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## Understanding the Meaning Making Process of Hispanic College Students in Their Spiritual and Religious Development

Roland Nuñez and John D. Foubert

### ABSTRACT

This study used narrative inquiry to understand what spirituality and religiosity meant to Hispanic students attending a large, Midwestern university in the United States. The study consisted of interviews with 10 Hispanic students who discussed their spiritual and religious beliefs from childhood through college. Findings supported current literature that spirituality increases and religiosity decreases during college. However, after an initial decline in religiosity during the first year of college, participants reported a noteworthy increase shortly after college began. Secondly, students' spiritual and religious beliefs were closely tied to their family, supporting research on familial centrality in Hispanic culture.

### KEYWORDS

College; higher education; Hispanic students; religion; spirituality

There are a number of ways in which the terms *spirituality* and *religion* are defined in the literature. Some use rather narrow definitions of spirituality, describing it as the human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world.<sup>1</sup> Others use broader terms to define spirituality such as *transcendent*, *subjective*, *personal*, *meaning*, *purpose*, and *authenticity*.<sup>2,3</sup>

In fact, many writings use the words *spirituality*, *religion*, and *faith* interchangeably. Yet, more precise researchers distinguish among these terms.<sup>4,5</sup> Generally speaking, religiosity is described as a person's involvement in practicing certain rituals, telling particular myths, revering certain symbols, or accepting certain doctrines about deities or the afterlife,<sup>6</sup> and usually refers to activities such as church attendance and prayer.<sup>7</sup> One of the reasons it is important to distinguish spirituality from religion is that students are growing in opposite directions on these variables. College students today are becoming more spiritually minded but less engaged in religious activities. As this occurs, students are becoming more ecumenical in their worldview, believing that nonreligious people can live just as morally as religious believers, and

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rejecting the notion that God will punish those who don't believe in Him. As students move from their first year to the end of their junior year, they find increased meaning during difficult times, feel more centered and at peace, and see each day as a gift.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the growth in recent research about spirituality and religion, this research has largely ignored Hispanic students in higher education. It has been well-known for years that the Hispanic population is the fastest growing minority in the United States.<sup>9</sup> This growth in the population has led many industries and organizations to take steps to accommodate the unique cultural background of Hispanic people. In 2012, Hispanic students accounted for 15% of total undergraduate enrollment at U.S. institutions, up from 3.5% in 1976.<sup>10,11</sup> The rapid increase in Hispanic students entering higher education has required institutions across the country to consider how to adapt to their unique needs. These students face unique educational and social challenges. If institutions do not take these challenges into account, they are likely to face substantial difficulty retaining Hispanic students in the future. The purpose of this study is to expand the limited knowledge base about how Hispanic students make meaning in the realm of their spirituality and religiosity by exploring the Hispanic students' spirituality and religiosity through the process of narrative inquiry. This, in turn, may help college student educators better meet the needs of Hispanic students through a deeper understanding of their culture.

In recent years, several studies have broadened the knowledge base regarding both college student spirituality and religiosity.<sup>12</sup> The majority of these studies focused on Caucasian college students. Hispanic college students have unique characteristics and resiliency factors. For this reason, it would be difficult to take spirituality and religiosity research with mostly White students and generalize these results to a Hispanic student population. There is limited qualitative research available regarding both Hispanic students and spirituality and religiosity, thus the present study will contribute knowledge that comes from that paradigm. Specifically, this study aims to answer three research questions.

1. How do Hispanic students conceptualize spirituality and religiosity?
2. How does the lived experience of having a Hispanic identity in the United States affect students' spirituality and religiosity?
3. How do Hispanic students relate spirituality and religiosity to particular educational experiences?

Given that very little is known about these research questions, the potential to illuminate previously unknown patterns and relationships is high. Also, because most studies available are quantitative in nature, they limit students to choose from predetermined responses. The qualitative nature of the study will allow for answers that are more in depth and relay the spiritual beliefs and religious customs of students in their own words.

## Spirituality and religiosity

Studies describing spiritual identity often use terms such as *spirituality*, *faith*, *religiousness*, *religiosity*, and *beliefs*. The present study will focus on spirituality and religiosity as two separate terms. Spirituality and religiosity are related in many ways but are conceptually distinct.<sup>13</sup> Given that matters of worldview are involved in assigning a definition to religiosity and spirituality, there are no generally agreed-upon set of definitions for religiosity and spirituality; however, much of the research literature tends to focus on key aspects that separate the two concepts in the literature.<sup>14</sup>

Spirituality has been described as the human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the world.<sup>15</sup> It is seen as a quality that can exist outside of religion. Religiosity is described as the importance or prevalence of religion in a person's life.<sup>16</sup> Religion is seen as consisting of many beliefs and practices of a collective group of people over a period of time, such as rituals, myths, symbols, and doctrines.<sup>17</sup>

### Spirituality

The study of spirituality in higher education is critical. Among other things, higher levels of spiritual development are correlated with greater life satisfaction and lower levels of depression.<sup>18</sup> In the college setting, faculty and administrators who support students are in positions where they have the opportunity to support the spiritual development of college students.<sup>19,20</sup> Many choose not to, despite findings that spirituality is an integral facet of the development of college students.<sup>21,22</sup>

The customs and cultures set by the university and society profoundly impact students' spiritual development.<sup>23</sup> However, the relationship between spiritual development and culture in education has generally been neglected.<sup>24</sup> Recent studies have begun to fill in the gaps of the impact of spiritual development on culture and vice versa. High levels of spirituality can be beneficial to a student's other forms of development.<sup>25</sup> Spirituality and religion have both been found to have beneficial outcomes to physical and mental health.<sup>26</sup> Students with high levels of spirituality are more satisfied with their lives, have lower stress levels,<sup>27</sup> and exhibit less violence.<sup>28</sup> Highly spiritual students have also been found to exhibit traits required for effective leadership.<sup>29</sup> Although high levels of spirituality were not found to cause better leadership among students, characteristics were found in students that related to both leadership and spirituality. Some of these characteristics were finding meaning in hardships, feeling centered, and experiencing a strong bond with humanity.

Studies in racial minority populations report that spirituality plays a big part in their lives. Black college students, for example, were found to accept their spirituality as part of their identity.<sup>30</sup> Spirituality has consistently played

a central role in building leaders and motivating social resistance. Spirituality serves as a means of support, coping, and resistance.

### ***Negative aspects of high spirituality***

Spirituality has been found to result in a few negative consequences for students. One study discovered that high levels of spirituality coincided with high levels of stress.<sup>31</sup> Researchers suggested that students with high levels of stress tend to turn to spirituality as a coping mechanism. Although spirituality itself does not necessarily cause stress, the spiritual struggle resulting from spirituality may contribute to it, often resulting in psychological problems.<sup>32</sup> Spiritual struggle results from a student's confusion when doubt on his or her own spirituality begins to emerge. This is usually caused by interacting with students holding different beliefs, reflecting on one's own belief through study and analysis, or by questioning one's own religiosity, which can end up extending to one's spirituality as well.

### ***Spirituality in a higher education setting***

The secularization of higher education has been a much-studied topic within the last few years. College-age students have been found to have significantly lower religiosity in some studies,<sup>33</sup> than before college attendance, but no consensus has been found towards how religiosity and spirituality are affected.<sup>34</sup> One study found that when starting college, students tend to increase in spirituality but decrease in religiosity,<sup>35</sup> whereas another study found that both spirituality and religiosity increase during the first year of college.<sup>36</sup> This is in contrast to the commonly held belief that students entering college experience a decrease in levels of spirituality and religiosity.

### ***Religiosity***

Studies focusing on the differences between spirituality and religiosity have described religiosity as consisting of mostly external traits and behaviors.<sup>37</sup> These involve actions such as going to church, engaging with prayer, and interacting with other members holding similar beliefs. Similar to spirituality, studies focusing on religiosity have demonstrated both positive and negative relationships to religious development.

### ***Positive aspects of high religiosity***

Studies on religiosity have discovered several positive outcomes. One study found that students with high levels of religiosity have a more developed sense of self-identity.<sup>38</sup> Families that exhibited high levels of religiosity tended to have children involved in less delinquency,<sup>39</sup> lower crime rates<sup>40</sup> and lower feelings of vengeance.<sup>41</sup> Lastly, religiosity has been found to increase the amount of hours students spend on school work and extra-curricular

activities while reducing the amount of time they spend at parties.<sup>42</sup> Just as in the case of spirituality, students with high levels of religiosity generally find a higher level of satisfaction with their lives.

### ***Detrimental aspects of high religiosity***

Religiosity, unlike spirituality, results in more negative consequences to students entering college. Highly religious students have been found to hold more traditional views of gender roles in society,<sup>43</sup> experience marginalization from peers due to religious involvement,<sup>44</sup> and feel stress over their identity when facing judgment from individuals in their religious affiliations.<sup>45</sup>

Based on research showing the interconnections between identity development and spiritual development, we conceptualized spiritual development as a part of a students' identity.<sup>38,45</sup> The theoretical framework for our study rests on the notion that identity is socially constructed and reconstructed. We ground ourselves in the proposition advanced by Egan-Robertson,<sup>46</sup> that identity is fluid, continually being constructed, co-constructed, and reconstructed over time. We maintain that outside influences impact the construction of identity; often, dominant values dictate norms and expectations. According to Torres,<sup>47</sup> identity is influenced by interaction with others and is influenced by the cultural milieu in which one is positioned. Although outside influences contribute to the development of an identity, individuals control their identity by constructing the person they want to become. In this regard, the concept of performativity suggests that individuals create and recreate identity through their actions, which are constantly shifting.<sup>48</sup> It is through these lenses that we viewed the experiences of our participants.

### **Method**

To appropriately portray the religious and spiritual development of the Hispanic students in the present study, certain theoretical perspectives were used. The interpretive paradigm was most appropriate as it attempts to understand the social world from the perspective of individual experience.<sup>49</sup> Understanding the beliefs of the students can best be displayed through stories and narratives from the students themselves. The interpretive paradigm views people as creators of their worlds. Similarly, spirituality, and to a lesser extent religion, can be viewed as individualistic experiences, often differing between individuals.

Qualitative inquiry and, more specifically, narrative inquiry, was chosen as it attempts to understand the world of the participants through their own voices and stories.<sup>50</sup> Narrative inquiry places the interview participant into the role of a narrator. In contrast to other qualitative methods within the interpretive paradigm, which search for themes among a number of interviews and then seeking themes across each narrative,<sup>51</sup> narrative inquiry

involves “listening first to the voice *within* each narrative”.<sup>52</sup> One defining characteristic of narrative inquiry as described by Coulter & Smith,<sup>53</sup> is as “the construction of narratives as representations of research studies, using literary elements and devices common to nonfiction and fiction texts.” In this view, individuals “story their worlds.”

### Research site

The study focused on college students of Hispanic background who attend a large, Midwestern university. Hispanic students are typically underrepresented in both population and research in this area. The Hispanic population is primarily represented by Mexican Americans. The study occurs in a state with a strong religious presence within its culture, so that culture may have an impact on the spiritual and religious beliefs of the participants in the study.

### Participants

The sample consisted of ten Hispanic students of traditional college age (the participants ranged from age 18 to 26) who are attending an institution of higher education. The study included participants consisting of students from Hispanic descent from the first year of college to graduate school (see Table 1). Hispanic descent in the context of this study is defined as students with an ancestry originating in Mexico, Central America, South America, or Spain.

The majority of the students in the study spoke Spanish as their primary language. Students of any spiritual and religious faith were chosen to better represent the variety of viewpoints that Hispanic students may have. The process for finding the participants for the study consisted of purposive sampling, which included meeting with representatives from Hispanic clubs and organizations. Prior access and contact with potential participants encouraged them to be more willing to participate. The criteria for student selection included a full-time undergraduate or graduate student at the university who identified him or herself as a student of Hispanic descent. Students holding any faith

**Table 1.** Demographic information of participants.

Name	Gender	Year	Ancestry	Religious identity
Lindsay	Female	First year	Mexican	Protestant grad student
Cheryl	Female	Junior	Mexico/European	Left Roman Catholic Church
Bravo	Male	Junior	Mexican Native	Occasionally attends Roman Catholic Church
Danielle	Female	First year	Anglo/Mexican	Roman Catholic
John	Male	Junior	Mexican	Roman Catholic
Snooki	Female	First year	Mexican	Roman Catholic/faded away
Jay	Male	Senior	Mexican	Roman Catholic
Gloria	Female	First year	Mexican Native	Roman Catholic
Sam	Female	Sophomore	Mexican	Roman Catholic
Chino	Male	Sophomore	Mexican	Spiritual, no religious group

or belief were welcomed to participate in the study, as long as they understood their faith or belief would be the subject of the study. Roland Nuñez, the first author, conducted all interviews. Each interview was completed individually with each participant in an office that was free of external distractions. As a Hispanic individual, this made blending into the culture a smoother process than had this not been the case and eased the process of finding willing participants. A \$5 gift card to a local restaurant chain was provided to participants as a small monetary incentive to participate in the study.

### **Interview questions**

This study attempted to examine two important variables related to a student's spiritual development: spirituality and religiosity. The interview questions, as shown in Table 2, were worded so that students would be able to talk about both without leading them in any particular

### **Direction**

Probing questions were provided following the initial questions if a student asked for clarification of the question or did not have much to say. The interviews took place in a quiet office setting with minimal disturbances, each lasting approximately 45 min. Each participant was asked to provide a

**Table 2.** The interview questions used for the study

Interview questions
1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
1a. What is it like growing up as a Hispanic?
1b. Tell me a little bit about your family.
1c. Tell me a little bit about your education history. What schools did you attend? Which did you like the best?
2. Tell me about your beliefs.
2a. What does the term spirituality mean to you? What do you do that is spiritual? What does it mean for your mental or emotional experiences?
2b. What do you think it means to others?
3. Do you attend religious services?
3a. What does the term "religiosity" mean to you?
3b. Tell me about your "church".
3c. Can you elaborate on that? What is your experience of your church?
4. Tell me about how you have changed and stayed the same in your beliefs.
4a. Compare your beliefs while growing up and today. How have they changed or stayed the same?
4b. How religious were you two years ago? How are you different now or the same? Why or why not?
5. Tell me about your college experience.
5a. Would you say your beliefs have changed since your first day of college?
5b. What is the role of your college experience in shaping your beliefs??
5c. What is the role of your beliefs in shaping your college experience?
6. Tell me a little bit about your relationships.
6a. Tell me about your college relationships (peers, faculty, etc.).
6b. Tell me about your church relationships.
6c. Tell me about your family relationships.

pseudonym for the research to use during the analysis and results to further protect their identity.

### **Protocol**

This study attempted to examine two important identity-related variables commonly referred to as a student's spiritual development: spirituality and religiosity. The interview questions were worded so that students would be able to talk about both without leading them in any particular direction. Probing questions were provided following the initial questions if a student asked for clarification or did not have much to say. The questions can be found in [Table 2](#)

Question 1 was meant to serve as a starting point to increase participant comfort in beginning the conversation. This question was meant to allow the participant to take control over the interview and guide it in the particular direction he or she wanted it to go. Question 2 attempted to hone in on their spirituality. By stating their beliefs, the question prompted the participant to focus on his or her internal beliefs regarding spirituality. To focus on religiosity, Question 3 asked a simple yes-or-no question to see if a student attends religious services. "Religious services" was worded in such a way to be inclusive of a student's faith. It attempted to be inclusive of not just churches, but other religious gathering locations, such as temples or synagogues. If they answered yes, Question 3a was asked. If they answered no, Question 3b was asked. Question 3a aimed to have the participant further elaborate on what guides their religiosity and better understand their religious involvement in their faith. Question 3b attempted to ask the participant why he or she does not attend religious services, helping to elaborate upon the participant's religiousness or lack thereof.

Question 4 asked the student about their faith in a retrospective context. It allowed the participant to think back and reflect on how their beliefs have changed over the years as they entered college. Question 5 then moved away from spirituality and focused on the student's college experience. Question 6, the final question, focused on the student's interpersonal relationships and how their spirituality and religiosity came into play.

The interviews took place in a quiet office setting with minimal disturbances, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Given that spirituality and religiosity can be considered a personal topic to some people, the interview had an informal, casual tone to help the participant feel comfortable discussing the subject. Questions were asked in the order they were written, but adjustments were made if the need arose. Follow-up questions were asked for clarification if necessary. They were encouraged to share only as much as they were comfortable sharing. They were also assured confidentiality in their responses by signing a form stating the specifics of confidentiality.

The results were only used for the study and will only be shared with the appropriate persons who are seeing them through the context of the study. Each participant was asked to provide a pseudonym for the research to use during the analysis and results to further protect their identity.

### **Reflexivity**

As a researcher inquiring about the spirituality and religiosity of Hispanic college students, Roland Nuñez was able to relate to the participants from a first-person perspective coming from a Hispanic background. This similarity affected the interview process and how the participants storied their experiences. Both authors consider themselves highly spiritual and religious individuals, from different faith traditions. Both believe their spirituality and religiosity played a major role in their higher education experience. In reference to data collection, these factors assisted Roland Nuñez in relating to students who also share that type of experience. Because of the narrative inquiry approach used for the study, the presence of Roland Nuñez as a Hispanic listener to the narrator's stories likely affected the stories they told and the way they told them.

### **Analysis**

Following Institutional Review Board approval, data collection took place in a span of 2 weeks, interviewing 10 participants through purposive sampling until "enough" information was gathered. Redundancy was the primary criterion for beginning the analysis phase. To prepare for the analysis, each open-ended, focused, and exploratory interview was recorded using a voice recorder then transcribed into a word processing document verbatim.

Data analysis is often the most complex and unclear process of a qualitative study.<sup>54</sup> It relies on inductive reasoning processes to interpret and structure the meanings that can be derived from data. The data analysis portion of the study used the data gathered to generate ideas, or hypotheses. Because of the nature of qualitative studies, analysis often took place during the data collection process as well as after. By detecting the main narrative themes within the accounts people gave about their lives through their interviews, we discovered how they understood and made sense of their lives. Such a process incorporates elements of emergent flexible design. Patton,<sup>55</sup> stated that the inductive nature of qualitative inquiry makes it impossible and inappropriate to specify specific variables, hypothesises, or sampling schemes in advance of the research process. The analysis process included four major stages identified by Thorne,<sup>56</sup> comprehending the data, synthesizing the data, theorizing from the data, and reconceptualizing the data.

## Findings and discussion

Through this study, we sought out the stories of 10 Hispanic college students regarding growing up in the United States. Whether immigrating from Mexico or being born and raised in the United States, these students had enriching stories to tell about their spiritual development. Culture was highly influential in their upbringing, so unsurprisingly, their culture also was highly influential in how these students viewed religiosity and spirituality. A description of the participants is portrayed in [Table 1](#). We chose to weave our report of findings and a discussion of how that fits with current research to make the similarities and differences between our participant experiences and prior research as explicit as possible.

We sought to answer three research questions relating to Hispanic college students and spirituality and religiosity:

1. How do Hispanic students conceptualize spirituality and religiosity?
2. How does the lived experience of having a Hispanic identity in the United States affect students' spirituality and religiosity?
3. How do Hispanic students relate spirituality and religiosity to particular educational experiences?

### *Conceptualization of spirituality and religiosity*

Spirituality and religiosity have traditionally been used interchangeably in research, even though most would distinguish the two concepts.<sup>57,58</sup> Furthermore, studies involving spirituality have primarily used White students as participants, limiting the generalizability of the results to other cultural groups. The students in the present study support the conclusion that spirituality and religiosity differ, with all but two making a distinction between the concepts. The most common descriptions for spirituality involved prayer, communication, and an internalization of one's beliefs. Sam and Gloria both believed that spirituality and religion were essentially the same thing. However, Gloria went on to say that "the spiritual part is going a little beyond, it's like the next step to religion." So, spirituality builds from religion.

### *Spirituality as a next step to religion*

Spirituality has been described as the human attempt to make sense of the self in connection to and with the external world. Religiosity, on the other hand, has been described as a process focused more on rituals and doctrine.<sup>59</sup> Gloria's interpretation seems to imply that a person's spiritual development begins as an external process brought about by the environment around the individual or, in the case of the participants, their parents. At some point, however, the process becomes internalized, allowing the individual to make meaning of his or her religious practices such as prayer or church attendance.

Sam, although not consciously differentiating between spirituality and religion, explained that she “had really not done anything spiritual” even though she had attended church in the past. Basing it on Gloria’s interpretation of spirituality, Sam had simply not taken the next step from religiosity to spirituality.

### *Spirituality as a link to religion*

Other participants did not see spirituality and religiosity in such a linear fashion. Such participants in their younger days believed that spirituality and religion were one and the same, until their experiences growing up led them to make a distinction. For Lindsey, Bravo, Danielle, and Jay, spirituality began to separate from religion when they entered college. The college environment made them realize that holding a belief was not necessarily tied to going to church. Lindsey’s spiritual development consisted of finding her place in a world where she was neither fully Hispanic nor fully White. She struggled to find her core and realized early on that the Roman Catholic church was not the appropriate venue for her to do so. The combination of leaving home for college, making a new set of friends while out on her own, and attending religious services that allowed her more freedom to be herself not only aided in her spiritual development, but also increased her religiosity as well by going to a different church more often and keeping up with religious practices.

Bravo seemed to use aspects of both Gloria’s and Lindsey’s philosophies in regards to spirituality and religiosity. He defined religion as coming from his family influence:

Religion, basically, it’s what your parents teach you and raise you, church-wise. Like, we go to this church, and we’re gonna listen to what this priest says, and ... we’re gonna believe, for me, I’ve got the look, God, and the virgin Mary, and a couple of saints ... Religion basically starts out with your parents, just like education. And ... it’s your beliefs.

Like Gloria, Bravo believes that spirituality can usually result from religion as a next step. However, he also believes that spirituality and religion can exist on the same level, similar to Lindsey. For example, Bravo reported an external influence of going to church every Sunday because he can still hear his mother telling him to go. He also goes because he has the internal drive to get closer to God.

Danielle distinguishes spirituality and religion by their focus. Danielle also believes that spirituality and religiosity are different concepts:

Spiritual is like your faith and grace and ... umm ... but then religious is like ... from the Bible and the steps that you should follow to be a good Christian and stuff. That’s what I see the difference. (lines 75–77)

Danielle’s separation from her family in college seems to have aided in her spiritual development, as it has motivated her to become more involved in church activities, raising both her religious and spiritual activity:

I would say I’m different. I’m more ... umm ... like more involved, wanting to be more involved. Back home it was like every Sunday go to church. And now here,

it's like, "oh they're having the rosary on Thursday" and I'm like "I wanna go. I wanna go and do that." On Friday they have like other mass and I'm like "I wanna go. I wanna do that." I think I'm different from 2 years ago. (lines 149–153)

Jay made a clear distinction between spirituality and religiosity. Like Danielle, Jay's definition of spirituality involved communicating with God, but also communicating with others. He believes that by praying for someone else, you are able to form a bond with them that will make you both better people. He sees religion as a tradition employed by groups of people to facilitate spiritual actions.

### *Distancing spirituality from religion*

For Snooki and Chino, the loss of a family member guided their spiritual development away from religion. Snooki describes the loss of her father as causing her to stop going to church and drop her Roman Catholic identity. She noted how her beliefs changed when her family changed as a result of losing her father:

They've changed a lot, cuz, I used to be more into the ... being Catholic. I mean, it kinda faded away. Like, I don't know, it just started fading away. I just got older and like, my parents, they just started working more. And ... it just got to the point where it's like, it's just ... it was okay when I was a kid ... we went regular and now it's just like they started working and it was like no more church. And we just grew apart from it. So I have to say it changed a lot now, cuz I don't even attend. (lines 158–164)

Snooki's statement is similar to a statement made by Sam, in which her religious practices didn't necessarily equate to being spiritual. In the case of Chino, although he did not stop going to church, his religious practices became very routine with no real meaning. His most meaningful spiritual moments were the conversations he would have with his deceased brother before bed. He didn't see it as a religious act, or an act of faith. He simply saw it as a form of relief and rejuvenation. As he put it

Well, I didn't mention this before, but like umm ... I had a younger brother ... well ... yeah, I had a younger brother ... and he like ... whenever he was born he had like a umm ... a bad heart, so he uh, like lived for a month and so that was kind of tough and so like, umm ... like sometimes during that ... some nights ... I'll like have a conversation with him or something like that.

Chino found a way to incorporate spirituality into his life without tying it directly to religion. He made the distinction without appearing to realize it.

Oh, yeah, I mean like ... like I said ... whenever I talk to him, you know, like ... I get ... it makes me feel better ... like I talk to him about my day, you know, like ... like the good and the bad and all that stuff, you know.

Other students, like Cheryl, always seemed to feel a disconnect between her spirituality and religious beliefs even as a child. Going to college, Cheryl's

spirituality was guided by her own values, morals, and ethics, not by religion. She tried being religious, and she realized it wasn't for her. It did not aid in her spiritual development like it did with her peers. Cheryl believes that you can still be a great person and live an honest life without having to step foot inside a church. To her, religion is a supplement, not a requirement.

### ***Intersections between Hispanic identity, spirituality, and religiosity***

Several studies,<sup>60</sup> have described the importance of family to Hispanic culture. Hispanic children often form strong bonds with parents and siblings, making the transition period to college challenging when they have to leave home.<sup>61</sup> The findings of this study further support the importance of family to Hispanic students through the linkages found between family, spirituality, and religion. Two culture-specific themes that were found within the responses are family and language.

### ***Importance of family***

Unsurprisingly, the participants in this study described family as being a major part of their lives. Every participant seemed to describe their spiritual development in interaction with their relationships with their families. Students with stronger family ties tended to have stronger spiritual beliefs and/or become more engaged in religious practices. For example, students like Jay, John, Danielle, and Bravo, who all mentioned having close relationships with their families, expressed strong religious and spiritual beliefs in their everyday lives. They all went to church often and attempted to form closer bonds with God. Spirituality and religion was interconnected for them, each one fueling the other one.

Like other college students, John admits that there were times when his faith was tested. The beginning of his college experiences led to experimenting and trying out new things that kept him from following his beliefs:

Like I said, in my freshman year, I rarely went to church. I mean, mainly because I didn't wanna go by myself and all that stuff. But, now I have two cousins here and my sister here. We go to church all the time. It's like a family thing that we have here. I don't know, like, I won't say like I've gotten stronger, I guess, in my faith. Cause I've left off a whole lot of stuff that I've done in my early years back in college, that's for sure.

Reflecting a similar influence of the family, Bravo's main emphasis was that religion starts with the parents. The same also applies to Jay and Danielle, as their religious beliefs began with how their parents raised them. Danielle has similar support from her family. But unlike Bravo, Danielle's relationship with her family didn't really strengthen until she started college. Prior to that, Danielle didn't talk to her parents much. She loved them and considered

herself close to her family, but she kept more to herself than the rest of her siblings.

I came out of a high school that had, like I said, mostly Indian people, people from India, or neighboring countries like that. There was probably two other Mexicans I could think of in my class. But they were, you know, the stereotypical Mexicans, like, they were not good people to be around. It's sad to say, but they were.

Cheryl stories herself as “different” from those “other” Mexicans. Unlike other students, Cheryl seemed to fall more under the Anglo Orientation in Torres' Bicultural model.<sup>62</sup> Whereas Hispanic culture typically consists of strong family relationships, Cheryl grew up in a culture where the family kept more to themselves. It was not until Cheryl started college that she felt a deeper connection to her parents. This was around the time that she also became more excited about going to church and praying. The stronger bonds with her family seemed to motivate her to be more religiously involved. Her spiritual development came from her family relationships, which resulted in increased religiosity.

Students like Cheryl, Snooki, and Sam, all of whom can be described as being spiritual, weren't particularly close to their families, seemed to have weaker attachments to religion. Although Cheryl and Snooki tried to find meaning in their lives, they didn't acknowledge the meaning making process as spiritual. Cheryl described her spirituality as her guiding morals and ethics. Snooki also skirted around the topic of spirituality when she discussed her experiences shortly after her parent passed away. She talked about finding meaning in her life and trying to figure out where to go from there. She felt lost and didn't know where to turn to for answers. This was a request for spiritual guidance. While she went away from home for college, she managed to find a surrogate family to lean on, consisting of her college friendships. Although not her biological family, they motivated her to do more and become more involved in church.

Gloria, on the other hand, reported an experience opposite of this trend in participant narratives. Although she was close to her family, it wasn't until she separated herself from her family in college that she became more religious. Her friendship with her roommate inspired her to attend religious services, something that she didn't get to do when she was home. Both her religiosity and spirituality developed. Her increased religious practices helped her get a better grasp of her own identity, passion, and meaning. Again, this exemplifies how strong family ties can have an effect on a Hispanic student's spiritual and religious beliefs and practices.

### *Importance of language*

Besides family ties, a common theme found throughout the interviews was that many of the students, whenever possible, went to Spanish-language church services over the English ones. They said they felt more comfortable in such surroundings and as they seemed to provide more of a family

atmosphere than the “White” churches. Gloria, for example, went to the Spanish mass whenever she had the chance. As she described it

Like when I go to the Spanish mass, I feel like it’s more open. Like they’re more willing to accept me. Like I know I told my roommate and she’s really, really, she’s not a hardcore Catholic but she really believes in it. And I told her and she told me “well, as long as you’re trying” and that’s the kind of feeling I get when I go to the church, like the Spanish mass.

Bravo, who was raised in Mexico, also felt more at home at Spanish-speaking churches. Language isn’t limited to just religiosity, however. Even in his personal times with God, Jay felt more comfortable saying his prayers in Spanish. He knew them in both languages, but there was something about the Spanish language that made his conversations with God more intimate.

However, this was only the case for the students who were raised in predominantly-Hispanic towns and cities. The students who went to predominantly-White schools didn’t seem to place much importance in the language spoken at their church. They mentioned going to both English and Spanish churches equally, usually the ones that were more convenient to their schedule. The only exception is Lindsey, who seemed to prefer English-speaking churches over Spanish-speaking ones.

### ***Relationship between spirituality, religiosity, and educational experiences***

Studies have shown that spirituality and religiosity can be affected in different ways when students enter college. Some studies have found religiosity to lower once a student enters college.<sup>63</sup> One study in particular found that when starting college, students tend to increase in spirituality but decrease in religiosity,<sup>64</sup> whereas another study found that both spirituality and religiosity increase during the first year of college.<sup>65</sup>

The present study found that the majority of participants described a slight decrease in religiosity at the beginning of college, while spirituality either stayed the same or increased. However, by the end of the first year or during the second or third years of college, religiosity for many of the students seemed to increase again. This was due in large part to the influence of friends they made in college. For example, Lindsey believes her beliefs were first tested when she started college, but she can trace back her doubts from her childhood. College merely allowed her the opportunity to investigate those doubts, learn from them, and develop a stronger understanding of her beliefs.

Umm, growin up, like I said, I was forced to go to the Catholic Church. And the fact that I couldn’t ask questions, it was seen as bad, umm, also put a bad taste in my mouth. I didn’t like that. I didn’t like that I wasn’t getting the answers and how am I supposed to believe all these things when they were just telling me and there was no rhyme or reason to it in my head... I don’t know if really my college

experience really did shape my beliefs. I think it might have tested them, and I guess that's part of shaping them, but I think I had my beliefs established before I got to college and it was just a matter of testing them.

Lindsay was introduced to her current church by a group of friends that she made in graduate school. By going to church as a social activity with friends, Lindsey found it to be a less-threatening and less-strict environment, allowing her to enjoy herself and desire to come back. Danielle's college experience aided her spiritual development by allowing her to become more autonomous in terms of her spirituality. When living at home, going to church was a mechanical process. She went to church, listened to what they had to say, then went home. However, once she was on her own, Danielle found herself spending more time making a connection with God when at church, whether it was through prayer or through truly taking in the message.

Gloria's first year of college introduced her to her roommate, which became the driving force behind her increased religiosity and spirituality. Although churches intimidated Gloria due to past negative experiences, her roommate invited her and showed her that she didn't have to be a "hardcore Catholic" to be accepted into the church. She described her roommate letting her go at her own pace and take the next step when she was ready. This is something that Gloria would not have been able to do back at home.

Chino mentioned how church was better when he went with his friends. His friends acted as a support system that kept him motivated to keep going. Even Snooki, who does not currently attend church regularly, is considering trying harder due to the support of her friends. Like other participants, she formed a surrogate family with the friends she made in college. The majority of the students instantly turned to other Hispanic students for friendships. When they were asked whether they made any friends outside of their Hispanic circles, they said no. Cheryl noted that she became friends with other Hispanic students when she started college and that once she made those connections, she didn't feel the need to reach out any further. For these students, their friendships were a pivotal part of their spiritual and religious development.

Other students, like John, Jay, and Bravo, use their parents as motivation for going to church. College seemed to bring about many new challenges and complexities in regards to spirituality and religiosity. Factors such as time, disconnection from family, and influence of new perspectives like roommates were all introduced when the participants entered college. This further emphasizes the importance of college in many aspects of a Hispanic student's life. Interestingly, the students with the closest relationships with their families were all male. This observation could be a cultural trend and is an opportunity for further research.

Jay also understands how his practices moved from a more external religious point of view to an internal spiritual point of view as he got older. He noted

When I was younger, I could tell you all the steps, ever since you're born, you're baptized, first communion, and all that, I did all that ... But if you ask me now, like what are the steps, I don't remember ... But I believe it's way stronger now than before. Like I would just do it because mom would say "you need to go to Catholic mass or class" or whatever. I would go because mom told me to. But I never really had an internal thought about religion or God. I just went because mom told me ... But now, I feel better, because now I do talk to God as if He was a friend. I would say that I used to practice it more before but I wasn't so ... spiritual. And now ... I don't practice it as much, because I don't ... haven't confessed in a while. I don't go to mass every Sunday. But you know what, I do believe more and I do have more communication with Him or practicing my spiritual beliefs I guess.

As part of this communication with God, Jay has a routine of praying every morning and every night. Even if he's in a rush, he manages to fit a small prayer into his schedule. It's a way for him to tell God "thank you" for everything he has, as well as prepare him for the day. He tries to incorporate his faith into everything he does, even if it's a small blessing of the food when he eats with his friends.

Most participants seemed to have increased in their religiosity in college. This is contradictory to studies that suggest that religiosity decreases during college. Although there were a few students like Cheryl, Snooki, and Sam who didn't consider themselves religious, they did acknowledge the value of religion and said they attempted to be better at following it. All students but one seemed to have increased in spirituality during their college years. Whereas religiosity fluctuated for many of them, they seemed to have a stable grasp on their morals, ethics, and identity, which they believed to be the core of their spirituality. Students like Cheryl and Snooki, who didn't consider themselves to be very religious, still considered themselves to be spiritual in some way. They based their decisions in college on morals they were raised with that haven't changed. Sam, on the other hand, seems to just be starting her journey of spiritual development, realizing that there is a need for some sort of greater meaning in her life but not yet going so far as to act upon the desire. For a lot of her life, Sam was on her own. She didn't have a very strong relationship with her family and didn't have many friends. She did not receive much guidance in her spiritual and religious development, resulting in her not thinking much about either. Because of her job, she couldn't see her family during the weekends in college like they hoped she would, and she didn't make many friends. As a result, even though Sam started college, she was more or less still sheltered from college life, not benefiting from the interactions with other students that would cause her to question her beliefs. During her interview, she started to reflect on her beliefs for the first time, sparking a sense of curiosity and reflexivity that can emerge from qualitative research.

## Implications

Further study is needed to determine whether the increase in religiosity we found is unique to Hispanic students. The decline we found in religiosity

happened within the first few weeks or months in college. The increase varied by the student, but usually ranged from the middle of their first year to their junior year of college. Similar qualitative studies may also be done using students from a wider variety of universities and different Hispanic regions, given that every participant in this study was of Mexican descent. The majority of students in the study identified themselves as Roman Catholic at some point in their lives. Although this is a large denomination in the United States, it is still only one denomination in one religious sector. Future studies might explore how the questions we raised are answered differently by students from various religious backgrounds.

In this study, students who identified themselves as Hispanic in culture followed a slightly different spiritual and religious trend than students who identified themselves more as White. The students with a Hispanic orientation described their religiosity as decreasing as they entered college, but increasing later on in their college experience. Students with an Anglo orientation, such as Lindsey and Cheryl, were more in line with the religious tendencies of White students, which was an overall decrease in religious involvement during the college years. In the case of Danielle, who describes herself as “switching” from a more Anglo orientation to a Hispanic orientation during her transition into college, she also exhibited the upward spike in religiosity like her other Hispanic-oriented colleagues. Further research examining the reasoning for this difference between cultural orientations could be fruitful.

Finally, we found it noteworthy and worthy of further inquiry that Hispanic males described being closer to their families than Hispanic females. It is uncertain whether this was a coincidence specific to this study, or if there is a greater pattern prevalent that has not been previously uncovered. Further studies exploring this gender difference in Hispanic family relationships may shed more light into this dynamic, particularly with regard to the intersections between gender, family, religion, and spirituality for Hispanic students.

### ***Implications for practice***

The results of this study provide many possibilities for student affairs professionals as well as church groups in and around college campuses to support Hispanic college students in their spiritual development. The importance of family relationships in Hispanic culture is a point that should be seriously considered by student affairs professionals. The foundation for many of the students' spiritual beliefs and religious practices came from their interactions with their family. The friends they sought out in college were also influenced by their need to fill the void left by leaving their family behind. Communication with a Hispanic student's family during the enrollment and orientation process would be a great way to develop initial rapport with the student and show that their family

is just as important as they are in the college transition process. Being proactive about including Hispanic families in family weekend activities allow students to spend some time with their parents and get them involved in their college life. Providing opportunities for families to support their student on site has great potential to ease the stress of the college experience.

Communicating with local churches and religious groups would be another way student affairs professionals can assist Hispanic students with their religious development. Students in the present study opted to go to Spanish-speaking religious services over English-speaking ones. They felt more at home at these types of churches, as the culture of the people that attended them fell more in line with their family culture. Facilitating a student's search for Spanish-speaking religious services can help drive a student's desire to interact with others. Many of the students in the study had a hard time motivating themselves to connect with a familiar religious community in college and only had the drive to go once their friends convinced them. By providing a conduit with Spanish-speaking religious groups, students can get that initial connection, should they wish to connect, when they often feel most isolated and homesick.

Continued education of student affairs professionals in spiritual development can better prepare them to deal with issues concerning spirituality and religiosity. The lack of proper preparation in spiritual development can lead educators to ignore the spiritual problems students face rather than help the students confront them and learn from them (Rogers & Love, 2007).

Finally, if a student affairs professional is not of Hispanic origin, it would be advantageous to find Hispanic leaders and role models for the students. Although college is a great time to experience diversity and get to know people from other cultures, the results of this study suggest that Hispanic students look to those of a similar culture for kinship. Providing a healthy balance of interactions with students of different cultures through purposive programming, as well as Hispanic-specific events led by Hispanic leaders or older students, will give students the appropriate amount of challenge and support as they try to build relationships in college.

## Conclusion

Research on spirituality, religiosity, and Hispanic college students is rapidly growing as student affairs programs across the country aim to promote diversity and inclusion. With the rapidly-growing Hispanic population in the US, more studies involving the relationships between spirituality, religiosity, and Hispanic college students are sure to grow in numbers. By understanding how Hispanic students develop spiritually, student affairs professionals will be better able to serve the Hispanic students attending American universities.

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