proposed as a means to understand the developmental phases GLB persons undergo as they realize, accept, and learn to celebrate their identities as gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual persons. Four theories are examined: Cass's (1979, 1984a, 1984b) model of homosexual identity development, D'Augelli's (1994a, 1994b) gay, lesbian, and bisexual development model, Troiden's (1979, 1989) model of gay identity acquisition, and Fassinger's (1998) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity formation.

***Cass's model of homosexual identity development.*** Cass (1979) proposed a six-stage theoretical model for gay and lesbian identity development. Her theory attempted to fully explain the phenomenon of the formation of a homosexual identity, including internal processes and social issues that affect the changes. The six stages in the model are identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (Cass, 1979).

Cass (1979) argued that individuals begin with no concept of homosexuality. This means that in order to move into the first stage, identity confusion, an individual must begin by being able to conceptualize his or her behavior as homosexual, which provides cognitive dissonance (Cass, 1979, 1984b). Through this, one may consider accepting a homosexual identity—that is, one is able to think that they may be gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Cass, 1979, 1984a, 1984b). Once a person is able to commit to his or her potential homosexual identity, he or she moves into the second stage, identity comparison, where he or she begins to look at homosexuality through a social acceptance lens (Cass, 1979, 1984b). People at this stage may begin to search out other people, particularly homosexual persons, because they do not want to feel different (Cass, 1984b).

Connection with the homosexual community is strengthened in stage three, identity tolerance. This is caused by a fear of alienation from the heterosexual world and a need for a social group (Cass, 1979). Therefore, the individual's connections to the homosexual community are viewed "as 'necessary' rather than desirable" (Cass, 1984b, p. 151). The constant contact with other homosexuals promotes a more positive view of homosexuality, which is stage four, identity acceptance. The individuals create identities they can accept for themselves because of the safety of the group. It is at this point when individuals begin to disclose their homosexual identity, or "come out."

Identity pride, stage five, is when the homosexual individual places a large amount of importance on his or her sexual orientation identity and society's inequality toward homosexuals. Pride allows individuals at this stage to establish themselves as homosexual publicly by fighting for homosexual rights and issues in a heterosexist world. However, pride eventually gives way to stage six, identity synthesis. "[The person] is now able to integrate [the person]'s homosexual



identity with all other aspects of self” (Cass, 1979, p. 235). Individuals are more comfortable with themselves as homosexuals, and thus disclosure of this identity is no longer an issue (Cass, 1979, 1984b).

***D’Augelli’s lesbian, gay, and bisexual development model.*** D’Augelli (1994a) proposed a six-status model for the development of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. His theory is grounded in human development, which postulates that humans develop over their entire lifespan, development has a certain amount of flexibility with other factors, and the development that occurs is a result of numerous biological, social, and environmental factors (D’Augelli, 1994b). Moreover, the statuses are not linear; there is no specific progression, as there would be in a stage model (D’Augelli, 1994a, 1994b; Savin-Williams, 1995). The six statuses are exiting heterosexual identity, developing a personal GLB identity status, developing a GLB social identity, becoming a GLB offspring, developing a GLB intimacy status, and entering a GLB community (D’Augelli, 1994a).

The first status, exiting heterosexuality, concerns individuals’ understanding and accepting the label of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This includes “coming out” to themselves as well as to society, beginning with the first person (D’Augelli, 1994a). From this, individuals begin to create their own personal sense of a GLB identity. People in the second status, developing a personal GLB identity, internalize their own thoughts and feelings toward homosexuality and their newly adopted social identity (D’Augelli, 1994a). This is achieved through learning to be a sexual orientation minority by increasing contact with and analyzing the behaviors of the GLB community (D’Augelli, 1994a).

Status three, developing a GLB social identity, solidifies the connection of the GLB community as the social group for the GLB individual (D’Augelli, 1994a). In this status,

acceptance is critical as this group often becomes a major support network (D'Augelli, 1994a). Continuing in the theme of support, status four, becoming a lesbian, gay, or bisexual offspring, is about redefining the relationship with one's parents (D'Augelli, 1994a). This status is about reintegrating into one's family unit and the family recognizing the individual as both their child and as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person (D'Augelli, 1994a).

Developing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual intimacy status, status five, involves the individual re-conceptualizing the society's ideas of relationships. The individual will examine the heteronormativity of society (D'Augelli, 1994a). He or she will attempt to make meaning and seek out cultural scripts and traditions (D'Augelli, 1994a). In the sixth status, entering a GLB community, individuals become integrated into the GLB population—they are engaged and involved in social and political issues within the GLB arena of their lives (D'Augelli, 1994a). They continue to fight heterosexism and fully accept who they are (D'Augelli, 1994a, 1994b; Savin-Williams, 1995).

***Troiden's model of gay identity acquisition.*** Troiden's (1979, 1989) theory takes a sociological approach to gay identity development. He explained that the individual must (a) learn about gay identity and that others use that identity, (b) begin to think about using the identity and examine what makes up the identity group, and (c) join the social group and allow the identity to become a part of who he or she is (Troiden, 1989). This model has four stages—sensitization, identity confusion (dissociation and significance), identity assumption (coming out), and commitment—which attempt to balance both the internal and social pressures put on the individual discovering a GLB self (Troiden, 1979, 1989).

Sensitization, which occurs in youth and adolescence, is the beginning of feeling like a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person (Troiden, 1979, 1989). Many people do not understand what

they are feeling—just that they are feeling different and perhaps isolated (Troiden, 1979).

Toward the end of this first stage, individuals will begin to recognize and define their homosexual feelings (Troiden, 1979, 1989).

From this, individuals move into stage two: identity confusion. During this stage, people are conscious of their GLB thoughts and feelings and how these are not the norm (Troiden, 1979, 1989). Individuals at this point will be working towards tolerating the idea that they are not heterosexual and what that means for their lives (Troiden, 1989).

Once tolerance of the identity is achieved, GLB people will move into identity assumption. This stage is where individuals come out to society, defining themselves as gay men, lesbian women, or bisexual men and women (Troiden, 1979, 1989). They have created a personalized identity as GLB persons, but they have not fully accepted it for themselves (Troiden, 1989). However, because of increased contact with GLB community members, tolerance is changed into acceptance (Troiden, 1979, 1989).

With acceptance, stage four—commitment—can be attained. Commitment to the sexual orientation identity requires both internal and external considerations (Troiden, 1979, 1989). Individuals are at peace with their identity and are capable of holding mature relationships with others in the GLB community (Troiden, 1979).

***Fassinger's model of sexual minority identity formation.*** In a different manner than other developmental theories surrounding gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, Fassinger (1998) took a two-pronged approach to identity formation. She argued that there are two concurrent processes affecting the person: a process affecting individual sexual identity formation and a process affecting the group membership identity (Fassinger, 1998). Both of these processes have similar stages, examining the internal process for adopting GLB status as well as the external

pressure of taking on such a status (Fassinger, 1998, Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Though reflective of one another, the fact that these processes have the same stages does not imply that both are concurrent; rather, both identity formation models can be exclusive or inclusive of the other.

Fassinger's (1998) model begins when a GLB person begins to notice that he or she is not the same as his or her heterosexual peers. This will present itself in phase one: awareness. On the individual level, this is explored with same-sex thoughts and feelings but not by labeling or accepting labels (Fassinger, 1998; Fassinger & Miller, 1996). This begins the questioning aspect of the coming out process (Fassinger & Miller, 1997). This is mirrored in the social group membership of that individual. The GLB person will begin to look into and explore the existence of different sexually-oriented people (Fassinger, 1998). Moreover, a sense of the heterosexism in society is seen and felt for the first time (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Stage two, exploration, is an active step toward answering the questions from the awareness stage (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). This may include acting on feelings for people of the same sex, but may or may not include sexual behaviors (Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Similarly, attitudes toward the GLB community shift and become more positive in nature (Fassinger, 1998; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). The potential GLB person will begin to consider accepting a part of the larger community with new found excitement (Fassinger & Miller, 1997).

Once into deepening and commitment, stage three, the individual is able to express knowledge about his or her GLB identity (Fassinger, 1998). He or she is more confident about sexual choices and sexuality (Fassinger & Miller, 1997). On the group level, the individual begins to identify with the GLB group. This is achieved through the increased exposure to and

immersion in the community; he or she becomes more of an advocate for GLB rights issues (Fassinger, 1998; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

Finally, in stage four, internalization and synthesis, the individual fully accepts his or her GLB identity and is able to disclose it to others (Fassinger & Miller, 1997). People in this stage are fully confident as gay men, lesbian women, or bisexual men or women (Fassinger, 1998); they are unwilling to change who they are, whom they are attracted to, and whom they love to fit in with the heterosexist society (Fassinger & Miller, 1997). Additionally, the individuals fully identify as GLB persons and become part of the GLB community (Fassinger & Miller, 1997). They are secure and accepted within the social group and are able to reflect their identity in any context (Fassinger, 1998; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

**Analysis of theory.** The reviewed theories of GLB identity development all offer various perspectives on how GLB persons develop and learn to identify as members of that community. These can be divided into two categories: Cass, Troiden, and Fassinger are considered to be stage models, whereas D'Augelli is a lifespan model (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

The stage models for GLB identity development navigate a linear progression of awareness and acceptance (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). These have strength in that they reflect other theories of development “in progression from less to more complex ways of understanding of self and society” (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 35). This means that they are able to be conceptualized and follow an observable progression, which makes this easier to apply in student affairs practice (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Evans et al., 2010). However, the stage models are limited in that they have a prescribed developmental path, have a stated endpoint for development, do not account for identity variables which can affect the sexual orientation development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005), and may be inflexible in that “most models reflected the

social and political forces of the 1970s when they were developed and may not reflect current social realities” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 311).

On another hand, lifespan GLB development models are nonlinear processes which focus on the identity forming in social and cultural contexts across one’s life (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Nonlinear theories have strength in their flexibility with regard to the order of the developmental tasks (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Evans et al., 2010). These are limited in their application to student affairs practice because they are created for lifespan development, not specifically college student development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Evans et al., 2010).

**Coming out in college.** The development of a sexual identity can be prominent during the traditional college years and, thus, often occurs within the collegiate environment (Stevens, 2004). Through this, sexuality and sexual orientation questions often arise and students look to find answers to who they are. This can be a very difficult and sometimes painful process for the students (Evans & Broido, 1999; Stevens, 2004).

Research has shown that one of the biggest challenges to university living is the coming out process (Evans & Broido, 1999; Stevens, 2004). Major items within this process include deciding to accept the GLB identity, becoming motivated to come out, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of coming out, and choosing whom to come out to (Evans & Broido, 1999). These internal factors can be aided or hindered by the environmental factors of the university (i.e., would the students feel safe if they identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; Stevens, 2004).

To make things more difficult for GLB students, identity at this age is often fluid and evolving; this concept can be lost on people in regards to sexuality. “Some students reported that they had experienced coming out to others as bisexual after previously coming out as lesbian or gay (or vice versa). Both heterosexual and lesbian and gay individuals . . . had trouble accepting

this shift in identity” (Evans & Broido, 1999, p. 663). This can be hard on the individual because he or she may not be able to express him- or herself, which is a complexity of having multiple social identities (Stevens, 2004). One remedy for this is to explore the intersections of the GLB identity with other identities because “exploration of these intersections provides a sense of empowerment for [GLB students] regarding their sexual orientation” (Stevens, 2004, p. 199).

### **Intersectional Identities**

Students are complex human beings. They have multiple facets to who they are and what makes them up. To explain this, Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) model of multiple dimensions of identity will be examined. This is then extended to literature that examines the intersection of spiritual identity and sexual orientation identity.

**Multiple dimensions of identity model.** Jones and McEwen (2000) proposed a fluid model of identity, which took into account the various salient identities for a person. A person’s core identity, which is central to the model, consists of personal characteristics and values. The various salient, social identities surround the core. Examples of these identities include race, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, and socio-economic status (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The identities all intersect with other identities throughout the model, representing where they come together. “The intersecting circles . . . represent that more than one identity dimension can be engaged by the individual at any one time. Identity dimensions then may be experienced simultaneously” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410).

This model was updated and reconceptualized in 2007. In this revision, Abes et al. (2007) added meaning making to the factors affecting the model. “The reconceptualized model, unlike the original model, portrays in two dimensions the interactive nature of relationships

among components of the identity construction process: context, meaning making, and identity perceptions” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 6).

There are three components to the revised model. First, the perception is just as it was explained in the first model, with various social identities intersected around the personal identity core (Abes et al., 2007). Second, the contextual pieces are considered to be the external pressures placed on identities, such as family, friends, norms, and stereotypes (Abes et al., 2007). These contextual factors are directed at the perception of identity. They are filtered, however, by the third component—meaning making. This is how the student creates significant support and purpose within their identities (Abes et al., 2007). By integrating a meaning making filter to the model, a higher level of complexity within the intersectional identities can be achieved by “opening up possibilities for understanding not only the relationships between context and identity, but also between social identities and the core” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 14). This is achieved by looking at the dominance of certain social identities and how they interact with the values that one holds (Abes et al., 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007). One such interaction is that of sexual orientation identity and spiritual identity.

**Intersection of spiritual and sexual orientation identities.** Often seen in conflict (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Helminiak, 1994; Knight & Hoffman, 2007; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005), GLB identity and spiritual identity both have a place in students’ lives. This is especially true with the current generation of college students, to whom spirituality is very important (Lindholm, 2007). This means that the salient identities of sexual orientation and spirituality will be likely to collide more frequently than before (Payne Gold, 2010).



This intersection can be seen within the coming out process (Love et al., 2005; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). "Coming out as [a spiritual GLB person] prompts a re-evaluation of one's world view . . . which can ideally lead to psychological and spiritual growth" (Roseborough, 2006, p. 58). Moreover, coming out can cause change in the spiritual dimension of one's life.

In some cases, the coming out process serves as a significant stimulus for spiritual development. . . . The stimulus for spiritual growth may be due to the conflict inherent between religious teaching, [students'] emerging awareness of their sexual orientation, and the dissonance that this awareness generates. (Love et al., 2005, p. 206)

This uncomfortable state will allow the individuals to choose how to make sense out of the conflict: some separate their spirituality and their sexuality; others seek out traditional religions; still others look for new age religion; more will reject spirituality all together (Barret & Barzan, 1996).

GLB persons may feel pressured to discontinue traditional religious and spiritual beliefs because GLB persons are often not accepted in numerous churches (Barret & Barzan, 1996). Moreover, "in order to accept their sexuality, homosexuals often feel they must reject religion" (Buchanan et al., 2001, p. 440). Thus, there is an institutionalized feeling of polarization in that religion/spirituality cannot mix with a gay, lesbian, or bisexual personal identity.

However, it is possible to integrate the two identities at odds, which is a good thing for the GLB community (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). This can be accomplished by finding religious or spiritual groups that accept GLB persons (Sanlo, 1998). "Some religious organizations are becoming more tolerant to differing orientations, or splinter groups have opted

to cut off from mainstream churches to cater to members who would normally be cast away from the church based on their sexuality” (Buchanan et al., 2001, p. 440).

### **Summary**

There has been extensive research on both spirituality and gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. However, there is limited research on how these identities intersect and interact with one another. This may be due to the highly taboo nature of both of spirituality and sexuality. Spirituality is seen as a personal way to make meaning in one’s life. Today’s students are looking for their college or university experience to help them in the process of developing such personal values and beliefs (Lindholm, 2007). Sexuality is just as personal. In a heterosexist society, students identifying as GLB have a hard time making sense of who they are and where they fit in (Fassinger & Miller, 1998).

Furthermore, as seen in the literature, both spiritual development and GLB identity formation can occur simultaneously. This dual development can take place in a college or university setting. Because GLB and spiritual issues sometimes can conflict (Helminiak, 1994), it is possible for student affairs professionals to assist with the development of both, help with the integration of each, and, through these actions, facilitate a more holistic approach to college student development.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Method**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the relationship between college students' gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities and their spiritual identity. More specifically, the study investigated how students' sexual orientation identity affects their spiritual development, and how students' levels of spiritual development affect their decision to express their sexual orientation identity. Semi-structured interviews served as the means of data collection.

### **Design of the Study**

This exploratory research was conducted in a qualitative, interview-based method. Because the research looked to find a better understanding of the meaning making relationship between sexual orientation identities and spiritual identities for traditional-age college students, an interview method was the most appropriate means to collect data. "Questions that seek to discover the meaning individuals make of their experiences are well suited for the interview method" (Ortiz, 2003, p. 36).

Additionally, the intersection of sexual orientation and spiritual identity has not been well studied, and this study is largely exploratory. There was no developed or intentionally designed instrument to analyze such data. The findings from this study may help design such an instrument or analysis tool for future research on this subject (Ortiz, 2003).

## **Participants**

Participants for the study were between the ages of 18 and 24 and identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The sexuality of the participants was a major determining factor for eligibility in this study.

The participants were undergraduate students at a comprehensive, mid-sized, public institution in the Midwest, whose student population is predominantly White, from a middle-class socioeconomic status, and overwhelmingly Christian. They were recruited from Advocates for Equality, an on-campus registered student organization for the promotion of GLB rights and equality for persons who are sexual orientation minorities, as well as via a “snowball” method (Goodman, 1961), where students were asked to recommend other students who would be a good fit for the study. I attempted to make contact with 14 religiously affiliated student groups, and two of them responded. I attended a meeting to explain the study for each of these groups: Advocates for Equality, FUEL SHACC Campus Ministry, and United Campus Ministry. Participants were asked to volunteer confidentially by contacting me via e-mail. Further, to protect the students’ identities, a pseudonym was assigned to each participant. A letter of informed consent was discussed before the interview and signed. An example can be found in Appendix A.

Eight students participated in interviews for the study—four men and four women. I was intentional to try to include students of various backgrounds to incorporate diversity. Their demographic information can be found below. The participants’ stories can be found in Chapter 4.

Table 1

*Demographic Information of Student Participants*

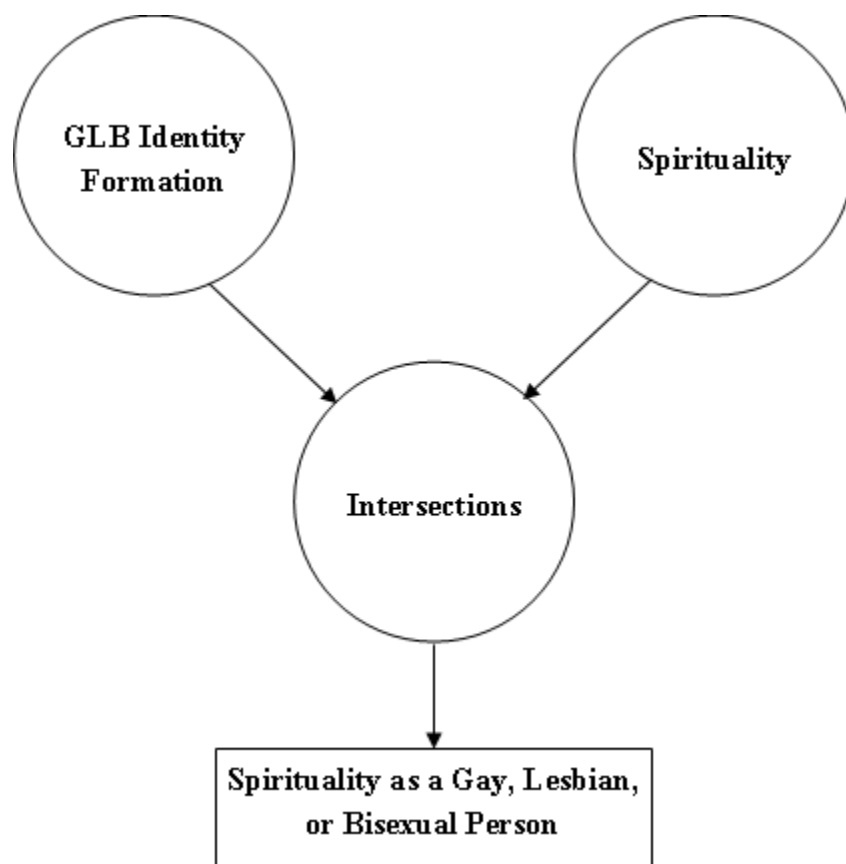
Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Class Standing	Racial Identity	Sexual Orientation Identity	Spiritual Identity
Brian	Male	20	Sophomore	White	Gay	Christian
Dan	Male	22	Senior	White	Gay	Christian
Fran	Female	22	Senior	White	Bisexual	Ethical Humanist
Jane	Female	21	Junior	White	Lesbian	Non- Spiritual
Joe	Male	21	Junior	White	Gay	Catholic
Rose	Female	19	First Year	White	Lesbian	Christian
Shawn	Male	21	Junior	White	Gay	Baptist
Sarah	Female	23	Senior	African American	Pansexual	Free Thinker

*Note.* Pansexual is a broad term that encompasses many aspects of sexuality. “Pansexuality includes heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and sexual behavior that does not necessarily involve a coupling” (Drobac, 1999, p. 301).

**Data Collection**

The student participants completed a one-hour interview. I conducted the interviews in a private room in the on-campus library, where students would feel comfortable talking about sensitive issues. Interviews were semi-structured with prompt questions. The interview focused

on the individual's development as a gay man, lesbian woman, or bisexual person; his or her spiritual and faith development; and the intersection of and connections between sexual orientation identity and spiritual identity. For a visual interpretation of the structure of the interview, refer to Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Visual representation of the structure of the interviews. Based on S. Payne Gold, 2010, personal communication.

In this hour-long interview, I asked the participants to explore the intersection of their spiritual and sexual orientation identities. I wanted to investigate how these students make meaning of their lives within the context of these sometimes conflicting factors. I began by asking about the student's faith and spiritual development, how it was formed, and how it has

changed since they have grown up. I then asked about the student's life as a gay man, lesbian woman, or bisexual person, focusing on the coming out process and what it means to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Finally, I asked the participants to connect the two self-definitions and how these affect one another, concentrating on how ideas about spirituality and being GLB have changed since the coming out process. Questions are listed in Appendix B.

All of the hour-long interviews were digitally recorded, and I transcribed them. This ensured that the data collected were accurately recalled. The digital files were stored on a password-protected computer and as password-protected files. Once fully transcribed without any identifiers and with pseudonyms attached, the digital files were kept password protected and will be deleted after three years. The transcriptions were also stored electronically on the password-protected computer as password-protected files. Then I analyzed all of the data collected using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

Through Merriam's (2009) constant comparative method, data analysis becomes a continuous process. Thus, the data are constantly being examined and meaning is being found (Tscheplikow & Wells, 2010). This allowed me, as the analysis tool, to be both systematic and flexible in the examination of the research findings. Further, findings which emerge over the course of the research directly addressed the research questions (Tscheplikow & Wells, 2010). This is because the participants were able to speak for themselves.

The researcher does not know what will be discovered, what or whom to concentrate on, or what the final analysis will be like. The final product is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the entire process. (Merriam, 1998, p. 162)

Because of this rationale and because of the exploratory nature of the study, the constant comparative method was the best approach to analyzing the collected data.

The constant comparative method, as developed by Glaser and Stauss (1967) and enhanced by Merriam (1998, 2009), is a means of conceptualizing and categorizing data from qualitative sources. “The researcher begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes, or document and compares it with another incident in the same set of data or another set” (Merriam, 1998, p. 159). This allows for the categorization of the data. The data are grouped by things they have in common (Merriam, 1998, 2009). Each potentially relevant piece of data is looked at and put in a category. From these, categories are grouped into themes (Merriam, 2009; Tschepikow & Wells, 2010). The process is repeated until themes and categories cannot be grouped anymore (Tschepikow & Wells, 2010).

To ensure that all relevant data are examined, categories must meet certain criteria. To be able to be considered effective, categories and themes of data must reflect the purpose of the research, be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998). This means that the groupings must be related to the research goal, be able to contain all important and relevant data, and be sensitive to what the data are saying. Additionally, groupings should be narrow enough such that each piece of important and relevant information can fit into only one. Finally, with respect to conceptual congruence, “the same level of abstraction should characterize all categories at the same level” (Merriam, 2009, p. 184).

**Trustworthiness.** To ensure that the data collected are trustworthy, I triangulated the data. This means that I checked the data to make sure it is both credible and plausible (Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2006). This allowed me to “offer verification that [I] did not reshape the data



to merely meet [my] assumptions” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 130). This was a two-fold process, which included having the data peer reviewed and conducting member-checks.

To have the peer review of the data, I granted access to the transcriptions to my faculty advisor, who drew independent conclusions about categories and themes. Through both reading and analyzing the data, I was able to compare and have a sounding board for my analysis of the data and the synthesis of my findings. To further check the integrity of the analysis, I produced an interview summary for each participant to check the data. I checked with the participant to ensure that the findings that I have concluded are accurate to what he or she was attempting to communicate to me.

**Standpoint.** I was the primary analytical tool for the data collected. As such, I must explain my point of view. I am a White, heterosexual, educated, middle-class man. I have lived my entire life in the Midwest. I was raised Catholic, but have since reconsidered formalized religion. I believe in a higher power, but do not identify with any one religious tradition. My interest has come from my own spiritual questions and journey. I have been attracted to spirituality because it is something universal but still extremely personal.

I began to question my beliefs during my senior year of my undergraduate experience. I went through some personal crises, which forced me to question my faith and reformat my spiritual identity. I found a spiritual mentor in my undergraduate campus’s chaplain, the Reverend Hope Luckie. She helped guide me and refocus the spiritual aspects of my life. She led me with the major theme of “do what gives you life.” With her, I was able to more fully develop my own values.

The selection of the GLB student subsection is based on two items: (a) my student staff members during my first year of graduate school were very active in GLB groups on campus, but

were still faithful; and (b) the lack of research in this particular area of intersectional identities made it a compelling topic of study.

### **Limitations**

This research study was limited because of the time restriction placed on this project. This was completed as a Master's thesis. Therefore, the time needed to fully develop an interview protocol, interview a large number of students, analyze the data, and find universal themes may have been compromised for this research project.

Additionally, I set the parameters for what I considered "spirituality" and "religion." Both of these items are personal. These terms can mean different things to different people. Thus, my own bias has been built into the study. Participants were invited to provide their own definitions, which helped minimize the imposition of personal bias.

With regards to participants, it was difficult to recruit from specific groups, specifically GLB students of color. This could be due to the cultural expectations of the populations of color (Ryan, Longress, & Roffmann, 1996). Additionally, it was difficult to find men who identified as bisexual. This could be due to male students feeling the stigma and pressure put on bisexuals by both the heterosexual and GLB communities to choose either a fully heterosexual or fully homosexual identity more than the female students (Robin & Hamner, 2000).

Moreover, I recruited participants from an active student organization for gay, lesbian, and bisexual equality and attempted to recruit from student organizations for specific religions and faith traditions. I may not have gotten a full range of student experiences represented because my sample was limited to those students who are active in these organizations and the students who could be recruited by the members of these organizations.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Participant Stories, Data Analysis, and Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the realms of spirituality and sexual orientation identity in traditional-age college students. Specifically, it was designed to see how students who identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual perceived their identity development as a spiritual person and as a GLB person. Additionally, I hoped to see how these students perceived that their identity development in both of these arenas affect one another. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, which focused on spiritual identity, GLB identity, and the intersection of both. The research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do GLB students describe their spiritual development?
2. How do GLB students perceive the role of spirituality in their decisions to publicly express a GLB identity?
3. How do GLB students perceive the role of their sexual orientation on their spiritual development and expression?

This chapter reports the findings of the research. Data from the interviews with eight traditional-age college students were analyzed using Merriam's (2009) constant comparative method. To have more context of the narrative statements made, brief introductions of each of the participants is given below. Following, the data are presented by thematic category and by their relations to the overarching research questions.

## Participant Stories and Introductions

**Brian's story.** Brian is a 20 year-old, White man from a small town in the Midwest. He is currently a sophomore. He identifies as a gay man and as a Christian.

When he was very young, Brian attended a Christian church with his biological parents. His parents divorced and he went without a spiritual outlet for a number of years until his father remarried. Because of his stepmother, his father had a renewed interest in religion. With his new family, Brian attended a very strict Christian church. Brian said,

In the church we went to with my stepmom and my dad, I didn't like the church because they were very strict about everything, like Pokémon was a sin, and witches were a sin, and I wasn't allowed to watch Harry Potter.

Since then, his family has changed churches to one that he feels is more open: "The pastor's really open about everything, and it's a comfortable place," he said. Now, he identifies himself as a Christian, but does not practice any religion because he says it confuses him and because it collides with his identity as a gay man.

I am who I am and I can't change that. I don't see it as a bad thing honestly, but it's confusing. Why should it be bad? I mean, I love who I love. Why can't that be good? I guess that's why it's so confusing to me.

Brian said that his gay identity began forming in middle school. "I realized I was gay when I was about 13 years old, about seventh grade. But I didn't come to terms with it until about my junior year of high school because that's when I got my first boyfriend," he explained. Since then, his gay identity has become a more salient one. He feels that being gay is an integral part of who he is as a person: "I personally love it. It makes me me. I wouldn't have it any other

way! I'm proud of it." He is out with all of his friends and on campus, but he has not yet come out to his parents.

I plan on doing it before I graduate college. I wrote a play about a guy who realizes he's gay and how it's okay and they all are going to come see it. I feel like that's a major step for me in coming out to them. So, I don't have anything major planned.

Brian has not come out to his parents because he says he is afraid of how his parents will react, specifically his father. He explained his fear:

I'm the only son and [my father] is super Christian. . . . And [my parents] do have the Christian values and they always say "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" and they've always kind of had something against homosexuality.

Additionally, he gets frustrated and confused with religion because of the close-mindedness of strict Christians. However, he credits his spiritual identity being bound to his gay identity.

I guess because I had that questioning about [spirituality], I've grown stronger as a Christian because I've learned that to believe in Jesus and that questioning helped me discover it. Being gay help me discover that I am a Christian.

**Dan's story.** Dan is a 22 year-old, White man from a small town in the Midwest. He is in his senior year. He identifies as a gay man and a Christian.

Dan was raised in a Baptist home, but when he was a teenager, he quit identifying as such because he was coming to terms with his gay identity. "Around the age of 16, [I] stopped going to church altogether. . . . I was so conflicted because I didn't know if I should be going to church at all if I was having these feelings [about men]," he explained. Through this, he allowed himself to reflect on what he truly valued and what he believed. "I value family, which seems contradictory to some people, . . . honesty, . . . don't lie to anyone, including yourself. Be true to

yourself. . . . Being loyal to your friends. . . . Being a good person. I know it's different for different people," he said. He still considers himself to be a Christian, as he still believes in God and Jesus, but he does not identify with any denomination. Dan says that he still has his faith, but he struggles with the religion because of his gay identity.

He started to realize that he was a gay man in his early teenage years. "When I was 13 or 14, I think that's when I started to consider myself bi, because that was still more socially acceptable because I still liked girls," he said. "I came to terms with [being gay] when I was 17 or 18." Dan has come out to all of the major people in his life, with the exception of his father. This was at the request of his mother because she thought that Dan's father could not handle it.

Dan feels that his gay identity has positively affected his spiritual identity. "I feel closer to God because I'm true to myself, and if this how God wanted me to be, I shouldn't deny his creation," he explained. Additionally, he feels that his spiritual identity has positively shaped his gay identity.

I feel like I have a few more values than some of gay men. . . . I don't feel I am as promiscuous as some people. . . . Some guys are and if that's what they want to do that's fine, but that's not how I'm going to live my life.

Dan feels that his role as a gay man of spirit is to be the role model that he did not have growing up.

**Fran's story.** Fran is a 22 year-old, White woman from a small town in the Midwest. She is a senior. She identifies as an ethical humanist and as a bisexual woman.

Fran grew up in non-religious home, but she did occasionally go to church with her grandmother. However, she said that she gave up on the idea of religion when she was in the

seventh grade after she lost a good friend to cancer. She has since developed her identity into an ethical humanist.

I got really sick of the negative connotations of being an atheist. I think it was the thing that best fit with what I really believe. . . . I just think we need to be good people and do right by each other because that's the only way to go to be a good person is if you're good to other people.

Through this identity, Fran said that she has become more open to others' spiritual stances. "So, it doesn't matter if it's God or religion or being good person, spirituality is that sense of comfort and understanding you get from being that kind of person," she explained. This also played into her being able to accept her own bisexual identity.

Fran first began to realize her bisexuality when she was in high school. "I dated predominantly men in high school, but I knew that there were women that I was attracted to," she explained. It was difficult for her to fully accept because of the people in her hometown being unable to understand people who were not heterosexual.

In high school, I was a lot more nervous about it. I didn't want to talk about it because of where I'm from is a very unsupportive environment for people like me. And bisexuality is even less acceptable than being gay from my own experience because so many people have the "you need to choose" attitude, where at least they can make excuses for those who are gay.

Fran did come out as a bisexual woman in college.

Last year was a very emotional, very traumatic year. I mean, I was engaged and I ended a relationship with my fiancé, dated a woman. . . . There wasn't any one thing that set it

off, but the combination of everything made the dealing with it—like getting my parents on board and my friends to understand—was difficult.

She has found a stronger sense of herself and a strong community among others who identify as GLB. She feels that she is more of herself since she has come out. “Although it seems like I’ve changed a lot to people that I met recently, it’s more of a re-founding. . . . It was more like shattering a façade of an individual as opposed to changing who I am,” she said.

Fran has found how to be comfortable with herself. Moreover, she has integrated her sexual and spiritual identities into a way to help others with difficult situations.

It feels good to know that I am founded in who I am and that one side of the coin is not going to shatter my entire world. . . . It’s good that both of my identities work together well. While it makes me feel good personally, I know that I can help other people who are in the same situation and I can be a source of support for people who are going through this.

**Jane’s story.** Jane is a 21 year-old, White woman from a mid-sized city in the Midwest. She is a senior. She identifies as a lesbian with bisexual tendencies and says that she is not spiritual.

Jane grew up in a very Christian and Pentecostal home. When she was young, she found religion to be second nature. However, she has since given up on traditional, mainstream religion; instead, she has chosen to live her life through a case-by-case basis. She explained,

Basically, it was a breakdown of what I thought was correct. . . . As I grew into who I am now, I slowly realized that these things are not really as second nature as I had felt they were. And some things that I held as true may not actually be true. . . . I think the reason I’m so drastically different now is because I realized that, like, if there are certain



discrepancies, how can I believe in the entire thing? If so many people believe in this, how can I believe in anything?

Jane has learned that she truly only believes in her experiential truths and not an absolute truth.

Jane says that she often doesn't like to identify her sexual orientation; when she is asked to do so, she identifies herself as a lesbian woman with bisexual tendencies.

The reason for this is that I believe there aren't clear-cut lines. I feel that you can identify as a lesbian who still has feelings for men; I feel you can identify as gay and still have feelings for women; I feel you can identify as straight and still have feelings for the same sex. So I tend to not identify myself.

She said that she had realized her identity when she was in middle school, but didn't accept it until considerably later in her life. "Because I was so religious, it was a mixture of ignoring and hoping it would go away," she said. She accepted her identity her first year of college.

To aid in this acceptance, Jane had to find a new support system, one that would take the place of her family and her church.

Mainly what I missed was the community [and] being part of a church. . . . But as I continued on, I've identified with other groups. I have become a part of other organizations, and I've gone and done other things. I've filled the void.

Jane's loss of faith coupled with her lesbian identity has caused her to try to understand others' attacks on her self-concept. "I've tried to understand where they're coming from and help them understand where I'm coming from," she said.

**Joe's story.** Joe is a 21 year-old, White man from a small town in the Midwest. He is a junior. He identifies as a gay man and a progressive Catholic.

Joe's spiritual stance has evolved as he has grown. "At one point, I wanted to be the first American Pope. I wanted to be a monk for the longest time. Around fifth or sixth grade, I decided that wasn't my calling," he said. He still has a strong interest in developing his spirituality.

I still try to grow in my faith. . . . I have recently been trying to develop "what do I believe and does it coincide with Church? Am I in full agreement with this or do I agree with parts of it and need to develop a relationship with God which is not so cut and dry?" He attributes his changing spiritual views to his gay identity and his striving for acceptance.

I call myself a progressive Catholic because I still don't support abortion; I still believe you should go to church every Sunday, and that whole thing. But, at the same time, I feel that my church should no longer just say that homosexuality is natural, but you shouldn't act on it. If it's natural, the actions that go with it should be considered natural. That's where I get fuzzy on that. I mean I think that there are other parts of the Catholic faith that should be altered or changed, but, things like that.

Joe realized he was gay when he was in middle school. He explained:

Boys were always interesting but I didn't know why they were more interesting to me. They were interesting on another level. And then as I grew older, I realized that that was an attraction and, around seventh grade or eighth grade, seventh grade, I found out about what being gay meant, what homosexuality was, and I was like "oh!" And then I found out that no one likes that, and that no one from where I was from liked that, and did not believe that homosexuality was right or that homosexuality was natural.

Knowing this did not line up with his Catholic values, he decided to keep it quiet and just live single. However, this did not keep when a female friend had a crush on him during their sophomore year of high school.

We were doing the play *Peter Pan* and she saw me looking on stage and she thought I was crushing on Wendy when I was crushing on Peter Pan. . . . I was like I have to tell her and so I came out to her and myself all at once. It was a very strange experience. It was very freeing but it also made me feel very, very vulnerable at the same time.

With that, Joe began to come out to more of his close friends. Yet, it was a major challenge to come out to his parents.

Joe realized that he wanted to come out to his parents because he did not want to live a lie with them. He realized the necessity to let them know about the gay part of himself.

My coming out to my parents actually was a spiritual thing. . . . I came up with a plan; I was going to come out to my parents the next time I went home. . . . It turns out that in two weeks was Easter and it was the next time I was going to be home. I was like “Do I really want to come out to my parents on Easter Sunday? Like, is that weird?” And then, I had two revelations: I said to myself “Well, if you back out once, you’ll back out twice; if you back out twice, you’ll back out fifty times. So you have to do it this time.” And I was like—and this is me being very tongue-in-cheek—I said, “If the King of Kings can come out of a tomb, I can come out of the closet.”

Since coming out to his parents, Joe has been able to find peace with himself and with God. He may experience some hate, but he makes meaning through his relationship with God. “I don’t need the approval or acceptance of mankind; I just need the approval and love that God has given me,” he said. Moreover, he has been able to integrate his gay identity with his Catholic

identity. “I feel this is my calling to become a figurehead within the GLBT community and to work with the church towards understanding the extent of God’s love and to understanding what homosexuality is.”

**Rose’s story.** Rose is a 19 year-old, White woman from a mid-sized city in the Midwest. She is a first year student. She identifies herself as a feminist Christian and as a lesbian.

Rose was raised in a Methodist household. However, since she came out, she has become less religious. “I think now in my life that I’m definitely a lot more spiritual than I am religious. After identifying myself as being a lesbian, it’s hard to go to church and be around churchy people because of their general beliefs,” she said. Because of this, she has reconsidered her spiritual stance and truly gotten to know her own values and beliefs.

Rose has created her lesbian identity in a way that is her own. She came out to her friends in high school when she was 15. She has also come out to her parents. “I was really shocked at how well the both of them were okay with it,” she said. Rose feels very supported and that she is accepted as a lesbian woman with faith by her friends and family.

However, she does not have the same relationship she used to with her church and religion. Since coming out, she has felt judged by the more traditional Christians at her church. Because of this,

I started to believe that God sees me as a person, not as a lesbian that needs to go to hell because I like women. That’s when I kind of started to get disenchanted by the whole thing of organized religion and I kind of just said, “I feel that God loves me and I’m not saying the same things that you are but I’m still a good person. I don’t see why I should be condemned to hell if I’m a good person, a moral person, and I still have my faith in

God and I'm still true to him. And you are saying that I can't be just because of the way I am." . . . I feel like organized religion doesn't really have a place for me.

Thus, Rose has created her identities, but they have not become fully integrated. They seem to occasionally become in conflict with her identity as a lesbian being more salient.

**Sarah's story.** Sarah is a 23 year-old, African American woman from a large city in the Midwest. She is a senior. She identifies as a free thinker and as a pansexual woman.

Sarah grew up in what she termed a "semi-Christian" household, which to her meant that her family was faithful when it was convenient to be. "God was always watching you, but I really don't necessarily think we had any connection to it," she explained. Sarah has gone through numerous stages in her own ideas surrounding faith, including her semi-Christian upbringing, a time when she was very Christian, and her current worldview.

I believe in the universe, and I believe in positive energy. I believe that good things happen to people who do good things. . . . I believe in the universe, I believe in positive energy, I believe in me. So, I believe that I am my own spiritual being. . . . I have faith in me.

Through this, she feels that she is able to make the most meaning and can direct her life from this. Additionally, she likes the fact that she has flexibility in her beliefs.

If I come to a point my life that I don't believe in what I used to believe, I'm free to change that. It's having that freedom of thought and that freedom of personal conviction as opposed to being convicted or attached to something else that is not of me.

Moreover, Sarah's pansexuality has become a way for her to classify herself in a very flexible term. "I know that I'm attracted to people. I love humans, adult humans, preferably

taller than me. . . . It's just me being not necessarily attracted to their anatomy, but their personality," she explained.

Sarah is out with her sexuality. She has not tried to hide it from anyone, including her parents.

My dad called me on it. He said, "You're kissing her." I was like, "What are you talking about?" Then I said, "Yeah, dad, that's my girlfriend" and that was that. I didn't have that necessary [coming out process], that whole shindig.

She is proud of who she is and embraces herself.

Sarah's spiritual views have also been solidified because she is comfortable with herself. Because she feels she is founded in both, Sarah has been able to fully accept and integrate these two identities.

I think it was me getting more comfortable with myself and knowing who I am and what I want out of life and realizing that these things don't align with the rest the world. That's okay because honestly, I don't still live in the rest the world, I live among them. I'm in the world, not of it.

**Shawn's story.** Shawn is a 21 year-old, White man from a large city in the Midwest. He is a junior. He identifies as a Baptist Christian and as a gay man.

Religion has always been a big part of Shawn's life. He has always been very involved in his church and spreading the gospel message.

As I grew and wanted to pursue being a leader in that area, I was very passionate about it. I was really passionate about bringing other teens to Christ because I feel like a lot of times of high school that's kind when you start formulating your identity. I was really passionate about talking to other people and being a leader and mentor.

In this, he found himself fully enveloped in his church and its teachings.

However, he was also developing his gay identity concurrently, which confused him and seemed to be in contrast to his religious stance.

I had the thoughts in the locker room, like, “am I attracted to guys? I’m not really attracted to girls” . . . around the time that I really knew that I was maybe different, but since I had been going to church I was like, “should I be thinking these things?” So, I kind of suppressed them, all of my feelings, for three years or so.

Upset and confused, Shawn often questioned his existence and his place in God’s eyes. His feelings were put to the test. “I can remember a specific example of one of the hardest days of my life. My junior year in high school, first semester, I had to give a lesson against homosexuality and I gave that lesson,” he said. He does not view this as something to be ashamed of; rather, he sees it as part of his own development of becoming more accepting. “I was viewing people that are gay or are different from afar, saying I need to help that person. I think now that I want to help people in general. I want to be a mentor, a leader,” he explained.

Shawn says that he is now more in touch with his spiritual identity as well as his religious identity. Moreover, since he has come out, he has been able to view himself as a role model and mentor for those who are struggling with gay and spiritual issues. “Incorporating being gay in my life has enhanced my spirituality. . . . I think it’s helping more so to say that I am a Christian and I am gay, and you can too.”

### **Thematic Findings**

By examining the participants’ interview transcripts, four major themes were found to be common to most, if not all, of the participants. The themes found were:

1. intrapersonal identity;

2. judgments;
3. life changing crises; and
4. moving from independence to interdependence.

These themes are made up of numerous sub-themes, which will all be discussed below.

**Intrapersonal view of GLB identity and spiritual identity.** Spirituality and sexual orientation identities are personal aspects of one's life. Because they are personal, both terms can, and do, mean very different things to different individuals. Because of this, it is important to look at how the participants defined and constructed their own spiritual and sexual orientation identities. Additionally, these self-definitions may be influenced by the degree to which these identities are integrated.

*Spiritual definitions.* Spirituality can be very concrete or very abstract. It is seen in different ways for differing individuals. Some participants said that a relationship with God is a major part of their spiritual identity, like Dan, who said

I believe in God. And I pray. I pray more now than I did when I went to church. . . . It helps keep me grounded. I feel that I have things more together and it's just the place to vent and be yourself.

Others talked about putting positive energy out into the universe, such as Sarah, who explained, "I believe in the universe, and I believe in positive energy. I believe that good things come to people who do good things. . . . I believe in me. So, I believe that I am my own spiritual being." Both of these worldviews are valid, as they both give the students the support and connection that they are looking for.



Most of the participants felt that spirituality was completely different from religion. However, they did recognize that the two can be connected or interconnected. For example, Joe saw things in terms of politics.

I always say that religion is the political party of the spirit. So, I believe that everyone has a sense of a higher power or a sense of rules or laws within the universe, whether or not there is an entity behind it is their belief or not. And then, they chose a religion which is closest to what they believe.

Through this interpretation, Joe believes that there is something driving the universe, be it a holy entity or chaos, and that various religions are ways of representing what that means.

Similarly, Shawn explained that religion and spirituality are different because of their focuses. “Religion is a set standard. It’s something that’s codified,” he said, “but spirituality does not have to be to be codified—it’s just broad. It’s as broad as you can make it.” Because of this, Shawn’s view of religion is very structured and orderly, whereas he considers spirituality his “constant search for enlightenment and growth and direction.”

Common across all the interviews was an idea of being a good person. This was the driving force behind the spiritual identities for all participants, regardless of religious affiliation or spiritual worldview. For example, Rose, who identifies as a Christian, said:

I believe in being a genuinely good person, try to do things for others. Living a life to the fullest, that’s more of what being spiritual means to me. More like living your life in the best way possible and doing things for others and trying to be just a genuinely good person.

Additionally, ethical humanist Fran reflected this idea, explaining: “I want to do good for the sake of humanity and be a good person, not because it is a moral code set down by a higher

being but it's better to be a good person." Thus, the idea of doing good for the sake of others, be it because of a religious obligation or because of a personal value, is an important factor for the participants in expressing their spiritual viewpoints.

***GLB definitions.*** Being a member of the GLB community meant a variety of things to the participants. Some explained it as simply an attraction to a person of the same sex or to people of both sexes. Others said it was more. For example, Sarah said that sexuality is more than just attraction to the physical. "I wouldn't limit who I'm attracted to to sexuality. But the thing I have a fight with, as far as people defining sexuality based on sex. Sexuality is emotional, behavioral; it's everything," she said.

Moreover, there was a need to understand the vast array of sexual minorities and to help people along their developmental path. Shawn said:

Being LGBTQ and all the way through the end of the alphabet, you meet so many people that are kind of struggling with their identity. So they add extra letters to that. There is a spectrum of people who don't know where they are, and in this day and age, I think that's a beautiful thing to say, "I really don't know who I am and I'm searching." And it's even more beautiful for someone to say, "I'm okay with that, I'm okay that you are searching, and I am going to accept you any way you are."

Because of the diversity in the sexual minority community, it was important for the participants to be more accepting of these differences and the differences of others.

For other participants, like Joe, sexual orientation identity was just another facet of his identity. When asked what it meant to be a gay man, he responded by saying:

What does it mean to be a rose bush? Was it mean to be you? I mean it's just. . . . It's genetics. I mean it's proven that, well they are like pretty sure that sexuality is genetic

and it's genetic that I have brown hair and it's genetic I that have crooked fingers, it's genetic that I have this nose, that my metabolism is higher than most people's. That's genetics. I don't celebrate my brown hair, I don't do that. But people aren't repressed for being brunette anymore.

Joe was not denying his gay identity, but rather he feels that it is simply who he is. He does not feel the need to celebrate the fact that he is gay any more than the fact that he has crooked fingers or a high metabolism.

**Judgments.** From the interviews, a general dislike or fear of judgments was seen in almost all of the participants. These judgments were seen both as external factors from family, friends, churches, religions, etc., as well as internal factors. This theme consists of five sub-themes: (a) labels, (b) close-mindedness, (c) fear of parental rejection, (d) conflict between love and hate, and (e) religious judgment.

***Dislike of societal labels.*** All of the participants felt that they had been judged in some way for their sexuality. However, they did not see sexuality as their only identity. Rather, they saw it as a piece of themselves and did not want to be unfairly judged because of society's ideas of what sexual orientation minorities may be. For example, Rose explained that her lesbian identity is not that of a stereotypical lesbian:

I feel there are so many connotations [in being a lesbian], and that it limits me and that people would only see me as [the stereotype]. They see me as some, like, softball-playing, dog-loving, "I just like to go out with women and that's all that I'm about." I feel like if I identified myself as that, people couldn't see past that and they would stereotype me as this person who I wasn't.

Rose felt that society's definition of being a lesbian is very limiting, as the ideas of the stereotypical lesbian do not apply to who she is. This means that she understands that there is a difference between her own idea of what it means to be a lesbian and what society expects out of her choice to identify as a lesbian.

Additionally, Fran said that she doesn't like to show her bisexuality to everyone. "I feel like if I show up to a party with a woman, then people will know I'm interested in women; if I show up to a party with a man, then they know I'm interested in men," she said.

This distaste for labels is echoed by Sarah, when she spoke about why she chooses to identify her sexual orientation as a pansexual woman.

I think that society sees me as bisexual because I am attracted to men and I am attracted to women. I feel that sexuality should be understood on a spectrum. There are parts of men that are feminine and parts of women that are masculine. . . . But I wouldn't say I'm heterosexual. And I wouldn't necessarily say that I'm gay.

In an effort to be true to herself, Sarah found a term that she could use to explain her sexual orientation identity. However, she had to give in to society's need for labels, which she does not like, in an effort to educate others on her attractions and desires.

Thus, society's labels are not liked by the participants; however, they realize that social settings require them to label themselves.

***Close-mindedness.*** Participants were frustrated with the lack of support for their sexual identities, especially from the religious sector. In particular, Brian had issues with Christians because they did not want to try to get to know him because he is gay:

I'm frustrated at the people out there who are so close-minded, and they all happen to be Christian and. . . not all of them, just most of them. It's just frustrating because they are so close-minded about everything. They listen to the Bible so strictly.

These types of feelings were common among participants and fed into issues of judgment in religion, another of the emergent themes.

The participants felt that they would be accepted more within religion and society if people would take the time to get to know them as individuals. Understanding seemed to be something that was needed, and it should become part of what society stands for. Sarah explained that it is difficult

having to exist in the world where people are gay haters because they don't understand.

People can't accept what they don't understand. People who don't try to understand what they can't accept will never get anywhere. I guess that's the world we live in.

This fuels a need for education on GLB issues and sensitivity to those who are different.

***Parental rejection.*** Some participants expressed that they found it hard to be out as a gay man, lesbian woman, or bisexual person because of their parents' religious backgrounds. This fear is grounded in the idea that the students will not be accepted for who they are because of the religious response to GLB people.

Brian has not come out to his parents because he is afraid of the rejection that could happen. He explained:

The main issue right now is coming out to my parents. They don't know yet. All my friends do, but they don't know yet. They will, just not yet. That is my biggest fear: my biggest issue is coming out to them, probably because, well, mainly my dad because he's my dad and I'm the only son, and he's super Christian.

He went on to say that he felt his parents would send him to a preacher or psychiatrist to “set things straight.” This shows that students who identify as GLB may not have the opportunity to talk with their parents for fear of being rejected.

Additionally, Joe had a fear of being rejected by his family because of his sexuality and his family’s religious values. He explained how he felt he needed to plan how he was going to take important items from his parents’ house, just in case they threw him out.

Before I told them, I was going to get all my sentimental things in my car. I was going to tell my mother that I needed my social security card and my birth certificate for employment purposes that I had to have proof. . . . I was planning on how I was going to get my Christmas ornaments out of the attic and into my car, my diploma and all this other stuff. . . . So the weekend comes, I get in my car what I need from my house without my parents knowing, they still don’t know I did this. And, I have everything I could possibly need; the only thing I needed to do was to turn on my key and go if I needed to.

Joe had gotten everything that was of value to him in an effort to protect himself from the potential rejection from his family.

***Love and hate.*** Even with hatred around them and focused at them, the participants found solace in being loving, understanding, and true to who they are. This was evident in all of the interviews, but was especially resounding with Joe.

Joe explained that he tries to put his faith in God first and uses that to deal with the hatred in the world around him.

I’ve had people who have called me inappropriate things and done some very hurtful things to me, but I can’t hate them. I just have to pity them and pray for them and say

“God, make me be a better person. Help me help them. Help them through what they need to do, and just try to help them in any way I can, even if it is not directly through me.” You know, I have people who call me “faggot” or “fag.” You know, I just say a quick prayer and go on my way; I don’t have to acknowledge that they were even talking to me. I mean, it doesn’t help anyone if I turn around and get sassy with them, or you know, do something that is cruel or hurtful. I don’t want to go that level. That’s not what I believe in. It’s counterproductive, so I think you just need to be a positive person and lead by example.

Joe’s emotional and spiritual maturity has helped him to overcome society’s inability to fully accept his gay identity.

This is also reflected by Rose, when she explained:

I started to believe that God sees me as a person, not as a lesbian that needs to go to hell because I like women. I kind of just said, “I feel that God loves me, and I’m not saying the same things that you are, but I’m still a good person.” I don’t see why I should be condemned to hell if I’m a good person, a moral person, and I still have my faith in God and I’m still true to him.

She was able to modify her social-spiritual identity to better match both her faith and GLB identity. She feels that she is able to live up to her morals as a Christian woman and as a lesbian.

The participants seemed to find ways to integrate their GLB identity into their faith, even among those who might express hatred. Through doing this, they found a way to accept themselves and learn how to love those who do not love them.

**Religious judgment.** Participants had many feelings of being judged from those in religion and religious life. All of the participants mentioned feeling uncomfortable with

organized religion at one point or another. For example, Dan reflected on his experiences as a junior high school student and going to church services.

A lot of [the services] especially as I entered junior high had to do with homosexuality and how it was a sin. Every sermon seemed to get around to it, like it was a plague or something. I was starting to have those feelings, and it would make me very upset because I wasn't sure how I was supposed to be feeling or what I was feeling at that time. It was very confusing and very frustrating.

This confusion and frustration was commonplace. Joe had some of the same feelings with regard to his belief in the Catholic Church's doctrine.

I can't follow the Church and believe that I'm going to go to hell because of the way God made me. Why would have God made me in the first place and wasted time and space? Eventually, I was like, you know, we aren't bodies with a spirit, we are spirits with a body.

The participants were not being supported in their religious and spiritual identities, which caused some of them to feel ostracized and alone. Rose said, "After I identified myself as being a lesbian, it's hard to go to church and be around churchy people because of their general beliefs. I feel like organized religion doesn't really have a place for me."

Moreover, many of the participants felt that these judgmental religious experiences were in contrast to what the religion stood for. Fran summarized her feelings on this contradiction when she said,

The most frustrating part is that if you look at all these religions, it's always about acceptance, accept people, we need to accept and tolerate people, but the underlying, hidden theme is that we can only accept the people that are the same religion as you



because people who are different—people who aren't heterosexual, who aren't White in today's society—are different. It's frustrating to sit back and think that all of these are founded in "let's love each other, love your neighbor like your brother," yet they don't.

By feeling that religion does not have a place for them, and finding paradoxical thought in religion, tensions between the participants' spiritual and GLB identities became strained. This could have caused a life-changing event with respect to how the participants were going to live out their spirituality, faith, religion, and values.

**Life-changing crises.** As people have new experiences, their lives can change as a consequence of these actions. This is compounded in the college years when students are being exposed to many new ideas and begin to formulate their identity (Evans et al., 2010).

Participants in this study explained how their lives as spiritual beings and as GLB persons changed because of specific crises in their lives. These stories fell into two major sub-themes: development on two paths, and an evaluation and adjustment of how the participant was living his or her life.

***Development on two paths.*** According to Parks (2000), questioning one's beliefs and worldview is a part of the developmental process. Within this study, two distinct paths were noted in the interview transcriptions: one leading to a stronger, deeper faith in spirituality, religion, or worldview; the other leading to a loss of faith and the creation of new ways of meaning making.

***Stronger faith.*** Participants recalled questioning how their spiritual identity and their sexual orientation identity could fit together. This was often met with anger, frustration, and sadness. Shawn recalled his personal frustration with merging his identities:

At the same time, I was trying to figure myself out and suppressing my being gay. I could remember specific nights where I had gone to bed crying and praying, like, “Why God why? Why am I gay? If I’m preaching the Bible, and preaching the word, why?” Shawn then talked about how he came to terms with his gay identity, how he came out to his family, and how he had to reestablish himself as a spiritual gay man:

I did kind of lose sense of self, but at the same time I think it just added to who I am now. I experimented with drinking alcohol for a couple weeks, and I tried marijuana one time. I experimented sexually with my boyfriend, and so, I think I was just trying to find out who I was and what I wanted to do with my life. A year later, I really started formulating, “Is this really what I wanted to do? Do I really want to continuously experiment with all these things and be a person who drinks all the time, smokes all the time, has sex all the time?” No. That’s not what I wanted with my life, especially going to be an educator. I feel I can’t preach furthering your life and education to kids if I am consistently depleting my brain cells to different things. . . . At that time, I did kind of lose sense of self. But I think that loss of sense of self aided me into developing my identity now.

Shawn has since reconfirmed his faith as a Baptist Christian and is active in a church group. Through questioning his identity, he was able to combine both his GLB identity and his spiritual identity. Thus, the events of questioning his existence and purpose allowed him to develop a stronger, deeper faith.

*Losing traditional faith.* Development can also mean moving away from theism and mainstream religion. This movement can be brought on by any number of events. For example, Fran said that she quit believing in a higher power from a young age because of a death:

I stopped believing God when I was in seventh grade when my best friend died of cancer. The default response was, “She is with God now. God wanted her with Him.” I was 13; I did not understand why they were saying that to me and I didn’t understand how this was comforting.

By being unable to be comforted by a God who could not or would not save her friend, Fran found herself feeling more at peace with the ideas of not having a higher power and living by her own morals and values.

Similar to Fran, Jane gave up on traditional faith for a more atheistic worldview. Unlike Fran, Jane’s reasoning was highly external. She had been wrestling with the ideas of complete belief, but after she came out, it became too difficult.

[Prior to coming out,] I had already had those problems before I decided to give up on it because, as I was raised, faith was a big part of Christianity. I still had that faith. But after I came out, so many issues arose with my family and with my church and it was kind of like the straw that broke the camel’s back. The thing that just pushed me over the edge was that. . . I don’t even believe in the stuff. And on top of that, I will not be accepted for who I am. And top of that, I’m going to have to deal with fighting for who I am within this religion.

For Jane, the coming out process changed her spiritual self from a Christian to that of an atheist. Joe explained that this can be common in the GLB community.

A lot of gay people turn agnostic or atheistic when they come out to themselves and they say, “I’m not going to be a part of an organization that says I’m less than them, treats me as second-class, and has no regard for what I do.”

Thus, the spiritual turmoil for GLB students can be quite high, especially as they are figuring out what their own worldview is.

***Evaluation and adjustment.*** Participants recognized that as they have grown and changed, they have evaluated their spiritual and GLB identities and have adjusted what they mean to them. As they have had new and different experiences of both acceptance and prejudice, they are constantly addressing who they are. Jane showed how she had changed as she accepted her lesbian identity. She said:

[When I accepted my lesbian/bisexual identity], it was a little after the time I moved out. I moved out when I was in high school, my senior year, three weeks after I turned 18. I moved out of my mom's house for really special reasons. After I moved out, I didn't know what my own views really were because they were so formed by my spiritual identity and my family identity that I didn't know what my own identity was. In my freshman year of college, I finally started realizing what separates my own identity apart from every other identity that had been imposed upon me. It was around freshman year college was when I, you know, became able to accept who I was.

Jane was in the position to be able to adjust her personal identities and truly delve into what she believed in and what she didn't. She evaluated that her identity, which was established by her family, was not fitting for her life and adjusted it to fit who she is.

***Moving from independence to interdependence.*** Chickering and Reisser (1993) argued that one of the vectors for college student development is to move from dependence through autonomy to interdependence. This was shown again in this study. Participants reported a need to interact with others as well as a need to know how to do so educationally.

*Need for others.* The participants explained that they went through an independent phase where they felt that fitting in was easier than coming out. However, suppressing and denying themselves to the general public proved to be a very lonely position for many participants. For example, Rose felt compelled to come out because she didn't have people whom she could relate to:

At that point, it was more beneficial to me to come out and just say it than to have it stay hidden longer and have to kind of like not being able to show my true feelings. And I wanted to discuss it but that's what really sucked. I didn't have anybody to talk with.

So, in order to do this, I had to put it all on the table.

For her, coming out was a means of creating community and establishing relationships. This is echoed by Dan, when he said,

The person that I was portraying to [my friends] wasn't the person that I was. I didn't want them to like me as someone who I was not. That's when I decided. I wanted them to know me for me, not for something that I was portraying or not telling them.

This demonstrated that he needed other people to be connected to and have community support.

Fran also used her coming out to create new relationships. She moved from the independent nature to one where she was interdependent with others for numerous reasons. She explained:

I've made a lot of new friends. At first, it was hard, but being bi was very different because I didn't know very many people besides me who were bi. So, I had my straight friends who I could talk about boys with, and I had my gay friends who I can talk about girls with. But there was no one I could talk to about both with. Finding the support

community or realizing that there are other people out there like me was a really, really good experience.

Fran found her community in her experience with the GLB community. She has become more connected with other bisexual people, as well as her gay and straight friends.

Participants realized that they could not work through their lives alone. They needed to have others be vital parts of their lives in order to make sense of the issues that they were all going through.

***Education.*** With the anger and hatred toward the GLB community from mainstream religion, it could be easy to fight back. However, the participants agreed that it was not productive to fight. Instead, they felt that it was their responsibility to take a more loving and educational approach to end the hate. Shawn explained how to combat the hatred. “You don’t fight hate with hate; you combat hate with love. . . . I don’t view myself as different from anyone else and I make sure to tell those people that,” he said. Through this, Shawn wants to teach others to be accepting of difference, and that it is possible to be both gay, lesbian, or bisexual and still be a spiritual person.

To go into more specifics, Rose explained how she deals with difficult, hateful people: If I run into someone who I know and they say something [negative about GLB identities and religion], I’ll be like “Hey! Whoa! Hold up!” I won’t get angry about it, but I’ll explain, “This how I am. I’m a lesbian, but I believe in God. I feel like my spiritual values and beliefs and being good person and helping others. That’s what’s getting get me in God’s good graces, not because I’m not straight.”

Rose's approach seemed to be similar to many of the other participants. They tended not to be hateful towards the ignorant others, but rather wanted to educate them on how to see things from their perspectives.

Additionally, bringing this education to the religious community was important to some of the participants. Joe, in particular, said that he feels that he is responsible to do this.

I feel that this is my calling: to become a figurehead within the GLBT community and to work with the church towards understanding the extent of God's love and to understand what homosexuality is. I believe it's my mission or part of my mission on this Earth is to correct the views of the church to make the church more open-minded and accepting of other followers and children.

Through this, participants have shown that they are interested in being involved with educating those who are not accepting of the GLB community both on the personal and community levels.

**Racial identity affects development.** It is important to note that Sarah's experiences maybe affected by her racial identity. While her identity as an African American does not seem to be salient, she does realize that this identity is oppressed, just as is her sexual identity. She explained, "I feel like, especially growing up, we were always taught that 'God doesn't love gays.' Really? But God loves everybody, right? He doesn't love Blacks either. I'm both, so I have two strikes against me." Thus, her racial identity is another form of oppressed identity, which has shaped how Sarah identifies herself.

### **Intersectional Identities**

Participants tended to express that their GLB identity affects their spiritual identity, their spiritual identity affects their GLB identity, or that both affect each other. Discussed below are the findings for the participant's GLB identity affecting his or her spiritual identity, the

participant's spiritual identity affecting his or her GLB identity, and the intersection of both identities.

**GLB identity affects spirituality.** GLB identity can affect spiritual identity because being GLB tended to force a questioning phase and probing commitments (Parks, 2000). This is shown in Brian's ability to reflect on his own spiritual growth since identifying as a gay man. "Because I had that questioning about it, I've grown stronger as a Christian because I've learned that to believe in Jesus and questioning that helped me discover it. Being gay helped me discover that I am a Christian," he said. His gay identity caused him to reconsider how he was spiritually. He has been able to solidify his identity as a Christian through this process.

This is also seen in Dan's reflection on leaving his childhood church and creating his own spiritual development.

This is going to seem contradictory: I feel further from the church, but closer to God because I'm being true to myself. I feel further from the church because I think being gay has caused me to not go to church and feel unwelcome in the church. I feel closer to God because I'm true to myself, and if this how God wanted me to be, I shouldn't deny His creation.

Dan has separated his spiritual self from the confines of an oppressive, organized religion, which was against his gay self, and found ways to connect to his beliefs, faith, and values on a personal level. Dan also has been able to recreate and merge his identities. Thus, instead of being a gay man and a Christian, he can identify as a gay Christian man.

**Spiritual identity affects GLB identity.** Similarly to above, spiritual identity can have an effect on GLB identity. This was seen as participants learned to live as what they termed "moral people" and to keep that in mind for their GLB identity and interactions.



Rose said that her Christian values are still a big part of who she is. She feels that her morals and values have greatly affected how she interacts with others as a lesbian woman.

[My values] have helped shape my identity as a lesbian. [I can] say that this is the kind of lesbian that I'm going to be because of the values I have and because of my spirituality. I'm going to stay true to my values and still be a lesbian.

This showed that she is cognizant of how her identity as a lesbian has been changed and is different from societal expectations.

Likewise, Fran found herself exploring how her spirituality affects her sexuality. She spoke about how she finds strength in her sexuality because her spiritual identity has created the space for her to do so.

I think [my spirituality] has made me a lot more comfortable in being founded in [my bisexuality]. It takes a lot in today's society and in an area like this to identify like this. If I didn't have the spirituality that I have, I don't. . . I wouldn't be as comfortable with being bi.

Through this, Fran's values have created a space for her to fully accept her identity as a bisexual woman.

**Intersectional identity.** As seen above, participants felt that the GLB identity or spiritual identity can affect the other. However, some saw these identities as intertwined and interconnected. They felt that sexual orientation and spirituality were deeply related and shaped each other. For example, Sarah talked about how she made sense of the intersection of her identities.

Because I have these two connecting things, the fact that I know what I believe in and I know who I am, it enhanced who I was as a whole person or who I am as a whole person.

They are interdependent and have influenced each other.

She went on to talk about how she knows what her own beliefs are and can articulate them. Yet, because she feels that she is constantly evolving, she is able to adapt and change her beliefs if the need exists.

Additionally, Shawn looked at himself as a developmental being. He recognized how he was able to integrate both his sexual orientation identity and his spiritual identity, make meaning from the integrated identity, and be able to further that integration in others.

I think [the integration of my identities] kind of sets me aside, or maybe I'm just further along in my walk than others. I think it means that I have moved and am moving closer to finding out who I really am and what I like. I think that it means that I am more in touch with my spirituality and sexuality.

Shawn has made sense of who he is as a gay Christian man and a Christian gay man. He understands that his identity is his own and he fully accepts and celebrates who he is. He has successfully navigated the intersectionality of his GLB and spiritual selves.

### **Summary**

Participants in this study were able to reflect on the formation of their spiritual identity, the formation and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity, how these identities have affected one another, and what it means to be a GLB person of faith or spirit. Themes gathered from the interviews are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

## Chapter Five

### **Summary of Findings and Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how students' gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities and their spiritual identities intersect and affect one another. Eight traditional-age college students participated in semi-structured interviews designed to provide data and insight on the following research questions:

1. How do GLB students describe their spiritual development?
2. How do GLB students perceive the role of spirituality in their decisions to publicly express a GLB identity?
3. How do GLB students perceive the role of their sexual orientation on their spiritual development and expression?

Data analysis revealed a number of thematic findings as well as potential connections between the individuals' development in each identity area. The students felt that their spiritual identity has affected their gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity; that their GLB identity has affected their spiritual identity; and that both the GLB identity and the spiritual identity have affected each other. The themes found were:

1. the intrapersonal identity,
2. judgments,
3. life changing crises, and
4. moving from independence to interdependence.

### **GLB Identity Affecting Spiritual Identity**

Many of the participants expressed that their GLB identity had caused them to reconsider their personal faith, values, and beliefs. In fact, this was a common way they began to question their purpose in life and who they are as people. Shawn explained how he has been asking some big questions since he accepted his gay identity.

From [the time that I've come out] until now, I've just been constantly searching and asking questions and meeting new people and experiencing different things and I'm really trying to figure out where I want to be in my life. At that time, I did kind of lose sense of self. But I think that loss of sense of self aided me into developing my identity now.

Shawn had gone away from his beliefs about what it meant to be gay (a thought put on him by his religious identity and community) and questioned the validity of that stance. He has since created his own definition about what it means to be a gay man, which was shaped through his interactions with others and learning what he wanted to get out of his life.

This phenomenon could be viewed as one interpretation of Parks's (2000) probing commitments. Within this, young adults begin to try new ideas and attempt to find how they can best understand themselves and the world around them (Parks, 2000). Because of the crisis caused by coming out and identifying as a gay man, Shawn utilized probing commitments to figure out how he understood what he believed. This may have caused his lost sense of self because it was unfamiliar and uncomfortable to him. He did go back to his faith after questioning. He now feels grounded in his spiritual identity.

Parks's (2000) theory also deals with dependence. This can be seen through Brian, who appears to be at an earlier developmental level on this factor of spiritual identity. He struggles to make sense of the rules placed on him by his religious authority.

The Bible says you're not supposed be gay; but I've never read the Bible. So, I go off of what people say. I guess religion just confuses me. I mean, mainly since I've come out, I just realized that it really confuses me. . . . I am who I am and I can't change that. I don't see it as a bad thing honestly, but it's confusing. Why should [being gay] be bad? I mean, I love who I love. Why can't that be good?

Brian has been taught from a young age that the Bible has the answers. However, as his gay identity emerged, the Bible's answers have proved to be less true for him. Brian struggled with his authority's diminishing ability to hold absolute truth (Parks, 2000). Brian's questions are his first ideas of fragile inner dependence (Parks, 2000), where he will attempt to create his own ideas about spirituality.

With respect to Parks's (2000) ideas about forms of community, participants reported that the community feeling they felt at their churches before they came out changed dramatically after they did. The churches tended to look negatively on them and treat them poorly. This ultimately caused a separation between some participants and their churches. Therefore, these GLB students did not have the support that they desired. For example, Jane talked about what she missed about her faith before she came out.

Being part of a church, you're being a part of something. It's having people you identify with and that kind of stuff. But as I continued on, I've identified with other groups, I have become a part of other organizations, and I've gone and done other things. I filled the void. . . . I feel like I have an unspoken community within [the GLB community]. . . .

Because I identify with [GLB people], it's one of those things. We just understand each other.

Jane's church community was so unsupportive that she left it. She found refuge and support in the GLB community. Through this, Jane changed her ideas about what a community is and what it should look like. This began when she questioned her church's stance on her lesbian identity and it ended when the conflict between her lesbian identity and her faith community identity were no longer congruent. Because of this, Jane found she was able to create her own self-selected group (Parks, 2000) with the GLB community because its values matched her own.

### **Spiritual Identity Affecting GLB Identity**

Participants also mentioned that their spiritual identity has affected their development as a gay man, lesbian woman, or bisexual person. This can be seen in Fassinger's (1998) model of sexual minority identity formation. Through this model, development occurs along both the individual sexual identity as well as the group membership identity dimensions.

Spirituality gave some participants the reflective space that they needed to build their sexual identity. For example, Rose talked about how her spirituality has become a means of dealing with issues regarding her sexuality.

When I'm going through a hard time because of my sexuality, I feel like I turn to God a lot and I turned to my spirituality to help me get through it. I feel like God is constantly providing me with tools to get through the rough times. I feel like my spirituality has grown stronger. . . . I feel like God is constantly bringing the things, saying here's a way to get through it.

Rose seems to fit in the deepening/commitment stage of Fassinger's model (1998). This is characterized by her fully accepting her identity as a lesbian woman through her expanding

knowledge of self and what she wants out of her life. She is able to find channels within her belief system to deal with her sexuality frustrations. By connecting with God on this level, she may be avoiding the anger and sadness that can accompany this phase (Fassinger & Miller, 1997).

Similarly, Dan found that his spiritual self gave him the confidence to be his gay self. He recognized that his spiritual identity has become stronger, which in turn has strengthened his identity as a gay man.

I'm still as strong a Christian as I have always been, maybe stronger because I believe more myself. . . . I feel closer to God because I'm true to myself, and if this is how God wanted me to be, I shouldn't deny his creation.

His comfort in who he is reflects Fassinger's (1998) individual internalization/synthesis stage. In this phase, Dan "fully internalizes same-sex desire/love as a part of overall identity" (Fassinger & Miller, 1997, p. 58). He has done this by learning to accept himself and finding the understanding that God created him, so he should only be himself.

Moreover, a similar process is occurring on a group level. The participants felt that they needed to find a new means of support for themselves because former groups no longer fit them or could relate to their personal struggles. This proved frustrating for many participants. Joe vented his feelings about the GLB community being separated from the traditional, heterosexual community.

We do have our own culture—it's sad to say, but it's been forced on us, the sense of rejection and being ostracized of not being loved fully by anyone; that you know finding someone to love is going to be so much harder for you depending on where you grew up

because you can't be out you can't be fully open with yourself. . . . You have to embrace yourself; you have to embrace your culture.

Joe, as a religious and spiritual person, was unable to find a support system similar to that of his Catholic faith. As a proud gay man, Joe's ideas of being gay and GLB rights were in conflict with the views of his faith. Because of this, Joe was frustrated with the homophobia that had separated him from his church. This may be seen as Fassinger's (1998) group deepening/commitment phase, which is characterized by having a combination of pride and anger. Joe's identity conflict is intensified when the apparent salience of both are examined.

### **Intersectional and Intrapersonal Identity**

Spirituality and GLB identity were noted as affecting one another. These often opposing identities were explained as being connected and interconnected by the participants. Many noted they considered themselves as just themselves, not liking to identify with social labels.

According to the model presented by Abes et al. (2007), this may mean that some of the socially constructed labels may not be as close to the participants' individual cores. However, because they felt pressure, they did note which identities were more prevalent to each of them. Sexuality tended to be closer to the core of most than spirituality.

One participant, Fran, felt that her spiritual identity was not of high importance. She felt that she was fortunate for this because it made accepting her bisexual identity much easier. She said "I think I've been lucky that I am not from a very strong religious background because otherwise I would have a lot more trouble to figure out who I was and making this change [to be out]." This allowed for her bisexual identity to be more salient to her. Additionally, her meaning making filter (Abes et al., 2007) may be considered to be relatively simple. This is



exemplified by her personal mantra of “be a good person.” She was not fully able to articulate what her valuing this meant other than “for the sake of humanity.”

In contrast, Sarah reported high salience of both spiritual and pansexual identities. Her ideas of these identities were much more internally driven than Fran. This may mean that Sarah is at a higher level of self-authorship than Fran (Baxter Magolda, 2009a) and is able to answer the questions of “How do I know?, Who am I? and What relationships do I want?” (Creamer, Baxter Magolda, & Yue, 2010, p. 550) from a more internal capacity rather than relying on that of external forces (Creamer et al., 2010). Through this Sarah’s meaning making filter may be more complex. This can be seen as she explained how her identities cannot be wrong.

Growing up, we were always taught that “God doesn’t love gays.” Really? But God loves everybody, right? He doesn’t love Blacks either. I’m both, so I have two strikes against me. I don’t agree with that. I don’t believe that there is some ominous force that is going to punish me for being who I am. If God made me, and God doesn’t make mistakes, how can what I’m doing be wrong? So, I never understood that.

Because she explains how she views her identity as complex and can support why she views it with sound ideas, she makes meaning through a more complex process.

Moreover, the identities have been constructed individually. “Identity can only be understood for each person individually, taking into account [his or] her multiple identities as [he or] she had constructed them” (Collins, 2001, p. 127). Because of this, the integration of these identities occurs uniquely. Moreover, this adds to the complexity of understanding the whole person. “Identities are overlapping and mutually influencing. To understand someone’s identity, the whole person must be taken into account rather than only one element of that person” (Collins, 2001, p. 129). Thus, the participants may have been at various degrees of identity

integration. They were choosing either to create their own unique interpretation of an interconnected identity composed of many socially constructed identities or to compartmentalize their multiple identities.

Through the participants explaining their “I’m me” stances, they may have been explaining their core identities (Abes et al., 2007).

### **Developmental Comparisons**

When comparing the estimated developmental levels for the participants at the time of their interviews, these participants tended to be more closely grouped on the Fassinger (1998) continuums and more spread out along the Parks (2000) continuums. This trend is most likely attributed to the students being out on campus. Because they had already accepted their GLB identities and outwardly identify as GLB, the participants were already at further levels of development. Ideas of how participants felt about the earlier stages of their identity development were recalled, but, due to the nature of the study, no participants were currently going through the early phases of GLB identity formation.

However, it also appeared that those students who were at more advanced levels of one theory were also further levels of development on the other; participants at lower levels of one tended to be at lower levels of the other. This pattern tended to fall along the lines of firmness in participants’ own beliefs, level of outness, and age, with junior and senior students appearing to be further along the developmental paths because they had accepted their GLB identity and were more comfortable in being both GLB and spiritual. This trend may not be a surprise as the participants were forced to make meaning of the combination of these identities in a different way. The students may have created their identities in a more holistic manner (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2010), which allowed them to consider the various perspectives and cultivate their own

inner voice (Baxter Magolda, 2009a, 2009b). Because of this, these identities and identity developmental processes could be considered intersectional (Abes et al. 2007; Torres et al. 2010).

Thus, the data suggest that identity development may be an integrated process. The participants' identities tended to develop simultaneously. This supports Abes et al.'s (2007) research, which states that "relationships among socially constructed identities represent a complex interaction among multiple domains of development" (p. 13). Because the participants are making meaning in this fashion, their sense of self was able to be fluid with regards to salience, yet still true to their individual personal values (Abes et al., 2007). This allowed for the holistic creation of their trusted inner voices (Baxter Magolda, 2009b).

### **GLB Students as Spiritual Beings**

GLB students, like others, were seen as having a desire to be spiritual beings and to be accepted for their beliefs. They have similar big questions to those of other students (Lindholm, 2007). To be able to help them find answers and make meaning, a sense of trusted community is one necessary tenet for developing a spiritual self (Parks, 2000).

It is natural that in matters of deep meaning and emotion, students should seek to share them with others closest to them. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the forms of spiritual search that are popular today with college students are social in nature. (Dalton, 2006, p. 171)

This is mirrored by the social search for acceptance among GLB students (Fassinger & Miller, 1997). Because of the social searches in both areas, it is important to look at what a gay, lesbian, or bisexual individual looks for in a spiritual community and what a spiritual individual looks for in the GLB community.

**Being GLB in a religious/spiritual community.** The biggest complaint against religion for the participants was being judged by fellow church members. This caused many to stop going to church or give up on their organized religion. Rose explained, “it’s hard to go to church and be around churchy people because of their general beliefs. . . . I feel like organized religion doesn’t really have a place for me.”

This frustration is a major disruption to developing the essential forms of community. The homophobia that occurs on these institutional and cultural levels creates ways that legitimize the oppression of the GLB community (Blumenfeld, 2010).

However, some churches have become more open to the ideas of acceptance for all. Shawn has found one such place of worship:

[At] the church I go to now, there are so many different races, different ethnic backgrounds. I feel like those people who are different, that they’re all treated as humans. I’m still human. . . . Seeing all these people and also hearing these messages of acceptance [is why I go there].

It is important for GLB students to feel welcomed and not judged at their places of worship. If members of spiritual communities show interest and support GLB students, then the students may feel more connected and be able to create relationships as they explore what it means to be spiritual and be GLB. This has been experienced by Muslim students (another oppressed group in US higher education) and it was shown that “small acts of kindness were highly valued by students and made a huge difference to their sense that both they and their practice of religion belonged on campus” (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2010, p. 302). The same principle could be extended to GLB students and their spiritual practices.

**Being religious/spiritual in a GLB community.** Some participants explained that it was a challenge to be religious or spiritual within the GLB community. For example, Joe noted that “a lot of gay people turn agnostic or atheistic when they come out to themselves.” This is a preemptive move to avoid being judged by the religious community. However, many of the participants did desire to explore the spiritual aspects of their lives.

Because of the conflict that often occurs between religious organizations and GLB persons, the GLB community may not be as accepting of formal spiritual and religious ideas. Yet, similar to the religious community, if the GLB community could open up and have these conversations about spirituality, GLB students might find the necessary community for development along both Parks’s (2000) and Fassinger’s (1998) models. “Finding the support community or realizing that there are other people out there like me was a really, really good experience,” Fran reflected. She has been able to find support for her worldview and her bisexual identity.

**Becoming a GLB person of spirit/faith.** Creating and integrating spiritual and sexual orientation identities requires meaning making complexity. This may be a cause for the potential correspondence of spiritual development and sexual minority identity development. Additionally, because of the intersection of these identities, participants may have developed their inner voices more quickly than their peers (Baxter Magolda, 2009b; Evans et al. 2010; Jones, 2009). This is not unexpected, as Pizzolato (2003) found that diverse student groups often reach self-authorship earlier because they were forced to make their own decisions earlier in life. The decision for many of the participants in this study was to come out.

Coming out for most of the participants was the first oppressed identity which the students assumed. All of these students had some form of Christian background and all but one

was White. Making the choice to outwardly identify as GLB created tension for the participants because they became the “other” in both society’s and mainstream religion’s eyes. By accepting an oppressed identity, the students changed how they were able to make sense of their world. “By examining how [GLB students] are disadvantaged as well as looking to the privileges [they] have, [they] can develop empathy for individuals different from [themselves]” (Blumenfeld, 2010, p. 377). Because the religious community may not be open to GLB persons and the GLB community may not be open to religion or spirituality, the students who desired to be both out and spiritual were left with lots of challenges, but no support (Sanford, 1969).

For Sarah, this was a more complex process. This was due to her identity as an African American. Her racial identity is not overly important to her at this point, which is surprising as many African American students feel that their racial identity is the most salient during the college years, particularly at predominantly White institutions (Thompson & Fretz, 1991). Because this identity is not salient, Sarah is likely in an assimilation identity of the pre-encounter stage on Cross’s Racial Identity Scale (Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Fhagen-Smith, 2002). This pre-encounter stage is noted as seeing White qualities as being more positive than African American ones (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Corkley, Cross, & Worrell, 2001). This also means that one’s own racial identity is not salient (Vandiver, et al., 2001; Vandiver, et al., 2002). Sarah’s sexual orientation identity is more salient for her than is her racial identity, which was evidenced by the fact that she mentioned her African American identity just once in the interview. This was also surprising as the connection between being African American and being a GLB person tends to be a strong intersection for many who identify with both (Ferguson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000).

Additionally, because of the oppression that is felt by the GLB community, this identity forces the individual to give up privilege. This can be a painful process because it adds anxiety to the students' lives (Eddy & Forney, 2000). Because the students are losing their hetero-normative privilege when they come out, they may feel the need to overcompensate by expressing that they are just themselves or that they are normal (Blumenfeld, 2010). This could be the students questioning the idea of moving from a privileged group to that of an oppressed one. They are making meaning out of the complexity of the systems of privilege and oppression (Johnson, 2006) and how it affects them on personal and group-wide levels.

However, integration is possible. It is important to understand that the students were not spiritual and GLB; rather, they are spiritual GLB students. "By focusing on the intersections of their identities, these individuals may be able to integrate their multiple identities. . . . [They can] offer new perspectives that challenge the status quo" (Reynolds & Pope, 1991, p. 179). By creating a community of spiritual GLB students, an accepting, supportive environment can be established; thus, students would have a safe space to discuss their GLB and spiritual issues.

## **Implications**

**Implications for practice.** Student affairs practitioners should understand the importance of community in the development of both sexual minority and spiritual identities. The community is vital to the understanding of the students' major issues of accepting a sexual minority identity, creating a spiritual worldview that is okay with their GLB identity, and creating a community where it is possible to talk about GLB and spiritual issues. "Issues of friendship, sexuality, tolerance, compassion, forgiveness, and autonomy are important aspects of emerging identity that are worked out in the company of peers in the college environment" (Dalton, 2006, p. 171). This community can be fostered by engaging students in dialogue about

the issues that are occurring on campus and around the world. This may help spiritual GLB students feel less alone and could further foster their development.

Additionally, it is important for practitioners to become mentors and support students in their development. This includes becoming “good company” (Baxter Magolda, 2009a, p. 15) for students as they progress and create their inner voices. This is done through balancing challenge and support (Sanford, 1969). Challenges include negotiating complex life challenges, developing personal authority, and collaborating to solve mutual issues; support is issued through respecting thoughts and feelings, helping sort through experience, and working collaboratively to solve problems (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). This will assist students in their values development. “Young adults . . . value places and people where the spiritual dimensions of life are acknowledged and where it is possible to work that delicate mix of sustaining comfort and solace, along with a healthy dollop of stimulation and challenge” (Parks, 2000, p. 202). By becoming mentors, students will be able to create meaning and become self-authored.

Problem-based learning, inquiry learning, service learning, and other forms of teaching that actively engaged learners in exploring ideas encouraged them to listen to and cultivate their internal voices. . . . Participants who encountered these learning partnerships recognized the need to develop their internal voices and, as a result, were better prepared for the complexity of college life, and of life beyond college. (Baxter Magolda, 2009a, p. 276)

Mentoring relationships allow deeper meaning making and further cultural identity development, especially if students have both culturally similar and different mentors (Tisdell, 2003).

Moreover, this could be expanded to higher education professionals, including faculty members.

This will allow for discussions around both sexual orientation issues and spiritual issues.



Additionally, faculty can create opportunities for students to explore these topics in assignments within their current classes to allow for personal reflection and a safe space to discuss such issues.

In addition to mentoring students, student affairs professionals can do more to bring about support for the spiritual issues of GLB students on campus. They can work with groups from the religious sector that affirm GLB rights (i.e. Dignity, Rainbow Baptists; de la Huerta, 1999) to help students make connections between their spirituality and GLB identity. This can be done by establishing a support group for these students to talk about the issues included in being gay, lesbian, or bisexual and spiritual or by bringing in a speaker to talk about this intersection. Moreover, student affairs professionals should have professional development discussions on how to support spiritual GLB students and familiarize themselves with new theories and ideas that can assist them as they work to develop their students. It may also be useful for student affairs and higher education professionals to assess campus ministries and religious life to see if an affirming, supportive environment is being created for GLB students.

**Implications for further research.** This study began to explore the intersectional nature of spirituality and GLB identity. The data collected suggested that there may be connections between students' developmental attainment on Parks's (2000) and Fassinger's (1998) models. Additionally, there may be implications for students' creating their inner voices and achieving self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009b; Jones, 2009).

Further research on this topic should explore the nature of intersectionality of sexuality and spirituality more intentionally. A more definitive correlation and the directionality of development in these could be looked at more closely. Additional studies could look at the meaning making filter (Abes et al., 2007) and its role in the developmental process. Another

area for future study could be the environmental constructs (Torres et al., 2009) and how those affect development. I suspect that the intersection of spirituality and GLB identity may be greatly affected by environmental causes because many of the students did not begin to synthesize and create their spiritual identities until their late high school and college years. Many cited that they did not or could not come out because they were from a small town. Thus, it may be of interest to look at how the environment affects development in both arenas.

Future studies should look at other higher education contexts and environments. This study took place at a mid-sized public institution. Other institutional types should be considered, including private, religiously affiliated, and anti-GLB colleges and universities.

Also, future studies can look at intrapersonal identity and how self construction can affect the integration of multiple identities into a core identity (Abes et al., 2007). This could be done through a post-college, longitudinal study to see how these identities continue to evolve outside of the campus environment. Moreover, research can look to see when an intersection of identity, such as GLB and spiritual identities, becomes more than just a part of an individual and becomes at the core of that individual.

## **Conclusion**

This research indicated a potential connection between students' spiritual identity development and gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity development. Factors within this potential connection were the following themes: (a) personal nature of both GLB and spiritual identity; (b) judgment and being judged; (c) life change causing identity crisis; and, (d) moving from independence to interdependence.

Additionally through this study, current research may have been confirmed (Abes et al, 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2009a, 2009b; Fassinger, 1998; Parks, 2000; Pizzolato, 2003).

Moreover, intersectional identity models were applied to spiritual identity development theory and GLB identity development theory in such a way that there is room for the study of a correlation between the developmental processes of both. Because of this, student affairs practitioners and other higher education professionals, including faculty and staff, should learn how to assist GLB students with their spiritual development through providing a safe space for reflection and exploration of values. Further research is needed to examine the exact relationship between GLB identity development and spiritual identity development.

This research gives some context to the internal struggle that the students can be going through when trying to make meaning of their GLB and spiritual identities. Because of this, student affairs professionals may have a more full understanding of the spiritual nature of GLB students.

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## APPENDIX A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Zachary Birch and Denise Collins, Ph.D. from the Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations Department in the Bayh College of Education at Indiana State University. This study is for a Master's thesis in Student Affairs and Higher Education. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the relationship between college students' gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities and their spiritual identity. More specifically, the study will investigate how students' sexual orientation identity affects their spiritual development, and how students' levels of spiritual development affect their decision to express their sexual orientation identity.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

Participate in a one-hour (60 minute) interview with the Principle Investigator. The interview will consist of questions about GLB identity, spiritual identity, and the intersection of both. The interview will be digitally audio recorded using a digital recorder. After signing this form, your identity will be protected by being assigned a pseudonym, which will be the only identifier for the remainder of the study. You, as the participant, will have the opportunity to decide where to conduct the interview. Following the interview, I will send an interview summary via e-mail, asking you to verify its accuracy.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Due to the immensely personal nature of both spiritual identity and sexual orientation identity, there is a potential for emotional distress. Referrals to counseling services, campus ministries, and other appropriate agencies will be available.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

This interview may create a safe space that offers the opportunity to discuss these subject matters. Additionally, this will create knowledge to help student affairs practitioners understand the phenomena of the intersection of spiritual identity and sexual orientation identity.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality

will be maintained by means of password protecting audio files and transcription documents. Transcripts collected in the interviews will be accessible to the principal investigator only.

All interviews will be digitally audio recorded. The digital file will be stored on a password protected computer and as password protected files. A transcription of the interview will be written out with a pseudonym to ensure that you will not be connected with it. This is to ensure that the data collected are accurate. The transcriptions will also be stored electronically on the password protected computer as password protected files.

• **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study.

• **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact Zac Birch, Principal Investigator, [zbirch@indstate.edu](mailto:zbirch@indstate.edu), (812) 237-4243; or Denise Collins, Ph.D., faculty sponsor, [Denise.Collins@indstate.edu](mailto:Denise.Collins@indstate.edu), (812) 237-2868, or Bayh College of Education, Terre Haute, IN 47809.

• **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at [irb@indstate.edu](mailto:irb@indstate.edu). You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

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I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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***Date of IRB Approval:***      *1/19/2011*  
***IRB Number:***            *11-053*  
***Project Expiration Date:***    *11/15/2011*



## APPENDIX B: QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWS

### Spirituality

- Where you raised in a faith tradition? If so, what was it? How did you feel about this faith tradition?
- How do you define spirituality? What does this mean to you?
- How do you choose to identify spiritually?
- What are your personal values? How do you live these out in your daily life?

### GLB Identity

- When did you first realize your sexual orientation identity was not heterosexual? How did you feel about this?
- When did you decide to “come out”? Why did you want to do this?
- How do you choose to identify your sexual orientation?
- What does it mean to you to be a gay/ lesbian/ bisexual person?

### GLB & Spirituality

- How have your spiritual identity and values changed since coming out? Since coming to college?
- What does it mean to be a GLB person of spirit/ faith?
- Have you changed religions/ faith traditions/ ideas about spirituality since coming out? Why or why not?
- Has identifying as gay/ lesbian/ bisexual has changed your spirituality? How?
- Has your spiritual identity has changed your GLB identity? How?
- Do you feel that you are judged within your childhood faith because of your sexuality? Within your current faith?
- Do you reconcile your GLB identity and your spiritual self with the social pressures placed on the GLB community by Christian/ Islamic/ etc.? How?(for those students who have kept the faith they were raised in)
- Why did you choose to find another faith/ give up on faith after you came out? (for those student who have changed spiritual traditions since coming out)
- Are you active in a religious organization or group? Why or why not? If so, do they know about your GLB identity? Do they accept it? How do you know?
- Has identifying as a GLB person changed your spiritual self? How?
- Do you miss your former spiritual beliefs? Why or why not?
- How do you think that you have dealt with the institutional homophobia in many organized religions?

- What have you experienced in terms of acceptance and prejudice as spiritual/ nonspiritual gay man, lesbian woman, or bisexual person?