AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Making Meaning of Supporting Student Spiritual Development: Perceptions of Graduate Students in a Student Affairs Program

Abstract approved:

Larry D. Roper

This interpretive, descriptive qualitative study explores how graduate students in a student affairs preparation program make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. Six one-on-one semi-structured interviews with six graduate students were conducted in this single-site study. Five prevalent themes emerged from the data, each playing a role in how the participants conceptualized and made meaning of their roles in supporting student spiritual development. They are: (a) definition of spirituality, (b) personal life experience, (c) feelings of discomfort with the role, (d) places of comfort with the role, and (e) the work of student affairs. This study contributes to the understanding of what internal and external factors influence graduate students when they are considering this role, specifically adding to the literature a deeper understanding of areas of discomfort with spirituality. The author suggests ways in which graduate programs can better prepare incoming student affairs professionals for the work of supporting student spiritual development and raises questions about the utility of the term “spirituality” within the student affairs profession.
Making Meaning of Supporting Student Spiritual Development: Perceptions of Graduate Students in a Student Affairs Program

by
Amy K. Thomson

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APPROVED:

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Amy K. Thomson, Author
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DEDICATION

For Roger Stanley Spark
Chapter 1: Introduction

Fourteen years ago, Patrick Love and Donna Talbot (1999) wrote,

Spirituality and spiritual development are topics that do not appear very often in higher education and student affairs literature. In fact, only one short essay addressing spirituality or spiritual development has appeared in any of the major student affairs journals…in the past 15 years. (p. 361)

Since the publication of this prescient and now definitive piece of scholarship, the landscape of higher education’s discourse and activity with regard to spirituality has been dramatically altered. In the last decade there has been a surge of student affairs literature stating the need to enhance the holistic development of undergraduates by addressing spiritual development. As key voices in this groundswell of promotion and interest include foundational developmental theorists Arthur Chickering and Alexander Astin, the topic of spirituality continues to gain traction within the student affairs community. Professional organizations have expanded to include interest groups around this topic (e.g., NASPA’s Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education Knowledge Community), and the scholarly literature has entire journal issues devoted to the topic (e.g., New Directions for Student Services, issues 95 and 125).

In identifying this discourse as perhaps a return to tradition, authors have cited documents that outline the earliest philosophical foundations of the work of student affairs (such as the Student Personnel Point of View first published in 1937), which stressed the importance of holistically considering the college student, and within which “religion and spirituality were specifically mentioned as relevant components” to this endeavor (Kocet & Stewart, 2011, p. 1). In a content analysis of 13 “major student affairs
philosophical statements,” Evans and Reason (2001) found one theme unique to all documents, identifying “the most prevalent and foundational concept” as the idea that “the ‘whole’ student must be considered in every educational endeavor” (p. 370). If student affairs is steeped in a legacy of addressing the “whole” student, is there something new about the emerging discourse on spirituality? Does a focus on spiritual development meet a current need in communities of higher education? Is there compelling evidence that makes this a worthy endeavor for student affairs? An overview of some answers to these questions will be helpful in framing and prefacing the purpose and goals at the heart of the present study.

**Defining Spirituality**

The abstract concept of spirituality impels the question of definition and as such, it is a conundrum of sorts to discover there is no definitive consensus within the literature of what exactly is meant by “spirituality.” Instead, there appears to be a concerted effort of reclamation of a term that often conjures up connections to religious or sectarian convictions. While these connections are not necessarily excluded from the burgeoning education definition, the recent movement within higher education looks to broaden spirituality as an aspect of student identity and growth touching on deeper, harder to define, universal aspects of human development.

Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) refer to spirituality as that which deals with the subjective, inner life of an individual, touching upon personal values, our sense of who we are and where we come from, the meaning and purpose of our life, and our sense of connectedness to the world (p. 4). Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) define spirituality as a “highly personal search for ultimate meaning, purpose, and values” (p.
Kazanjian (1998) regards spirituality as “that which animates the mind and body, giving meaning, purpose and context to thought, word and action. Think of it as the meaning-making aspect of learning” (p. 37). For Tisdell (2003), spirituality is also fundamentally a meaning-making process, and involves movement toward greater authenticity within one’s life (p. 29).

Love and Talbot (1999) define spirituality using a set of propositions of spiritual development that touch upon many of the myriad definitions of spirituality within the higher education literature. Described as processes that interrelate and can be experienced concurrently, the propositions posit spiritual development as: (a) an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness; (b) continually transcending of one’s locus of centricity; (c) expanding connectedness to self and others via interpersonal relationships and community; (d) finding meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life; and (e) an openness to examining relationship with a higher power or life essence that transcends rational ways of knowing and human existence (pp. 364-367). The propositions of Love and Talbot (1999) have been recognized as the most cited and used definition of spirituality within the student affairs literature (Estanek, 2006, p. 273).

**Students and Spirituality**

Authors are careful to note the terms religion, faith, and spirituality are used interchangeably within cultures and, as such, this strikes the researcher as an ever-present limitation within the body of research. While researchers define spirituality within their work, it is sometimes acknowledged that this definition may conflict with their research subjects’ own conceptualizations of spirituality. As Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) state, “The distinctions between religiousness and spirituality are perhaps less obvious to
first-year students completing survey items than to scholars who have worked to carefully parse out the meaning underlying these weighted terms” (p. 738). With this in mind, what follows is a brief overview of research that has been cited as showing both a need for addressing spirituality within higher education, as well as possible evidence that frames the support of student spiritual development as a worthy endeavor for student affairs professionals.

Astin et al.’s (2011) Spirituality in Higher Education project found that of approximately 112,000 undergraduate first-year students, “80% reported having an interest in spirituality” (Fisler et al., 2009). Of students who scored high on measures that reflected a “search for meaning”, 90% believed that it was “‘essential’ or ‘very important’ for their campus to enhance their self-understanding” and 73% of them responded that campuses should “encourage personal expression of spirituality” (Astin et al., p. 31). Fifty percent of students at the end of their junior year “rated ‘integrating spirituality in my life’ as a ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ life goal” (Astin et al., p. 31).

In addition to evidence showing this an area of interest to undergraduates, research reflects students struggling with existential and spiritual issues during college (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fisler et al., 2009). Alternately, spirituality may also be a protective measure against stress, low self-esteem, and antisocial behavior such as stealing and property damage (Knox, Langehough, Walters, & Rowley, 1998; Muller & Dennis, 2007). Astin et al. (2011) found certain qualities of spiritual growth correlated with outcomes such as: (a) higher GPAs; (b) increased development of leadership skills, psychological well being, and satisfaction with regards to college experience; and (c) increased ability to get along with different cultures as well as commitment to promoting
racial understanding. Research by Kuh and Gonyea (2006) found that “students who frequently engage in spirituality-enhancing practices also participate more in a broad cross-section of collegiate activities” (p. 44) including exercise, cultural events, and community service.

The cited research speaks to an active and possibly influential aspect of students’ lives that could be nurtured in the higher education environment, and, in turn, may have a direct relationship with co-curricular outcomes that educators are seeking to develop within students. It is argued in the literature that if the profession believes in a “holistic educational paradigm that regards mind, body, and spirit as cooperative and mutually enhancing aspects of the human experience” (Stewart, Kocet, & Lobdell, 2011, p. 11) then it follows to support spiritual needs in the same way physical or emotional needs of students are supported.

**Overview of Present Study**

In the past decade there has been a proliferation of research on spirituality in undergraduate students’ lives, as well as a growing trend within the student affairs literature explicitly stating the need to enhance the holistic development of undergraduates by addressing and supporting spiritual development. This discourse has been referred to as both a return to tradition for the student affairs field and an emerging new area of study. Influential developmental theorists are involved in this “call” to the profession, and student affairs scholarship and professional organizations have proactively responded to this call. This being said, there is evidence that practitioners working in the field are wary of discussions of spirituality and may consider supporting spiritual development outside their “role” as student affairs professionals (Burchell, Lee,
& Olsen, 2010; Kiessling, 2010), as spirituality continues to be conflated with, or narrowly defined solely as, religion (Moran & Curtis, 2004). Findings like these may be indicative of the emergent nature of this discourse—with its broadening definition of spirituality—as many professionals working in the field completed graduate studies before the spirituality movement gained traction in education. Alternately, perhaps these findings bring to light an ongoing scholarship/practitioner divide.

Given that the spirituality literature/discourse is now over a decade old, the researcher is interested in how this “call” to student affairs is currently being understood by the profession’s up-and-coming practitioners. Considering the profession’s emergent emphasis on spirituality, these individuals may very well be tasked to shape, nurture, assess, and evaluate services that address or support the spiritual lives of students. This present study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the ways in which incoming student affairs professionals—specifically graduate students in a student affairs preparation program—make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. This is a qualitative study using an interpretive social science approach. Analyzing data collected from 6 one-on-one interviews at a large, public university in the northwest United States, the researcher will attempt to describe how supporting student spiritual development is understood and conceived by graduate students in the field of student affairs, through the knowledge, meanings, and self-understanding that they ascribe to this process.

The primary purpose of this study is to describe how graduate students in a student affairs preparation program understand and conceptualize their role in supporting student spiritual development. Given the number of subjects and the nature of qualitative
methodology, the research is not intended to generalize all student affairs’ graduate students, but to provide an in-depth examination of an emergent discourse and phenomenon (Creswell, 2005, p. 203). This study provides a snapshot of the current pulse of the spirituality discourse among study participants; it provides a greater understanding of how graduate students’ make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development; and it lays the groundwork for further research into the academic and practical preparation of future student affairs professionals; and it raises questions that may have implications for the future of the spirituality discourse within student affairs.

**Definition of Terms**

The researcher is aware the present study reveals a number of varying definitions of spirituality held by the research subjects. This was an assumption of the study and was a thematic component for data interpretation. As is already the case in published studies in the field, these varying definitions of spirituality are “part of the hermeneutic process. That is, studies are not conducted based upon a commonly held definition of spirituality. Instead, defining spirituality is a part of the interpretation itself” (Estanek, 2006, p. 272).

This being said, the lens through which the researcher situates spirituality as a construct and practice is Love and Talbot’s (1999) five processes of spiritual development, previously explored herein:

- Spiritual development involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development.
- Spiritual development involves the process of continually transcending one’s current locus of centricity.
- Spiritual development involves developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community.
- Spiritual development involves deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life.
• Spiritual development involves an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing (pp. 364-367).

Estanek (2006), within her qualitative study of definitions of spirituality, cites this definition as “the first, and most quoted, definition of spirituality in student affairs literature. It is also the most comprehensive” (p. 273). Like Estanek (2006), the researcher believes that “by taking a developmental approach to spirituality we locate spirituality within the mainstream of the student affairs profession” (p. 278). This approach asks of students “what we ask of them in other areas of development: that they reflect upon their spirituality, however they understand it, in light of experience and integrate it into their emerging adult self” (p. 279). When viewed developmentally, and defined in such a way, it is the researcher’s belief the work of supporting student spiritual development can be “understood as a dimension of good practice” (p. 278).
Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

What follows are key areas of scholarship that will both aid the reader in understanding the foundations and parameters of this present study, as well as offer insight when considering the contribution of the research herein. As the focus of this study is on the perceptions and meaning making of graduate student within a student affairs preparation program on the topic of spiritual development, this literature review will examine: (a) relevant student development theory; (b) research that discusses both the prevalence and importance of spirituality in the lives of students, as well as the impact it may have on their lives that is of particular interest to student affairs practitioners; (c) cited best practices in supporting student spiritual development; (d) empirical research exploring the ideas, feelings, and practice of student affairs practitioners around the topic of spirituality and spiritual development; and (e) empirical research on graduate students and the student affairs preparation programs of which they are a part, regarding spirituality and spiritual development.

During the research gathering process, queries were limited to spirituality and spiritual development in higher education and student affairs. Literature that focused exclusively on religiosity (as a concept separate from spirituality) was excluded from this review in order to: give specific parameters to this study; align with the broadened definition of spirituality that is a hallmark of the emergent discourse; and broaden/boundary the discussion of spirituality within the definition adhered to by the researcher—those ideas reflected in Love and Talbot’s (1999) propositions of spirituality development—as it is one the researcher believes, as previously discussed herein, best places spiritual development within the purview of all student affair practitioners.
Theoretical Foundations

In their analysis of student affairs philosophical statements and subsequent identification of guiding principles of the profession, Evans and Reason (2001) state,

Merely providing services to students who showed up with needs and requests was viewed as inadequate for a profession that truly wishes to have an impact on students. The importance of identifying developmental and learning outcomes and designing interventions to achieve these outcomes was highlighted again and again. To be intentional…the work of student affairs professionals must be grounded in research and theory. (p. 373)

As such, when considering how to conceptualize and operationalize support of spiritual development, it is prudent to ground concepts and actions in the developmental theory of the profession, as to be sure these interventions, promotions, or support services are developmentally appropriate and align with targeted outcomes of the work. The emergent discourse on spirituality identifies spiritual development as a component of identity development. Specifically, Love and Talbot (1999) in framing their spiritual development propositions, assume “the quest for spiritual development is an innate aspect of human development” and spirituality and spiritual development (which they use as interchangeable concepts) “represent a process (i.e., movement, interaction, transcendence) with no endpoint” (p. 364).

This being said, no single theory of spiritual development—as conceptualized by Love and Talbot (1999)—exists. Love and Talbot (1999) summarize this as a challenge of studying spirituality from a scholarly perspective, stating, “Perhaps the variations in students’ spiritual experiences make it difficult to develop parsimonious theories of spiritual development” (pp. 370-371). When student affairs scholars do discuss spiritual development theory, they most often turn to one of two faith development theories authored by either James Fowler (1981, 1986, 1996, 2000) or Sharon Daloz Parks (1986,
Fisler et al. (2009) argue, “Definitions of faith appear to be more closely akin to the concept of spirituality than to the concept of religion, although the term is often used as a substitute for religion” (p. 259). Both Fowler’s (1981, 1986) and Parks’s (1986, 2000, 2011) faith development models will be briefly outlined, as they provide a foundation for considering faith formation as an aspect of spirituality within both secular and sectarian realms.

Even within models of faith development, the subject at the center of these frameworks is lengthily described as opposed to pithily defined. For example, Fowler (1986), when framing his Theory of Faith Development, describes faith as,

[having] to do with the making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning. It is a mode of knowing and being. In faith, we shape our lives in relation to more or less comprehensive convictions or assumptions about reality. Faith composes a felt sense of the world as having character, pattern, and unity...It orients us toward centers of power and value which promise to sustain our lives. (p. 15)

Fowler (1981) considers faith to be, “the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence” (p. 14) and goes on to call it a universal feature of human life. It is, “an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions” (p. 14). Fowler (1986) views faith as relational—represented by a triangle with energy flowing in both directions between baselines of self, others, and “supra-ordinate value” of shared, agreed-upon trusts and beliefs (p. 17).

Fowler’s (1981, 1986, 1996, 2000) theory, heavily influenced by the intellectual and moral development theories of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg respectively, consists of seven stages of faith development that individuals can move through as their faith matures. The model moves from a “prestage” of *primal faith*, which is prelinguistic and based upon one’s relationship with caretakers in infancy, to a final stage of
universalizing faith, in which he cites Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Mahatma Gandhi as examples of those who have reached this most advanced “radical decentration from self” (Fowler, 2000, p. 55). The model’s stages are labeled as (a) Primal Faith, (b) Intuitive-Projective Faith, (c) Mythic-Literal Faith, (d) Synthetic-Conventional Faith, (e) Individuative-Reflective Faith, (f) Conjunctive Faith, and (g) Universalizing Faith, with “each proceeding stage in his model…a more complex and comprehensive way of understanding” one’s faith (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 197).

“Movement from one of these stages to the next is not an automatic function of biological maturation, chronological age, psychological development, or mental age” (Fowler, 1986, p. 27) but instead transitions occur via crises and experiences that cause a person to confront the limits of one’s present pattern of knowing. In this framework, some individuals may never move beyond certain stages within the model.

Critiques of Fowler’s theory often take issue with his definition of faith (as too broad); find the framework theistic rather than nonreligious, and specifically biased in favor of Christianity; and see the theory as steeped in a Western cultural perspective and/or excluding of the voice/experiences of women (Evans et al., 2010, pp. 201-202). Higher education literature often applies Fowler’s theory to counseling and teaching, utilizing it as a framework that may shed light on clients’ or students’ ideas about faith or their religious belief systems (Evans et al., 2010, p. 201). The researcher sees a similar utility in Fowler’s theory as a model that may aid student affairs professionals in better understanding students’ crises of faith. However, when it comes to creation of interventions and support services for students, student affairs scholars often find Sharon

Sharon Daloz Parks (1986, 2000, 2011) devotes no less than one chapter of each of her books to defining faith. For Parks (1986), faith “is something that all human beings do” (p. 12). She calls it “the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience” (Parks, 2000, p. 7). In describing this meaning-making, Parks (1986) states,

Meaning-making is the activity of seeking pattern, order, form, and significance. To be human is to seek coherence and correspondence in the disparate elements of existence. To be human is to want to make sense out of things. To be human is to want to be oriented to one’s surroundings. To be human is to seek to understand the fitting connections between things. To be human is to desire relationship. It is in the activity of finding and being found by meaning that we as modern persons come closest to recognizing our participation in the life of faith. It is in this activity of composing and being composed by meaning, then, that I invite the reader to associate with the word faith. (p. 14)

“God” [Parks’s quotes] represents the values and center of power for an individual; it could be defined as a focus or idea to which a person is committed (Parks, 2011, p. 30). In this way, the journey of faith development does not assume belief in God as a supreme being. Parks’s (1986, 2000, 2011) Faith Development Theory presents four periods of faith development: adolescent or conventional, young adult, tested adult, and mature adult. She identifies three forms of development that influence the process of faith development: (a) forms of knowing (five cognitive aspects of faith development), (b) forms of dependence (four affective aspects of faith development), and (c) forms of community (five social aspects of faith development). The components within each form of development, with their corresponding periods, are briefly outlined below.
During the adolescent period, Parks (2011) identifies forms of knowing as authority figures or objects (such as the Bible) outside of oneself and labels it *authority-bound* (p. 72). This eventually moves to *unqualified relativism* that brings with it the realization that reality may have more than one form (p. 75) and is no longer absolute. The form of dependence in this period is labeled *dependent/counterdependent* (pp. 98-99), which posits one’s development as “dependent on whatever and whoever the authority is in one’s life” (Love, 2001, p. 11). When one’s black and white worldview shifts to something more ambiguous and authority figures are seen as fallible then the counterdependent piece comes into play as a reaction against authority. *Conventional community* and *diffuse community* are identified as forms of community, with conventional community being face-to-face relationships with significant people or groups who share the same cultural norms or interests, and diffuse community occurring when one becomes open to different ideas and begins to look for new communities, but ultimately one’s commitment to any community lessens (Parks, 2011, p. 119).

During the young adult period, Parks (2011) labels one’s form of knowing as *probing commitment*, which is characterized by tentative commitments “centered on future plans related to relationships, vocation, and faith” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 204) that are often short term. Coupled with this is the form of dependence of *fragile inner dependence* wherein the individual begins to balance one’s own knowledge and experience with the views of others. There is recognition of the ability to make independent decisions and begin shaping one’s own future. A *mentoring community* is needed for development through this period. These communities are considered key to
offering support to young adults as they continue to move further away from the beliefs of their past adolescence (Parks, 2011, pp 120-123).

In Parks’s (2011) theory, the tested adult period brings tested commitment, a form of knowing wherein individuals advance into adulthood with more secure commitments. A confident inner dependence grows and is characterized by increasing confidence in one’s abilities to “shape their destinies” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 205) and is a precursor to active inner dialogue and regular reflection on one’s values and ethics. The form of community in this period is a self-selected group, where adults seek out preferred relationships with communities that share similar beliefs (Parks, 2011, pp. 128-129).

Finally, when one has reached the mature adult period, the form of knowing is convictional commitment – a deep commitment resulting from “actively exploring the complexity and mystery of life” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 204). The form of dependence becomes interdependence and others’ perspectives are valued rather than experienced as a challenge to one’s beliefs. A form of community that is open to the other is embraced as awareness of difference and otherness is seen as a path to continued growth.

Parks worked with and was heavily influenced by Fowler and his Theory of Faith Development and this may be why they share similar critiques as being biased by Western cultural assumptions; lacking in women’s possibly unique experiences; and ignoring potential differences related to individuals’ ethnicities (Evans et al., 2010, p. 209-210). This being said, two key differences in Parks’s theory—her focus on both structure and content/context of faith (as opposed to Fowler’s focus on symbolism and intellect) and her special consideration of a young adulthood period—may play a role in why student affairs scholars/professionals more often cite and find Parks’s theory more
accessible to praxis. But while Parks decided to place development stages into specific life periods (i.e., young adulthood, adult), her delineations of forms of knowing, forms of dependence, and forms of community could happen at any point in one’s life and are not necessarily bound to an age group. She herself notes the young adulthood stage “rarely occurs until at least age seventeen and that many people never reach it at all” (as cited by Evans, et al., 2010, p. 203). Fowler (1981) frames his stages as reflective of various faith processes, which he loosely ties to age, but also acknowledges wide variations of possible movement. In referring to the fourth stage of his theory (individuative-reflective faith), Fowler (1981) states it “most appropriately takes form in young adulthood” but that “for a significant group it emerges only in the mid-thirties or forties” (p. 182). So while Parks’s (1986, 2000, 2011) clearly delineated young adult period may at first glance seem appealing to educators, it is more likely her description of development at three different levels (affective, social, and cognitive) that makes it seemingly more practical. As Love (2002) states, “through [Parks’s] framework one can view both the structures and the content of meaning making” (p. 373). Parks’s identification of mentoring communities as an important developmental feature within the young adult phase is one such example of a structure often identified within the best practice literature of student support services.

The many-layered and dimensioned aspect of Parks’s (1986, 2000, 2011) Faith Development Theory highlights the complication of seeking a singular, one-size-fits-all, spiritual development model. If spirituality encompasses one’s entirety of being, as burgeoning attempts at definition seem to attempt to describe, then the researcher posits what is being newly packaged within student affairs as “spirituality” touches upon a broad range of student development spheres that has been addressed within myriad
theoretical development models of the profession. Indeed, scholars have noted the influence that intellectual, moral, and identity development theories have had on faith development theories (e.g., Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006; Evans et al., 2010; Love, 2001, 2002). When considering Love and Talbot’s (1999) propositions of spiritual development, one could conceptualize Chickering’s (1969) Theory of Identity Development, Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Theory of Self-Authorship, and Kohlberg’s (1981) Moral Development Theory as possibly providing further insight into aspects of the spiritual development of students. As spirituality is not one-dimensional or easily defined, it is likely important to think beyond solely faith development theory when framing student spiritual support services.

**Spirituality in the Lives of Students**

Complementing the theoretical literature that might undergird student affairs practitioners’ framing of spiritual development, research provides information on the prevalence of spiritual interest among students; students’ thoughts about spirituality within the higher education environment; and the ways students may experience and engage with spirituality. These studies offer an overview of key points of discourse concerning spirituality in the lives of students.

Perhaps the most well known study used to tout the need for colleges and universities engagement in the spiritual development of students is the Spirituality in Higher Education project with the Higher Educational Research Institute (HERI) led by Alexander Astin. Percentages from this longitudinal survey research (with data collected between 2004-2007) are cited heavily within the spirituality literature to reflect current student interest in the topic. And indeed, the College Students’ Beliefs and Values
(CSBV) Survey administered to approximately 112,000 undergraduate first-year students indicated that 80% reported having an interest in spirituality “to some or a great extent” (Higher Education Research Institute, n.d.b, p. 4). Additionally, of the students who scored high on scales measuring their degree of spirituality, the great majority of them (90%) believed that it was “‘essential’ or ‘very important’ for their campus to enhance their self-understanding”; 85% thought their campus should “provide for their emotional development”; and 73% of them responded that their campus should “encourage personal expression of spirituality” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 31). The longitudinal research found that 50% of students, by the end of their junior year, “rated ‘integrating spirituality in my life’ as a ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ life goal” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 31). The CSBV survey (Higher Education Research Institute, n.d.a) uses the terms “religious” and “spiritual” throughout as separate measures, though neither is defined on the instrument nor are they identified specifically as constructs addressing two different ideas.

In an earlier, smaller study, Dennis, Muller, Miller, & Banerjee (2004) explored spirituality with 524 college students using a quantitative instrument that did not mention the words religion or spirituality. The authors defined spirituality as “a way of being” that includes having “life goals, direction, and eagerness for living” (p. 220). The instrument used was designed to measure meaning in life, including such concepts as life purpose, goal seeking, and death acceptance, as well as personal meaning, and existential transcendence—defined as “a broader view of life beyond the personal level” (p. 223). Results indicated that students, in general, had a moderate degree of spirituality, scoring 75.84 out of a possible 112. What is most notable about this study, and warranting inclusion herein, is the finding that the spirituality “score” was substantially higher than a
1981 normative sample, suggesting that the college students “may view life more meaningfully than college students 20 years” prior [to 2004] or they were better able to express it than their earlier counterparts (p. 223). This could provide some empirical evidence that the emerging discourse of spirituality within higher education may be following a greater cultural trend towards more openness and/or interest in this topic.

Information on how students conceptualize or engage with spirituality can aid student affairs practitioners in understanding ways to approach support of spiritual development. Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, and Echols (2006) sought to identify forms and patterns of student spiritual practice. They defined spirituality as, “all forms of reflection and introspection in which the primary goal is to explore one’s relationship to the transcendent in order to deepen and enrich personal meaning, purpose, authenticity, and wholeness” and practice was defined as “behaviors and activities that college students engage in as part of their spiritual searches” (p. 5). Findings showed those inclined to experience their spirituality through religion were: (a) faith centered seekers, who practice spirituality within a particular religious tradition; and/or (b) multi-religious seekers, who explore multi-religious and interfaith practice and dialogue. Those with a secular approach were: (a) mindfulness seekers, employing spirituality in order to increase self-awareness and understanding; and (b) wellness seekers, those trying to “achieve a more holistic, healthy and integrated way of life” (p. 7). These categories are not mutually exclusive. While a great limitation to the research is the absence of methodology, findings provide a framework in which to consider various ways students practice or engage with spirituality in their lives.
Of Particular Interest to Student Affairs

While it is useful to identify spirituality as an area of interest to students and better understand how it may be practiced, research that reflects possible student needs and educational outcomes with regard to spiritual development has particular relevance to student affairs practitioners. The literature shows spirituality to be a point of struggle for students, as well as both a possible correlate of positive educational outcomes and a protective factor against negative behavior. These perceived needs and outcomes are generally cited to further illustrate the “worth” in supporting spiritual development.

Data garnered from the Spirituality in Higher Education project (Astin et al., 2011) previously described herein, show spiritual struggle as a typical experience in the lives of students. Bryant and Astin (2008) define spiritual struggle as “intrapsychic concerns about matters of faith, purpose, and meaning in life” (p. 2). Twenty-one percent of students responded that “they frequently ‘struggled to understand evil, suffering, and death,’ while 18% had frequently questioned their religious/spiritual beliefs” (p. 12). Additionally, 16% felt to a great extent, “unsettled about spiritual/religious matters”, while one in ten students felt “disillusioned with my religious upbringing”, and 40% occasionally experienced anger toward God” (p. 12).

In an attempt to identify correlates and consequences of these spiritual struggles, Bryant and Astin (2008) found that: (a) belonging to a non-dominant religion—Islamic, Buddhist, Unitarian, Hindu, and Eastern Orthodox; (b) being female; (c) attending a religious college; (d) majoring in psychology; and (e) having “experiences in college that challenge, disorient, and introduce students to new and unfamiliar worldviews” (p. 20) all correlated with increased experience of spiritual struggle. Higher rates of spiritual
struggle were associated with: (a) psychological distress; (b) poorer physical health; and (c) lower confidence in “personal, social, and intellectual competencies” (p. 16). Possible consequences of struggle were not all negative—it was also positively associated with students “reporting that their ‘acceptance of people with different religious/spiritual views’ has grown much stronger since entering college” (p. 17).

Subsequent qualitative research supports and adds further depth to these findings. Citing research that showed approximately 25% of students who sought services from college counseling centers reported moderate or extreme spiritual or religious distress (Johnson & Hayes, 2003), Fisler et al. (2009) identified ways spiritual struggle (as defined by the subjects) was encountered and how these struggles came to be “resolved.” Students encountered spiritual struggle via: (a) academics, such as religion classes or being exposed to opposing viewpoints in classrooms, which stimulated critical thinking; (b) external influences—mentors, roommates, student groups, and the campus climate of religious tolerance—which were sources of both challenge and support; and (c) internal influences—books, and internal self-study of core values—wherein the student often wrestled with emerging thoughts/ideas. Four themes emerged regarding how students resolved struggles: (a) recommitment to their existing faith, (b) a slight readjustment to their spiritual or religious values, (c) blending aspects of their spiritual upbringing with new perspectives, and (d) loss of faith (pp. 265-266). While these “resolutions” represented where students currently were with their spirituality, most—even those who felt committed to their faith—indicated they were still actively questioning and exploring spirituality. As such, the spiritual struggles of students have likely not reached a final resolution in their senior year in college.
That spirituality is an area of struggle within students’ lives, and likely remains unresolved, supports faith development models that place traditionally aged students within developmental stages of continued spiritual growth and/or development. As expressed by Bryant and Astin (2008), “Spiritual growth can occur as a result of struggling….Many developmental frameworks assume in fact that ‘crisis’ is both necessary and instrumental in promoting personal growth and maturation” (p. 5). However, “spiritual growth in the wake of crisis cannot be automatically assumed…There must be a balance between challenge and support…Without adequate challenge, growth may stagnate; without adequate support, faith may be lost” (p. 5). The work and role of student affairs practitioners can be located here—filling a need for adequate guidance and support for students struggling with spirituality.

And what of a healthy balance of challenge and support with regard to spiritual development? Are there reasons other than the support of struggling students that might make supporting spiritual development of interest to student affairs practitioners? While not being able to show direct causation, research has shown spirituality measures correlate with outcomes or behaviors many would consider favorable, and may also serve as a protective measure against negative behaviors. Knox et al. (1998), using measures of both religiosity and spirituality, found that students who scored higher in these realms also reported having higher self-esteem and possessed more competencies related to being able to better thrive on one’s own, such as “having a purpose in life,” “finding a way to make things better,” and “persevering in the face of obstacles” (p. 431). Additionally these students were less likely to engage in antisocial behaviors such as stealing, damaging property, and getting in trouble with law enforcement.
Over a decade later, the findings of Astin et al. (2011) support and add a wider breadth of correlates related to spirituality and spiritual growth. The CSBV survey used in the Spirituality in Higher Education project measures spirituality along five dimensions. These five measures focus on two “internally directed aspects of students’ spirituality” and three “externally directed aspects” (p. 20). They are, respectively,

- *Spiritual Quest*, the student’s interest in searching in searching for meaning/purpose in life, attaining inner harmony, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life.
- *Equanimity*, the extent to which the student feels at peace or is centered, is able to find meaning in times of hardship, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of her/his life.
- *Ethic of Caring*, the student’s degree of commitment to values such as helping others in difficulty, reducing pain and suffering in the world, promoting racial understanding, trying to change things that are unfair in the world, and making the world a better place.
- *Charitable Involvement*, activities such as participating in community service, donating money to charity, and helping friends with personal problems.
- *Ecumenical Worldview*, the extent to which the student is interested in different religious traditions, seeks to understand other countries and cultures, feels a strong connection to all humanity, believes in the goodness of all people, accepts others as they are, and believes that all life is interconnected and that love is at the root of all the great religions. (pp. 20-21)

After controlling for other variables, Astin et al. (2011) looked at whether changes in spiritual measures correlated with changes in three areas of “more traditional college outcomes” (p. 116) including: (a) intellectual/academic outcomes, such as grades, educational aspirations, and intellectual self-esteem; (b) personal/emotional outcomes, such as psychological well-being, leadership abilities, and satisfaction with college; and (c) attitudinal outcomes, such as the ability to get along with people of different races and cultures, and placing importance on promoting racial understanding.

Key findings from Astin et al. (2011) indicated that increased growth in the qualities of equanimity, ethic of caring, and ecumenical worldview “has positive effects
on virtually all of the traditional outcomes” (p. 135). Growth in equanimity is shown to enhance “grade point average, leadership skills, psychological well-being, and self-rated ability to get along with other races and cultures, and satisfaction with college” (p. 135). Growth in ethic of caring and ecumenical worldview “enhances students’ interest in postgraduate study, self-rated ability to get along with other races and cultures, and commitment to promoting racial understanding” (p. 135). Increased growth in spiritual quest “enhances the student’s intellectual self-esteem but tends to lower the student’s satisfaction with college and sense of psychological well-being” (p. 135).

In examining spirituality as it relates to engagement, Kuh and Gonyea (2006) analyzed National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data to look at correlates associated with students who engaged in spirituality-enhancing practices such as worship, meditation, or prayer. Those who frequently engaged in these practices were more likely to exercise, attend cultural events, participate in community service and, echoing the findings of Astin et al. (2011), were more satisfied with college. They found no evidence that spiritual practices have a negative effect on co-curricular activities.

The emerging discourse on spirituality in higher education posits that a heightened sense of spirituality or spiritual growth can bolster co-curricular outcomes educators are seeking to develop within students. While these finding may be attractive to student affairs professionals, it is important to address a key limitation in the research: the absence of a direct causal relationship. The research can certainly be used to make a case for the benefits of supporting those students for whom spirituality is a salient and active aspect of their lives. It would be useful to have more research on the benefit of addressing aspects of the spiritual with students who would score low on measures of spirituality.
Also, the absence of a singular definition of spirituality can be felt again as a research limitation. This is illustrated in the need to look at studies on a case by case basis to examine points of overlap and connection, as measures of spirituality may differ and may include one or more items of religiosity, spiritual practice, or abstract ideas/feelings about one’s place in the world. Do these studies address the same construct if one measures something akin to religious practice and another a person’s sense of purpose in the world? If these constructs are connected, how do practitioners create services to support both ends?

**Best Practices**

There is a danger of stifling creativity and innovation when declaring best practices, especially as the discourse is still developing with regard to support of student spiritual development. The literature however is replete with case studies and brainstorming of practices and programming addressing the praxis of spiritual development support. In an attempt to offer a broad synopsis, what follows is a brief overview of: professional standards; common reported practices; learning environments/delivery methods that have been found to be correlates of aspects of spiritual development as defined by Love and Talbot (1999); and ways in which practitioners are thinking about addressing spirituality within already-present functional areas.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) promotes standards in student affairs, student services, and student development programs. CAS (2009) publishes a guide to professional standards, within which “Campus Religious and/or Spiritual Programs” (CRSP) (pp. 116-122) are addressed.
CAS states student learning and development within CRSP must promote purposeful and holistic outcomes that “prepare students for satisfying and productive lifestyles, work, and civic participation” (p. 116). Outcomes are identified within the following realms: (a) knowledge acquisition, integration, construction, and application; (b) intrapersonal development, including self-understanding and realistic self-appraisal; (c) interpersonal competence, including meaningful relationships and interdependence; (d) humanitarianism and civic engagement, including appreciation of cultural differences and global perspective; and (e) practical competence, such as pursuit of goals, maintaining health and wellness, and living a purposeful and satisfying life (p. 116). To these ends, CAS states programming “must be”: integrated into the life of the institution; intentional and coherent; guided by theories and knowledge of learning and development; reflective of developmental and demographic profiles of the student population; and responsive to the needs of individuals, diverse and special populations, and relevant constituencies (p. 116).

What does programming look like within spiritual development? Dalton et al. (2006) identified strategies of service within four categories: awareness and advocacy; supportive environments; educational programs; and staff/faculty development (pp. 17-18). Bryant (2008) sought to create a starting point for assessing current campus resources, and in doing so synthesized the spirituality literature to create a more robust “preliminary ‘best practices’ typology” (p. 4) of common practice. The four types of practices include examples as to what these activities might look like:

- Discerning meaning and purpose
  Curricular and co-curricular programs and course offerings geared toward helping individuals discover and connect to their vocation or ‘calling,’ find
congruence between their professional and personal lives, and develop contemplative and reflective practices.

- **Engaging religious pluralism**
  Formal and informal opportunities for inter-religious engagement, initiatives intended to generate understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of religious pluralism, and coursework designed to enhance religious literacy, provide discussions of religious differences and commonalities, and foster religious/spiritual self-understanding.

- **Developing consciousness and compassion through service and social justice activities**
  Curricular and co-curricular opportunities to participate in initiatives to connect personal purposes with broader social justice and civic responsibility purposes, which can include service learning courses, community service experiences, and alternative spring break trips.

- **Providing spiritual support mechanisms**
  Space for students to grapple with existential questions, spiritual struggles, and stressful life experiences, including special topics courses, residential life programs, and retreats, and incorporated within mentoring relationships with faculty, student affairs professionals, counselors, campus ministers, and peers. (p. 4)

Chickering et al. (2006) and Lindholm, Millora, Schwartz, and Spinosa (2011) perhaps offer the most comprehensive summaries of campus-wide initiatives and institutional practices within their respective books, collecting examples from colleges and universities across the United States. These annotated lists of practices reflect both the hoped for qualities of the CAS standards, and the variety of categories identified within the literature. Palmer and Zajonc (2010) focus their work on high-impact pedagogical practices, which have been identified as correlating with positive outcomes of aspects of spiritual development. Their theoretical grounding is within integrative education and learning, which seeks to embed “greater explicit connection” between coursework, and between curricular and non-curricular activities, including community engagement (p. 8). They highlight such practices as experiential learning, contemplative pedagogy, and
transformative conversations and offer practical examples of integrative education techniques for the classroom and beyond.

Outside of offering specific examples of practice, some of the literature offers ideas and musings on how to best approach the creation of services/support, with scholars reminding practitioners of the importance of connecting practice to student development theory or definitions of spiritual development. Dalton et al. (2006) stress, “Learning in college is intrinsically connected to students’ inner lives of emotions, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs. Higher education that ignores the connections between the cognitive and emotional domains of students’ lives will necessarily be less effective” (p. 2). More specifically, Love (2001, 2002) discusses the close relationship faith development theory has with both cognitive development theory and other student development theories. He states, “Focusing on enhancement of students’ cognitive and psychosocial development will in all likelihood contribute to their spiritual development” (Love, 2001, p. 14).

Capeheart-Meningall (2005) specifically focuses on making connections between possible support programs and activities and Love and Talbot’s (1999) five propositions of spiritual development.

Other professionals imagine how to re-frame services or use models and structures that are already in existence for the promotion of spiritual development. Berty (2007) relates spiritual conversations to the “Relational Leadership Model” and illustrates how one can use the elements of this model (inclusion, empowerment, ethics, purposefulness, and process-orientation) as opportunities to guide students to meaning-making and process through value-driven inner examinations of themselves. Eberhardt & Dalton (2007) on the other hand, illustrate the campus-wide structures students will
encounter in their time on campus and discuss how each one (from first-year experience courses to career services) can be shaped to provide and enhance moments of “soul-searching in which students seek to develop their own beliefs and understandings” (p. 269). For the most part, the literature does agree that much of supporting spiritual development does not require the creation of new services, but instead is about a change in approach, awareness, and intention. Hindman (2002) speaks to this, stating:

Spirituality is not something we have to add to the curriculum, or infuse into students’ lives like a missing additive or a diet supplement. It is already there. The question is what spirit shall be affirmed and nurtured. The task is to increase awareness, open eyes to see, and provide ways for our spirited lives to move from being splintered and painful toward wholeness and joy. (p. 181)

**Spirituality and Student Affairs Practitioners**

As noted, the literature is quite plentiful with examples of practice regarding support of student spiritual development. However there is research regarding student affairs professionals’ engagement with students around spirituality that highlights a divide between what the scholarly literature advocates—examples of good practice and the importance of spirituality as an integral aspect of holistic development—versus the actual practice of some student affairs practitioners. Studies addressing this reflect both a discomfort with the subject or a tendency, perhaps related to this discomfort, to conflate spirituality with religion.

Kiessling (2010), observing a disconnect between the profession’s “professed mission of holistic student development” (p. 1) and the practice of student affairs professionals, surveyed 177 practitioners to measure engagement with practices related to spirituality or spiritual development. Practitioners consistently ranked highly items such as, “help student develop personal values” (94%) and “mentor students in their personal
development” (86%). However, items dealing with notions of “life purpose” or spirituality were ranked lower such as, “facilitate search for meaning/purpose in life” (61%), “enhance spiritual development” (43%), and “discuss life purpose with students” (29%). Kiessling (2010) states the following:

This research strengthens the notion that even though the profession of student affairs espouses the goal of holistic student development, student affairs professionals do not consistently integrate spiritually-infused practice as a component of their work. This finding…is illustrated through gaps between perceptions of appropriate roles and actual practices, as well as in indicated perceptions by many that integration of spirituality is not an appropriate role. (p. 8)

While it is true this research possibly reflects a scholarly literature and practitioner divide, Kiessling’s (2010) assertions with regard to how this is illustrated in the study seem far-reaching and presumptuous. Again, we are faced with the research limitation of spirituality having been included within a survey without clarification or definition. Additionally, it is unclear from the quantitative nature of this study if the survey reflected the perceptions of student affairs professionals—about their role or otherwise—or if it merely served to quantify their current practice. Practitioners’ feelings about these practices were not collected and thus are not reflected within the results.

A qualitative study from Burchell, Lee, and Olsen (2010), however, does offer some insight into this possibility. In interviews with 70 student affairs professionals, the question of how comfort level with spirituality affected practitioners’ engagement in spiritual conversations with students was examined. Findings indicated participants’ perceptions of the appropriateness of those conversations directly related to their comfort level with those interactions (p. 118). Practitioners were most comfortable addressing spiritual issues in three different scenarios: (a) when students initiated the conversation,
(b) when students shared similar beliefs as the practitioner, and (c) when the practitioner felt close to or more involved with the student in question. There were also practitioners who did not feel at all comfortable with these conversations under any circumstance.

Regarding insight into perceptions of participants, some comments did express discomfort with the topic of spirituality due to the perceived notions that: (a) it was a very personal topic, (b) it was not an appropriate or acceptable topic to discuss with students, (c) it was not within their role to discuss spirituality with students, and (d) their department or university would not approve of these discussions.

The authors state, “For this study, spirituality is understood as…exploring the larger questions of life” including, “personal search for meaning, transcendence, wholeness, purpose” (p. 115). They later state, “The focus of this study was to understand [student affairs professionals’] perceptions of engaging in spiritual conversations however the participants understood them [emphasis added]” (p. 117). Again, the lack of clarity of definition and the lack of parameters of what specific construction of spirituality is being used prevents one from drawing conclusions or from making connections to previously published research on this topic. From the responses given, it seems many practitioners defined spirituality as religion. The authors themselves may have encouraged this conflation as three of their interview questions focused on the “spiritual beliefs” [emphasis added] of the subjects (p. 127).

This study raises the issue of practitioner disconnect between, not only the emergent higher education definition of spirituality, but also of professional roles and best practice. When one participant in the study responds, “Every opportunity where, someone has kind of given me [the opportunity] to kind of put in a perspective or, or even
show them a different perspective on terms of themselves in terms of spirituality, I’ve tried to take it as far as possible” (p. 119), it raises a concern that some practitioners may be serving as happenstance proselytizers rather than guides who might provide students support and resources to help them better understand or define their own values and belief systems. This, in turn, highlights a need for further research examining the benefits and challenges of the emergent construct of spirituality, and as the authors note, a possible need for the “development of a national set of standards” for this issue within student affairs (p. 125).

In studies that have looked at the role of spirituality within practitioners’ lives (Kiessling, 2010; Moran & Curtis, 2004), the conflation of spirituality with religion comes up again. For example, Moran and Curtis (2004) state that student affairs professionals’ “descriptions of how ‘spirituality’ plays a role in their work were often manifestations of what many would call ‘religion’. It is likely that for many of these respondents, religion is the vehicle through which their spirituality is expressed” (p. 635). While some practitioners’ ideas of religion and spirituality seemed distinct even when they overlapped, “most made little to no effort to distinguish one from the other while discussing the basic phenomenon under investigation” (p. 642). These findings can lend insight into the roots of disconnect between how practitioners conceptualize spirituality and how their profession does so.

Additionally, the focus on the personal spiritual lives of student affairs’ practitioners within the professional literature can bolster an assumption that the degree to which a practitioner is spiritual/religious is a critical consideration in supporting the spiritual development of students. Wanting to test this theory, Seifert and Holman-
Harmon (2009) examined student affairs practitioners’ responses on measures that scored them on a Life Purpose Scale, which addressed psychological well-being, and a Spiritual Well-Being Scale, which addressed existential, religious, and spiritual well-being. They correlated responses to a measurement scoring how often these individuals engaged in practices cited to promote the spiritual development of students (practices in the domains of community building, modeling authenticity, and reflective practice). “The practitioner’s purpose in life had a statistically larger positive effect on the extent to which they engage [in the three domains of practice]” (p. 16) than scores of spiritual well-being. Statistical analysis data were not provided within the results or discussion of this study making it impossible to draw conclusions about how large or small an impact these various measures had on practitioners’ engagement with activities supporting spiritual development. But this research does attempt to respond to “a perception that practitioners who identify as religious or spiritual are more inclined to engage in practices associated with facilitating students’ inner development than those who do not” (p. 14) and widens the conversation with regard to who can do this work, the role of student affairs staff in this work, and assumptions or perceptions about the skills or expertise needed to support the spiritual development of students.

**Student Affairs Graduate Students and Graduate Programs**

Considering the growing body of research on spirituality in higher education, the focus and weight educational theorists are giving spirituality, and the continued attention the student affairs profession is giving this topic, recent research has begun to look at how/if student affairs preparation programs are addressing this topic and how graduate students might be responding to this discourse. In 2007, Rogers and Love published two
qualitative studies. The first examined faculty perceptions of the role of spirituality in the preparation of student affairs professionals, and the second considered graduate students’ constructions of spirituality in preparation programs. These appear to be the only studies of their kind and are critical in considering how or if the scholarship of the emerging discourse of spirituality is reaching incoming practitioners and how this topic is being engaged with or understood by new professionals.

In Rogers and Love’s (2007a) qualitative study of faculty members at student affairs preparation programs within a public university, a Catholic college, and a Christian university, the majority of faculty members were not certain how well their programs were preparing incoming student affairs professionals to address students’ spirituality or spiritual issues. Upon further exploration, faculty members stated that their programs did address constructs such as meaning-making, life purpose, and authenticity, but these were not linked explicitly to spirituality. So for example, “students may be exploring questions of meaning, but they do not recognize such deep work as preparation for responding to undergraduates’ spiritual questioning” (p. 93). With regard to curriculum, within the Catholic college and public university, core values of the programs included things such as social justice, self-reflection, collaboration, and challenge and support, but again, these were not explicitly linked as tools that could be used to address/support spiritual development of students. Institutional context played a key role in how spirituality was addressed, as the Christian university was explicit in including spiritual development of their graduate students in their curriculum. And while issues of faith and spirituality are integrated through all the courses at the Christian university, both the public university and Catholic college had one elective seminar course focused
on spirituality. Lastly, “role modeling was identified as the primary way faculty ‘teach’ students about making meaning and about authenticity” (p. 97).

When Rogers and Love (2007b) turned their attention to graduate students in these three student affairs preparation programs, the focus of the study was students’ constructions of spirituality, how or if they experienced spirituality within their graduate program, and how well they felt prepared to respond to students’ spiritual development. The interviews reflected the absence of a common language to discuss the broad concept of spirituality within the education literature. Many students tied spirituality to religion until specifically prompted to think about the topic in ways that encompassed authenticity, meaning-making, and reflection on life-purpose. Like the faculty interviewed before them, the students were able to identify these values present in their programs but again, they did not at first explicitly link these things to spirituality. Again, institutional context played a role in how students experienced spirituality in their own programs, as spiritual development was integrated within the program at the Christian university. Most students identified personal self-knowledge and self-awareness as being key to preparing them to work with future students’ own explorations of spirituality. Graduate students felt their faculty prepared them for this work through mentorship and role modeling. There were students who felt comfortable working with broad constructs of spirituality in their future careers but expressed discomfort about possibly discussing or supporting spirituality if it overlapped with religious faith traditions or was tied to belief in a higher power.

Overall, the Rogers and Love (2007a, 2007b) research reflects that explicit discussion and links to spirituality within student affairs preparation programs may be
absent, but these programs are perhaps providing educational experiences that are giving incoming student affairs professionals tools to support student spiritual development. It is unclear whether or not the graduate students were aware of the emerging spirituality discourse in education, as the study design introduced students to Love and Talbot’s (1999) definition of spirituality as part of the qualitative interview process. As Love was a co-researcher of this study, and co-author of the spiritual development definition specifically and intentionally used within the study, the research seemed like a first step in exploring if the Love and Talbot (1999) definition could serve as a common language of the student affairs profession—in essence, in some ways it felt like a validity/reliability study. This is not a weakness in the research and, in fact, it does show that once Love and Talbot’s (1999) five spiritual development propositions are discussed and explained, incoming student affairs professionals can better see how supporting student spiritual development can fit into their professional roles.

Research by Kiessling (2010, 2011) supports Rogers and Love’s (2007a, 2007b) finding that graduate schools may not be “intentionally or specifically” preparing graduate students “for their role in supporting spiritual development” (Kiessling, 2011, p. 33). Kiessling (2011) states that responses from student affairs professionals to her quantitative study “indicated very low integration of topics related to spirituality into the graduate school curriculum” (p. 33) with

- 14% responding that they studied student development theory focused on spirituality while in graduate school
- 9% responding they took graduate courses that dealt with searching for meaning or purpose in life, without explicit connections to spirituality
- 9% responding they were assigned readings on spirituality
- 8% having attended a course or workshop on matters related to spirituality
- 5% having taken courses that dealt with religious pluralism (p. 36)
As Rogers & Love’s (2007a, 2007b) research shows, graduate preparation programs may indeed have spiritual concepts—as defined by the emergent education discourse—embedded in the curriculum, but programs may not make explicit links between spiritual development and things such as authenticity, reflective practice, examination of values, and meaning-making. As such, this highlights a weakness in Kiessling’s (2011) analysis, as the responses above may simply be reflective of this disconnect and not necessarily reflective of actual programmatic content. While not as strongly stated as in her earlier work—previously mentioned herein (Kiessling, 2010)—Kiessling (2011) again wonders if the findings indicate student affairs professionals’ lack of comfort in the role of providing spiritual development support (p. 36). Again, nothing in the quantitative data suggests this; it is speculation on the part of the author and requires further research. While not the specific question/focus of the present study, results of the study herein may be able to provide additional data to address this gap.

Significance/Justification of Current Study

In the last decade professional organizations and scholarly publishers within student affairs have heeded the call of key developmental theorists in education, such as Arthur Chickering and Alexander Astin, to examine spirituality as a forgotten, yet integral, aspect of supporting holistic student development at colleges and universities. The emergent discourse frames spirituality in a broad, seemingly inclusive way, encompassing not only one’s possible relationship to a higher power or religious faith, but also personal authenticity, transcendence of one’s locus of centricity, greater connectivity to self through relationships with others, and deriving meaning and purpose in one’s life (Love & Talbot, 1999). This has been noted as a return to tradition for a field
rooted in supporting the education and development of the “whole” student and, in some ways, the spirituality discourse repackages constructs and theoretical foci embedded within developmental foundations of education.

The research of the last decade shows spirituality as not only a growing area of interest to current undergraduate students, but also as an aspect of identity development they are actively engaged with and expecting to nurture while in the higher education environment. For educators, it is important to note that spiritual struggles can negatively impact student lives. Alternatively, the correlates of spiritual growth and a heightened sense of spirituality include positive co-curricular outcomes many student affairs practitioners work to support including increased competence to better thrive on one’s own, increased ability to get along with different cultures, and greater overall engagement with campus activities and community service. So whether for spiritually struggling students, or for those for whom spirituality is a positive force, the research frames student spiritual development as a worthwhile area of support and services.

This being said, existing research on student affairs practitioners’ engagement with issues of spirituality reflects a divide between what the professional literature advocates and actual practice of student affairs professionals. The literature shows practitioner discomfort with the subject, a sometimes-singular focus on religion, and it raises the question of whether or not practitioners see supporting spiritual development as outside their role in student affairs. It could be expected that some practitioners—having been educated in their field before the emergence of the spirituality discourse in education—may lack knowledge of how spirituality is currently being framed and may
indeed see spiritual development connected to only religion, and consequently, as the
purview and expertise of campus ministers and ministries.

Even more scant in the spirituality literature is research on graduate students in
student affairs preparation programs and the graduate programs educating these future
professionals. Rogers and Love’s (2007b) research with graduate students is now five
years old. Within that research, graduate students resonated with Love and Talbot’s
(1999) spiritual development propositions and, when prompted, were able to identify
ways in which spirituality was being addressed in their graduate programs even if
connections were not being explicitly made. As the spirituality discourse in education is
now over a decade old, new research on incoming student affairs professionals is needed
to see how/if the seeds of this work are currently being translated and incorporated into
the knowledge base of newest practitioners of the field.

The current study addresses an aspect of this gap by exploring how incoming
student affairs practitioners make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual
development. The research aims to describe how graduate students in a student affairs
preparation program understand and conceive their role in student spiritual development
through an exploration of their knowledge, meaning making, and self-understanding of
this work. While not intending to be generalizable to all student affairs’ graduate
students, an in-depth examination of this specific question and phenomenon has a degree
of transferability (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 42), and identifies areas of further
study and discussion concerning the current understanding of the spirituality discourse in
a segment of incoming members of the student affairs profession, as well as the academic
and practical preparation of student affairs practitioners as a whole.
Chapter 3: Methods

The aim of this study is to explore and describe how incoming student affairs practitioners make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. This study uses an interpretive qualitative research framework as outlined by Neuman (2011) and Merriam (2002). In general, qualitative research attempts to find out how people make meaning or interpret a phenomenon. Basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative studies, “which are probably the most common form of qualitative research in education, simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). While the goal of research using an objectivist paradigm can be framed as describe, predict, and control, “the goal of interpretivist research might better be described as ‘describe, interpret, and understand’” (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992, p. 6). The process therefore, “is inductive; that is researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively deriving postulates or hypotheses to be tested” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5).

Research Perspective

This study is epistemologically grounded in constructivism. In interpretive social science a constructivist orientation assumes that “people construct reality out of their interactions and beliefs...[and] what people see and experience in the world is socially constructed” (Neuman, 2011, pp. 103-104). In short, knowledge is formed from interpreting experiences and social interactions, rather than garnered from a single external ‘truth’. As such the constructivist paradigm is also “pluralist and relativist” as there are “multiple, often conflicting, constructions, and all (at least potentially) are meaningful” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 128). Relevant to the current study, theoretical
perspectives informed by constructivism include hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism. With regard to the social sciences, hermeneutics involves the interpretation and understanding of social events through analysis of the meanings assigned to them by people or by the culture in which they are located (Willis, 2007, p. 106). Symbolic interactionism “also focuses on interpretation but within the context of the larger society; that is, the meaning of an experience is constructed by an individual interacting with other people; meaning is formed as the person intersects with society” (Merriam, 2002, p. 37).

Research Design

These theoretical perspectives inform the methodology, which is interpretive and influenced by phenomenology. Phenomenology is a methodological approach that explores and seeks to understand a specific phenomenon from the participants’ perspectives (Merriam, 2002, p. 37). Merriam (2002) states,

> Qualitative researchers conducting a basic interpretive study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experience. (p. 38)

As such, the research perspective and approach is appropriate for this study in that the researcher is seeking to describe and understand, from the participants’ multiple points of view, the meanings or constructions they attach to their role in supporting student spiritual development as incoming student affairs practitioners. The methodology chosen, in turn, informs the study’s methods, which are in-depth, semi-structured interviews with graduate students in a student affairs preparation program.

**Participants.** The researcher’s initial intention was to conduct interviews with 3-6 full-time graduate students within their second year of a student affairs preparation
program at a large, public university in the northwest United States. Due to the small number of students in the eligible participant pool (approximately 18), this sample size was deemed adequate by the researcher to best provide “reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study” (Patton, 1990, p. 186). The researcher met this goal with 6 participants.

Students in their second year of the program were chosen with the assumption that they would provide richer qualitative data than students within their first year, as full-time second year students likely: (a) will have taken two foundational theory courses, a course in programs and functions of student services, and a course in the history of higher education; (b) will have a greater chance of exposure to professional and scholarly literature and organizations; (c) may have at least one year of work experience in the field as a graduate assistant; and (d) may have taken or had exposure to an elective in their program that focused on spirituality in higher education.

As the intention of this research is not to produce generalizable results, but rather provide an in-depth exploration and description of a specific phenomenon in a sample of incoming student affairs professionals, the research site was chosen to allow the researcher the greatest access to the study participants. Additionally, a single graduate program location provides consistency of context, which is an important aspect of analysis within the constructivist research paradigm when considering the formation of knowledge of the study participants.

**Participant recruitment.** This study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in November 2012. After IRB approval, a recruitment email (Appendix A)—that briefly described the study, expectations for participants, and eligibility
requirements—was distributed through a listserv used by the graduate student cohort eligible for inclusion in this study. There was an incentive of $5.00 for those who participated and completed an interview for this study. No more than the first 6 respondents meeting the study criteria would be selected as participants for this study. After being contacted by 6 interested individuals, the researcher responded via email to schedule one-hour interviews with each potential participant. Participants responded via email, text messaging, or in person (depending on their preference or convenience) to schedule these with the researcher.

**Data Collection**

Prior to the beginning of each interview, participants were asked if they had any questions regarding the study or the Informed Consent document (Appendix B) they had been given to review and sign. After informed consent was received, participants were pre-screened (Appendix C) to ensure eligibility. Once it was determined that a participant met the eligibility requirements, optional demographic information was collected (sex, age, ethnicity, race, self-described socioeconomic status, faith or religious upbringing, current faith or religious affiliation) and individuals were asked to choose a self-selected pseudonym for the purpose of identification within this study.

Six one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting between 20-45 minutes were conducted. The interviews took place at one of three sites reserved for the study and were audio-recorded. Participants were asked a set of predetermined questions (Appendix C) that had been developed based upon the review of the literature and the research query. The researcher piloted the questions for usability before being used within the present study. Because the interviews were semi-structured, the researcher was free to ask
additional follow-up or clarifying questions. After the final question, participants were asked if they had any other thoughts or comments on the topics/ideas discussed. At the completion of the interview, the researcher asked participants if they were open to being contacted for additional information or for further clarification if needed. All participants agreed to this. To increase trustworthiness of the study, each participant was given the option of receiving a transcript of their individual interview to review for clarifications, corrections, and additions as they saw fit.

Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data, the researcher used coding procedures as discussed by Creswell (2008) and Neuman (2011). The process was also influenced and guided by Kvale’s (1996) work on meaning condensation and categorization of qualitative interview data. As outlined by Creswell (2008), this procedure includes: reading through the textual data; dividing the text into segments of information; labeling the segments of information with codes; reducing any overlap or redundancy within these codes; and finally, collapsing codes into themes (p. 251).

The researcher’s transcription of the interviews allowed the first look of the data as a whole. The participants were then given the option of reviewing their individual transcripts to note clarifications, additions, or corrections. Two participants opted for this; neither amended nor expanded on their transcripts in any way. The researcher read through the transcripts; divided the text into segments—grouping answers of all participants to each individual question asked; read through the transcripts a second time; and began open coding on the second reading. Neuman (2011) explains open coding as the first level of coding within qualitative data analysis in which the researcher “assign[s]
initial codes in [the] first attempt to condense the mass of data into categories” (p. 511). It is at this point the researcher began listing early possible themes/categories from the data coding.

The second pass through the data is axial coding, defined by Neuman (2011) as the “second stage of coding during which the researcher organizes the codes, links them, and discovers key analytic categories” (p. 512). While the researcher expanded upon the initial codes created during open coding, the focus of this read through was review of initial codes in an attempt to begin identifying categories and concepts that were connected or, alternately, could be subdivided into further categories. During this stage the researcher began noting themes and patterns that overlapped or differed from information garnered from the literature review. Certain categories seemed naturally occurring based upon the questions asked within the interviews. Other categories were created based upon the connection to the overall research query.

Finally, selective coding was done to “support the conceptual coding categories” developed in the first two coding phases (Neuman, 2011, p. 514). During this reading the researcher reviewed all the data and previous codes, identifying specific sections of data that illustrated the themes/categories created in the earlier coding. This phase was complete after ensuring the entirety of data had been exhaustively reviewed and relevant data had been placed within the major themes as well as identified subthemes and subcategories. Once the final themes and data sets were formed, the results enabled the researcher to report findings, suggest general conclusions, and frame the discussion herein on how graduate students presently enrolled in a student affairs preparation program make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development.
Limitations of Study

At the onset of this study, the clear limitations of this research are those inherent within qualitative studies. It is not the researcher’s intention to produce work that will be a generalizable representation of the knowledge and experiences of all incoming student affairs practitioners. Kvale (1996), when discussing qualitative generalization, writes of analytical generalization involving, “a reasoned judgment about the extent to which the finding from one study can be used as a guide to what might occur in another situation” (p. 233). He discusses three targets of generalization as: “what is”, “what may be”, and “what could be” (pp. 234-235). Within the present study, the data produced may have implications for or raise questions about “what is” as it relates to the context of an in-depth qualitative analysis at a single site. In other words, some aspects of the results may be more indicative of “what is” at one particular institution or within one particular student affairs preparation program because of the specific pedagogy or context of that program. However, questions arising from the data addressing “what may be” will be broader and may have implications or the potential for transferability to areas of further study relating to the present experience of incoming student affairs professionals or the academic and practical preparation of future student affairs professionals as a whole.

As the present study is an exploration of an unknown aspect of how a population makes meaning of a specific phenomenon, the study is not intended to be an examination of “what could be” as that is often framed as, “locating situations that we believe are ideal and exceptional and studying them to see what goes on there” (p. 235).

In short, this is a qualitative study examining how 6 graduate students in a student affairs preparation program make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual
development. It is the researcher’s goal that the data produced raise implications, or at the very least, areas of further study concerning this population and the student affairs profession’s education and discourse on spirituality.

**Trustworthiness.** To increase the trustworthiness of this study, it has been the researcher’s goal to assure the methods used throughout are appropriate, intentionally selected, and transparent. Additionally, member checking (respondent validation) was employed to aid in improving the accuracy, validity, and transferability of this study. Lastly, the researcher attempted to be as cognizant of her personal biases as able and continually reflected on these throughout each phase of the study.

**Personal disclosure.** The researcher is aware of how personal bias can play a role within the analysis and presentation of qualitative research. Indeed, as a researcher grounded within a constructivist paradigm, the researcher believes the meaning-making herein can not be separated from the experiences, worldview, and context of the researcher herself. The researcher is a white, able-bodied, lesbian woman, completing her second Master’s program and making a transition from a faculty role in academia into one in student affairs. She identifies as highly spiritual, culturally Christian, and moderately religious. The participants in this study are her colleagues within a shared student affairs preparatory program, and as such the researcher is cognizant that “the interpretive lens of researchers in their own natural settings is shaped by personal experiences and assumptions brought to the research process” (Jones, 2002, p. 464).

As to the subject of this research, as previously discussed, the researcher adheres to the definition of spirituality of Love and Talbot (1999). Additionally, the researcher believes the work of supporting student spiritual development must be “understood as a
dimension of good practice” (Estanek, 2006, p. 278) within student affairs, and like Love and Talbot (1999) believes,

[T]he profession’s failure to engage in discussions of spirituality and spiritual development may contribute not only to foreclosure on matters of spirituality, but also to a general narrowness of perspective and an inability or unwillingness to think critically, explore value-related issues, and question authorities. (p. 363)

This frames spirituality, and spiritual development, as a key component of a liberal arts education. In turn, this aligns with the researcher’s pedagogical philosophy and foundation, which is based within the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2011), bell hooks (1994), and Laura I. Rendón (2008).
Chapter 4: Results

This study aimed to explore how graduate students presently enrolled in a student affairs preparation program make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. This chapter will provide an overview of the study participants as well as present the detailed findings based upon the collected qualitative data. The results have been organized into five general themes, with three themes having subthemes, and one subtheme having three subcategories as follows:

- **Definition of spirituality**; includes subthemes of
  - (a) personal definition of spirituality
  - (b) problems arising from commonly held definitions of spirituality

- **Personal life experience**

- **Feelings of discomfort with role**; includes subthemes of
  - (a) professional identity
  - (b) appropriateness of topic
  - (c) lack of knowledge/areas of need, including subcategories of
    - (i) lack of knowledge of religions
    - (ii) need for examples of practical applications
    - (iii) need for discussion with peers/professionals

- **Places of comfort with role**; includes subthemes of
  - (a) role engenders positive feelings
  - (b) role enhances professional identity

- **The work of student affairs**
Themes will be illustrated and discussed using direct quotes from the participants. The themes chosen were ones shared by at least 4 or more participants. If a theme was not present for every participant, this will be noted within the results narrative. While some themes were present for all participants and while some quotes could be used to support more than one theme, the researcher selected quotes that were most demonstrative and illuminative of the corresponding theme.

Participants

Six graduate students participated in this study. They each met the three eligibility requirements of (a) being an enrolled full-time student of the student affairs preparation program at the study site, (b) being a second year student of said program, and (c) having entered the graduate program in Fall 2011. To help maintain confidentiality, each participant in the study chose a self-selected pseudonym. Table 1 below provides an overview of participants’ responses to the following optional demographic questions: sex; age; race/ethnicity; self-described socio-economic status; faith or religious upbringing; and current faith or religious affiliation. It is not pseudonym-matched to further aid in maintaining confidentiality.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>5 women, 1 man</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Participants were between the ages of 23-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity and/or Race</td>
<td>All participants identified as white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-described SES</td>
<td>1 lower class; 1 lower middle class; 4 middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith/religious upbringing</td>
<td>1 Christian; 1 Christian (Southern Baptist); 1 Episcopalian; 1 Catholic/Jewish; 1 Catholic; 1 Non-practicing Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current faith/religious affiliation</td>
<td>1 Non-denominational Christian; 1 Christian; 1 Christian (Baptist); 1 Non-religious; 1 Spiritual, not religious; 1 Exploring, questioning, culturally Christian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the research seeks to examine how participants make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development, the following narrative summary of each participant includes key aspects of each participant’s ideas about what their role in supporting student spiritual development looks like. The themes will then add context to how the participants may have arrived at or make meaning of these ideas.

Karl was one of two participants that felt his role in supporting student spiritual development would depend on campus culture and mission, specifically differentiating public institutions from Christian or Catholic institutions. He feels his role in the spiritual development of students is that of “challenging students to figure out who they are, and where they are situated in the world” instead of just asking students “what they do and how they do it.” He places emphasis on the importance of the development and learning process rather than the end result/answer. Within this role of “challenging” students, he would provide a useful balance of support along with questions that help students “look beyond the face value [of things].”

Ashton describes her role in supporting student spiritual development as one that “helps students make meaning of what they’re doing.” This would involve “figuring out what spirituality means to an individual student and assessing their needs…and then being intentional about supporting what they need.” She explained the importance of “offering opportunities” and “creating space” for students to talk about “the bigger questions” of why they are doing what they are doing and why they think what they are doing is important to their life. She feels student affairs needs to go beyond offering “spaces for prayer, or spaces to go and do things that [students] enjoy” and initiate larger conversations by “asking why [students] are doing it.”
Molly sees her role in supporting spiritual development of students as someone that would offer “empowerment or encouragement of the student’s individual faith.” She described this as being a “conversation partner” and “ear to listen” if students have questions. She did not see “a means by which [she] can help students develop spiritually” within her “realm of work right now.” Supporting student spiritual development would include (a) creating “space that is set aside”—either “physical space, or a time for students to come together;” (b) including in that space “faculty or student affairs professionals who are knowledgeable and can facilitate a healthy dialogue [about] spirituality and development in general;” and (c) encouraging students to come to that space and engage in that process.

Iris sees her role in supporting student spiritual development as someone who “supports people’s mental health.” Specifically, she sees herself as making sure if students “are stressed, or if there is a lot going on—that they’re taking time for themselves, and that they’re taking care of their own needs.” While she doesn’t “necessarily identify that as spiritual,” she thinks that it “does play into spirituality.” Iris sees herself as a “sounding board for students when they are struggling with anything, and so supporting students through spiritual development, reflecting those feelings or reflecting what someone may be struggling with in a conversation [is a part of the role].”

Georgia thinks her role in supporting student spiritual development might differ depending on the institutional context (public versus religious) and also feels she is currently in a functional area where spirituality “doesn’t come up as much as maybe it would in other functional areas.” Georgia says she sees support of spiritual development as supporting “holistic development,” and as such it is “part of [her] work.” When asked
what this support looks like, she states, “If a student brings it up, I think being willing to engage in dialogue is what it would look like.”

Zoe describes her role in supporting student spiritual development as “listen[ing] more deeply to what students are saying, and know[ing] that students are asking really big questions of themselves.” She sees her role as “being very open to what students present and growing more comfortable in [her] own practice at being able to ask follow up questions that help students share more fully what their thought processes are about life, their experience on planet earth, as well as ethics, their meaning-making, their relationships to one another.” Another aspect of this role is helping students gain exposure to new ideas and a greater awareness of things “outside their own sphere.”

**Thematic Summary**

As shown above, participants spoke to what they saw as their roles in supporting student spiritual development. In exploring how they came to this and how they make meaning of this role, questions posed (Appendix C) asked participants to discuss their beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about this role and examine what may have impacted these ideas. The analysis of findings brought forth the following five most common themes. Three themes include subthemes, and one subtheme has three subcategories as follows:

- **Definition of spirituality:** includes subthemes of
  - (a) personal definition of spirituality
  - (b) problems arising from commonly held definitions of spirituality
- **Personal life experience**
- **Feelings of discomfort with role:** includes subthemes of
  - (a) professional identity
(b) appropriateness of topic

(c) lack of knowledge/areas of need, including subcategories of

(i) lack of knowledge of religions

(ii) need for examples of practical applications

(iii) need for discussion with peers/professionals

• **Places of comfort with role;** includes subthemes of

(a) role engenders positive feelings

(b) role enhances professional identity

• **The work of student affairs**

Each theme will be illustrated using quotes from the participants. If a theme was not present for every participant, this will be noted within the results. While some themes were present for all participants and while some quotes could be used to support more than one theme, the researcher chose quotes that are most demonstrative and illuminative of the theme in which they are placed.

**Definition of spirituality.** Defining spirituality proved to be a way that participants came to their understanding of what their role in supporting student spiritual development entails, but also was a point of struggle or challenge for some. For some participants both these states were present. As such, two subthemes emerged from the data that spoke to definitions of spirituality: (a) personal definition of spirituality, and (b) problems arising from commonly held definitions of spirituality.

**Personal definition of spirituality.** When examining how participants conceived their roles in supporting student spiritual development, it is clear that for most it is tied to how they personally define spirituality. Karl, who sees his role as “challenging students
to figure out who they are, and where they are situated in the world,” speaks directly to this when he says of spirituality:

**KARL:** I think it can be defined different for a lot of different people, but for me I really think it’s where I’m situated within the world, the larger context of how I see myself in relation with others and in relation to a higher order of things. Spirituality is my self-knowing of where I’m situated in the world and how I interact within that world.

Iris framed her conception of her role as someone who “supports people’s mental health.” She sees herself making sure students are “taking time for themselves, and that they’re taking care of their own needs.” When asked to define spirituality, she says:

**IRIS:** My own spirituality is related to nature, meditation, or meditative spaces—whether that’s exercise or whether that’s going for a walk. It’s connected to...spending time with friends and family...and for me all of these things are very interwoven with personal mental health. It is purpose and meaning also, so, am I doing something that makes me feel like I’m making a difference? Am I contributing to the good of the world? I think that’s connected to spirituality.

Ashton described her role as a facilitator of meaning making for students, placing emphasis on getting students to talk about “the bigger questions” of why they make the choices they do and why the things they do are important in their life. While Ashton said for her “personally, spirituality is religion,” she went on to say:

**ASHTON:** But I know spirituality is different for everybody. I think in a way it is how somebody makes a connection with the world they live in, how they live their everyday life, why they live their everyday life that way. Whether they don’t believe in a religion or they believe in going out into the world and exploring, [it’s] what they find important in their life. That’s how I would define it: how someone makes connection with the world or makes meaning with everyday choices.

This direct pattern of role reflecting personal definitions of spirituality was repeated with both Zoe and Molly as well. Zoe, who spoke about her role of engaging students to help them share “more fully what their thought processes are about life, their experience on planet earth, as well as ethics, their meaning-making, their relationships to one another.”
defined spirituality as a “shared energy” and spoke in terms of connection, relationship, and the elements of nature. Of all the participants, Molly aligned spirituality most closely with religion and defined it as the “personal relationship that a person has with a higher power.” Perhaps because of this, she saw her role primarily as someone who would empower or encourage students’ individual faiths.

**Problems arising from commonly held definitions of spirituality.** At times throughout the interview process participants struggled with speaking about their roles in supporting student spiritual development or were challenged by their ideas of how others’ may perceive this role. This was primarily due to what they saw as implied definitions of spirituality beyond that of their personal definitions. Georgia, the only participant who did not offer a definition of spirituality, spoke to some of these feelings when she said:

GEORGIA: Spirituality is loaded for me. Like, do I feel comfortable identifying as spiritual versus religious? I think I have a lot of baggage from my upbringing in that. So, I don’t have a definition of it…Does it mean, ‘Here’s how this university defines spirituality?’ Is that limiting for the student then that doesn’t feel like that defines their spirituality? So, that was my immediate thought—‘How could this work?’…How do you write [about what the mission of spiritual development is] in a way that is inclusive as possible, and not perpetuate parameters that only fit certain folks and not others?

Perhaps this struggle is reflected in Georgia’s response to the question of what her role in supporting student spiritual development would look like. Of all the participants she offered up the most succinct response: “If a student brings it up, I think being willing to engage in dialogue is what it would look like.” Additionally for Georgia, whether or not an institution was religious or public was also important when talking about her role. Another participant was also hesitant to define spirituality. While Iris did eventually define it, at first she said:
IRIS: I don’t know if I have a definition? I feel like there’s a definition in the world that I don’t necessarily click into so I have this sense that when someone says spirituality, they mean a certain thing that is more connected to religion, is more connected to faith in a being.

This hesitancy and ambiguity showed up when she spoke of her role as being someone who is focused on students’ mental health. She qualified her response as something she doesn’t “necessarily identify” as spiritual, even though she does indeed define mental health as part of her spirituality. When Ashton and Karl spoke of their roles in supporting student spiritual development, they identified other people’s association of religion with the concept as a specific challenge to these roles. Ashton spoke of students’ possible resistance to engaging with spirituality:

ASHTON: What if a student is just like, “I don’t want anything to do with spirituality, it’s all about religion and I’m not into that,” but they’re out doing yoga all the time, you know? I think there’s a lot of resistance because there’s a lot of attachment of religion to spirituality. I think that would be a great challenge to take on. There are just so many sticky boundaries when it comes to religion in particular, and since spirituality is related with that people always think that it is [about religion]. Obviously it’s not but that makes me nervous.

Karl, on the other hand, spoke about resistance that might be encountered at an institutional or campus level:

KARL: I feel like this is a large area that is often overlooked or for whatever reason is sometimes taboo on campuses just because of some of the connotations that play into religion. I think that if we truly want to [address] this then we need to help define [spirituality] on campus, culturally….How do you define spirituality? Is it really religion? I think people have just been…hands off on that because we don’t want to deal with the repercussions if we really want to examine [how] people understand who they are. Or maybe they’ve named it something else and that’s where really the conflict is—now we’re trying to rename it spirituality and it’s hard.

How the participants navigated the ambiguity of the term “spirituality” affected their perceptions of their role in supporting student spiritual development. For at least four of the participants—Karl, Ashton, Iris, and Zoe—they were able to see past what they
imagined was a more universally accepted definition of spirituality relating to religion, and construct their roles based upon their personal definitions of spirituality.

**Personal life experience.** Personal life experiences with spirituality or religion influence how participants understand their roles in supporting student spiritual development. For some, their upbringing was significant. Iris traces her fluidity and openness—in looking at spirituality in broad ways, and in how she conceptualizes her role—directly to her early life experiences:

IRIS: Because I come from...an upbringing of diverse spiritual development, I understand that people have different definitions of what it means to spiritually develop. And students might be...not comfortable with the concept of spirituality. I wasn’t for quite a long time. I feel like now I have embraced the word as I define it for me. But in the larger world, that word means something that some students are like, ‘that’s not me.’ I’m sure that has influenced the way I want to approach students because I want to honor the fact that they may not see themselves as spiritual. And that’s fine. But meaning and purpose is important for everybody and you don’t have to call it spiritual...you can call it whatever you want, but it’s important to make meaning of your education....It’s important to think about how you’re affecting other people. Or, how healthy you are in your taking care of yourself, you know?...Those things may all mean spirituality to me, but they may not be that word to someone else.

Some participants reflected on their own spiritual development process when they explored how they understood their role in supporting student spiritual development. For Zoe, who emphasized exposing students to new ideas and greater awareness as being integral to this role, said, “I think once again we’re going back to my own development. My own pushing, challenging, stretching didn’t take place until I had a greater global awareness.” Karl directly relates his own personal spiritual development to how he approaches this role:

KARL: If I didn’t know where my own path was it’d be hard for me [to support students in their self-discovery of their spirituality]...Spirituality, in my definition, is how one individual is situated within the world and within different relationships, within a variety of different spectrums. It’s always dynamic and
fluid because our relationships change, our purpose and our situations within the world change, so that’s how I developed it for students….I thought, ‘I need to know my own stuff before I start helping somebody else figure out their own place.’ …A lot of stuff personally has happened over the last two years where it’s really made me look at where I’m at, how I’m situated within certain relationships, and what I want out of my own life….That process of development also helps to define my own purpose, and that process has helped inform how I want to serve students, or how I can support students.

Georgia, who was most challenged by defining spirituality and stressed a more hands-off approach of engaging students in spiritual development work by saying she “thinks” she would be “willing to engage in dialogue” if a student brings the topic up, touched on some negative personal experiences involving religion and faith. When speaking about how she came to develop her ideas about her role, she says:

GEORGIA: Broadly, just personal experiences…a little bit of a model of ‘that worked for me, that didn’t.’ But then there’s obviously personal bias in there. But lived experience, broadly, far more than any specific framework [helped develop my ideas about this role]…. Looking early in my faith development—I’ve been in places where religion and faith have been pushed on me, so that’s the last thing I want to do to someone else. So it’s that delicate dance to be accessible and approachable and show that you’re willing to have these conversations without bias or answers…. Because I’ve been burned by that, when people [have made] assumptions about myself at different points.

Ashton and Molly were both influenced by their personal experiences as undergraduate students and both, in speaking about their roles, emphasized the need to create space for students to engage in this work. Ashton reflected on how that space was not available to her as a student:

ASHTON: I had to make that space for myself. There were times when I would come home after a long night of partying with my roommates and I would be so upset. I would say, ‘I can’t do this. The Bible tells me not to do this.’ And they would say, ‘[Ashton] what do you want to do?’ …So it was those conversations that we would have, but I would have to seek those out. And I sought those out because I wanted them. I think that if I [hadn’t] wanted them it would be easy to fly by my development and just forget about being a spiritual person at all and I think that could happen for a lot of students. They just don’t have that opportunity to sit down, talk with someone about how they’re feeling, or talk with their
friends… I, as a spiritual person, struggled... I had to figure out what is the right thing to do. Finding that confirmation… from my peers and my mentors, that was helpful really in my development. So that really does go along with how I feel about what student affairs professionals should be doing. Creating that space for students to talk about it, and enlightening them about what there is, and what spirituality means.

Molly reflected similarly, saying that in both her undergraduate and graduate student experience she didn’t see many “spiritual areas” that were not “denomination-specific.” Therefore, she sees the need for there “being a space” where one can explore “other religions or spiritualities.” Molly’s personal life experience not only influences what she feels are the functions of her role but it also influences how she feels about her role.

Supporting student spiritual development holds great weight to her because of her “own importance that [she] place[s] on having spirituality and having a personal relationship with God.” She says:

MOLLY: I’ve been able to feel how that has helped me throughout school, throughout growth, throughout transition and change and so there’s an importance to the role because of my past and my history.

**Feelings of discomfort with role.** At various points in their interviews, all participants found themselves navigating feelings of unease with regard to their role in supporting student spiritual development. These feelings affected comfort levels with the role and as such seemed part of the meaning making process when considering the function of their roles, where one is situated within the institution they may be working, and areas participants felt were their learning curves. Three subthemes emerged from the data that was expressive of participant unease—or what the researcher is calling “feelings of discomfort”—and they are (a) professional identity, (b) appropriateness of topic, and (c) lack of knowledge/areas of need. This last subtheme, in which participants touched on either things they feel they are lacking or would find useful in their roles, has three
subcategories of (i) lack of knowledge of religions, (ii) need for examples of practical applications, and (iii) need for discussion with peers/professionals.

**Professional identity.** For Georgia, Iris, and Ashton, having a role in supporting student spiritual development brought up some anxiety of what that might mean for their professional identities. This concern was mainly about what other people’s perceptions of them might be. For Georgia this overlapped with concerns as to how “accessible” she would be viewed:

GEORGIA: I think [with] professional identity, there’s a risk of someone identifying as spiritual and that means they must be these things, and the pre-conceived notions we have. So, if I am known on my campus as someone who’s supporting spiritual development in students, what does that mean about other students’ perceptions of me, or my identity on campus?...How is that going to be viewed by my peers? How will it be viewed by students who may need that resource? Seems very much a risk in that way. And I don’t know why I feel that it’s different from supporting other realms of development but I think it’s very loaded because it’s dealing with big questions.

Iris brought up issues of institutional context (faith-based versus public) and the role of emotionality in one’s work. She also considered what it means to be “professional,” or more specifically, what other people might mean when they frame things as “professional”:

IRIS: The idea of professional identity is fraught to me in that there’s this idea of what a professional is and sometimes that bumps up against emotion. And spirituality, I think, is connected to emotion. So if you are [emotional]—in political ideas, ideas of social justice—‘whoa, you’re rocking a boat and that’s not professional’...So, I think if you were to really embrace spiritual development as a student affairs practitioner, it could affect your professional identity and the way that others hear you because if you’re at an institution like this, which is not a faith-based institution, the other staff members may find that inappropriate.

Ashton struggled with the idea that her own identity as a Christian might affect how other people view her professionally if she were engaged in this work. Like Iris, she also brings up institutional context, assuming that if she were to be open about her identity it might
be more acceptable at a religious institution. And like Georgia, she had questions about whether her identity would affect how accessible she would be to some students:

**ASHTON:** Do I have to tell them that I’m a Christian? And what if they don’t agree with that? Are they going to respect me as a professional? And so there’s that boundary because of that, but also, do I share that? Because what if people are identifying with me, and that helps them in their development, and we can share that experience? If I were to go out and tell everyone that I am a Christian, because that’s who I am…I think that it would, kind of, deteriorate from the professional that I am….I mean, if I was to go to a Christian college they would love it. But I think if I really want to truly respect all students and be open to all students, then it’s hard to bring my own spiritual development stuff into it. But…I also don’t think it takes away from who I am as a professional? Because my spirituality and my religion—I think that really I just care for people? So that’s just part of just who I am and what I enjoy doing, and I think that just shows through in my professionalism and my practice every day.

There is a sense in this subtheme that the topic of spirituality might be considered incongruent with the role of “professional.” Iris specifically mentioned her concern about other staff members finding spiritual development an “inappropriate” topic.

**Appropriateness of topic.** Wariness about the appropriateness of spirituality as a topic—apart from its connection to one’s professional identity—came up for five of the six participants. For both Georgia and Iris this means feeling uncomfortable engaging students in the “topic” of spirituality unless a student initiates the conversation. Iris summarizes:

**IRIS:** I don’t dare ask directly about spirituality. I think it’s more about [being a] sounding board and reflecting. I think I’d be uncomfortable unless a student brought it up to me. I did have a student I was teaching talk about faith in class, and it wasn’t uncomfortable in class—we were talking about values, and that was one of her primary values. It wasn’t uncomfortable at all but she brought it up. I don’t feel like I would be someone who would bring that to a student. I would let that student bring it up.

Molly, Ashton, and Zoe spoke to spirituality as being a topic that one is taught not to discuss, with Ashton stating, “I get nervous. And I think that comes from the whole idea of, ‘don’t talk about religion over the dinner table.’” Molly, whose definition of
spirituality is rooted within a relationship with a higher power, specifically talks about it as a topic that she was taught not to discuss within an educational environment:

MOLLY: Initially, I feel hesitant to incorporate [this into my role] because there’s so much weight on the separation of church and state. Like, you can’t pray in school, you can’t do this...And so, I feel like growing up—everything within public high school and college—there’s very much that separation, and so I almost feel like it’s taboo to talk about. And possibly one reason that it’s not talked about more is that people don’t know how to talk about it?

Echoing this, Zoe also talked about spirituality being a seemingly off-limits topic at school. As such, she sees herself as needing to grow into comfort with the role:

ZOE: I do feel apprehensive...And I think it boils down to, growing up I very much felt a divide between the knowledge we were allowed to share in school—like what sort of topics were allowed or appropriate and what wasn’t. We talk about the saying, ‘politics and religion should not be discussed outside of the home.’ However, politics certainly come into conversation frequently on campuses...but, for me...world religions were not fully fleshed out or discussed in school and issues of faith were not. Spirituality. Connection. These big, human questions were really not brought up in my environment of learning. So my acculturation around this topic really was, ‘that’s not appropriate to go there.’ I really do have some apprehension....However, I also have a strong understanding that I’ve been uncomfortable around other topics that were also important to me and that through practice I’ve become far more comfortable. And I see that with spirituality—as I have more information and allow myself to practice and learn from others, I’ll become far more comfortable saying, ‘yeah, this is something I consider a part of my role.’

Lack of knowledge/areas of need. Sentiments expressed by both Molly and Zoe above—of people not knowing how to talk about spirituality and of needing more information and practice to grow in comfort with the role—begin to touch upon the third subtheme of “discomfort.” As participants conceptualized their roles in supporting student spiritual development they identified areas of perceived lack of knowledge, or of needs they felt would improve their ability to function in their roles of supporting student spiritual development. Three subcategories emerged from this subtheme: (i) lack of
knowledge of religions, (ii) need for examples of practical applications, and (iii) need for discussion with peers/professionals.

**Lack of knowledge of religions.** Five of the six participants identified their lack of knowledge of others’ spiritual faiths, religions, or beliefs as something they need to address to improve their functioning within their roles. Georgia, Iris, and Molly specifically mentioned that taking a “religion class,” which addresses world religions, as something that would be helpful to them in this role.

MOLLY: I would need education surrounding general religions. I know my own religion. I am not as familiar with practices or with beliefs of other religions. So, like, a general religion class would be beneficial as a person that is in that role.

Likewise, Ashton stated, “I need a lot more education around spirituality because I know what it means to myself, but I don’t know what it means to enough people…. Experience in learning about different avenues of spirituality would be helpful.” Zoe, who in the past has studied different faiths within her coursework, feels it is important to continue to study in order to have a better grasp of vocabulary/language as it relates to spirituality:

ZOE: [I took it] upon myself in college to take coursework that focused on how different people practice their connection to the universe, the spiritual, the higher power, whatever it may be. And I focused more on eastern religion: Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism….And so when we talk about the tools that I need, I need to study…to be able to draw connections between different practices or ideas, and also have that vocabulary so when students or colleagues are talking about things I’m not always guessing at their meaning. So the language is really important for me. I need to practice language around topics of the spirit and faith and practice.

**Need for examples of practical applications.** The idea Zoe brings up about a need to practice language around spirituality is echoed in participants who expressed unease when they considered scenarios with which they imagined they could be faced. Five of the six participants all expressed a need for more examples of real-life or case study
examples in order to help them develop more comfort around their roles in supporting student spiritual development. Iris imagines a scenario where she might encounter a student having “a struggle with faith that I think is crazy” and gives an example of a student who might be struggling with engaging in masturbation because it “conflicts with some kind of doctrine”:

IRIS: That is going to be hard for me. Because to me that is not a struggle. (laugh)…Or struggling with someone who has a faith-based belief that is hurtful to others, that’s going to be a struggle….I want to play a role in challenging when a faith-based belief may run up against hurting others, or injustice, you know? That’s a challenge for me. But I don’t know how I’ll encounter that or deal with that when I’m in the moment….Overall I feel comfortable, if it’s [the student’s] initiative…I think that if they brought it up that it would be an okay conversation to have as long as it didn’t run up against those…beliefs I have about the way to treat people.

Ashton wants to use case studies to explore, “what do you say as a professional and what do you not say?” as she is wary of “stepping on people’s toes.” She wants to “be able to navigate conversations in a way that students are going to be able to benefit from them and feel like [she’s] supporting them in their development.” Georgia likens the need for case studies to when her graduate program looks at “more rudimentary questions of, ‘what did the budget look like at your school?’” She feels like spirituality should be “modeled” in the same way, “like, how would we respond if someone came in with these questions?” Zoe speaks to this as well:

ZOE: I’ll be honest and say I don’t feel like…concrete information or practice has been put forth in my graduate program. And why I bring that up is, what I think I do need or what I do think I could benefit from would be more case studies and examples of, ‘when have students asked for more?’ Because I’m very focused on, ‘What do students really need from us and what are they saying they want?’ So I’d like it sort of situated in that sphere. I’d like to know what students are asking for, what they need, what they want, and then show [us] how practitioners have met those needs or tried to meet those needs.
Karl echoes this as well when he also brings up the need for case studies that are specific to spiritual development:

KARL: I don’t think we’re given the opportunity to explore. I feel we always get examples in class like, “A student comes to you and is on your floor and says, ‘I had issues with this...,’ what resources can you send [the student to], or what would you do?” We never really get, ‘You had [a student] come in who was really questioning their existence, why they’re at school, why they’re even [in] this world, and why [when] they lost somebody it wasn’t them?’ I think we immediately go into, ‘Let’s think about functional areas. Where can we get support and services for these kids?’ It’s been less about, ‘Well let’s go ahead and talk. I might not be an expert on this, but let’s talk it out.’...Because I think we leave it up to the campus ministries. ‘We’ve got the Islamic center here, so if you [students] need that, those are resources you can go to,’ and well great. That’s like handing a kid 5 bucks [and saying], ‘Go ahead, go to the theme park. I won’t get you to the line, but find this ride, right?’ It’s interesting. I feel like that’s something that we lose the connection to. It’s this idea of, ‘refer refer refer’ rather than why aren’t we expected to know a little more about this and why can’t we have that conversation?

Need for discussion with peers/professionals. Karl’s need for conversation offers a bridge to the final area of need that five of the six participants spoke to regarding something they would find beneficial in their role of supporting student spiritual development. Participants expressed the desire, beyond case studies or practical application, for specific opportunities to talk about spirituality with peers or professionals connected to their graduate program. Iris saw the importance of this conversation as a way to “remind people that’s part of identity that people may forget about.” With regard to the lack of this conversation she said, “It could be that even our instructors are uncomfortable talking about it.” Georgia wanted conversations that addressed spirituality as a part of identity in the ways other aspects of identity have been discussed in her program. She says, “In multicultural issues [class] we discuss Christian privilege, but we did not discuss what it meant to challenge it or grow outside of it.” Ashton wants the opportunity to talk to peers about how they see themselves as spiritual people. She says a
class offering discussions “about how do we as [graduate students] figure out our big questions and what is important to us and how are we making meaning” would be beneficial if she is “going to help students make meaning in their lives.” Zoe also speaks to this when she says:

ZOE: We don’t talk about it as colleagues—how our spiritual life interplays with our daily practices—and I think I could really benefit from learning that if we were willing to share. If we’re going to ask one another to have these meaningful conversations with students, then I wonder why we’re not having them with one another. I think I could learn a lot from [that] practice.

Karl also wanted these discussions modeled by faculty and staff within his program:

KARL: What I want to get at is, like, talk to us. Who writes good stuff on this? Who does this? Who does that? Guide us in a direction where there are tools….I haven’t known any of [the] faculty or staff to really say that this was something they feel strongly about, or they’re really situated in, and [who] can speak to us from personal experience, professional experience….those conversations don’t necessarily happen….Provide those other perspectives; I would like to see that.

**Places of comfort with role.** For all the unease or discomfort participants attached to their role of supporting student spiritual development, there were also feelings of positivity or comfort that were involved in how participants made meaning of their roles. Two subthemes emerged from these more “comfortable” aspects of this role and those were, (a) role engenders positive feelings, and (b) role enhances professional identity.

**Role engenders positive feelings.** Molly, whose main source of discomfort was a perceived lack of knowledge of religions and faiths different than her own, found comfort in what she felt she could contribute to the role:

MOLLY: I would be comfortable in that role because I have been raised in a church upbringing, so I have a context of spiritual religion….I can relate to what being religious may look like or feel like and so I would feel comfortable working with students on, like: let’s engage what spiritual development looks like; let’s
talk what that process is; what is a belief as opposed to a feeling?; how does one pray? Almost like awareness-raising around spirituality.

Ashton, who had reservations about her perceived lack of knowledge about spiritual paths that may be different than her own, as well as what the role means for her professional identity, is still drawn to the work by the aspects of deeper learning she can engage in with students:

ASHTON: I also think that I would be excited. Just because, it’s a part of who a student is. It’s a part of who I am. And it’s something that’s really important to me and I know that it’s important to other people...so why wouldn’t I have a conversation about that and why wouldn’t I help students figure out what that end goal is for them, or what is important to them, or why they do what they do every day? So there’s that mixture of excitement. I would love to sit down with students and really figure out and learn...what are all of the different avenues that people seek spirituality? I think learning about that excites me.

Even Georgia, who seemed to feel the most unease with the role, was able to identify positive feelings that supporting student spiritual development would bring:

GEORGIA: I feel comfortable if it’s brought to me. So that is where my comfort is—of not initiating those conversations, but being willing to sit and talk. And I love discussing things and religion and faith just because of my upbringing and some of my own challenges. I feel comfortable, but I also feel trusted....and I’d also feel honored that students would be willing to talk about those things because I think they’re intimate and not always something that comes up for all students.

**Role enhances professional identity.** While three participants had concerns about what their role in supporting student spiritual development might mean to their professional identity, three participants’ meaning making of this role saw the work as enhancing to their professional identity in some way. Molly connected her own perceived growth within that role to the growth of her students:

MOLLY: I think incorporating support for student spiritual development [into my role]...would develop my professional identity. I would be growing as a holistic professional as we’re trying to develop students holistically. If I’m also educating myself or being educated on how to support students spiritually, that’s going to develop my spirituality as well as my knowledge around how to teach student
spirituality to different student populations, different religions. So I think it would develop me as a professional, which would be beneficial not only to myself but also the institution where I’m working.

Zoe speaks to how her conceptualization of supporting student spiritual development aligns with her already-defined professional goal of working towards developing resilient students. Like Molly, she links student growth with her own growth as a professional:

ZOE: …Incorporating student spiritual development into my role—my professional identity and practice—I’ll feel that much more confident that I’m fulfilling this goal I’ve created around cultivating resilience in students….When I think of spiritual development, that’s just this type of courage and strength that I admire so much in students. It’s that core piece of being willing to ask those big questions, feel your connection to others in a profound way, and then look at your environment as something you have responsibility for. That’s a lot to ask of young people. But, those being the components of spiritual development that I’ve mentioned today—being willing to engage in dialogue with students about them, I think with my professional identity and practice I’ll be stronger in this connection with my own resilience and others.

Karl already sees his own spiritual development reflected in how he currently navigates organizational structures. He sees that continuing in his professional work and becoming a part of how his professional identity is shaped:

KARL: [My spirituality has] affected the way I look at organizational structures, and how I see myself operating within those structures, too….I think my own professional understanding of spirituality, and where I’m situated, [reaffirms] that it’s not a rat race….It’s not about one [person having power] over the other. It’s about relationships. At least it has been [a] part of spiritual development in myself—[a focus] on development of relationships. I think as a practitioner, and in my own professional identity, that’s going to be salient for me. Wherever I go, if I’m interviewing for a job, if I have the job, I’m going to talk about my role to build and maintain relationships…cultivate relationships amongst colleagues, amongst students. I think incorporating that support of student development is essential.

The work of student affairs. Karl’s last point about what is “essential” in support of student development speaks to the final theme that emerged from the data.
Four of the six participants connected their roles of supporting student spiritual development to the “work” of the student affairs profession. As much discomfort Georgia wrestled with when considering her role, she saw spiritual development “on the table with all other elements of holistic development.” She identified the focus of holistic development of students as the work of student affairs, thus identifying spiritual development as “part of [her] work.” Molly also couched spiritual development within the student affairs profession’s “responsibility” to holistic development:

MOLLY: I think it is the responsibility of student affairs professionals to encourage holistic development and though educational institutions focus mainly on academic and [intellectual] knowledge and [those] educational aspects of development, the mental and spiritual and emotional [also] impact the educational development of students. So, looking at a student as a whole person. Spirituality has a big part in that.

Zoe sees her role in supporting student spiritual development as being grounded in social justice work, which she sees as integral to the work of student affairs professionals:

ZOE: It comes down to social justice for me. What’s just and what’s right, and that’s in caring for people and the whole person. So, why I think this is an important topic and why I feel like it can’t be ignored, is that to marginalize others and to say, ‘I’m not going to see that part of you, I’m not going to ask that part of you,’ puts folks on the margin. And so I ask myself, I challenge myself daily, to be open to everything—for each student that…comes into my life. That doesn’t mean I have to like them, but I need to be open to seeing them as fully as I can and pushing myself to do so….When I think about social justice, it’s that willingness to take a step back and say, ‘Okay, I don’t know enough about that, I’m going to do my own work and put that forth, and I’m willing to see all of you. Not just part of you or the parts of you that make sense to me today or the parts that this institution tells me I should see. I’m willing to see all of you.’

Lastly, Ashton connects her meaning making approach to supporting student spiritual development to the meaning making she sees as central to the activity of student affairs professionals. For her most everything student affairs professionals do can be used in the service of supporting student spiritual development:
ASHTON: As student affairs professionals, we’re supposed to help students make meaning of what they’re doing. We always talk about the curricular or the co-curricular activities we’re getting them to do, but really we’re helping them make meaning. What does this mean for their life? I think that is what spirituality is. Whether it’s going to do a service learning project, or something else, we’re finding what is important to them and why are they doing these things. What is their purpose in college? What is their purpose in their life? What is their purpose of every move that they make?...And I don’t think we label it as spirituality, but it is. I mean that’s what it is. I wish there was just a different word to use for it, but that’s the perfect word for it. Like, it inspires your spirit….That’s what we do as student affairs professionals.

Results Summary

This study explores how graduate students presently enrolled in a student affairs preparation program make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. In six one-on-one interviews, study participants discussed their conceptualizations of how they would function in this role, what this role might entail, feelings about performing in this role, as well as thoughts they had about how they have come to their ideas. Five themes emerged from the data: (a) definition of spirituality; (b) personal life experience; (c) feelings of discomfort with role; (d) places of comfort with role; and (e) the work of student affairs. These themes provide context to how participants’ make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. The results from the data analysis provide a snapshot at how some incoming practitioners in the field of student affairs understand and conceptualize spirituality as it relates to their chosen profession. The following chapter will address general conclusions; possible implications of these results; limitations of this study; recommendations for further research; and final concluding thoughts.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative study examines how six graduate students in a student affairs preparation program make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. The sample size and methodology were chosen to provide an in-depth exploration and description of a specific phenomenon in a population of current graduate students at a single research site; the results are not generalizable to all incoming student affairs professionals. Conclusions and discussion drawn from results might be built upon and developed further should the study be replicated across myriad institutional cultures and types, and include greater diversity of students voices. That being said transferability of this study is possible to the degree one can make “a reasoned judgment about the extent to which the finding from one study can be used as a guide to what might occur in another situation” (Kvale, 1996, p. 233). Using cautious analytic generalizations, this study gives insight into how graduate students within student affairs preparation programs may make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. It provides greater understanding into what may influence their ideas and, as such, it can lay the groundwork for further research into the academic and practical preparation of future student affairs professionals. If the results herein serve as a snapshot of the current pulse of spirituality discourse among incoming student affairs practitioners, questions can be raised that may have implications for the future of that discourse within student affairs.

General Conclusions

In this exploration of how graduate students in a student affairs preparation program make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development, five prevalent themes emerged from the textual analysis of the six qualitative interview
transcripts. These themes provide context to how participants may have arrived at or make meaning of their ideas. The themes also give insight into factors that may influence participants’ conceptualizations and feelings for their role, and whether or not those ideas/emotions shape how they think of or approach their role.

As is fitting for the constructivist epistemology in which this study is grounded, the themes highlight what the researcher identifies as “internal” and “external” factors at play in how the participants make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. The tension between these two forces—internal growth, process, and belief versus external constructs, institutions, and assumptions—show up throughout the narrative data. Perhaps at the heart of this is the content of the first theme: definition of spirituality. The subthemes within this theme—personal definition of spirituality, and problems arising from commonly held definitions of spirituality—are representative of internal and external forces, respectively. The participants in this study draw a direct correlation between their conceptualizations of the role of supporting student spiritual development and their own personal internal meanings of spirituality. That the participants each had a slightly different take on what the role in question entailed and how it functioned, was not surprising when these ideas were aligned with each individual’s unique personal definition of spirituality. It is clear from the data that personal definition of spirituality is hugely influential in how one makes meaning of one’s role in supporting spiritual development. This being said, participants were consistently challenged by their ideas of how others might perceive their role due to definitions of spirituality those “others” might assume or hold. This external factor caused participants to: avoid or have difficulty defining the word, qualify their personal
definitions, or imagine resistance that their role could encounter. This first theme is central to this study, as it seems to be particularly relevant whenever participants talk about their feelings of discomfort with the role. The participants seem to have an understanding that, much like how they construct spirituality, there are “multiple, often conflicting, constructions, and all (at least potentially) are meaningful” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 128).

Personal life experience is the second theme and seems to be influential in how participants make meaning of their role supporting spiritual development. Many of the participants’ life experiences are reflected in their personal definitions of spirituality. Experiences as a student, upbringing, and reflections on one’s own spiritual process and “knowing,” were all personal experiences that shaped participants’ meaning making. In this theme, both internal and external forces come into play and both positive and negative personal experiences shape how participants see themselves approaching their roles. Participants’ positive encounters with external support and guidance during their own personal journeys aid them in honing their approaches to supporting student spiritual development, as they want to mirror what “worked” for them. Likewise, negative or neutral personal experiences with external support or internal struggle, give participants ideas about what their role should not be and their motivations seemed based upon filling deficits they personally faced or addressing needs they themselves had at some point in their development.

While definitions of spirituality and personal life experience seem to play the most direct role in how participants come to make meaning of and understand their role in supporting student spiritual development, various feelings of discomfort or unease
boundary their conceptualizations of how they might function in the role or limit what they think this role entails. The third theme of feelings of discomfort with role emerged from this aspect of the data and included three subthemes: (a) professional identity, (b) appropriateness of topic, and (c) lack of knowledge/areas of need. In at least the first two of these subthemes, the focus of concern was on external forces, with participants again struggling with how individuals or institutions surrounding them might make meaning of spirituality. There was concern from at least 3 participants that their role might negatively impact their professional identity should students find them inaccessible, or colleagues and institutional forces find spirituality in conflict with what it means to be a “professional.” One participant was reconciling whether or not she should be “out” at work regarding her own Christian identity. These ideas bumped against the second subtheme of appropriateness of topic, with participants expressing that the very notion of addressing spirituality went against messages they received growing up—especially around what was appropriate to talk about in educational settings. The third subtheme highlighted the ways participants felt they were either not fully prepared to take on this role or expressed things they thought would be helpful in becoming more competent to take on this role. These places of internal examination of lack of knowledge/areas of need included three subcategories. Most of the participants discussed their personal lack of knowledge of religions—a clear link to the participants’ understanding that spirituality is a word often connected to religious faith. The participants also expressed need for examples of practical applications of what supporting student spiritual development looks like. This subcategory not only highlights scenarios in the field that the participants are unsure about how to handle, but the researcher also sees this subcategory tapping into
participants’ continued struggle of defining what the role entails and what is expected of them within it. By asking for practical examples, the participants are saying plainly, “We want to know what this looks like,” which is another way of saying, “We don’t really know what this looks like in practice.” Participants also brought up the need for discussion with peers/professionals. This subcategory saw participants challenging the engagement of spiritual development within their graduate program, wondering aloud about: the role of spirituality within identity and privilege discourses; their instructors’ comfort with the topic; and why, if they are going to be asked to have “these meaningful conversations with students,” they were not having them with one another. It is the conclusion of the researcher that the majority of areas of discomfort, and the conflicts participants have concerning their role in supporting student spiritual development, stem from either their own or others’ associations of religion with spirituality. When religion is added to the conversation, notions of appropriateness of topic and conflicts regarding their role in relation to their professional identities become salient and leave the participants wanting clarity about how to make meaning of this role. Again there appears to be a balancing act in play between external influences and perceived needs for internal self-development in order to understand more fully or be more competent in their roles.

Aside from these feelings of discomfort, of which many seem brought about by external influences, participants found sources of internal satisfaction and comfort with their role in supporting student spiritual development. This fourth theme of places of comfort with role included two subthemes. The places where the role engenders positive feelings for the participants often were present along side feelings of discomfort; these were not mutually exclusive emotional states. “Comfortable,” “excited,” “trusted,” and
“honored” were some of these positive feelings stemming from feeling competent and knowledgeable (in the case of Molly) to understanding the weight and importance of this aspect of development for students (as was the case for all the participants, when reflected against their own internal personal spiritual development). And while three participants struggled with what the role would mean for their professional identities, an equal number of participants feel the role enhances professional identity, often linking their own personal continued growth with that of their students. They felt what was required of themselves in the role would either fit with their professional goals and ideals, or would serve to develop them holistically.

Encouragement and support of holistic development, the work of social justice, and the role of student affairs professionals in helping students make meaning of their experiences were all ways participants saw supporting student spiritual development as part of the work of student affairs. Within this fifth and final theme, four participants articulated their roles as inseparable from the call of their profession. This theme seemed to include both internal values and personal philosophy, and beliefs about the external mission and work of their profession. The latter point is especially interesting to the researcher when juxtaposed with participants’ discomfort attached to possible institutional or collegial resistance to spirituality. Participants who expressed their role as being integral to the work of student affairs were also some of the same participants who struggled with issues of professional identity and appropriateness of this role and topic.

The researcher concludes that the meaning making expressed and undertaken by participants is tied to both internal and external social forces. For all the participants internal definitions of spirituality and personal life experiences strongly influence how
each conceptualizes and approaches their role. However, participants’ meaning making is also contextually bound with possible institutional culture, colleague persuasions, and societal definitions of what it means to be spiritual or to spiritually develop. In this way the meaning making of participants is dynamic and fluid and will likely continue to develop and take further shape throughout their careers.

**Anticipated Findings**

Several of the findings that emerged from the results are suggested by the existing literature and thus this study lends further support and evidence to these ideas. First and foremost, definitions of spirituality among participants were as varied as those within the literature. While no participant used a specific definition of spirituality found in the literature, the definitions offered by participants are reflected in the myriad definitions their professional literature espouses.

That practitioners are or might be uncomfortable with aspects of engaging with student spiritual development has been addressed by the literature (Burchell, Lee, & Olsen, 2010; Kiessling, 2010, 2011). The present study’s theme of *feelings of discomfort with role* expands upon and further illuminates these studies. When Kiessling (2010) suggests that perceptions of many student affairs professionals indicate, “integration of spirituality is not an appropriate role” (p. 8), this study gives some evidence to this possibility. When this current study’s participants indicate they would be most comfortable engaging with students on spiritual development matters if it is the student who initiates those conversations, it echoes the findings of Burchell, Lee, and Olsen (2010). Also, as found in Burchell, Lee, and Olsen (2010), the current study’s participants expressed, to some extent, feelings that spirituality was a personal topic and as such
might not be an appropriate one to discuss with students. Additionally, like the above-cited study, participants in the current study expressed concern that integrating spiritual development into their practice might be seen as conflicting with their professional identity/role or they might experience resistance from their institutions. Research by Kiessling (2010) and Moran & Curtis (2004) reflect how student affairs professionals will often conflate religion and spirituality. This happened to varying degrees within the current study, although the researcher feels the participants often consciously balanced the two constructs and held an awareness of both simultaneously. Indeed, the fact that these constructs (religion and spirituality) can both overlap and be disparate was a source of discomfort for participants.

The current study and the work of Seifert and Holman-Harmon’s (2009) both support the idea that one does not have to identify as spiritual or religious to be “inclined to engage in practices associated with facilitating students’ inner development” (p. 14). All participants in the current study mentioned student inner development as an aspect of their roles in some way and each were varying degrees of spiritual, religious, or non-practicing/non-religious. There appeared to be no correlation between participants’ self-identified faith/religious affiliation and their commitment or interest to engaging with students’ inner development.

Like the current study, Rogers and Love’s (2007b) study on graduate students in a student affairs preparation program reflected the absence of a common language among graduate students to discuss the broad concept of spirituality within the education literature. Additionally, the current study’s second theme of personal life experience also echoes Rogers and Love’s (2007b) finding that graduate students identified personal self-
knowledge and self-awareness as being key to preparing them to work with future students’ own explorations of spirituality. Rogers and Love also found that students felt comfortable working with broad constructs of spirituality in their future careers but expressed discomfort about possibly discussing or supporting spirituality if it overlapped with religious faith traditions or was tied to belief in a higher power. This tension was seen throughout the current study.

Kiessling (2011) states her quantitative study “indicated very low integration of topics related to spirituality into the graduate school curriculum” (p. 33). The Rogers and Love (2007a, 2007b) research posits that explicit discussion and links to spirituality within student affairs preparation programs may be absent, but these programs are providing educational experiences that are giving incoming student affairs professionals tools to support student spiritual development. While not a theme in the current study, comments from participants did align with Rogers and Love’s findings. When reflecting on his graduate program, Karl said:

I think my program does a good job of getting you prepared for skills, but I don’t think we actually talk a lot about it….If you define spirituality as your understanding and knowing within your space and time, I think we’re there, but I’m not quite sure that we really discuss it in [the] language.

And Zoe said something similar when she stated, “So [spirituality] is there, but I’m saying it just isn’t spelled out in a way where it makes this topic important.”

**Unanticipated Findings**

Rogers and Love (2007b) found that many graduate students in their study tied spirituality to religion until specifically prompted to think about the topic in ways that encompassed authenticity, meaning-making, and reflection on life-purpose. The participants in the current study each had a broader understanding of spirituality than
merely “religion.” Even when participants identified religion as how they personally defined spirituality (i.e., Ashton and Molly), they still had an understanding that definitions of spirituality differed for individuals and might very well be constructed outside the framework of faith or religion. The students in Rogers and Love’s (2007b) research were able to identify the emphasis of authenticity, meaning-making, and reflection on life-purpose present in their programs but did not at first explicitly link these things to spirituality. As mentioned within the anticipated findings, the majority of participants in the current study had an awareness of these concepts as being connected to spirituality and did not need prompting to do so. Additionally when current participants explored the ways in which they felt their program could better prepare them for their role, they spoke about spirituality beyond the construct of religion (though it too was included).

The scholarly literature/practitioner divide Kiessling (2010) posits is present within the current study at times when graduate students struggle to define their role. However, the results paint a more nuanced and rich picture of the many factors that play into how some incoming student affairs professionals make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. Participants in the present study seem aware of a broader definition of spirituality outside that of religion. While not explicitly linking it to the scholarly literature, they seem conscious that this broader definition is being used within their profession, as seen in the study’s final theme of the work of student affairs. That being said participants also recognize the complexity of defining spirituality in this way and problematized this, holding with them the possible assumptions of people who
are not familiar with this broader definition, and understanding that the word has a more common definition that equates to religion for many people.

The researcher feels the present study shows that student affairs professionals are likely wrestling, in a far more nuanced way than the literature has suggested, with how internal, personal spheres exist and coincide with external social and institutional spheres of influence. The current participants’ ability to hold their own personal definitions of spirituality alongside definitions that might conflict with their own is illustrated within the theme of feelings of discomfort with the role, especially within the subcategory of lack of knowledge/areas of need. The participants’ desire to learn more about religion illuminates not their conflation of spirituality with religion, but instead their awareness that for many students spirituality will tie into faith or religious backgrounds/affiliations. When participants wrestle with how their own religious identities might affect their professional identities, and discuss spirituality as an aspect of identity that should be both talked about further and included in discussions of power and privilege, they are highlighting their awareness of social structures and the positionality of various identities within those social systems. While some of this is being addressed within a burgeoning body of interfaith literature outside the scope of the present study, the literature focused strictly on “spirituality,” as explored herein, does not reflect practitioners’ personal stories in this way. Perhaps this is why participants also see the need for examples of practical applications and the need for discussion with peers/professionals.

A final unanticipated finding is perhaps reflective of the researcher’s bias more than a finding that did not align with the present literature in the field. The researcher was surprised at how little emphasis was placed on the participants’ graduate program as an
influencing factor in their meaning making. The researcher anticipated, that due to the participants being presently situated within a graduate program, there might have been some mention on the importance of grounding their practice—and the conceptualization of their role—within a theoretical framework. Could the absence of this be because, as discussed in the review of the literature, there is no uniform, single theory of spiritual development? Or could it be that participants were influenced by theoretical foundations in their field and did not explicitly make this link?

**Implications for Practice**

Various implications for practice can be considered in light of these results. This study indicates that personal definitions of spirituality, as well as personal life experiences, have a strong influence on how graduate students in a student affairs preparation program make meaning of and conceptualize their role in supporting student spiritual development. Given how the participants’ interpretations of their role was dependent on how they each defined spirituality, student affairs preparation programs should begin to consider how they are supporting the spiritual development of their own students. The researcher would encourage programming that supports the outcomes of Love and Talbot’s (1999) five propositions of spiritual development, as this is the definition most cited within the professional field the students are entering into and it captures the majority of constructs being used to define spirituality within education. The graduate programs can look towards the best practices literature to begin conceptualizing how to best integrate spiritual development programming that: aids in their graduates’ discernment of meaning and purpose; provides space and facilitation to grapple with “big
questions;” and engenders consciousness-raising and compassion through service or social justice activities.

A significant contribution this study makes to the literature is its identification and discussion of areas of discomfort for practitioners. The findings suggest participants are aware of myriad definitions of spirituality and wrestle with areas of discomfort or unease within their possible roles specifically when considering the religious connotations of spirituality or the perspectives of others whom they might be serving or working beside in the field. The finding that some participants are troubled by what embracing spiritual development might mean to their professional identity, as well as what they see as the possible perceived “inappropriateness” of spirituality as a topic in higher education, indicates the need for continued education at both a professional organizational level (NASPA, ACPA) and institutional level (i.e., graduate preparation programs). This may also indicate a need for those in leadership positions within student affairs to take on an advocacy role around addressing issues of spirituality (and religion) on their campuses and within the profession. To this end, student affairs professional organizations must continue to help build the capacity for addressing this topic through their interest groups and the scholarly literature. It is the researcher’s belief that the discomfort faced by practitioners in the field, which is reflected herein as well as throughout the student affairs literature, might call for clarity of definition of spirituality. This latter point will be addressed later as a recommendation for further research.

The six study participants illuminated ways in which they might be better prepared to address student spiritual development or, at the very least, ways that their abilities might be bolstered. These identified areas of need have direct implications for
how student affairs graduate programs can prepare graduates to address student spiritual development. Encounters with, and understanding of, religious plurality was identified as something all participants felt could help them in their work. Some participants mentioned a “multicultural issues” course as being a place where these discussions can take place. This can be one way in which programs can meet this need, but what are other ways? How can programs increase the likelihood or possibility that their graduate students will have a better understanding of religious pluralism and the issues they might face on their campuses related to such pluralism? Additionally, almost all participants asked for examples of practical applications to be embedded within the curriculum of their program much like they feel is the case for issues such as budgeting or student housing. They also suggested having “spiritual” conversations with colleagues and instructors might be one way to model practice in preparation for their work in the field. Graduate programs should examine and consider where such opportunities exist to better incorporate practical examples and actual practice into the curriculum.

Lastly, participants spoke about the ways in which they felt their role in supporting student spiritual development was fulfilling for them, enhanced their professional identity, and aligned with their professional roles. The profession can look at these narrative examples to continue to develop a framework that situates spiritual development as integral in the work of student affairs. Such an emphasis is likely to engender a stronger sense of competence among student affairs professionals, and might aid in lessening unease or discomfort around the topic. An approach that highlights positive outcomes of engaging in this work with students and links it to the enhancement
of professional identity and the development of practitioners’ holistic skills might make the topic seem more approachable, accessible, and appealing.

**Limitations**

Aside from the inherent limitations of qualitative studies, as has been discussed previously, this study is limited by the size and demographics of its sample population. Participants in the current study are all white Euro-Americans from predominantly Christian upbringings and from socio-economic backgrounds that fall between lower- and middle-classes. The majority of participants are female. Due to obvious size limitations, the sample is not large enough to draw any conclusions or correlates between the meaning making of participants and the demographic data collected. Future studies might strive to include greater diversity with regard to participant race, ethnicity, sex, religious or faith beliefs, and socio-economic status. Other data, demographic or otherwise, that could prove relevant but was not collected in the current study might include gender expression, sexual orientation, degree one rates oneself as spiritual, degree one rates oneself as religious, and undergraduate institutional type.

The participants in this study self-selected into it, thus the researcher may have only received data from those who perhaps had an interest in the topic or had given the topic some consideration. Different methodological approaches, such as inviting a random representative sample of graduate students or engaging in snowball sampling, might enhance or produce differing results. Additionally, this is a single-site study. The research site was chosen to allow the researcher the greatest access to the study participants and to provide consistency of context, which is a consideration with regard to the formation of knowledge of the study participants. However, this does not allow for
comparative analyses to be made about differing institutional programmatic content with regard to participant responses. Replication of this study at additional sites—varying institution type, mission, and cultures—would allow for a broader ability to generalize the graduate student population within student affairs preparation programs.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

As suggested above, further research can expand upon this study simply by including a greater diversity of voices, life experiences, and institutions with differing programmatic content. The current study’s participants understood spirituality in a broader way than Rogers and Love’s (2007b) participants did five years ago. This could indicate that the spirituality discourse in higher education is making its way to our incoming professionals, or at least it is at one institution. Further research might explore how this information is reaching graduate students. Quantitative studies might ask if, how, and how many times graduate students have encountered topics of spirituality within their coursework or professional literature/conferences. It could be that a broader culture shift in current practitioners is helping to raise the consciousness of graduate students within these student affairs preparation programs. Perhaps in another five years, a study similar to this one or similar to Rogers and Love’s (2007b) might once again “get a pulse” of the spirituality discourse among the profession’s graduate students. Perhaps similar studies could also include an analysis of program curriculum with regard to spirituality, spiritual discourse, and engagement with best practices.

The researcher is concerned by the continued discomfort expressed by practitioners with regard to spirituality. Additionally she is concerned, as were some of the study’s participants, that “spirituality,”—as it historically and quite frequently is
conflated with religion and as it contains connotations to the presence of a soul—might be a construct that feels exclusive and inaccessible to some students. If this is the case, the profession may need a re-examination of the term. Additional research on undergraduate student populations to better understand their interest in spirituality might help illuminate the aspects of spirituality in which they most want to engage, and this could, in turn, inform graduate programs as to how to better prepare incoming practitioners. It could be that addressing issues of religious pluralism and faith diversity becomes commonplace under the umbrella of what is commonly multi- and inter- cultural student services. Fully appreciating and respecting the religious connection to spirituality may be the least confusing way to address “spirituality.” The secular inner development work of meaning, purpose, authenticity, awareness of self through community engagement, and transcending one’s locus of centricity might be better served if situated under a more inclusive term that does not have a tendency to stir feelings of discomfort or alienation. Further research might explore how current student affairs practitioners define their work within these spheres of growth.

If the profession is indeed married to the idea of spirituality as a broad construct that includes both religious/faith connotations as well as a redefinition to encompass developmental processes that have already been defined within the profession’s developmental foundations, then scholars and practitioners will need to pursue research on this construct with greater care than they have thus far. The limitations in the body of literature pertaining to spirituality—due to the lack of a single definition—make it difficult to draw conclusions, suggest clear courses of action, or build upon it/replicate it in a sound methodical way. Researchers should strive to define the construct within the
framework they are wanting/intending to study it, and they should also strive to make clear participants’ understandings/definitions of the word.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In the last decade there has been a proliferation of research within the student affairs literature on spirituality in higher education. This groundswell of interest has included key theorists within student development, who frame spirituality as an aspect of human development that touches deeper, hard to define, universal aspects of human meaning making, encompassing: “big questions” of meaning and purpose; personal authenticity and wholeness; ability to relate to others; greater connectedness and awareness of self through relationships and community engagement; and one’s personal relationship with a higher power or “intangible essence” that may exist beyond rational human knowing.

The spirituality discourse has called spirituality an integral part of holistic development. In this way the discourse is a return to tradition, as the earliest philosophical foundations of student affairs stresses the importance of holistically considering the college student—and identify religion and spirituality as specific components to this. In other ways spirituality is a re-packaging of ideas and constructs already present within the student development theory that guides practitioners’ work, aspects of which can be seen in the work of Perry (1968), Chickering (1969), and Kohlberg (1981) to name but a few.

This being said, the research on spirituality in undergraduate students’ lives identifies it as an area of interest, a place of struggle, and a correlate of positive educational outcomes. While these studies vary and define spirituality in differing ways
there does appear to be consistent findings in support of these claims. As such, spirituality has been seen as a relevant and additional avenue of engagement for student affairs professionals seeking to address current student needs and looking to bolster certain co-curricular learning outcomes.

This study contributes to the body of literature focused on spirituality as it relates to the practice of student affairs professionals and graduate students within student affairs preparation programs. Evidence in the literature suggests that practitioners working in the field are wary of discussions of spirituality and may consider supporting spiritual development outside their “role” as student affairs professionals. The single study—now 5 years old—on graduate students in a student affairs preparation program found those students defining spirituality as religion until prompted to conceive of it in the broader way the burgeoning definition describes. These students felt comfortable working with broad constructs of spirituality in their future careers but expressed discomfort about possibly discussing or supporting spirituality if it overlapped with religious faith traditions or was tied to belief in a higher power.

Now that the spirituality discourse in higher education is a decade old, the researcher was interested in seeing if incoming student affairs professionals were aware of the broader construct of spirituality and was also curious as to how they understood their role. As such, this study explores how current graduate students in a student affairs preparation program make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. Five themes emerged from the data:

- *Definition of spirituality*: includes subthemes of
  
  (a) personal definition of spirituality
(b) problems arising from commonly held definitions of spirituality

• Personal life experience

• Feelings of discomfort with role; includes subthemes of

  (a) professional identity

  (b) appropriateness of topic

  (c) lack of knowledge/areas of need, including subcategories of

     (i) lack of knowledge of religions

     (ii) need for examples of practical applications

     (iii) need for discussion with peers/professionals

• Places of comfort with role; includes subthemes of

  (a) role engenders positive feelings

  (b) role enhances professional identity

• The work of student affairs

  These results support a possible evolution within the field with regard to how the newest practitioners understand spirituality, as participants were conscious of varying definitions of spirituality and conceptualized their roles through these different lenses. Results also highlight ways in which the student affairs profession and student affairs preparation programs can better meet the needs of graduate students in the field, which will in turn better serve the student population they will soon be supporting. And, like many studies on practitioners have shown, graduate students are still grappling with discomfort and unease in the places where spirituality overlaps with or is equated with religion.
Given the profession’s emergent emphasis on spirituality, graduate students in student affairs preparation programs will likely be tasked to shape, nurture, assess, and evaluate services that address or support the spiritual lives of students. This study provides a snapshot of the current pulse of the spirituality discourse among a small sample of graduate students and provides a greater understanding of how graduate students’ make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. It offers some groundwork for further research into the academic and practical preparation of future student affairs professionals, as well as raises questions that may have implications for the future of the spirituality discourse within student affairs—specifically with regard to the definition of spirituality. If the student affairs profession believes in the “holistic educational paradigm that regards mind, body, and spirit as cooperative and mutually enhancing aspects of the human experience” (Stewart et al., 2011, p. 11) then it would benefit the profession to continue working towards common language, shared philosophy, and professional competencies around this issue to best meet the needs of college and university students.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Invitation e-mail

**Study Title:** Making Meaning of Supporting Student Spiritual Development: Perceptions of Graduate Students in a Student Affairs Program

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Larry Roper

Dear Student,

My name is Amy Thomson and I am a graduate student in the College of Education. This academic year, I plan to study the ways in which future student affairs practitioners make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. The results of this study will be used to write a thesis in partial completion of a Master of Science (MS) degree in College Student Services Administration at Oregon State University. I would like to invite you to participate in this study. The study would ask that you participate in an individual one-on-one audio taped interview during the next few weeks. Participants who complete an interview will receive $5.00.

Qualifications to participate in this study include:

- Must be at least 18 years of age
- Must be enrolled full-time in the College Student Services Administration (CSSA) Program at OSU
- Must be a second year student who is a member of the Fall 2011 CSSA cohort

If you meet the qualifications for participating in this study, and wish to do so, please email me at amy.k.thomson@oregonstate.edu or contact me via text or phone at 217.722.5118. The first six qualified respondents will be eligible to participate in this study. I look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Amy Thomson
Graduate Teaching Assistant
Counseling and Psychological Services
Appendix B

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Making Meaning of Supporting Student Spiritual Development
Perceptions of Graduate Students in a Student Affairs Program
Principal Investigator: Dr. Larry Roper
Student Researcher: Amy K. Thomson
Version Date: September 29, 2012

1. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This form contains information you will need to help you decide whether to participate in this study or not. Please read the form carefully and ask the study team member(s) questions about anything that is not clear.

2. WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which future student affairs practitioners make meaning of their role in supporting student spiritual development. The student researcher is conducting this study for the completion of a thesis, and the findings of this study may be used for future publications, presentations, or conferences.

Up to six students may be invited to take part in this study.

3. WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in this study because you are a full-time graduate student in the College Student Services Administration (CSSA) program. Additionally, you entered the program in Fall 2011.

4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

This study involves research exploring the perceptions that future student affairs practitioners have about supporting student spiritual development.
The study activities include a one-on-one interview structured around ten predetermined open-ended questions. Related follow-up questions may be asked during the interview depending on a participant’s answer to each of the questions. You are free to skip any questions that you would prefer not to answer. You are free to opt out of the interview process at any point.

**Study duration:** The interview will take about one hour.

**Recordings and photographs:** Audio recordings will be taken during this interview. Audio recording is a required study activity, and participants should not enroll if they do not wish to be recorded.

**Storage and future use of data or samples:** Information gathered from this study will be stored in password protected digital files, only accessible to the principle investigator and student researcher. Any notes taken during the study will also be kept in a locked storage file. The information will be stored for three years before it is disposed.

**Future contact:** We may contact you in the future for follow-up questions that are directly related to your answers in this study. You may ask us to stop contacting you at any time.

**Study Results:** Participants may request a copy of the transcribed audio at any time after the completion of the interview portion of the study. Participants may also request a copy of the completed study once it has been compiled and converted to a Masters thesis.

5. **WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND POSSIBLE DISCOMFORTS OF THIS STUDY?**

The only foreseeable discomfort in this study may come from discussing personal opinions and beliefs with regard to spirituality. Since you are a student at Oregon State University, there is a risk that you can be identified based upon your interview responses. To minimize this risk, you will choose a pseudonym that will be used during the study.

**Breach of Confidentiality:** There is a risk that we could accidentally disclose information that identifies you when we are using the internet and email as a means for communication with participants in this study. The security and confidentiality of information sent by email cannot be guaranteed. Information sent by email can be intercepted, corrupted, lost, destroyed, arrive late or incomplete, or contain viruses.

6. **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?**

This study is not designed to benefit you directly. This study may be beneficial to education research in that it might raise questions or highlight areas of future research.
with regard to the understanding of spirituality or spiritual development in student affairs.

7. WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?

You will be paid for being in this research study. You will receive $5.00 upon completion of the interview process. Should you not complete the interview process, you will not receive compensation.

8. WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Federal regulatory agencies and the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research. Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you.

If the results of this project are published your identity will not be made public. To help ensure confidentiality, participants will be identified by pseudonyms throughout the entire research process. The answers given during the interviews will be used for the purpose of completing a thesis. The thesis will be accessible to the public through the Oregon State University library.

A professional transcriber may be hired to transcribe interviews. Should this happen, the professional transcriber will be given access to the audio recordings, in which you will be identified by a self-selected pseudonym.

To help ensure confidentiality, individually identifiable information will be kept in a secure location and separate from the interview records. Computer files pertaining to this research will be password protected and will be kept in a secure location, locked and only available to the researchers. They will be used only for the purposes of this study and will be erased by June 15, 2016. Audio recordings will be kept in a secure location, locked and only available to the researchers. They will be used only for purposes of this study and will be erased by June 15, 2016.

9. WHAT OTHER CHOICES DO I HAVE IF I DO NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you and this information may be included in study reports.
10. WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact:

Larry Roper  
Vice Provost for Student Affairs  
632 Kerr Administration Building  
541.737.3626  
larry.roper@oregonstate.edu

If you have questions about your rights or welfare as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu

11. WHAT DOES MY SIGNATURE ON THIS CONSENT FORM MEAN?

Your signature indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant’s Name (printed):

______________________________________________________________

(Signature of Participant) (Date)

______________________________________________________________

(Signature of Person Obtaining Consent) (Date)
Appendix C

**Study Title:** Making Meaning of Supporting Student Spiritual Development: Perceptions of Graduate Students in a Student Affairs Program

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Larry Roper

**Student Researcher:** Amy K. Thomson

**Pre-screening Questions and Interview Questions**

**Eligibility Questions**

☐ Participant is enrolled as a full-time graduate student in the College Student Services Administration (CSSA) program

☐ Participant is in her/his second year in the CSSA program

☐ Participant entered the CSSA program Fall 2011

**Participant Information** (if participant meets the above eligibility requirements)

Sex:

Age:

Ethnicity/Race:

Self-described socio-economic status:

Faith or religious upbringing:

Current faith or religious affiliation:

Self-selected pseudonym:
**Interview Questions** (the audio recording device will record the responses to the following questions)

1. As a future student affairs professional, what role do you see yourself playing in supporting student spiritual development?

2. How do you define spirituality?

3. How do you define spiritual development?

4. What does supporting student spiritual development look like to you?

5. How do you or would you feel about playing a role in supporting student spiritual development?

6. What skills and/or knowledge do you think you might need to fill this role?

7. What role do you feel your graduate program plays or can play in helping prepare you for this role?

8. How did you come to develop your ideas about this role in supporting student spiritual development?

9. How has your own spiritual development influenced your perspective on supporting student spiritual development?

10. How do you think incorporating support of spiritual development into your role as a student affairs practitioner would affect your professional identity and practice?