UNDERGRADUATES AND RELIGIOSITY: INFORMING COLLEGE PREPARATION FOR HIGH SCHOOL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMS

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctorate of Education

with a

Major in Education

in the

College of Education

University of Idaho

by

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August 2014

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AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The college experience is a challenging transitional time when students assume adult roles and responsibilities, face new social and academic pressures, and enter a foreign and demanding environment. Diverse sectors of society are attempting to mediate this experience. This independent qualitative case study, in conjunction with a collaborative meta synthesis of three case studies on aspects of religious practices of college student and graduates in higher education, sheds light on the premise that religiosity may ease some of the challenges faced by college students during this challenging transitional period. This dissertation reports on three articles examining religiosity in the university environment.

This Professional Practices Doctoral (PPD) Dissertation in Practice (DiP) is designed to enhance curriculum and training, and deepen the discussion regarding student religiosity during the college years. This DiP consists of three parts, (a) in independent inquiry (chapter 2) that describes the experiences of highly religious college students regarding the challenges of college life and the role of religiosity, (b) a collaborative team-based qualitative meta-synthesis (chapter 3) of three research projects sharing a similar theme, and (c) a white paper (chapter 4) presenting the findings and implications for practice from both the individual and group research projects.

The independent inquiry reports on eight undergraduate students enrolled in two Intermountain West universities. They reported academic, social and familial challenges which, at times, were amplified by religiosity. They also reported behavioral expectations and community support from their religiosity, which helped them manage particular challenges. The collaborative meta-synthesis described the contextual nuances and lived experiences of LDS college students and academic professionals and sought to understand

how college life influenced their religious choices. Findings revealed that students and academic professionals experienced varying levels of tension between religiosity and academia; however, the participants were supported by the sense of community their religion provided. Examples of religious living and thinking from church members provided support in times of stress and challenge. The white paper is intended for those in the industry of religious education—stakeholders of the professional practice—and presents implications for curriculum development and training.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to many people who have assisted me through the challenges of this journey toward a doctorate. First, I would like to acknowledge my committee chair, mentor and guide, Dr. Bryan Maughan. His careful word-smithing, thoughtful mentoring, and helpful encouragement were both necessary and appreciated. Next, to my supporting committee members, Dr. Jean Henscheid, Dr. Tricia Browne-Ferrigno, and Dr. John Thomas: Thank you. You have earned my friendship, appreciation and respect. I wish we could have worked together more closely. Thank you for your patient endurance and dedication to this project and to our research team. Third, my gratefulness to thoughtful and helpful faculty of the University of Idaho who aided in this journey. And finally, thank you to James and Nate for keeping me sane, or as close to sane as possible.

DEDICATION

To God, to my wife, and to our children.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Dissertation Format

This dissertation in practice (DiP) follows the Three Article Dissertation (TAD) format recommended for Professional Practice Doctorates (PPD) by Willis, Inman, and Valenti (2010). Learning in situ underpins the nature of the dissertation. The circumstances that frame these studies reported here are relevant and timely to three researchers' current professional situations. Each researcher investigated specific areas of their immediate practices and produced three manuscripts. The three manuscripts consist of (a) an individually authored inquiry into one researcher's respective place of employment, (b) a collaborative, co-authored interdisciplinary qualitative meta-synthesis of the individual research findings that addressed a shared theme, and (c) a white paper intended for stakeholders to consider plausible policy or procedural changes informed by the findings of each research inquiry.

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) developed the format of this dissertation. CPED has formed an initiative to "strengthen and reclaim the educational research doctorate and develop a distinct form of doctoral education for professional practice" (Amrein-Beardsley et al., 2012, p. 99). It is the culminating product of a Professional Practices Doctorate (PPD) in Education (EdD), partially fulfilling the requirements for the degree through the College of Education at the University of Idaho.

Lee Shulman, first acting president of CPED, envisioned a new type of degree that would prepare practitioners for their careers, the PPD (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, and Garabedian, 2006). Shulman's vision for the PPD combined with the historic EdD prompts the authors to reference the program, not the degree, for this paper only as a Professional

Practices Doctorate in Education (PP-EdD). This degree maintains high rigor as expected for doctoral research (Willis et al., 2010).

As envisioned by CPED, the PPD is an advanced research-intensive degree designed for the development of school practitioners, education professionals, and academic leaders at all levels. Willis, Inman, and Valenti (2010) explained, "The modern PhD programs and the research dissertations are not well suited to preparing professional practitioners even though increasing percentages of PhD students go into professional practice rather than becoming academics" (p. 22). They pointed out the need for a degree that "serves the needs of students who plan careers as professionals rather than academic researchers" (p. 59). This is why Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, and Garabedian (2006) observed that education degrees are often sought by practitioners who are well into their careers, whereas students of other disciplines usually complete graduate degrees before entering the work force or return to their educational pursuits after only a short time in their careers. The PPD provides a way for full-time professionals to pursue their doctorate and perform meaningful job-embedded scholarly inquiry intended to improve or enhance immediate practice.

Interdisciplinary research, like that emphasized in the PPD's companion dissertation approach, is gaining increasing acceptance among practitioners of all disciplines. The educational backgrounds of this dissertation's authors vary but all three are practitioners in a shared profession. Across a variety of companion dissertation models (McNamara, Lara-Alecio, Irby, Hoyle, & Tong, 2007), all share six common elements: (a) a common research agenda, (b) a common inquiry statement, (c) integrated research tasks, (d) a common report format, (e) the same advisory chair, and (f) a similar statement in each dissertation about how each component fits with the others (Browne-Ferrigno, McEldowney, 2012).

Overview of the Three Articles

Article 1 or chapter 2, of this dissertation is an individual article written by W. Mitchell Simmons. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of college students who consider themselves highly religious as identified by the criteria of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Smith, 2011). Furthermore, I intended to understand the college student experience regarding the challenges of college life and the role of religiosity in their lives. As a practitioner researcher, I focused my efforts on having an immediate impact on my professional practice. Specifically, my intent was to seek to improve curriculum and promote improved practice among religious educators. This case study, was conducted using the principles of Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) (Beebe, 2001, 2011) and Action Research (AR) (Stringer, 2007), and captured the lived experiences of eight undergraduate students enrolled in a church-owned university and a state university in the Intermountain West, United States. Rapid Assessment Process uses a team based approach to research which increases trustworthiness (Beebe, 2001). The team members worked together on research design, data collection, and data analysis. Having team members present at interviews and collaborating during the analysis process provided observations and insights into the research problem that would have been difficult to gain individually.

Article 2, or chapter 3, is a collaborative co-authored group article. My study was combined with the individual studies conducted by James Williams and Nathan Williams. The three studies were analyzed following the guidelines of qualitative meta-synthesis (QMS) (Erwin, Brotherson, & Summers, 2011; Jensen & Allen, 1996; O'Halloran, Grohn, & Worrall, 2012; Walsh & Downe, 2004; Zimmer, 2006). Walsh and Downe (2004) explained the value of QMS: "Bringing together qualitative studies in a related area enables the

nuances, taken-for-granted assumptions, and textured milieu of varying accounts to be exposed, described, and explained in ways that bring fresh insights" (p. 205). The purpose of QMS is "theory development, higher level abstraction, and generalizability in order to make qualitative findings more accessible for application in practice" (Zimmer, 2004, p. 313). While my study focused on stresses and difficulties such as academic demands and social concerns, James's study, on the other hand, specifically examined the cognitive dissonance experienced by college students who felt their religious beliefs were opposed or challenged while attending a public university. Nathan's study investigated the meaning and relationship between religiosity and the academic experiences of university professors from across the nation.

As part of a PPD, chapter 4 of this dissertation provides a white paper intended to inform stakeholders of the findings from these studies and presents implications for my professional practice. This individually authored white paper is based on a combination of the findings of my inquiry, the findings of the QMS, and the knowledge I acquired by participating in the overall collaborative research endeavor. This chapter reports key findings from the individual and group projects and provides recommendations for religious educators employed by Seminaries and Institutes of Religion (S&I) and ecclesiastical leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, or Mormon). In Chapter 5, I offer my reflections on the companion dissertation process.

CHAPTER 2: UNDERGRADUATES AND RELIGIOSITY: INFORMING COLLEGE PREPARATION FOR HIGH SCHOOL RELIGIOUS EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

W. Mitchell Simmons

Introduction

College life constitutes the most formative years for emerging adults (Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014). The benefits of the formative university experience for individuals as well as society are substantial. For instance, higher education increases preference for higher-order cognitive tasks, improves writing skills, strengthens reading comprehension, and produces a heightened recognition that academic success is based on individual effort (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, & Pascarella, 1996). In their report, Cohen and Kisker (2010), confirm that after only one year of college, students exhibit increased rationality and critical thinking, including greater intellectual creativity, wisdom and understanding of knowledge.

Attending college not only improves cognitive skills, it also has been shown to improve socioeconomic status (Bills, 2003). For example, college graduates are more likely to earn higher wages and have increased upward mobility between social classes (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; United States Department of Education, 2013b). Additionally, students who obtain at least a bachelor's degree are the least likely to be unemployed even during times of recession (United States Department of Education, 2013a). The college experience frequently includes interaction with peers and others that, in turn, advances social capital (i.e., competences that enhance one's ability to achieve desired goals) and cultural capital (i.e., familiarity with the prevailing culture of a society), which often relate to socioeconomic well-being (Bills, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Returns from the college experience go far beyond academic and economic benefits. For instance, those who attend college tend to have "stronger future orientations and are better able to delay gratification" (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 556). College students often experience other social developments such as emotional maturity, the discovery of self-identity, and the ability to interact with others which are important outcomes of university life (Pascarella &Terenzini, 2005). In addition, college graduates are also more confident, independent, and self-directed than their less educated peers (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Bowman (2012) tells us that during the college years, students enjoy increased exposure to diversity that can improve leadership skills and intellectual engagement. College students also explore new vistas of information, view differing social values, and experience new perspectives from peers and professors (Braskamp, 2007). This diversity can kindle an enhanced "interest in diverse worldviews, acceptance of others, and belief in human interconnectedness" (Bryant, 2011, p. 445). Certainly, as high school students transition into college they encounter new cultures, unique personalities, and diverse thoughts that have the capacity to profoundly impact their development (Bryant, 2011).

Although the transition to college can be liberating and transformative, for some, the new environment can be formidable. Indeed the very benefits of college life can become sources of difficulty. The new culture that includes the Greek symbols of fraternities and sororities, the social diversity, variety of religious beliefs, and the values and norms among ethnic groups create a world foreign and strange to many first-year students who may experience a lack of belonging (Cushman, 2007; Paul & Brier, 2001). To compound the novelty of the culture and environment during this transition into adulthood, students begin to experience responsibilities associated with finances, relationships, academic competitiveness,

conflicting ideologies, and coursework. Chickering and Havighurst (1988) delineated four transitional challenges faced by college students: (a) becoming independent from parents and family, (b) deciding and planning a career path, (c) preparing for future family life, and (d) developing personal norms and ethics. Stress and other difficulties from college also occur in other substantial ways such as change in sleeping and eating habits, increased workload, and managing other new responsibilities (Merrill, Read, & LeCheminant, 2009; Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999).

For instance, the challenges of college are amplified as students address changes in important social relationships. Besides leaving parents and other family members, when students leave home for the first time they also frequently move away from an established network of friends. This change in friendships often leaves college students vulnerable as they develop new friendships and deepen interpersonal relationships with others (Paul & Brier, 2001). When students struggle in their social relationships they miss out on what Hirsch (1980) discovered; the value of healthy, supportive friendships that improve socialization opportunities and assist in developing personal identity. These friendships are also an important aspect of creating committed relationships. To add to the challenges, leaving the familiar home environment has been associated with depression, anxiety and absent-mindedness during college (Fisher & Hood, 1987).

Depression, distress, and anxiety are distinct realities and concerns of college life (Bouteyre, Maurel, & Bernaud, 2007; Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007; Kang & Romo 2011; Merrill et al., 2009; Ying, 2007). The challenge of balancing the new demands and foreign environment of college along with the social struggles and difficulties of emerging adulthood make college students highly susceptible to these psychological

difficulties. For college students, depression and anxiety "significantly affect their well-being and academic performance" (Conley, Durlak, & Dickson, 2013, p. 287). Additionally, depression and distress are often influential factors in drug and alcohol use and suicide among college students (Dvorak, Lamis, & Malone, 2013; Kaiser, Milich, Lynam, & Charnigo, 2012).

The difficult transition to college life with its accompanying social, emotional, physical, and mental challenges, may, in part, account for the low college graduation rates plaguing the nation. In 2001, only 57% of bachelor students graduated within 6 years (Pleskac, Keeney, Merritt, Schmitt & Oswald, 2011). In 2010 the percentage had risen only slightly to 58% (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Education administrators, college and university faculty, local and national political leaders, and parents have been mobilized to assist students and moderate the stresses of college life (Kustigian, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2010). Despite these effort and the many programs and activities designed to temper challenges among college students, one area appears to be repeatedly overlooked. It is the role religiosity plays in the lives of college students (Braskamp, 2007; Elms, 2007; Fearer, 2004; Lee, 2002; Loury 2004; Regnerus 2000, 2003).

Religiosity, as operationally defined in this study, is a "multifaceted" concept that describes a person's "religious identification, religious attachment, religious behavior and religious beliefs" (Solt, Hable, & Grant, 2011, p. 447). As a religious educator in the Church Educational System (CES) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I am concerned with helping high school students prepare for the challenges they may encounter in college. CES has three divisions: (a) seminaries, programs designed primarily for high

school students, ages 14-18; (b) institute, programs primarily designed for students at public universities, ages 18-30; and (c) church-sponsored universities (Brigham Young University—Provo, Utah; Rexburg, Idaho; Laie, Hawaii; the LDS Business College in Salt Lake City, Utah).

My focus is on students enrolled in Seminaries and Institute (S&I). Seminaries and Institutes enrolls more than 744,000 high school and college students in more than 150 countries. In addition, S&I faculty and staff are made up of more than 3,200 employees, and more than 43,000 volunteer administrators, faculty and staff (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 2013). Understanding the role of religiosity and the potential difficulties of the university experience will inform my efforts, and the efforts of other religious educators, to prepare students for the challenges they will face in college.

Religiosity's Influence on High School and College

Although Glass and Jacobs (2005) suggest religiosity does not help high school or college students in academic pursuits, Jeynes (2009) maintains that students who foster forms of religious practices excel in academic performance. Particularly, biblical literacy has a positive effect on academic performance. Jeynes (2009) asserts, "Students with the highest level of Bible literacy also had the highest grade point average (GPA) and the highest ranking in test and grade results" (p. 36). Jeynes propounded multiple theoretical explanations: (a) Religious people often develop a strong work ethic through studying and applying Biblical teachings; (b) the Bible encourages abstinence from activities which negatively influence academic success such as drug and alcohol abuse; and (c) the process of studying the Bible requires a reading ability that enables a person to analyze other literary works and academic curriculum.

In addition to studying scripture (i.e., sacred texts considered authoritative by various religious groups), other religious behaviors have been connected to better-than-expected GPA and academic performance. Prayer has a stronger positive correlation with high GPA than any other religious behavior (Kang & Romo, 2011). Besides the beneficial correlations with prayer and scripture study, attending religious services promotes social relationships that influence educational performance and attainment. Regnerus (2000) found frequent participation in church activities to be positively correlated with higher scores on standardized mathematics and reading tests. Church participation promoted "social control and motivation toward education" (p. 369). Social control and motivation toward education are often the result of social capital created through participation in religious communities (Glanville, Sikkink, & Hernandez, 2008). Often, a strong relationship with God and parents promotes high academic expectations, which, in turn, supports improved performance in school (Elms, 2007).

Moreover, gathering with a religious congregation often builds support networks such as mentors and friends. While Bryant (2007) argues that the educational benefits do not stem from religiosity, but rather from strong friendship networks, the fact remains that friendship networks often stem from religious associations. Muller and Ellison (2001) point out that social religious participation leads to strong friend networks, which promote learning through regular class attendance and more time spent on homework. Creating strong friend networks has been found to help students during the difficult transition from high school to college (Cushman, 2007; Glanville et al., 2008). Furthermore, social networks created through religious engagement promote mentoring relationships between youth and adults, advancing educational attainment. Loury (2004) identified a strong correlation between frequent church

attendance and students both completing high school and attending college. Erickson and Phillips (2012) tell us that, “having a religious mentor increased the odds of college enrollment three times compared to having no mentor” (p. 583).

Accordingly, mentors provide a strong model for students to emulate. In 2011, Kang and Romo captured another relationship between religious communities and mentoring. Data from the study correlated personal (intrinsic) religious behaviors, such as prayer, with higher levels of church engagement (extrinsic religious behavior), which created mentoring pathways that “predicted less depressive symptoms” (p.772) for men and women. To complement Kang and Romo’s (2011) research, Merrill et al. (2009) found that religiosity significantly decreases feelings of anger and minimizes upset feelings due to unexpected events and happenings outside of a person’s control. This was particularly evident when considering “time-management challenges, changes in sleeping habits, new responsibilities, increased academic workload, financial difficulties, and changes in social activities” (p. 502). However, some scholars have acknowledged that religion may increase levels of stress and anger (Winterowd, Harrist, Thomason, Worth, & Carlozzi, 2005).

Kang and Romo (2011) also found that religiosity decreased risky behaviors associated with negative educational effects such as drug and alcohol use, having sex, and stealing. As I discussed earlier, the effects of religiosity are likely correlated with social control and pro-social (i.e., benefitting society) community norms. Other researchers have recognized similar effects of religiosity. For instance, Elms (2007) and Fearer (2004) found religiosity to be a factor in discouraging partying, sex, and drug and alcohol consumption, while Regnerus and Elder (2003a) found religion to be a direct protective factor against drug use, delinquency, drinking, and problems in school, such as fighting and truancy.

Also in regard to students participating in risky behaviors, Mooney (2010) found religious attendance and religious observance correlated with more time spent studying and increased participation in co-curricular activities, and thus less time spent partying and participating in risky behaviors. Mooney also confirmed that students who frequently attend religious services tend to have higher GPAs than students who do not. She affirmed that "[religiosity leads to] improved satisfaction with one's college experience" (p. 206). Ellison (1991) recognized satisfaction and happiness related to religious involvement going beyond college and influencing life in general.

College and Religiosity

Understanding how the college experience influences religious beliefs, behaviors and attitudes is foundational to improving efforts to help high school students prepare for college through religious education settings. Religious college students may face unique challenges in college due to their religious convictions. While religiosity is correlated with positive behaviors among college students, the impact of university life on religion is less well understood. The findings and conclusions of scholars are inconsistent and often contradictory. It may be that the college experience creates tensions for religious students. For instance, in the past, the majority of research about religious beliefs in college portrayed institutions of higher education as places where religious students lose their beliefs (Hill, 2011). When Albrecht and Heaton conducted research about the influence of education on religious commitment in 1984, they summarized their findings:

> The most prevalent view in the literature, then, seems to be that educational achievement impacts negatively on religious commitment and that increased levels of

> education often lead to apostasy as individuals encounter views that deemphasize spiritual growth and elevate scientific and intellectual achievement. (p. 46)

While this may be one challenge influencing the religious college student experience, more recent literature tells a different story. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stated, "Evidence is mounting to suggest that students' commitments to religious values during the college years may not so much increase or decrease as become reexamined, refined, and incorporated in subtle ways with other beliefs and philosophical dispositions" (p. 284). To further illustrate this observation, a recent study by Scheitle (2011) revealed that the majority of undergraduates do not view the relationship between science and religion as conflicting.

Far from being in conflict, when religiosity and education combine religious commitment may, indeed, be strengthened. While trying to identify the influence of college attendance and religiosity on worldviews, Bryant (2011) reported, "The salience of religion and spirituality in academic encounters tend to provoke religious/spiritual struggles" (p. 441). These struggles, or tensions, can lead to a reformation of understanding and openness toward the religious beliefs of others, but does not necessarily lead to a decline in personal religious beliefs. As Hill (2009) indicated, "No widespread, long-term decline in religious participation is likely for any particular religious group" (p. 530). Not only did Hill (2009) discover religious decline to not be long-term, but in another study conducted two years later, he reported that graduating from college actually increases preference for institutionalized religion (Hill, 2011). Others have also found increased religious commitment among college students (Bowman & Small, 2011; Lee, 2002).

In summary, religiosity appears to play a heavy role in the college student's experience. There seems to be a resurgence of religiosity in the college environment (Finder,

2007). In 2004 the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) conducted a study of over 112,000 first-year college students and concluded that "today's college students have very…high levels of religious commitment and involvement" (Astin et al., 2005, p. 3). In light of the ongoing concerns regarding the challenges students face in college (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Porter & Polikoff, 2012), there is evidence that religiosity has a positive relationship with desired college student behaviors and outcomes. In order to better prepare high school students for the challenges of the college experience a richer understanding of this relationship suggests a need for further research.

Statement of the Problem

Both the benefits and the challenges of college life are significant and efforts to assist students with their challenges will proffer increased opportunities to those who hope to experience the benefits of higher education. Forces have been mobilized by education administrators, college and university faculty, and local and national political leaders to address the challenges students may face during college life (Kustigian, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2010). While scholars and others attempt to understand and curb these challenges, some claim that religiosity is too often overlooked as a possible means for remediating these difficulties (Braskamp, 2007; Elms, 2007; Fearer, 2004; Lee, 2002; Loury 2004; Regnerus 2000, 2003).

While studies confirm the potential usefulness of religiosity, unfortunately, many of them only examine a few of its features, such as attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer, or the level of importance people place on their beliefs (Idler et al. 2003; Fearer 2004). Studying limited measures of religiosity may misrepresent important conclusions. For

instance, a student may consider their religion to be very important even though they do not attend religious meetings. In this example, a measurement of religious service attendance, without accounting for student perceptions concerning the importance of religiosity in their lives would underreport levels of religiosity.

A research design capturing the multi-dimensional relationship between religiosity and the college student's experience within particular institutional contexts has been suggested as the richest design for further research (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno 2003; Idler, et al. 2003; Mayrl & Ouer, 2009; Regnerus, 2003). The majority of research regarding religiosity and education has been conducted quantitatively and the findings aggregated across both educational and religious contexts failing to capture important nuances and dimensions of the relationship between education and religion (Bender, 2007; Mayrl & Ouer, 2009). To illustrate the importance of context, Hill (2009) found that religious service attendance is stronger at religiously conservative colleges than at public universities while attendance at certain religion-sponsored universities have further religious decline than public universities.

Regarding religious context, multiple scholars (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; McFarland, Wright, & Weakliem, 2011; Regnerus & Elder, 2003a; Saenz & Barrera, 2005) have noted the need for research on education and religion that does "not neglect the role of religious tradition" (McFarland et al., 2011, p. 184). Religious traditions differ in the way they influence the educational pursuits and experiences of their adherents. As Regnerus and Elder (2003a) pointed out, "The influence of particular institutional religious traditions may vary considerably in their relationship to educational aspirations and post-secondary educational

attainment" (p. 653). Therefore, research findings must be understood within the context of religious and educational contexts.

Furthermore, quantitative data effectively identifies important correlations, but does not capture the self-reported reasons behind the correlations (Regnerus, 2003). Most research does not examine the specific means by which religiosity and education influence one another (Glanville et al., 2008). Research conducted by qualitative methods complements quantitative literature (Regnerus, 2003) and there is a call for investigating the role of religiosity by capturing the lived experiences of college students who are influenced by religious practices during their college years (Hill 2009, 2011; Regnerus, 2003). Hill (2009, 2011) for instance, believed that interview data would be crucial for improving survey instruments and research findings in light of the multi-dimensional aspects of religiosity. There is a need to capture the lived experience of college students in order to determine the usefulness of religiosity, or lack thereof, in assisting students as they face the difficulties of transitioning to college life.

Also, as a corollary, part of the problem I want to address is a problem of practice. My research efforts were directed by The Professional Practices Doctoral (PPD) program which affords me the opportunity to address a localized problem within my profession as a seminary teacher—the need to more effectively prepare high school students for transition to college. As part of the curriculum for high school students, seminary instructors teach lessons encouraging college enrollment and completion. Resources are provided to help them enroll in post-secondary schooling (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 2006). However, some S&I administrators are concerned that the current curriculum does not prepare students for the potential challenges they may face during college (R. Stewart, personal communication

October 15, 2013). In the words of one S&I administrator, “We have been doing a good job of telling them to go to college, but we have not been telling them how to be successful in college” (L. Toone, personal communication, October 13, 2013).

The college experience of LDS students is purported to be different from the experiences of other college students. When Bowman and Small (2011) examined religious transformation during college they excluded data from LDS participants “because the religious change of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) often differs substantially from that of other young adults” (p.159). Hill (2011) also noted the uniqueness of the LDS religious tradition and commented on his data:

> These variables indicate that the religious tradition of the respondent as an adolescent is an important predictor of belief change. Those raised in most nonevangelical religious traditions, with the exception of Mormons, are more likely to decline in their super-empirical Christian beliefs compared to evangelical Protestants. (p. 543)

A number of other scholars (Albrecht & Heaton, 1984; Heaton, Bahr, & Jacobson, 2004; Stott, 1983; Merrill, 2003) have also found Mormons to be an exception to the correlations between declines in religious commitment and increased educational levels. For example, Albrecht and Heaton (1984) found Mormons with higher educational levels are more likely to attend church, pay tithing, pray, study religion and have stronger religious beliefs than less educated Mormons. More recently, Smith (2011) found that Mormons who have graduated from college are significantly more committed to their religiosity (84%) than those with high school education or less (50%). As seminary students face the daunting task of obtaining further education, S&I would benefit from a deeper understanding regarding the challenges and religiosity of LDS college students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of self-reported highly religious college students regarding the challenges of college life and the role of religiosity. Further, it is intended to inform college preparation efforts in high school religious education courses. College students were considered highly religious by the standards adapted from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (Smith, 2011). Students were considered highly religious if they (a) consider their religion to be very important to them, (b) pray at least daily, (c) attend religious services weekly, (d) pay tithes, and (e) honor the unique health code of the LDS faith. I purposefully selected the study participants to provide a deep understanding into the problem addressed by this study.

Research Questions

To inform college preparation in high school religious education courses and promote professional development in my career, the main question that guided my study was: What is the relationship between religiosity and the college student experience? The following sub-questions directed the research further: (a) What do highly religious LDS students say about the challenges of college life? (b) What are the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of these students regarding religiosity during college? And (c) What do these students say about their college preparation experience in seminary?

Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical framework influenced the purpose of this study and the research questions, which stemmed from my understanding of the reviewed literature. Success in college is largely influenced by social orientations (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Social expectations and limits from relationships play a key role in the transitional

phase between adolescence and adulthood. Peer pressure works to frame much of a college student's social life. Religious affiliations provide one social network that may present respite from stress or even guilt or shame (Elms, 2007; Glanville et al., 2008; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Regnerus, 2000).

I chose Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as the framework of my study as it provides a helpful basis for understanding the complex effect of religion in a person's life. Fearer (2004) explains, "Social cognitive theory offers a promising framework within which to understand the mechanisms by which religion exerts its influence" (Fearer, 2004, p. 14). The seminal theorist of SCT, Albert Bandura, promoted SCT as a powerful framework for understanding religiosity (Bandura, 2003). From an ontological perspective, SCT views humans as beings capable of choice. They are agentic beings with "power to shape their life circumstances" (Bandura, 2006, p.164). Agentic beings are not automatons that react mechanically to environmental influences or inputs. Instead "the human mind is generative, creative, proactive, and self-reflective not just reactive" (Bandura, 1999, p. 23). The agentic approaches of undergraduate college students can be either positive or negative during this critical identity management time as they seek to feel a sense of belonging. Social cognitive theory may help glean understanding about how religious behaviors help or hurt in this process.

Social Cognitive Theory assumes that humans gain knowledge from both personal and interpersonal sources—the individual and/or community. The interplay of cognitive structures, biological influences, and social-cultural environments influence behaviors. During this interplay, there are no unidirectional causalities (Bandura, 1996, 1999). People can recognize the effects of their own actions and predict and judge what might happen in the

same or similar circumstances in the future and thus can alter their behaviors. Agentic beings can learn from both personal and social experiences. Transformations happen from personal experiences as well as observing the actions and consequences of others. Learning from others in social contexts can take place in either formal or informal relationships, such as mentoring. Bandura (1986) refers to this type of learning as modeling.

Religious congregations provide "multiple models of behavior and reinforce lifestyles patterned on them in close associational networks" (Bandura, 2003, p. 171). Modeling is a social construct that integrates religion and education. Mentoring provided by religious leaders during moments of social unrest has been shown to be a powerful turning point for some college students (Kang & Romo, 2011). Additionally, human beings experience modeling through reading, viewing, and hearing stories and biographies by religious leaders in the present as well as from the past. According to Bandura (2003), scriptures provide stories and models of behavior by which agentic beings can pattern their lives.

Modeling in religious contexts also relates to Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy construct. Self-efficacy refers to the level of confidence a person has in his or her ability to perform specific tasks or behaviors. As people see role models face adversity, their examples may encourage perseverance and accomplishment of difficult tasks or the adoption of new behaviors. Self-efficacy is further strengthened through religious communities forming a network of support (Bandura, 2003).

Significance of this Study

This research, although specific to the LDS culture, contributes to the current body of literature attempting to identify the role of religion in the university context. Each religion has a different influence on their members in regards to assisting them in academic settings

(Bender 2007; Bowman & Small, 2011; Jeynes, 2003, 2009; Idler et al. 2003, Mayrl & Ouer 2009; Regnerus & Elder, 2003a, 2003b). This study has deepened understanding regarding the unique influence of the LDS religion on the educational experience of Mormon students (Albrecht & Heaton, 1984; Hill, 2009; Merrill et al., 2003; Smith, 2011). In addition, the findings contribute to the conversation concerning the multifaceted correlation between religiosity and education noted in the literature by focusing on the lived experiences of college students.

Civil, educational, and private entities, as well as parents and interested individuals, are seeking to develop and integrate more plans and services to help students prepare for and obtain the educational training necessary to be competitive in our modern world (Kustigian, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2010). For years S&I instructors have taught curriculum designed to encourage students to further their education. However, there is a long-standing and ever-growing need to not just encourage but also prepare college students for their educational experience.

Capturing the lived experiences of college students will inform seminary teachers and administrators concerning the challenges their students will likely face in college and the role of religiosity. Being aware of the college experience may lead to adaptations in curriculum to address important issues and encourage or discourage attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that were helpful or hurtful for college students. Additionally, this study may be presented at several conferences held within the Southeast Idaho area of S&I as requested by administrators. The purpose of the conferences will be to help teachers more effectively prepare students for the college experience by informing them concerning college student

experiences with religiosity and university life (L. Toone, personal communication, October 13, 2013).

Research Design

As indicated above, many scholars have connected religiosity to positive student behaviors and outcomes. Most of these studies have been conducted through quantitative methods. As noted earlier, most research does not examine the specific mechanisms by which religion exerts influence on academic outcomes (Glanville et al., 2008). Exploring the lived experiences through a qualitative research design helped capture the *how* and *why* behind these reported correlations (Regnerus, 2003).

The context, problem, and purpose of this study led me to use a qualitative case study design using principles of Action Research (AR) and Rapid Assessment Process (RAP). Case studies are often used to focus on understanding culture within a group (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Further, case studies allow researchers to capture the lived experiences of participants through open-ended questions and dialogue. "Fundamentally, action research is grounded in a qualitative research paradigm whose purpose is to gain greater clarity and understanding of a question, problem, or issue" (Stringer, 2007, p. 19). Action Research "is often conducted in organizational contexts and in education, where professionals collaboratively question their practice, make changes, and assess the effects of those changes" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 23). Rapid Assessment Process is a method of conducting qualitative research with multiple researchers (Beebe, 2001; 2011), which bridges the gap between the need for timeliness and in-depth qualitative research. The difference between AR and RAP is that RAP requires multiple researchers to triangulate data gathering

and analysis, which increases the credibility of the research process whereas AR does not (Beebe, 2001, 2011).

Participants

I purposefully chose to seek participants from a private LDS church-sponsored university and a state public university in the Intermountain West. Potential participants volunteered from LDS institute courses at the public university and religion courses at the private university. After I had obtained approval from course instructors, students in four religion courses at the church-owned university and four institute courses adjacent to the public university were introduced to the study and invited to participate. Those students who desired to participate completed a short survey containing selection criteria to determine eligibility for the study. After I collected the surveys, I invited four participants from each site, to participate further in semi-structured interviews because they met the following criteria. Each interviewee:

- Demonstrated high levels of religious commitment as adapted from the definition created by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (Smith, 2011): (a) their religion is very important to them, (b) they pray at least daily, (c) they attend religious services weekly, (d) they pay tithes, and (e) they honor the unique health code of the LDS faith;
- Completed at least two years of college;
- Experienced seminary in high school; and
- Represented a variety of LDS perspectives.

This study helps answer the call of scholars (Bender 2007; Bowman & Small, 2011; Jeynes, 2003, 2009; Idler et al. 2003; Maryl & Ouer 2009) to portray a more nuanced view of

student religiosity in higher education by focusing on highly religious students. Additionally, I chose highly religious students because as a religious educator, my efforts to improve college preparation in religious education courses will be grounded in religious beliefs and behaviors. Highly religious students have the potential to reveal unique perspectives regarding the role of religiosity during their college experience.

I selected students with at least two years of college experience because the transitional challenges of college life mostly occur during the first-year (Paul & Brier, 2001). Having completed a year of college, students could reflect on their experience and provide thick-rich descriptions concerning the experience of college life. Further, Hill's (2009) finding that religious decline was not long-term in college prompted me to consider students with more college experience.

I made every attempt to seek multiple LDS perspectives. Creswell (2013) suggests that a diversity of perspectives lends to a more complete understanding of the case being studied. The experience of female participants is different from male participants (Ellison, Burdette, & Glenn, 2011; Leis, 2005), returned missionaries experiences are different from non-missionaries (Kiley, 2013), and single students experiences are different from married students (Braithwaite et al., 2013; Ellison et al., 2011; Uecker & Stokes, 2008; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski, 2005). Hence, I sought the perspective of each of these types of individuals as I selected participants from the volunteers.

Two men and two women ages 20-33 from each university participated in one-hour semi-structured individual interviews. Half of the participants were married, and three of the married students had children. Six of the eight had served as LDS missionaries (i.e., 18-24 months of volunteered proselyting and community service away from home). The research

team conducted interviews in locations free from interference from others, convenient to the interviewees, and physically safe and comfortable for the participant. After completing transcription and compiling the findings, I conducted member checking in which participants reviewed their responses, and the presentation of their responses. The respondents then made corrections, clarifications, or additions to assure their perspectives were properly represented (Stringer, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

As a Caucasian, male, seminary teacher it is possible that the responses of the participants may have been influenced by my position. In order to ameliorate any perceived teacher or hierarchical ecclesiastical authority, the participants volunteered from two settings outside of my current teaching and ecclesiastical assignments and over whom I had no ecclesiastical or educational power or authority. Furthermore, after volunteering, I provided participants with ample understanding of the study and they were then allowed to freely provide informed consent to participate.

Additionally, participants were given the right to withdraw from research or limit their participation without penalty if, at any time, they became uncomfortable as suggested by Stringer (2007). I assigned pseudonyms to protect participant anonymity and guard against participants being linked to the study (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In the event of concern about confidentiality, I reminded participants of the clause in the informed consent indicating their names would be protected by the use of pseudonyms. I gave verbal reassurance regarding no “right or wrong” answers. And lastly, I reminded the participants that they were not required to respond to questions that they deemed excessively personal or uncomfortable.

Data Collection

The research team collected data through semi-structured interviews procuring the interviewees' perceptions about their college experience. The semi-structured interviews contained open-ended questions that allowed participants to fully express their perceptions in their own words (Beebe 2001; Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Stringer 2007). Every attempt was made to assure that more than one researcher was present at each interview in accordance with RAP procedures of data collection (Beebe, 2001). Small talk preceded the formal interview to establish rapport and put participants at ease (Beebe, 2001). The interviewers were reassuring and supportive to promote a comfortable environment in an attempt to help the interviewee freely describe their stories. In order to not overwhelm the participants, only two researchers were present at the interviews. As the lead researcher I asked the majority of the questions, although the other researchers, at times, asked clarifying questions (Beebe 2001; Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Stringer 2007).

In order to assure accuracy in data collection I used audio recording devices, and the interviews were transcribed (Beebe 2001, Stringer 2007). As a method of triangulation, each researcher took extensive field notes following Bogdan and Bilken's (2007) suggestions. An interview protocol guided and focused the interview and the researchers asked additional questions to improve clarity and understanding at their discretion (Bodgan & Bilken, 2007; Spradley, 1979; Stringer, 2007).

Data Analysis

Following Beebe's (2001) suggestions for RAP coding, the research team reviewed the interview transcripts and field notes multiple times and coded the responses of the interviewees by categories and themes. During multiple readings we noted and categorized

emerging themes. Beebe (2001) suggests beginning with only five or six major coding categories and then subdividing the themes as necessary. Bogdan and Belkin (2007) and Marshall and Rossman (2011) recommend establishing codes based on previous literature, the theoretical framework, and the research questions guiding the study. Initial codes were based on challenges experienced by the participants, sources of help for the participants, religious beliefs and behaviors, and perceptions of college preparation efforts in seminary.

Once initial coding was completed and developing themes were identified both individually by the researchers and collectively as a research team, we returned to the transcripts and field notes and searched for overlooked data related to the identified themes (Beebe, 2001). The theoretical framework provided a foundation that helped us refine the categories and codes. As noted earlier, SCT views religious communities as supportive networks providing modeling to individuals. During the analysis process we identified and focused on comments from the participants that indicated the modeling influence of religiosity whether through the religious community or through religious literature. As students described their religious beliefs and behaviors, we were able to see connections between those beliefs and behaviors and self-efficacy. In addition the role of religious community became a major theme that may have been overlooked without an understanding of SCT. The reliability of the findings increased as we made connections between the findings, the theoretical framework, and the literature review. To further increase the credibility and reliability of the study, the research team implemented member checking, and peer review.

Limitations

In both case study and AR, findings and interpretation of findings are context-specific and not concerned with generalizability (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Stringer, 2007). That is, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to other university settings, professional practices or religious contexts. However, there is much to be learned through exploring the lived experiences of other people. As Flyvbjerg (2006) stated,

> One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas 'the force of example' is underestimated (p.12).

In the end it is the responsibility of the reader to make application from *a* context to *their* context (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Caution should be taken when generalizing results to contexts dissimilar to those of the current study as described in the delimitations below.

Selection bias is generally an issue in qualitative studies. In this study respondents initially volunteered to participate before I implemented purposeful sampling to narrow the selection of interviewees based on the criteria for this study, hence there may be concerns with data collected from voluntary participants. Participants and researchers are susceptible to selective memory, social desirability, and possible exaggeration. This research was influenced by my worldview and biases, as well as that of the participants.

Researcher as Instrument

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative researchers should be clear from the outset about their positions, biases and assumptions. "When they are out in the open…the reader of

the final report can assess how those elements of identity affected the study" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 97) This allows the reader to make informed conclusions about the transferability of the research (Merriam, 1998).

As discussed previously, I am a seminary teacher for the LDS Church. I have been employed as a religious educator for eight years. I have been a lifelong member of the LDS faith and I was raised in a predominately LDS community. My religious beliefs and practices influence my worldview as well as my professional practice. I adhere to the tenets of the LDS faith and I work to educate high school students regarding the religious beliefs and practices of the LDS church. My religious belief that extols the importance of higher education has caused me to gain as much education as possible.

In seeking higher educational attainment I have attended a church-owned university and two public universities. My educational training has been of great benefit to my family and me, and consequently I believe in the merit of gaining an education. As I have sought further education I have experienced many of the benefits and challenges of the university experience. In my associations with both high school and college students I have seen both the excitement and concerns of students as they face and manage the difficulties and benefits of gaining formal education. In my desire to help students, I often reflect on the numerous support mechanisms, including religiosity, that have aided me as I have sought to improve as a parent, teacher, and citizen throughout my college career. I have come to view religiosity and higher education as mutually beneficial. I believe that both religion and education seek the betterment of society through increased knowledge and understanding. I also believe that the two institutions are effective at producing pro-social values and norms. The relationship

between university life and religious life need not be confrontational, as some have suggested (Johnson, 1997; Petersen, 1994; Schieman, 2010; Sherkat, 1998).

By using RAP as a research method I was able to bracket myself as the other research team members checked my biases. The other researchers recognized when I had imposed my biases and worldviews upon the analysis of the data. This type of triangulation and peer review between team members increased the likelihood that the findings were reported through the lens of the participants. Further, member checking assured that the transcription, analysis, and reporting of the data properly represented the views of the participants.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to participants who volunteered from two specific university settings. I selected the sites based on accessibility. The private church-owned university considered in this study is a 4-year, bachelorette degree granting university that enrolls 15,000 students. According to the schools website, the student population is 90% Caucasian, 6% Hispanic/Latino, and 1% Asian American, with African Americans, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and others each making up less than 1%. The public university is a research university that awards associate, bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. Demographics include: 77% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic/Latino, 6% unknown, 3% Non-Resident Alien, 2% American Indian, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% African American. The University enrolls nearly 12,500 students. Only Caucasian students volunteered for the study. Both research sites had high concentrations of Caucasian students reflective of the LDS demographics—86% of Mormons in America are Caucasian (Smith, 2011).

Furthermore, I narrowed the study to students who considered their religion to be very important to them, prayed at least daily, attended religious services weekly, paid tithes,

and honored the unique health code of the LDS faith. The views and experiences of less religiously committed interviewees would likely be different. The participants had at least two years of college attendance to provide a depth of experience with university life and religiosity. First-year students' responses may be dissimilar to those of the study participants. Finally, all participants were members of the LDS faith due to the need for research focused on specific religious traditions (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; Regnerus & Elder, 2003a) and in line with my professional practice. The experiences of students from other religious traditions would likely be different.

Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

Prominent themes regarding the challenges faced by the participants in college included academic, social, and family difficulties and stresses. Common academic challenges included the difficulty of course workloads, pressure to achieve high GPAs, and anxiety about tests and assignments. Social challenges included dating, making friends, living with roommates, and pressure to get married; the latter unique among the LDS population. Some participants spoke about family challenges such as difficulties with spouses, caring for children, and health problems. These difficulties were aggravated by concerns about their economic future, the ability to maintain life-balance, and the need to manage time among competing priorities. Some also experienced emotional distress threatening them with depression. In addition to these difficulties, aspects of religiosity complicated the college experience and increased the academic, social, and family challenges for these highly religious students. Debbie adequately summarized the challenges and feelings expressed by the participants in these seven words: "College is hard, it is really hard."

Academic Stresses

Academic stresses for the college students ranged from difficult and repetitive evaluations, to pressure to earn good grades, to unclear expectations. Each participant in this study spoke of the difficult class workloads they were experiencing and the challenge of managing their time to properly meet academic demands. Paul, a chemistry major at the public university who is applying for pharmacy school, described the challenge of carrying heavy course workloads: "The classes obviously cause a lot of stress, and they're a challenge…It can be difficult to have the work ethic to do what you need to do."

Academic pressures were exacerbated among students who were maintaining scholarships or needed good grades because of the competitive nature of their field. Keith, an engineering major, stated, "The stress of school in general is just getting the grades, I shoot for pretty high grades because I like the academic scholarship mostly, so that's what contributes to most of my stress, holding on to that academic scholarship." Melissa, a radiographic science hopeful, and Paul both acknowledged the pressure they were experiencing as they applied for further education in their competitive fields.

Jason, a student from the church-sponsored school, was frustrated by some of his interactions with professors, especially concerning the expectations of teachers and the challenge of academic workload. He related an encounter he had with a professor who "gave huge reading assignments, unfathomable amounts of reading." Then, after Jason had spent a great deal of time trying to complete the assignment, the professor informed the students that they were not expected to read the entire assignment; instead they should have skimmed through the reading. Jason concluded, "You need to be reasonable with your students.…if

you tell us reading these 90 pages is what is expected and then after we do it you say, 'Oh you didn't really need to,' that's really frustrating."

Similarly, for many of the students, tests and quizzes were a source of stress and anxiety. Paul related the stress of high-pressure tests. His anecdote describes the sentiments of the other students:

> There was one year where I missed one of my finals for Chemistry, and I almost lost my mind. I was trying to contact my teacher. I called him like 10 times. I emailed him and I didn't hear from him and I stayed up all night and I was throwing up.

The academic challenges alone may not have been as exacting if it were not for other demands competing for the participants' time. David, a communication major, admitted, "I feel overwhelmed with the combination of stresses with everything I need to get done. Just everyday tasks like school work and assignments." The greatest difficulty from academic challenges came as students struggled to balance academic demands with other arduous aspects of college life. Another participant, McKenzie, an excelling mathematics major who has always done well in school, described her challenge with balance: "Balancing the social and then the academic has always been a stress because I want…good grades and I want good friends and it's a hard balance." McKenzie's comment leads into another aspect of difficulty for the participants: the need to be successful both academically and socially.

Social Challenges

The desire to have good friends mentioned by McKenzie was also mentioned by Debbie, a college athlete on scholarship at the public university. As an exceptional athlete in high school, Debbie had a strong friendship network. However, when she got to college, she described the difficulty of making new friends:

> I think when I first moved here, my biggest struggle was friends….Like I said, I am super social, and I would just cry all of the time because I felt I had no friends. I have no one to talk to, no one to hang out with, and that was my number one struggle, and it may seem silly, but it was really hard for me.

Paul, who described himself as an introvert in high school and acknowledged having only one close friend, also expressed his desires for friendship. When he left home and began attending college, he continued to struggle to create friendships. He expressed his unmet expectations: "It's not really any fun to not have any friends."

The religious behaviors of the participant complicated their attempts to make new friends. At times, in their desire to fit into the social environment of college, participants felt pressure to abandon their religious standards. When asked to describe the challenges of college life, Paul, who was at the public university, replied, "Just keeping your values to heart….It's easy to get swept up in it and be, you know, 'I am a college student now, they act like this.'"

Debbie, from the public university, also found it difficult to continue attending church and live her religious standards as she tried to make friends. "You have to make new friends," she explained, "and sometimes you choose wrong friends that can lead you astray and so that's definitely a challenge." Coming from a small predominately LDS rural community, she reported that her desire to be social was one of the reasons she began drinking in college against her religious standards:

> I am social, so I would go to parties, but I wouldn't drink and I wouldn't do anything else, but I would go for the social aspect, you know to make friends….That spring I started to fall in, hang out, with the wrong people and doing things that they were

> doing. I started taking sips here and there of alcohol, you know, just little things, and slowly went downhill. And so then one time I did drink completely, and then I felt like what I was doing was wrong, but I didn't feel like I should go and fix it. I didn't know how, and I was like, this is fun, like in college this is what college kids do. I got in a lot of trouble and got scholarship money taken away because we were caught.

Pressure to abandon religious standards to fit in with the social mold of college was prevalent at the church sponsored university as well. All but one of the participants from the church school acknowledged this difficulty. "It's easy to be a Mormon here, and it's hard, too," described Keith. "Just because everyone is LDS but not necessarily with standards like they should. So, sometimes…that can be difficult." Kelsey, who was finishing a degree in English at the private university, reported, "I kind of just expected to be protected from everything, and I still found a lot of opposition." She went on to describe a difficult dating relationship with a young man who frequently attacked her religious beliefs. She explained one possible reason why someone would choose to attend a private, religiously conservative school and then attack the beliefs of the religion sponsoring the university. In her words, "His parents said, 'If you come here we'll pay for your education.' That was the only reason he was here. They were kind of hoping for him to have a heart-changing experience, but he never did."

McKenzie, a mathematics major, explained that attending the private university may actually make it easier to abandon religious beliefs than attending a public university: "I think it's just easier to justify yourself…when it's predominantly LDS." It seems that the type of university made little difference when it came to pressure to abandon religious standards for social acceptance or convenience.

Challenges with dating were closely associated with the difficulties of making friends. Because of the central role of family in the LDS religion, Mormons tend to marry earlier than their peers and start families during college (Ellison, Burdette, & Glenn, 2011; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski, 2005). For some of the students who were interviewed, LDS beliefs and culture concerning family created social challenges and stress in regards to dating and marriage. A recently married student, Keith, mentioned the pressure he felt to get married after serving an LDS mission: "Definitely pressure to get married.…I was back from my mission for three and a half years before I got married." The pressure Keith described came from external sources such as friends and family members, but Jason, who was also married, described an internal pressure to get married. He felt that it was his responsibility to quickly marry and start a family. His focus did not coincide with the focus of his peers: "I wanted to get on with my life, and everybody else wanted to have fun. So that's when I realized the social part wasn't working as well for me."

Jason and Keith were not uncommon among the male students from the LDS-sponsored university. However, Paul gave voice to the challenges of dating at a non-LDS school when having compatible beliefs with future spouses was a concern. He said, "You know you've got these things [here] where you go to class and you start talking to a girl and you have to sit there and wonder if she is LDS." There was a common concern among the unmarried interviewees at the public university regarding finding a spouse with compatible beliefs and values.

The women in the study also expressed the challenges of dating. McKenzie is currently not in a committed relationship, and she will soon be graduating from the private university and making decisions about her future educational and professional plans. Her

responses contrasted with those of the other women. She said, "I'm not stressed out about dating or not dating, you know. But it's certainly something that you think about, especially when it comes to the future." Kelsey, as reported earlier, described dating men who failed to meet her expectations while at the church school, like the one who attacked her beliefs. She mentioned, "I dated a couple of really weird guys…I wanted to like try to help these guys… [They] definitely influenced the experience I had here."

Kelsey and Debbie, who attended the public university, both experienced depression in regards to dating and other social and academic challenges. The first two years of college were particularly difficult for Kelsey, a woman from the private university, who has started a family and will soon be graduating:

> I never was diagnosed, but I think I was a little bit depressed in those first two years just because I was really struggling with my identity and being away from my family. I dated some really stupid boys, and I just wasn't loving myself very much. And my classes were very rigorous.

Debbie, the highly social college athlete, had a much more acute experience with depression. She described how her desire for companionship during college led to sleepless, tear-filled nights. She talked of the difficulty of not dating anyone seriously and said, "It is so much easier when you have someone to lean on." She went on to describe how this social difficulty contributed to the depression she faced during college. "I started to get depressed, and I would just cry like nightly….There was like a month where every night straight I cried myself to sleep or cried on the phone with my mom for like three hours."

One of the male participants in the study acknowledged deep emotional distress regarding dating, although he did not specifically use the word "depression." David, who is

currently single, was engaged to a young lady when a church policy was changed that allowed young women to serve an LDS mission at age 19 instead of age 21. He related how this affected his prospects of starting a family and the emotional stress created by breaking off an engagement. He described it as his most significant challenge, and to strengthen his claim he concluded by saying, "I have had my twin brother die, and I have had some things, but that…was by far the most unspeakably painful thing. During those extremities, my lifeline was God, the scriptures, revelation. That's what made me keep going." The psychological and physical toll of meeting educational necessities while harmonizing socially important aspects of college life are heavy, however, to add to those pressures, the participants also acknowledged family challenges, which complicated their experience during school.

Family Challenges

The dating and marriage culture of LDS college students contributed to family difficulties that increased stress among study participants. Because of the pressure felt by these LDS students to marry early, some interviewees experienced the pressure of raising a small family during college. Two of the men and two of the women in this study were married, and three of the married students had children. For Kelsey, the challenges of being newly married had an immediate impact on her educational pursuits at the private university. She lamented, "Being married was very stressful." She failed two classes the semester she was married because her marriage occurred in the middle of the semester. She described herself and her husband as "very strong-willed," which led to "a lot of heated arguments" as they adjusted to married life.

With marriage came pressure to bear and care for children. Two of the four married respondents had one child, one had three children, and one did not have children at the time of the interviews. Shortly after being married, Kelsey became pregnant with her first child. She described her feelings: "I didn't want to get pregnant. I did but I didn't. I wanted to but I was like I've got to finish school before I get pregnant, that's just too much." To add to her distress, after deciding with her husband to have a baby, she experienced pressure from her father who opposed having a child before graduating thinking that she would not finish her degree if she had a baby.

The challenge of balancing family with school, and concerns about the future, were most poignantly expressed by Melissa, a mother of three boys who went back to school after her husband became ill. She currently struggles with her desires to be with and care for her sons while preparing for a career that will help provide for her family now that her husband is disabled. She expressed, "It's really hard, because I'd rather be home taking care of my kids and not having to worry about the future." She went on to describe leaving her children as the most difficult aspect of her college experience: "I'd like to just take care of my family, but it's not an option....I think the hardest part is honestly leaving my kids."

Another participant, Jason, provided a male's perspective about marriage and school. Jason and his wife had a son shortly after being married. He said, "I finally feel like I have a face to the responsibility I knew I would someday acquire." He explained that having a child in college made the realities of providing for a family real. "I always knew, someday I'm going to need to provide for a family," he said, "but now it's real." He went on to describe a greater sense of urgency to successfully complete his schooling and begin a career that would allow him to properly care for his new family.

Providing for the needs of a new family was not the only type of familial challenge. For these highly religious participants, religiosity became a source of stress and challenge in other substantial ways related to family. Kelsey explained the pressure she felt from her parents, who lived far away, to maintain her religiosity even while separated from them:

> I knew the church was what I wanted, but I wasn't at the point where I was completely committed to my testimony. I knew I wouldn't ever leave the church, but I wasn't… like for myself…it was more like I'm there because of my family. There's so much family pressure to stay in the church.

A testimony for Mormons is "a knowledge of eternally significant truths imparted by the Spirit" (Givens, 2004, p. 327).

Paul similarly identified how family pressure to live church standards can increase stress as he shared the disappointment his parents felt when he initially was not going to serve a mission after his first-year of college. He later had an experience in institute that made him reconsider, and he served an LDS mission in England. The renegotiation of family relationships was difficult for Paul from another standpoint. Family difficulties made it hard for him to immerse himself in the social and academic life of college. He often spent time returning to his home an hour away from campus to help with family difficulties. He explained, "There is always stress with my family. Some people in my family…struggle even more socially than I do." He went on to describe the difficulty of caring for his mother: "She's a constant form of stress to especially us older kids...she suffers from a lot of anxiety disorders [and] uses us to vent a lot of her anger." Frequently, Paul would spend weekends at home trying to assist the family, which pulled him further away from social engagement at the university and contributed to social stresses.

These lived experiences of highly religious LDS students help to identify and clarify the challenges such students experience. In addition to difficulties related to family, social, and academic challenges, each of these areas were influenced by the religiosity of the respondents. However, despite the challenges created by religiosity, the respondents also acknowledged multiple benefits. Religious beliefs and behaviors provided means for managing the stresses and difficulties as described above. The beneficial influence of religiosity shared by the interviewees was categorized into three major themes: belief, behavior, and community.

Religious Beliefs

Belief in God and belief in self were prominent religious views helping participants at the universities. Belief in God was more than simply acknowledging faith in the existence of a supreme being, but also included a level of personal connection with God. McKenzie explained, "I think just believing that God has an active part in what's going on…keeps you from despair." She further described, "Even if you don't think your roommates care, don't think your classmates care, don't think your teachers care, you know...somebody cares what [you're] doing, what's going on, what [you're] worried about." The students felt that God played a very personal role in their college experiences. For instance, some students believed that God guided and directed them as they contemplated which university to attend. When asked what motivated him to come to the church school, Jason responded simply, "Divine hand." When McKenzie was asked if she applied to any other schools, she said, "Nope….I knew that God was pretty clear on the subject, so I was like, all right."

The experiences of the respondents illustrate that belief in God influences belief in self and mediates feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress during college. Debbie described

her challenge with self-worth and depression as noted earlier in her description of the depression she felt while attending college. She went on to describe how her religious beliefs helped her overcome those feelings:

> You feel like you don't have any value, it's hard because as people we want to be important….We want to have value. We want that feeling.…For sure going to church and stuff has helped with that.…I am a child of God, and He is there, and there is a purpose, and I continually have to remind myself while I am going through this.

Jason, who struggled balancing the demands of college and being a father, said, "I've just learned to appreciate that I am a child of God. In college my potential is a lot greater than I think...I can consistently do anything that is required by my school work." To further illustrate, Keith also described how belief in God and belief in self are related:

> I know that here's this big challenge in front of me, and all I have to do is put in my part and God will do the rest to get over that challenge. And if I'm not getting over that challenge, I just need to put in a little more of my part and I'll be able to get over it. It's kind of like knowing you can do it before you start.

For Keith it was important to recognize personal responsibility and effort in overcoming difficulties. For him, God's role is to enhance personal effort to overcome, not to take over the responsibility.

Belief in self and belief in God helped the students manage academic, social, and personal challenges through feelings of peace, confidence, belonging, and hope. David, who felt he was going crazy after his fiancé broke off their marriage, concluded, "Things will work out…Maintaining that hopeful optimism, that is a large part of my religion." In addition

to belief in God and belief in self, other religious beliefs benefited the students during college.

As mentioned previously LDS culture and beliefs about the importance of marriage were a source of stress for the participants. The responses of the interviewees also portrayed multiple benefits of being married. This was surprising in light of literature claiming that early marriage has a negative impact on educational success (Marini, 1978; Smith & Hooker, 1989). The married students agreed that being married in college was better than being single. For Jason, who was married for all but his first-year, and Keith, who is recently married, being married helped them academically during college. Jason reported, "I've been married for the last two years, so a year single, and two years married, and married has been a lot of fun. I am able to focus on my school work a lot better." Keith also described the benefits of being married in college. For him, being married increased time for academic pursuits.

> It was easier married. I don't have to spend a great deal of time just trying to get married. I'm not really drawn to just going and hanging out or to use my time in that way, so it frees up a lot of time for other things…like my social time… it's just focused on being with my wife basically, and I can do homework while being with her, you know, just spending time with her, so yeah, freed up some time to do more school work.

Even Kelsey, who failed classes when she was first married and felt stressed about being a new mother, still agreed that "being single is the most stressful" in comparison with being married and being a parent.

For Melissa, her family was very helpful and supportive. Her husband became an informal editor who always helped her with writing papers, which she considered one of her weaknesses. “My husband is incredible at being able to edit and see things and different perspectives. He’s really good at flow and organization. He’s really good at it.” In addition, her extended family became an essential support mechanism to aid her while obtaining her education. She now lives close to family and travels to school so her three children can be cared for by extended family while her husband is sick.

The very challenge of providing for a family became a motivating factor that made the married men in this study more committed to, and focused on, academic pursuits. Jason, while reflecting on the needs of his family and the financial stress created by attending college at the private university, explained, “I don’t want to have to be cheap with my family, and I’m feeling that sense of responsibility to provide the kind of lifestyle that I want, so it helps me focus more.” Religious beliefs about family as well as God and self were advantageous constructs for managing college difficulties. The students felt that their beliefs spurred them to higher levels of commitment and self-efficacy. The beliefs of the interviewees undergirded their religious behaviors, which also influenced university life.

Religious Behaviors

In addition to religious beliefs, the interviews revealed positive aspects of religious behaviors. Prayer and scripture study were “big ones” according to McKenzie. Both habits provided a sense of and source for strength, guidance, and comfort that helped the students with social, academic, and personal challenges. For instance Jason described the value of frequent prayer and scripture study. He felt that praying before doing his homework helped him to focus and not be distracted by social media and other forms of entertainment. He said,

"So when I pray, and say, 'Help me learn,' if I don't turn my mind and my focus to learning I almost feel guilty." Jason also related how he prays before tests and quizzes. He recalled one experience with praying before a test:

> I have a history class right now that's my class that I most struggle with…and I've found that praying can help me improve my ability to learn the material…and then as I take the test, I pray that I'll remember the things that I've studied, and it consistently works.…One time, I didn't have time to prepare for a history test, and when I got there, I still prayed that I could still pass, and it was the highest score I got on a test.

However, Jason then went on to describe the danger of expecting God to help you when you haven't done your part. He told how the next test he took he failed to prepare well even though he had time to do so: "I had time, and didn't prepare, and I prayed, but as I prayed, I knew that I hadn't put in the time, so when I got a much lower score, I was able see that…work comes along with prayer." In this narrative, self-efficacy (i.e., the level of confidence a person has in his or her ability to perform specific tasks or behaviors) was negatively impacted by Jason's belief that God would help him even when he hadn't done his part. Keith on the other hand described the value of prayer when combined with individual effort: "I would say I notice when I sincerely pray before tests and quizzes I'll do better.…I'm able to recall what I've learned better." In this instance the respondent had exerted sufficient effort to learn the materials.

Prayer was mentioned by every participant as a source of help in facing the challenges of university life. The second most mentioned religious behavior was scripture study. Seven of the eight interviewees acknowledged the help of this religious habit. Jason perhaps gives the best description of the influence of scripture study:

> I always do my scripture study before I touch my homework. It often pushes me back an hour, but once again, in the same sense as prayer, it helps me focus my mind.…The study time becomes sacred because I involve it in my scripture study. And just for myself I make a connection between secular and spiritual for that time period.

By making scripture study a priority, Jason explained, "I feel like I can look at the clock and see what I've achieved in five minutes, and it always seems to be more focused. I get more done." Keith verified the feeling of increased academic efficiency in relation to scripture study and other religious behaviors. He described how studying the scriptures and practicing other religious habits helped him: "It just seems like my schooling is more effective and my mind's clearer and what would have taken me X amount of hours to do in school took me a little bit less."

Efficiency, time-management, and balance were byproducts of another religious practice: serving an LDS mission. Keith, who spent two years in Mexico proselyting and performing community service, explained that, during his mission, he learned how to set goals and follow a planner. These and similar skills have carried over to college for the six respondents who served missions. A mission also helped these students with their social challenges. McKenzie, who spent 18 months in Argentina, expressed, "I think I am definitely more social since I came back from my mission….I'm a little more confident about myself and happier being with people." A mission exposed participants to different cultures and viewpoints that helped them socialize better with roommates, study partners, teachers, and other acquaintances. Missions also helped the participants develop study skills as they learned new languages and studied scripture.

Serving a mission also assisted participants in maintaining religious commitment during college. Of the three participants who spoke of not keeping church standards (two from the public university and one from the private), two of the three had not served missions. The third, Paul, quit attending church services and questioned his beliefs while at the public university until feeling inspired by God to serve a mission during an institute class. He described the change in his personal life following his mission:

> I got back [to the public university], and I started trying to be as active as I could in my ward [a geographically determined congregation of LDS members (Cnaan, Evans, & Curtis, 2012)]. I have only been happier as I have done that. The more and more I have been able to serve, the happier I have been.

In regard to practicing religious behaviors, the other five participants who served missions mentioned feeling pressured to stop living church standards of behavior. Although these participants never acknowledged whether or not they had given in to that pressure, five of the six participants who served missions recognized educational benefits in addition to strengthened religious commitment as a result of their service.

Besides prayer, scripture study, and missionary service, other religious behaviors were mentioned briefly as helpful means to manage challenges during university life such as: attending the temple, serving others, attending institute and religious services, giving and receiving priesthood blessings, repenting, partaking of the sacrament, fasting, and keeping the Mormon health code. Many of these religious behaviors or practices relate to the final major theme that came from the interviews: the influence of the religious community.

Religious Community

Participating in a religious community created mild amounts of stress for the interviewees in this study, but it also created additional pathways for relieving the stress of university life. Cnaan et al. (2012) identified the importance of participation, community service, and support as part of Mormon religiosity:

> One of the Mormons' basic tenets is the belief that they are called by God to serve others. That means that practicing members of the LDS Church act under the belief that they are called to give time and expertise for the church, society, and humanity. (p. 2)

LDS members accomplish this service through callings (i.e., specific responsibilities members are invited to fulfill voluntarily). These callings are often fulfilled within specific congregations of LDS people, or wards. The following experiences illustrate how community support helped students during the college experience.

Participating in church callings provided an avenue for community service for the interviewees. Debbie, who struggled with depression, explained that focusing on serving others helped her forget about her own problems and frustrations. Paul, the introvert, described how serving in callings in the church and participating actively in his ward influenced his ability to make friends. After describing how he has overcome his tendency toward shyness, Paul was asked why he thought he was able to be more outgoing. He reported, "Completely the ward and the institute." He went on to describe how involvement in these elements of his religion improved his social abilities: "Through the ward, I have met a lot more people. Especially as I have been able to have more callings with more responsibilities. I am able to be more involved with people in the ward."

Paul also expressed how easy it can be to focus on oneself during college. He described how academic demands can keep a person excessively busy and deter him or her from participating in the religious community. He also explained how involvement in his ward, serving others, and religious activities such as institute and scripture study eased his academic challenges and helped him maintain balance. According to Paul, "Investing your time in the church makes college work out….I think personally that that's the best way to get through college is to make your priority church…and then college. I feel like it recharges me." He went on to say how this "recharging" helped him more effectively meet academic demands.

Some of the interviewees described another aspect of being a part of a religious community. Melissa's story captures the other side of volunteerism in a ward. When Melissa and her husband left home to attend college, they planned on her husband finishing his doctorate and providing for the family. Melissa, on the other hand, hoped to stay at home and raise her three sons. She described the support she received from the religious community when her husband became ill, and she began providing for the family.

> The biggest help was the ward because I didn't have family that was close. Our ward was absolutely amazing, and when everything started to happen with my husband being sick, and then I started going back to school, they, all of the friends that I had there in the ward, just started saying, "Okay we're going to take care of your kids on this day. We're going to bring you a meal on this day. What else can we do?" And it was the biggest boost that I've ever had. There were people that had bigger problems than I did, people with babies in the hospital, and yet we all helped each other through all of those really tough times. It was...I think that was the biggest help.

In addition to volunteerism, participation in the religious community came through attending religious services and meetings. Every participant attending the public university specifically identified the institute experience. David said, "The institute…is why I have friends" and called it "an integral part of my college experience." Paul added, "It's interesting too because you go to institute and there's loads of kids at the institute. There's still loads and loads of LDS people. It always just seems so hard to find them outside of the institute." Melissa emotionally expressed, "The biggest help for me, honestly, this semester has been the institute."

All of the public university students who attended institute mentioned the helpfulness of institute classes, whereas only one respondent, Kelsey, from the private university mentioned her religion classes, and even then it was in combination with other classes that helped her make career decisions. However, she did acknowledge that the overall environment of the LDS university was very encouraging and supportive – a comment unparalleled by the public university students. She described, "I was constantly being brought up rather than torn down." She went on to say that she felt this way in spite of very high expectations from the university faculty and her peers. She related, "I think a lot of the times the world hates you for being successful and I feel like here…the people are wanting me to be successful and my peers are more encouraging…Every semester I would meet wonderful people."

The religious community, combined with religious behaviors and beliefs, aided the students as they managed the challenges and tensions of the college experience. After describing their difficulties and the role of their religiosity during college, the participants were asked to describe their college preparation experience in seminary. Their responses

became foundational to accomplishing the professional practice focus of this study to improve college preparation efforts in seminary.

College Preparation in Seminary

The student experiences in seminary regarding college preparation were illuminating, particularly regarding implications for practice. Four of the interviewees related the importance of having personal experiences with living their religious beliefs and behaviors prior to college. For instance, McKenzie stated, "I would say the one thing that's come out of seminary is just having more experiences with my religion….The biggest ones for me were when they invited us to do stuff outside of class."

As reflected by McKenzie's comment, participants felt that regular invitations from teachers to set specific, self-determined goals to live religious behaviors were particularly helpful. David, for example, illustrated how his seminary teacher helped him: "My freshman seminary teacher…invited me to act and to read scriptures and I consequently have a testimony of reading scriptures." McKenzie shared why she had personal religious experiences before college:

> [Our seminary teacher] helped us or encouraged us to have…our own personal experiences with the scriptures and prayer outside of class. That was something that is kind of in there in the base of my testimony was that one time I prayed after seminary because the teacher told me to and having a good experience with it.

The experience helped strengthen her religious beliefs, but how did it influence her educational experience? When asked to make the connection between her comment and being ready for college, she described how her religious experience prior to college became foundational to her strong beliefs when she faced challenges in college. She related that

during those times, "You can go back to what you do know.… It gave me something to build on."

Melissa's experience confirms McKenzie's comments about the importance of having foundational experiences with religious beliefs and behaviors to look back on in college. She stated, "When we have those experiences it gives us an opportunity to look back and say, 'Because of that one time, I know that [God] will continue to help me.' It provides a strength that you can't really get anywhere else."

Helping students connect their religious beliefs and commitments to learning did not occur for all of the participants. Keith felt that his seminary teachers could have connected religiosity to university life more explicitly. He commented on how his seminary experience fell short:

> I was taught spiritually for the situation I was in. I was living at home, going to high school, but my situation as I went to college changed drastically…Maybe if teachers just bring up every once in a while, "You're going to be on your own, you're going to have big decisions, you're going to have to have your own testimony, go to church on your own.…They're going to have to rely on their own testimony."

For Keith it was difficult to connect what he was learning in seminary to the college experience. This could easily be changed in seminary if instructors would be cognizant of opportunities to connect religious behaviors and beliefs to learning in high school. The experiences of these participants in seminary, as well as their perspectives concerning religiosity and college life helped accomplish the purpose of this study.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of highly religious college students regarding the challenges of college life and the role of religiosity in their lives. In addition this study was meant to improve college preparation of seminary students. To that end, the experiences of the participants supported Bandura's (2003) theoretical concepts concerning religiosity, especially the theories of self-efficacy and proxy agency. Many of the participants' responses reflected increased levels of self-efficacy which influenced the challenges they faced in college.

The participants experienced anxiety, stress, and depression from balancing multiple aspects of college life as suggested by many scholars (Bouteyre, Maurel, & Bernaud, 2007; Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007; Kang & Romo 2011; Merrill et al., 2009; Ying, 2007). They were also challenged by the need to fit in socially in the college environment as they developed new friendships and attempted to balance cultural aspects of college and religiosity. Moreover, the religiosity element of these students' college lives added another dimension of stress that was uniquely influenced by LDS beliefs and behaviors, supporting the need to study religious influence on college life by religious tradition (Hill, 2011; Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; McFarland et al., 2011; Regnerus & Elder, 2003a).

The participants' beliefs about God often caused them to turn to him for help with their challenges. Bandura (2003) cautioned that partnering with God through proxy agency "can foster dependent passivity that detracts from the development and exercise of personal efficacy" unless the relationship "is viewed as a guiding supportive partnership requiring one to exercise influence over events in one's life" (p.172). As respondents partnered with God

their beliefs in their abilities to perform necessary tasks related to their college experience were enhanced, thus promoting self-efficacy, except in the case of Jason who admitted once passively expecting God to help him on a test when he had not done his part studying and preparing.

Regarding prayer, Bandura (1999) theorized that in some reciprocation between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors, people are left with limited or no control over social conditions or institutional practices influencing their lives. In these situations human beings encourage others, who are able to influence environmental factors, to work on their behalf (Bandura, 1999). Bandura (2003) explains prayer as petitioning divine help when people are unable to control conditions affecting their lives. Bandura (2003) believes this petitioning may have an enhancing or detracting effect on self-efficacy. If prayer is simply seen as a way of passing responsibility to divine agency to solve problems then it can be detrimental to developing self-efficacy. On the other hand if prayer is seen as a way to partner with divine agency and influence one's own life as Keith described, it can promote self-efficacy and increase resilience. Self-efficacy correlates strongly with academic performance, college adjustment, stress management, and overall satisfaction and commitment to higher education (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001).

This study further identified multiple means by which religiosity influences academic performance. Religious habits were perceived as improving clarity of mind, increasing focus and attention, increasing a person's ability to recall information, and enhancing study skills. Being married was influential for increasing participants' commitment to serious academic engagement through increased study time and decreased time socializing. Latter-Day Saint students often marry earlier than their peers and start families during college due to a high

religious focus on the importance of family (Ellison et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2005). Findings in this study suggest that scholars (Marini, 1978; Smith & Hooker, 1989) may be accurate regarding early marriage and the challenges of family creation making college more challenging. For some of the participants of this study, being married increased stress to provide for family members, and in one case led to poor academic performance. However, all married students agreed that being married was better than being single, and often improved their academic performance as their efforts became more focused. These findings may aid in understanding correlations in the literature linking LDS religiosity to improved academic performance (Cannon et al., 2005; Jeynes, 2009; Kang & Romo, 2011; Mooney, 2010; Regnerus, 2000).

Depression and anxiety are common among college students because of the strenuous demands of fulfilling academic expectations while balancing social and emotional pressures during a time of increased autonomy and development (Bouteyre et al., 2007; Conley et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Kang & Romo, 2011; Ying, 2007). This was true of three of the students in this study. While some scholars argue that religion may increase levels of stress (Winterowd, Harrist, Thomason, Worth, & Carlozzi, 2005), the participants' responses indicated increased feelings of peace and support from their religious beliefs. Their beliefs that God was a part of their lives and would guide them, strengthen them, and support them, as well as their belief in self, provide insights into Kang and Romo's (2011) research, as well as Merrill et al. (2009) that religiosity decreases stress, anxiety and depression during college. The social support produced by religious communities as expressed by the participants also expands our understanding of how religiosity may be helping with these

challenges. The religious community created a support mechanism (Bandura, 2003), which benefited participants as they faced academic, social, and personal challenges and pressure.

Maintaining religiosity was similarly difficult for participants at both the public and private universities. This is an important distinction in relation to Hill's (2009) findings that religiosity is higher at religiously conservative schools. Although this may be accurate, it needs to be qualified by an understanding that students at conservative schools may also face pressure to abandon their beliefs. Of course the interviewees only spoke of pressure to forgo religious behaviors in the face of academic pressures. There may be other pressures leading to declines in religiosity that are peculiar to specific university contexts.

Furthermore, religiosity produced family strain for some participants. When students enroll in college they often leave home and become independent of parental influence. This can be a source of both strength and difficulty for parents and students as there is a change in familial roles and relationships (Leondari & Kiosseoglou, 2000). This difficult transition was magnified for religious students as they felt pressure from family members to remain committed to their religiosity while outside of their immediate influence. Although important understanding of religiosity and education emerged from the data there is still much to explore in regards to this relationship.

Conclusion and Implications

There is no question that Debbie's seven words ring true for many other college students: "College is hard, it is really hard." The findings of this study indicate that highly-religious LDS college students experience university challenges in common with other college students. They struggle to meet academic demands while balancing social

expectations and desires for friendship while experiencing other difficulties such as depression, concerns about the future, and family challenges.

Moreover the religiosity of the students created tensions as the respondents struggled to merge their religiosity with the social climate of college. Students from both the private and the public universities were challenged to abandon specific religious behaviors and had their religious beliefs questioned while at the same time feeling both internal and external pressure to maintain their religiosity. The unique LDS emphasis concerning the importance of family likewise created stress as students sought marriage and family creation during the college experience.

Although, at times, religiosity increased stress for the participants of this study, it also provided unique beliefs, behaviors, and support systems that helped the students navigate the college experience. The participants' reflections described how their beliefs in God helped them to feel loved and cared for while coping with social challenges such as loneliness and the desire to "fit in." This belief in God was influential in helping students overcome feelings of depression, anxiety, and distress. Students' self-efficacy was both enhanced as they partnered with God and weakened when they passively expected God to fix their problems without effort on their part. Although beliefs about family life caused social anxiety when students were single, being married helped students at both universities focus academically by decreasing social demands and creating more time for study. Even the challenges of adapting to being married and the responsibilities of balancing family and education were preferred over the difficulties of being single.

Religious habits aided participants with time-management issues by assisting in the establishment of a sense of balance between religious, academic, and social demands.

Furthermore, praying and studying scripture assisted students academically by helping them think more clearly and remain more focused while studying. Additionally, the act of praying was perceived to improve performance on tests and quizzes. Moreover, for these LDS students, serving a mission improved study habits, increased time-management abilities, and aided social relationships.

Finally, the religious community was particularly helpful for students who were away from home and needed support to meet university demands. The community provided an opportunity for volunteering, which helped students socialize and find relief from academic stresses for a time. Momentarily setting aside academic demands to help others refreshed and rejuvenated the participants and increased their sense of self-efficacy for facing those demands when they were resumed.

Implications for Practice

What then are the implications for improving college preparation for high school students in seminary? In light of the challenges described by the participants and the benefits they perceived and experienced from religiosity, it is apparent that seminary classes can play an important role in helping students prepare for college. Undoubtedly, CES instructors have done their best to provide effective religious education. However, based on the experiences of the students, there seems to be a gap in connecting religiosity to education as a means of managing college challenges. The participants described how invitations from seminary teachers were effective in helping them develop, understand, and live their religiosity. Yet how exactly religiosity would help students in their educational pursuits was less emphasized and apparent. Helping students experience a relationship with God and supporting a self-

efficacy promoting relationship with God may be a path for improving college support and preparation in S&I.

Cushman (2007) recommended preparing students for college by giving "them opportunities to think like college students, and coach them in how to do so" (p.46). The idea of projecting students' thoughts to the future college experience is reflected in the experiences of the respondents. Students would benefit as instructors and curriculum focus on specific beliefs or behaviors and discuss how they may or may not assist them in their future educational pursuits. Cushman (2007) also advised high school administrators to invite college students back to high school to speak to classes. This may be a viable means for assisting students in seminary. Bandura's (2003) theory that religiosity provides models by which others can learn and develop supports this suggestion. Kang and Romo (2011) also found informal mentoring or modeling in religious communities significantly mediated feelings of depression and anxiety

Additionally, finding that students were pressured socially to give up their religiosity at both the LDS university and the public university has important implications for professional practice. As S&I teachers encourage the pursuit of education they must recognize that students may be pressured to divest themselves of religious beliefs or behaviors to assimilate into the social environment of college and make friends regardless of the educational institution. Students enrolling in church-owned universities, in particular, would benefit by understanding they will likely not be immune to this challenge. It would be helpful if students were not surprised by this opposition as were the participants of this study.

Finally, the stressful and beneficial aspects of family life are important considerations for S&I administrators and faculty. Teachers must be careful to acknowledge possible family

challenges while also helping students recognize the benefits of marriage and family relationships.

As I have conducted this research while simultaneously fulfilling my professional responsibilities to teach seminary and institute students, I have begun emphasizing how religiosity may benefit them or be challenging both in high school and college. In addition, I have shared my findings and reflections with other faculty members who are also emphasizing the religiosity/education connection. As we have invited the students to experience and share the influence of religiosity as they pursue their education, we have benefited from hearing experiences such as improved study time and decreased levels of stress as students have prayed or studied their scriptures before working on assignments. I have had numerous discussions with S&I administrators about these findings and their implications, which have continued to improve my ability to help students prepare for and manage the challenges of university life. I have been invited by administrators to share my findings as they may influence curriculum and training both locally and globally.

Implications for Future Research

Future research warrants continued focus on one religion at a time and further examination of the lived experiences of religious students as they manage the challenges they face during college (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; McFarland, Wright, & Weakliem, 2011; Regnerus & Elder, 2003a; Saenz & Barrera, 2005). Additional qualitative research applied to specific religions might then be studied through secondary qualitative analyses and meta-syntheses involving the reuse of existing data, collected from prior studies (Heaton, 1998; Zimmer, 2004). These analyses could be done across multiple religious and educational contexts and deepen understanding of religiosity and education. Furthermore, in an effort to answer the

call for more nuanced approaches to studying the religiosity/education relationship this research endeavor only captured the experiences of highly religious students. The experiences of less religiously committed students should receive further attention.

Understanding the adversity faced by LDS students aids S&I teachers in preparing students for their future educational experiences. It also improves institute teachers' abilities to encourage, counsel, and assist current college students. In particular, LDS institute played an important community role for the participants at the public university. All of the public university students who attended institute mentioned the helpfulness of institute classes, whereas only one respondent from the private university mentioned her religion classes. As the participants who volunteered came from institute courses, finding institute to be helpful was not surprising. What was surprising was that religion classes were not more influential. This finding has important implications for religious education courses. What practices are making institute so imperative to these students, and why were religion classes less important?

There may be many reasons why religion classes at the private university were not as noteworthy as the religious classes at the institute adjacent to the public university. This is an area that would benefit from future research. Perhaps religion classes at the private university do not contrast with academic classes where religiosity is so prevalent. Furthermore, religion classes are required at the private university and students receive college credit for the classes; therefore, they reflect the rigor and demand of credit-worthy courses. Attending institute, on the other hand, is a choice for students at public universities. Students are free to come and go as they please; hence, teachers cannot require assignments, tests, and homework, although they are often suggested. Paul, who attended the public university,

stated, “Institute is just really nice because everybody who is there wants to be there. It’s up to you to sign up.” He went on to describe how institute was a break from the rigor of academic courses that helped him relax and refocus. In regards to seminary, questions should be considered such as what level of rigor should be expected from the participants? And, what are the costs and benefits of increased or decreased rigor regarding student well-being and college preparation?

But what more can be done to help students manage the challenging college environment? Although this study is done within a PPD using AR focused on local contexts and is not generalizable (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Stringer, 2007), I hope this research can form a foundation for further research. My desire is that other religious denominations will find the research helpful for understanding how their institutions can help their youth prepare for the challenges of university life. In addition, I hope this research will promote college and high school settings that “actively create conditions and campus environments that foster these oft-neglected dimensions [spirituality and religiosity] of holistic student development” (Braskamp, 2007, p. 6).

In 1995, The National Education Goals Panel advised, “If the National Education Goals are to be achieved, families, schools, and communities must work collaboratively to form strong family-school-community partnerships” (p. 63). Universities are part of a larger social ecosystem of individuals that represent a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, gender and social orientations, and religious systems. The values each sub-culture shares (faith, trust, honesty, love, justice, and kindness) create a cooperative system that elevates educational experiences. Among the larger meta-system lie religious beliefs and subsequent behaviors.

University students yearn for belonging, and religious practices are one way they may find social acceptance and the strength to cope with staggering university challenges.

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CHAPTER 3: RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

W. Mitchell Simmons, James Williams, & Nathan Williams

Introduction

Historically, religion shaped higher education in America (Chery, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001). Early colonial colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale were primarily funded by religious denominations with the purpose of directing students toward religious studies that were "in line with the spirit of [the] religious tradition" of the day (Brickman, 1972, p. 31). These schools were also designed for educating the clergy, and worked to promote and preserve the views of their sponsoring religious denominations. Cohen and Kisker (2010) note that during the founding of these early colonial colleges "the pattern of curriculum and faculty student relations [stemmed] from church-related institutions [and] was most prominent" (p. 20).

Toward the conclusion of the Colonial Era, religious influence in higher education waned while a "civil community centered on principles of morality and public service, apart from an established church grew" (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 24). Additionally, the early Protestant acceptance of an approach toward scientific inquiry led to a weakening of religious influence and orthodoxy in higher education (Hartley, 2004). Prior to this movement, colleges had focused on the preservation of specific knowledge rather than the epistemological discoveries (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This new approach to the discovery of knowledge through scientific inquiry led to "a significant departure from the old prescribed curriculum of the classics" (Hartley, 2004, p. 113). The transition from primarily church-directed universities to a focus on scientific learning contributed to secularization in higher education (Smith, 1990).

Secularization in American higher education was a steady and multifaceted process beginning early in the 19th century (Hartley, 2004). Berger (1967) defines secularization as the "process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (p. 107). The progression of secularization in higher education was influenced by the advancement of scientific inquiry, leading to modifications in academic curriculum (Marsden, 1994; Perko, 1991; Sloan, 1994). Additionally, the religious atmosphere on college campuses changed as the relationship between colleges, and the ministerial and civic objectives upon which churches founded them, began to deteriorate. Course requirements in religion and moral philosophy changed as a new morality was introduced, and mandatory church attendance was abolished (Haynes, 2002; Marsden, 1994; Pattillo & Mackenzie, 1966). In many ways, "the university itself became a major religious phenomenon," becoming the "secular religion" of American culture by the 20th century (Sloan, 1994, p. 21). It was the belief of the clergy and their lay supporters of the day, that the rise of the university marked the advancement of the practical and scientific over the spiritual (Smith, 1990) and parents of prospective college students were warned that their children "would become raw recruits for Satan if they enrolled at [these] secular institutions" (p. 100).

The Secularizing Effect of Higher Education on College Students

The question as to whether or not higher education has a secularizing effect upon the religiosity of college students today is complex and controversial (Stark & Finke, 2000). Several studies (Johnson, 1997; Petersen, 1994; Schieman, 2010; Sherkat, 1998) identify the modern university as a place where religious beliefs are challenged and faith is abandoned. Johnson (1997), Petersen (1994), and Shieman (2010) all suggest that higher education leads

to lower levels of belief in the existence of God and religious commitment. Sherkat (2007) came to a similar conclusion noting that at some point in their college careers students distance themselves from Biblical teachings. Albrecht and Heaton (1984) cite how this type of environment often pushes students toward diminished religiosity as they "encounter views that deemphasize spiritual growth and elevate scientific and intellectual achievement" (p. 46).

Other research paints a different picture about the effects higher education has on the religiosity of college students. Although Hill (2009) found evidence that church attendance among students declined during college, he noted that the change was not permanent. He stated, "no widespread, long-term decline in religious participation is likely for any particular religious group—particularly at public colleges and universities" (p. 530). Bowman and Small (2011) investigated whether students' religious transformations during college were associated with their religious affiliation, experiences, and characteristics of their college or university. Their report shows that many students, belonging to a variety of religious denominations were just as committed to their religious beliefs following their college experience as they were before they started college. Mayrl and Oeur (2009) also maintain that "college attendance does not inevitably create apostasy among most students" (p. 265), and Lee (2002) notes that academic and social encounters in college may cause students to rethink their religious beliefs, but not necessarily abandon their faith. Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) point out that "evidence is mounting to suggest that students' commitments to religious values during the college years may not so much increase or decrease as become reexamined, refined, and incorporated in subtle ways with other beliefs and philosophical dispositions" (p. 284). Klassen and Zimmermann (2006) refer to this

reexamination of beliefs as "a form of Christian dualism" where students define themselves against tradition by "uncritically accepting certain modernist assumptions about thinking" (p. 90).

Inward Tension from Opposing Worldviews

Most college students reexamine their religious beliefs in light of unfamiliar worldviews and secular philosophies (Braskamp, 2007). Bryant (2011) notes, "The salience of religion and spirituality in academic encounters tend to provoke religious/spiritual struggles" (p. 441). The cognitive and emotional struggles of students when their beliefs were challenged either intentionally or otherwise, was observed among the participants in these three studies. Inward tensions were experienced when a student felt pressure to reconcile opposing worldviews, which created confusion, anxiety, and frustration. When their religious perceptions, or beliefs, did not match those of university peers and professors, they felt compelled to choose one or the other, or justify their incongruences, and thus minimize the internal conflict and associated emotional distress.

This inward tension is described in psychology literature as cognitive dissonance, "a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, [or] opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent" (Tavris & Aronson, 2007, p. 13). One of the basic assumptions of cognitive dissonance is that people want harmony in their lives by having their perceptions match their reality (Ryan, 2010).

While working through these inner conflicts the students have the choice to do the following: (a) modify their existing beliefs; (b) add new beliefs to construct a consistent belief system; or (c) minimize the significance of any one of the dissonant components. Cognitive dissonance theory asserts that when these inward tensions occur individuals will

attempt to avoid circumstances or reject facts that may intensify feelings of discomfort or dissonance (Festinger, 1985). Often, the avoidance of new, conflicting views is unavoidable for college students who are required to master their course studies—to get the grade. In process, some come to the position of what Scheitle (2011) found, with a majority of undergraduate students who do not view the relationship between science and religion as one of conflict. Klassen and Zimmermann (2006) describe such Christians as "accepting a dualistic split between public and private realms" (p. 90). They argue that once undergraduate college students incorporate secular ideas into their religious traditions, their faith becomes more subjective.

The Phenomenon of Education and Faith

When Bowman and Small (2011) conducted research analyzing religious transformation during college, they chose to exclude data from LDS participants "because the religious change [during college] of Latter-Day Saints often differs substantially from that of other young adults" (p. 159). Among the many religious traditions observed in his study, Hill (2011) gives an example of the uniqueness of college students within the LDS faith. He observes,

> The religious tradition of the respondent as an adolescent is an important predictor of belief change. Those raised in most nonevangelical religious traditions, with the exception of Mormons, are more likely to decline in their super-empirical Christian beliefs compared to evangelical Protestants. (p. 543)

The research by Bowman and Small (2011), as well as Hill (2011), is supported by a national survey conducted by the Pew Forum:

> Mormons [LDS church members] who have graduated from college display the highest levels of religious commitment (84%) followed by those with some college education (75%). Mormons with a high school education or less exhibit substantially lower levels of religious commitment (50% score high on the scale) than their more highly educated counterparts. These large differences in religious commitment among respondents with different educational backgrounds are not seen among many other religious groups in the population. (Smith, 2011, p. 37-38)

RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT			
	High %	Medium %	Low %
U.S. Mormons	69	28	2
Men	65	32	3
Women	73	25	-
College Grad	84	15	1
Some College	75	24	1
HS or Less	50	44	4

Figure 3.1 Religious commitment. Adapted from Smith (2011)

The Pew Forum also discovered that highly educated LDS members regularly practice their religion and are stronger in their beliefs than their less educated counterparts (Smith, 2011). Additionally, Albrecht and Heaton (1984), as well as Merrill and colleagues (2003) noted how LDS members are an exception to the correlations between increased educational levels and declines or no difference reported in religious commitment. Albrecht and Heaton concluded that education had a positive effect on religious commitment among Latter-day Saints. They found that LDS members with university degrees are more likely to attend church, pay tithing, pray, study scripture, and have stronger religious beliefs than those without university degrees. It appears that higher education may have a "reverse secularization effect" on Latter-day Saints (Heaton, Bahr, & Jacobson, 2004, p. 61); a phenomena worthy of further inquiry.

Scholars theorize about the possible reasons behind this reverse secularization effect among LDS members. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Albrecht et al. (1984) hypothesize that the involvement of educated LDS members in positions of leadership fosters this anomaly. Skills developed in university settings often overlap with abilities needed to fulfill voluntary church responsibilities (e.g., conducting meetings, public speaking, interpersonal relations, and managing organizations). Stott (1983) and Merrill et al. (2003) theorized that the behavioral relationship between religiosity and educational attainment is due to the LDS doctrinal, historical, and cultural emphasis on education. These researchers posit "individuals who attend church frequently…are members of church-based networks that can reinforce religious commitment to aspirations of higher education" (p. 121). In this view, LDS social norms promote educational achievement while simultaneously diminishing secularizing influences. Stott (1983) hypothesized, "Latter-day Saint theology appears to negate the secularizing impact of education by sacralizing it and incorporating it into the total religious milieu" (p. 8). These studies suggest that something unique is occurring among LDS members as a result of their higher education experience: College-educated LDS members seem to challenge the secularization effects of higher education (Albrecht et al., 1984; Heaton et al., 2004; Hill, 2009; Smith, 2011; Stott, 1983).

Problem Statement

Not everyone agrees on the impact higher education has on a person's religious beliefs and commitments. The discrepancies between the effects of higher education and secularization are a hotly debated subject (Maryl & Ouer, 2009; Merrill et al., 2003; Mooney, 2010; Wuthnow, 2012). Among Latter-day Saints, the debate is no less intense. Despite a plethora of evidence discussing the positive correlation between higher education and

religiosity among LDS college students, there is other research suggesting trends of defection among LDS membership (Ash, 2013; Henderson & Cooke, 2012)—particularly among those attending college (Stack, 2012). The evidence that some LDS students are abandoning their beliefs during their young adult years are of great interest and concern for religious educators and church leaders. As religious educators in high school and college, we have observed these downward trends among our students. In our search to inquire about this problem, we found a dearth of literature describing the lived experiences of those who represent this phenomenon. We also found that the social, cultural, and personal forces that have contribute to the transformation and weakening the faith among college-educated Latter-day Saints had not been addressed.

Purpose Statement

Our broader objective was to capture and describe the contextual nuances and lived experiences of LDS college students currently attending college as well as doctoral graduates currently employed as professional educators (professors or administrators) to understand how college life influenced their religious choices. A corollary purpose is to provide stakeholders with information to make data-based decisions regarding policy and curriculum development.

Research Questions

The grand tour question guiding our research was: What are the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of LDS participants concerning religiosity in their higher education experience? The following sub-questions further guided the study: (a) How do participants reconcile or attempt to reconcile possible tensions between their religiosity and their university experiences? (b) How is religiosity transformed by the higher education

experience? (c) What do the thoughts and experiences of the participants offer those interested in religious commitment and academic achievement?

Research Method

We implemented a qualitative meta-synthesis (QMS) design to deepen understanding of the Mormon experience in higher education. We selected this method to complement the results, conclusions, and theories discovered through quantitative inquiry (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; Regnerus & Elder, 2003a). The dearth of qualitative data on this topic prompted Merrill, Lyon, and Jenson (2003) to recommend a more focused approach: "The relation between secularizing and religiosity needs to be qualified by specific references to particular denominations and faith traditions" (p. 114). In considering a research approach to addressing this problem, we noted that, "The influence of particular institutional religious traditions may vary considerably in their relationship to educational aspirations and post-secondary educational attainment" (Regnerus & Elder 2003a, p. 653).

Qualitative meta-synthesis (QMS) is a research method involving the reuse of existing data, collected from prior studies related in focus (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Zimmer, 2006). As explained by Walsh and Downe (2005), QMS is intended to deepen understandings of specific accounts by "bringing together qualitative studies in a related area" which "enables the nuances, taken-for-granted assumptions, and textured milieu of varying accounts to be exposed, described and explained in ways that bring fresh insights" (p. 205). Qualitative Meta-Synthesis creates a more complete understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Erwin, Brotherson, & Summers, 2011; Walsh & Downe, 2005).

Jensen and Allen (1996) contend that QMS is "rooted in the original data" (p. 556), whereas Erwin et al., 2011 suggests QMS is not "a secondary analysis of primary data from a

group of identified research studies; rather, it is an interpretation of the findings of the selected studies" (p. 188). In conducting QMS, the research team chose to focus initially on the findings of three related studies during the synthesis process; however, we also returned to the original data to increase credibility and confirmability (O'Halloran, Grohn, & Worrall, 2012). Credibility in QMS is achieved by handling data so that it remains true to the original source. The original researchers should be able to verify the integrity of the data used. This is naturally achieved by analyzing research conducted by the research team (Walsh & Downe, 2005). In QMS, findings are validated internally through agreement between the quotes of the participants and their common experiences. Externally, the findings are validated through comparison with related literature (Jensen & Allen, 1996). The recurrence of themes between compared studies increases the validity of the QMS as well as the validity of the original studies (Estabrooks, Field, & Morse, 1994). Furthermore, QMS allowed us to conduct the research in a timely manner as analyzed data had already been collected and related literature reviewed.

The purpose of QMS is "translating, explaining, and discovering meaning from the written narrative" and seeks to "integrate and interpret patterns and insights systematically across qualitative investigations while also maintaining the integrity of the individual studies" (Erwin et al., 2011, p. 189). In QMS, analysis and synthesis of data involves "comparison, translation, and analysis of original findings from which new interpretations are generated, encompassing and distilling the meanings in the constituent studies" (Zimmer, 2006, p. 312). This type of synthesis is an inductive process leading to the development of themes through the in-depth coding of qualitative data (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009).

Analysis

The research team was responsive to the specific guiding principles governing a QMS as described by scholars (Erwin et al., 2011; Jensen & Allen, 1996; O'Halloran et al., 2012; Walsh & Downe, 2005; Zimmer, 2006). We were guided by research principles in the synthesis of findings and data collected from their three related studies on religiosity and higher education. In Phase 1 of the QMS, we compared, contrasted, and coded primary data collected from three related studies in order to identify themes common in all studies. To increase the credibility and authenticity of the research, research team members reviewed and coded the studies individually before collectively analyzing the data. Personal coding of data provided a means of triangulating data and increased the credibility of the findings (O'Halloran et al., 2012; Walsh & Downe, 2005). As each individual researcher analyzed, coded and checked the process at each phase of synthesis, trustworthiness was increased by inter-rater reliability checks (Walsh & Downe, 2005).

During Phase 2, we determined the interrelated nature of the data collected in the individual studies. During this phase reviewing the emerging themes as a research team triangulated the data. Throughout Phase 2 reciprocal translations occurred in which each study was translated into terms consistent with the other studies and vice versa (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Walsh & Downe, 2005). The research team created categories and higher order categories through discussion and reflection. After we established common codes, we reviewed primary data and findings from each study again in order to assure all themes were accounted for in the analysis (O'Halloran et al., 2012). The recurrence of common themes increased the validity of the group study as well as the individual studies (Walsh & Downe, 2005).

Further confirmation of the coding process occurred in phase 3. We analyzed and synthesized common codes by comparing the created categories of each study through reading and discussing the research again as a team. To accomplish the research purposes, we increasingly refined the codes until a clear consensus was reached elucidating "more refined meanings, exploratory theories and new concepts" (Walsh & Downe, 2005, p. 209).

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) provided a guide for collecting, interpreting and analyzing data regarding the lived experiences of the participants of this study. In SCT Religiosity can be seen as a social phenomenon determined by the beliefs of others within specific social and cultural environments and community in which people belong (Clarke, 2009). "Social cognitive theory offers a promising framework within which to understand the mechanisms by which religion exerts its influence" (Fearer, 2004, p. 14).

Social Cognitive Theory views people ontologically as agentic beings influenced by the interplay of three factors: (a) intrapersonal influences, (b) behavior, and (c) environment forces (Bandura, 2012). According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2013), SCT, describes each individual as existing in a life-space. They emphasized that life-space takes into account the unique features the environment brings and how people react to it. In the environment people encounter and manipulate their situations, the people they meet, and also experience "private thoughts, tensions, goals and fantasies that influence their behaviors. As agentic beings, humans are capable of choice and can influence their personal circumstances (Bandura, 2006). Agentic behavior occurs when people intentionally act to influence the events of their lives (Bandura, 2012). People are not just products of their environment who react automatically to environmental stimuli; rather people can alter their behaviors based off

of the ability to recognize the effects of actions and predict the results of those actions (Bandura, 1996, 1999).

Modeling is also significant factor of SCT that relates to our study. Modeling influences agentic behavior and occurs when people learn from the actions of and results obtained by others. Through modeling people can develop personal objectives, values, and lifestyles (Bandura, 1997). Albert Bandura, the father of SCT, connected modeling and other aspects of his theory to religiosity. Religious congregations provide "multiple models of behavior and reinforce lifestyles patterned on them in close associational networks" (Bandura, 2003, p. 171). This theoretical lens was used as the research team analyzed and discussed the lived experiences of the participants. In fact, two of the major themes that evolved from the findings were directly connected to SCT.

Limitations

Creswell (2013) describes how delimitations and limitations are important characteristics of qualitative research in that they "establish boundaries, exceptions, reservations and qualifications inherent in every study" (p. 147). In QMS, biases of the researchers and the participants in the primary studies may be amplified. Using predefined data meant that we could not ask additional questions; neither could we invite additional participants to provide further perspectives. We also could not ask additional questions of the participants to solicit clarifications or derive deeper meanings.

Delimitations

As part of a professional practice doctorate, this QMS was confined to the research of three studies previously conducted by research team members. Limiting the number of studies involved in the meta-synthesis runs the risk of reducing the diversity of

interpretations of the phenomenon (Hoon, 2013). Each of the individual studies which we analyzed had unique delimitations related to purposeful sampling strategies. Two of the studies were limited to university students at public and private universities in the Intermountain West. One of the studies investigated educational professions who graduated with doctoral degrees from non-religiously affiliated universities and are now employed within the ranks of academia across the United States. Collectively, the participants of these studies were from three populations within the Mormon faith: (a) undergraduate students currently enrolled at a private, large university sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS); (b) undergraduate students enrolled at public university in the western United States; (c) educational professionals who completed graduate degrees and are currently employed as education administrators or professors at public universities across the United States.

Findings

Implementing principles of QMS helped us identify emergent themes. We only reported themes common to all three studies and provided accompanying and exemplifying descriptions from the participants. The following themes emerged from the analysis process: (a) tension, (b) community, (c) modeling, and (d) inquiry. Figure 3.2 presents an overview of the themes.

THEME 1	THEME 2	THEME 3	THEME 4
Tension	Community	Modeling	Inquiry
Diverse types of tension existed between religiosity and academia.	A variety of communities within the Mormon religion proved influential during the college years.	Effective role models were found within the LDS and higher education communities.	Serious inquiry stemming from the college experience created opportunities for both religious growth and discord.

Figure 3.2 Findings summary.

Tensions

We identified moments of tension for participants between religiosity and the university experience from the data and findings contained in all three studies. These moments of opposition ranged from naïve partiality to direct disagreement. Tensions were in part related to the social collegiate environment, and curriculum. Through these tensions, which will be described, participants remained committed to their educational and professional pursuits. These straining moments, at times, led to a reexamination of religious beliefs which, in turn, helped redefine, and deepen commitment to religiosity for the participants.

One undergraduate student, Melissa, struggled to connect her religious beliefs and behaviors with the ideological aspects of higher education. Her belief in God was challenged by the perceptions of an atheist science teacher. She explained,

> He didn't actually…bash about people believing in God, but you knew where he stood, and you didn't talk about religion at all, with that man, ever…He was like, "you can believe that if you want to, but it's ridiculous." Basically, that's what it came down to.

While some resistance was directed broadly toward belief in God, other participants experienced deliberate and focused opposition related specifically to Mormonism. Barbara was a standout volleyball player who on scholarship at a public university. She recalled how her coach would specifically target her and her teammates who shared her religious affiliation. She described the incessant pressure he put on the students to challenge their beliefs. Her coach had read Mormon literature and often questioned, "Why do you believe this?" and "Why do you do that?" Although he interviewed others, it seemed that he targeted

the LDS students in one-on-one interviews. Barbara related that he reiterated carefully, "Well, why do you do this?" Barbara said she felt he was disingenuous and that he really did not care. She felt his motive was to test their beliefs. She explained, "It was really weird. He ruined my whole experience…" He encouraged the team to "try everything before you can believe it," she said. When he challenged the LDS students about the church's health code he chided them with questions about why, "why don't you drink?" Barbara said that the best she could do was answer, "We don't drink." He would say, "You can't believe it without trying it, without trying other stuff." Barbara said she tried to argue, but the best come-back she had was, "Nope, this is just what we do; this is just what we do." And, she said, "I didn't have a good reason." This caused Barbara to question her beliefs and in her second year of college she said, "I did have a lot harder time just because it was just too much." She did not only question her beliefs, but, she questioned, "everything in my life," and said, "you start to have those doubts."

For Daniel, an undergraduate student from a public university, his faith was challenged from a professor of English. Because the community where the university is located has a large LDS population, Daniel felt the professor was purposefully challenging the LDS faith by deliberately conducting classroom discussions that conflicted with Daniel's religious beliefs and standards. He explained that his professor was "kind of rough," and the tone of the class was edgy. He went on to explain, "He [the professor] didn't ever say anything specifically about the church other than that one of his ex-wives had been a member of the church." The professor, according to Daniel, was bent on "attack[ing] everything that we believed in and would often bring up sexual references that came out of the poetry or stories." He saw the professor "lure kids into debate with him and then embarrass them." He

said that he would go home "feeling pretty low—feeling like you're nothing." Daniel noticed the affect this was having on a fellow classmate who was also LDS. This student ended up dropping the class. The classmate later told Daniel, "about two weeks after mid-terms… [I] just couldn't handle that kind of environment."

Similar to Daniel, Steven, a respected scholar, experienced opposition to his faith from a professor during undergraduate schooling. He remembered a Harvard professor telling him in a private conversation, "I hope you know that many people around here think Mormonism is garbage." This comment prompted Steven to explore further and analyze his beliefs deeper. After confirming his faith within himself, he was determined to find a way to thoughtfully articulate his religious worldview in a scholarly manner that the Harvard elite would respect and understand. He studied controversial topics and posed questions to himself about his beliefs. He tried to anticipate questions from peers and professors, and then sought answers that would perhaps appease their curiosity and criticism.

Later during his professional career at another university, Steven reflected on a conversation with a colleague, partially responsible for hiring him, who expressed concerns about his religiosity. His experience revealed a negative predisposition toward his research regarding the LDS faith, as opposed to a direct challenge:

> As we were driving along to the lunch place, I was just making conversation and I said casually that I was working on a biography of Joseph [Smith]…He stopped the car and pulled over to the curb and looked at me. He was driving and touched my arm and said "We took all that into account, and decided it didn't matter." So that was one sign and then when I got to Columbia, he was taking me from office to office and

> introducing me to the faculty. There was this guy, a distinguished historian from India and he says, "Oh yes, you are the Mormon."

During our analysis we also noted tensions that were created by college curriculum, which was perceived by participants as being in opposition to their religious beliefs. Frank, another undergraduate student from a public university, who was seeking a degree in nursing, described an experience when a specific course curriculum caused him to question his beliefs. He struggled to reconcile Biblical teachings concerning creation and the origin of the human species as posited in Darwin's theory of evolution:

> About a year ago I was in a Biology 101 class, and we were going over evolution…and the teacher talked quite a bit about evolution and how we came from single cell organisms.…[He] went really in depth about evolution and how we came from apes, and so on and so forth. And that totally brought back everything I had been taught about Adam and Eve and the creation. So, I would say that my faith was a little bit shaken….Really, I knew where I had come from with Adam and Eve, but science is telling me it's like this, and this is how it happened. So for me, at least for a while, it was kind of hard to actually take both of them….To actually understand them both at the same time. So I would say that my faith was a little shaken up.

While some participants struggled with curriculum challenges, others recognized social tension between religiosity and the prevailing moral environment. For Debbie, there was a time at the public university when she distanced herself for a brief period from core standards expected of her faith. In order to fit in with peers, she began drinking alcohol and stopped attending religious services. Another public university student, Paul, quit attending religious services because, "I am a college student now, and they act like this."

Students at a church-sponsored university were not shielded from tensions between academic learning and religious beliefs. However, in contrast with the participants who did not attend an LDS university, the opposition came from less religiously committed peers as opposed to academic professors and curriculum. Kelsey, who was completing a degree in English at a church-sponsored university reported, "I kind of just expected to be protected from everything, and I still found a lot of opposition." She went on to describe a difficult dating relationship with a religiously apathetic young man who frequently challenged her religiosity. In addition, Keith found being a student at an LDS university had unique challenges: "It's easy to be a Mormon here and it's hard too just because everyone is LDS but not necessarily with standards like they should. So, sometimes…that can be difficult." The challenge to maintain religious standards of conduct at a church-sponsored university were captured by McKenzie, a mathematics major, who explained how attending an LDS university may also make it easier to abandon religious behaviors for a time: "I think it's just easier to justify yourself…when it's predominantly LDS."

The lived experiences of these participants demonstrate multiple tensions that may occur as religiously committed individuals become immersed in the university environment. Other themes emerged as participants described their efforts to maintain their religiosity and reconcile the tensions between religiosity and university life.

Community

Another emergent theme we observed was the use and influence of the religious community by participants. This community occupied a significant role as the interviewees worked through the tensions between their academic experience and their religiosity. College attending Mormons are embedded in a religious system with various sub-communities that

influenced religiosity in students during the formative years of young adulthood and appeared to assist the participants in maintaining their religious beliefs. Edward, an undergraduate student attending a public university captured the supportive nature these numerous communities provided him:

> I have an army of people to talk to. I go to church, I go to meetings, I go to the temple, and I just associate with those kinds of people. I can talk to almost anyone at any time about something that's bothering me and that group of people will help me see the better side of things.

We recognized several religious communities within the LDS faith which provided resources to help students as they struggled with a variety of college challenges, including tensions between religiosity and college life. Three prominent communities within Mormonism emerged from participant interviews: the family, the ward (i.e., a congregation organized by geographical boundaries), and the institute.

According to some of the participants, the LDS institute provided an environment of safety, friendship, and doctrinal instruction that often mediated the unique challenges participants encountered during their college years. LDS institutes are religious education programs for 18-30 year-old college students located in buildings adjacent to many public universities across the United States (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 2013). For multiple participants, institute was a place to increase understanding and resolve conflicts when they experienced tensions between religiosity and academia.

One way Angie, a student attending a public university in the Intermountain West, resolved ideological tensions created by her college coursework was by seeking help from religious educators. She expressed, "If I have questions, I go to them for answers." For

Barbara, another college student interested in friends with similar values, institute provided an environment that helped young people identify "who was LDS on campus." Such thoughts reflect the interests of Paul, who also desired to "be around a lot of people with the same values." Participants felt being around people with similar religious beliefs and behaviors provided positive reinforcement for maintaining religiosity. Additionally, Barbara found institute provided a proxy family for her. This was particularly meaningful to her since she was currently living far away from her own family. This sense of family provided an escape from the pressures felt from her college volleyball coach who questioned and challenged her beliefs. She recalled how the "institute director would bring his wife and kids with him. I really liked that. It made you feel like you had family. It kind of joined us together. Institute gave you a chance to get away."

Other participants found the LDS ward to be a community of strength and support for handling the diverse challenges of university life. Melissa, a mother returning for her baccalaureate degree, was experiencing a difficult time as her spouse began to suffer from major health problems. She was distant from her and her husband's families and any familiar support networks. She indicated a closeness she felt to others in her church who became her "new" family of support—she relied on them and they relied on her. Melissa explained how they built each other during their challenges. During her husband's sickness other church members said to her, "Okay we're going to take care of your kids on this day. We're going to bring you a meal on this day. What else can we do?" It was a boost for Melissa and her husband. It was particularly humbling for her when she realized those helping had bigger problems than she was experiencing. One ward member who helped her had a baby in the

hospital struggling with an illness. She expressed that those times were “really tough,” but given the support, they grew closer.

Leaders in the ward community helped Debbie maintain her religiosity during a difficult moment in college. As described earlier. She found her religiosity being challenged and weakened due to pressures from other college students to conform to behaviors, which contradicted her religious standards. She began going to bars with her roommates and acting in ways that were against the standards of her religiosity. When confronted with the consequences of her choices and a desire to maintain her faith and standards she found it helpful to frequently meet with ecclesiastical leaders. These leaders helped her to “make sure I was on track or if I slipped up they would be like alright, well let’s meet weekly.”

In addition to institute and the ward, participants across the three studies indicated that family relationships were beneficial when dealing with challenges at college. In reference to maintaining her religiosity during difficult moments of her undergraduate experience, Debbie related, “I learned that my mom is my best friend and I set this new thing that if I can’t tell my mom about it then I shouldn’t be doing it. So, I would call her every day.”

The theme of the family is also evident in the choice for many Mormons to marry during their college experience. Being married during the college experience appeared to remove participants from many of the social pressures that challenged the religiosity of other participants. David, as a post-graduate student, found that “the fact that I was married, of course took me out of a lot of the social environments, I didn’t hang out with college kids. The only ones that we hung out with as couples would be mostly church members.” Jason, another married participant attending the church-sponsored university, noticed how being

married helped him "focus on my school work a lot better." Keith, also attending the church-sponsored university, enjoyed the fact he was married because he no longer felt the pressure to socialize and find dates. He considered doing homework together as a both bonding and a time saver.

The family, ward, and institute communities provided participants with supportive and educational environments that appeared to assist with the tensions of college life. Each of these communities was described as environments where participants could find relief from stress, reorient themselves, and be reinforced in their religiosity.

Speaking of an influential religious community in his life, Steven, a university professor, believed, that everybody should have access to a community of support to help others preserve faith in secular settings. Steven believed that staying in touch with believers was the most important thing a college study can do. Recognizing the social nature of faith development and preservation was also seen in the comments of Frank, an undergrad nursing student, found it hard to keep his faith in classes. But, he explained that it was a help to him to talk with others who shared his beliefs and ask the "tough questions." He expressed concern about falling away from the church, but also enjoyed the benefit of having someone he could trust and rely on.

Despite the many benefits of living within a supportive religious community, some participants felt constrained by various cultural aspects of the community. Failing to live up to cultural behavioral norms and patterns, whether real or perceived, was difficult for some participants. In one Mormon gathering, Angie, an undergraduate student who transferred from the LDS private university to a public university, didn't feel she "fit the mold" of the LDS university. She viewed herself as "a little off colored from the rest of the cookie cutter

[members].” Another woman, Jill, explained that despite cultural pressures for Mormon women, such as not working outside the home and maintaining a picture-perfect family appearance, there are many different ways to be happy in the church. She sees the diversity of talents among believers and the abilities they brought as they worked together. The church expresses a need to be united as members in many ways, but Jill finds that sometimes members get confused about what it means to be united. She’s concerned that many members are cut out of a “cookie-cutter mold” and lose their identity. She argued,

> I actually think that that creates of lot of frustration among women in the church. If you asked women about this, you would actually find that a lot of the ones that look like they adhere to this traditional mold, some of them are very happy doing that, but I think that a lot of them are frustrated because they feel like they have to and they feel like they’re not getting, you know they’re not as happy as they think they should be either.

While some found aspects of these communities suffocating because of expectations to express their faith in a particular or limited manner, the overall observation was that family, ward, and institute provided participants with communities of safety and reinforcement during their college years. Religious communities are made up of individuals who believe in common ideals and can assist members who are struggling to maintain beliefs and behaviors valued by others. The individuals in these communities not only provided support for participants but also were viewed by participants as influential models.

Modeling

The concept of modeling was frequently illustrated in the experiences of participants as they looked to and learned from specific members of their community. Modeling occurred

in multiple settings. The LDS ward was a rich source of models for many of the interviewees. Jill, an Ivy League economics professor, reflecting on her experience as an undergraduate student, enjoyed observing members of her faith who were influential in the academe, community, and politics. She specifically named Mitt Romney, a candidate for the United States presidency, who was, at the time, a stake president; Clayton Christiansen, author of "The Innovator's Solution," and a host of other business books and also considered as one of the best business minds in the nation; and Kim Clark, the Dean of Harvard Business school who later because the president of Brigham Young University-Idaho. She was also among a host of other political, academic, economic and academic leaders.

She went on to emphasize, "It was an amazing experience to go to church every week and to talk to these people and hear them. They have such strong testimonies." These individuals provided Jill a model of academic achievement and religious devotion. She found in these individuals an example of how to be academically, professionally, and religiously excellent. Today Jill has a number of educational and religious responsibilities that give her opportunities to mirror the influential examples she looked to years ago.

Paul, a chemistry major at a public university in the Intermountain West, expressed how he looked up to his church leaders even saying that he "adored them." He along with Debbie, Daniel and Frank described the value of counseling with church leaders about the challenges of college life and looked to them as sources of inspiration and guidance. Steven, an American history professor, valued the suggestions and guidance of church leaders. He described the modeling experience of growing up in an LDS ward and being influenced by members of the faith when they would "stand up [in church] and bear their souls about what they were going through." He continued, "It meant a lot to me because I was a teenager

going through my anguishes, and to see other people have anguishes and were struggling, was very helpful for me." Currently, Steven's transparent nature of writing and speaking provides members of the church with a potential model for thoughtfully considering religious beliefs.

We noticed that modeling for participants was not just limited to the living. Historic figures also provided models of faith. When Jill was asked how she balances the tensions of being a highly educated academic professional with being a mother of two children in their teens, she drew upon the example of a church member she had recently learned about. She summarized the experience of Ellis Reynolds Shipp, a Latter-day Saint woman in the 1870s. Shipp explained the Brigham Young, a leader of the LDS church at the time, expressed concern that there were not enough women doctors. Ellis Shipp traveled to Philadelphia to attend medical school, which at that time was three years long. She was married, she had two kids at home, and her third child was delivered the day after the last final exam of her second year. The rest of her story was very inspirational for Jill who explained,

> [Ellis Shipp] went back to Salt Lake and started practicing as a midwife's physician. Over the course of the next 50 years she delivered around 50,000 babies. She also started a school to train others and trained more than 500 other physicians, [male and female].

An undergraduate student, David, related another type of historical modeling. He felt that scripture (i.e., sacred text considered authoritative by religious traditions) provided patterns, which could be followed during any time of life, not just in college. Specifically, David felt that a habit of regular scripture study not only prepped him for college, but also for life because the scriptures provided a model for dealing with challenges associated with

university life. David explained, “With the struggles that come with college…if you have a foundation in the scriptures then you likely have a relationship with God and then you’re self-sufficient.”

Others found helpful examples in the LDS institute community. Barbara, who dealt with a volleyball coach who attacked her faith daily, found a religious educator that helped her through a difficult time. Barbara praised the faith of her Institute director. She noted, “It was his faith that got me through a lot of my challenges.” He answered her tough questions and “wasn’t afraid to say what needed to be said.”

Others influenced Frank, an undergraduate student, in the institute setting. There he found peers and professional educators who could help him when his faith was contradicted by what he was learning in a biology class. He explained that institute provided a classroom setting with other LDS students who could help him as he asked difficult questions. Not only did he receive answers in this setting but also he learned how the other students resolved similar issues. Karen, an English professor, found during her undergraduate experience a number of teachers that she could identify with that became models of thinking and believing that helped her feel there was a place for her in the religion during a time when her faith was being challenged. Drawing upon her experiences, Karen asserts the importance that “Mormon kids need a place where they can ask the great questions of faith and have adult role models….”

Debbie, a college undergraduate student, and other participants, suggested providing models in religious education courses to help younger students with the challenges of being in college. She thought it would be a good idea to have successful religiously committed college students come to high school religious education courses. The concept of modeling

was captured in her explanation for why she thought this type of modeling would be beneficial. She explained:

> I really looked up to people in college, they were almighty, they were in college…if you know those people still have trials but they rely on the Lord to help them through, then it's like wow [*sic*], it can help me. Or, "They pray, I want to pray, I want to know what they are getting from that." You look up to people so if you just copy what they do in those situations than you get the same result as them.

Modeling did not come solely from the religious community. Prior to attending UCLA, Karen was inspired by the "excellent role models" in her honors program she experience at BYU in Provo, Utah. They were "rigorous thinkers." Seeing people who could ask tough questions and who also "seemed to be assured in their faith" was a positive modeling experience for her. She added, "I had these role models all around me of people I knew who had thought these things through…There are lots of ways to sort out how to be a believing, thinking person." This comment by Karen leads into another theme, which emerged, from the lived experiences of the students and professors.

Inquiry

Rigorous thinking, a trait valued in higher education, at times was a concern for participants. In particular, the young adults who were in college during the interviews experienced tension when their religiosity was exposed to the rigorous thinking and religious opposition of certain professors. As mentioned earlier, Daniel, a 23-year-old Bio-Med Science student recalled an undergraduate English class where the professor's purpose was to "tear down everything we believed in so that we could build ourselves back up and see things more objectively." He went on to describe the instructor as, "a very good debater who would

often would lure kids into debates with him and then embarrass them. He would constantly want people to ask questions, and then he would just belittle them." Although Daniel struggled at times with his faith as a result of these questions and discussions, he concluded, "I felt like the class, in the end, was good. I feel like my faith is stronger because I've heard his points."

Angie, a 25-year-old nursing major, also recognized the value of considering opposing views in class even though those views caused tension. She acknowledged, "Questions [from professors] are a good thing . . . Being able to think about things has strengthened my own testimony." Participants in these studies frequently shared experiences with opposition to their faith in the college experience that led them to deeply examine and strengthen their faith.

Although Daniel and Angie felt inquiry strengthened their faith in the end, other interviewees felt inhibited when questioning their beliefs in certain religious communities. Frank, a 26-year-old nursing student described how growing up in the church he felt there was a negative attitude toward anyone who expressed doubts about their testimony: "You're either 100% or you're nothing. And if you ever had doubts, it wasn't acceptable to say it." Karen also felt these stifling effects of a Mormon community. She described how some communities are "really hospitable to being a thinking-progressive Mormon...and some places are less." During college Karen "saw areas of inquiry around hot-button issues where it was really rocky in institutional LDS spaces to be pursuing those lines of inquiry." For her, "what's far more difficult is push back in a place that's supposed to be home." Kelsey remembers "thinking it was really bad to ask questions when I was little." She used to wonder, "Am I supposed to question that? Is that not okay to ask that question?"

The importance of asking questions and being willing to think deeply about one's religion were noted particularly by the academic professionals who seemed more comfortable and confident asking difficult questions concerning their beliefs. A common quality each of these professors shared was a willingness to examine their religion in a thoughtful way without fearing the "tough questions."

Steven recalled a conversation early on in his college experience where a mentor and professor warned him of perceptions from others who viewed his religion as "foolish garbage." Steven notes that this professor "was preparing me for my next step, which would be to outgrow my childhood religion and to go on to something more mature." Steven learned later on that it wasn't religion in general, but rather "naïve religion, unquestioned religion" that bothered many at the university. He recalls, "They wanted people to be critical and thoughtful about their own religious belief."

Steven went on to describe how he developed the ability to inquire deeply into his religion in order to better articulate his beliefs to others:

> I've always asked questions, but it was not like questions of doubt, it was questions of inquiry. I'm always having to formulate an answer explaining why I believe what I do in terms that my Harvard classmates would understand. It's really Harvard that I am speaking to in my internal dialogues…This is how I lived my life to answer these questions. Not just ones that were posed by someone, but ones that I posed myself every time I had a belief I had to find some way of stating it that it would make sense to that imaginary Harvard intellectual.

David, a physics professor described how he has become comfortable and confident inquiring into areas where religiosity and scientific knowledge intersect. He found that the

antidote for knowledge is confusing and challenging is to gain more knowledge. He chided, "it's certainly not running away from it…." David explained a number of times his faith was troubled, but his solution was to "learn more and try to figure them out." The more he studied and found, the stronger his faith grew.

David was not the only professor who offered advice to aspiring college students who are religiously committed. Like David, Steven strongly expressed the need to ask "all" questions on "every" issue. Not talking was a problem in Steven's eyes. He urges believers to talk it out when they run into a question or problem that is threatening or challenging and not "run away," or "go around or to conceal." Steven encouraged courageously running "right into the middle of it, and think about what is the problem here?" It's from that space the answer can be pursued with vigor and a solution is found. Sometimes it takes patience, as Steven noted, "even with the most difficult questions, sooner or later, you begin to get some light on what's going on and then you're much better off."

John, a professor, offers some insight into why college educated Mormons can wrestle with their beliefs, but in the end be strengthened by the struggle, "I think that the [Mormon religion] appeals to the intellect. It answers more questions. It just literally does. The gospel is remarkably open." Freedom to explore and embrace knowledge in various dimensions including a strong emphasis by church leaders regarding the importance of receiving secular education was an appealing aspect of Mormonism for these scholars.

Karen like the other LDS scholars in this study has become very confident that her religious beliefs can withstand rigorous inquiry. She asserted, "Our faith is so capable of cosmic thinking it is not a fragile theology."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the higher education and religiosity experience of religiously committed academic professionals and college students in order to better understand the link between religiosity and higher education and assist those desiring to maintain their religiosity during the college experience. We observed how the university environment created moments of tension for religiously committed students and academic professionals. This tension often became a catalyst for a reappraisal of religiosity for the participants. As suggested by multiple scholars (Bowman & Small, 2011; Hill, 2011; Regnerus & Elder, 2003a) the college years are often a time and place for religious reexamination. For many in these studies, these tensions led to a reevaluation of religious beliefs and commitment, and in the end increased religious belief and commitment. For some participants, these tensions led to diminished religiosity for a time while beliefs were reconsidered. However, in accord with Hill's (2009) findings, the relinquishing of religiosity was not long-term for these individuals.

The analytical nature of the college experience was a source of tension and growth. These findings are of particular interest in light of several recent studies (Baumard & Boyer, 2013; Gervais, 2013; Ritter, Preston, & Hernandez, 2013; Zuckerman, Silberman, & Hall, 2013), that suggest religiosity is negatively influenced by critical and analytical thinking. It may be true that many believers experience what Gervais and Norenzayan (2012) described: "Analytic thinking strategies might be one potent source of religious disbelief" (p. 493). The argument that analytical thinking skills reduced peoples' inclination to say they believed in God is certainly strong and there is much evidence to support this claim. In contrast to these assertions, we observed, in these select cases, serious inquiry became an intellectual tool to

develop higher order thinking skills that often led to religious reexamination and increased levels of religious commitment.

It is commonly understood that challenging and threatening ideas—ideas that oppose current assumptions, beliefs, cultures, and systems—may create strife and discord. Among believers, asking difficult questions about religious beliefs and behaviors has a way of generating stress among the participants. However, Stark (1998) asserts that for a religious movement to succeed, it must maintain a medium level of tension with its surrounding environment. Stark (1998) further claimed that high or low levels of tension would likely minimize the growth of religious movements. Tension produced by the intersection of academia and religiosity may be one reason educational achievement is positively correlated with high levels of religiosity in the LDS community (Smith, 2011). Due to social and ideological cultures found in higher education, the participants experienced tension. A number of factors appeared to help participants balance tension levels so that participants could reexamine their beliefs without abandoning them. One of the key factors in maintaining an optimal level of tension between religiosity and environment was the religious community.

It appeared to us that challenges to participant religiosity were often moderated through involvement in one of the multiple Mormon communities. The participants' descriptions of the role of religious community support the theory posited by Merrill et al. (2003) that belonging to the LDS church strengthened religious belief in the importance of obtaining as much education as possible. Albrecht and Heaton (1984) also hypothesized that commitment to religious community and educational community developed skills mutually benefiting individuals in both environments. Harvard historian, Thatcher-Ulrich (2009)

suggested Latter-day Saints have proven to be successful in their "ability to create communities out of people who have nothing in common" where people "learn to be brothers and sisters and take care of each other and live together" (p. 104). The role of religious community was highlighted in the experience of multiple participants and appeared to influence the lives of participants as they managed the challenges of university life.

Religious communities provided an environment where participants could associate with individuals from a variety of backgrounds who have come to share common values and beliefs concerning religiosity and education. Sociologists refer to these types of religious communities as "sheltered enclaves" (Smith, Emerson, Gallagher, Kennedy & Sikkink, 1998, p. 67), which serve as a protection for members "from the undermining effects of modernity" (p. 68). McFarland et al. (2011) used the phrase "closed network communities" to describe religious organizations that, "shelter individuals from exposure to challenging beliefs, lifestyles, and worldviews" (p. 3). Like McFarland (2010), we observed the closed network nature of a religious community to be integral for preserving religiosity among members. Although these closed-network communities provided a level of protection and support for some participants, others found the community stifling to religious growth as a result of its limited exposure to the surrounding environment. Balancing the protective nature of the religious community with openness to university thoughts and experiences seemed essential in providing the participants with optimal opportunities for intellectual growth while maintaining religiosity. Our observations concur with the theory articulated by Stark (1998), who argued that religious movements "succeed to the extent that they sustain strong internal attachments, while remaining an open social network, able to maintain and form ties to outsiders" (p. 47).

For many participants, religious community was not only a means of support but also a source from which members could observe role models for balancing the tensions between religiosity and the college environment. Modeling is a concept closely related to the religious community. Bandura (2003) saw religious congregations as sources of examples for living or modeling. The congregations provide "multiple models of behavior and reinforce lifestyles patterned on them in close associational networks" (Bandura, 2003, p. 171). Kang and Romo (2011) found that more time spent in church activities, such as attending religious services and church sponsored youth activities, was associated with stronger mentoring or modeling relationships. As people see models face adversity or challenges, such as those faced by college students, it encourages them to persevere in accomplishing difficult tasks or adopting behaviors they have not already adopted (Bandura, 2003).

The findings of this QMS suggest that modeling was benefited the participants in multiple ways and on multiple levels. Besides modeling from individuals with whom the participants interacted in their religious and educational communities, historic models influenced the interviewees. Bandura (1999) acknowledged the connection between historical texts and modeling. People generally experience symbols through external social sources such as media, books, and hearing stories. "Through the medium of symbols, people give structure, meaning and continuity to their experiences" (Bandura, 1999, p. 27). In this way people obtain modeling. Historical texts provide stories and models of behavior by which people can pattern their lives (Bandura, 2003). The religious community provided forms of modeling that assisted participants as they maintained religiosity while seeking degrees in higher education.

Implications for Future Research

There is still much work to be done in understanding the phenomenon of Mormon religiosity and higher education. We recommend that future research on higher education and religiosity within the Mormon community address the following:

- The college students and graduates who did leave the religion. What was their relationship with the LDS community during college?
- Examining the influence of an LDS mission on the educational experience. How was the college experience different pre- and post-mission for both men and women?
- Capturing the female perspective within Mormonism. How do they wrestle with the tension of family life, education and a professional career?
- What role does the church play in fostering educational achievement in less educated members of the faith?

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

What factors influence the preservation of religiosity in college students and academic professionals? We recognized some key answers in the lived experiences of participants as we combined, analyzed and synthesized the data of three studies through QMS. A common thread among the studies was the participant's attitudes and perceptions about the importance of belonging to a supportive religious community when encountering tension between the university environment and religiosity. The religious community was most beneficial for these participants when it provided modeling and encouraged thoughtful inquiry.

Implications from this study would suggest that religiosity may be diminished in college students when the religious tension provided by the university experience is not accompanied by (a) a supportive religious community, (b) a variety of role models within the religious community, (c) a religious community open to inquiry and reevaluation.

As noted earlier, members of this research team are religious educators for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Each of us has an interest in providing a religious education for future and current college students. From our experience with this research, religious education is intended to complement the secular education students receive in secondary and post-secondary schools. Analysis of three related studies has caused us to consider the following questions concerning our professional practices:

- How do religious educators help students thoughtfully examine, understand, and articulate their religious beliefs and behaviors to secular communities?
- How do religious educators help students develop an inquiring disposition that would assist them in educational and religious settings?
- To what extent should religious educators introduce sensitive information to students?
- Should religious education be settings where students resolve tensions they have experienced outside of religious education or should they be settings where the instructor helps students experience religious tensions?

Religious communities (family, institute, and ward) within Mormonism provided college students and professors with means for managing the intersection of academia and religiosity. These communities provided assistance to students in times of social and intellectual distress. In these religious communities, interviewees observed patterns of living

and thinking that impacted their college experience and religious devotion. For the individuals in this study, the religious community provided college students safe places to gather during their educational experience and appeared most successful when populated with diverse models for students to learn from and be influenced by. The participants valued religious communities that were willing to acknowledge and address sincere inquiry concerning religious beliefs and practices.

As students began to engage in the analytical emphasis of higher education, they recognized an aspect of the buffering nature of the religious community that adversely impacted their experience. These participants felt the closed-network culture of the religious communities in some instances stifled religious observance and kept participants from seriously questioning aspects of their faith. In contrast, when encouraged and supported by the religious community the questioning culture of higher education often led to a deepening of religious beliefs as challenges from peers and colleagues demanded thoughtful examination and articulation of beliefs. The favorable relationship between higher education and religiosity for these LDS college students existed when individuals connected with influential models and had access to other community resources that allowed them to reevaluate their religiosity within a safe, supportive, and open environment.

Community, modeling, and inquiry offer understanding into what resources LDS college students have available to them as they attempt to maintain their faith while attending college. The need for further research into the relationship concerning religiosity and higher education remains evident. Mayrl and Oeur (2009) stated, “while there has been increased scholarly interest in religion on campus in recent years, the amount of high-quality research remains low relative to the scope and urgency of the debates” (p. 272). The question of how

one's religiosity influences and is influenced by the higher education experience is as important as it is far reaching. This study represents only a small contribution and recognizes that there are many more questions to be asked and answers to be discovered.

Outside of our professional practice settings, parents and ecclesiastical leaders concerned with maintaining religiosity in higher education may recognize value of the findings and questions communicated in this study. University administrators may also have an interest in these findings. According to Braskamp (2007), "Colleges will only succeed in effectively fostering truly holistic development when faculty address the issues of meaning, purpose, religious, spiritual and moral growth along with academic learning in the classroom and in their relationships with students" (p. 7). The face and function of higher education in America has experienced a fundamental transformation from the clergy producing, religion-sponsoring institutions of the Colonial Era to the, arguably, secularizing universities of today.

While some argue that secularization in university settings has taken a toll on the religiosity of young adults (Sloan, 1994; Smith 1990), others argue that the intersection of religiosity with higher education catalyzes a reexamination of religious beliefs and behaviors but does not lead to an abandonment of beliefs (Lee 2002; Pascaraella & Terenzini, 2005). Leaders and members of the LDS religious tradition should not feel threatened by secular education but rather continue to find ways to utilize the educational experience of its members to nurture younger generations and serve the needs of a larger community. As religious and educational communities combine efforts, their capacity to produce influential and informed individuals concerned with meeting the local and global needs of humanity may be enhanced.

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CHAPTER 4: S&I AND HIGHER EDUCATION – A WHITE PAPER

W. Mitchell Simmons

For the past decade, seminary teachers have taught specific lessons encouraging students to gain as much education as possible. In an effort to better equip current and future university students, Seminaries and Institutes of Religion (S&I) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) began redesigning this global curriculum during the spring of 2014. This white paper is aimed to informing the design of this curriculum and improve the ability of S&I employees to assist parents, church leaders, and students

For this white paper, data is drawn from four research projects recently conducted as doctoral dissertation studies from the University of Idaho. The researcher team consisted of a religion faculty member at Brigham Young University-Idaho (BYU-I), a seminary teacher, and myself. The four studies combined included fourteen LDS students attending church universities and public universities as well as five distinguished LDS professors from across the nation. The interviews captured the perspectives of religiously committed men and women, mothers and fathers, single and married students, non-mission and returned missionary students, and university professors. A brief description of the challenges faced by these LDS students and professors will be followed by suggestions from the research team. Each suggestion will be accompanied by examples from the lives of the participants.

University Life for LDS Students

It is not surprising that leaders of the LDS church frequently stress the importance of education. The benefits of college for individuals, as well as society, are substantial (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Higher education increases academic abilities, improves employment opportunities, (Bills, 2003) and produces graduates who are more focused on the future and

more adept at delaying gratification (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). College graduates are more confident, independent and self-directed than their less educated peers (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

For LDS students, religious commitment is positively correlated with educational attainment. Smith (2011) found that Mormons who have graduated from college are significantly more committed to their religiosity (84%) than those with high school education or less (50%). Albrecht and Heaton (1984) found that Mormons with higher educational levels are more likely to attend church, pay tithing, pray, study religion and have stronger religious beliefs than less educated Mormons. The transition to college can be both emancipating and life changing, and for Mormons it seems to also be faith-promoting. However, for some, the new college environment can also be challenging.

Prominent challenges faced by the students we interviewed related to academic, social, and family stresses. Some of these challenges were common to college students as described by contemporary scholars. As college students leave home and become independent of parents, they have to adjust to the unfamiliar college environment and develop new relationships while adapting to a challenging academic curriculum. Atop these difficulties lie economic challenges such as the high cost of college tuition, and the staggering prospect of long-term debt from student loans (Elliott, Sherraden, Johnson & Guo, 2010; Lake Research Partners, 2011). Other challenges stemmed from concerns regarding the future, such as determining and developing long-term career plans (Towbes & Cohen, 1996).

From the interviews, we learned that LDS religiosity impacted these common university challenges. It also created challenges, perhaps unique to LDS college students. Common academic challenges for the participants included: tensions between religiosity and

the academic ideologies, difficult course workloads, pressure to get good grades, and anxiety towards tests and assignments. In addition, social difficulties included feeling pressure to violate religious standards in order to fit the collegiate social mold, difficulties making friends, and challenges with dating. Some participants expressed family challenges such as difficulties in marriage, caring for children, and family health problems. Further, many of the participants were concerned about the future, and they struggled to maintain balance, manage time, and cope with emotional stress.

Academic Challenges

Tensions from mixing religiosity and academia were a challenge for many participants. At times, college curriculum contradicted the religious beliefs of the respondents in these studies. "There's an anthropology class I'm taking," said one undergrad at a public university, "[that's] challenged my faith just because you have so many different theories about how people came to the United States….How does this story of Lehi and Nephi (considered as prophets from within the Book of Mormon) fit into all of this?" Another student reported having his faith "shaken" as he considered the theory of evolution in light of his religious beliefs about the creation of the earth.

At times, the students' professors challenged the beliefs of the participants. One student, from a public university, described an exemplifying experience from an English professor, "The whole entire tone of his class was pretty rough….He would attack everything that we believed in and would often bring up sexual references that came out of the poetry or stories." A professor we interviewed recalled a similar experience he had had as a student with an influential professor at an Ivy League school. The professor remarked, "I hope you know that many people around here think Mormonism is garbage." The interviewee went on

to explain, "It wasn't a malicious statement….He was preparing me for the next step, which would be to outgrow my childhood religion and to go on to something more mature." These experiences represent ideological challenges or pressures felt by participants found in the three studies.

In the past, college has often been portrayed as a place where religious students lose their beliefs. Albrecht and Heaton (1984) acknowledged that most literature concerning religion and education saw college as a place where students abandoned their religious beliefs and standards. As college students encounter perceptions and attitudes portraying the pursuit of scientific knowledge as more valuable than the pursuit of spiritual knowledge, religious commitment decreased. This view is especially worrisome for LDS youth who are strongly encouraged to receive as much education as possible (Uchtdorf, 2009).

Although past research highlighted religious decline among college students, more recent literature portrays the relationship between education and religion differently. Scheitle (2011) for example, discovered that the majority of undergraduates do not view the relationship between science and religion as one of conflict. In addition, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that religious thinking is simply re-examined and refined as opposed to being abandoned. Although attending college tends to promote religious re-examination, (Bryant, 2011), Hill (2009) reported that long-term religious decline was not evident for any religious group.

In addition to feeling tensions between religiosity and the college experience, the participants of the studies spoke of difficult class workloads and the challenge of managing their time to properly meet academic demands. From the findings, it was evident that the

greatest difficulty from academic challenges came as students struggled to balance these demands with other arduous aspects of college life such as social challenges.

Social Challenges

Social concerns and relationship challenges are often the primary source of distress among college students (Kaufman, Brown, Graves, Henderson, & Revolinski, 1993). When students leave home for college they not only leave behind parents and other family members, they also leave an established support system of friends and acquaintances. This change in friendships leaves college students vulnerable as they proceed to create new friendships and personal relationships (Paul & Brier, 2001).

Social challenges, as reported from those we interviewed, ranged from building friendships to difficulties with dating and family creation. The desire to have supportive friends was a challenge for many of the participants. One young lady described the difficulty of being away from home and desiring friendship: “I think when I first moved here, my biggest struggle was friends….Like I said, I am super social, and I would just cry all of the time because I felt I had no friends.” A young man who described himself as an introvert in high school continued to struggle making friends at the university he attended. He expressed his unmet expectations: “It’s not really any fun to not have any friends.” To add to the stress of creating supportive friendships, the participants also reported that their religiosity impacted their relationships with others.

Being religiously committed in college could at times be socially straining as students struggled to adapt to the new college lifestyle while upholding their religious convictions. When asked to describe the challenges of college life, one interviewee described his difficulty “keeping [his] values to heart.” He admitted, “It’s easy to get swept up in it and be,

you know, 'I am a college student now, they act like this.'" Another student reported as similar experience, "You have to make new friends and sometimes you choose wrong friends that can lead you astray and so that's definitely a challenge." Pressure to abandon religious standards was not limited to public university settings. Three of the four students from the LDS university mentioned the difficulty of living religious standards at the private university. As one young lady explained, "I think it's just easier to justify yourself…when it's predominantly LDS."

Students at the church university also faced another type of social challenge. Insulated Mormon communities can create tension for those who practice their faith in an unorthodox manner. Church members often fall into common patterns of living their religion. Such cultural behavioral norms and patterns proved to be a source of tension for some. One respondent who attended both a church school and a public school, didn't feel she fit in at the church school, because, as she put it, she was "a little off colored from the rest of the cookie cutter [members]." One professor also acknowledged the cookie cutter challenge as she described her experience as an undergrad: "We get confused about this idea of being united means we have to come out of the same cookie cutter mold, and I actually think that that creates of lot of frustration among women in the church."

In addition to cultural challenges and a desire to belong, the participants identified stress associated with family formation. Mormons tend to marry earlier than other college students and start families while still attending school (Ellison, Burdette, & Glenn, 2011; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski, 2005). Because there is so much focus on the central role of family many of the students felt pressure to quickly create serious and lasting relationships that would lead to marriage.

For two young women and one young man, the challenges of dating and seeking a spouse, combined with academic and other challenges, led to severe emotional distress and, in two acknowledged cases, depression. Challenges with anxiety, stress, and depression from balancing multiple aspects of college life are common among college students (Bouteyre et al., 2007; Conley et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Kang & Romo 2011; Ying, 2007). However, there may be a uniquely LDS aspect to emotional stress related to feeling pressure, while still in college, to start a family. The psychological and physical toll of meeting educational necessities while harmonizing socially important aspects of college life is heavy, yet in their desires to practice their religious beliefs, these LDS students added another load to their brimming college platter. They pursued marriage and family creation.

Family Challenges

Because of the pressure felt by these LDS students to marry early, some interviewees experienced stress from raising children during college. One young lady failed two classes the semester she was married. To add to the difficulty, it took her and her husband some time to adapt to marriage. With marriage, came internal and external pressure to have and care for children. After deciding with her husband to have a baby, she experienced pressure from her father to change her decision because he was concerned that she would be unable to finish college if she had a child.

A young man who had recently become a father expressed his concerns about providing for a new family: “I finally feel like I have a face to the responsibility I knew I would someday acquire. I always knew, someday I’m going to need to provide for a family, but now it’s real.” Balancing the responsibilities of family and school, plus concerns about the future, were also expressed by one non-traditional student, who related, “Being in

college, especially as a mother, is difficult. It's really hard, because I'd rather be home taking care of my kids and not having to worry about the future….I think the hardest part is honestly leaving my kids."

The academic, social and family challenges described by these individuals elucidate the college experience of religiously committed LDS students. The individuals in the study experienced anxiety, stress, and depression from balancing multiple aspects of college life. They were also challenged by the need to fit in socially with the university environment through making friends and balancing cultural aspects of college and religiosity. The religiosity element of these students' university years added another dimension of stress. With these challenges in mind, some unique to Mormons, and some common to college life, what can be done to help LDS college students prepare for and successfully navigate the university experience?

Implications for Seminaries and Institutes of Religion

There is a need to carefully consider what is happening among LDS college students for S&I to be effective in their attempt to prepare high school students for the challenges of college and help current college students achieve academic excellence while maintaining their faith. I propose that S&I curriculum may be improved by considering the following: (1) connect secular education and religious beliefs early—not only in high school, but for first-year college students, (2) challenge students to experience their religiosity by facing opposing views and take specific action steps to help them construct meaning and purpose for their lives, (3) welcome and anticipate difficult questions and provide guidance and resources to help them find their own answers—don't answer them for them, and (4) provide excellent role models.

Make the Connection Early

Instructors and curriculum should focus on assisting students in connecting specific religious beliefs and behaviors to high school *and* college. This should be done consistently throughout the seminary course, integrated with lessons from the scriptures, and not as infrequent standalone lessons. One undergrad explained how his seminary experience fell short, "I was taught spiritually for the situation I was in. I was living at home, going to high school, but my situation as I went to college changed drastically." He went on to describe how he could have been more prepared by seminary teachers if he had been encouraged to consider how his college experience might be influenced by the things he was learning in seminary

One respondent related why it would be helpful in seminary to connect religious beliefs to future educational experiences. She described how a belief in God can help college students as they experience adversity: "I think just believing that God has an active part in what's going on…keeps you from despair." She described how trusting in God's awareness of her strengthened her when she felt that others around her were unconcerned or unaware of her difficulties. She went on to describe how this feeling of awareness helped her as she faced adversity and stress during her university experience.

The belief in God described by this student was expressed by other students who struggled with depression and anxiety. One young lady described her challenge with self-worth during college and how her beliefs about God, and about herself, helped her through her discouragement, "For sure going to church and stuff has helped with that.…I am a child of God and He is there and there is a purpose and I continually have to remind myself while I am going through this." Another interviewee pointed out the value of believing in God when

he described how he views his relationship with Deity, "I've just learned to appreciate that I am a child of God. In college my potential is a lot greater than I think….I can consistently do anything that is required by my school work."

In addition to stressing the connection between religious beliefs and college, teachers should also emphasize religious behaviors. The religious habits of prayer and scripture study were the most frequently mentioned behaviors that helped interviewees in college. For instance, one participant explained what happens when he prays before starting his homework. He reported how committing himself to academic study through prayer made him feel accountable to be diligent and not become distracted. He added that scripture study also helps. This young man felt that studying scripture before doing homework made his academic studies "sacred" which caused him to focus his mind and made his academic study time more productive even though scripture study took an hour of his time. This description supports a theory posited by Stott (1983) who hypothesized that, for LDS students, educational attainment becomes sacred and is incorporated into their religious beliefs.

In addition to improving academic study time, participants also reported feeling they performed better on tests when they prayed. To illustrate, one interviewee felt that he does better on tests because he is able to recall needed information when he sincerely prays before exams. As S&I personnel help students connect prayer to their educational pursuits, it is important that they also teach the importance of balance regarding prayer. One theorist, Bandura (2003), cautions that petitioning God through prayer may decrease a person's level of confidence in his or her ability to perform specific tasks or behaviors. Some believers may view prayer as a way of placing responsibility on God to solve problems while shirking individual responsibility. On the other hand, Bandura (2003) felt that belief in one's abilities

could be enhanced if prayer was viewed as a means of partnering with God, while acknowledging personal responsibility, in order to influence one's own life.

In addition to prayer and scripture study, participants mentioned other sources of strength that helped them deal with adversity such as: temple attendance, serving others, attending institute and religious services, receiving priesthood blessings, repenting, partaking of the sacrament, fasting, and keeping the Word of Wisdom (health code). One student summarized:

> When I'm doing what I should and I'm studying my scriptures and attending the temple and putting in my time with callings and stuff, it just seems like my schooling is more effective and my mind's clearer and what would have taken me X amount of hours to do in school took me a little bit less.

These findings agree with and add insight to scholarly literature linking religious behaviors to academic performance. Academically, religiosity has been linked with higher GPA and improved performance on tests both in high school (Jeynes, 2009; Regnerus, 2000) and college (Cannon, Barnet, Righter, Larson, & Barrus, 2005; Mooney, 2010; Kang & Romo, 2011). Academic performance is also correlated with Bible literacy. Jeynes (2009) asserts, that students who show high levels of Biblical understanding have higher GPAs and perform better on tests than their peers.

Intrinsic religious behaviors (e.g., covert religious practices such as prayer) were strongly correlated with a high GPA. While extrinsic religious behaviors (e.g., passive, overt, and socially motivated such as church attendance) predicted lower GPA. Of all religious behaviors, prayer has the strongest positive correlation with high GPA (Kang & Romo, 2011). The stories of these participants give a possible explanation for these scholarly

findings. It may be that religiosity promotes confidence in a person's ability to perform specific tasks or behaviors. This is referred to as self-efficacy in scholarly circles (Bandura, 1997).

Help Students Experience their Religiosity

In addition to connecting both religious beliefs and religious behaviors to educational pursuits, it is important that students have personal faith-confirming experiences with living their religious behaviors prior to college. These faith-confirming experiences are critical in the formation of a personal testimony. The importance of having a personal testimony prior to college was illustrated by the participants from the studies who, for a time in college, questioned or failed to live aspects of their religion. They acknowledged lacking this personal testimony and being dependent on the testimonies of parents and family members before college.

One professor who graduated from an Ivy League school described struggling with and not feeling he had a testimony of the gospel until his junior year. Another professor recognized, "There are lots of people at universities who are agnostic or atheist or even anti-religion…The first time you encounter this, I think it can be a challenge if you don't have a strong sense of your own faith." When she was asked why she was so comfortable with her faith, she replied, "I had some experiences early on, for me I just kept going back to them, remember this, remember that."

Inviting participants to act on specific religious behaviors enhanced the development of personal religious commitment. In order to help students experience their religiosity for themselves, independent of the experiences of others, teachers should regularly invite students to set specific, self-determined goals to live the religious behaviors they are learning

in seminary. As BYU-Idaho President, Kim B. Clark stated in his inaugural address, "The challenge before us is to create even more powerful and effective learning experiences in which students learn by faith… Students need opportunities to take action (2005, para. 11). When students are only passively participating in seminary they may fail to develop religious habits that might benefit them in high school and college.

One college student explained how his seminary teacher helped him have this kind of active and involved experience. He reported that his seminary teacher "invited [him] to act and to read the scriptures." He went on to explain that because of that invitation, he had a strong belief in the value of reading the scriptures. Another student related a similar experience and then explained how it helped her in college:

> [It was] having that base of a testimony that I could look back to, you know, when I was in classes, or things were hard, or whatever, or you have questions that come up in a science major…You can go back to what you do know...I remember having these experiences when I read this story, when I prayed, other experiences that I had in Seminary, or in church, or personal…It gave me something to build on.

This participant also recognized the value of sharing those experiences with her seminary class and hearing the experiences of her classmates. Encouraging students to share both faith-promoting and faith-challenging experiences is another way seminary and institute teachers can prepare and support students.

Questions are Welcome

In order to connect gospel doctrines and principles to college life and provide students with opportunities to experience their religiosity, it is critical that teachers create an environment open and conducive to sincere questions. To illustrate the importance of

creating this type of environment, a young man we interviewed, who struggled with the theory of evolution, explained that institute provided a classroom setting with other LDS students who helped him as he asked difficult questions and discovered how the other students resolved similar issues. Unfortunately, this type of open dialogue is not always found in religious education settings, which is something S&I may consider facilitating.

Prior to his institute experience, this same young man felt there was a negative attitude, in his religious meetings, towards anyone who expressed doubts or asked questions: "You're either 100% or you're nothing. And if you ever had doubts, it wasn't acceptable to say it." Another respondent remembered "thinking it was really bad to ask questions" in religious learning environments. She recalled thinking to herself, "Am I supposed to question that? Is that not okay to ask that question?" One professor explained how she "saw areas of inquiry around hot-button issues where it was really rocky in institutional LDS spaces to be pursuing those lines of inquiry." These responses indicate an unwelcoming attitude toward sincere questions concerning religious beliefs and practices.

Church leaders have recently addressed the importance of asking and being open to questions. Jeffrey R. Holland (2013) encouraged church members, "So please don't hyperventilate if from time to time issues arise that need to be examined, understood, and resolved. They do and they will (p. 94). Just six months later, in the October 2013 General Conference, Dieter F. Uchtdorf proffered similar advice about the importance of asking questions:

> In this church that honors personal agency so strongly, that was restored by a young man who asked questions and sought answers, we respect those who honestly search for truth….It's natural to have questions—the acorn of honest inquiry has often

> sprouted and matured into a great oak of understanding. There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions. One of the purposes of the Church is to nurture and cultivate the seed of faith—even in the sometimes sandy soil of doubt and uncertainty…. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters—my dear friends—please, first doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith. (p. 22-23)

Instructors should not be fearful of students asking difficult questions about their religious beliefs. The same professor who recognized dangerous areas of inquiry at an LDS university later stated, "Our faith is so capable of cosmic thinking it is not a fragile theology…. It doesn't and never has needed to be protected from inquiry." Seminary and institute teachers must be knowledgeable regarding important and sensitive issues so we can address those issues instead of avoiding them. One professor expressed the danger of avoiding sensitive issues, as he described why some people abandon their religious convictions. He said, "The classic story is not, 'Oh, I found this fact and it's shocking.' It's, 'Oh, I found this shocking fact that they've kept hidden from me all these years.' It's the disillusion with the system as hiding the truth."

Be and Provide Excellent Role Models

Perhaps even more important than providing answers to difficult questions is to provide models and patterns by which students can learn to find their own answers. One professor extolled the importance of providing models for finding answers to difficult questions. She explained that the youth of the church require safe places where they can sincerely inquire concerning their religious beliefs. She also extolled the need for adult

mentors who provide patterns for learning and living religious lifestyles. She felt the faith of the youth would be "more robust" as a result of these role models.

In this regard, many of the students and lifelong academics expressed the importance of role models. Seminary and institute instructors should not only be role models, but should also look for opportunities to provide role models in addition to teachers, parents, and leaders. Several students expressed the value of inviting college students to seminary classes to describe their university experiences and acknowledge the importance of maintaining their beliefs and living church standards. One young lady pointed out, "I really looked up to people in college; they were almighty…. If you know those people still have trials but they rely on the Lord to help them through, then it's like, 'Wow, it can help me!'"

Models of current and former college students could be used during recruitment efforts by CES universities. They could also appear on the *Be Smart* website (http://www.besmart.com). The website and recruitment materials could be enhanced by producing student testimonials in print and video form to supplement current media. The media should capture LDS college students as they describe the challenges and benefits of college life and the challenges and benefits of living the gospel in the university environment. This type of media, accessible from the website, would be useful for both future college students and their parents. It could also be used in seminary and institute classes to promote discussions regarding university challenges and the difficulties and benefits of being religiously committed during college.

Conclusion

As we considered the interviews and experiences of these LDS students and professors, we recognized an amplification effect. The students and professors who had

experienced their religion and were firmly committed to their religious lifestyle before college left the university experience more committed to their faith (amplification) and struggled less with religious pressures, academic challenges, social difficulties, and family problems. Those who went into the college experience unsure of and untested in their childhood beliefs struggled to find balance and happiness in college (amplification), until finally deciding for themselves that they would be committed to their religiosity. As Paul, who had fallen away and then returned to the church, stated, "I started trying to be as active as I could in my ward. I have only been happier as I have done that." He went on to add, "Investing your time in the church makes college work out….I think personally that that's the best way to get through college is to make your priority church…and then college. I feel like it recharges me." With that in mind, S&I may use data from these studies to make decisions about ways they may improve and enhance curriculum and instruction among the youth of the church locally and, perhaps, globally.

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CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This white-water journey through the PP-EdD program at the University of Idaho has been challenging, overwhelming, discouraging, and well worth the exertion. I have been privileged to see the benefits of the degree anticipated by Dr. Shulman and promoted by CPED (Shulman, et al., 2006). Many of my S&I colleagues, who have completed terminal degrees, have lamented that their degrees have benefited them very little in their professional practices. In contrast, I feel my ability to teach students has been amplified. My approach to mentoring and supporting colleagues and students has improved as I have tried to reflect the high quality mentoring and modeling that I received during my education.

The cohort design of the PP-EdD program increased the diversity of my learning experience. The cohort consisted of capable and intelligent professors, teachers, business professionals and educational administrators. The diverse perspectives of the group deepened my understanding of key concepts and principles that I learned throughout the program. It was fascinating to participate in multi-dimensional analytical discussions enhanced by the diverse backgrounds and life experiences of other cohort members. The diversity of thought transferred into my classroom as I expended greater effort to encourage participation and involvement of all of my students. In the same way that the diversity of the cohort deepened my understanding of longstanding and innovative concepts, I hoped to bring to bear in my classroom the different beliefs, assumptions, and experiences of my students.

Working with the professors at the University of Idaho was a remarkable experience as well. I am very appreciative of their efforts to come and associate with our cohort in-person. Personal contact with my professors aided my learning and increased my desire to perform well. Much of my master's program was done through online learning and

collaboration, and the experience was not nearly as satisfying. Each professor brought new insights and approaches to my coursework and ultimately to my dissertation. At times this was frustrating as professor preferences often contradicted one another. However, in the end I believe that these different predilections led to a more complete educational experience. The course sequence was a main advantage of the program. Each course built upon previous courses, and professors were mindful to create meaningful assignments contributing to the completion of a dissertation.

The culminating companion dissertation process was one of deep inspiration and despairing road blocks. At times it was difficult to incorporate the personalities and preferences of my research team with the personalities and preferences of professors and committee members. It was also difficult to put my trust in others as my dissertation and ultimately graduation depended highly on the other members of our research team. However, I have learned to trust the other team members. Nate and James each put in great amounts of time, thought, and diligent exertion. Each member brought a different set of weaknesses and strengths to the research process. Often times the strengths of Nate and James would make up for my weaknesses, and I hope I reciprocated the courtesy.

The benefits of multiple researchers were especially evident in the data analysis process (Beebe, 2001, 2011). As the team spent hours, days, weeks, and months meticulously collecting and reviewing data, themes began to emerge. The perspectives of each member of the research team deepened insights to the emergent themes. At times there were comments and responses from participants that did not seem important until they were analyzed by the entire group. Important themes from my individual research highlighted and brought forth

important aspects of the group project and vice versa. The other team members were able to see my biases and recognize when I was making assumptions about the meaning of my data.

Of course working with Nate and James had challenges. In some ways, the work seemed to go more quickly as team members would combine efforts to complete projects. At other times, the work seemed to proceed slowly as organization and schedules broke down under the pressure of academic, professional and personal demands. However, I have learned much about working as a team, caring about others, and learning from differences. Knowing that team members were relying on me forced me to labor more diligently and be more exacting in my efforts. Had I been left to complete my research on my own, I would have struggled to remain motivated, and my research project would have been incomplete.

Many of my colleagues who have completed their doctoral dissertations have simply put their dissertations on the shelf and moved forward with their lives. In contrast, my participation in this program and dissertation experience has already led to marked improvements in my professional practice. My colleagues and I are implementing changes to improve support and preparation for current and future college students. Our research is already impacting curriculum in S&I and at LDS-sponsored universities. This summer, the research team will be traveling throughout the Southeast Idaho area conducting training conferences for multiple faculty and administrators concerning implications of our study.

In retrospect, I realize that I experienced many of the challenges of university life experienced by the participants of my study. I believe that, like them, I have been strengthened by the experience. As I have learned to view my life experiences with new foci, I have developed a deeper understanding of myself and my relationship with others. As I have turned my newly fostered analytical abilities toward examining my biases, my beliefs,

and the aspects of my life that I revere, I have only become more committed and focused in my efforts to benefit my family, my students, and my community.

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APPENDIX A

Consent Form

Appendix A: Consent Form

The University of Idaho Institutional Review Board has approved this study. I am a doctoral student in Professional Practices Doctorate (PPD) program at the University of Idaho. I am conducting a study to improve college preparation curriculum in high school religious education courses by exploring how highly religious undergraduate students, with at least two years of college experience, use religiosity (religious beliefs and behaviors) to meet university challenges. The data gathered by this study will be used to inform the design of new curriculum focused on preparing high school students in religious education courses. Data may be used in future articles and studies. This form indicates your consent to participate. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one to two hour audio-recorded interview. We can meet at a location convenient to you.

As the study continues you may be contacted to clarify and enhance the information you provided during the interview stage. When my research and analysis is complete, I will return the transcription to you to ensure I have represented your thoughts and ideas accurately. Your comments will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored on an electronic device that will be password protected and will not have access to any other social media. Interviews will be recorded and stored on electronic devices that are password protected. The interview will be transcribed into a Microsoft Word document file on a computer that is password protected—no other knows the access code other than the student investigator. After transcription and member checking audio recordings will be deleted from the electronic devices storing the recordings. It is anticipated that no hard copies of the data will be generated, but in the event that they are, they will be deleted within one year. Author(s) will retain interview data for a minimum of five years after publication of research (APA Manual, p. 12). Electronic copies will be kept at a minimum of five years after publications of materials (2017).

You will be encouraged to select a pseudonym, or have one assigned to you for anonymity. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer or withdraw from the study at any time without consequences to your reputation or standing with the researchers, university of Idaho, the university you currently attend, or the religious institution where you are affiliated. You may declare your consent to participate null and void at any time. Every effort will be made to ensure the information provided will be strictly confidential within the limits of the law. Consent to participate will be indicated by your signature at the bottom of this letter. The conditions of your participation are always open to negotiation.

Please take your time to review this letter. If you have any questions concerning this study now or at any time during the research process, please contact me at 208-351-2500 or simmonswm@ldschurch.org. You may also contact my major professor, Dr. Bryan Maughan at bryanm@uidaho.edu, or University of Idaho office of Research Assurances, (208) 885-6162. The University of Idaho Institutional Review Board approves this study and the protocol number is 13-261. I appreciate your willingness to participate and the time you are dedicating to this study. Thank you, in advance, for your generous involvement.

Sincerely,

William Simmons

Statement of Consent

I consent to participate in the research study "Undergraduates and religiosity: Toward improving high school college preparation in religious education courses."

_____
Participant Name (please print)

_____ _____
Participant Signature Date

_____ _____
William Simmons, Researcher Date

APPENDIX B

Potential Participant Survey

Appendix B: Potential Participant Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating. The purpose of this study is to improve college preparation curriculum in high school religious education courses by exploring how highly religious undergraduate students, with at least two years of college experience, use religiosity (religious beliefs and behaviors) to meet university challenges. If you are selected to participate you will be invited to participate further in a 30 min to 1 hour interview at your convenience.

Name: _____ Cell #: (_____)_____-_____

Gender (please circle): Male Female Email:_____

Age:_____ Have you attended at least two years of college (please circle): YES NO

Did you serve a mission? _____ Where? _____

Are you married? _____ Number of Children?_____

Did you graduate from Seminary (please circle): YES NO

How important is your religion to you? (Please circle one)

Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not too Important	Not Important at all

How often do you go to church? (Please circle one)

Once a week	Twice a month	Once a month	Less than Monthly

How often do you pray? (Please circle one)

More than once a day	At least once a day	A few times a week	Less than weekly

Do you keep the Word of Wisdom? (please circle) YES NO

Do you pay a full tithe? (please circle) YES NO

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Study Overview

Thank you for taking the time to help me understand your perceptions of how your religious beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are influencing your college experience. Your responses will be helpful in understanding the ways students describe the influence of their religion as they face the challenges characteristic of university life? This study will help Seminary and Institute teachers better prepare their students for college as well as help future college students meet the challenges of university life. I would like to record our interview and take a few notes to make sure I correctly capture your experiences; however, I hope you will feel free to just tell me your story. Let's just have a great conversation. Of course, you have the right to not answer any questions you feel uncomfortable with or stop participating at any time, and everything you say will remain anonymous.

- Do you have any questions before we begin?
- Is it alright with you if I record our conversation?
- Before we get started will you please carefully read through and sign this consent form?

Become acquainted and help the participant feel at ease

- To start off, please tell me about yourself. (Where are you from? What is your family like? Have you always been a member of the church?)

Questions about the university experience

- What motivated you to come to BYU-Idaho or ISU?
- How would you describe your college experience so far?
    - Tell me about some of the highlights of your college experience.
    - What has surprised you about the university experience?
- What challenges have you faced during your college experience?
    - What has been difficult or stressful about your college experience?
- What has helped you manage these challenges?

Questions about the role of religiosity

- What was it like being LDS at this university?
- What role has your religion played in your college experience?
    - What role have your religious beliefs played during college?
    - What role have your religious beliefs played in facing your college challenges?
- Over the past few years what have been some of the most meaningful religious habits or behaviors you have tried to develop or maintain during college?
    - How have these things (religious habits) impacted your college experience?
    - What role have your religious habits played in facing your college challenges?

Questions about College Preparation

- What were some of the most helpful things that prepared you for your college experience?
- What do you wish you would have known better, or been better prepared with, prior to your college experience?
- Thinking back to your seminary experience, what could your teachers have done, or taught, to better prepare you for your university experience?
- Is there anything else you would like to share to help seminary teachers better prepare their students for college life?

Conclusion

Thank you once again for all of your help. Is there anything else you would like to talk about related to the topic of this interview? Once I have transcribed our conversation I would like to have you look over what I wrote and make sure it is accurate, would it be alright if I contacted you again if I have any further questions? Thank you again for all of your help.

APPENDIX D

Institutional Review Board Approval – University of Idaho

University of Idaho

Office of Research Assurances
Institutional Review Board
875 Perimeter Drive, MS 3010
Moscow ID 83844-3010

Phone: 208-885-6162
Fax: 208-885-5752
irb@uidaho.edu

November 8, 2013

To: Bryan Maughan
Cc: William Simmons

From: Traci Craig, PhD
Chair, University of Idaho Institutional Review Board
University Research Office
Moscow, ID 83844-3010

Title: 'Undergraduates and religiosity: Toward improving high school college preparation in religious education courses'

Project: 13-261

Approved: 11/08/13
Expires: 11/07/14

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Idaho, I am pleased to inform you that the protocol for the above-named research project is approved as offering no significant risk to human subjects.

This approval is valid for one year from the date of this memo. Should there be significant changes in the protocol for this project, it will be necessary for you to resubmit the protocol for review by the Committee.

Traci Craig

APPENDIX E

Institutional Review Board Approval – Brigham Young University-Idaho

BYU
IDAHO

March 5, 2014

Dear William,

Your request to use human subjects from the BYU-Idaho campus for the study entitled *Undergraduates and religiosity: Toward improving high school college preparation in religious education courses* is approved.

Please notify the IRB if you intend to make any significant modifications to the study's design or implementation.

Good luck with your study.

Regards,

Scott J. Bergstrom, Ph.D.
Chair, BYU-Idaho Institutional Review Board

Scott J. Bergstrom *Director, Institutional Research & Assessment, Kimball 290C*
Phone (208) 496-1136 Fax (208) 496-5136 E-mail bergstroms@byui.edu