

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS WHEN RELIGIOSITY IS
CHALLENGED BY SECULAR WORLD VIEWS

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ABSTRACT

College years are important transition years for adult learners. It is a time when students are expected to broaden their minds and deepen their understanding of both general and specific topics. It is also a time when students are introduced to diverse theories and ideologies, often for the first time. One challenge first-year students often face upon entering college is the apparent conflict between new philosophies and theories and more traditional religious views. Confusion, anxiety, and frustration can result from such conflict, leading students to a state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1985). Past research has shown that many college students who have their religious beliefs challenged eventually abandon their faith (Caplovitz and Sherrow, 1977; Hunter, 1983). More recent studies have found that college students may not necessarily abandon, but rather reevaluate their religious beliefs (Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno, 2003; Lee, 2002). Their religious beliefs become less formal, more personal, and they begin to show more tolerance towards others beliefs. However, the transformations taking place among college students during these formative years have not previously been evaluated through qualitative research (Maryl & Oeur, 2009).

This dissertation reports the lived experiences of college students who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) attending a public university in the northwestern United States. Using a qualitative case study, it presents a rich description of students who were confronted with worldviews that contradicted their religious beliefs. It describes the variety of ways in which these college students' beliefs were challenged, how they chose to manage the inner tensions that followed, and how such experiences transformed their faith. Additionally, this dissertation offers recommendations, in the form of a White

paper, to stake holder in relation to better preparing future students for having the religious beliefs challenged during college.

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DEDICATION

To the love of my life, Samantha.

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PREFACE

This dissertation 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 the 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 content analysis 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 the research.

The format of this dissertation was developed under the aegis of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). The Carnegie project 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 for the preparation of 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 PP-EdD 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 & Jensen, 2012).

Overview of the Three Articles

Article 1 or chapter 1, of this dissertation is an individual article written by James G. Williams. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of college students who felt their religious beliefs were challenged while attending a public university. As a practitioner researcher, I (James) focused my efforts on having an immediate impact on my professional practice. Specifically, the intent was to seek to improve curriculum and promote improved practice among religious educators. This case study, reported here in journal-article format and informed by principles of Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) and Action Research (AR), captured the lived experiences of eight undergraduate students enrolled in a church-owned university and a state university in the Intermountain West United States. . 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 2, is a collaborative co-authored group article my study was combined with the individual studies conducted by Mitch and Nathan. The three studies were analyzed following the guidelines of a qualitative meta-synthesis (Erwin, Brotherson, & Summers, 2011; Jensen & Allen, 1996; O’Halloran, Grohn, & Worrall, 2012; Walsh & Downe, 2004; Zimmer, 2006). “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” (Walsh et al., 2004, p. 205). The purpose of secondary qualitative analysis is “theory development, higher level abstraction, and generalizability in order to make qualitative findings more accessible for

application in practice” (Zimmer, 2004, p. 313). Mitch’s study described the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of highly religious college students regarding the challenges of college life and the role of religiosity. 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 3 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 my (James’) findings, the findings of the secondary qualitative analysis, 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 4, I offer my perspective on the companion dissertation process.

CHAPTER 1 – TENSIONS WITH RELIGION AND SECULARIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

(James G Williams)

During the founding years of the United States, religion, and religious practices, played a significant role in education. In 1636, Harvard, the first Ivy League college, was founded by puritan ministers who wanted to train future clergymen for the ministry (Rudolph, 1961). During Harvard's early years, one half of all students entered the ministry upon graduation, and 10 of its first 12 presidents were ministers themselves (Morison, 1935). Congregational clerical support was vital to the early success of Harvard as the clergy promoted the school's interests through sermons, prayers, and private donations. While referring to the clergy of the day, Quincy (1840) states, "[they] contributed according to their means, in money or in books and were [Harvard's] unceasing and unwearied advocates" (p.44). The college's early motto, *Veritas Christo Et Ecclesiae* (Truth for Christ and the Church) along with its ministerial (Unitarian) leadership, foreshadowed the organizational model that many of the later colonial era schools would follow (Morison, 1935). During the 17th and 18th centuries, eight more colleges, including William and Mary, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia, emerged in colonial New England and Virginia. Much like Harvard, these schools were also affiliated with, and often directed by, local clergy (Hartley, 2004).

Students attending colonial era schools were expected to maintain high levels of moral and religious behavior including keeping the Sabbath day holy and abstaining from card playing and loud singing (Dexter, 1903). There was an emphasis on the study of philosophy, ethics, and theology within the liberal arts curriculum as a way of reinforcing Christian values. Even scientific studies, including biology, geology, and physics, had

religious influence and perspective (Meriwether, 1907). Cohen and Kisker (2010), commenting on the emphasis of study at these early schools, notes they were “not for the purpose of advancing knowledge but for preserving what was already known” (p. 33). These attitudes and beliefs towards higher education were in harmony with the popular traditions of the colonial era, and would remain so until a new cultural movement known as the period of Enlightenment would take shape (Brickman, 1972).

During the 18th century, an intellectual change occurred that transformed the American colonies from distant territories into a unified leader in the fields of political philosophy, industrial technology, science, and educational reform (Kors, 2002). The Age of Enlightenment was a revolution in human thought that promoted intellect and individualism over tradition. Its primary purpose was to reform society using reason, to challenge beliefs built on tradition and faith, and to acquire knowledge through the scientific method. As scientific thought, skepticism, and intellectual interchange grew in popularity, officially sanctioned religious influence at the universities began to give way to secularism (Cherry, DeBerg, & Porterfield, 2001). Secularization is a process of social change through which the influence of religion and religious thinking declines as it is replaced with other ways of understanding reality and regulating social life (Norris & Inglehart, 2011).

By 1770 the proportion of Harvard students who were entering the ministry after graduation had dropped from 50% to 15% (Morison, 1935). About that same time, 24-year-old colonist Thomas Jefferson was completing his university training in law at William and Mary in Virginia. Jefferson had a strong Anglican background, a denomination with ties back to the Church of England. While Jefferson was himself a religious man, he would become one of the most prominent supporters for the secularization of higher education in the early

19th century (Addis, 2003). He had developed a love for learning and believed the pursuit of knowledge based on scientific exploration and discovery should be distinctly separate from religious teaching and training (Brickman, 1972). By 1800, while serving as the vice-president of the United States, Jefferson petitioned for a true secular university in the commonwealth of Virginia. He wrote, “We wish to establish . . . a University on a plan so broad and liberal and modern, as to be worth patronizing with the public support” (Cunningham, 1987, p. 336). In 1819, at the age of 76, Jefferson established the University of Virginia; a new university free from the oversight of oppressive religious leaders who decried scientific inquiry.

Secular learning continued to grow in popularity throughout the 19th century, strengthened by its mission to advance knowledge by scientific inquiry (Marsden, 1994; Perko, 1991; Sloan, 1994). Wilson (1978) explains,

The growth of the scientific world view means that the natural (and, later, the social) world becomes the object of systematic scrutiny, for the purposes of which canons of procedure are agreed upon . . . The scientific worldview is largely incompatible with a belief that there are supernatural powers. Science is valued not only for its practicality but also for its universalism, impartiality, and skepticism. The contrast between religion and science is one of values as well as technique (p. 412–13).

This popular way of learning promoted the use of rational thought. The process it encouraged began with clearly stated principles, using correct logic to arrive at conclusions, test the conclusions against evidence, and then revise the principles in the light of the evidence.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the social sciences emerged in the universities and became a part of the modern curriculum (Smith, 1990). In 1876, Yale University offered

the first course identified as “sociology” in the United States, and in 1892 the University of Chicago created the first graduate department of sociology (Cragun & Cragun, 2011).

Sociologist Peter Berger notes that “once the world had been divided up along scientific and nonscientific lines, sociology became a much more formidable enemy of religion than the sciences per se, since sociology claimed jurisdiction over social man” (Smith, 1990, p. 223).

Smith observes that the social sciences were more dangerous to the principles of theology than hard sciences because they “claimed, in practical fact, to supersede history and psychology by giving a more up-to-date account of the nature of social man” (p. 224).

At the dawn of the 20th century, Christian churches had “come to see [themselves] as besieged by humanism apparently incompatible with a supernaturalism required by orthodox beliefs” (Klassen & Zimmermann, 2006, p. 91). During this time, a new type of “social gospel” emerged as a way of satisfying a scientific worldview by emphasizing its humanitarian character, which it shared with secular humanism (Klassen & Zimmermann, 2006). The popular belief was that secular people required a secular theology and that a belief that God communicated with humanity was not rational. This phenomenon was brought about by the academic culture at large, not solely within the realms of established religion (Robinson, 1963).

In response to this schism, Christianity became more and more rigid towards what it defined as fundamental Christian beliefs, which contributed to the “basic split between religious faith (as subjective piety) and scientific reason (as objective, publicly shared facts)” (Klassen & Zimmermann, 2006, p. 91). The more rigid religious leaders became, the more the chasm grew and students exerted their rights to be free from what was perceived as dogmatic and oppressive religious traditions (Robinson, 1963). By the 1960s there was, in

higher education, “a flourishing tradition of humanism that gladly embraced the death of God and wanted to see the human as simply and purely a product of the natural world” (Klassen & Zimmermann, 2006, p. 91).

This newer naturalistic structure, articulated in the humanist philosophy, has a significant impact on the religious practices of students across contemporary college campuses. Researchers have come to a range of conclusions regarding the effect higher education has on religious beliefs and practices. Several studies have shown that higher education weakens religious faith (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Hunter, 1983; Saenz & Barrera, 2007). This view is supported by the argument that it is difficult to hold both a religious and scholarly view of the world simultaneously.

Religious and Secular Tensions in Higher Education

Although colleges and universities have become more secular, religious organizations continue to maintain a presence and seek to have a voice on college campuses (Laurence, 1999). While secular groups maintain “fundamentalist Christianity is at war with secular institutions, and particularly . . . with secular education” (Sherkat, 2007), religious groups claim that a secular culture on college campuses marginalizes religious values, shows intolerance towards religious influence in public debate, and treats religious beliefs with hostility (Oaks, 2009; Givens 2010). Sherkat (2007) predicts religious and secular conflicts on college campuses will rise, as more students are encouraged to attend college: “With the expansion of higher education, we have seen unprecedented proportions of conservative Christians entering higher education” (p. 6). A 2004 survey of 112,000 first-year students at 236 colleges by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) found that 83% of students

said they were affiliated with a religious denomination, and only 9% identified themselves with a non-Christian religion.

School fairness plays a role in the struggles between the secularists, humanists and people of faith. School fairness legislation cries for the just treatment of all people, no matter their gender, ethnicity, race, or religion. As a result, legal battles have increased over the past decade between student-led religious groups and university administrators on the campuses of Purdue, Princeton, Brown, Southern Illinois, University of Wisconsin, University of North Carolina, and Vanderbilt (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, FIRE, 2014). One group dedicated to protecting the first amendment rights, freedom of speech, of students on college campus, is the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). Since their founding in 1999, FIRE has seen a steady increase in freedom of speech litigation. They report that 2013 was a record year for the number of cases, and predict 2014 to be even higher (FIRE, 2014).

The number of students coming from homes and cultures of devout religious traditions entering public universities are on the rise (Braskamp, 2007; Sherkat, 2007). According to the HERI (2004) survey, the number of incoming first-year students who claim to frequently, or occasionally, attend religious services is 81%; among this same group 79% profess a belief in God. On entry, first-year students are vulnerable and tend to exude strong faith and high levels of religiosity, bringing with them traditions from their homes (Clydesdale, 2007). However, new ideas wait to test their religious traditions. Braskamp (2007) notes that many first year students enter college having never had their religious beliefs seriously tested. Depending on the student and their familial social norms, some may not be prepared to confront the plethora of theories, ideologies, cultures, ethnicities, and

sexual orientations that may conflict with their religious beliefs. Consequently, some abandon their faith in pursuit of secular learning.

In support of these findings, Mayrl and Oeur (2009) note that “evidence strongly suggests that religious practice declines during the college years” (p. 264). Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) examined the religious habits of upper class students and found that 64% of students reported attending church services less frequently than when they began college. A survey conducted at the Harvard University Institute of Politics (HUIP) (2008) affirmed that of over 1200 college students surveyed, 40% reported that religion was “very important” in their everyday lives but, ironically, only 20% said they discussed religion “frequently.”

While literature shows the differences in religiosity between incoming first-year students and upper class students, there is no single causal model that adequately explains the changes. Braskamp (2007) notes that the distancing from religion may in part be due to distance from paternal and childhood social influences. Most sectarian Christians have spent the majority of their lives in “segregated religious communities, isolated from people of different races, ethnicities, and religious traditions” (Eiesland, 2000, p. 5).

As the new social reality presents itself to first year students, by the third or fourth year in college the social gap begins to widen between secular humanist college professors—those who do not believe in supernaturalism—and religiously inclined students (Maryl & Oeur, 2009). This gap can “lead to unpleasant exchanges, particularly when students honestly do not understand that their faith is not relevant for coursework” (Sherkat, 2007, p. 6). For Christians, attempting to force the square peg of religion into the round hole of a college education, where “75% of college professors view the Bible as a book of fables” (Sherkat, 2007, p. 6), can be troublesome to the “believer.” Despite the research that points to the

decline of religiosity in college undergraduate students, there has been little attention toward the array of emotional and mental tensions that students experience during these formative years (Clydesdale, 2007).

Inner Tensions and Cognitive Dissonance

Typically, college represents a transitional phase between adolescence to adulthood; when traditional aged students develop and become independent and responsible for themselves (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2013). These are vulnerable times when deep and profound changes will determine their professional and personal futures. With the tension created from an attempt, by the student, to reconcile religious worldviews with secular worldviews, there is some evidence of inner conflict that includes mental and social stress, confusion, anxiety, and frustration (Ashurst-McGee, 1999). Where the most important decisions regarding one's future takes place is within the silent chambers of one's mind and heart. It is in those unquantifiable spaces where one decides whether to abandon or strengthen one's deeply held beliefs and devotions to past traditions, whether they are religious or otherwise. The psychological phrase describing this inner conflict is the phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1985). Tavis and Aronson (2007) define cognitive dissonance as "a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions that are psychologically inconsistent" (p. 13)

A basic assumption of cognitive dissonance is that people want harmony in their lives by having their perceptions match reality (Ryan, 2010). Festinger (1985) notes, "The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance" (p. 3). Feelings of dissonance often lead an individual to recognize the inconsistencies between two different sets of beliefs and will

stimulate them to resolve the inner conflict. Additionally, the degree of dissonance one feels will vary depending on the severity of inconsistency between the two sets of beliefs. In other words, the greater the dissonance one feels the more motivation there is to resolve the conflict (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). As Tavis and Aronson (2007) affirm: “Dissonance is bothersome under any circumstance, but it is most painful to people when an important element of their self-concept is threatened – typically when they do something that is inconsistent with their view of themselves” (p. 29).

Many people define themselves by a particular cause in which they invest both emotionally and cognitively. This investment has implications for what may be considered as religious. While there are several definitions of religion, including a belief in a supernatural power, the Oxford English Dictionary offers at least two broad definitions: Religion is (a) “a particular system of faith and worship or (b) “a pursuit, interest, or movement, followed with great devotion” (Oxford, 2014 p.483). Given these definitions, if one’s self-concept is influenced, or defined, by their faith (in which they place their confidence), worship (what they honor), and devotion (earnestness and reverence), they may be considered as religious.

When beliefs are challenged, and the argument against one’s beliefs are reasonable, rational, and convincing, an individual may move toward rationalization—a need to hold tight and defend one’s original beliefs. Cognitive dissonance claims that individuals typically avoid circumstances or reject facts that may intensify feelings of discomfort or dissonance, but at the university, where grades matter, avoidance is not always possible. Therefore, rather than deal with the discomforting tensions, they will either find a distraction or strive to resolve the issue with a series of justifications (Festinger 1985).

Braskamp (2007) observes this need for justification after students feel confused, anxious, and frustrated after their faith is challenged. On one hand, some students seek to cultivate social relationships with professors who show understanding, and locate students whose religious perspectives differ from their own. As these students progress through college they begin “to view matters of their own religiosity and religious practices with more complexity and diversity than before” (Braskamp, 2007, p. 2). Rather than seekers of Truth, with a capital T (which means a belief in a supreme authoritative supernatural power), they become more liberated and identify themselves as seekers of truth, with a small t (which means a belief that is less about an authoritative power and more about themselves). Their religious beliefs become more personal and less formal, and they are more likely to question what they once accepted to be fundamental to their faith (Plante & Thoresen, 2007). Their form of worship changes from the traditional style of their childhood into a more inclusive and diverse set of spiritual contemplation and meditation. As they engage in less formal forms of worship, they begin to associate with others of more diverse backgrounds and experiences, and share these in more casual and varied settings (Braskamp, 2007).

Latter-day Saints and Higher Education

While some students are challenged by secular theories that conflict with their childhood religious traditions, and change their worship practices, there seems to be one sect that maintains religious solidarity while pursuing secular knowledge. This phenomenon can be found among several faiths, but in this inquiry I will focus on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Leaders of the LDS church emphasize the importance of higher education, and, as a result, there has been a considerable increase of students on college campuses since the last decade of the 20th century. Albrecht and Heaton (1998), two LDS

scholars, report, “The percentage of Mormons who have completed post-high school education is significantly higher than is the case for the population as a whole.”

For Mormon males, 53.5 percent have some post-high school education compared to 36.5 for the U.S. population. For females, the figures are 44.3 for Mormons and 27.7 for the U.S. population generally. (p. 297)

From its inception, the LDS Church has placed an emphasis on education. In 1832, two years after the church was officially organized, church founder and president Joseph Smith wrote that a “school [be] established for [the] instruction in all things that are expedient for [members of the church]” (Book of Doctrine & Covenants 88:127, 1992). Two schools had been established in Ohio and Missouri by the summer of 1833, and church leaders were meeting weekly to study the subjects of Theology, English, and Hebrew (Wilkinson & Skousen, 1976). By 1877, Smith’s successor, Brigham Young, had established several academies in the Utah territory as higher education continued to be emphasized by church leaders (Wilkinson & Skousen, 1976). This emphasis continues today with current LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson (2007) who notes, “Beyond our study of spiritual matters, secular learning is also essential . . . I urge you to pursue your education” (p. 119).

One example of the commitment church leaders have toward higher education is the Perpetual Education Fund (PEF). The PEF was designed to provide prospective college students with “the support and resources necessary to improve their lives through education and better employment” (Perpetual Education Fund, 2014). This worldwide program allows college students to receive low-interest loans to pay for schooling. The loans are made with the understanding the graduates will pay the money back to the fund and be made available to future students. In 2013, the LDS Church reported over 57,000 students in more than 55

countries had received financial assistance through the PEF (2014). A strong clerical emphasis on education coupled with the increased opportunity to attend college has contributed to the rising percentages of LDS attending college.

As more LDS youth attend college than ever before and have resources made available to them, their religious beliefs are challenged, and several leave their faith (Uecker et al., 2007). Research on LDS and higher education over the past 75 years has produced a variety of results. O’Dea (1957), a sociologist who made an in depth study of compatibility between higher education and Mormonism, notes:

[The Mormon youth] has been taught by the Mormon faith to seek knowledge and to value it; yet it is precisely this course, so acceptable to and so honored by his religion, that is bound to bring religious crisis to him and profound danger to his religious belief. The college undergraduate curriculum becomes the first line of danger to Mormonism in its encounter with modern learning. (O’Dea, 1957, p. 226-227)

A study of LDS students by Stott (1983) indicates that while religious behaviors, such as personal prayer and weekly church attendance, rose with educational attainment, “the surety of belief in basic religious tenets (belief in God, the existence of Satan, the infallibility of the President of the Church in matters of doctrine, and the acceptance of religion over science) diminish with educational advancement” (p. 7). Like Stott, Albrecht and Heaton (1998) also report that higher levels of education are connected with higher levels of religious practices. They note “highly educated Mormons are more likely to pray frequently, to have strong religious beliefs, and to attend meetings, suggesting that devotion is even more important for those with higher levels of education than those with lower educations” (Albrecht & Heaton, 1998, p. 12).

There is, however, a gap in the literature that addresses how LDS address these inner tensions while in college, and the subsequent attitudes that follow. Other limitations include insufficient study designs and measures to adequately capture the complexity and pattern of change in college student's spiritual beliefs and practices. Hartley (2004) notes "while there is evidence that change occurs in students' spiritual journeys, little is known about how and when such changes occur, [and] what influences these changes" (p. 11).

Problem Statement

Although there is research addressing the progressive diminution of faith as students advance through their college years, there is no causal model that adequately explains these transformations. Students entering college are introduced to new theories, beliefs, and philosophies that challenge their religious views (Albrecht & Heaton, 1998) because, in many instances, they have been sheltered from them before college (Braskamp, 2007). Their faith had not been tested. It seems to be commonly understood that new language, cultures, diverse ideologies along with persuasive peer pressures (e.g., partying, alcohol, dating, sexual relationships) may cause some to push away from, and in some cases abandon, the religious practices of former days. That is a problem this study addressed was the lack of understanding about the emotional experiences (i.e. anxiety, depression, discouragement) and cognitive tensions experienced once college students have their faith challenged and how they attempt to reconcile their religious views with secular ideas (Ashurst-McGee, 1999).

Purpose Statement

Despite the research that points to a decline of religiosity in college undergraduate students, there has been little attention paid toward the array of emotional and mental tensions that students who have their religious beliefs challenged in college, experience

during these formative years (Clydesdale, 2007). As a professional instructor in religious education, the primary purpose of this study was to gain insight and understanding from the experiences of LDS college students whose religious beliefs are challenged while attending a public university and to provide a deeper understanding about the inner tensions they experienced. Additionally, this study was designed to address this problem in my professional practice as a religious educator by uncovering prevailing trends in beliefs and opinions of students who maintain their religiosity after having their faith challenged in a university setting.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study: In what ways have LDS college students had their religious beliefs challenged in a public university setting? How do LDS college students handle the tensions of having their religious beliefs challenged? How do these experiences impact on the faith of LDS college students (i.e., positive, negative, or no effect)?

Research Design

Qualitative research is an excellent way to study complex human experiences that are otherwise difficult to capture through quantitative techniques (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research also allows researchers to study such behavior in context. Creswell (1998) notes that qualitative research provides a valuable opportunity to “listen to the participants we are studying” and to “refrain from assuming the role of the expert researcher” (p. 19). Several techniques of qualitative research that guided this study include interpretations of data based on thick, rich, description and analysis of the creation of a holistic picture of individuals, events, processes, and phenomenon; and, research that was reflexive in nature, allowing the

researcher to examine his role, prejudices, and biases within the context of the study (Creswell, 2013; Silverman, 2001). Mayrl and Oeur (2009) note that while recent quantitative studies provide a portrait of “what college students believe and how they practice their faith” (p. 261), “exactly what happens to college students’ [religious] beliefs remains unclear” (p. 265). Speaking of the need for qualitative research in religion and higher education, Lawson (2006) observes “we are in need of more qualitative research . . . much can be learned from careful and rigorous case studies, phenomenological studies, and ethnographic research” (p. 161).

Action Research

Action Research (AR) involves individuals applying the scientific method to real-life problems that may be happening in their environment. AR begins with hopes and dreams and an ever-evolving commitment and desire to create a change for the better (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009). It is fixed in a qualitative research model with the purpose of gaining a greater perspective and understanding of a concern, problem, or topic (Stringer, 2007). While qualitative research methods look for meaning and understanding, AR seeks to solve problems and find solutions that can be implemented (Beebe, 2001). An additional aspect of AR is that it is about practitioners carrying out research within their own discipline, rather than outside observation. Action Research is also a practical, common sense approach to data interpretation that involves collaboration among fellow researchers, stakeholders, as well as the research participants themselves. Action Research is a form of personal inquiry; however it is also collaborative in that researchers work with various people including participants, research partners, and stakeholders.

Action Research is also phenomenological, interpretive, and hermeneutic in nature (Stringer, 2007). It is phenomenological in that it focuses on the way things appear to people through their personal understanding. Within this framework, the researcher's goal is to provide a rich, textured description of lived experience. This is accomplished as the researcher examines the participant's world of experiences as they are lived (Husserl, 1970). AR is also interpretive and hermeneutical as the researcher must study and then reflect on the data.

Phenomenographical Research

Phenomenography is a research method "adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of the world around them. . . phenomenography investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or think about various phenomena" (Marton, 1986, p. 31). Phenomenographies emerged in the 1980s as a reliable form of research and share many of the same principles of a phenomenology (Marton, 1986). Phenomenography includes the use of interviews and reflection, and the search to gain deeper understanding into the meaning of human experiences (Creswell, 2013; Manen, 1990; Walker, 1998).

Phenomenographies also focus on how individuals experience different phenomena, rather than focusing on the phenomenon itself. Walker (1998) explains that a phenomenography should emphasize the way people experience a phenomenon differently. Phenomenographical studies are interested in individual experiences and seek to understand the qualitative ways in which people experience, cognize, and internalize various aspects of phenomena in the world around them (Bowden et al., 1992). Phenomenographical research

takes on a non-dualistic ontological approach, which recommends that researchers do not separate the object and subject from one another (Marton, 1981).

Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2003) notes that “qualitative research is interpretive research” (p.184), with the researcher as the primary device for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Creswell (2013) recommends that researchers identify their biases, personal beliefs, and tenets about their research topic and methods when conducting qualitative research. Silverman (2001) notes that once researchers identify their values and beliefs, they will seek to recognize and bracket potential biases and set aside their assumptions.

I am a life-long member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I have been employed as a religious educator in the S&I division, under the CES department of the LDS church for 15 years. My assignments have included teaching high school, college, and continuing education courses to students ranging from 14 - 65 years old. Through my teaching experiences I have formed many opinions that influence how I view the relationship of religion and education. As an S&I employee, I am expected to accept and adopt very specific beliefs and practices about education. For example, the stated purpose of S&I is to “help youth and young adults understand and rely on the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ, qualify for the blessings of the temple, and prepare themselves, their families, and others for eternal life with their Father in Heaven” (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 2013). As an S&I employee I am expected to implement practices and procedures that support the philosophies established by my employer. Additionally, my employment with S&I is conditional based on my personnel acknowledgment and adherence to their standards and philosophies.

I realize that my socialization into this culture will affect my biases when gathering data, analyzing it, and reporting. Rapid Assessment Processes is a way to triangulate and assuage these biases as colleagues check my attitudes and interpretations to ensure an authentic representation of the participant's voice. To ensure my interpretation and reporting accurately communicated; participants were invited to check the final analysis and report.

Participants

With permission from the local LDS institute director, students from the institute of religion program in eastern Idaho were invited to participate in one of two focus-group discussions. The first focus group consisted of five students, and the second group consisted of eight students. Participants in the focus groups were each given informed consent forms and assured that their participation in the focus group was completely voluntary, and that any information they shared would be kept confidential. Group members were informed that they might also be asked to participate in a follow-up personal interview, which would also be voluntary. Members of the focus group were then invited to share any experiences where they felt their religious beliefs had been challenged while attending a public university. Four of the 15 participants indicated they had little or no experience having their religious beliefs challenged in college and did not show an interest in participating in the personal interviews. Of the existing eight members, six agreed to participate in a follow-up, personal interview. Their participation in the study was dependent upon their desire and availability to speak openly and candidly about their experiences.

Three of the participants were male, and three were female. Of the male participants, one was married and had one child, one was married without any children, and one was single. Two of the male participants were natives of Idaho, and one was a native of Utah.

Two of the male participants had served full-time missions for the LDS Church, and one had not. Of the three female participants, one was married with two children, one was married with one child, and one was single. Two of the female participants were natives of Idaho, and one was a native of New Jersey. None of the female participants had served full-time missions for the LDS Church. The participants represented a variety of academic interests including two Nursing majors, one Computer Science major, one English major, one accounting major, and one Bio-Med Science major. The participants identified themselves as highly religious and felt their religious beliefs had been challenged in a university setting. The parameters for being considered highly religious were drawn from the Pew Forum (Smith, 2011) and defined as one who attends church services weekly and prays daily. The decision to target a strictly LDS population was influenced by the current research on religion and higher education from Darnell and Sherkat (1997), Sherkat and Darnell (1999), and Regnerus and Elder, (2003a).

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews with six participants who are currently enrolled at a public university. The interview process followed the specific design feature of a phenomenography by, first, directing the interviewee towards the phenomenon (having their religious beliefs challenged at college) and, second, asking broad enough questions to “obtain meaningful responses in relation to the aim without forcing a particular structure or way of responding upon the participant” (Bruce et al., 2004, p.146). Data collection also involved a team of three researchers that provided triangulation to the research being conducted (Beebe, 2001). At least two team members were present for both focus group discussions and all six personal interviews. Creswell (2013) explains how “the

nature of an interview sets up an unequal power dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 173). The research team implemented the recommendations of Marshall and Rossman (2011) to “convey the attitude that the participant’s views [were] valuable and useful” (p.145), by creating what Creswell (2013) calls a “collaborative [relationship] where the researcher and the participant approach equality in questioning, interpreting, and reporting” (p.173). All discussions and interviews were digitally recorded and field notes were taken by members of the research team. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants.

Data Analysis

Each recorded interview was transcribed and analyzed following the steps outlined by Marshall and Rossman (2011). The primary researcher personally transcribed each interview, taking care to capture the tone of each interview with the aid of field notes and vocal-speech patterns from the recordings. As Marshall and Rossman (2011) note “the judgments involved in placing something as simple as a period or a semicolon are complex and shape the meaning of the written word and, hence, of the interview itself” (p. 164). Through the use of careful punctuation, the transcripts were written to reflected pauses, hesitations, and emotional intensity within the conversations.

Once the data were transcribed, they were analyzed using In vivo coding (i.e., qualitative analysis software). The research team read the transcripts several times looking for themes. The data were then coded by using words or short phrases from the participant’s own language (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The research team also looked for plausibility, clusters, metaphors, and comparisons (Beebe, 2001; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Limitations

Participants in this study were all enrolled in a public university in eastern Idaho and were selected based on their experiences as college students whose religious beliefs were challenged while attending a public university. Their views about having their faith challenged in a university setting may be different from those attending a private or religious university. All of the participants interviewed shared a common faith (LDS), race (Caucasian), and age bracket (21-27 years). Students representing a different age, ethnic, or religious group may have responded differently. Additionally, as with all qualitative research, this study is not generalizable, but may be transferable (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The reader should recognize the limits of this study when transferring the findings to other religious denominations, other Latter-day Saints, and to other public and private university settings.

Delimitations

This study was limited to currently enrolled college students at a public university in Eastern Idaho. Participants were all practicing members of the LDS Church, and described themselves as having their faith challenged in a university setting. Participants also had to be willing to participate in focus group discussions and personal interviews.

Findings & Analysis

Four themes emerged from the data.

1. Religious beliefs are challenged in a variety of ways.
2. Connecting secular and religious beliefs relieves the tensions caused by cognitive dissonance.

3. Strong support systems are essential to students having their faith strengthened as their beliefs are challenged.
4. Prior experiences play a significant role in how prepared students are to have their beliefs challenged in college

Religious Beliefs Challenged in a Variety of Ways

I first began to see traces of cognitive dissonance during interviews with my participants. The following chart shows the tensions participants experienced while attending college, and also demonstrates the different settings in which participants beliefs were challenged.

Participant: Age: Major:	Angie 25 Nursing	Barbara 22 Accounting	Christy 27 English	Daniel 23 Bio- Med Science	Edward 25 Computer Science	Frank 26 Nursing
Religious beliefs that were challenged:	Validity of the Book of Mormon	General LDS standards and beliefs	The existence of God	General Christian standards; especially morality	Benefits of smoking marijuana	Creationism
The venue in which such beliefs were challenged:	Lectures and reading assignments in an Archeology class	Personal discussions with a sports coach	Writing assignment in an English class	Lectures, debates, and reading assignments in an English class	In class debate in a Critical Thinking and Writing class	Lectures and reading assignment in a Biology class

Angie, a 25-year-old nursing major, was challenged during discussions in a new world anthropology class. The course caused her some tension regarding her belief specifically in a book of scripture accepted by the Latter-day Saints, The Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon claims that Native Americans are a part of the 12 Tribes of Israel. The lectures in her course had “hinted at the religious aspect of how native people got to America.” The professor considered the Native American origins as a pseudo-science. Angie noted how the writers had “just automatically threw that theory out of the book, and didn’t

even consider the fact that it might be a viable explanation.” She further explained “there [were] so many different theories about how people came to America. It has made me stop and think about how the Book of Mormon stories fit in with scientific evidence.” She went on to say “there’s evidence that these people came here 20,000 years ago, or something like that.” Then to her disillusion, Angie reported, “the Book of Mormon [says] like 500 years before Christ came . . .” This tension between ideas confused Angie as she pondered, “maybe it’s true, but for me I just want to know how it all fits in.”

Barbara a 22-year-old accounting major reflected on her first year in college and the tensions between her traditional religious beliefs and a volleyball coach. She reflected on how her volleyball coach was “not religious at all, and he would always put pressure on us to try and explain what we believed.” She noted that his theory was “you can’t believe [something] without trying it, without trying other stuff.” She remembered how the coach “question[ed] everything in my life” which led her to start having her own doubts. Barbara explained that she was not the only member of the LDS church on the volleyball team, and believed other girls struggled as well. She mentioned how all the LDS girls on her team “faltered at some point, whether it was morality or alcohol, or whatever.” Another way Barbara’s coach challenged her religious beliefs was by questioning her understanding of her own beliefs. She explained:

There was an LDS professor on campus that was a really good guy. And he [the coach] would always ask him questions about the Book of Mormon. And then he would come to us and ask us. And we would say . . . ‘Our institute teacher said this.’ And then he would come back by saying what the LDS professor had said. And I just think he was trying to catch us in something. Because he had heard the answer before,

from the other professor, and then he just came and wanted to see if we knew what we were talking about.

Barbara also stated that her experience became more challenging as time went on. She remembered that her second year on the team was more challenged than the first. When asked why that was, she believed “it was just too much, and I just kind of got worn down.”

Christy, a third year English major, felt her religious beliefs were being challenged in a persuasive writing class in which she was enrolled. She explained how some of the reading assignments dealt with the lack of existence of the nature of God. As a result of the class she noted “I think when you have to [read and then] argue both sides of a topic and if you’re teetering at all, if you’re wavering in your testimony and you read some of this stuff, you might say ‘Oh maybe this is true.’” In addition to some of the reading assignments, Christy also mentioned that her professor’s religious beliefs had created an additional challenge. Christy explained the professor recently left the church and openly shared her feelings and ideas to the class about why she left. It wasn’t clear why she left the church, but, as Christy was concerned about the repercussions, particularly that her professor’s personal feelings on religion could affect her grade in the course.

The discussions about God were affected as well as the assignments. Christy remembered, “We [recently] had to write an argumentative essay . . . and I’m really worried I’m going to fail it because my teacher will think it’s too religious.” She also noted, “And now that I think about it, when I was writing the paper I did have it in mind that she has left the church. I did have her in mind.” Christy had to confront the tension between writing to please the professor, or risk receiving a poor grade. This nagging fear challenged the way she conducted herself in class.

Daniel, a 23-year-old sophomore majoring in bio-medical science described an experience where his religious beliefs had been challenged recently. He recalled,

It was this English class, so we had a lot of poetry and a lot of stories; and oftentimes [the instructor] would attack everything that we believed in and would often bring up sexual references that came out of the poetry or stories . . . This guy had a real obsession with these sexual references . . . just the entire tone of his class was pretty rough; very edgy, liberal, anti-religious, just stuff that our church doesn't believe in.

Daniel said the environment was "offensive enough" that an LDS friend who was taking the class with him dropped out. Daniel mentioned his friend had dropped the class shortly after mid-terms because "he just couldn't handle that kind of environment." Daniel went on to say that the only reason he stayed in the class was because he did not want to have to retake it again later. He explained that the professor was "a very good debater who would often lure kids into debate with him and then embarrass them. He was a very smart person." Daniel said that after a while he would find himself leaving class feeling pretty low, "feeling like I was nothing." He went on to say that the professor "would constantly want people to ask questions, and then he would just belittle them." Daniel pointed out that it was difficult "not only to have someone talking about principles that you didn't believe in, but then to belittle you about it. And to show every little thing that was wrong about what you believed in."

Professors were not the only source to challenge the faith of some of the participants. For Edward, it was his peers. Edward's religious beliefs were challenged in a critical thinking and writing class while discussing the benefits of legalizing marijuana. A 25-year-old computer science major, Edward recalled how "we were supposed to be completely objective and look at both sides of the topic." Edward, who described himself as someone with "pretty

strong personal opinions” explained what happened next: “there was one kid in the back who immediately, kind of angrily, piped up and said there was a recent study where college students who were allowed to smoke marijuana had higher class attendance and better grades.” He noted that even though the debate had begun as a classroom discussion, it turned into a singling out between him and another student in the class. Although he felt confident about his personal beliefs concerning the dangers of marijuana, Edward also admitted that there were pressing arguments, what he called “good arguments brought up towards marijuana as being a positive thing” Edward believed that if someone’s mind was “impressionable at all; they could have easily been convinced” that legalizing and smoking marijuana was a good thing.

Frank’s experienced tension between his faith and scientific theory. He was involved a lecture series in a biology class concerning the overwhelming evidence of evolution over creationism. Frank, who is a 26-year-old nursing major, mentioned how the teacher talked frequently about how mankind came from single cell organisms, and delved deeply into evolution. What added to Frank’s challenge was how important the principles of evolution were to the entire course and to some extent, his chosen field of study. He recalled,

It was a pretty big part of the chapter we were studying. We had at least a week and a half of solid lectures just on evolution. But the principles of evolution were applied to every chapter after that. So, the topic of evolution was never out after that. And it probably took at least a month and a half for me to be at ease with it.

Frank experienced the effects of being reared in a protected or sheltered community where theoretical ideas were seldom discussed, and, if they were, it was not on a level that challenged his faith. His first reaction to his Biology professor was to completely reject

everything being taught. “At first I didn’t want to believe my professor . . . I didn’t even want to listen to her lectures, but I knew that in order for me to understand the material, I had to.”

Frank knew, however, that as much as he wanted to reject the subject of evolution, he would have to understand it: “It was really hard for me . . . knowing that if I was going to have to pass a test, or write a paper, I had to know it.”

Connecting Secular and Religious Beliefs Relieves Tensions

Several participants talked about how they connected secular learning with their existing religious beliefs. Angie explained how alert she was to the secular environment, but it did not challenge her faith. She felt a positive connection and expressed, “it can strengthen my own testimony and my own faith . . . by meshing the two, spiritual and secular, and find the truths in things that I’m learning.” She also observed, “Questions are a good thing. Being able to ponder about how the Book of Mormon fits into anthropology.” She also noted, “[This class] has just broadened my question of how these people [Native Americans] came into play.” When asked how she chose to respond to these challenges, she replied, “It’s up to me to be able to go and sift through this information that I have been given, and find the truth out of it.”

Daniel’s experience in his English class also showed a willingness to find connections between secular and religious beliefs. Referring to his professor, he said, “I thought he had good points. I don’t mean everything he said, but I did try and take the good out of what he said. And tried to find the good from where he was coming from.” By the end of the semester he noted, “I feel like the class was good . . . in the end I think it was a good experience. The [final] paper I wrote for that class was probably my favorite paper of any class.”

For Edward, the willingness to consider secular and religious knowledge during a discussion in his critical thinking and writing class came over the legalization of marijuana. Although Edward argued against the benefits of marijuana he noted, “I think people are entitled to believe in what they want to believe in . . . I expect people to bring up opposition.” Rather than becoming defensive or confrontational in the class, he tried to stay as objective as possible. He recalled how a study from Washington State had claimed that college students who smoked marijuana had higher class attendance and better grade improvement. Edward said, “Instead of getting into a [heated debated] . . . I thought, okay, maybe there really are college students who have better attendance because they smoke pot . . . That’s very possible.” Edward went on to explain how a quote he committed to memory from high school had helped him reconcile secular and religious ideas: “It is the mark of an educated man to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

Christy’s experience writing a paper in her persuasive writing class also allowed her to see the value of nonreligious views. She recalled, “We had to argue both sides . . . and that was really hard.” Christy used scriptures and teachings of LDS leaders to emphasize her belief of agency over predestination. However, she felt that in order for her paper to represent fairly both sides of the argument, she needed to research and present the views of atheists. “I had to find atheist websites, and find their opinions too, since I was arguing both sides.” As she conducted her research she was surprised that Mormonism and Atheism had some shared beliefs. “They [atheists] don’t believe in any higher power, but they totally believe you have your agency . . . I learned a lot . . . about the atheist side.”

Although anxieties were experienced while their faith was confronted with new ideas, all of the participants noted some support system or method that provided some stability,

which enabled them to reconcile their mental and emotional conflicts and find what, for them, was a way to return to inward harmony.

Faith Strengthened as Beliefs are Challenged

Frank talked about how his religious beliefs were strengthened after his conviction in creationism was challenged in his biology class. He conceded that “college is a real tough time for people.” He acknowledged the result of tensions felt by students as he said, “It can be a time when your faith can either be strengthened, or you could end up falling away from the church.” Although there were plenty of reasons to lose his faith, he found his faith strengthened because of a network of friends, family members, and church leaders with whom he could discuss difficult questions. “I actually talked to my father-in-law, and we had a really good conversation about evolution.” He continued, “It’s good to have [family and] church leaders who are there who we can ask those tough questions to.” When asked how the experience had strengthened his faith, Frank replied, “I think the biggest thing is that my faith and testimony are based more on the doctrines of the church now. Before, with my [college] experience I had just accepted a lot of the answers that I had heard in church.” Although Frank still had questions about the correlation between evolution and creationism, he was able to work through his challenges.

Edward also admitted that his faith had been shaken at times and was not afraid to admit it. He scoffed, “Some people in the church say . . . that you’ve got to have this strong testimony, that ‘nothing can shake me!’ Well, I get shaken a lot.” But like Frank, Edward also felt his faith was stronger than before college. He exclaimed, “[My faith] is definitely stronger! When my faith is challenged and I make it through, then it’s definitely stronger.”

A Strong Network of Friends

Building a strong network of friends was another way LDS students worked through the tensions from having their beliefs challenged. It was important for Edward to have “an army of people to talk to” when something was bothering him. He managed his tensions by surrounding himself with people from his church and Institute groups. Frank shared some similar sentiments. For him it was “hard to keep the faith in class and on campus.” But once he surrounded himself with people who shared similar values he felt safe to talk about any controversial topic from class, or from his professors.

Barbara shared some of her experiences from her first-year in college. She also discussed the value of having family and friends to serve as a strong support system. While still single, and playing volleyball on scholarship she reflected on a time when she did not have a support system. She talked about how hard it was for her to be surrounded by people who didn’t share the same beliefs as her. She mentioned feeling it was “hard to be around people that don’t believe like you.” Her situation left her feeling like she was all alone dealing with her challenges.

Institute

The LDS Church Institute program was yet another way that college students worked through the trial of having their religious beliefs challenged. Daniel felt the institute program helped him to turn his life around in a moment when he was struggling spiritually. “When I got back to college after my mission, I felt like my faith was doing pretty well . . . But then I felt like it was slowly going down, and these challenging experiences probably didn’t help.” But then Daniel started attending Institute “Once I went to Institute, things got better . . . and now I feel like I’m better than ever.” Daniel further explained “I’m able now to take that little

time out of each day and go back and strengthen my testimony. That is just really important to me.”

Christy and Barbara also emphasized the importance of institute. One factor Christy talked about was the importance of feeling the spirit. She remarked how Institute was the one class she really got excited to attend. She remarked “I feel like I’m learning more, I feel more spiritual.” For Barbara it was not just the institute class, but the example of her teacher that provided the most help. She remarked how it was the faith the Institute director that got her through a lot of her challenges. In referring to the Institute director she noted how “he helped me through a lot of things.” While class discussions were at times intense, they helped her confront her beliefs straight on. She said that her questions were answered. She appreciated, “He wasn’t afraid to say what needed to be said.” It was surprising to discover how important a family connection was to Barbara: “The institute director would bring his wife and kids to activities . . . and I really liked that. It really made you feel like you had family. It kind of joined us together.”

Angie felt institute also answered a lot of the questions she was experiencing in her college courses. She noted how it had relieved her stress about passing her college classes. It was a magnet for her, a force that opened her mind to learning about the scriptures and other important religious topics. Frank also found refuge in the environment of the institute class. He expressed, “Because you can talk about any of those controversial topics we talk about in class. And I can see from others point of view how the church works for them.”

Edward made a direct connection with his religious beliefs being challenged, his faith being strengthened, and the Institute program. He observed:

When my faith is challenged and I make it through, then it's definitely stronger...but I can't help but think of how many [LDS] students would say "not stronger" ...and maybe institute is the reason why it's stronger for me and not stronger for the ones not going to institute?

Edward went on "I need to surround myself with good people, and that's why I go to institute. Those guys are my friends." He also observed "if I didn't associate with the friends like the ones I have in institute, then I would probably have bad friends."

Recommendations for Future College Students

Participants in this study were eager to offer advice to future college students who might have their religious beliefs challenged while in college. Christy suggested, "You have to start younger. You can't just drag your kids to church and say 'you have to do [this].' Rather, help them figure out why church is important." Frank suggested that parents and church leaders need to get specific when it comes to the challenges the youth are going to face, and "then give those students ideas of how to handle those problems." Edward suggested the church could make "more personal contact, more reaching out . . . teenagers need to be surrounded by good people, and have good places to go when those challenges arise."

Angie remarked, "I see a lot of kids coming right out of high school and go to college, and their parents have sheltered them too much throughout their lives." She also noted "I think sheltering your child like that is detrimental to them because [they] are not exposing them to things." Angie also felt that this strategy would only work if youth could have an "open relationship" with their parents by feeling comfortable to ask questions. Barbara agreed confirmed the idea of LDS youth being too sheltered prior to enrolling in

college. In reflecting on her own experience she recalled “I was never challenged at home. [The gospel] was never questioned in my home, and I never had to make a decision for myself.” She also noted “once I left [home], I didn’t know how to handle having my faith challenged.” She also shared some insight she had from a magazine article:

I read in a church magazine article about how you have to be allowed to fail. I think it was a daughter who was going to play a sport on Sunday, and her mom had to let her do it, so that she could know what that was like. I think that’s a great idea. Sometimes you have to fail where you’re a little bit guided and watched over like at home. And then you can figure out how to get through it.

Discussion

Data from this study reveals that LDS college students often try to connect their religious beliefs with current secular learning as a way of dealing with cognitive dissonance. Frye (2008) describes the phenomena as students choosing to enlarge their mindsets without allowing their religious beliefs to become corroded. Angie, for example, chose to let her understanding of the origins of Native Americans be expanded, rather than threatened by the curriculum in her anthropology class. Christy gained a new perspective on her understanding of free will and agency by objectively studying atheism. Daniel learned to think about his religious beliefs more openly because he was willing to listen to the views of what he called “an edgy, liberal professor.” Each of these participants said that their understanding and mindsets had been enlarged and expanded, without having to compromise their religious beliefs.

Maryl and Oeur (2009) note that it was once believed “the expanded horizons and exposure to new ideas that college provides were thought to lead students to question and

ultimately abandon their traditional religious beliefs” (p. 264). But more recent studies (Hurtado et al., 2007; Lee, Matzkin, & Arthur, 2006; Uecker et al., 2007) show that the effects of higher education on one’s religious beliefs may not be as detrimental as previously thought in certain conditions. Balancing the tensions of holding on to traditional religious beliefs and accepting new secular ideas can be a challenge for any individual committed to preserving their religious identity. How well students are prepared to deal with the challenges they will face in college may be a significant factor in whether they expand, or abandon their religious beliefs. The results of this study also suggest that students who are properly prepared for college, and have the right support structure during college experience an increase of their faith.

Most of these students came to the university not yet having their faith and religious perspectives tested as Braskamp (2007) reported as a common trend across the nation. Sherkat (2007) narrowed this assumption to sectarian Christians (including Latter-day Saints) who “...spend most of their lives in a segregated religious community, isolated from people of different races, ethnicities, and religious traditions” (p. 5). Participants in this study who were raised in the most segregated religious communities also experienced the most inner tensions when their beliefs were challenged. Likewise, those who came from communities where the LDS church was less prominent showed a much higher tolerance for accepting new ideas.

Angie and Christy had the most diverse backgrounds of the six participants, and appeared to deal with having their beliefs challenged better than the others. Both participants were reared in communities where they were in the minority as Latter-day Saints. Later on, Angie struggled in college when she attended a private LDS church school. In speaking of

her time in that university, she remarked how she “never felt like I belonged because I didn’t fit the cookie cutter [Mormon] mold.” She also recalled how “you don’t get talked to, unless you fit the mold.” Conversely, Angie’s experience at a public university was much more positive. She noted “all in all, I like the fit of a [state] college better.” If Angie and Christy were the most prepared of the participants to face new theories and philosophies, Barbara and Frank represented the least prepared participants. Barbara discussed how the segregated religious community she was reared in did not adequately prepare her for college. She noted “before I left [for college] I felt like the church said ‘keep your distance away from those things that aren’t good’, but you can’t always do that [in college].” She also noted that because of the overly protective environment she grew up in, “it was hard to be around people that didn’t believe like me.”

While Angie seemed to enjoy the challenge of connecting her religious beliefs with secular knowledge, Barbara struggled with such a notion. She remarked “I feel like I’m just not quite as confident in a lot of things [and] it’s hard to change that questioning mindset.” She also noted “I feel like I haven’t bounced back to where I was before I left for college. I feel like I’m still battling that.” Unfortunately, Barbara saw her religion and the secular ideas she studied in college as adversaries that could never peaceably coexist.

Like Barbara, Frank was also reared in a sheltered LDS community. He noted an additional challenge he saw many high school and college students face. He remarked “I often felt growing up in the church that . . . there was a very bad attitude towards ever expressing doubts about your testimony.” He continued “the message was you’re either 100%, or you’re nothing, and if you ever had doubts, it wasn’t acceptable to say those things.” Frank also discussed how relieved he was when he finally heard a general authority,

a high ranking church official; say it was acceptable to have feelings of uncertainty from time to time about your faith. Edward also described the negative attitudes church members had towards someone who would ever dare publically questioning their faith. He remarked,

There's this belief [in the church] that you've got to have this strong testimony, that 'nothing can shake me' and that there's something wrong with you if you've ever doubted your beliefs.

This type of attitude may be more prevalent among local LDS church leaders than other Christian denominations due to its lay ministry status (Newsroom, 2014). This may also be due to the fact that local LDS church leaders, who profess to have strong testimonies, may be ones with low levels of formal education. Many times these leaders have not had their religious beliefs challenged in an intellectual setting. As a result, they dismiss church members with sincere questions about their faith as rebel-rousers and pot stirrers. This attitude by local church leaders can have a harmful effect on people who are simply seeking answers to their questions.

A favorable relationship between higher education and religiosity can exist when individuals have access to a proper support system that allows them to reevaluate their religious practice within a safe environment. Lehman (1972) found, in his study of college and university faculty members, that academic and religious commitments were likely to be mutually exclusive. Other studies have also shown that higher education strengthens religious faith (Hill, 2011; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007; McFarland, Wright, & Weakliem, 2010). These findings support the theory by Shiner (1967) that it is possible for both secular and religious influences to raise to higher levels of intensity at virtually the same time. Additional studies have shown that higher education transforms religious faith. Cherry,

DeBerg, & Porterfield (2001) found that students began to identify themselves as spiritual rather than religious. Sherkat (1998) and Lee (2002) both note that academic and social encounters at college caused students to reevaluate their beliefs.

All institutions of higher education, both public and private, serve a public purpose. Shapiro (2005) notes “the resulting heterogeneity of America's institutions of higher education not only matches the wide spectrum of achievement and aspiration of entering students, but is one of the principal sources of strength and vitality of American higher education” (p. 1). Religion provides a sense of meaning and purpose. Stott (1983) notes “knowledge and mastery of both self and environment through obedience to divine law is the basis of eternal progression” (p. 1). The amalgamation of higher education and religious devotion tends to transform the naïve, unapprised religionists and invites them to exam their own religious beliefs in a more critical and thoughtful manner. The result is a population that can explain their faith with a degree of intellectual confidence (Albrecht & Heaton, 1998).

Implication for Future Research

Future research on the relationship between higher education and religiosity within Mormonism might address the following:

- Studying the experiences of LDS college students and graduates who left the faith after having their religious beliefs challenged.
- Exploring how men and women handle cognitive dissonance (from having ones religious beliefs challenged) differently.
- Studying the experiences of Latter-day Saints who did not t attend college, and the feelings of relegation and possible resentment towards those with college degrees.

- Examining to what extent an LDS mission may prepare college students who have their religious beliefs challenged.

Conclusion

Religion and higher education in America share a history, which began early in the 17th century with the founding of Harvard University as a way for Puritan ministers to train future clergymen for the ministry. During the 18th century, an age of enlightenment revolutionized the fields of political philosophy, industrial technology, science, and education. The result was a societal reform using reason to challenge beliefs built on tradition and faith, and to acquire knowledge through the scientific method. Eventually, religious dominance in the universities declined and gave way to secularism. Secular learning continued to grow in popularity throughout the 19th century, being strengthened by the advancement of scientific inquiry (Marsden, 1994; Perko, 1991; Sloan, 1994). At the dawn of the 20th century, Christianity saw itself as being overwhelmed by a humanism that was incompatible with supernaturalism, an essential traditional religious belief (Klassen & Zimmermann, 2006).

The growing popularity of advanced degrees is drawing more and more Christians to college (Greenstone & Looney, 2012). Many of these students have spent the majority of their lives in “segregated religious communities, isolated from people of different races, ethnicities, and religious traditions” (Sherkat, 2007, p. 5). These students may experience significant challenges to their religious beliefs, which have primarily been influenced by their parents’ point of view (Braskamp, 2007). As they continue through college, many of them start to see matters of their own religiosity and religious practices with more complexity than ever before. They begin to identify themselves as seekers of truth, and are more likely to

question what they once accepted to be fundamental to their faith (Plante & Thoresen, 2007). Additionally, their religious beliefs become more personal and less formal as many find their form of worship change from the customary style of their childhood into a more inclusive and diverse set of spiritual contemplation or meditation (Braskamp, 2007).

One religious organization that emphasizes the importance of higher education is the LDS Church. From its beginnings in the early 19th century, Mormonism has placed a strong emphasis on educating the spirit as well as the mind. Snow (1901) states, “Wherever Mormon settlements have sprung up, the village school has been among the first things thought of and provided for” (p. 257). Snow also notes, “The whole idea of Mormonism is improvement – mentally, physically, morally, and spiritually. No half-way education suffices for the Latter-day Saint” (p. 257). Although LDS youth are generally encouraged to pursue a college education, many are not sufficiently prepared to have their faith challenged while at college. The challenges of university life can take their toll on students by influencing them away from their religious practices, resulting in several leaving their faith.

The question of how one’s religiosity is influenced by their college experience is as important as it is far reaching. Furthermore, situations that challenge students’ beliefs have the potential to create a significant level of confusion, anxiety, and frustration. The purpose of this study was to gain insight and understanding from the experiences of LDS college students whose religious beliefs are challenged while attending a public university. Three main categories that emerged from the research were (a) religious beliefs are challenged in a variety of ways, (b) college students tend to connect secular and religious beliefs in order to make sense of their world, and (c) religious faith can be strengthened as beliefs are challenged, when a proper support system is present. These themes offer insight into how

college students deal with having their religious beliefs challenged, and what resources are available to them as they seek to maintain their faith at college. The findings in this study support the theory that those who attend college reexamine their beliefs, but do not necessarily abandon their faith (Bowman & Small, 2011; Hill, 2011; Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; Regnerus & Elder, 2003). Frye (2008) describes the task many college students face as “navigating the treacherous waters of challenges to their existing [religious] beliefs” (p. 6). The discussions and interviews from participants in this study reveal that family, friends, ecclesiastical leaders, and religious educators are all in important positions to help these students through justifying any cognitive dissonance they may experience and find the harmony and peace they desire as they increase in their learning mentally and emotionally.

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CHAPTER 2: RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

(W. Mitchell Simmons, James Williams, & Nathan Williams)

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 (Braskamp, 2007; Laurence, 1999; 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 Schieman

(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 (Gorman, 2001).

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 is 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 a 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 became 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, majoring in chemistry 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 always have 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 3 – THE VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG LATTER-DAY SAINTS

(James G Williams)

An old saying among Christians, made popular once through cross stitches and more recently Facebook posts, Tweets, and hashtags states that “he never said it would be easy, he only said it would be worth it.” While no one really knows who “he” is or what “it” is, the quote applies well for college students. No one said college would be easy, but data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Survey (2013) confirms that it is worth it. The report shows that unemployment rates are nearly twice as high (7.5%) among persons with no college, as opposed to only 4.0% among persons with at least a bachelor’s degree. Additionally, the median weekly earnings between the same two groups were \$651.00 among persons with no college, compared to \$1108.00 among those with at least a bachelor’s degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics Survey, 2013). Despite the rising cost of a college education, most experts agree it is still worth it, and the general population seems to agree (Greenstone & Looney, 2012).

While better wages and an increased standard of living are positive outcomes for college graduates, there is some evidence of an additional benefit for those who embrace a religious tradition. The benefit is that one’s devotion to their religion (i.e. prayer, church attendance, scripture study, etc.) increases as they gain more formal education (Smith, 2011). While this phenomenon does not apply to all religious groups equally, it appears to be especially true among Jews, Muslims, and Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormons) (McGreal, 2014; Smith 2011). For the purpose of this paper and the research reported herein, the focus is on the Mormon religion, or Mormons.

In a recent study 90% of LDS college graduates indicated that religion was important to them (Smith, 2011). Smith notes that among Latter-day Saints with a high school education, just 70% felt religion was an important part of their lives. With positive financial benefits coupled with increased religious devotion, it is no wonder then why leaders of the LDS church strongly encourage their members to attain a college education.

Although the majority of LDS graduates appear to grow stronger in their faith (PEW reference), many also lose their faith along with the general student population (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). The diminishment of religiosity among the general student population was reported by Bryant, Choi, and Yasuno (2003) who found that by the end of the first year of college, students are less likely to “attend religious services, discuss religion, and pray . . . relative to when they first entered [college]” (p.732). Saenz and Barrera (2007) note the secularizing effect that the aggregate experience of college has on students. Their findings reveal that fourth year students discussed religion with peers less, attended church less frequently, and considered themselves to be less religious than during their first year of college. Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) focused primarily on religious behaviors among college students and reported a significant decline in church attendance among that population.

Religiosity and the Transitional Phase to Adulthood

The decline in religious behavior may be partially due to the transformation that occurs when young people become adult learners and shift from adolescents into adulthood (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). Due to the vulnerability of young minds, college represents a time when students may experience a shift in worldviews, which will impact them both emotionally and intellectually. Deep changes experienced during those years often

determine the student's professional and personal futures. In speaking of this transition, Braskamp (2007) observes that as students advance through college and mature, they will "[begin] to view matters of their own religiosity and religious practices with more complexity and diversity than before" (p. 2).

Their spiritual focus shifts away from authoritative power and more toward themselves as individuals. Their religious beliefs become more personal and less formal, and they are more likely to question what they once accepted unwittingly to be fundamental to their faith (Plante & Thoresen, 2007). As a result of this spiritual shift, their form of worship changes from what might be deemed as the naïve beliefs of their childhood into a more broad and complex spiritual contemplation and meditation. Associations with others of more diverse philosophies tend to lessen the formality of worship and a more casual acceptance of all beliefs. If worship continues, it takes place in less structured environments (Braskamp, 2007).

But these religious transformations do not always happen smoothly. Depending on the student and their familial and social norms, they may not be prepared for the challenge of confronting a variety of theories, ideologies, cultures, ethnicities, and sexual orientations that contradict their beliefs. Because they may not be prepared for the invitation to investigate new theories and philosophies, they may withdraw and favor seclusion—a time to reflect and attempt to make sense of their new world.

Naturally, students want to fit in with peers and avoid feeling inferior or appearing closed-minded to new ideas (Plante & Thoresen, 2007), but the flood of new thoughts and feelings can create an inward tension that may lead to mental challenges (Ashurst-McGee, 1999). While they may have once exhibited strong faith and high levels of religiosity, the

inability to communicate thoughts and ideas can eventually lead to a weakening of their faith. Consequently, an attempt to reconcile differences between the religious ideas from their past and the more secular ideas they may learn in college (Maryl & Oeur, 2009). While the most important decisions regarding one's future takes place within the silent chambers of the mind and heart, it is in those unquantifiable spaces where one decides whether to abandon, or strengthen their faith.

Religiosity and Cognitive Dissonance

At this point of reconciliation—a period of deep reflection—students may begin to experience what psychologists call cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1985). Tavis and Aronson (2007) define cognitive dissonance as “a state of tension that occurs whenever a person holds two cognitions that are psychologically inconsistent” (p. 13). In this instance, the tension is held between deeply entrenched religious beliefs and new worldviews that suggest religious faith is outdated, limiting, and coercive. For example, a college student in a geology class who has been taught creationism by their parents and religious leaders must now deal with the scientific theory that the earth is billions of years old and not created by an intelligent being.

A basic assumption of cognitive dissonance is that people want harmony in their lives by having their perceptions match their reality (Ryan, 2010). Festinger (1985) explains, “The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance” (p. 3). When two beliefs held simultaneously do not match, individuals typically avoid circumstances or reject facts that may intensify feelings of discomfort or dissonance. This experience intensifies when beliefs are deep and strong. Frye (2008) suggests that when one's religious beliefs are personal and

connected to one's character, situations that challenge such beliefs have the potential of generating high levels of dissonance. When the tensions are highest, individuals will avoid circumstances or reject facts that may intensify feelings of discomfort or dissonance (Festinger, 1985).

But avoidance is not always possible in a university setting where students cannot simply walk away from a class solely because it challenges their views. When beliefs are challenged, and the arguments against one's beliefs are reasonable, rational, and convincing, students may be inclined to abandon their former beliefs and adopt new ones. This is particularly the case among those within Christianity, including Mormons, who enter the university having come from sheltered communities where they have not had their religious beliefs challenged (Braskamp, 2007; Clydesdale, 2007; Putnam & Campbell, 2012).

Caplovitz and Sherrow (1977) also speak of the risk the university poses to religious students, particularly those who come from sheltered communities. Their report describes college campuses and curriculum as "a breeding ground for apostasy" (p. 109) and Hunter (1983) affirms, "it is a well-established fact that [higher] education, even Christian education, secularizes" (p.132). In the case of Mormonism, an in-depth study by O'Dea (1957) notes that the challenge of religious beliefs is not only inevitable, but also devastating for young Latter-day Saints attending college. He observes that LDS youth have been taught by their church to seek and value knowledge and learning from a very young age. But O'Dea also foretells of a "religious crisis Mormonism is [bound] to encounter" within higher education (p. 22). He reasons that it is the "college undergraduate curriculum that becomes the first line of danger to Mormonism in its encounter with modern learning" (p.26). He continues to shed

a bleak light as he predicts the LDS youth will face a “profound danger” as their religious beliefs are undermined in pursuit of higher education (p. 22).

Until recently, it was commonly believed that pursuing a college degree undermined one’s religious faith. But while a number of current studies confirm the idea that college has some negative effects on students’ religious practices, there is far less agreement about the effect college has on student’s religious views. Mayrl & Oeur (2009) note that “while evidence strongly suggests that religious practice declines during college years, there is far less consensus about the effect of college on student belief” (264). Uecker et al. (2007) suggest that a decline in church attendance and other religious practices may not be an indication of apostasy, but rather a reflection of “the late-night orientation of college life” and concerns by students of “appearing to be too religious in front of their peers” (p.1683). In other words, a decline in religious activity during college may have more to do with social pressure than with religious disbelief or apostasy caused by cognitive dissonance.

Furthermore, Clydesdale (2007) argues that cognitive dissonance is a basic step in college students further developing their social, political, and religious identities. Additionally, Frye (2008) notes that when students have strong support system of friends and mentors, cognitive dissonance can actually have a positive effect on their faith. One example of this type of support system for LDS college students is the Institute of Religion program.

Religiosity and the LDS Institute Program

The Institutes of religion are education programs for all LDS college-aged students, and are located in buildings near many public universities worldwide. Most Institute teachers hold advanced degrees and are typically chosen from among the ranks of full-time seminary teachers with years of classroom experience. The first LDS Institute program was established

in 1926 in Moscow, Idaho adjacent to the University of Idaho with 25 students. Today the Institute program is considered the most effective church sponsored program for reinforcing the faith of LDS college students (Seminaries & Institutes of Religion, 2014).

Although the Institute program offers many advantages to college students, enrollment numbers are dismal, which may be a reflection of the overall decline of religiosity among the general student population (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003). Currently, less than 20% of all college age students in the church enroll in an Institute class, and of that group only 30% meet the attendance requirement for class credit. Even more concerning is the fact that only 5% of those who attend Institute will earn enough credits to graduate from the program (Seminaries & Institutes of Religion, 2014). Unfortunately the Institute program, up to this point, has only been able to reach a fraction of the students it aims to serve.

All religion teachers within the Church Educational System (CES) are expected to share the same objective of helping as many youth and young adults as possible, “understand and rely on the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ...and prepare themselves...for eternal life with their Father in Heaven” (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 2013). As a religious educator, it has been my experience that while the LDS Church and CES has done an excellent job of telling students why and how to go to college (Education: Your Key To Opportunity, 2006), they have not spent much time telling local church leaders and parents how to prepare their children for the challenges of college, nor emphasizing the importance of the Institute program. It was with this awareness in mind that I, along with two other religious educators CES, Nathan Williams and Mitch Simmons, formed a research team and set out to better understand the current challenges of LDS college students and graduates by using qualitative methods to gather data and synthesize ideas.

Our research was a collaborative effort conducted as a partial fulfillment of requirements for a doctoral program at the University of Idaho. The team conducted three independent qualitative case studies including one pilot study, two focus groups, and 19 semi-structured interviews. Both students and professors from public and church owned universities participated in the research, and each individual study was directed at a specific LDS population within higher education. All discussions and interviews were recorded, field notes were taken by members of the research team, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. The study by Nathan Williams will be hereafter labeled Study 1. Nathan's focus was on educational professionals who graduated with doctoral degrees from non-religiously affiliated universities and are now employed within the ranks of academia across the United States. The study by Mitch Simmons will hereafter be labeled Study 2, which focused on undergraduate students currently enrolled at a private, large university sponsored by the LDS Church. Study 3 was conducted by me, and focused on undergraduate students enrolled at a public university in the western United States. Within each individual study, the research team also examined the transition from adolescence to adulthood experienced by college students. Once the three independent studies were completed, the research team conducted a secondary qualitative analysis in an effort to better understand the challenges LDS youth face during college.

Recommendations for Stakeholders

Data from the three independent case studies (Creswell, 2013) and secondary qualitative analysis (Jensen & Allen, 1996) offer valuable insight into how college can become a faith- building, rather than faith-killing experience for LDS youth. Based on the findings of these studies, three areas where stakeholders can improve are: (1) the willingness

of church leaders, CES instructors, and parents to discuss difficult topics (2) allow student's faith to be challenged while in a safe environment, (3) increase enrollment in the LDS Institute program during college.

Be Willing to Discuss Difficult Topics

The first area of improvement is a willingness of CES teachers, ecclesiastical leaders, and parents to discuss difficult topics with their youth. Interviews from all three studies revealed that a majority of students are not prepared to have their religious beliefs challenged in college. Karen, a college professor from Study 1 observed that LDS youth are not equipped to logically discuss topics such as same-sex marriage, evolution, humanism and atheism (Braskamp, 2007). Barbara, an undergraduate student from Study 3 explained how unprepared she was at handling some of the "difficult topics and hard questions" her first year of college. She noted how she was "totally unprepared" when a coach asked her about why she held certain religious convictions. She had very few answers to the "bombardment of questions" he asked her about her faith. She explained how that experience eventually led her to seriously doubt her religious convictions. Although the event had occurred years earlier in her college career, she said she was still feeling the "long-term negative effects" of her religious naivety.

Steven, a college professor from Study 1 reminisced about being "sadly unprepared" to discuss the new theories and philosophies that awaited him in higher education. He discovered it was not that his college professors despised his faith or religion, but rather the "naïve, unquestioned, and unexamined faith that [he] had brought with him to college." He noted that "my parents probably could have done so much more to prepare me for the challenges of college." He described how he coped with this problem by "quickly

outgrowing my childhood faith and moving on to something more mature.” Steven described this growth as an important step in allowing him to engage in the kind of intelligent conversations that were expected to take place at the university he attended. Although he eventually moved to that more mature level of faith, the process was not easy. Steven first had to experience what he called a “crisis of faith” that took several years to work through. However, through that experience his faith and religious convictions were strengthened in a way that “may not have been possible by not attending college.”

Daniel, an undergraduate student from Study 3, suggested that CES could improve the practice of discussing difficult topics by having the seminary program offer a “crash course on life” the last semester of a student’s senior year of high school. He suggested using current talks from general authorities, high ranking church officials, that address controversial topics students would likely encounter in college. Jason, an undergraduate student from Study 2 added that in addition to reviewing current difficult topics, discussions with high school students need to be “very direct regarding the college life they are going to experience.” Along those lines, Steven notes, “It’s not that the youth are saying, ‘oh I found this fact and it’s shocking’”. Rather they are saying ‘oh I found this shocking fact that they’ve kept hidden from me all these years.’” Jason thought that while the church “does a great job with [its] website and being able to make so much information accessible”, it needs to be conversational, not just informational.

An undergraduate student from Study 3 named Frank also commenting on the value of using the Internet to provide information said, “If a particular topic comes up, kids need to know where to go. Whether it’s finding the information on LDS.org, or elsewhere, sometimes they need help finding those resources.” However, knowing what resources are

available and how to access them is only part of the equation. Kelsey, student from Study 2 spoke of the need for teenagers to have a more personal connection with the topics being discussed. She suggested that “if they could have that personal experience with each controversial topic, and then know exactly where to go back to it. I feel like that could help [high school] seniors.” Karen remarked “it’s important that when youth come across questions or problems about their religion that they don’t run away or sneak around the topic, but rather face it with the confidence that answers can be found.”

These comments illustrate why parents, church leaders, and CES instructors need to help young people examine how their religious convictions mesh with seemingly contradictory topics (Frye, 2008). Doing so will give young people the confidence they will need to talk openly about their faith once they enter college. These suggestions would require stakeholders to be more aware of the current issues college students are facing and then discuss them with their high school students. This could be accomplished by using in-service and training meetings to keep leaders, teachers, and parents up to date on current issues as well as current instruction from church leaders.

Allow Faith to Be Challenged in a Safe Environment

The idea of having one’s faith challenged in a safe environment is another way youth can be better prepared for college. Gorman (2001) notes it is “a surrounding, safe people environment” that is essential to helping youth move through the “phase of questioning and risking” to get to a higher plane (p. 103). Home is one of the best places where young people’s faith can be challenged in a safe environment. Christy, an undergraduate student from Study 3 observed that many LDS youth come out of high school “having been sheltered by their parents for too much of their lives” and haven’t had their faith challenged. She

observed that while parents strive to protect their children from the “evils of the world”, they are “unfortunately sending them off to college unprepared to face an array of new challenges”.

Barbara noted, “Although some people are challenged at home, unfortunately I never was.” As she reminisced about her childhood she recalled how religion was never questioned in her family. She also remarked how she “never had to make a decision for herself.” She went on to explain how her lack of religious experiences at home had left her feeling unprepared for the challenges of college. She observed that “sometimes you have to fail where you’re a little bit guided and watched over like at home, [so that] you can figure out how to get through it on your own.”

An undergraduate student from Study 2 named McKenzie recalled reading an article that discussed the importance of allowing children to fail in a safe environment. She summarized the article by saying “sometimes it is okay to fail where you can be guided and watched over by parents and mentors. Allowing young people to work through trials and challenges in a safe environment will help them later on.” She also offered a suggestion for using the seminary program to accomplish this by having “a devil’s advocate day” the idea being that students have someone question them, and then requiring the students to explain their position. This process can be most effective in a home, seminary, or church setting where students could be challenged in their faith, yet also carefully guided.

Another important aspect of challenging faith in a safe environment is having the right resources and knowing where to go for answers. Edward, an undergraduate student from Study 3 remarked that college is a time when “faith can either really be strengthened, or you could end up falling away from the church. You start asking some of the tough questions

of life and it's important to know where to find the answers." He believed it was important to get "very specific" with high school kids about exactly what types of challenges they will face, and then "giving them some ideas on how to handle those challenges."

Additionally, young people need a place where they can feel safe to "ask tough questions and then work through the process of making sense of the world without feeling judged." Unfortunately, there is a subgroup of LDS people, especially within CES, that is quick to label those with questions as doubters and rebel-rousers. Maintaining a safe environment with an undercurrent of antagonism can prove to be challenging. Karen had experienced that antagonism firsthand as a young college student at one of the LDS church's private colleges. Her idea of a "safe place" was more about the type of people she chose to associate with. She recalled how helpful it was to have positive role models and mentors who were willing to "listen to people with new ideas rather than just condemn them." Karen remarked how she "had role models all around me who had thought things through, and it hadn't ended their lives." Such role models gave her the confidence to "examine and question my faith at a deeper level" than she had previously done. Having positive, encouraging, and open-minded mentors and role models in the church will help young people feel safe as they work through difficult topics. One place where this "safe environment" can exist is in the LDS Institutes or religion.

Encourage Enrollment in Institute

Participants from all three studies spoke of the advantages of being enrolled in the Institute program. Steven, for example described the Institute program he attended as a young college student as a type of religious community where he could "put [his] academic learning and religious growth in perspective." The Institute program also provides social

interaction, leadership training, and service opportunities for college students that can also be helpfully as they experience cognitive dissonance. One LDS leader L. Tom Perry (1997) in speaking of the benefits of Institute remarked “I know the power that comes from associations in the Institute program. It has enriched my life, and I know it will do the same for [others]” (p. 61). Other participants described Institute as a social environment that allowed people with similar beliefs to talk openly and freely about the challenges of college life. Angie, an undergraduate student from Study 3 explained how the Institute program helped her to identify who the other LDS students on campus were. Knowing who other LDS students were was beneficial for her since she “desired to be around and talk with people with the same values.” Barbara called the Institute her “home away from home.” She described the program as a proxy family for her while she was at college. She recalled how the Institute director would often bring his family to the Institute’s extra-curricular activities. She also noted, “I really liked that he did that. It made you feel like you had a family. It kind of joined us together.” John, a professor from Study 3 believed that college students who are able to associate with peers of similar beliefs, whether religious or otherwise, have an increased resolve to maintaining their values.

Beyond the social aspect of Institute, there is also a spiritual feature that participants discussed during interviews. One of the beliefs of the LDS faith is that people can be guided by a spiritual power—an inner feeling or impression one has within them that guides them in decisions and provides internal comfort and peace. This spiritual power may be believed by some to be one’s conscience, but Latter-day Saints also believe it to be the Holy Spirit. They also believe the influence of the Holy Spirit is strengthened in one’s life through private and public worship. Perry (1997) alludes to the influence of the Holy Spirit in the LDS Institute

program when he refers to the program as a “shield of protection” that keeps participants free from the enticements and lures of the world (p. 62). Angie remarked how Institute provided that spiritual guidance as she received answers to her prayers while attending classes. Christy explained that she was able to get answers to many of her questions about faith and religion by talking to her Institute instructors. She expressed, “If I have difficult questions about the church, I know I can always go to them for answers.” She noted how just being in the Institute building and around people with common values and beliefs helped her at times when she was questioning her religious views.

For many participants, Institute was a place to increase spiritual understanding and resolve conflicts when they experienced tensions between religious beliefs and secular ideas. Others also enjoyed the relaxed and low stress atmosphere Institute programs provide to college students. Barbara remarked that because she was not pressured to pass the class for college credit, she could be more open to learning from the Spirit. She observed, “I’m more open to learning about the scriptures, and just wanting to be [in Institute].” Christy discussed how being a part of the Institute program had strengthened her faith while taking challenging classes in college. She referred to her Institute class as “the one class that I get excited to come to. Even when it’s early in the morning, I still get excited to come to Institute.” She also said she enjoyed attending Institute and learning more about her religion because it made her “feel more spiritual.” She believed that increased feeling of spirituality gave her a “calm assurance” that it was okay to have questions about her faith.

Frank recalled that while he could not remember how he initially found out about the Institute program, once he did find, he took full advantage of the opportunities within the program. He also offered a very practical suggestion as a way to improve Institute enrollment

among LDS students. He suggested announcing Institute class times early enough in the school year for students to build their schedules with an Institute in mind. He believed that students who “aren’t aware of the different Institute class times when they are setting their schedules are probably not going to take an Institute class.” Daniel noted “because I found out about [Institute] early, and I was able to work my schedule around it, I was able to attend.” He also suggested that CES faculty should “let students know, before they get to college, that their school does have Institute, and these are the times when classes are available.” This could be accomplished by keeping the local Institute websites current. Personnel from each Institute program should be assigned to keep their webpages up-to-date and relevant. While CES maintains a website for all the Institute of religion programs worldwide, it is up to local administrators to keep information such as class schedules up to date and current. Unfortunately, too often the information for registration and class schedules is old and outdated.

Conclusion

The purpose of this report is to help stakeholders better understand the challenges currently faced by LDS youth in college. This report also describes the relationship between religiosity and higher education in an effort to put the current challenges of college students in proper context. Both students and professors from public and church-owned universities from across the nation participated in the studies.

Data from studies 1, 2, and 3 supports the idea that college students often reexamine their religious beliefs, but do not necessarily forsake their faith (Bowman & Small, 2011; Hill, 2011). However, a majority of university students who have deep religious and spiritual commitments come to college ill-equipped to have their beliefs challenged, and Latter-day

Saints are no exception (Albrecht & Heaton, 1998; Maryl & Oeur, 2009). While many LDS youth are urged by parents and church leaders to attend college, most are not sufficiently prepared to have their religious beliefs tested in a university setting (Henderson & Cooke, 2012).

This state of unpreparedness can lead students to undergo feelings of anxiety and frustration as they experience cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, the degree of dissonance one feels varies depending on the severity of inconsistency between the two sets of beliefs. In other words, the greater the dissonance one experiences, the more motivation there is to resolve the conflict (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). As Tavriss and Aronson (2007) affirm: “Dissonance is bothersome under any circumstance, but it is most painful to people when an important element of their self-concept is threatened – typically when they do something that is inconsistent with their view of themselves” (p. 29). Because religion is a significant factor in how Latter-day Saints identify themselves (Smith, 2011), dissonance over one's religious beliefs are especially burdensome. These challenges can take their toll on college students by influencing them away from their religious practices. However, if students resolve the issues causing the cognitive dissonance, it can lead to a strengthening of their faith (Gorman, 2001).

The process of resolving such tensions may explain why LDS students who complete college eventually show an increase in religious practices over their less educated counterparts (Smith, 2011). Stott (1983) indicates that religious behaviors such as personal prayer and weekly church attendance rose with educational attainment (p. 7). Similarly to Stott, Albrecht and Heaton (1998) report that higher levels of education are often connected with higher levels of religious practices. They note “highly educated Mormons are more likely to pray frequently, to have strong religious beliefs and to attend meetings, suggesting

that devotion is even more important for those with higher levels of education than those with lower educations” (Albrecht & Heaton, 1998, p. 12).

Smith (2011) found that “Mormons who have graduated from college display the highest levels of religious commitment (84%) followed by those with some college education (75%)” (p. 37). The report also notes that “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” (Smith, 2011, p. 37). Data from Albrecht and Heaton, (1998) and Phillips and Cragun (2008) support the idea that while attending college may have a short-term negative effect on religious practices, obtaining a degree appears to have a long-term positive effect on religious devotion.

But simply attending or graduating from college does not guarantee greater religious devotion. However, certain factors when properly implemented can improve the probability that college will be a faith strengthening experience. First is the willingness of parents and church leaders to openly discuss with young people difficult topics that they will likely face in college. Next, is to safely challenge the faith of young people while in protected environments like home or church. Both these practices will prevent the over-sheltering of youth, and prepare them both spiritually and cognitively to face the array of theories, philosophies, and ideologies that contradict their beliefs. Once young people leave home and attend college, the LDS Institute program becomes the most valuable resource in helping them maintain and develop their faith

Although this report only scratches the surface of how one’s religiosity is influenced by their college experience, its recommendations for helping students work through such challenges are practical and worthwhile. Young people who have been sufficiently prepared

to have their religious beliefs questioned in college, and who have a strong support system of people to help answer such questions as they arise, will likely experience a deepening of their faith and religious devotion.

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CHAPTER 4 – CONCLUSION

(James G Williams)

The PP-EdD program at the University of Idaho (U of I) has provided personal and professional opportunities that were beyond my expectations. Three things made this doctoral program a positive and successful experience for me. First, was the dedication of the U of I in maintaining a first-rate program in spite of the cohorts distance from the main campus in Moscow, Idaho. Various U of I faculty and administrators from Boise, Moscow, and Coeur d’Alene made concerted efforts to travel to Rexburg, Idaho each semester in order to establish a more personal relationship with the group. Visits from professors and administrators from the U of I’s College of Education added a personal touch to the remote classroom experience. The use of technology, including video conferencing and the U of I’s Blackboard (Bb Learn) website also improved the personal interaction between professors and the cohort.

Second, was the dedication the program director had toward adequately preparing the cohort for writing the Three Article Dissertation (TAD). The director was always available to members of the cohort, and served as a local resource to answer questions and resolve concerns about the program. Additionally, the coursework was meaningful, applicable, and organized in a methodical way. The texts that were assigned throughout the course rotation became valuable resources once the focus of the program shifted towards research and writing. The cohort also had opportunities to spend time developing camaraderie and a sense of belonging through extra-curricular activities under the direction of the program director. Willis, Inman and Valenti (2010) note that a PPD program “accepts students in cohorts that complete the program together and thus form a cooperating and collaborating group that

provides support and encouragement to members of the cohort” (p. 25). Activities such as white-water rafting, laser tag tournaments, and family picnics all served to reinforce a sense of belonging within the cohort.

Third, was the opportunity to work independently on my own research, while at the same time completing a companion dissertation with a research team. This unique research approach - conducting both independent and group studies - allowed me to gain extensive knowledge and experience. In addition to better understanding the experiences of LDS students whose religious beliefs are challenged in college, I also learned how teamwork provides a greater understanding about a topic being studied. I also witnessed how a well-organized research team can manage large issues by allowing each member to share in the workload. Having a team available for data collection and analysis, made it possible to draw upon the unique skills of others to conduct a more meaningful and in depth study. As a single researcher, I could have completed my own study, but it would have been an incomplete look at the experiences of Latter-day Saints in higher education. As a research team, we were able to produce a study that can inform and benefit stakeholders.

Completing a TAD has provided me with a professional development strategy that I will be able to practice and continue to refine throughout my career. The TAD has allowed me to demonstrate growth within my chosen career of religious education by gaining experience within the context of my work environment. Conducting research for my dissertation allowed me to work closely with LDS college students as well as Church Education System (CES) faculty and administrators in a variety of social experiences. One theory of professional development research is that the learning process is predominantly a social experience (Lave & Wenger 1991). Individuals do not construct patterns of

professional conduct on their own, but rather through their participation as members of a specific community. This process allows professionals to move through a developmental continuum as they progress from a novice to an expert (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1985). I began the PP-EdD journey as a novice in my field, with experience that was limited primarily to classroom instruction. By conducting a qualitative phenomenography guided by the principles of Action Research (AR) and Rapid Assessment Process (RAP), I have been able to gain insight into the lived experiences of the students whose lives I hope to make better. While I do not claim to have attained the level of expertise described by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1985), I have been able to develop many of the professional skills I need to be successful in my profession. I am grateful for the opportunity I have had to be a part of the first U of I's professional PP-EdD cohort in east Idaho.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

University of Idaho

November 25, 2013

Office of Research Assurances**Institutional Review Board**

875 Perimeter Drive, MS 3010

Moscow ID 83844-3010

Phone: 208-885-6162

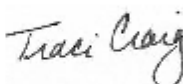
Fax: 208-885-5752

lr@uidaho.edu

To: Bryan Maughan**Cc:** James Williams**From:** Traci Craig, PhD
Chair, University of Idaho Institutional Review Board
University Research Office
Moscow, ID 83844-3010**Title:** 'Tensions with Religion and Secularization in Higher Education'**Project:** 13-281**Approved:** 11/22/13**Expires:** 11/21/14

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 B

Focus Group Discussion Protocol

Focus Group Discussion Protocol

Suggested introductory script outline:

Thank you for taking time to share your thoughts and experiences you have had (and are having) as a student at Idaho State University. Please feel free to share with me any comments you may have that go above and beyond the questions I will ask. I would like this to be a free-flowing conversation rather than a question and answer session. This conversation will be recorded as you have agreed and I will probably jot down a few notes during our discussion with your permission. You have the right to not answer any question you are not comfortable with or stop participating at any time.

Do you have any questions at this time?

Interviewer: Do I have permission to record this interview?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & OUTLINE

PERSONAL ACQUAINTANCE

- Take a few minutes to allow the participants a chance to introduce themselves and give a brief religious and educational background. Participants may also share any information regarding (family, personal interests, etc.)

COLLEGE EXPERIENCES & RELIGIOSITY (FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION)

- What religious beliefs do you feel have been challenged during your time at college (please be specific)?
- Please explain what it was like for you to have your religious beliefs challenged at college?
- How did you deal with the tensions you felt when your religious beliefs were being challenged?
- Were there specific things you did that helped you through the experience of having your religious beliefs challenged?
- Do you feel like you were prepared (before college) to have your beliefs challenged in such a manner (if so, explain how)?
- Do you have any recommendations of what college students could do to be better prepared for having their religious beliefs challenged?
- Do you feel that your faith has changed or been transformed as a result of your beliefs being challenged in college (if so, explain how)?

Appendix C

Individual Interview Protocol

Individual Interview Protocol

Suggested introductory script outline:

Thank you for taking time to share your thoughts and experiences you have had (and are having) as a student at Idaho State University. Please feel free to share any thoughts or comments you may have that go above and beyond the questions I will ask. I would like this to be a free-flowing discussion rather than simply a question and answer session. This group discussion will be recorded as you have agreed and I will probably jot down a few notes during our discussion with your permission. You have the right to not answer any question you are not comfortable with or withdraw from the conversation at any time.

Do any of you have any questions before we get started?

Interviewer: I will begin recording our conversation at this time.

COLLEGE EXPERIENCES & RELIGIOSITY (INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW)

- Discussion concerning why participant attended Idaho State University. What motivated you to go to this particular [ISU] college? (Sub questions or prompts – why study a certain major)
- What is it like being a member of the LDS Church while attending a public university? (Sub questions or prompts related to challenges they may have faced while attending college)
- Could you describe some specific in more detail some of the religious beliefs you've had challenged during your time at college?
- Were there specific things you did that helped you through the experience of having your religious beliefs challenged?
- Do you feel like you were prepared (before college) to have your beliefs challenged in such a manner (if so, explain how)?
- Do you have any recommendations of what college students could do to be better prepared for having their religious beliefs challenged?
- Do you feel that your faith has changed or been transformed as a result of your beliefs being challenged in college (if so, explain how)?
- Do you feel there were things your parents, church leaders, or seminary teachers could have done to better prepare you for having your religious beliefs challenged (if so, explain how)?

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

31 October 2013

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral candidate in a Professional Practices Doctorate (PPD) program at the University of Idaho and am currently studying the experiences of Mormon college students whose religious beliefs have been challenged while they were attending a university. My research goal is to gain insight and understanding by interviewing active LDS undergraduate students who have been introduced to new teachings that run contrary to their religious beliefs. Your religious commitment, coupled with your current status as an undergraduate student at a public university make your experiences particularly relevant to this study.

Your comments will be kept confidential and will be stored on a password protected computer. You will be assigned a pseudonym to allow for anonymity, and every effort will be made to ensure the information you provide will be strictly confidential within the limits of the law. This consent form is an invitation for you to voluntarily participate in the study. Your consent to participate in this study will be indicated by your signature at the bottom of this form. You may also declare your consent to participate as null and void at any time, as conditions of your participation are voluntary and always open to negotiation.

If you choose to participate, our discussions will be digitally recorded. When my research and analysis is complete, I will transcribe our conversation and then share a copy of the text with you to ensure your thoughts and ideas are accurately represented. We will meet for as long as you would like to meet, but our time should not exceed an hour and a half at a time and location convenient to you. After our discussions have been transcribed, the audio recordings will be deleted. The interview will be transcribed and saved in a Microsoft Word document file on my computer. Any hard copies of our conversations will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed within one year of the interview. 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).

Data gathered from this study will be used in the dissertation of James G. Williams in an attempt to understand how LDS college students manage tensions from having their religious beliefs challenged at college. Information gathered from these interviews will inform this dissertation, and may also be used to inform future articles and studies.

If you have any questions concerning this study at any time during the research process, please contact me at (208) 521-3599 or jamesgwilliams@ldschurch.org. You may also contact my major professor, Dr. Bryan Maughan at bryannm@uidaho.edu, or University of Idaho office of Research Assurances, (208) 885-6162. The University of Idaho Institutional Review Board approved the protocol for this study and the protocol number of this study is _____. Thank you for your willingness to contribute to this study, your participation is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

James G. Williams

Participant_____
Date_____
James G. Williams, Researcher_____
Date