BE THOU MY STRONG HABITATION: SPIRITUALITY, FAITH, AND RELIGION FOR BLACK COLLEGE WOMEN

Montisa Anntoinette Watkins

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Department of Educational Leadership

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my son, Roschard Isaiah Watkins, who walked along this journey with me. The culmination of this work is my living testimony to you that with God all things are possible. In the face of grief, loss, COVID-19, and anything else that the enemy had in mind for us, God continued to show himself strong. God still knows the plans he has for us, plans of a hope, and a future, an expected end when we call on him—and we did just that!

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“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of [this woman] man, the things which God has prepared for them that love him” (I Corinthians 2:9, King James Version, Bible)—and this is just the beginning.
ABSTRACT

BE THOU MY STRONG HABITATION: SPIRITUALITY, FAITH, AND RELIGION FOR BLACK COLLEGE WOMEN

by Montisa Antoinette Watkins

Black women have multi-faceted identities which intersect and place them on the end of racist behaviors and discriminatory practices (Crenshaw, 1991). Beyond a marginalized race and oppressed gender, these identities also include spirituality, faith, and religion. Today’s Black college women are connected to a larger historical background of Black women in this country, who endured the daily physical whip of slavery. Yet, Black women resisted and survived (Collins, 2014) by exchanging that same brutality for hope in a higher power. Spirituality, faith, and religion have been an integral part of the Black woman’s existence, from the shores of Africa to this country, and settling into the lived experiences of seven Black college women who used the phenomenon as they pursued their education at one Mid-western, public, comprehensive university.

This phenomenological study collected data using interviews to describe the essence of what spirituality, faith, and religion looks like through the eyes of the participants (van Manen, 2002). Findings revealed that the participants used the phenomenon to help them deal with challenges around race, racism, relationships, mental health stressors, and academics. Participants’ definitions of spirituality, faith, and religion differed and were sometimes contradictory or overlapping for a single participant. A family legacy of faith connected the participants’ prior experiences with phenomenon to their present lived experiences. This study contributes to the body of knowledge wherein higher education practitioners and faith-based
communities learn how to attend to the holistic development of Black college women, which includes spirituality, faith, and religion.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Black female collegian encounters daily microaggressions on campus due to her race and gender (Commodore, Baker, & Arroyo, 2018; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Moreover, Black women, are often misunderstood and viewed as angry, emotional, irrational, and innately depraved; yet, they remain positioned in a racialized, marginalized, and oppressed group (Bond, 2018; Grant, 1995; Young & Spencer, 2007). For example, First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS), Michelle Obama, received criticisms ranging from body image to parenting style to social upbringing and questions regarding her [in]ability to represent this country. As a Princeton and Harvard graduate with senior level political status and influence, she could not protect herself from being viewed as a stereotypical Black woman (Haynes, 2012). In her memoir, Becoming, Obama (2018) recalled a poignant reminder given by her parents about race, “the color of our skin made us vulnerable. It was a thing we’d always have to navigate” (p. 43). Before Michelle Obama, the first Black woman to hold the office of First Lady in the White House, or Lori Lightfoot, Chicago’s first Black woman mayor, or the 1,629,000 Black college women enrolled in the Fall of 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017, table 306.10), Black feminist scholars had long ago pointed out the Black woman’s need to navigate such complex and overlapping identities.

In the 18th century, Black activist, Mary Church Terrell (1940), blatantly stated in her essay, A Colored Woman in a White World, the constant challenge the Black woman faces due to her race and sex. In the 20th century, Terrell (1940) reiterated:
a White woman has only one handicap to overcome—that of sex. I have two—both sex and race. I belong to the only group in this country which has two such huge obstacles to surmount. Colored men have only one—that of race…I wonder what they would have done if they had been obliged to overcome two handicaps instead of one. (p. 29)

Toni Cade Bambara (1970/2005), in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, contended the combination of a Black woman’s race and gender created intersecting spaces of marginalization. Twentieth century legal scholar and activist, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), introduced the term intersectionality to explain the various multiple identities placed upon Black women and then overlooked by the judicial system. Her study also applies to the Black woman on today’s college campus. The Black collegiate woman has an assumed presentation: Black and woman, both marginalized and oppressed. Yet any other identity she may have is either erased, forgotten, or minimized (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). In her 2016 TEDTalk, Crenshaw affirmed that every encounter a Black woman faces becomes unique based on the labels assigned; therefore, she must be ready to cope with experiences that either validate or invalidate her existence, while she masks her own needs (TED, 2016).

A Black college woman can be perceived in numerous ways. She is the proverbial Black college-educated woman. She is also the Black college woman on financial aid and admitted only because of affirmative action policies; she is the Black college woman, who is queer; the Black college woman, who is affluent and from the suburbs; the Black college woman, who is a STEM major from the inner city; the Black college woman, who is heterosexual, clinically depressed, and from a rural town; the Black college woman on academic probation; or, the Black college woman who is a single mom but on the dean’s list—always Black and a woman. Yet hers is an experience that should never be assumed or labeled. Regardless of background or
social circumstances, the Black college woman remains branded. Young and Spencer (2007) noted that slave owners branded Black women for just being Black and female. Therefore, every label has an assumed “meaning and consequence” for the Black female (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1927). Her complex identities are labeled and assigned value that continues to reinforce stereotypes, which further narrow down her location and overshadow what may be needed in that space (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Moreover, Black women explaining or justifying these multiple facets of self and experience remain a “struggle…not ever over or finished” (Smith, Guy-Sheftall, & Giddings, 2014, p. 127). However, despite a historical context where each converging intersection of a Black woman’s identity is internalized and socially prescribed, this study explored the lived experiences of Black college women who used their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursue their education.

Overview of the Study

Black women have lived with tension of race, gender, and class since the days of slavery when their physical bodies were traumatized; yet, many found hope in God through their spirituality, faith, and religion. Alice Walker (1982) described this tenacious hope in her poem, *Women*:

They were women then
My mama’s generation
Husky of voice—Stout of
Step
With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
Starched white Shirts
How they led Armies
Headragged Generals
Across mined Fields
Booby-trapped Kitchens
To discover books Desks
A place for us
How they knew what we Must know
Without knowing a page Of it
Themselves. (xiii)

Spirituality, religion, and faith have always been an intricate component in the life of Black women. In her essay, *Connected to Mama’s Spirit*, Gloria Wade-Gayles (1991) described the sensible peace, clarity, and love she witnessed in her mom, while she endured the toughest situations. Wade-Gayles (1991) articulated her mother’s notion, “But when it came to that other
dimension, Mama played no games. I don’t care how much education you get, if you lock out
the spirit, you’re empty…” (p. 215). From the days of chattel slavery in the antebellum south,
having a connection to a higher power or that “other dimension” as noted by Wade-Gayles
(1991, p. 215), helped Black women survive the mental and emotional anguish placed upon them
as their lived experiences kept them bound in chains (Giddings, 1984; McKenzie, 1997; Rosser-
encompasses the belief that it takes a higher power, primarily God, to overcome life’s obstacles”
(p. 465). Nothing but a faith in and a reliance on a higher existence could help an enslaved race
of people, particularly its women, see their way through three centuries of physical and mental
bondage. Beginning with a historical perspective from a time when Black women were enslaved
to a self-informed narrative embodied with race work and uplift (Perkins, 1983; Smith et al.,
2014) coupled with a view of Black women in education to the lived experiences of Black
women in college, this study explored how spirituality, faith, and religion have always been a
part of the lives of Black women and served as sources of hope to the Black college woman
today.

The next section will highlight two foundational pillars needed before engaging with the
dissertation: language and history. Language is socially constructed; therefore, it is important to
clearly define the terms used in the study (Creswell, 2013, 2014). History, like race and
language is socially constructed depending on the storyteller—the one who formulates and holds
the cannon hostage (Ladson-Billings, 2012). The foundation of spirituality, faith, and religion
for Black college women is rooted in their historical experience.
Language

The language used in this dissertation is personal and political. Personal because the stories of Black women are ignored, when it comes to the intersection of race and gender or other identities which challenge a patriarchal cannon of knowledge (Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2012). Political because the experiences faced by Black women demonstrate oppression and marginalize Black women in those intersectional spaces where they are considered as the other. In the speech, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, Audre Lorde (1984) challenged the Black woman’s tiresome responsibility to educate others, particularly White women, about who Black women are, noting these efforts took the focus away from fighting against a patriarchal society of which all women, including Black and poor, stand. She wrote, “interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive be and the active being” (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). The language and definitions used in this study are an active testament to intentionally dismantle the political tools of language which are influenced by the thoughts and experiences of the reader—challenging what the reader knows and what the reader does do not know to be true. A discussion of definitions related to this study will come later in Chapter I. However, I open with a preliminary explanation of two terms paramount to the study: Black and Black college women.

[Black] College Women

The study will use the terms Black and Black College Women when referencing Black women who attend college. This language is not to be confused with Black women who attend a Historically Black College or University, commonly referred to as an HBCU. The word Black
will be used when referring to race as opposed to the term African-American. I agree with author, Beverly Tatum (1997) who preferred using the term Black. She noted the following in her book, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race:

I refer to people of acknowledged African descent as Black. I know that African American is also a commonly used term, and I often refer to myself and other Black people born and raised in America in that way. Perhaps because I am a child of the 1960s “Black and beautiful” era, I still prefer Black. The term is more inclusive than African American, because there are Black people in the United States who are not African American—Afro-Caribbeans, for example—yet are targeted by racism, and are identified as Black. (Tatum, 1997, p. 31)

Furthermore, the word Black represents the power and pride relegated to a race of people who endured slavery, particularly the Black college woman who continues to persevere in her multiple identities amidst this present racist and sexist society (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Historical Perspective

The presence of Black women in higher education demands a historical look at the journey of Black women in this country. In Multiple Jeopardy: The Impact Of Race, Gender, And Slavery On The Punishment Of Women In Antebellum America, Young and Spencer (2007) recalled the critical mass of Black women, who endured harsh treatment under slavery. They noted, as a colonized and enslaved people, Black women faced severe punishments, bore and cared for children, and worked tirelessly. The history of Black women in America is not to be
regarded as a deficit model for achieving success, as cautioned by Ladson-Billings (2014). Therefore, a historical perspective of Black women, who held fast to their spirituality, faith, and religion, is offered here as a means of resistance and critical for the empowerment of today’s Black college women and thus up for examination.

Slave Narratives

In Paulo Freire’s (1994) seminal work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he admitted, “[W]hen I found how naïve I was I became critical” (p. 17). His statement gives credence to this study. The researcher [re]engaged the tumultuous lives of Black women reflected through slave narratives. Therefore, I [re]examined history, as suggested by Delgado (1989), the participants and the audience became paramount to the investigation of the role spirituality, faith, and religion play in the lives of Black college women. The study included samples of these recounts to establish the strength and resilience of the Black woman and a reliance found in her spirituality, faith, and religion. Slave narratives follow a rich tradition of historical storytelling in the Black community by offering a counternarrative, which presents “a different reading of the world” (Chapman, Dixson, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 1021). These lived experiences establish a precedence of strength and resilience by providing hope to the present day Black college woman and affirming that she is indeed connected to a valuable past worthy of her purview. A historical perspective found in slave narratives is shared to inspire and uplift the Black college women of today. Activist for the Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago, Julie de Jesus Alejandre, addressed a Detroit genealogy group about the importance of history. She remarked:
Knowing where we come from and how to call upon this [spirituality, faith, and religion] as part of the fight; learning who we are and where we come from [means] falling in love with yourself and being unapologetic about who you are [and] healing comes when you find out who you are and then you connect with others. (personal communication, March 27, 2019)

The ancestral roots of Black women in this country relied upon spirituality, faith, and religion as part of their fight—the struggle to survive. This dissertation study explored what spirituality, faith, and religion look like today for the Black college woman in her struggle to succeed on campus.

Sharing the Journey

To walk the reader through this dissertation and illuminate the journey of Black women and Black college women, the remainder of the chapter begins with historical context. This section introduces the backstory of Black women in America who used their faith, spiritual, and religious roots to forge a path of resistance and survival. The backstory envelopes slavery, emancipation moving through the Civil Rights era to a contemporary view of Black women undergirded by a social justice right to be educated as Black people to the halls of higher education. Following the historical context, the chapter examines the research problem using that historical point of view to inform and ground a perspective to move towards a more contemporary focus of Black college women who use the phenomenon of spirituality, faith, and religion. The chapter then articulates the problem statement to frame the purpose of the research with supporting research questions, which guide the study towards answering the research problem. The next section explains the theoretical and epistemological framework used to craft
the study and frame its perspective. This section also highlights the significance of the study; definitions of terms; assumptions; delimitations and limitations; and an overview of the literature. Next, the methodology used to collect and analyze the data is described followed by my analysis and interpretations of the findings related to the research questions. The final section provides a summary of conclusions gained from the lived experiences of the Black college women participants, implications for practice, and recommendations for future investigations involving spirituality, faith, and religion for Black college women.

Statement of the Research Problem, Background, and Context

Angela Davis (1981) argued in *Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves* that throughout the history of the United States, Black women together with Black men endured slavery, lynchings, and Jim Crow segregation. She further noted the Black woman “was not sheltered or protected…She was also there in the fields, alongside the man, toiling under the lash from sun-up to sun-down” (Davis, 1981, p. 7). What is the role of the Black college woman today? No longer enslaved on a plantation, Black women still exist in present day challenges in unwanted and unmerited spaces—remnants produced by the intersections of racial and gender prejudices (Crenshaw, 1991). Black women live within these ideologies and the corresponding policies, which stand against people who “live with their backs against the wall” (Thurman, 1949, p. vii). Civil activism against injustices such as police brutality in BlackLivesMatter (Taylor, 2016), and other liberatory initiatives, specifically in resistance to crimes against Black women, such as #SayHerName (Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, Gilmer, & Harris, 2015) and #BlackGirlsMatter (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015) give voice to the needs of Black women, whose story and struggle is often erased or engulfed amidst the struggles of others (Davis, 1981;
Jiménez, 2016). Yet the challenge of equality and equitable representation in higher education for Black women remains.

Pre-College Experiences and Access Challenges

For the 2013-2014 academic year, the U.S. Department of Education reported that Black women held 66% of associate degrees, 64% of bachelor’s degrees, 70% of master’s degrees, and 64% of doctoral degrees as compared to Black men (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Despite the positive trend of postsecondary enrollment and graduation rates of Black college women, predatory practices influence the pre-college experience and impact college access for aspiring Black college women. For example, poor and inadequate academic preparation affects college access for Black women and the inability to qualify for merit-based scholarships creates a financial burden and impacts college persistence (Alexander, 2010; Commodore et al., 2018).

The African American Forum policy report, *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpolicied and Underprotected* (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015) reflected the systemic neglect of young Black girls including unwarranted surveillance demonstrated by harsh treatment resulting in higher expulsion rates, making discipline a priority over educational attainment. Therefore, young Black girls are placed on a trajectory towards prison instead of higher education. The impact on access to higher education remains steadfast. Black girls who are unsuccessful in gaining the necessary academic preparation to meet standardized testing expectations will also find inadequate financial aid packages, which also increases the likelihood of college retention leading to student loan debt and the potential of earning more than a living wage let alone equitable pay (Commodore et al., 2018; Reeves & Guyot, 2017).
Postsecondary Access and Participation

The number of Black women holding college degrees reflects centuries of hope and promise. Mary Church Terrell (1904) wrote in *Voice of Negro*, “The intellectual progress of colored women has been marvelous…so great has been their thirst for knowledge and so herculean their efforts to acquire it…” (p. 292). The doors of higher education have received many determined Black women since Terrell, who graduated in 1884, or Mary Jane Patterson, the first Black woman to receive a bachelor’s degree in 1862 from Oberlin College in Ohio (Baumann, 2010; Carter, 2003; Fletcher, 1943; Howard-Vital, 1989; Oberlin College and Conservatory, n.d.; Patton, 2009, Slowe, 1937; Terrell, 1904).

In 1990, over 120 years later since Mary Jane Patterson received her college degree, almost 61% of Black undergraduates were women compared to 39% of Black undergraduate men (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). In addition, from 1990 to 2005, Black women enrollment increased from 61% to 64% (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). The data from 2013 also reported a gap between Black male and female enrollment, where Black women represented 62% of total Black enrollment (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). The comparison rates for graduation also demonstrate Black women outpacing Black men in college graduation rates. NCES data for 2015-2016 showed Black women received a majority of postsecondary degrees earned by all Black students when compared to Black men (NCES, 2019, Table 322.20). Black women earned 65.9% of doctoral degrees, 69.6% of master’s degrees, 64% of bachelor’s degrees, and 66.58% of associates degrees. These statistics are encouraging and indicate positive enrollment and graduation trends for Black women as compared to Black men participating in postsecondary education (NCES, 2019).
However, a closer look at these data also revealed that the six-year graduation rate for Black women is 44% compared to 63% for all women. Compared to women of other races and ethnicities, Black women have lower six-year graduation rates than White women (67%), Hispanic women (58%), Pacific Islander women (53%), Asian women (77%), and women of two or more races (62%) (de Brey et al., 2018). In 2013, Black women ages 18-24 enrolled in post-secondary education at a 38% rate, lower than their White (45%), and Hispanic (39%) counterparts (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Bonner (2001) discussed the misconception of solely relying on NCES data, which continues to feed the popular narrative of Black women’s participation in higher education and outpacing Black men in college attainment. He noted:

> [W]hile enrollment patterns and degrees earned are often used to show how well women are doing in education and particularly how well Black women are doing in relation to Black men, it is only when this data is disaggregated for Black women that the gains appear not so wonderful. (Bonner, 2001, p. 181)

Commodore et al. (2018) further argued that there is still more to be done with Black women’s representation, participation, and achievement in higher education.

Beyond NCES data (i.e., Musu-Gillette et al., 2016, 2017), reports such as *Brookings Institute* (Reeves & Guyot, 2017) along with online magazines such as *Essence* (Davis, 2016), *Salon* (Parker, 2016), and social media outlets such as the *TheRoot.com* (Helm, 2016) and *Black and Married With Kids* (Morton, n.d.) all reported increased graduation rates among Black women—a widespread narrative that touts the postsecondary progress of Black women over Black men. Slater (1994) noted, “in fact, Black women are dominating almost every statistical measurement of black performance in postsecondary education” (p. 52). Despite the gains reflected in the NCES postsecondary data and reported by popular media, Black women still
represent a small subgroup of racially and ethnically diverse students on college campuses. Winkle-Wagner (2015) cautioned that these data overshadow the individual needs of Black college women. Black women’s experiences in, and outside of, the classroom balanced with the proper support must transition to meet their diverse needs. Commodore et al. (2018) noted “after going through girlhood in a racist and sexist society, successful Black women are aware of the strategies and strength to overcome” (p. 78). Therefore, it is imperative that higher education consider spirituality, faith, and religion as another approach to work with students because “survival for Black women is a spiritual pursuit” (Shahid, 2014, p. 117). This study hopes to shift the narrative to consider spirituality, faith, and religion to be paramount to the success of the Black college woman.

Today’s College Campus for Black Women

Moses (1989) suggested that Black women experience the college campus differently than Black men, White men, and White women, noting challenges such as social isolation, fear, and feeling invisible. Black women face their college experience within the hostile environment of daily microaggressions because of their status as a marginalized race and oppressed gender (Commodore et al., 2018; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Solórzano et al., 2000; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). The Black woman’s status of living in a marginalized and oppressed gender and race means living with “double-jeopardy or triple jeopardy” (Gilkes, 2001, p. 5)—a station placed upon the Black collegiate woman whereby she becomes a target of misunderstanding and miscommunication (Cade, 1970/2005; Grant, 1995). Because of a Black woman’s intersecting identities, other members outside of her race lack a connection to the experiences of Black women. This lack of understanding minimizes the Black woman’s need to commune, dialogue,
and share to successfully navigate their college experience (Hughes & Hamilton, 2004; Stewart, 2002; Watt, 2003). Gilkes (2001) suggested “the differences between White and Black women were usually interpreted as Black women’s deviance” (p. 4). Therefore, the Black woman has been notoriously plagued with stereotypical images of the bossy, overbearing, indecisive, boisterous, matriarch controlling her family and castrating her Black male counterpart while seeming unstable, and despising of others (Cade, 1970/2005; Davis, 1981; Grant, 1995; Guy-Sheftall, 1990, 2003). These negative images can breed fear, confusion, and uncertainty in the minds of other students and impact the life of the Black collegiate. Pursuing a college education in an environment with such hostile perceptions can present academic and social challenges for the Black collegiate (Commodore et al., 2018; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Moses, 1989; Solórzano et al., 2000). This study considered spirituality, faith, and religion as a tool to help the Black collegiate woman find the hope and support she needs to be successful.

Spirituality and Black College Students

Various scholars have explored the impact on and relationship between religion and spirituality for different groups within the African American collegiate community. For instance, studies of students have focused on career development (Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, & Lewis-Coles, 2006), academic persistence and grades (Walker & Dixon, 2002), spirituality as a form of resistance for Black gay men (Means, 2014), African American men at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Herndon, 2010; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008), establishing student belonging through a college gospel choir (Strayhorn, 2011), intersecting and managing of multiple identities (Stewart, 2002), the impact of spirituality on the academic success of male students enrolled at an HBCU (Square, 2015), African American
students and the role of faith-based institutions preparing African American for collegiate success (Placenti, 2012), the impact of church participation for African American college students (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010), and the coexistence of religious and spiritual influences within Black Greek lettered organizations (Esdaille, 2006; Harris & Sewell, 2012; Pruitt-Logan & Miller, 2012). Other research focused on African American leadership within the higher education community, includes the presence of spirituality and religion for Black faculty dealing with racism and other microaggressions (Bonner et al., 2015), spirituality and leadership for African American women college presidents (Richardson, 2009), spirituality as a coping resource for Black professional women (Bacchus & Holley, 2004), and Black women leaders within higher education settings (Brown-McManus, 2012). Although the aforementioned studies center on Black women in higher education settings, this study solely described the experiences of spirituality, faith, and religion for Black college women.

Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and the Black Woman—A People of Faith

Black women have always been spiritual and religious—a people of faith as depicted through their tumultuous history (Johnson, 1966). The slave narratives demonstrate how Black women accessed their spiritual connection to God during 300 years of violent captivity and yet moved forward with power and might. In 1831, the state of Maryland made it a crime for Blacks to gather and hold religious meetings without the presence of a slaveowner, overseer, or minister—“if said meetings are held in compliance with the written permission of white licensed ordained preacher, and dismissed before ten o’clock at night” (General Assembly of the State of Maryland, 1832, Chapter 323). In We Slipped and Learned to Read: Slave Accounts of the Literary Process, 1830-1865, Cornelius (1983) described Blacks, who, despite the laws, met
secretly to design escape routes, communicated with family members from other plantations, learned to read, and planned revolutionary actions to secure their freedom. During the Civil Rights Movement, Gilkes (1994) noted that church was a place where Black women organized, rallied, and received comfort and community support through prayer meetings while singing songs; a galvanized effort to combat racism, prejudice, and oppression. Leak and Reid (2010) discussed the support of Black churches who birthed missionary aid societies and fraternal organizations who supported advanced educational opportunities for Blacks as a way to reinvest in the community for advancement and racial uplift. Oftentimes, Black women were left out of the early feminist rhetoric, which placed the narratives of White women at the forefront (Crenshaw, 1993). To combat this alienation, “Black women formed clubs to counter white racist suffragettes, they also formed sororities to combat similar exclusions faced on college campuses” (Esdale, 2006, p. 2123). For example, on August 26, 2018 Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, the first sorority created for Black college women in 1908 on the campus of Howard University, hosted an International Day of Prayer. Women involved in the sorority, called Sorors, were requested to attend worship services together and pray corporately at 19:08 or 7:08 p.m. The goal was “to have prayers offered around the clock in our chapters covering the globe” (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, personal communication, August 3, 2018). Events such as the International Day of Prayer not only impact the world, but attest to and meet the spiritual, religious, and faith needs of Black college women.

Religion and College Life

Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) further posited that a critical mass of Black women is needed on college campuses for recruitment and retention purposes. They argued that Black
women lacked role models and support systems to find safe spaces to dialogue, build empathy, and find understanding among those with like-minded experiences. In such small numbers, the impact results in a taxing collegiate environment where “playing the role is stressful and takes a toll on all aspects of African American women’s lives” (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 100). Helen Cade Brehon (1970) wrote in her essay, *Looking Back*:

> Black women are a hale and hearty group. With the odds against them, they managed to excel…[She] has gotten together with other women with common interests to pray, sing, dance, sew…let them now get together to set a course for a new America. (pp. 319, 322)

Although Brehon spoke to the historical oppression of Black women, she also expressed the perseverance of Black women who have flourished in community with one another despite disenfranchisement. That communal fellowship among Black women such as prayer and singing are also tenets of religious expressions rooted in the experiences of Black people—a worship experience of resistance that also gives power (Vondey, 2012). Nonetheless, higher education maintains a community with a set of well-defined programming directives to push students towards degree completion and graduation. Students move through planned coursework and engage in various opportunities to build leadership skills, such as campus employment and student involvement. In this community, students receive support for academic achievement, physical and mental well-being, and career guidance to prepare them for graduation (Burke, 2017). Often ignored, however, is the student’s hunger to explore the role of spirituality and religion (Nash, 1999).

Lucy Diggs Slowe (1937), the first Black woman to serve as Dean of Women at Howard University, asserted that college overlooked a critical pillar in the student development for the Black collegiate woman. Of that experience, she referenced “often what is popularly called
‘college life’ represents only those activities which have no relationship whatsoever to the spiritual, intellectual, and real social development of students” (p. 279). Slowe understood the value in preparing young Negro women to build the social and cultural capital alongside the academic, so that they may live “self-directed lives in a modern world” (p. 356)—the word Negro reflects the language used in society and in the literature during that time period. Part of that self-direction is an attentive and intentional relationship to the spiritual, faith, and religious needs of Black college women. To support her point, Slowe (1937) surveyed 40 schools’ various extracurricular activities offered at Negro institutions serving only Negro college students. She found organized interests in sororities, glee clubs, and debate teams. The survey also identified other clubs and organizations attending to the religious, moral, and character development of the Black collegiate, which included the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), Christian Endeavor, and College Prayer clubs (Slowé, 1937). Over 70 years later, other seminal research included James Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith development, Sharon Daloz Parks’ (1986, 2000) theory of faith development for young adults, and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011), which would advocate for this attention to the inner needs of college students. The HERI research team posited that spirituality and religion are key components in the holistic development of a college student and “undergraduates often expect their college experience to facilitate this discovery process” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 139).

Spirituality and Black College Women

Specific studies on the Black collegiate woman have included using spirituality as a means of resistance, coping, and identity (Watt, 2003), influences of church attendance on
college life (Donahoo, 2011; Donahoo & Caffey, 2010), Black women navigating the academy by using spirituality (Shahid, 2014), and defining spirituality and religion from the Black woman’s perspective (Mattis, 1995; 2002). However, Winkle-Wagner (2015) warned against considering the experiences of all Black women to be the same. Just as Love (n.d.) noted spirituality and religion are not the same; neither are the perspectives of Black women.

Encompassed within a racialized, marginalized, and oppressed gender come diverse perspectives where religion and spirituality can intersect social class, education, age, and sexual identity (Bambara, 1970; hooks, 1993; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Patton, 2009; Stewart, 2009; Stewart & Lozano, 2009; Vanzant, 2010). This study expands the topic of spirituality, faith, and religion for the higher education community based on the experiences of the Black collegiate woman. The research explored how Black women access and use spirituality, faith, and religion as a tool for their collegiate success.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black college women, who use their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursued their education. The study described spirituality, faith, and religion used among seven Black college women from one comprehensive, Midwestern institution.

Research Questions

One central research question guided the emerging phenomenological design: What is the role of faith, spirituality and religion in supporting the success of Black college women? The following sub-questions support the main research question:

1. How do Black college women define spirituality and religion?
2. How do Black college women describe their spirituality or religious journey?

3. What does spirituality and religiousness look like for Black college women?

4. How have Black college women navigated campus resources related to their spirituality and religion?

Theoretical Framework

The study explored the lived experiences of Black college women, who used their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursued their education. I assumed a constructivist worldview, along with a theoretical lens of Black Feminist Theory, to view the individual and collective experiences of seven Black college women from one comprehensive, Midwestern institution. Creswell (2014) described the constructivist paradigm as a worldview, where knowledge is socially constructed or built by individuals; rooted and influenced by “historical and cultural norms operating in people’s lives” (p. 8). The participants and I facilitated this study in which Black women’s voices construct knowledge based on culturally normed and influenced experiences as witnessed through the historical lens of a race and gender that is both marginalized and oppressed.

Black Feminist Theory or Black Feminist Thought (BFT) served as the theoretical lens, through which knowledge and truth were garnered and established. Collins (1986) noted the importance of BFT, which produces knowledge about Black women for Black women. BFT also comes from a critical theoretical perspective employed to identify and address the unique needs of Black women (Collins, 1989). BFT seeks to clarify the perspective of the Black woman from the perspective of a Black woman. Therefore, the research study considered the valuable view and experience of the world as seen through the eyes, heart, mind, and soul of the Black woman.
Taylor (2013) posited that although Black women are a collective, their individual expressions diverge based on generations, social classes, and religions making BFT a plausible fit for looking at spirituality, faith, and religiousness for Black college women. Collins (2015) further noted that focusing on the Black woman as the unit of research will lift up the voices of Black women and provide others a more comprehensive understanding beyond facts and figures.

BFT aligns with the constructivist worldview, which supports my stance on how knowledge is acquired and truth ascertained. As a theoretical framework, BFT is also congruent with the use of phenomenological inquiry as the methodological approach to understand and interpret the lived experiences of spirituality, faith, and religion for Black college women. Phenomenology provides the pathway, which “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Moustakas (1994) suggested that phenomenology creates a comprehensive picture of what participants experience and how that experience occurred. According to van Manen (2014), phenomenology provides insight through questioning, and where everything can offer meaning under any set of circumstances without any prejudgment. He further suggested that no thing or experience can be named—they are indefinite possibilities opening the door for others to provide their own label or meaning based on their personal experience. Yet, Jones (2002) and Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) signaled me to remain aware of my connected footprint of values, biases, history, and assumptions to the study and its impact. Investigating the spiritual, faith, and religious needs of Black college women using a Black Feminist Theory framework, constructivism, and phenomenological reduction methods was not a simple task. The lived experiences of the Black college woman exist within an unstable collective of race, gender, and the college environment. However, BFT uses the collective intersections of race and gender to challenge my assumptions on how Black
women think about and use spirituality, faith, and religion to transform the oftentimes challenging circumstances of their collegiate experience to move toward self-defined college success.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant adding to the body of knowledge regarding spirituality, faith, and religion as tools of success for the Black college woman. First, research findings offer college practitioners with ways to provide holistic support for Black college women through spirituality and religion. The study empowers the campus community with greater knowledge of this population of students to better understand their needs and recognize the types of programming, human and fiscal resources that must be brought to bear to meet those needs. Second, the study provides a basis for future use by college and university practitioners to make informed decisions regarding policy, programming, and curriculum recommendations that may improve the types of support related to spirituality, faith, and religious experiences of Black college women. In particular, the individual and collective stories of the research participants help build professional competency and expertise for student affairs professionals, who can be instrumental in providing supportive space for Black college women to connect and share concerns using their spirituality, faith, and religion (Kocet & Stewart, 2011).

Third, the study empowers the campus community with greater knowledge to better understand their needs and recognize the types of human and fiscal resources that must be brought to bear to meet the needs of Black women. Study findings may also impact retention and graduation rates of Black college women, promote future off-campus partnerships to develop spiritual and religious support, and help direct all students to safe spaces to discuss spirituality,
faith, and religion. I hope to provide insight to the spiritual, faith, and religious experiences of Black women on campus. However, implications for practice and programming will offer space for discussion and debate among other practitioners regarding spiritual, faith, and religious support offered to Black women on their campuses.

Another perspective in looking at the experiences of Black college women, who use spirituality, faith, and religion as a tool for their collegiate success, is to build upon and expand current literature within the higher education and the religious communities, and to possibly enhance the pre-college experiences of students. This qualitative study seeks to energize the field to look deeper into the experiences of Black college women and the importance of spirituality, faith, and religion. Most importantly, the research offers various perspectives of lived experiences narrated by its participants amid the backdrop of history—a rich history of narratives, stories, and experiences that is available to them. Vondey (2012) theorized that spirituality and religious practices originated in the slave camp meetings often held after dark on plantations. He noted that meetings provided solace and empowerment, which often inspired strategies of resistance to hope, move, and live forward within a cruel environment. The lived experience offered from the historical perspective are just as important as those gleaned from the study’s participant voices—each presenting its own story. One lived experience begets another story, which can inspire and shape another’s lived experience. This study demonstrates that the more the stories are told, the more alive they become to the participants, researcher, and future audiences who engage this study. I invite the participants and the audience to consider the history of Black women and its contributive influences to reflect on the ways in which their spirituality, faith, and religion have on Black women in college. Furthermore, do the lived
experiences of these women of the past, who have used their spirituality, faith, and religion to struggle, persist, and endure, have any influence on my present collegiate journey?

Stakeholders

The stakeholders of a research project are those external and internal communities that have the potential to benefit from one’s research. Arminio and Hultgren (2002) challenged researchers to consider their purpose for conducting research. “It is not for the sake of research itself that researchers should embark upon this work, but rather to improve the lives of others” (p. 457). This study intends to improve the lives of not only its participants, but also those of the stakeholders in the higher education community who will benefit from the individual and collective experiences shared by the Black collegiate women in the study. Administrators, faculty, and student affairs staff, such as counseling, sororities and fraternities, residence life, career services, gender identity and sexual orientation, and academic advisors serve as spaces where spirituality, faith, and religion can impact and intersect the lives of the Black woman collegian.

Other stakeholders may include support for Black women from those extended villages, such as organized places of religion and worship, notably Black churches. Stephens and Watkins (2009), authors of *From Jay Z to Jesus: Reaching and Teaching Young Adults in the Black Church*, echoed that “young adults are struggling with everything from generational challenges to family stuff to their own sexual identity and relationship issues…a time of intense pain and conflict” (p. 68). Organized religious institutions, such as the Black church, would benefit from learning about the trajectory of faith and spirituality as Black women navigate their college experience. Churches with youth ministries focused on college access and preparation for
students, especially women to enter college, can establish a foundation for their pre-college experience to stabilize Black women and help them to navigate the postsecondary arena ready to meet those challenges.

A [In] Visible Yet Visible Community

Although the Black collegian woman deals with racial and gender microaggressions and microinsults, which intentionally assault her character and impede her progress, many go “unnoticed and unheard” (Sesko & Biernat, 2010, p. 357). While she maybe on the dean’s list, serve as a resident assistant, student club president, or campus volunteer, she is still viewed as a racialized and marginalized gender from various socioeconomic and class backgrounds. She exists within a race and gender that not only silences her voice (Vaccaro, 2017), but also makes her “virtually invisible” and yet visible at the same time (Collins, 1998, p. 52). Therefore, if the needs of Black women are masked and overlooked, then how can we expect the Black college woman to make decisions regarding her purpose, her life’s work, calling, and vocation and still navigate the unchartered territory of college attainment without any consideration of her spirituality, faith, or religious beliefs? College is the place where students can reshape, develop, and define who they are—a transformation towards their best self. Places of worship located in college towns serving Black students through campus ministry programs or other outreach efforts may utilize study findings to raise awareness of the issues of Black collegiate women and to provide additional support. This research provides recommendations that “allow for the empowerment of people and improvement in the quality of life” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 132). Parks (1986) further noted “if the institutions of religion are to offer leadership in the formation of a mentoring ethos for a young adult world, then the religious community must recognize that
countless people have a sense of having outgrown religion in order to be truthful and faithful” (p. 198).

Definition of Terms

As a precursor, the research study provides separate definitions for spirituality, religion along with religiousness, faith, and belief. Cresswell (2014) noted the definition of terms brings clarity, precision, and a shared understanding of the concepts discussed in the research study. He further advocated that “the need to ground thoughts in authoritative definitions constitutes good science” (p. 43). However, despite the attempt to place the terms in similar categories, spirituality and religion do not share identical meanings (Love, n.d.). Mattis (1995, 2000), Walker and Dixon (2002), and Watt (2003) discussed the same inconsistency within the literature on the varied meanings for spirituality and religion due to the personal nature and ambiguity of the terms.

For Black women, these terms are often used interchangeably (Mattis, 1995, 2000). The study offers the lived experiences and voices of Black women to construct perspectives of spirituality, faith, and religion while encompassing the meaning, value, and impact on their lives as college students. Collins (2000), in her discussion of Black Feminist Theory, maintained that all knowledge can be challenged with a “set of fresh eyes” (p. vii). Moreover, Jones et al. (2006) argued that the research process can be influenced by the researcher, study participants, and the audience. Therefore, the descriptions of spirituality, faith, and religion may be contested, challenged, and reframed throughout the research process. The research will offer new perspectives for college-practitioners, faculty, and administrators surrounding spirituality, faith, and religiousness for Black college women. Although the research uses the literature to define
the terms and illuminate the current understanding, the meaning will likely change—derived from the lived experiences of those involved in the research, including the participants, investigator, and the audience. As the researcher, I concur with the definitions explained in this section. These definitions provide the reader with clarity and consistency because these terms take on different meanings based on personal experience.

Spirituality


Religion

Religion is an “institutional set of beliefs tied to or relying upon values and practices based on the teachings of a spiritual leader or sect” (Nash, 2001, p. 25). Religion is an outward demonstration of corporately shared beliefs that are practical, organized, traditional, and doctrinal. Wilmore (1999) and Gilkes (1994) characterized the distinct nature of practices within the Black religion, which are rooted in an established denominational tradition and reflective of the experiences of African-American people. Masci (2018) described the religious practices for African Americans based on the 2014 *U.S. Religious Landscape Study* from Pew Research
Center. The study self-reported data from African-Americans who indicated: 83% believe in God, 75% identify religion as being very important, 73% pray daily, and 47% attend religious services once a week (Masci, 2018). Gilkes (2001) recognized the religious practices of “preaching, praying, singing, and testifying” as the “four pillars of the Afro-Christian religious tradition” (p. 125). Parks (2008) noted that religion is how we become spiritual together as a collective body. Religion is the vehicle bringing spirituality to life by providing a collective framework to express meaning through set practices such as special observances, celebrations, feasts, times of fasting, and prayer. This study also examines religion and its practices among Black college women.

Religiousness

Religiousness is defined as “adherence to a set of faith-beliefs (and related practices) concerning both the origins of the world and the nature of the entity or being that is believed to have created the world” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 5). Religiousness connects devotion and practice to “some kind of faith tradition” or “institutional beliefs based on the teachings of a spiritual leader or sect” (Nash, 2001, p. 25). Astin et al. (2011) connected the religious life of college students to their commitment to a religious faith, engagement to the practices of their religious faith, and the conservative level of their beliefs. Their study noted a decline in religious engagement during the college year. However, The Washington Post (2012) poll found 74% of Black women noted that living a religious life is very important. Furthermore, Mattis (2000) argued that religiosity/spirituality help Black women manage the various social and political challenges. For Black college women these challenges included: racism, sexism, and classism amidst the academic and college adjustment issues faced on campus (Constantine, Greer, &
Howard-Hamilton, 2003). The study likewise investigated religiousness or the religious life as experienced among Black college women.

Faith

The 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews described faith as “the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1, King James Version). The Latin translation for faith is *Fides or Fidei*, meaning confidence, trust, belief, or loyalty (Faith, n.d.). Faith is also used synonymously for words such as acceptance, assurance, and hope. Nash (2001) described faith as an attitude of trusting belief in something that goes beyond the available evidence. Faith is believing in something that cannot be seen with the natural eye, yet offers an expected hope. Faith is finding meaning and purpose in who we are and the decisions we make (Parks, 2000; Bowman & Wessel, 2002). The Washington Post (2012) poll also found that 88% of Black women hold religion or faith in God as a very important role in helping them get through tough times. The collegiate environment is a threatening place for Black women who must manage issues of marginalization, oppression due to the different perceptions of their identity where there is lack of empathy, and understanding (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Therefore, tools such as faith can support college students. Rosales and Person (2003) in their article, *Meeting the Needs of African American Women*, posited that “faith systems are embedded in the Black community; African American women bring these traditions and practices with them to college as part of their survival systems” (p. 55). The study participants revealed that faith is an important tool in helping them navigate their daily survival as college students.
Belief

Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defined the term belief as “a state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing; something that is accepted, considered to be true, or held as an opinion” (Belief, n.d., para. 1). Similar to the other terms listed in the study, belief is often used synonymously with faith. However, the word belief is also used when there is some kind of evidence even though the person or believer is not always sure of the evidence or truth. Commodore et al. (2018) characterized beliefs as self-identified priorities, which inform the values and commitments of Black women in college. They further suggested that external factors, such as beliefs, inform habits and behaviors which help Black women cope and adjust to a college environment fraught with barriers. Beliefs about spirituality, religion, or faith influence the decisions and responses of Black college women. Also seen as a value and commitment, these external factors also have the potential to “thwart” the progress of the Black college woman (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 69).

To summarize, the described definitions invite a shared understanding for the research. However, the reader and researcher must be prepared to have these constructs and assumptions challenged based upon the experiences of the study’s participants. Mattis (2002) advised “researchers and practitioners…to be mindful of religion/spirituality’s analytic, interpretive, and constructive functions in the lives of Black women” (p. 317). van Manen (2014) suggested that how meaning is constructed creates barriers to our own thinking and must be deconstructed; otherwise, no new knowledge can be formed. Therefore, those who engage this analysis must proceed with caution in how terms are named. The definitions and meaning reflect social and historical influences and thus are rooted in the lived experiences of the participants.
Assumptions

The most substantial assumption that I have regarding this study is the same one that must be constantly bracketed and reflected upon to remain transparent throughout this exploration—Black college women find solace and encouragement in spirituality and religiousness as a means of college success. I recognize that not every Black woman may identify as spiritual or religious. However, the potential of this topic appealed to me as both a researcher and college practitioner. Attending to the holistic development of college students, in particular Black college women for this study, includes spirituality and religious experiences (Astin et al., 2011; Kocet & Stewart, 2011). Thompson (2012) noted that Black women are notorious for “staring down obstacles” and having a “make it happen attitude” (para. 27). This research describes how spirituality, faith, and religion informs their ability to do so in a collegiate environment. The data analysis and findings from this inquiry required me to [re] bracket and deconstruct my personal experiences to form new perspectives around the phenomenon. Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated that the inquirer must “value freedom to discover how things [spirituality and religiousness] are and how they work” (p. 107). As a researcher, freedom to explore the experiences of Black college women appealed to me.

Delimitations and Limitations

The limitations and delimitations of this study are a critical part of this dissertation discussion. The limitations and delimitations bring welcomed opportunities for future research. There were many perspectives that I could have embarked upon for this study. For example, where all of the participants came from a Protestant Christian background meant that the study lacked religious diversity. Shahid (2014) noted that matters of spirituality and religion are
intimate subjects among Black women; therefore, the small sample size allowed time for me to conduct two interviews with each participant and establish rapport. However, there is a lack of generalizability beyond the seven participants. This lack of generalizability is a delimitation of qualitative phenomenological research. I chose to use a constructivist lens of endarkended epistemology, which places Black women’s truth and reality at the center of the research. The goal of my dissertation was to be intentional in hearing the voices and learning about the lived experiences of Black college women. By virtue of what I intended to accomplish through this research, the limitations and delimitations reveal there is still more research to be done around spirituality, faith, and religion, specifically among Black college women and for the entire higher education community.

Overview of Literature Review

In Chapter II, I review the literature surrounding spirituality and religion for college students, including existing research related to the experiences of Black college women. Creswell (2014) described the literature review as a focused search of the existing scholarship on the phenomenon. The literature review begins with a historical context for Black women in America and the evolution of Black college women as participants in higher education. Next, a discussion follows the research related to the constructs of spirituality and religion within higher education (Astin et al., 2011; Chickering et al., 2006; Love & Talbot, 1999; Rogers & Dantley, 2001), as well as spirituality and religiousness among the college student population (Astin et al., 2011; Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003; Kocet & Stewart, 2011; Lindholm, Millora, Schwartz, & Spinoza, 2011; Rockenbach, Walker, & Luzader, 2012). Then, the literature review presents seminal works of faith development theory (Fowler, 1981) and faith development for young adults (Parks, 1986, 2008).
Creswell (2014) posited that a literature review can also “build bridges between related topics” and extend the scholarship by presenting other voices (p. 28). The study also explores the literature related to the experiences of Black college women as their voices inform and expand the scholarship on spirituality and religion for this segment of the higher education community. Pivotal research includes Mattis’ (1995, 2002) work on meaning making, coping, and defining spirituality and religion for African American women; Donahoo and Caffey’s (2010) research on the impact of church attendance for African American college students; Donahoo’s (2011) examination of how African American women view church, spirituality, religion and college life; Square’s (2015) investigation of spirituality and Black student achievement at HBCU’s; Constantine et al.’s (2006) connection between religion, spirituality, and career development for Black college students; Gehrke’s (2013) use of race to understand spiritual development for college students; Rosales and Person’s (2003) programming recommendations and services for African American college women; Watt’s (2003) view of how Black college women use spirituality as a coping mechanism and identity formation; Shahid’s (2014) perspective on Black women’s use of spirituality to navigate the academy; Walker and Dixon’s (2002) assessment of spirituality and academic performance among African American college students; and Hill’s (2009) discussion of the college persistence of Black women using spirituality to cope. As a way to guide the discussion in the literature review, supporting scholarship for Black Feminist Theory (BFT) (Bambara, 1970; Collins, 1986; 2000; Davis, 1983; 1999; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000; Giddings, 1984; Gilkes, 1994, 2001; hooks, 1993, 1994, 1997; Perkins, 1981, 1983) will be also presented. BFT is the theoretical lens through which all prior works will be filtered to give credence and deference to the experiences of Black women (Rosser-Mims, 2010; Taylor, 1998).
Present Day Theories of Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education

The current literature does not provide a framework on how Black college women develop their sense of spirituality, faith, and religion or what that experience looks like. However, the seminal works of James Fowler (1981), Sharon Daloz Parks (2000, 2008), and Alexander and Helen Astin (2004, 2011) are included as a starting point within higher education focusing on faith development, spirituality, and religiousness. James Fowler (1981) developed a stage theory of faith development based primarily on the experiences of White males. Sharon Daloz Parks (1986, 2000) expanded Fowler’s work of faith development by providing research on how young adults, including college-aged students realize and develop their faith. Yet, both Parks’ (1986, 2000) and Fowler’s (1981) theories point towards a Eurocentric experience and paradigm of spirituality and faith development (Donahoo, 2011; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Hill, 2009; Patton & McClure, 2009; Watt, 2003). Another important seminal work included Alexander Astin and his team from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), which investigated spirituality and religiousness among college students (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2004, 2011). With only 8% of the study participants being Black, the HERI study is limited in its ability to provide data on the experiences of Black college students (Astin et al., 2004, 2011). Moreover, the HERI study offered no delineated data or discussion on the experiences of Black college women. Current research and theory have not explored how Black women access and use their spirituality, faith, and religiousness for their collegiate success. Therefore, to add to the body of literature regarding spirituality and religion among college students, this study seeks to lift the voices of Black collegiate women to explore their lived experiences in using spirituality, faith, and religion while pursuing higher education.
The Presence of Spirituality and Religion in Higher Education

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) published their findings in *Cultivating the Spirit: How Colleges Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives* (Astin et al., 2011). The longitudinal study collected empirical data from 14,527 students from 136 colleges and universities. Using a quantitative approach, the HERI study focused on the spiritual and religious changes of the college student and “how colleges can contribute to this developmental process” (Astin et al., 2011, p. 9). Women comprised 55% of participants in the HERI study. Again, the study lacked a discussion on the spirituality and/or religiousness of Black college women. McEwen, Roper, Bryant, and Langa (1990) argued that “spiritual development needs to be incorporated in student development theories for a better understanding of African American students” (p. 434). Moreover, spirituality, religion, and faith can serve as a strategy to provide strength in hopes of “surviving to the next day” in an environment that is often hostile to their presence, unappreciative of their experience, and uncertain of their academic ability, which prove counter to their learning and leading (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 79; Moses, 1989). Therefore, this study sought to expand the spiritual, faith, and religious experiences by including the lived experiences voiced from Black collegiate woman using a qualitative approach.

Theoretical Constructs

The theoretical constructs covered in Chapter II focus on the major themes covered in the literature review, which include seminal works and those prevalent in the current discussion within the higher education community surrounding spirituality, faith, and religion. These areas include: faith development; faith formation in young adults, namely college students; spirituality and religious identities or identity development; spirituality and religiousness in higher
education, including formative research data from HERI. These mainstream theories hold credibility and offer long-standing research in higher education. However, Patton (2009) indicated that Black Feminist Theory challenges these widely embraced perspectives as they do not consider the experiences of Black women, particularly those in the study. Jones et al. (2006) noted the importance of theories which serve to “create a lens through which researchers can describe their perspective of the phenomenon” allowing these theoretical perspectives to “inform the perspective of their study” (p. 22). Ladson-Billings (2012) affirmed the use of culturally relevant pedagogy that accounts for perspectives and theories which speak to the experience of Black people. Therefore, Black Feminist Theory is used to interpret the present findings of spirituality, faith, and religion in higher education and for those participants in the study.

Methodology Overview

I employed a qualitative approach, using phenomenology as the method of inquiry, to explore spirituality, faith, and religion for the Black collegiate. Qualitative research provides a “broad explanation for behavior and attitudes” (Creswell, 2014, p. 64), and phenomenology accounts for “what individuals have experienced and how they have experienced it” (Moustakas as cited by Creswell, 2013, p. 79). Phenomenology seeks to gain the essence of a phenomenon based on the lived experiences of individuals. This study investigated the context of how the phenomenon of spirituality, faith, and religion is experienced and meaning found and used by these Black women during their college years. The study followed phenomenological methods to select participants, collect, and analyze interview data from seven Black college women from one public, comprehensive Midwestern institution. Arminio and Hultgren (2002) noted “research [that] makes connections between self, other and world and offer reflections on what is
right to do and good to be as an inquirer” (p. 458). Therefore, the phenomenological research provides the researcher, participants, college practitioners, and the larger higher education community with ways to provide holistic support for Black college women through spirituality and religiousness—reflecting on ways to become more attentive to the world (van Manen, 2002).

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

The analysis of the data and the interpretation of the findings are discussed in Chapter IV. I also discuss what the reader should take away from the each theme, elaborate on each theme, review how the findings fit into the literature presented in Chapter II, characterize what is being said about the participants, and lead the reader to meaning and what is important to know.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A summary of the conclusions discovered from the study, along with implications for theory, practice, and policy, and recommendations for future research are presented in Chapter V.

Summary

Porter and Dean (2015) argued “the survival of a Black woman is dictated by her ability to use all of her resources” (p. 126). Furthermore, Lorde (1984) maintained that “survival is not an academic skill” (p. 113). Therefore, this study addressed how these Black women used their spirituality, faith, and religion during college. Shahid (2014) pointed out the intimate nature of spirituality and religion for Black women, which makes the study so compelling because it will include the voices of Black college women. Black women who find utility in spirituality and
religiousness form what author bell hooks (1993) called “spiritual solidarity” (p. 189) connecting them to a higher power with the ability to cope and resist (Watt, 2003), build equanimity, and find meaning and peace despite the challenges faced during their collegiate career (Rozeboom & Frohardt, n.d.). Not all Black college women identify as spiritual, a person of faith, or religious. However, the potential of this topic appealed to me, as both a researcher and college practitioner, affirming the tenets of the American Council on Education (ACE)’s (1937/1944) *The Student Personnel Point of View* and American College Personnel Association (ACPA)’s (1994) *The Student Learning Imperative*, which supported the holistic development and needs of college students. This holistic purview includes time for curiosity, reflection, and self-authorship on spirituality, faith, and religious identity and the supporting experiences needed for college success (Astin et al., 2011; ACE, 1937/1944; ACPA, 1994; Kocet & Stewart, 2011). The goal of my dissertation is to reveal that Black college women are the best source to advocate for their needs, including what adds meaning to their success. Without their voices, higher education is left uninformed about ways to address their position and aid them in fulfilling their potential.

This chapter provided an introduction to and overview of the research study. Chapter II presents the literature reviewed to provide the reader with relevant scholarship which framed the dissertation. Chapter III describes the methodology used to conduct the study and Chapter IV presents the data analysis and interpretation of the findings. Chapter V discusses the conclusions related to the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review poignantly guides the discourse for the researcher, participants, and future readers by presenting a historical perspective of Black women’s stories to explore how spirituality, faith, and religion are used by Black college women. The literature review exposes the reader to the history and backstory of Black women in this country, which is germane to the study, and explains why the phenomenon of spirituality, faith, and religion among Black college women is even important.

This study reviews the literature surrounding spirituality and religion for college students, including existing research related to the experiences of Black college women. The literature review will also examine how spirituality and religion are connected to the experiences of Black women, specifically Black women in college. Additionally, the literature review will elucidate on the past and present scholarship on spirituality and religion within the higher education community. Furthermore, the literature represents my informed understanding of how spirituality and religion and their accompanying identities can impact the holistic development of Black college women.

Research indicates that religion and spirituality are finding their place back into the larger conversation of higher education (Astin et al., 2011; Love & Talbot, 1999; Nash, 1999; Rogers & Dantley, 2001). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) noted that spirituality “allows Black women to forge ahead valiantly no matter how trying life becomes” (p. 81). The spiritual and religious experiences of Black college women take on various forms in the literature. Black women in college are often compared to Black men in college or amassed into the category with other underrepresented groups (Commodore et al., 2018). Winkle-Wagner (2015) noted the
tendency to gravitate towards the more positive trends found among Black college women, such as higher postsecondary enrollment and completion numbers, causing research to minimize or “narrow down” their life experiences and overlook individual needs and differences found as part of a collective group [of Black women] (p. 189).

Paradigmatic and Epistemological Perspectives

I reviewed the literature on spirituality, religion, and faith in the lives of Black college women. First, the literature review begins with an epistemological statement pointing toward the reality of what is known in this study—the lived experiences of Black women. I employed phenomenology as the methodology used to collect and analyze data (Creswell 2013, 2014). Phenomenological research honors the lived experiences of its participants as sound data (Creswell, 2013, 2014; van Manen, 2002, 2016). I implemented a constructivist paradigmatic foundation using Black Feminist Theory in the literature review, because the worldview grounds and informs the research study. Black Feminist Theory lays the foundation of the research, a perspective which refocuses the “gaze” (Dillard, 2006, p. xi.) back onto the Black woman and provides her with the resistance and power to combat “daily discrimination” (Taylor, 2013, pp. 1063-1064). Taylor (2013) offered these hallmark tenets of Black Feminist Theory, whereas Black women are: empowered to resist negative stereotypes, able to self-define and self-validate their experiences, and resist all forms of oppression be it race, class, gender, or her other marginalized identities. King (1988), Taylor (2013), and Dillard (2006) affirmed that a Black woman can exercise her political resistance alongside an academic power recognizing that she exists in and beyond her multiple oppressed identities, which have a story and experience of their own.
Endarkened Epistemology


Endarkened is past tense for endark. The website, YourDictionary.com defined endark as “to render dark or darker; to obscure; to obfuscate or to confound” (Endarkened, n.d., para. 1). These basic definitions are fitting for a study centered around spirituality, religion, and faith.

Dillard (2006) addressed the political, yet purposeful resistance, in using the worked endarkened as opposed to enlightened. Even though endarkened is the past participle of the word endark, meaning a completed action or a time or state gone; forming the passive voice, there is nothing passive or absent about the word endarkened. Dillard (2006) resolved that endarkened is intentionally used as a means of resistance—a play on language to denote the necessity and power of the Black woman’s story. Hence, shaming the canon of what is thought to be enlightenment and exchanging it instead for tradition for the multiple dark hues and shades of the Black woman. The Black woman’s experiences shine brilliantly, but only through an endarkened epistemological perspective. Dillard (2006, 2008) described endarkened epistemology as “how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black Feminist Thought” (p. 3). She further noted that an endarkened epistemology breaks the traditional recipe of the positivist paradigm which separates the researcher from the research by creating objectivity. However, the language used cannot be separated from the research, the researcher, the participants, and the potential audience. The study used language based upon the experience of the Black woman—her story, her understanding. Therefore, language use is critical to the
study. Definitions place the researcher, participant and reader on the same page. Heretofore, endarkened is explained and must be accepted and embraced as part of the research study.

Constructivism

The constructivist paradigm is also offered here as part of the literature review because of its congruent nature to Black Feminist Theory and alignment with an endarkened epistemology. A full discussion of the constructivist worldview will also be shared in the methodology chapter. Mertens (2005) discussed the responsibility to construct knowledge and form meaning on those active in the research process, including the values of the researcher and the participants. Jones (2002) along with Jones et al. (2006) suggested that constructivism as a worldview or paradigm reauthorizes the researcher and participant to [re] construct meaning. Henceforth, the Black woman’s experience will provide the information which gives credibility to construct and reconstruct new meaning to have spirituality, religion, and faith for today’s Black woman to navigate her college experience.

Black Feminist Theory

Dillard (2006) affirmed that using Black Feminist Theory makes good research sense, because it turns the lens inward to focus on the experiences of Black women. Their voices and stories shape and inform the reality of what is known, valued, and respected. Anna Julia Cooper (1892/1988), celebrated Black activist from the early nineteenth century, declared in her essay, *A Voice from the South*, “only the Black woman can say when and where I enter in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without seeing or special patronage, then and there the whole race enters with me” (p. 63). Cooper (1892/1988) affirmed this over a century ago along with other Black Feminist scholars who validated the experience of the Black
woman. Cooper (2017) said that we must trust the experience of the Black woman, which gives proper place to Black Feminist Theory in the study. She further stated that academic research must move beyond caring for the Black woman’s experience. Scholars must “acknowledge, appreciate, struggle, disagree with, sit with, and question” the experience of the Black woman (Cooper, 2017, p. 2). The study contemplated and wrestled with the complexities of the Black woman’s life as she navigates the collegiate experience and the forces of spirituality, religion, and faith, which impact the quality of her lived experiences.

The Beauty of Sharing a Continuous Journey

As previously stated in Chapter I, the story of Black women in America is a journey that must be shared to grasp the relevance of the phenomenon described in this study. Black history is American history. However, in The Politics of “Silence”: Dual-Sex Political Systems and Women’s Traditions of Conflict, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1994) argued that a proper accounting of African people and its women are difficult to find. She further noted “history books are a poor place to look for history” (Harvey, 1927, p. 6 as cited by Gilkes, 1994). This study presents a historical perspective of Black women’s experiences in this country, who amplify the voices of Black college women while bringing the reader alongside a raw and powerful experience. Located within that experience is difference. Lorde (1984) affirmed this variance. She noted, “difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged”—giving space for transformation (p. 10).

The remainder of the literature prospectus tells a story by providing a perspective of difference beginning with a historical examination of Black women in this country, who, through their faith, engaged their spirituality and religion during slavery, both raw and powerful. The
A historical perspective is imperative in framing the research. Next, the literature recognizes Black women as the initial contributors to their own educational process, which also served as a means to uplift the Black race (Dubois, 1901, 1924; Giddings, 1984; Grimke, 1899; Laney, 1899; Perkins, 1981, 1996; Woodson, 1933) as they became partakers of (Bell-Scott, 1979; Humphries, 1995; Slowe, 1933, 1937), and leaders in, higher education (Bell-Scott, 1979; Pruitt-Logan & Miller, 2012; Richardson, 2009; Slowe, 1933, 1937). The literature review broadens the discourse to examine how the constructs of spirituality (Astin et al., 2011) and religion (Nash, 2001), traditional theories of spiritual development (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000, 2008), faith development for young adults (Parks, 2000, 2008), and spirituality and religiousness among college students (Astin et al., 2011; Bowman & Small, 2012; Chickering et al., 2006; Lindholm et al., 2011; Rockenbach et al., 2012) cross the threshold of lived experiences of Black college women (Donahoo, 2011; Hill, 2009; Mattis, 1995, 2002; Phillips, 2000; Rosales & Person, 2003; Shahid, 2014; Watt, 2003).

### Historical Perspective

The literature review begins with a historical perspective of Black women in the United States by providing a critical cultural understanding of the research topic. Hughes (1987) stressed that “the Afrocentric culture is deeply rooted in spirituality as an archetype that sustains Black people through many hardships and oppressive conditions, including the condition of slavery…” (p. 540). Beginning the literature review with a historical lens also supports the use of a Black Feminist epistemology which places the Black woman’s experiences at the center of the research (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2000, 2008), while sustaining a constructivist paradigm using that rich legacy of experience to shape knowledge. Brown (2015) wrote, “our memories can and
do teach; our memories can and do inform our research” (p. 16). Therefore, this historic foundation will recall the memories and legacies of mayhem faced by Black women in this country to establish the research context by joining the ancestral past to the present experiences of Black college women.

New Arrivals Bring Free Labor

The earliest documentation of African slaves arriving to the new formed colony of Jamestown, Virginia was recorded in 1619 (Gates, Kunhardt, & McGee, 2013; Gates & Yacovone, 2013; Kendi, 2016). The first African men and women came as indentured servants. But under the socially controlled and economic system of slavery, their status changed over time to that of slaves (Jones-Rogers, 2019). Alexander (2010) argued that, unlike their White counterparts, race became the dividing and deciding factor on the fate of a dark-skinned people intended for a lifetime of slavery. Ibram X. Kendi (2016), author of *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, referred to the 1662 Virginia Hereditary Slave Law that denounced the existence of Black women and relegated their bodies as mere property. Research guides related to property law, which included slaves and indentured servants, published by the Library of Congress (n.d.) provided the Old English version language of the 1662 Hereditary Slave Law, which stated:

WHEREAS some doubts have arrisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a Negro woman should be slave or free, *Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly*, that all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother, *And* that if any christian shall committ
ffornication with a Negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the ffines imposed by the former act. (para. 4)

The 1662 Hereditary Slave Law attributed the race and status of every child born to a Black woman by the sex of the female giving legal license for white men to rape black women—further proliferating the race with slaves and a free labor market for the burgeoning colonies (Kendi, 2016). Black women were purposefully disregarded as chattel and used as a continuous resource to build a nation. Spirituality, faith, and religion aided the Black woman to persevere in a life of viscous servitude.

Black Women and Slavery

The tragedies experienced by Black women during slavery are poignant to the historical context. By using their spiritual connection to a higher power, which helped them to endure the barrage of emotional, physical, and mental horrors inflicted upon them, Black women were tenacious. In her essay, Life Ain’t Been No Crystal Stair: The Rhetoric of Autobiography in Black Female Slave Narratives, Olga Idriss Davis (1999) chronicled the hopeful spirit of Black women who were liberated by the re-telling of their stories. Mary Prince’s (1831) portrayal is even more vivid:

There was no end to my toils—no end to my blows. I lay down at night and rose up in the morning in fear and sorrow...I could escape from this cruel bondage and be at rest in the grave. But the hand of that God whom then I knew not, was stretched over me; and I was mercifully preserves for better things. (p. 242)

Although Prince and other Black enslaved women suffered mental and bodily atrocities, they connected to a presence, their spirituality, in times there was no foreseeable peace.
A Woman’s Worth

Gilkes (1994) noted that all Black people were considered “legally nonpersons” (p. 17). Moreover, Mary Church Terrell (1904) observed in the *Progress of the Colored Woman* that when gender is added to the mix, the Black woman faced double jeopardy—“handicapped” by her sex and “baffled and mocked” because of her race (p. 292). The Black woman was an exchangeable and expendable commodity bought and sold with no value or worth, thus making her easy to be mistreated and void of any dreams, aspirations, thoughts, or feelings. So how did she cope? How did she survive? The Amplified Bible of Proverbs 31:17 offered insight into the hope found by Black women, “She equips herself with strength [spiritual, mental, and physical fitness for her God-given task]. And makes her arms strong.” This research presents one way to un-shelve the many sacrifices of mind, body, and soul, not by simply citing the participants words or recanting their experiences, but to fully and wholeheartedly engage by [re] placing ourselves in the steps of the Black matriarchs who have gone before them while honoring those steps. Cooper (2017) posited that we must trust the experience of the Black woman. She further noted that beyond caring about their experience, we must “acknowledge, appreciate, struggle, disagree with, sit with, and question” going forth with the understanding “that Black women’s intellectual work does still matter” (p. 2). Concomitantly, Black women became beacons of light, praying and waiting for the liberation of their souls and the freedom of their families.

The God, Religion, Spirit, and Faith of a Slave Narrative

Slave narratives present a rich history of Black women and portray the atrocities suffered at the hands of men and women who deemed them “morally inferior” and regarded them as a controllable source of free labor (Young & Spencer, 2007, p. 69). These experiences point Black
college women towards the importance of spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursue their
education. Historically, the terms, God, religion, and the Spirit, although used synonymously at
times, hold different meanings. During slavery, God was viewed as all knowing, all seeing—an
omnipresent being in the eyes of Black women. A being who was in control of everything and
everyone. Olive (1875) recounted Sojourner Truth’s slave narrative of an exchange with a slave
mistress regarding the return of her son who was sold off. Truth, an enslaved Black woman and
mother wanted her son back and recalled the following:

Well, I didn’t rightly know which way to turn; but I went to the Lord, an’ I said to him,

‘O Lord, ef I was as rich as you be, an’ you was as poor as I be, I’d help you—you know
I would; and, oh, do help me!’ An’ I felt sure that he would. (Olive, 1875, p. 162)

Truth’s affirmation of her spirituality and dependence on God is communicated further:

I am something of the type of Moses on this 49th birthday; not that I am wrapped in
luxuries, but that my thoughts are wrapped in the luxuries of the heavenly life in store for
me, when my life is done, and my friends shall be blessed by the work I shall have done.
For God has commanded me to write this book, that some one may read and receive
comfort and courage to do what God commands them to do. God bless every soul who
shall read this true life story of one born in slavery…God said, “Write the book and I will
help you.” And He has. (Olive, 1875, p. 25)

Slave narratives, such as Sojourner Truth’s, spoke of God often, for He was the source of
balance and sanity for the enslaved, who while honoring Him, recognized that God seemingly
approved bondage. Faith in God helped Black women during slavery to maintain hope for
freedom, although it was not a present-day reality. Greater Detroit area Pastor, Jerry Weinzierl’s
declaration that “faith sees the promise; it does not ignore the facts, but sees the promise before
the facts” (J. Weinzierl, personal communication, August 5, 2018). In reality, slavery was a legal force that kept Black people involuntarily servitude for 400 years of captivity and death. Yet Black women through faith in God, a spiritual connection to a higher power, and religion expressed their gratitude, frustration, and hope, while “weathering the emotional, physical, mental and psychological storm of a government sanctioned oppression,” still found a way to survive (Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, & Bound, 2006, p. 826).

Exploitation of Black Women

Black women, as property and a valuable commodity, lacked personal value. Perkins (1983) declared there was no finesse, daintiness, care, or compassion endowed her. In her Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves, Angela Davis (1981) noted that Black women possessed an internal power—and helped their community survive. She further described the tragic and intentional dismemberment of Black families, where Black women were purposefully raped to produce children who would serve the economics of a lucrative slave trade. These same women, who bore children, had no power or authority over their own lives or that of their offspring. The Black woman, heretofore, possessed all the characteristics of an isolated yet moving target: Black, woman, and slave. Vulnerable in every sense, the Black woman had no rights or privileges. Constantly exploited, she had the responsibility to work, earn, and care for others (Davis, 1981; Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003). This sentiment is expressed in Alice Walker’s (1983), In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose by Alice Walker:

Black women are called in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, “the mule of the world,” because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—
everyone else—refused to carry. We have also been called, “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen,” and “Mean and Evil Bitches”…When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. (p. 237)

Walker’s words affirmed the misconceptions of how Black women were treated. Grant (1995) acknowledged the [mis]perception of Black women being emotional and irratational. Yet despite the tainted view of her described persona, the Black woman persevered from the transatlantic shores of Africa to the auction block in Jamestown, Virginia to the “Black Ivy League” halls of higher education (Fleming, 1984, p. 6). Despite the horrors of slavery while carrying the burden of these predisposed and what Bambara (1970) termed “socially contrived roles” (p. 152) based on a disenfranchised race and gender, the Black woman yielded to a higher power amidst her desolate conditions. Walker (1983) described the unique relationship between the soul, mind, and body of Black women, who, on the brink of insanity, found their own way to endure. Wallace (1982) noted that “being a Black woman means frequent spells of impotent, self-consuming rage” (p.11). hooks (1995) also discussed this same rage and anger as Black women must hold themselves together while paradoxically, they scream on the inside.

Viewed as second class citizens, lacking any kind of status, devoid of humanity, an animal and treated as such (Davis, 1981), Beyonce’s *HOMECOMING* reiterated Malcolm X’s claim that “the most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman” (Carter-Knowles & Dixie, 2019, Track 18). Therefore, Black women used spirituality,
faith, and religion to dispose of this ill-treatment, rage, anger, fear, doubt, and
disenfranchisement; finding a way to live and exist with hope when none could be seen—
essentially making a way out of no way (National Museum of African American History and

Religion of the Slave

In Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of
Afro American People, Wilmore (1973) pointed out that Black religion originated in Africa and
melded its way into the southern plantations fused with “European Christianity in the Caribbean
and Latin America” and was influenced by Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Evangelical
Protestants (p. vii). He further noted that “despite the ignorance, prejudice, and repression of
White Christians, African spirituality found refuge in the religion of the slave” (Wilmore, 1999,
p. 21) and that same “religion has functioned closer to the survival needs of Blacks in America
than it has to those of Whites” (Wilmore, 1999, p. 23). Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1893) described
the insanity of Black skin rearing its poisonous venom into a racialized caste within the church.
In The Convict Lease System, Wells-Barnett (1893) stated: “to have Negro blood in the veins
makes one unworthy of consideration, a social outcast, a leper, even in the church” (Chapter 3,
para. 3). Howard Thurman (1949), author of Jesus and the Disinherited challenged the hypocrisy
of forced segregation which legally divided Blacks and Whites within the church pews. He
acknowledged this functional marginalization of religion which pushed “the masses of men [and
women] who live with their backs constantly against the wall” (Thurman, 1949, p. 3).

While Black women existed within this oppressive environment, they found church to be
a place of spiritual replenishment. Prince (1831) underscored, “I enjoy the great privilege of
being able to attend church three times on the Sunday...I trust in God I have profited by what I
have heard” (p.255). Although Cole and Sheftall (2003) noted that “White people have used biblical texts to argue that God supported slavery” (p. 121), Gilkes (1994) deemed that “after reflection on their own experience, the most important critical tool used by Black people has been the Bible” (p. 127). As an institution, the Black church served as place where Black women became active participants in how religion was used to carry out their spirituality and relied on biblical truths as a mainstay for their religious beliefs. Sterling (1984) noted in her edited collection, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*:

> to be a Black woman in nineteenth century America was to live in the double-jeopardy of belonging to the “inferior” sex of an “inferior” race. Yet 2 million slave and 200,000 free women of that time possessed a tenacity of spirit, a gift of endurance, a steadfastness of aspiration that helped a whole population to survive. (p. ix)

The life and work of the enslaved and exploited Black woman was hard, and that challenge remains ever so present today (Davis, 1981).

**Church, Organized Religion, and Slaves**

Organized religion through Christianity was brought to Black slaves as a way to control them. The saved soul of a slave was now a Christian bound to the biblical teachings of humility and obedience to her master. Kendi (2016) described the “first generation of Puritans” who followed the teachings of New England church influenced by Aristotle’s teaching of a God-ordained human hierarchy. He further expounded on the puritanical thoughts and practices which “began rationalizing the enslavement of these “Negroes” without skipping a Christian beat” (Kendi, 2016, p. 19). However, Rostic (2018), writer for *Our Daily Bread*, a Christian devotional, affirmed that Blacks used Christianity to serve one another. In *The Gift That Keeps*
Giving, Rostic (2018) described a constant reliance on God: “through time of pain and persecution, great joy and deep mourning, serving has always been a priority...we can extend our legacy in the body of Christ by serving each other—just like those who’ve gone before us” (para. 3). In the same devotional, Loyd-Paige (n.d.) reflected on the church’s necessity in the lives of Black people:

There’s nothing like hearing a Spirit-filled gospel message or an uplifting gospel song to refocus one’s thoughts towards God’s faithfulness on those days when life seems particularly challenging. The unfolding of African-American history is an ongoing story of challenging days—slavery, Jim Crow, and seemingly never-ending days of discrimination. However, amid these challenges, one also finds the sounds of gratitude, joy, and hope. Those sounds are the loudest and strongest on Sunday morning. (para. 2)

The irony of an organized religion which propagated slavery; artist, James Cleveland, would later declare this same joy and hope in the famous gospel song, “you'd be there, between each line of pain and glory. Jesus, you’re the best thing that ever happened to me” (Weatherly, 1973) because you continue to make a way out of no way (Wade-Gayles, 1995). Even though Christianity was introduced to the slaves to keep them in line, it evolved into a support system for Black women.

Black Women and the Religious Community—Church

Laney (1899) presented a paper at the Hampton Negro Conference, The Burden of the Educated Colored Woman, where she declared that the educated Negro woman was one of substance, “character and culture” and “only those of character and culture can do successful lifting [of the Negro race], for she who would mould character must herself possess it” (p. 41).  

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A Black woman’s character and morality were developed by religion, which influenced their manner of speech and dress and impacted their ways of thinking and living. The philosophy of building and preserving the educational and social station for Negro women was inundated from biblical references. For example, Grimke (1899) remarked that “girls must be trained to “dress simply and inexpensively,” for “idleness and the love of dress are among the greatest sources of demoralization among us” (p. 15). Women should be “neat,” “tastefully attired,” and “proper” not overly concerned with “adorning” (Grimke, 1899, p. 15). In a thesis, The Factor of Race in the Religious Education of the Negro High School Girl, Iona Mack (1927) further posited that Negro girls needed help and religion provided the necessary foundation to build her character along with social and academic skills.

In If It Wasn’t for the Women: Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (2001) argued that Black women ungirded the existence of the Black church movement in this country. She asserted that, “Black churchwomen approach their churches and communities with the understanding that they matter and they are indeed indispensable…if it wasn’t for the women, you wouldn’t have a church” (Gilkes, 2001, p. 4). Many Black collegiate women hail from this type of upbringing and support. Slowe (1937) noted that “much of the religious philosophy upon which Negro women have been nurtured has tended toward suppressing in them their own powers” (p. 276). The historical perspective and the influences of slavery, religion, and the Black church provides context to the racial uplift of Black people and the impact of spirituality, religion, and faith on the present-day lives of Black college women.
Education, Religion and the Black Church

Penn (1893) considered the education of Black people necessary so “that all of the Negro’s interest, particularly his social life, centers in his church” (para. 14). Although Penn does not reference Black women specifically in his language, Gilkes (1994) and Collier-Thomas (2010) noted the significance of Black women in the building of those religious denominations which served Black people—the Black church. Gilkes (1994) maintained that Black women have historically demonstrated commitment and dedication to the Black church and were instrumental “in maintaining the organizational integrity of the Black community” (p. 106). Mack (1927) claimed that religious education offered hope for the Negro girl to hedge “problems caused by the factor of race” and has “determinative power” (p. 101).

Educating the Negro Woman—A Case for the Spirit

Despite being enslaved, Black people engaged their spirituality and religion through Christianity and became educated—using the Bible. Prince (1831) recalled in her slave narrative, “my dear mistress teaches me daily to read the word of God” (p. 255). Moreover, Black women cared for their families by teaching themselves and their extended members to read and write using oral religious traditions and spiritual songs with lyrics taken directly from the Bible, which were secretly exchanged on plantations (Cornelius, 1983; Davis, 1981; Wilmore, 1999). Janet Cornelius (1983) described in her essay, We Slipped and Learned to Read: Slave Accounts of the Literary Process, 1830-1865, that literacy served as a two-edged sword. She noted that biblical literacy was used by slaveowners to instill piety and devotion, yet slaves saw learning the Bible as liberation from an oppressive state. Although reading and writing were unlawful acts that brought the most violent of consequences for the perpetrator,
such as beatings, cutting off a finger, or death (Cornelius, 1983), Laney (1899) and Mack (1927) found religion to be a critical tool in the education of Negro girls. Gilkes (1994) stated:

> Their [Black women] prominence in the slave community and their commitment to religious life guaranteed that women would emerge as part of the leadership class—particularly as educators, who are so essential to the development of a stable post-Emancipation black community where religion “has helped to shape and organize orientations to family work, politics, economic behavior, and education.” (p. 84)

For example, Mary Jane Patterson was the first Black woman in this country to receive a college degree from Oberlin College in 1862 (Fletcher, 1943), along with other notable early nineteenth century activists such as Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida A. Gibbs Hunt, all whom graduated in 1884 and spoke against racist and sexist practices against Black women (Baumann, 2010).

In *Constructing Black Education at Oberlin College*, Roland Baumann (2010) shared a correspondence written to Oberlin’s President, James Fairchild, from Julia Wilson, also a Black woman and Oberlin alumna. Wilson challenged President Fairchild to look to God for leadership and guidance on protecting Negro students and guiding the Oberlin student body on issues of race. Wilson penned the following in 1882, “treating this color-line as God, and the angels, and redeemed saints will treat it in the new heaven and the new earth? Will not Oberlin show us how Christians now ought to treat this color-line?” (Baumann, 2010, p. 86). Wilson assumed the powerful persuasion of her spirituality and religious faith placed in a God to improve the racial circumstances at Oberlin.
Black Sororities

In 1908, at the turn of the century, on the campus of Howard University in Washington, D. C., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated was founded to meet the social, academic, service, and leadership needs of Black women. The first sorority of its kind established by Black women provided a place for, and support of, young women who were just one generation removed from slavery. In *Faithful to the Task at Hand: The Life of Lucy Diggs Slowe*, Anne Pruitt-Logan and Carroll Miller (2012) noted the forward-thinking of these young Black women. Black Greek Lettered Organizations (BGLO), such as Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, developed women into leaders through organized programs by providing them mentorship, guidance, and support, so they would play an intricate role in uplifting the Black race—also called race uplift (Giddings, 1984; Perkins, 1981; 1983; Pruitt-Logan & Miller, 2012). Perkins (1983) further noted that “this education was for the entire race and its purpose was to assist in the economical, educational and social improvement of their enslaved and later emancipated race” (p. 18). Pruitt-Logan and Miller (2012) described the first Black woman to serve as Dean at Howard University in 1922, Lucy Diggs Slowe’s educational philosophy which transformed young women with a strong spiritual background into leaders on their campus and beyond. Dean Slowe advocated for the educated, young Negro college woman to exceed the patriarchal demands of her religious upbringing. Issues of spirituality, faith, and religion have always been vanguard for the Black college woman.

Past to Present

It has been 400 years since African men and women found themselves on the selling block in Jamestown, Virginia in 1629, more than 150 years after the emancipation of slavery in
1865 (Gates et al., 2013), 156 years after the first Black woman received a college degree from Oberlin College in 1862 (Bauman, 2010; Fletcher, 1943), and no less than 10 years since the first Black woman, Michelle Obama, served as the First Lady of the United States of America, or Carla Hayden, the first Black librarian of Congress, or Loretta Lynch, first Black woman to become the United States Attorney General, or Condoleeza Rice, the first Black woman to be appointed as United States Secretary of State, or Paulette Brown, first Black woman to be named president of the American Bar Association, or Shonda Rhimes, the first Black woman to create and executive produce a top 10 network series, including popular shows such as Grey’s Anatomy and Scandal. Black women forerunners attaining prominence in athletics, entertainment, and the professoriate included professionals such as Simone Biles, Lena Waithe, and Dr. Rene Shingles, respectively (Davis, 2016; The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2018). Yet in 2018, despite the accomplishments of Black women in this country from politics to entertainment to academia, Black women only earn 63 cents to every dollar earned by White men (Finley, 2018). Black women still face present day challenges and issues related to oppression, marginalization, and doubt regarding their abilities.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1995) shared in her edited book, Words of Fire, Maria W. Stewart’s (1995) declarative statement, “for I am firmly persuaded, that the God in whom I trust is able to protect me from the rage and malice of mine enemies, and from them that will rise up against me” (p. 26). Black women believed it was the workings of the Spirit or a connection to a higher power that gave them the wherewithal to endure slavery and provide a legacy for generations to follow.
The Spirit and Spirituality

Wade-Gayles (1995) noted that the Spirit or spirituality cannot be defined or measured, nor is it an object to be held in one’s hand. Spirituality is the interaction had with the Spirit—an unseen object, being—a force. She outlined spirituality as “the weight, the force, of its influence in our lives. We cannot hear it, but hear ourselves speaking and signing and testifying because it moves, inspires and directs us to do so” (Wade-Gayles, 1995, p. 220). This study explored the lived experiences of Black college women who use their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursue their education. Mattis (1995) described in her study of Black college women that “spirituality is a space in which to receive guidance about the lives that they live in environments (schools, cities, institutions) which are frequently unreceptive and/or foreign to them” (viii).

Spirituality, an interpersonal relationship, served as the mechanism through which, with a higher being, helped Black women to survive the unending tragedies of slavery. Spirituality and religion figure into the lives of Black college women helping them function within a college setting where they are not safe, often find themselves as one of the few in the classroom with Black skin, and face oppressive and marginalized practices including microaggressions (Harris-Perry & Dias, 2018; Solórzano et al., 2000).

Contemporary Context of Spirituality in Higher Education

Spirituality in higher education is not bound by religious practices. Although the practices and the denominational constructs inform our spirituality, it is the commonalities and the diversity of thought that strengthen the college student’s experience, particularly in faculty-student relationships. Higher education faculty, administration, staff, and specifically, student affairs practitioners are called to consider spirituality as a viable component in the teaching,
learning, and development of college students (Love & Talbot, 1999). Tyner (2012) posited that “the silence surrounding the role of spirituality in higher education is breaking as students and faculty dialogue about the necessity of exploration and awareness in this area” (para. 1).

Longitudinal studies conducted by the HERI (Astin et al. 2004, 2011), and the subsequent research studies produced from this investigation, provided higher education institutions with a plethora of qualitative and quantitative research to exemplify better ways to “serve students and help them achieve a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their academic and personal lives” (Astin et al., 2004, p. 38). Ultimately, higher education serves as a training ground where students are exposed to opportunities to find meaning through learning, serving and seeking a vocation. Faculty and students are engaged in different activities to know and appreciate content during the process of teaching and learning. The classroom is a great arena to dialogue, build trust, respect and share information about the role of spirituality in our lives. College students expect help in making meaning and developing their spirituality (Lindholm et al., 2011). Moreover, Astin et al. (2011) found that college is the place where students make meaning of their education and their life’s purpose.

Another consideration is the relationship among spirituality, faculty collegiality, and what matters to faculty. Rice, Sorcinelli and Austin (2000) stated, "What I want most in a faculty career is a profession that makes me feel connected (collegiality) to my students, to my colleagues, to the larger community and to myself” (as cited in Gappa, Austin and Trice, 2007, p. 305). Students want to connect with faculty and spirituality can be one of those connections. “Knowing spirituality forms such a large element of a student’s life, both inside and outside their academic studies, ought to impress upon student development and faculty members the
importance of this issue; for how they approach the matter of spirituality will greatly influence the manner in which their students approach learning” (Tyner, 2012, para. 3).

Spirituality and Religion for Black Students in Higher Education

Higher education scholars have previously studied spirituality and religion among college populations (Astin et al., 2011; Chickering et al., 2006; Parks, 2008; Rogers & Dantley, 2001). These works have been germane to the study of spirituality and religion within higher education. Research examples included faculty who manage stress using spirituality and making meaning (Astin, Astin, & Higher Education Research Institute, 1999), providing leadership and best practices for college campuses to incorporate spiritual and religious programs and services (Lindholm et al., 2011), the impact of spirituality for student affairs professionals (Love & Talbot, 1999), reconnecting teachers to their vocation’s passion and the inward work necessary to do so (Palmer, 1998), and finding space within the liberal arts for spirituality and reflection (Astin, 2011). While these seminal works are important to academe, Hughes (1987), McEwen et al. (1990), and Wright (1987) affirmed that they do not consider the different developmental and unique experiences of Black college students.

What’s Out There?

The importance of spirituality, faith, and religion among Black people, particularly Black women, is not an untold story (Collier-Thomas, 2010). Prior research has explored spirituality, religion, and faith among Black collegiate students. Notable and relevant research among Black college students in the realm of spirituality and religion have examined the relationship of spirituality and religion related to academic grades and persistence for Black students in college (Walker & Dixon, 2002), the impact of the collegiate environment (Weddle-West, Hagan, &
Norwood, 2013), the dealing with racism and the influence on health outcomes (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002), adjusting to a predominately White institution (Phillips, 2000), building community and sense of belonging through participation in a campus gospel choir (Strayhorn, 2011), career development (Constantine et al., 2006), and academic success at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Square, 2015). Further studies focused specifically on the spiritual and religious experiences of Black male students. Watson (2006) revealed that spirituality and religious practices such as church attendance, prayer, and meditation were salient parts of students’ identity development and a necessary tool for college survival. Riggins et al. (2008) focused their study on Black males attending an HBCU and found men retain their spirituality as a means of coping in college. Stewart (2002, 2010) and Means (2015) provided research on the impact of intersecting identities of race, gender, and sexual orientation with faith development and religious and spiritual identities.

The studies listed above focused on Black students as a whole group or specifically, Black men. Commodore et al. (2018) recognized the importance of “carving out intellectual spaces for Black women to be researched and remembered” (Foreword, p. xi) and “to identify opportunities for addressing student success” (Preface, p. xiii), such as the study on spirituality, faith, and religion. However, there are studies which focused on Black women and the role of spirituality, faith, and religion. Moving closer to the research study’s population, studies related to spirituality and religiousness concentrated on the leadership experiences of Black women in academia (Brown-McManus, 2012; Dillard et al., 2000), and those in corporate management (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Richardson (2009) looked at spirituality used by professional Black women in leadership roles and Mattis (2000) defined spirituality and religion among African American women. Like the HERI study on spirituality and religiousness (Astin
et al., 2011), none of the aforementioned studies exclusively addressed the needs of Black college women. Winkle-Wagner (2015) called for research to lift the voices of African American college women instead of experiences relegated only to race or gender.

There is research directly related to spirituality, religion, and faith experiences of Black college women. Dillard et al. (2000) discussed the partnership between spiritual centeredness and religiousness as self-discovery tools for Black women, which provided them with the courage and freedom to successfully navigate the multiple identities of race and gender as their spiritual selves with the college environment. Donahoo and Caffey (2011), Donahoo (2011), and Strayhorn (2011) found spirituality through religious practices, such as prayer, church attendance, or even participation in a school gospel choir, as familiar markers for Black women which helped them stay connected to familiar patterns of faith practices while in college. Hill (2009) and Watt (2003) examined spirituality as a coping method in college persistence and supporting identity development for Black women in college. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) found in their study that Black women are considered one of the most spiritually fervent populations in the United States. The researchers agreed that both religion and spirituality provide a powerful sense of connection and an emotional support system for Black women. Historically, for the Black collegiate woman, spirituality, faith, and religion have remained an important component of their existence and imparted a functional tool for their success.

Theoretical Framework

Existing theoretical frameworks present limited space for the spiritual and religious development based on the experiences of Black college women. In Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning, Fowler (1981) introduced the
six stages of faith development that occur over the span of a lifetime. In his work, he credited the influences of Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson, and Jean Piaget—seminal works which represent the scholarship canon within higher education administration and student affairs graduate programs. Sharon Daloz Parks (1986, 2000) extended Fowler’s work through her research on faith development which focused on the transitions emerging adults, a population which includes college-aged students, make as they develop their faith. Watt (2003) challenged Fowler and Parks which focused their stage development theories on moral and cognitive development leaving no room for the affective or emotional domain—which is where Black people traditionally connect to their faith dimensions. For any research related to Black women and spirituality, she argued that the inquiry must involve a “move toward wholeness and authenticity, [where] African American women must wrestle with the question, ‘Who am I within a society that devalues my race and gender?’” (Watt, 2003, p. 34). This study has addressed the challenges Black women, who are forever connected to and impacted by race and gender, face in the United States and on college campuses (Andrews, 2015; Cooper, 1892/1988; Cooper, 2017; King, 1988; Terrell, 1904), where she must account for this double and sometimes triple-jeopardy (Andrews, 2015; Carter, Pearson & Shavlik, 1987). Commodore et al. (2018) argued for “culturally-sensitive models that relocate Black women from a position of ‘other’ to a position of centeredness” (p. 64). The spirituality, religion, and faith used by Black college women as they navigate the college experience must be investigated using a framework that aligns with her cultural identity whenever and where she enters (Giddings, 1984).

As previously mentioned, the HERI study conducted by Astin and his team concentrated on spirituality and religiousness development for college students and represented only eight percent of African American [Black] students (Astin et al., 2011). Yet, research supports that
African Americans [Black people] are among the most spiritual people in America (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2013). Pew Research Center (2014) also reported key indicators, including 79% of Black Americans who identified as Christian, 75% indicated religion as very important in their lives, and 53% of Black Americans who classified themselves as members of a historically Black Protestant tradition. Moving closer to the college-aged population, 61% of Black millennials were reported as being more religious than other millennial groups (Dimanat & Mohamed, 2018). This research seeks to further expand the theoretical framework by adding more voices to the discussion while exploring the spiritual, faith and religious experiences of Black college women.

College Student Development

Alexander Astin’s (1985) seminal work, *Achieving Educational Excellence*, is credited for his theory of college student involvement which looks at the prior experiences of students, what they bring to their collegiate experience, and the resources they engage in during the college experience. The output is considered as their college success. Beyond Astin’s (1999) theory of college student involvement, other theories related to the realm of college students include: college student departure and attrition (Tinto, 1975, 2012), Chickering’s (1969) seven vectors of student development, ways colleges can create and implement high-impact practices to influence student engagement (Kuh, 2008; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991), and the impact of what happens in and outside of the classroom and its impact on student learning (Kuh, 1995). These valuable theories are used in higher education circles and highly respected among student affairs practitioners and educational administrators. I acknowledge the research and related scholarship devoted to helping university communities improve the instruction delivery
to college students. However, Ladson-Billings (2012) took note of the importance of culturally relevant research and pedagogy when looking at people of color. In the article, *On Spiritual Strivings: Transforming an African American Woman’s Academic Life* Dillard (2006) reminded the academy that conducting research and offering scholarship has healing power—“healing is done through the very act” (p. xi). Likewise, McEwen et al. (1990) cautioned researchers to consider the experiences of African American college students into theory work. Dillard (2006) observed that Black Feminist theory offers “culturally indigenous ways of knowing” students and for the study of Black college women (p. 2). She suggested that researchers be attentive to:

> alternative epistemological truths are required if educational researchers and leaders are to be truly responsible, asking for new ways of looking into the reality of others that opens our own lives to view—and that makes us accountable to the people, interests, and needs of whom we study. (Dillard, 2006, p. 2)

The traditional canon offered by Astin and others are respected, yet challenged by the radical research of my dissertation.

This research study counters the “on-going narratives of superiority/inferiority, citizen/alien, intelligent/unintelligent, and human/inhuman,” which view Black college women as other, an aside, or afterthought (Ladson-Billings, 2012, p. 115). Commodore et al. (2018) recommended new ways of knowing and thinking about Black college women. These scholars offered a holistic model that included what happens to Black women prior to college, during college, and after college. One of the key pre-college influences of the model centered around identity development, external assets or support systems, and the self-identified priorities of the students exemplified in their values and commitments. Albeit, Astin’s (1999) model considers the input and environment of the college student; however, Commodore et al.’s (2018) model is
student-centered accounting for the Black collegiate’ experiences, personal choices, responses to support, responses to the consequences of her choices, and the support provided during those times. The decisions of the Black college woman and her responses to those decisions have the ability to “thwart” her progress (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 69). The model’s holistic nature is well-formed by the time the Black collegiate graduates from college. She makes a return on the investment in her community through reinvesting her academic and non-cognitive skills—life skills through mentoring and building a new generation of learners essentially uplifting her race (Commodore et al., 2018; Perkins, 1981).

Prior scholarship has been dedicated to the spirituality and religious experiences of college students. For example, Stewart (2009) and Stewart & Lozano (2009) discussed the ways in which students navigate their identities as they cling to religion. Rockenbach et al. (2012) noted how college students vascillate between who they are and who they are expected to be with regards to their spirituality. They argued that students find themselves in a quandry of spiritual struggle. Parks (1986, 2000) offered insight to the faith development of young adults and the impact of faith on how students solve problems and make decisions during their college years. She found that when it comes to spirituality, faith, and religion, students who incorporate these components in their lives also struggle with their identities during the college years. Tatum (1997) suggested that we are multidimensional people with identities mediated by class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. She noted:

how one’s racial identity is experienced will be mediated by other dimensions of oneself: male or female; young or old; wealthy, middle-class, or poor; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or heterosexual; able bodied or with disabilities; Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, or atheist. (p. 33)
Higher education practitioners have much research to draw from and consider when helping the development of college students. This dissertation intentionally focused on how Black women think about and experience their spirituality, faith, and religion as part of their identity and college student experience.

Black Women in College

The story of Black women is multi-layered. Black women have various hues of skin, hair texture, body types, socioeconomic statuses, education levels, family histories and backgrounds. In spaces where her name and identity are questioned, she must also learn the rules to the game of crisscross. Gilkes (2001) identified this game of jeopardy where her intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1991) traverse betwixt race, gender, and class, placing her in a game of “double jeopardy…triple jeopardy and then multiple jeopardy” (p. 2). Obama (2018) noted, “the burden of assimilation is put largely on the shoulder of minority students, in my experience, it’s a lot to ask” (p. 97). Although daunting, Black college women have the resiliency to live and learn in such a community. This study reveals that spirituality, faith, and religion help relieve that burden.

A Critical Mass

As previously discussed in Chapter I, the outlook on college enrollment and graduation numbers for Black women offer more than one perspective and multiple interpretations. The NCES data for 2013-2014 indicated Black women received a majority of postsecondary degrees earned by all Black students. Black women earned 64% of doctoral degrees, 70% of master’s degrees, 64% of bachelor’s degrees, and 64% of associates degrees. The data are encouraging and indicate positive enrollment and graduation trends for Black women participating in
postsecondary education (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). According to *Status Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018*, the overall, the six-year graduation rate is higher for women than men (62 vs. 57 percent) and is also higher for women in each racial/ethnic group (de Brey et al., 2018). However, the 6-year graduation rate for Black women is 44% compared to 67% for all women. Compared to women of other races and ethnicities, Black women have lower six-year graduation rates than White women (67%), Hispanic women (58%), Pacific Islander women (53%), Asian women (77%), and women of two or more races (62%) (de Brey et al., 2018). Although the enrollment and graduation data for Black college women reveal increased participation, more work needs to be done. Black women still face a lack of critical mass on college campuses (Bartman, 2015; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Campuses with a critical mass are described as those having enough individuals who share a common characteristic or racial, gender or cultural background, where such individuals no longer feel isolated or have to be the group spokesperson—meaning they are no longer the only one in that group. Sidhu (2013) offered a commentary in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on the challenges of applying critical mass theory to higher education settings. He noted, “the critical mass theory, therefore, may actually validate racial stereotypes and perpetuate notions of racial inadequacy” (Sidhu, 2013, para. 14). However, Bartman (2015) presented the lack of a critical mass of Black women on college campuses as a barrier to success. She suggested that Black college women receive support from one another and experience a sense of belonging. On college campuses, Black women benefit from seeing familiar faces which resemble their own, a visibly tangible peer group sharing the same racial and cultural background even if their individual experiences differ. Everett and Croom (2017) moved this notion forward in cautioning “Black womyn” not only rely on these interdependent relationships,
but also seek out relationships with women from other cultural backgrounds (p. 75). Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) argued that a critical mass is needed to support Black women on college campuses using recruitment and retention while offering space for safe dialogue. A lack of role models and support for and among Black college women creates a challenging environment where “playing the role is stressful and takes a toll on all aspects of African American women’s lives” (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 100). These previously shared perspectives underscore counter narratives of having a critical mass of Black college women and how Black women enter and graduate from postsecondary education institutions.

The New Model Minority Myth or Simply #BlackGirlMagic

Black women are fighting against the Model Minority Myth, which says that they will outperform their male counterparts (Commodore et al., 2018). Commodore et al. (2018) cautioned educational leaders to be careful, because the myth causes undue stress and pressure—calling it a “burden” that carries itself beyond the college years (p. 68). Others mistakenly label this burdensome pressure to perform and persevere in the face of adversity, grit (McGee & Stovall, 2015). This myth has been carried down for generations. In 1899, Lucy Laney presented *The Burden of the Educated Colored Woman* to the Hampton Negro Conference. Laney (1899) dubbed this “race inheritance” as an inherited burden, one in which Black women were called to respond to and change issues related to their homes, families, and community at large (p. 39). From raising kids to dealing with Black male incarceration, education, prejudice, hygiene, and economic empowerment, "the intelligent [Black] woman can and must help to carry” the race (Laney, 1899, p. 39). Dubois’ (1914) poem, *The Burden of Black Women*, referred to this same burden as the “struggle to be free” (para. 1). Laney (1899) and others of her
time fostered a primordial conversation of the strong and responsible, “refined and noble Negro woman” (p. 41), which is now viewed as the #BlackGirlMagic movement created by CaShawn Thompson (Thomas, 2015; Wilson, 2016) to honor the spirit of Black women who persevere in the face of adversity. However, the Black women’s celebration of empowerment is juxtaposed with the vulnerable Black woman (Chavers, 2016; Ford, 2016), whose legacy is one of inborn magic. Laney (1899) postulated, “can a [Black] woman do this work? She can; and she must do her part, and her part is by no means small” (p. 40). Yet the influential, Black woman of grace like First Lady Michelle Obama also carries the burden along with her status. In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, *The Black Woman’s Burden*, Haynes (2012) noted that the First Lady was depicted as the angry Black woman who yields her power but does not know her place. He further discussed Michelle Obama’s challenge in fighting off stereotypes against the backdrop of constant enquiry, despite her professional experience and academic background. In the same article, Dr. Marilyn Mobley, diversity administrator from Case Western University, shared “while college campuses are replete with highly intelligent, well-educated African American women, there is a common thread of walking a tightrope in managing perceptions and avoiding stereotypes” (Haynes, 2012, para. 2). Black women, such as First Lady Obama and others, continue to persist in life declaring, “when they go low; we go high” (Obama, 2016). However, McGee and Stovall (2015) challenged this notion of grit and resilience, leading us to further consider the unrealistic and undue toll brought to bear among Black students, particularly Black women attending predominately White institutions (PWIs).
Microaggressions—Respect My Voice, Experience, and Ability

Black women face disrespect on college campuses and must live and learn in hostile environments while occupying the intersection of race and gender or, as Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003) stated, “dual oppression” (p. 100). Commodore et al. (2018) reiterated how Black women in college not only deal with external factors, such as structural and environmental barriers akin to campus policies and procedures but also microaggressions, which demean their existence and stagnate academic and social progress. They described microaggressions as “conscious and unconscious insults” (Commodore et al., 2018, p. 50). However, this level of insolence is not a new phenomenon for Black women. Black women in college must live, work, and learn on hostile campuses that do not recognize their voices, give credence to their existence, support their academic ambitions, or recognize their ability as leaders or scholars (Moses, 1989). Microaggressions, micro-insults, and assaults can bring wear and tear to the spirit of Black women and impede college success. Commodore et al. (2018) found external factors, such as microaggressions and racism, cause pressure and work against the progress of the Black college woman.

Former president of Spelman College, Dr. Beverly Tatum (1997), explored issues of race and privilege in her book, Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race. She defined the term racism as “a system of advantage based on race” where “prejudice plus power” has historically influenced social and structural systems of behavior (Tatum, 1997, p. 7). Tatum posited that there are political and economic systems which benefit a certain group of people. Racist attitudes make great partners for prejudicial acts thus promoting social injustice. When those in power feel as if they are losing power, then they will behave, create laws, enact policies to maintain the status quo. Tatum (1997) continued:
It is important to acknowledge that while all Whites benefit from racism, they do not all benefit equally. Other factors, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, mental and physical ability, also play a role in our access to social influence and power…it is also true that not all people of color are equally targeted by racism…We all have multiple identities that shape our experience…when one is targeted by multiple isms—racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism—in whatever combination, the effect is intensified. (pp. 12-13)

Therefore, spirituality, faith, and religion can serve as tools to help Black women navigate the impact of living in such unreceptive environments while facing multiple isms during their college experience.

Mental and Emotional Health Support

Black communities navigate the constant stigma attached to acknowledging mental health issues and in seeking support to deal with such challenges (Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar, 2004). The lack of trust in health care in the Black community has been documented (Washington, 2006; Williams & William-Morris, 2000), which creates barriers for Black people in seeking assistance to address their mental and emotional needs. Kessler et al. (2005) found the onset age of mental health disorders, such as those affecting mood, anxiety, and impulse control, can begin as early as age 11. They further noted that “half of all lifetime [mental health] cases start by age 14 and three-fourths by age 24 years” (Kessler et al., 2005, p. 593) with the ability to follow students into their collegiate experience. A blog from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) examined how discrimination affects mental health among college students of color, especially when they are dealing with race and perceptions of socio-economic status (Primm,
2018). Other scholars have also stressed the challenges of mental and emotional health for Black college students. In *Reimagining Critical Race Theory in Education: Mental Health, Healing, and the Pathway to Liberatory Praxis*, McGee and Stovall (2015) pointed out how Black students use and wear the façade of resiliency and grit while enduring challenging institutional environments. Commodore et al. (2018) noted issues of isolation, chilly campus climates, and the lack of romantic relationships, which can problematic for the Black woman in the midst of her collegiate experience. Donovan and Guillory (2017) discussed sociocultural stressors, such as those related to racial and gender discrimination, which can have a negative impact on student’s emotional and academic performance.

Culturally relevant agencies and practices are needed to support the mental and emotional health needs of Black college women. Chatters, Nguyen, Taylor, and Hope (2018) used a national probability sample of African Americans to study the symptoms of depression and social support from extended family members versus the social support received informally from church congregants. The quantitative study revealed that African Americans’ mental health is impacted from the social and emotional support gained from religious service attendance (Chatters et al., 2018). Using a database of 3,000 participants collected from the National Survey of American Life with ages ranging from 18 to 93, the study found that the social and emotional support from church attendance was linked to positive mental health (Chatters et al., 2018). Conversely, a lack of church attendance and support was favorably linked to symptoms of depression (Chatters et al., 2018). The study’s population was comprised of African Americans who experience higher levels of depression and are also prone to “experience life circumstances (poverty) and events (life stressors) that represent risk factors for the development of depression” (Chatters et al., 2018, p. 404). According to Chatters et al. (2018), the
longitudinal data collected from 3,000 African American participants included a sample of 42% males (999) and 58% females (1992). Although the study focused solely on African Americans with significant participation from African American women, the mean age of participants in the study was 43 with an average of 12 years of education. Chatters et al. (2018) suggested for future studies to look at adolescents or emerging adults.

College Success

Black college women are entering college and completing their degrees. But how do Black women define college success? Does it mean grades, academic persistence, or is it just getting through, walking across the stage at graduation, having soundness of mind and completeness, not selling out, authenticity, being whole, or getting hired and making money? Commodore et al. (2018) defined college success for the Black women as more than degree attainment. They observed that the successful Black college woman gives back to her community (Commodore et al., 2018). Even the 18th century Negro collegiate woman who was one generation removed from slavery, emancipation, and without the right to vote, gave back to her community. The opportunity to access higher education and earn a college degree served as a vehicle to lift a race of people by preparing its most valuable asset—the Negro woman. Slowe (1933) remarked “those interested in the higher education of women should bear in mind that women are not only conservators of the race, but they are its real educators” (p. 358). The Black college woman reinvests and nurtures others by maintaining the National Association for Colored Women’s motto, “lifting as we climb” thereby sharing a legacy to future generations (as cited by Perkins, 2015, p. 722).
Summary

For college students, Parks (2008) affirmed the strength of community lies in religion; it is how we become spiritual together. She further stated that these practices are celebrated through shared ideas, stories, and symbols. Wright (1987) and McEwen et al. (1990), along with Donahoo and Caffey (2010), noted among Black students that religion through the support of church becomes paramount during their college years. Watt’s (2003) study on spirituality as a means of coping and resistance bridged the study’s connection for the Black college woman. She writes, “African American college women often turn to spiritual beliefs to cope with everyday struggles that come with living in a socially and politically oppressive system” (Watt, 2003, p. 29). Therefore, it is here, whether under the harrowing weight of terror, subjugation, and deliverance of the enslaved Black woman (Davis, 1981; Kendi, 2016) or the daily microaggressions suffered (hooks, 1995; Solórzano et al., 2000) alongside the pressure to perform faced within the academy (Mattis, 1995; Moses, 1989; Shahid, 2014; Watt, 2003) where the research studied how spirituality, religion, and faith work in the lives of Black women. Whether she circumvents the myth of being the model minority, navigates the hostile, “pervasive environmental-structural barriers to positive progress that a Black woman faces throughout the college persistence process”, Black women survive using their spirituality, faith, and religion to find strength in a strong habitation (Commodore et al. 2018, p. 69).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black college women who use their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursue their education. Through the lens of Black Feminist Theory with a constructivist paradigm, I explored how spirituality, faith, and religion are used among seven Black college women from a selected comprehensive, Midwestern institution. This qualitative study used phenomenology as the emerging design to understand how Black collegiate women use their spirituality, faith, and religion as tools for collegiate success. Jones (2002) argued that qualitative research “uncovered” and looked “underneath the carpet” (p. 24) to reveal a “way of life” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). She further posited that qualitative research uncovers things we did not even know were an issue prompting action; therefore, “once we see [Black college women] differently, we [college educators have the capacity to] act [program, assess, evaluate, value] differently” (Fishman, 1988, as cited by Peshkin, 1993, p. 26)—essentially learning why it is important to ask Black women about the place spirituality, faith, and religion has in their lives as college students. Qualitative researchers “learn about the problem or issue from the participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 186), while reflecting on their own assumptions, roles, positions, authority, and abilities to influence all aspects of the research process (Jones et al., 2006). I considered how Black college women use their spirituality, faith, and religion to navigate their college experience using a phenomenological methodology.
Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the methodological approach used to conduct the study. Methodology provides a guide for the researcher on “how data are collected and analyzed” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 16), the action plan to direct the research study aligned to the epistemological and theoretical perspectives. Jones et al. (2006) further advised the methodology to be aligned with the methods of data collection to answer the research question. To explore the spirituality, faith, and religiousness of Black college women and answer the research questions, phenomenological methods were employed. Creswell (2013) noted that phenomenology describes the lived experiences of its participants to explore what they have in common as they experience a phenomenon—spirituality, faith, and religion.

This study employed phenomenology, because it took the lived experiences of participants as data to respond to the phenomenon and answer the research question. This study examined the lived experiences of Black college women and explored the lived experiences of Black women who use their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursue their education at one comprehensive institution. The phenomenological methods of Max van Manen (1990, 2002, 2016) guided the study. van Manen (2016) connected phenomenology to the discipline of philosophy. He further explained that phenomenology is not solely a research method, but a way of thinking with corresponding actions mirrored in the way data are collected, reflected upon, and written. Phenomenology is a source for finding answers in research; a resource tool by which a study is conducted. Phenomenology also produces a product concurrently serving as the mechanism forming the product. Phenomenology is the search, the act of a new discovery, uncovering another layer of meaning where “nothing is more meaningful than the quest for meaning, the mystery of meaning, how meaning originates and occurs” (van Manen, 2016, p.
van Manen (2016) ascribed phenomenology’s purpose as the ability to grasp the essential meaning or essence of something utilizing the “everyday meanings of life, experiences, phenomena and events” (p. 22). This study investigated the phenomenon of spirituality, faith, and religion as experienced by Black women as they pursue a college education. The chapter contents also connect the constructivist paradigm’s link to the epistemological stance of Black Feminist Theory. Collins (2000) and Dillard (2008) declared Black Feminist Theory as the lens which informs and substantiates the basis of knowledge from a Black woman’s perspective placing her lived experiences at the center of the study. Black Feminist Theory, by its very nature is a critical lens. This study used a Black Feminist Theory lens to reclaim and reconstruct knowledge (Collins, 2014) around spirituality, faith, and religion. Black Feminist Theory brings attention to, and raises awareness of, the life experiences witnessed and realized by the Black woman, which also includes spirituality, faith, and religion. Black Feminist Theory becomes the foundation from which the “historical and cultural norms that operate in people’s lives” and therefore, give meaning to the Black woman’s experience (Cresswell, 2014, p. 8). This chapter explains the phenomenological methodology used to direct the investigation in answering the research questions and justification for its use in the study. A description of the population, study participants, data collection and analysis methods, justification for selecting the chosen methodology, along with limitations and delimitations are also discussed. The final section of this chapter addresses strategies to ensure credibility, which include statements of positionality and reflexivity used to bracket my personal experiences and bolster the study’ trustworthiness. The next chapter will discuss research findings and the final chapter will offer conclusions,
implications for theory and practice, and recommendations for college practitioners on how to provide holistic support for Black college women through spirituality, faith and religion.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology, as an emerging design, allowed me to follow a prescribed plan for data collection and analysis, all while allowing space for flexibility and modifications, if needed, to maintain the voices of the participants (Creswell, 2014; van Manen, 2002). In *Writing in the Dark*, Max van Manen (2002) described phenomenology as both a research method and a phenomenon which requires the researcher to have an open and available heart and mind, allowing for continuous questioning and never resting on one definitive interpretation of an experience. He further suggested that phenomenology invites the researcher and her research to a deeper experience transcending words; touching an experience for the participants, researcher, and the audience; and, having those expressive moments reflected or gazing back to all engaged in the process. Phenomenology also dictates that researchers intentionally bracket or set aside their assumptions regarding the subject (Creswell, 2013; Gray, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, spirituality, faith, and religion successfully steered me through my college experience and served as my “abiding concern” for the research study (van Manen, 1990, p. 34). Jones (2002) asserted that researchers can never fully remove themselves from their assumptions and who they are permeates the study. The research expanded my perspective by searching the lived experiences of other Black college women to bring awareness to the higher education community regarding the importance of spirituality, faith, and religion for Black college women.
Research Questions

The phenomenological study employed two individual, semi-structured interviews with seven Black women enrolled at one comprehensive, Midwestern University. The purpose of the study was to explore how Black college women use their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursue their education. The study focused on one central research question: What is the role of faith, spirituality and religion in supporting the success of Black college women? In addition, the following sub-questions were used to support the main research question:

1. How do Black college women define spirituality and religion?
2. How do Black college women describe their spirituality or religious journey?
3. What does spirituality and religiousness look like for Black college women?
4. How have Black college women navigated campus resources related to their spirituality and religion?

Research Design

A qualitative approach was used to answer the research questions. Creswell (2013) described qualitative research as “a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world” (p.43). He further noted the importance of the researcher’s paradigm or worldview, which influences the theoretical framework informing the study. Moreover, Jones (2002) noted a qualitative approach “honors multiple truths” through the power of affirmed narratives, which lift the voices of Black college women who engage their spirituality, faith, and religion (p. 471). Qualitative inquiry was used because of its ability to reach beyond empiricism and invite the reader into the lives of its participants to search for meaning gained though experiencing a phenomenon. In addition, surveys, such as those
conducted by Gallup (Newport, 2006, 2014), Pew Research Center’s (2014) *Religious Landscape Study*, and the longitudinal study conducted by the HERI from Astin et al. (2011) did not offer an in-depth discussion on lifting up the unique voices and experiences of Black people, particularly Black women. Moreover, Dillard (2008) noted the challenge in quantifying spirituality for African people; therefore, justifying the qualitative approach used for this study. The literature speaks to the difficulty of defining and measuring spirituality and religion, because they possess different, and often peculiar, meanings based on the background experiences of the individual (Astin et al., 2011; Conyers, 2015; Dillard, 2008; Donahoo, 2011; Richards, 1985; Shahid, 2014). Research findings, to be discussed in Chapter IV, affirmed that spirituality, faith, and religion held similar meanings, but participants experienced the phenomenon in different ways and were rooted in their personal backgrounds.

Since there are varying interpretations of what spirituality, faith, and religion looks like in the literature, the research, as suggested by Lunenberg and Irby (2008), employed a phenomenological methodology to describe, rather than explain, what the phenomenon looks like through the eyes of the participant. Using phenomenology, the study explored the lived experiences of these Black women and the role of spirituality, faith, and religion used by them as college students. This qualitative research approach also connects to the paradigm of constructivism, which is consistent with the perspective of Black Feminist Theory to communicate the experiences of Black women in establishing knowledge, reality, and truth. I invite the audience to an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of these complex social constructs including spirituality, faith, and religion by delving into the lived experiences of Black college women.
Justification of Research Design

According to van Manen (2016), phenomenology is a methodology guiding and leading the researcher through and to new experiences. van Manen (2016) presented an exegesis of phenomenology and is offered here as justification in guiding this research study. Phenomenology orients to the meanings that arise in experiences. Any and every possible human experience (e.g., event, happening, incident, occurrence, object, relation, situation, thought, feeling) may become a topic for phenomenological inquiry. What makes phenomenology so fascinating is that any ordinary experience tends to become quite extraordinary, when we lift it up from our daily existence and hold it with our phenomenological gaze. Wondering about the meaning of a certain moment of our lived life may turn into a phenomenological question; we may then wonder and ask, what is this experience like?

This research study elevated the often misunderstood, assumed, and complex meanings of spirituality, faith, and religion reflected through the experiences of Black college women. van Manen (2016) discussed phenomenology’s connection with philosophy. He referenced the Greek root word for philosophy, philo, meaning to have a love of or need for. I selected phenomenology as my methodology for two reasons: (a) I love stories, and (b) my love for stories and the shared experience with the phenomenon; a potential bias and limitation of the study to be discussed later in the chapter. The study used a phenomenological method which focuses on the experiences of individuals surrounding a shared phenomenon; moreover, the method provided space for me to bracket my experience as I engaged my participants as co-researchers (Jones, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). Whereas philo means to have a love for, the other part of the Greek word sophy means in search of wisdom. The study carefully searched for the wisdom found within the lived experiences of Black women and how
spirituality, faith, and religion are experienced during their college years. van Manen (2016) argued that “doing phenomenology” offers a perpetual way of conducting research ranging from the selected topic to how one attempts to collect, interpret, and reflectively write about what has been uncovered (p. 41). He, along with Jones (2002), further noted the continuous unearthing of new information, especially in times of reflection when the researcher brackets her own opinions yet realizing that she is being led to wonder all while reconstructing new meaning for herself, the participants, and the audience. This is the work of phenomenology, to have, as van Manen (2002) deemed, wonder or “that moment of being when one is overcome by awe or perplexity—such as when something familiar has turned profoundly unfamiliar, when our gaze has been drawn by the gaze of something that stares back at us” (p. 5). The wonderment of this study is to take something as familiar as spirituality, faith, and religion and truly marvel about the complexity of use and meaning for Black college women. van Manen (2002) also noted the powerful ability of phenomenology by which research text gazes back, making a connection to what is known to what is possible. The beauty of the research will happen when what is known about spirituality, faith, and religion is introduced to what is discovered through the lived experiences of Black college women.

Jones (2002) noted the qualitative researcher leaves her imprint throughout the research and makes space to intentionally reflect on the thoughts and assumptions that will threaten the integrity of the study. I do not have to forget that I am a Black woman and a Christian who actively engaged her spirituality, faith, and religion as way to help me persist through difficult times during my college years. van Manen (2016) stated “phenomenology is best suited to investigate the meaning aspects of terms that clearly correlate with the lived experience” (pp. 44-45). I realized that my lived personal, social, and academic collegiate journey with spirituality,
faith, and religion helped me make it through college, which precipitated the focus of this study. For a long time, I have been interested in how other Black women in college use their spirituality, faith, and religion to help navigate through school. This question remained a driving force from my time as an undergraduate student, but has since evolved into a research agenda. I contend that Black women access and engage their spirituality, faith, and religious influences to help them through college. This driving force of a resilient heart and mind has been an integral part of the Black woman’s existence stemming from slavery and beyond. Bruce (2008) claimed that spirituality connects us to the deepest part of who we are, the innermost dimensions of self. Therefore, I want to know how Black women in college connect to their spirituality, faith, and religion. Who do they call upon from the “core of [their] our being” (Vanzant, 1996, p. xxiii), when things get rough, when there is uncertainty about a decision to make during times of grief and loss, when faced with unmet expectations, in moments of failure and disappointment, and when utterly falling flat on our faces? A qualitative research design is the best approach in answering the research questions to facilitate future dialogue around what allows the Black college woman to get up, persevere, and get back in the game when every internal thought and outward emotion points to quitting, giving up, and walking away.

Epistemological Approach and Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective frames, interprets, and informs the research agenda (Jones et al., 2006). The theoretical perspective offers its own set of characteristics, distinct approach, and lens to mold the research project (Creswell, 2007). Glesne (2011) pointed out a researcher must figure out what philosophical and theoretical perspectives inform their work. These perspectives are often hidden and unspoken, yet undergirds the passion of the research project and influences
the questions asked throughout the study (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011; Jones, 2002). The phenomenological study is situated in an interpretive, constructivist, philosophical perspective, which embraces the notion that "knowledge and meaning are always partial" and "the world is always interpreted through the mind" (Schwandt, 2007 as cited by Glesne, 1992, p. 8). Critical thinking occurs when we interact with outside experiences and dialogue. In this study, Black college women are the focus of engagement and our dialogue is with them. Their lived experiences challenge what we think we know about spirituality, religion, and faith, and therefore, must be reconstructed for new meaning.

Phenomenological inquiry calls for [re]enlightenment, [re]clarification, [re]understanding and [re]knowing through an endarkended epistemology, Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2008) through interaction and engagement with selected Black college women. Black Feminist Theory informed the study, which calls for an epistemological stance of truth informed by the perspectives of Black women (Collins, 2000; Shahid, 2014). Black Feminist Theory, “fundamentally exclusive of women of color,” provides self-defining interpretations of their social world (Collins, 2000; Taylor, 1998, p. 56). Jones (2002) maintained that “care” and “respect” must be demonstrated in doing qualitative research (p. 461). She further characterized the researcher as the primary instrument who respectfully tells and [re]tells the stories of others while being attentive critically, reflectively exposing and uncovering “complex dynamics that emerge” to demonstrate a problem or expose a need (Jones, 2002, p. 461). Qualitative methodologies, such as phenomenology used in this study, are fundamentally anchored in a concern for developing depth of understanding for a particular phenomenon. The study will seek to understand the role of spirituality, faith, and religion in the lives of Black college women;
placing them and their experiences at the “center” of this study to discover how they engage their spirituality, faith, and religion while in college (Collins, 2015, p. 2350).

Creswell (2014) encouraged any plan of study to be based on the philosophical views espoused by the researcher. The philosophical worldview or basic set of beliefs that guides my actions is to (re) interpret what I see as a social constructivist. I gleaned understanding from the meaningful life experiences of Black college women. I concur with Creswell (2014) and Jones (2002) in recognizing the shared background, values, and experiences of the participants and acknowledge any common cultural norms that may influence and shape the interpretation of my findings.

Black Feminist Theory

Black Feminist Theory informed the epistemological stance for the research project. Black Feminist theory takes the lived experiences of Black women and places those experiences at the center of all inquiry. Therefore, the study respectfully examined the lives of Black women to find out how spirituality, faith, and religion are used during their time in college. The word respectfully is used intentionally because religion and spirituality are considered intimate subjects among Black women. Rkhyt Amen (1990) offered his thoughts on the ethos of African American people and spirituality:

Spirituality is above religion, above science, above social creeds (holy books).

Spirituality is about the Amen, the infinite unknown, and Atum, the infinite known.

Spirituality is about a love of an understanding of the entire universe, an understanding that life is more than just what is here on Earth, but includes the entire Universe. (p.115)
Mattis (2002) in her study of women found “religion and spirituality hold central places…using formal religious involvement and private devotional practices to negotiate a range of adversities including race, class, and gender oppression…financial stress, illness, psychological distress, and a vast array of daily hassles” (p. 309). I agree with Dillard (2008), who offered that by using an endarkended epistemology, in this case, Black Feminist Theory, to establish how reality is known will provide an “alternative” perspective (p. 2). Dillard (2008) challenged educational researchers “to be truly responsible, [in] asking for new ways of looking into the reality of others that opens our own lives to view—and that makes us accountable to the people, interests, and needs of whom we study” (p. 2). As a researcher, I explored how spirituality, faith, and religion are experienced by Black women during their college pursuits.

The Combahee River Collective (1982) declared in *A Black Feminist Statement in All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave,* that Black Feminism is a movement which addresses the intersectionality of marginalizing issues such as race and gender that impact the lives of Black women. The statement further noted, “there is also an undeniably personal genesis for Black Feminism, that is the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women’s lives” (The Combahee River Collective, 1982, p. 15). The above quotation is what makes Black Feminist theory such a powerful, useful, and justifiable perspective for this study. My aim is to look at another set of resources used by Black women such as, spirituality, faith, and religion, which allow them to lift up their individual and collective voices and lived experiences to illustrate the impact on their collegiate success.
Constructivism

A constructivist worldview is congruent with the use of Black Feminist Theory and phenomenological methods of inquiry, because knowledge and truth begin and end with the lived experiences of the Black college women. Crotty (1998) noted that a constructivist worldview is where “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (p. 43). He defined constructivism, also known as constructionism, as a paradigm where:

[a]ll knowledge, and therefore, all meaningful reality as such is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an especially social context. (Crotty, 1998, p. 42)

Constructivism is consistent with a Black Feminist epistemology as truth is found in the re-telling discovery of their lived experiences as Black college women. Creswell and Miller (2000) affirmed that a constructivist perspective applies time and place to establish context, which introduces the reader to reality. For this study, it is a reality constructed from the lived experiences of seven Black college women.

Setting

The research site, R-State University (RSU), is a PWI, a comprehensive university located in a small Midwestern city of the United States. According to RSU’s On Campus Enrollment Profiles & Projections Fall 2018, RSU enrolled 16,769 on-campus students (RSU, Office of Academic Analysis & Strategic Planning, 2020). Of those enrolled on-campus students, 14,794 (88.2%) were undergraduates, while 1,974 (11.8%) were graduate students with
18.5% identified from minoritized and racialized groups. The number of on-campus undergraduate women was 9,490 (56.6%) with undergraduate men at 7,279 (43.4%). Students classified as minorities comprised 18.5% of the total on-campus population 24% (3,103 students). Of that number 10.2% (1,713 students) identified as Black; 2.0% (342 students) identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native; 2.4% (395 students) identified as Asian/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 3.9% (653 students) identified as Hispanic/Latino; 1.3% (217 students) identified as Unknown; 4.2% (708 students) identified as Non-Resident Alien. The largest racial group of students at RSU are White and comprise 76% (12,741 students) of the on-campus population. 773 Black women enrolled on its main campus, which included 726 undergraduate and 47 graduate students for the Fall 2019 academic year.

Sampling

The feasibility of interviewing the entire population of on-campus Black women would be labor-intensive, time-consuming, and fiscally demanding (Creswell, 2013). From the undergraduate population of Black women enrolled at RSU’s main campus, the study examined the lived experiences of seven Black women who used their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursued their education. Although Patton (2002) does not dictate a steadfast qualitative prescription for sample size, he noted that sample size must support “what do you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 244). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) further noted that the researcher must “seek out groups, settings, and individuals where and for whom the process being studied are most likely to occur” (p. 370). Therefore, a purposive sample of Black college women from the university research site meeting the following criteria
were recruited—a student must: (a) identify as Black or African American; (b) identify as spiritual, religious, or a person of faith; and (c) be enrolled as an on-campus junior or senior.

Recruitment

After receiving IRB approval, I informed the campus community about the purpose of the study and intent to recruit participants. To gain access to the research site, I conferred with the Director of the Diversity Office who is an esteemed, long-standing professional, leader, and role model on the designated campus, particularly among Black women. Her guidance, along with the rest of the dissertation committee, provided suggestions on how to best access academic departments and staff offices to introduce the study. I emailed a cover letter highlighting the study, criteria, and commitment to the study (see Appendix A), along with a flyer (see Appendix B) to selected campus departments and faculty who worked with the intended population of Black women such as the Office of Justice and Civil Rights, Office of Student Activities, Diversity Office, and the Office for Institutional Equity and Diversity. In addition, flyers were posted on campus department social media outlets and websites as way to advertise the study to fellow colleagues and students. I also participated in Connections, which is the popular fall campus opener for new and returning students to connect to campus organizations. It was important to be in a trusted space where I could talk directly to Black students, particularly Black women as well as the departments, faculty, and staff who know and support them. While in attendance, I passed out flyers and spoke directly with students to provide information on the purpose of the study and time commitment. Nineteen students signed the interest sheet that I made available for students, who expressed an interest in the study at the Connections event. Those 19 students received a follow-up invitation email (see Appendix C) with the flyer. Eight
students responded to the email and received another follow-up email (see Appendix D) and phone call from me, where I reviewed the purpose of the study, time commitment, expectations, and an invitation to schedule an interview. Seven students responded to my email and/or phone call. At this point, I scheduled interviews with those seven students selected as study participants.

**Recruitment Challenges**

During the recruitment phase, I found challenges in communicating with potential participants. At the Connections event, interested students signed up and provided me with their contact information. I followed-up with each student on the list by email with another flyer and an invitation to participate in the study. This email included purpose and intent to explore the spirituality, faith, and religious experiences of Black college women; confidentiality, and informed consent (see Appendix E); and the structure of data collection including the interview process. Interested students emailed me back with an available time to talk by phone, so I could answer any questions about the study and to confirm an interview time. I confirmed the interview time and location by phone. I also followed-up with an email (see Appendix F) and text confirmation. After the initial follow-up email to the potential participants and in my attempt to provide more than enough information, I realized that some students did not read or respond to my email, but would respond to my texts, follow-up phone calls, and vice versa. The seven students selected as participants for the study all met the criteria for the study, followed up with my email and/or phone call, and scheduled an interview time.
Participants

Seven Black college women took a chance on me as a researcher and this dissertation project. They eagerly and graciously opened their hearts and shared with me as I inquired to answer the main research question: What role does spirituality, faith, and religion play in the lives of Black college women? To maintain the integrity of their stories, honor their voices (Broido & Manning, 2002; Jones, 2002), and recognize the lived experiences of Black women as more than human subjects in a research project (Washington, 2006), this chapter offers a descriptive profile developed in the brief time that I was allowed to enter the lives of these women. Brown-McManus (2012) included a description of her study participants presenting a case for each woman to understand their professional journey in academia. I intentionally placed these descriptions prior to the discussion of the findings to offer what Yin (2003) characterized as a holistic approach to seeing “what it [a case] is, how it [a case] works, and how it [case] interacts with its real-world contextual environment” (xxiii). This dissertation is not a case study. However, phenomenological data analysis begins with the understanding that the researcher attempts to tell the story of another, but the researcher is outside of the person and herself (van Manen, 2002). The researcher and reader alike enter the lived experience by getting to know the individuals who are connected by this shared phenomenon of spirituality, faith, and religion, the Black college women behind the research. The lived experiences of each woman comprise the breadth, depth, and intent of this study. Therefore, this chapter includes a descriptive profile of each participant. In addition, I asked each participant to give me the name of a song that motivates or inspires them. The name of that song and the artist selected by each participant are included next to the participant’s name. In addition, a more indepth explanation of the motivational songs are found in Appendix G. Table 1 provides an overview of the study
participants and their demographic information, which was obtained from the participants via a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix H) at the beginning of the first interview.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Class Status</th>
<th>Major/Minor</th>
<th>Affiliation and/or Background</th>
<th>Religious, Spiritual, Person of Faith, Other</th>
<th>Religious, Spiritual, or Faith Practices</th>
<th>Frequency of Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashely</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Religious, Spiritual, Person of Faith</td>
<td>Prayer, community service/outreach</td>
<td>Two to three times a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynelle</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Child Development</td>
<td>Christian background; does not identify with a religion</td>
<td>Spiritual, Person of Faith</td>
<td>Prayer, yoga, meditation, community service/outreach, participation in religious club/organization</td>
<td>Indicated that she does not participate in any religious practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Accounting/Management</td>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>Spiritual, Person of Faith</td>
<td>Prayer, singing in choir, meditation, community service/outreach, participation in religious club/organization</td>
<td>About once a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kym</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Athletic Training</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Person of Faith</td>
<td>Prayer, yoga, community service/outreach</td>
<td>About once a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Spiritual Activities</td>
<td>When I do it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lina</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Psychology/Creative Writing</td>
<td>Christian (Baptist)</td>
<td>Prayer, Group Bible Study, Community Service/Outreach</td>
<td>When I visit home (church); on campus (watching videos online); about twice a month</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Integrative Public Relations</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Religious, Spiritual, Person of Faith, Prayer, Bible Study, Group Prayer, Community Service/Outreach, Participation in religious club/organization, watching YouTube videos, listening/singing gospel music</td>
<td>Whenever I go home (13x/semester approx.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Person of Faith, Prayer, Bible Study, Group Bible Study, Meditation, Community Service/Outreach, Participation in religious club/organization</td>
<td>One or more times/week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In total, seven Black women participated in this study. Each completed two interview phases which included an interview along with the review and approval of the transcript. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 26 and represented junior and senior standing. Many held various leadership roles and memberships across campus, including religiously affiliated groups, such as the campus gospel choir and Pinky Promise, to academic support services for Black women such as, HOPE and POWER, or community service organizations such as Black Greek-Lettered Organizations (BGLO)—sororities which also provide social engagement and support. Participants shared their spiritual, faith, and religious experiences as Black women living and learning in their college community.

Researcher’s Preface to Participants

As the researcher, I thought it would be important to preface my role alongside the participant descriptions. This is the place where I discuss positionality, my role as researcher-participant, and disclose my story and how it is connected to the study. In Researchers, Reflexivity, and Good Data: Writing to Unlearn, Kleinsasser (2000) affirmed that a critical self-narrative acknowledges the researcher as self and provides space for the researcher’s voice within the study which is a form of reflexivity and aids in establishing a study’s credibility. I agree with Jones (2002), this research is personal. Jones (2002) further noted that the researcher cannot separate herself from her research for who we are guides what is asked and what is ignored. I had the opportunity to re-tell the experiences of these seven Black college women regarding the role that spirituality, faith and religion plays in their lives.

I am a 51-year-old Black woman who identifies as a non-denominational Christian. Ever since I began thinking about this research topic, I presumed that I would share similar
experiences with the participants. Like many of the study’s participants, I too was raised in church. I grew up attending services all day on Sunday, mid-week Bible Study and prayer meetings, Saturday choir rehearsals, and youth group meetings. Church was the place where I gained leadership skills and learned to speak in front of large groups. The auxiliaries seemed endless but allowed me to develop a peer group who believed in God like me since I was a young child. My maternal legacy brims with singers, musicians, pastors, preachers, ministers, missionaries, and teachers who were, and continue to be, God-fearing, praying women. Upon leaving for college, my mother admonished me to find a church home, get connected, find support, and stay involved. I am a first-generation undergraduate student, I lacked self-efficacy and confidence in my academic abilities. I was my academic advisor’s worst nightmare, failing one class or two every semester. I wondered why I was in college and often questioned my purpose. All I had to lean on was my faith in God, and I attribute that relationship to seeing me through difficult times, including this degree. I will be the first person in my family to receive a doctorate. This hope and reliance on that higher power is where my research interest stems. I want to know how present-day Black women navigate their spirituality, faith, and religion during their college years—what do they call upon to see them through?

Kym (Better by Jessica Reedy)

Kym is a 20-year-old junior majoring in Athletic Training, who, in her free time, is also a consummate photographer. During high school, Kym took community college courses and entered RSU with an associate’s degree. She has “been in church since [she] I was born.” Kym shared that she faced a traumatic life event in the sixth grade when she was sexually assaulted. She recalled her struggle to make sense of the situation noting, “…I am 11. There’s no reason. I’m
not understanding…I had to do some soul searching to figure out why it was so upsetting, and why it happened to me. Because I was like, why would he [God] let that happen to me? That doesn’t make sense.” Kym is a Christian and considers herself as a person of faith.

Ashely Jones (*Soulmate* by Lizzo)

Ashely is a 19-year-old junior majoring in Finance, because her favorite subject is math. Ashely affirmed that school is her priority. She is a Diversity Leader and an honors student. Ashely is very involved on campus. She serves as a peer leader, Financial Literacy coach, and treasurer for the National Associations of Black Accountants and the Black Student Union. Ashely specifically outlined her future educational plans. She plans to attend graduate school and earn an MBA with a concentration in finance and accounting. Ashely identifies as Baptist and considers herself to be religious, spiritual, and a person of faith.

Lynelle Watson (*The Climb* by Miley Cyrus)

Lynelle is a 21-year-old Child Development major, who talked about having a “smooth” transition to college because of her pre-college experiences. She ended her first semester with a 3.1 grade point average. While at RSU, Lynelle revealed that she had academic challenges with failed classes, relationships, and also told me that “stuff wasn’t right at home with [her] my grandparents.” She changed her major in her junior year and is now a fifth-year senior, who is slated to graduate in the spring. Lynelle grew up in a Christian church. However, she shared with me that during her high school years, she had a negative experience with the religious teachings centered around gay marriage. She noted the disparaging treatment she received from church members, and the impact it had on her family. With a parent who is gay, Lynelle stated, “they just said some things, I don’t agree with. More specifically about gay marriage…and so I just wasn’t
comfortable.” Lynelle does not identify herself as having a religion. She considers herself spiritual and a person of faith.

Robin (Confident by Demi Lovato)

Robin is a 26-year-old junior majoring in Communications. Robin is the oldest of the women in the interview group. Prior to her time at RSU, Robin spent time at a community college and was engaged to be married. However, she ended the engagement on a pronouncement she received from God. Robin shared the following exchange she had with God on her pending nuptuals: “God gave me a decision,” and

the day before our wedding day, I felt something different. I felt something that I couldn't deny and God said it's either me or it's him. And God knew if he gave me that ultimatum, it was a deal breaker. So I looked at him and I said, ‘You know, you got to go.’

After the traumatic experience of a halted engagement, her brother being murdered, and her parents divorcing after 30 years of marriage, Robin said she embarked on a marathon and lost 40 pounds. She declared, “I was really focused. I went back to school, got my degree, my associate’s.” In our first interview, Robin immediately acknowledged to me, “I love the Lord, number one…God has a way of teaching you through experience and his word, and talking with you…I’m forever a servant, but I am also forever a student.” She identifies as a Christian and considers herself as a person of faith.

Olivia Mason (The Battle is the Lord's by Yolanda Adams)

Olivia is a 21-year-old senior with a major in Integrative Public Relations, who aspires to work in higher education. Olivia is close to her grandparents. She talked about RSU having a “sense of community.” She plays an active role in making sure that RSU has that “real family
home vibe.” Olivia is a campus leader working with groups such as IMPRESSIVE, The Diversity Student Summit, and Student Orientation. She stated, “I feel very passionately about helping students transition into the university, and also personal and student development for students of color.” She identified as a Christian and considers herself religious, spiritual, and a person of faith, where “faith and spirituality [are] more a part of my daily routine.”

Lina (Running Back to You by Commissioned)

Lina is a 21-year-old senior studying Psychology and Creative Writing and is preparing to attend graduate school for sports psychology. College was an expectation for Lina. She noted, “It wasn't really like, ‘I want to go to college,’ and trying to convince them [her parents] that was something that... I had to go to college, pretty much.” RSU was not Lina’s first choice for college. She is from a large metropolitan city and noted, “It’s [RSU] in the middle of nowhere…yeah, it was just like grass to me. That’s just all I’d see.” Lina’s college list included Penn State, but the finances required additional steps, and she was not admitted to Grand Valley State University. She is the President of an on-campus religious organization called, Pinky Promise, where she leads a group of women, mostly Black women, in biblical teachings and prayer. Lina has a deep passion for music. She identifies as Christian from a Baptist denomination and considers herself spiritual.

Catherine (Take Over by Anthony Evan featuring Tamela Mann)

Catherine is a 22-year-old senior from the Midwest and is majoring in Accounting and Management. Catherine noted that she connected right away to the campus gospel choir, where she talked about finding family and community on campus. She grew up in the church and singing in the choir. Catherine shared, “I know when I came to college, it was just like, I need to
find that [choir] here...I sing at home...it feels like home.” She further noted, “church has been a part of my life since before I came out the womb.” Catherine’s father passed away just before she came to college. She entered RSU with her twin brother and six other friends from her high school; however, Catherine is the only person from her group that will graduate from RSU. Catherine is from a Pentecostal background and considers herself spiritual and a person of faith.

Data Collection

Creswell (2013) outlined data collection methods for phenomenological studies. Data were collected using two semi-structured interviews with all participants to develop “rich-thick descriptions” of the spirituality, faith, and religious experiences of the participants which also bolstered the trustworthiness of the study (Cresswell, 2013, p. 202). The following sections describe the instruments developed and protocol used for data collection. Other areas included consideration of participants and the recruitment process.

Interviews

Selected participants were invited to participate in two semi-structured interviews (see Appendix I and J for interview protocols). Whereas Creswell (2013) recommended using two broad general questions around the phenomenon in question, phenomenology focuses on what the participants experienced and how that experience occurred (Moustakas, 1994). van Manen (2017b) noted that phenomenological inquiry must focus on the phenomenon itself; therefore, I wrote the interview questions to get at the primal meaning, or originary understanding, of what it is like to experience the phenomenon of spirituality, faith, and religion for Black college women.

As previously shared, matters of spirituality and religion are intimate subjects among Black women (Shahid, 2014). It was important for me to establish a rapport with the participants
and build trust in the study’s intentions; therefore, each participant was interviewed twice: Phase I and Phase II. Students were given the opportunity to select their own campus location for the interviews. When no preference was provided, interviews were held in a reserved room in the campus library or an empty office in the Diversity Office, both spaces are familiar to students and located in the middle of campus making it convenient and easy to find. Using the IRB-approved interview protocol and the student’s informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by Rev.com. Each interview was slated for an hour. However, actual interview time frames ranged from 11 minutes to 39 minutes. To establish the trustworthiness of the data, students received a copy of the transcription to review the interview content after each interview. This method of member-checking ensured accuracy of language used, intended meaning, and contextual understanding (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews were held in September, the beginning of the fall semester. The first interview, Phase I, re-introduced the study, reviewed informed consent, timeline, and expectations for each interview phase. Interview questions in Phase I established rapport and explored each participant’s journey to college, personal and family background, and definitions of spirituality, faith, and religion. The second interview, Phase II, was the follow-up to the initial interview. Second interviews were scheduled at the end of the first interview because students were aware of their schedules, and it would eliminate the confusion of email exchanges. The follow-up interviews were held within a two-week time period. This gave me enough time to get the interviews transcribed and back to the participants for their review and approval. I followed up with a thank you email (see Appendix K) to each participant, which included their transcription and a confirmation of the second interview phase. The second interview questions began with a review of the consent form, timeline, and expectations. Participants were asked if
they had any questions or concerns about the process. In the interview, I asked the participants to revisit the definitions they initially gave me for spirituality, faith, and religion. Other questions asked them to reflect on being a college student, challenges, accomplishments, and how their spirituality, faith, and religion help them manage these areas of college life.

After the first interview, transcripts were returned to the participants for member-checking to ensure their thoughts were recorded accurately and reflected their ideas, meaning, and intentions (Glesne, 2011). I received approval from the participants by email to use the transcripts, either with revisions or as originally received for data analysis. Participants received a $15.00 gift card to the campus bookstore or Starbucks at the end of each interview phase to thank them for their time in the interview process. Each interview phase included the interview, along with review and approval of the transcription with or without revisions. I followed Brown-McManus’s (2012), *We Walk by Faith, Not by Sight: An Inquiry of Spirituality and Career Development of Black Women Leaders in Academe*, who issued a commemorative CD with inspirational selections to her participants. In turn, I asked for the name of a song that inspired or motivated my participants. As a thank you-gift, a collective music playlist with encouraging songs was shared with each participant. In addition, at the completion of the study, I sent participants an email (see Appendix L) notifying them that the study was complete and asked them to review the final document for accuracy.

Instrumentation

I developed interview questions with the intention of learning about the spiritual, faith, and religious experiences of Black college women. In July 2017, as part of an Advanced Qualitative Research course, EDL 900, I conducted pilot interviews to practice questions,
improve question content, reframe for understanding, and assess researcher bias (Creswell, 2013; Jones, 2002). The pilot interview questions were reviewed by the committee and revised for protocol use. Hill’s (2009) study engaged college-age student participants; therefore, the approved interview questions reflected the cognitive, affective, and social needs of college students. I also received recommendations from the dissertation committee on which questions would be most effective and yield answers to the research questions. Per approval of the committee, I redesigned the interview questions to collect data from the participants. The protocol was approved by RSU’s IRB and used to collect data from the participants.

Consideration of Participants

Historically, Black people, specifically Black women and their bodies, have been defiled, maligned, and misused to meet immoral and unethical research needs (Kendi, 2016, Lincoln, 1970). Harriet Washington (2006) in her book, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Time to the Present*, discussed the vulnerability of Black women who were exploited in the name of medical research. She depicted unscrupulous practices such as forced sterilization, autopsies, vaginal mutilation, and experiments conducted without their knowledge or consent; steeped in a racist ideology undergirded by the belief that Black people were less than human. In a conscious and intentional effort to respect and protect the rights of the Black women who elect to offer their stories and experiences, I refrained from referring to the Black women in this study as human subjects or any other disparaging language which demeans their existence. Other areas used in consideration of the participants include: ethic of care, language, use of the word Black, informed consent, confidentiality, and management of data records.
Ethic of Care

I guided the research using an ethic of care as described by Nel Noddings, which “places students at the top of the educational hierarchy” (Noddings as cited by Shapiro & Gross, 2013, p. 51). The university IRB policy mandates that all research must be conducted ethically, morally, and without harm to protect those in its care. Washington (2006) affirmed this ethic of care in suggesting that Black researchers pay attention to the lack of trust by the Black community in research by seeking to ensure a balance of the risks and benefits of any research. This section outlines the steps taken to ensure ethical care of the participants which included: language use, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Language Use

Dillard (2008) argued that language can and must resist all forms of subjugation even within the research processes; “oppressive descriptions of sociocultural phenomena and relationships” (p. 279). She further explained that “language has historically served and continues to serve as a powerful tool in the mental, spiritual, and intellectual colonization of African and other marginalized people” (Dillard, 2008, p. 279). Qualitative research language holds historical roots “inherited from more positivist traditions” (Glesne, 2011, p. 47). From these perspectives, the language offered in this research served as a form of resistance “toward transforming particular ways of knowing and producing knowledge” about how Blacks engage their spirituality, faith, and religion (Dillard, 2008, p. 279). As previously noted, I made a conscious effort to respect and protect the rights of the Black college women, who offered their stories and experiences. I intentionally refrained from referring to Black women in the study as
human subjects or any other disparaging language which demeans their existence. In addition, I used the term Black as opposed to African American, which is also discussed.

*The Word—Black*

The researcher opted for the language of Black instead of African American when referring to Black women. Dillard’s (2008) understanding defined this study’s use of Black college woman. She noted the use of an endarkened epistemology, which extends Black Feminist Theory to include “a more global role and nature” moving beyond the US borders out to the African diaspora. A Black woman is one of African descent, whether she is born in America or abroad, reaching “across nation-state-cultural groups” (Dillard, 2008, p. 280). Moreover, using Dillard’s definition, the researcher empathetically ascribed to Lincoln’s (1970) sense of pride in using the word Black. At the height of Black pride, demonstrating during the Civil Rights movement, she candidly declared:

The fact that white people readily and proudly call themselves “white,” glorify all that is white, and whitewash all that is glorified, becomes unnatural and bigoted in its intent only when these same whites deny persons of African heritage who are Black the natural and inalienable right to readily and proudly call themselves “black,” glorify all that is black, and blackwash all that is glorified. (p.123)

The study embraced the term Black and its historical influences, intentions, and meaning to encompass all that is good, bad, and indifferent. The Black college woman is not to be confused with one who attends a historically Black college or university, commonly referred to as an HBCU. However, for this study, a Black college woman is defined as a Black college woman enrolled in and attending the selected university.
Informed Consent

The IRB for RSU approved all procedures and forms for the study. Participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent in an email during the initial recruitment phase. Prior to each interview, I reviewed the informed consent and informed them of their voluntary participation in the study and ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant was provided with a signed copy of the informed consent and the researcher maintained a file copy. Participants were also provided with a list of on- and off-campus resources (see Appendix M). The resource list offered the names and contact information of follow-up services such as the Counseling Center, Listening Ear, Campus Police, and the Office of Justice and Civil Rights to provide support and space to talk through any issues of trauma or need resulting from sensitive experiences and personal discussions centered around spirituality, faith, and religion.

Confidentiality

To protect the confidentiality of the conversation with the participants, all identifiable information was removed. Students were also provided with the option to select a pseudonym for anonymity to readers of the dissertation. Some students chose a pseudonym, while others elected to maintain their identity in the study (see Appendix N). I honored their right to make that choice, because there is a level of power placed in the hands of the participant and researcher in selecting a pseudonym (Allen & Wiles, 2016). However, after a thorough review of the transcriptions, I noted highly sensitive matters shared during the interviews. Because Shadid (2014) acknowledged that the topic of spirituality, faith, and religion is an intimate one along with the size of the research site and population, participants who did not select a pseudonym were again invited to select a pseudonym. Those who did not respond were informed that their
names were anonymized for confidentiality and to respect their willingness to disclose such
delicate information about their lives. In addition, university site, accompanying offices, and
departmental personnel were also provided with aliases to protect the confidentiality of any staff,
faculty, administrators, or programs mentioned in the study (Shahid, 2014).

Records

Upon approval from the participants, all interview transcriptions were uploaded into the
dedoose software system. After I entered data into Dedoose, I kept hard copies of interview
protocols, interview transcriptions, researcher memos, journals, and notes from peer-debriefing
in a locked file cabinet. Additionally, all data gathered was stored on a separate external hard
drive for added security and access (Glesne, 2011).

Data Analysis

According to van Manen (2016, 2017a), phenomenology is both a method of inquiry and
way to analyze data that allows themes to organically rise to the top. Following van Manen
(2002), as researcher, I had the freedom to view the data without any preconceived notions;
therefore, I had no thoughts about giving an immediate definition, assignment of names,
meaning, or identifying what I saw in the data. In Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving
Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing, Max van Manen (2014) observed that the
researcher must approach the data with a sense of wonderment—where an “ordinary experience
becomes extraordinary” (p. 30). Spirituality, faith, and religion appear to be ordinary, but like
phenomenology itself, are hard to measure, quantify, or pinpoint its impact. van Manen (2014)
noted that phenomenology does not follow a prescribed method and is unable to “be fitted to a
rule book, interpretative schema, set of steps, or a systematic set of procedures” (p. 29).
Furthermore, he posited that phenomenology invites the researcher and reader to unearth or discover another level and another way to experience the phenomenon. I, along with readers, am invited to glean from the participants and myself, while suspending judgement and definition—not just glazing over the facts or minor details of a thing, but to wonder, enter, traverse, gaze, and draw from, as described by van Manen (2002).

Wonderment and Entrance

Van Manen (2002) explained wonderment as the process of raising more questions about what you see and hear in your data. This is a difficult process in phenomenology, because you must first enter the lived experience and describe it by using language. I started out reading through Phase I and Phase II interview transcripts. For each participant, I read each participant’s first interview transcript followed by their second interview transcript. During the first set of readings, I employed open coding without looking for any specific themes. I simply highlighted what I found interesting and familiar from our conversations and wrote notes on the side of phrases and language that stood out for me from each participant. While reading through the transcriptions, I was reminded of the historical impact that slavery has had on the lives of present-day Black women. The complexity of their enslaved lives was birthed out of difficult and traumatic experiences. I wondered what could be discovered about the spirituality, faith, and religion used by those first Black women in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 to the present day lives of Black college women. As I progressed through the transcriptions, I noticed similar experiences among the women, such as, the religious influences of a mother or grandmother and repeated phrases, such as “I grew up in church” or “never really thought about the differences between spirituality, faith, or religion.” I recorded those repeated phrases in the margins.
Traverse

van Manen (2002) described traverse as the action of stepping in and out of the world and to remain in that world sharing its attributes of light and dark using language to move from one level to the next. I read through the transcripts a second time. This was my time to transverse; to assign language to the experience. Using Dedoose to designate codes to organize the information found in the data transcriptions proved challenging. I forced myself to return to the phenomenological tenents of allowing the essence of the lived experience to rise while noting van Manen’s (2002) caution that the researcher is “already too late” (p. 33), because phenomenology is our best attempt at a reflective guess. With that in mind, I attached a code to an experience lived by the women in the study, careful to remain fluid with my definitions and judgement. This traverse round yielded 511 excerpts within 234 different codes providing a foundation for the outline used to organize the findings discussed in Chapter IV.

Gaze

van Manen (2002) mandated that the researcher look again at the data by gazing. This process drives further inquiry by looking into the research and have it look back at you, constantly asking for more. This “turning away of the eyes” (van Manen, 2002, p. 6) from the research kept the data analysis honest in spite of the high number of initial codes, because it required me to think of what more could be seen in the experiences of the participants.

Draw

The draw in phenomenology is the words used to draw in the reader leaving her speechless, confused, enlightened, perplexed, reflective, and "struck with wonder" (van Manen, 2002, p. 4). It is the language used to craft the story of findings in Chapter IV, which draw in
and mesmerize the reader to an unknown place of consideration regarding the phenomenology of spirituality, faith, and religion. The following findings will be discussed in Chapter IV:

1. Dealing with Challenges
2. Belonging, Finding Community, and Building Relationships
3. Practices
4. Intersectionality of Spirituality, Faith, and Religious Identities
5. Uncertainty in Defining
6. Definitions of Spirituality, Faith, and Religion
7. Growing Up in Church
8. Pivotal Moments and Life Events
9. Belonging, Community, and Relationships as Spiritual Support
10. A Reset for The Bounce-Back
11. Navigating Resources

Because spirituality, faith, and religion are intimate partners, it was challenging to bring these phenomena together in a single study. This research study allows me, the participants, and now the reader to connect to and “bring the experience to reflective awareness” (van Manen, 2002, p. 33) by exposing or lifting up the phenomenon to be seen and experienced through developing “a wondering attentiveness” (p. 36).

Strategies for Credibility

I return to Shahid’s (2014) observation of the intimate nature of spirituality and religion for Black women. The data represented in this study were complex and reflect a closeness for the participants and their lived experiences. In *Researchers Reflexivity, and Good Data: Writing*
to Unlearn, Kleinsasser (2000) suggested that qualitative researchers are in close proximity to their data and the participants; therefore, a researcher must explore the tensions between the power held by the researcher in relation to the data. To that end, my positionality and role as the researcher made strategies to ensure credibility of the data even more critical. Guba and Lincoln (1994) noted a study’s dependability uses effective strategies to clarify researcher bias and ensure consistent findings. Due to my role as researcher and familiarity with the topic, I employed the following strategies: a statement of positionality and reflexivity as a way to bracket my personal experiences and ensure trustworthiness.

Positionality

Jones (2002) and Jones et al. (2006) cautioned the researcher to pay attention to her positionality within the research process, and the researcher’s power to inadvertently influence how data are collected, analyzed and interpreted. As previously stated, I am a Black Christian woman, who identifies with the topic of spirituality, faith, and religion. I am also a former employee of the university who may have interacted with many of the campus staff and offices. Glesne (2011) stated “researchers cannot control positionality in that it is determined in relations with others, but they can make certain choices that affect those relationships” (p. 157). I disclosed this information in an effort to establish participant trust and demonstrate authenticity in noting any possible bias or personal motivations which have the potential to impact the study. Positionality is also discussed in the section on the role of the researcher.

Reflexivity

Reflection is an important tool in the data analysis process (van Manen, 2016). Reflexivity provides intentional space and methods for “learning about self as researcher”
Memoing, journaling and peer debriefing was necessary. The transcripts were difficult to read through, because my identities and personal experiences intersected with the research. Hence, the data analysis proved equally challenging, because I kept seeing my 20-year-old self in the participants’ experiences. Whether the experience was the same or different, I found commonalities among their lived experiences. The similarities were matched with the pained reality of choice and consequences. I found myself reliving my undergraduate years fraught with disappointment with intense coursework, frustrating relationships, and an ambiguous future. I also sensed that these women were just as proud of me as I am of them. During a text message exchange, Robin sent me these encouraging words, “You’re welcome, Dr. Montisa. Get your degree, Queen.” These Black women have accomplished much in their college journey. Regardless of how each woman defined spirituality, faith, and religion, or their personal connection to whichever concept resonated most for them, I maintain there is always another level of revelation and understanding of how that relationship is formed and its impact—their stories proved there is more to be revealed. There were times during the interviews that I was challenged to hold back my tears and remain present. Other moments, I wanted to break professional research protocol and extend a hug and then in the next instant, slap a high five! However, I realized that their storied moments proved most important and my steadied focus represented a genuine interest in what would come next. To that end, I welcomed reflexivity as a means to reflect on my own moments and bracket my experiences.
Bracketing is also an essential component when doing phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016). Rockenbach, Walker, & Luzader (2012) used the epoché process for bracketing, which included journaling and peer debriefing, because they too had experience with the similar spiritual struggles as referenced in their study. Strategies such as journaling, memoing, and peer debriefing helped illuminate and check for biases related to my personal experiences with the phenomenon. These entanglements could impact the integrity and trustworthiness of the study (Rockenbach et al., 2012). Jones et al. (2006) noted that a researcher is never devoid of her own interests and choices in the research process. This meant that bracketing my personal experiences to the extent possible from those that I heard during my interviews was necessary—which proved to be impossible. To assist me in the bracketing process, I also consulted two peer reviewers to review my drafts, memos, interview transcripts, and coding processes, all of which proved necessary in separating my experiences and emotions (Glesne, 2011; Kleinsasser, 2000) from that of the participants, which, at times, became extremely difficult. In essence, the peer reviewers kept me honest about my own head and heart space throughout the study. Many of the experiences shared by the participants were similar to my own. However, it was important that I remained present as the researcher, but also present as one who is genuinely interested in their story (Seidman, 2019). One peer reviewer and I completed an initial round of coding simultaneously. She was a graduate student in social work who did not share the same racial background and was unfamiliar with my topic. My reason for selecting this person was to find out if the themes I selected would connect to a lay person—someone outside of my research. I found that we pointed out many of the participant excerpts and codes such as involvement, prayer, maternal influence, grandparents, and mental health. The
other peer reviewer made herself available to talk me through my data and how my experiences overlapped with my participants. This peer emphasized issues of trustworthiness and credibility. She recommended the use of an external coder and challenged me to write through my own personal triggers experienced during the research process. I have included my reflections in the preface to the participants and my positionality statement. Additionally, Black Feminist Theory reminded me that it is the Black woman’s experience that falls at the center of the research; therefore, the experiences of the participants and mine—all Black women—can fully coexist in this research study because the qualitative researcher leaves her footprints on her research (Jones, 2002). Concomitantly, the audience will discover that each Black woman described in this study offered her own perspective when it comes to her lived experience with the phenomenon of spirituality, faith and religion.

Trustworthiness

Because meaning always changes based on the perspective of the individual, trustworthiness in qualitative research is essential. Tierney and Clemens (2011) described trustworthiness as the rigor of qualitative research which determines the worth of the study by considering the following: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. They noted credibility represents the accuracy of the study, transferability looks at the study’s future applicability, dependability speaks to the appropriate protocol followed based on the research methods and design, and confirmability means that the findings must be connected back to the data and follows a path of analysis. The following validation strategies promoted the study’s trustworthiness by ensuring the different data sources reflected proper ownership of voice and intent:
1. Peer review and debriefing to support the dependability and confirmability of the study;
2. Use of member checking and external coders for credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000);
3. Noting positionality in an effort to clarify research bias and understanding the personal, historical, and cultural influences brought to the research project (Jones, 2002); and,
4. Use of thick, rich, descriptions support credibility and help the reader to determine transferability of study to other groups or research sites (Creswell, 2013).

The study adapted van Manen’s (2016) stance in not attempting to arrive at a right or wrong answer, but to uncover and present multiple perspectives of a phenomenon. As previously noted, spirituality, faith, and religion hold various meanings, especially in the African American culture (Amen, 1990; Richards, 1985). Therefore, it was important for me to establish an open and trusting relationship with the participants and to honor the unique voices and experiences represented in the study (Jones, 2002; Manning, 1999). All of the aforementioned strategies collectively worked to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Limitations

Limitations are those conditions which are out of the control of the research design and influence how data is interpreted that restrict or weaken generalizability, because they cannot be controlled as part of the design (Creswell, 2013). The first limitation is reflected in the sample, which originally intended to capture a diverse group of women reflecting various spiritual, faith, and/or religious beliefs, not just those limited to a Protestant Christian perspective, but also those from Muslim, Catholic, or other backgrounds. However, the research reflects the experiences of seven undergraduate students who all identified themselves as Christian.
The second limitation is related to my potential bias as a Christian. I assumed to share the same phenomenon of using spirituality, faith, and religion during my time in college as well as the research participants. As previously mentioned, bracketing proved to be a critical tool used to reflect my limited personal knowledge and experience (Glesne, 1992). Shahid (2014) pointed out the intimate nature of spirituality and religion for Black women; therefore, transparency supported the trustworthiness and ethical behaviors needed to engage the participants in sharing intimate details of their spirituality, faith, and religious journey. Again, qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable beyond the analyses of the lived experiences of these women. Creswell (2013) noted “the researcher may focus on a few key issues (or analysis of themes), not for generalizing beyond the case, but for understanding the complexity” (p. 101). Although Creswell (2013) provided this recommendation for using a case study approach, Van Manen (2016) claimed that “phenomenology means to start with the lived experience, with how something appears or gives itself to us… and is best begun in the living of our ordinary life” (p.31). He further added phenomenology engages the reader to enter the research each time to discover another way to experience the possibilities and complexities of the phenomenon—spirituality, faith, and religion for Black college women. Moreover, Dillard (2008) echoed James’ (1993) sentiment that Black people remain connected to the larger African community regardless of time or physical constraints. For this study on Black college women, I agree with James (1993) when she stated, “you may move out the state or the old neighborhood to escape your family or people, but you carry that family, the neighborhood, inside yourself. They remain your family” (p. 32). However, all Black college women are not the same, nor do they all share similar experiences. This study intentionally shared the unique experiences of each participant to preserve, as opposed “narrow[ing] down” (Winkle-Waggoner, 2015, p. 189)
or minimizing, their spiritual, faith, and religious experiences or attempting to meld them into one collective experience.

Finally, as the researcher, the principal instrument of the study (Jones, 2002), I acknowledged my biases before entering this study. Jones et al. (2006) shared the power of their lived experiences’ ability to impact research. The following statement from Jones (2002) resonated my own concerns as a researcher to make sure that I do not get lost in the exploration, while yet again honoring diverse perspectives of reality and truth reflected in the stories and experiences of the participants:

We were never far from our own experiences, motivated in part by something we did not understand about ourselves or by a part of our own experience that had not been investigated before, but was very, present in our own lived experience. (p. 189)

As a researcher, I am a part of this study as well. Bracketing strategies such as journaling, memoing, use of external coders, and peer reviewers aided me in monitoring the sometimes blurred intersections of my identities and experiences, and the research which had an impact on how I came to know and understand the phenomenon found among the data.

Delimitations

Delimitations are self-imposed constraints placed on the study by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The researcher elected to purposively sample only Black college women at one Midwestern university. The foremost delimitation included the smaller sample size of seven Black college women from one selected site. These women are from one secular, public, comprehensive university located in the Midwest. In addition, all of the women except for one identified themselves as a part of a religious denomination, and each considered themselves as
spiritual or a person of faith. A larger sample from multiple institutions may have increased the breadth and representation of background experiences reflected in a more diverse understanding of spirituality, faith, and religion. Manning (1999) argued that constructivist inquiry is not generalizable beyond the time, space, and context. This study provided perspectives based on the lived experiences from this selected group of Black women in one university setting. However, audiences are invited to move the study’s transferability through future research by gleaning similar experiences to build upon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tierney & Clemens, 2011).

Methodology Summary

The methodology used in this study attempted to remain true to the phenomenological methods and served as a key factor in the planning and implementation of the dissertation, discussing the findings, and making future recommendations (van Manen, 2002). The study aimed to look for the extraordinary experiences of spirituality, faith, and religion for the Black college woman. The data revealed thoughts and feelings that the participant may have never considered or discussed aloud but was given the break for thoughts of wonder, struggle, and confusion. Nonetheless, the participants, researcher, and the audience are invited to access this lived experience through personal reflection, contemplation, and dialogue with the opportunity to introspectively engage their own spirituality, faith, and religion. In the next chapter, I will provide the research findings discovered through the data collected during the interview process. Data analysis, interpretations, and synthesis of the findings related to the research questions will be discussed.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Preface to Findings

Chapter IV is my turn to [re]present my understanding of this phenomenon and bring together meaning for myself and the audience informed by the lived experiences of seven Black college women. Any effort to conflate or narrow down the experiences of these Black women into a monolithic group was constantly checked, because Black women are “not [a] one size fits all” model (Hughes & Howard-Hampton, 2003, p. 95). However, this study holds true to its Black Feminist perspective which reclaims and reconstructs knowledge and where the knowledge of Black women matters—voices which cannot afford to be invisible (Collins, 2014). I declare that being Black and a woman represents a collective power birthed out the shared experience of slavery. In Life Ain’t Been No Crystal Stair: The Rhetoric of Autobiography in Black Female Slave Narratives, Olga Idriss Davis (1999) noted, “The voice of enslaved women is a continuum linking the ancestors of Africa, the living ones in slavery, and those who are not yet born. Locating voice provides a way to create identity, which leads to resistance and liberation” (p. 154). The individual experiences of these women are theirs alone to own and give voice to what the phenomenon means to them and reflects a shared experience around spirituality, faith, and religion. In my role as the primary investigator, who is also a Black woman, an ever-present tension found its way into what I [re]constructed from what I discovered in these findings that made sense to me. I am fully aware that as the researcher, I hold a position of privilege and power. Therefore, I enter this chapter with a respectful ear, eye, and heart,
which informed my delicate pen to reconstruct meaning for the reader and me from the lived experiences of these seven Black college women.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black college women who use their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursue their education. This chapter offers the key findings of this study by answering each of the research questions based on an analysis of the interview data. However, before answering the main research question, it is important to understand that the participants’ thoughts and meaning attached to spirituality, faith, and religion were formed out of their previous experiences with the phenomenon. The participants’ ideas of spirituality, faith, and religion were shaped by a prior spiritual and religious journey influenced by a legacy of faith found within their family background and upbringing.

This first set of findings responded to the main research question: What is the role of spirituality, faith, and religion in supporting the success of Black college women? The first set of themed results discusses how participants dealt with challenges related to the following areas: race, racism, and microaggressions; family and social relationships; mental health; and academics. The second finding, belonging, finding community, and building relationships, explained how participants linked to campus groups, such as the gospel choir or joining a Bible study group, like Pinky Promise, to build and maintain their spirituality, faith, and religion. The third finding, practices, focused mainly on religious practices, such as prayer and Bible study, used by these Black college women. The last finding related to the main research question pointed out the intersectionality of spirituality, faith, and religion with the participants’ race and gender. The next set of findings addressed the first sub-research question: How do Black college women define spirituality and religion? The themed findings included the following:
uncertainty in defining and the participants’ definitions of spirituality, faith, and religion. Before answering the second sub-research question, How do Black college women describe their spirituality or religious journey?, I connect the participants’ prior experiences of growing up in church to their present-day college experiences. This theme, growing up in church, expounded upon by the participants, described a journey which encompassed their prior experiences of being raised in church and involved in religious practices—behaviors already learned, active, and in full use prior to their arrival at RSU. The other theme included in this sub-research question focused on participant’s pivotal moments and life events. The third sub-research question was What does spirituality and religiousness look like for Black college women? The theme, a reset for the “The bounce-back” returned to the challenges faced by the participants with attention paid to those pivotal moments which made an impact on how these women repositioned themselves and reconnected to their spirituality, faith, or religion. The last sub-research question is, How have Black college women navigated campus resources related to their spirituality and religion? This final theme focused on navigating resources where participants described campus offices, staff members, family members, as well as those technology and social media platforms, which served as sources of support for participants.

The research findings are [re]presented from the lived experiences of seven Black college women who gave their voices to the main research question: What is the role of spirituality, faith, and religion in supporting the success of Black college women? And the supporting sub-questions:

1. How do Black college women define spirituality and religion?
2. How do Black college women describe their spirituality or religious journey?
3. What does spirituality and religiousness look like for Black college women?
4. How have Black college women navigated campus resources related to their spirituality and religion?

Findings of the Research Questions

This section addresses each of the research questions and the related findings constructed from the participant interviews.

Main Research Question: What is the role of spirituality, faith, and religion in supporting the success of Black college women?

To answer this research question, I returned to the interview protocol designed to guide me in understanding the role of spirituality, faith, and religion in supporting the success of Black college women. The interviews began with asking participants to talk about their journey from high school to college. The goal was to find out what types of influence and support these women already had in place regarding their spirituality, faith, and religion. As previously stated, before answering the research question, it is important to recognize that spirituality, faith, and religion are not an accoutrement for the participants. The phenomenon is not a mystery or a new-found invention discovered by these Black women. Spirituality, faith, and religion was an innate part of who they already are—fully functioning and well before they arrived at RSU. For example, Catherine offered this sentiment as something that was “instilled” in her since she was a child:

Things that you've grown up with and they have stuck with you. No matter how much you try to part from it, it's like, this is literally not going to let me go. For instance, like for me, going to church or just needing some type of spiritual release, it's something that's
been embedded in me. And when I go too long without it, I need it. So I need to be at a church where I feel like I'll receive that and stuff like that.

Olivia’s response echoed the same type of prior experience:

I grew up in a church with my grandparents. They would take me to church every Sunday…I think growing up... I even got baptized, and at the time I was like, “Oh yeah, I understand,” but I still didn't fully dive into it. And I was young, I was maybe not too young. I think I was 14 or 15. That's when I started routinely going to church …But even after that, it was just like, “I know He’s [God] there and He’s [God] a part of my life.”

Catherine spoke about her spirituality, faith, and religion being an embedded source in her life—something that “stuck” with her. Olivia referenced having the routine of church from a young age and into her teenage years. All study participants spoke of a parent or grandparent as a key influencer of their spirituality, faith, or religion, meaning that the phenomenon was already operational and valuable to the participants before entering college. Although an active and valuable resource for the participants, the phenomena presented here are just as complex as the findings which overlap in many ways.

Finding/Theme: Dealing with Challenges

During the interviews, I asked participants to share a challenge or obstacle faced as college students. Through our conversations, I learned that race, racism, and microaggressions; family and social relationships; mental health; and academic challenges, as described here by the participants, illustrated the role of spirituality, faith, and religion in helping them move through these challenges while supporting their college success.
Race, Racism, and Microaggressions

Participants shared various incidents in and outside of the classroom where they had to endure the disrespect of microaggressions and blatant racist acts due to their race—being Black. Olivia reminded me about a recent racial incident that took place in the residence halls: “So the one last year was when someone wrote on the whiteboard, ‘you monkey Black whores’…There was a big press conference.” Lina referenced microaggression she faced on more than one occasion with her college roommates:

I remember my roommates my freshman year, I was the only Black girl in the room. And that was something that I was excited for it because being in my high school, it was probably about 20 Black kids and everybody else was White…And so coming to college I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to have a friend with like red hair and maybe like a Mexican friend." Or something so that we all were different in the way that we presented ourselves. But then coming to college it was different because my roommate even said to me, well one roommate she... like on Snapchat or whatever, we added each other and she said the “N word” on her story. And so I UN-followed her…and then another roommate was saying, “how she never had... There weren't any Black people in her hometown, so I was her first experience with Black people kind of,” and I was like, “Oh, okay, this is kind of weird too.” I guess it was what I asked for, like people who didn't look like me. But it wasn't what I expected them to act like. I thought that they will be kind of open and not experimental in the sense of like, “oh my gosh, like you’re my only Black friend. Now I can say the N word, or now I can do certain things because my roommate is Black.” It just kind of rubbed me the wrong way.
Lina also spoke about a racially insensitive microagression, which took place during a discussion about inappropriate Halloween costumes in her Sociology class:

And then so of course Blackface came up. And people were saying, “well, if costumes are supposed to be taken lightly or it's just a joke”…But I'm thinking that, “you shouldn't use somebody else's culture as a joke in that sense. That's where it becomes a problem. So, even if you think that you're celebrating this culture, that this is the one day that you get to dress as this culture, and you want to celebrate or use it lightheartedly, that person …have to live in their costume [race or skin color] every single day. They don't get to take it off for one day.” So talking about that was kind of hard because a lot of people felt that way, that they could dress up as Black face or that they could dress up as a Native American…It's just a big mess essentially. But it's like you're doing that [getting drunk] in somebody else's tradition…and you're kind of just making a mockery out of it. So trying to explain all of those things as a Black woman was kind of difficult. Because it was probably only two people who felt the same way that I did compared to the rest of the classes.

Catherine discussed her frustration of being a Black woman in a predominately White space and having her voice heard and respected:

I feel like all in all, we don't have to prove ourselves or have to feel like we have to prove ourselves. We know qualifications and we know what we work to get. We know what we've worked for, how we got there, what got us there... We don't need to give people an explanation as to why we belong anywhere, because everybody else gets to walk in and sit down with no questioning and so we should demand the same thing, honestly. It's just that.
Participants spoke about using their spirituality and faith to move through racially motivated challenges which also impede the learning environment and impact the campus climate. Ashely responded to the issue of race and being a Black woman in a predominately White space and how she viewed her spirituality, faith, and religion:

going through college besides like finding people with the same belief as me, same beliefs as me, finding people with the same religion as me. Like finding friends to go to church with or finding people who like tell me about churches because like they know I believe in God.

Kym described a racial incident that took place off-campus at a local retail store. However, she prefaced her statement with some personalized inward encouragement:

And then just trying to like remember that you come from great people, like you come from great roots, it doesn't matter like that you're in a predominantly White place, like you are greatness wherever you are. So just trying to keep that in my head cause they're [White people] not the nicest people.

I asked Kym to elaborate more about this incident and she conveyed the following:

They're [White people] not so there's just, so I wouldn't say racist, but I would definitely say prejudice. I got followed the other day in the Walmart, not followed. I was walking behind like a lady in Walmart and she just kept looking back and be like really strange and I was like, “I'm not following you.” They just made me so uncomfortable. I like turned down a different aisle just so she would like stop looking at me like I was doing something wrong…It was really like uncomfortable, but you got to remember like they don't see us often here. They, they're not used to this. The only time that they do see us is when campus is in session, but they're usually not used to that. So coming here and trying
to adjust to how they're like, what they're used to and what I'm used to kind of, it shifts you a little bit, like you had to think about, “okay, they're scared of you and it's not for a good reason, but they are, they see like your skin color as a weapon and that sucks, but you have to remember who you are and what you come from.” So I just try to keep that in my mindset and I think my spirituality helped with that just because I, my mind, my mental is a hard, it's a hard place to be….So there's always something going on in there. So it's like, “okay, let's just calm down, take a second to breathe.” Cause I won't, I'll just keep going and going and going and not think about it, but taking that second to myself to like, “okay, you're still amazing, you're great. You know what's going on.” So yeah.

With the racially motivated incidents and microaggressions taking place on- and off-campus, and impacting the lives of these Black women, Robin reflected on the challenges of the former slaves who endured their own set of life and death challenges:

God. God. Before we could ever read a Bible, our people did not know how to read, but yet we were singing Negro spirituals in the fields, you know what I'm saying? Faith is not ... is a thing to hope for, but not see. We knew God was going to bring us through, we didn't know how, but we knew that we would overcome.

The next challenge describes the family and social relationships participants encountered and navigated as college students.

*Relationship Challenges*

Relationship challenges include interactions with family members and other social associations with friends and partners which involve and impact the life of the participants. Kym shared how she felt about being away from her family and home life as she transitioned to RSU:
Challenges that I face on getting, being away from my family is like my biggest one, family is number one in my life. So it was really hard to adjust to being on-campus and like seeing them once a month. Once you got past that part. I guess my biggest challenge was believing in myself on-campus because I went to community college completely different. Like it's like upgraded high school. College is like, “what the heck is this?”

Robin arrived on-campus with grief and loss already in tow. Her brother had been murdered, yet she shared her story of endurance and hope in keeping the dream of a college education alive; not only for her, but in memory of her slain sibling. Robin described a tender exchange that took place between her and her brother, who was equally excited about Robin going to college:

I applied for RSU and I got the acceptance letter as well. And I told my brother and he was like, “You got to take me with you, you've got to take me with you.” And he's such a goofball. And I was like, “Now this ain't about partying, like this is serious, this is education.” And he was like, “You know, all jokes aside,” he said, “you got to take me for your first day at college, because it's always been my dream to go to a big university.” That dream was stolen from him two weeks later. I feel like I do this not only for myself but for him as well. Because even though he isn't here, I am still my brother's keeper and I want to fulfill his dream, not only for me, but for him.

Catherine faced her own family challenge due to grief resulting from the loss of her father, which happened prior to her freshman year. His death challenged her decision to even come to school:

My journey to college, it was interesting. I had to say that because a lot happened right before I got to college. My dad passed away the summer of my senior year in high school. At that point, I was just like, “I'm not even finishing high school. This is a no. I'm done…” just dealing with the ups and downs. Like I had stated, my dad had passed the
summer going into my senior year of high school, so here goes a whole full year around, I'm going into my freshman year of college, and I'm grieving heavily… and my friend back at home, even more so my mom was just like, “Your dad wouldn't want you grieving like this.” I'm just like, “I can't even help it.” Getting past all these milestones without him here, still gets me. It's even getting me now, honestly [Catherine tearing up]. The grief and loss faced by Robin, in the wake of her brother’s murder, and the death of Catherine’s father presented them with family challenges. However, they both shared how their spirituality, faith, and religion helped them to endure. Robin’s earlier comments in the theme on belonging and community spoke to her finding support through a community comprised of family, her hometown, and the RSU campus. Moreover, Robin found community, and with an affirmed sense of optimism in her spirituality, she faced an insurmountable challenge in the death of her brother:

I believe it's by the strength of God that we have overcome. You know? First John 4:4 says “greater is He, the Christ that is in us, than he that is in the world.” Our strength runs out as humans. It does. But God’s never does. You know? It's by the grace. It's by the grace of God and Christ. I know that for a fact in my own life; because there's been moments, there's been moments when I didn't see no way. I knew that He would have me overcome what I was going through. You know?

Catherine described the sense of peace she believed in and received comfort in hearing her father’s voice encouraging her to attend college:

But I just kept hearing him, “Do it as if I was there,” because he wouldn't expect nothing less. “Go to school, finish high school, go to college”…After seeing the campus, and just feeling kind of at peace, in a way.
Not only did family matters present challenges for the women in this study, but also relationships with friends and partners. Ashely described how God helped her navigate a space of loneliness as a college student:

I would say, I don’t know, basically just having somebody else to talk to, like feeling so alone but knowing that you're not alone. So having that other person to pray to or to talk to and to be like, “okay well like everything's going to be okay because God's going to get me through it.” Like I believe in a higher power who can do more for me than any person can do. So just believe in that, having faith in that.

Lina’s relationship challenge also pointed to a time of loneliness, where she described having a relationship with God prepared her to be her best self for other people:

I want to say my freshman year, and maybe my sophomore year, that was probably the strongest that I've ever felt in my relationship with God. And because I was so alone, that was enough time for me to figure out me and what God wanted from me… And so instead of looking at that time as me being lonely, I was alone with God. That's how I just thought about it. And I did Bible plans all the time. I think I'll always watch like videos on... just different, not even sermons but just like different people talking about different things having to do with God. And I was really active in that and I just thought that I was building this relationship so that when someone else did come in my life, whether that'd be a friend or just a stranger, I knew who I was and who God wanted me to be for that person.

Catherine expressed her struggles with relationships and her spirituality:

I think the main thing I've been struggling with, since I've been in college is, relationships. Relationships like friendships or whatever, but more so relationships with
just me and a male, like the partnership type of thing… And so I was like, okay, let me just start out being his friend, let's just be friends. That's what we did, then it worked its way into something…and so going through it, my spirituality played a huge part. And even just separating myself completely from it, because sometimes I could just feel when something is going to happen or like when something is happening in a way, like maybe I'm in the midst of a process that's coming to an end or something's about to begin, but I can feel it.

Robin explained her relationship challenges in a different way in that she prayed for guidance in managing her feelings for a young man that she liked and with people:

Like I'll tell him, “Lord, I have a crush on his boy right now. Please lead me in the right direction. If he is not on the right and he wants to the left Lord, help me to go to the right.” You know? Because a lot of times … I'm so serious… [laughing]. I talk to him, I be like “Lord, this person got on my nerves today. So I'm going just need you to … Lord, let my peace be still in this moment. You know, help me to be slow to anger and slow to speak in this moment, because I want to say some that ain't got no business saying.” You know? But it's literally, it's not about I … it's relationship. He is my best friend. And one thing about God, if you tell him, guess what, he ain't telling nobody else. Right? …he got me through. That's my best friend. That's the love of my life. God is the love of my life.

Ashely spoke to challenges with relationships and affirmed her belief in God:

I would say I deal with a lot of challenges, like social challenge, so like having friends and stuff like that… So I would say like social challenges, so going through things with my friends. Coming into college, I was young coming into college because I have a late
birthday. So I feel like that kind of set me behind in the way I thought and like maturity levels and stuff. So I feel like, believing in God got me through this.

I asked Olivia if her spirituality, faith, or religion, has provided support in dealing with relationships and does it play a role?

Yeah, it helps me a lot…. It hurts so bad that you can't make sense of it, but I think ... I just went through another breakup a few weeks ago and with someone that I should be with, it almost feels like...We didn't break up for that reason, it's just like timing, I think, it was a bad thing. But I literally can't make sense of it. He can't make sense of it. So being able to rely on God and like, “Okay, this is happening for some kind of a reason.”

Lynelle discussed the challenges she faced with personal relationships and its impact:

I had personal relationship problems, and stuff wasn't right at home with my grandparents...And so it was just like I felt like everything in my life that could have been going wrong was going wrong, and that's when I had met my boyfriend, and he got me into talking to God, and praying more often, and just having faith that everything would get back on track and that everything was happening for a reason.

Dealing with family and relationship crises, whether related to grief and loss due to the death of a family member, the end of a toxic relationship, or the lack of companionships proved challenging for the participants. Beyond the family and relationship challenges conveyed by the participants, mental health predicaments also taxed the lives Black college women.

Mental Health Challenges

Study participants shared challenges to their mental health state as highlighted in the following student narratives. Unashamed, Kym revealed that “last year, my mental was not
there” after being denied admission into her academic major. She decided to seek help through the campus counseling center:

  Yes, it was very hard, because it was like, “I don't want to go talk to you guys, but if I don't, it might be worse off.” So, I went and talked to them, and they were very helpful. We colored for, like, an hour. But, the coloring was helpful.

Lina described a troubling point from her freshman year where her mental health met an impasse. She stated, “My freshman year I was probably depressed and I didn't go to any like therapists or anything like that. Just because I didn't have any friends here.” Lina further expressed to me her outlook on what college life should have been, “so having all those expectations of what I thought college would be like and then getting here and it wasn't like that at all. It was just really...it kind of crushed my spirit a little bit.” Olivia recalled that her mental health challenges began prior to being a college student:

  I started having mental health issues when I was in high school... I knew what it was because I was experiencing anxiety... I could tell the difference between anxiety and stress. I know what my body does when it's anxiety and stress…but once I got to college, it was amplified just because of the amount of pressure that I feel a lot of the times we're put under in terms of academics and then involvements and then relationships, and just a lot at all times. And learning how to manage that as a first-year student was a lot.

Ashely shared her reliance on God to help her manage mental health issues:

  Throughout college I was diagnosed with an illness, not, kind of serious, but the one I have is not serious. So I would say like being faithful in God that he'll get me through that and like just being hopeful that like everything will be okay. And then because of that illness, I'm struggling with mental health. So depression and anxiety and so always
remembering that like, everything will pass like this too shall pass. I say that because I have it tattooed on me.

Catherine talked through how she sees depression on-campus among students, and how she handles her own mental health:

"Being on-campus, when I'm on-campus, you can kind of feel the depression in the air. I walk by students...You can just see in their face like, “I don't even want to do this anymore.” Sometimes when I'm on campus, I catch myself saying, “I don't want to be here. I'm drained.” As soon as I get off-campus and back to my apartment, I'm like, “Okay, I can do this. It's not that bad.”

The experiences of Kym, Lina, Olivia, Ashely, and Catherine revealed how their mental health overlapped into their academic lives as college students. Yet, these complicated circumstances showed me that these women are strong and are here to bear witness to their story, but how? I offer an exchange between Catherine and her mom as an example of how spirituality, faith, and religion undergird the persistence to move forward:

My mom will just text me, ask me, “how I'm doing?” I prayed last night against like, “no weapon formed against me shall prosper.” Whatever weapons and everything else, that's coming up against me right now like depression and all that other stuff, just prayed about that last night. And then my mom texts me this morning, like sent me a prayer, literally praying for my peace of mind and that “whatever it is that I'm asking for, that I will receive the desires of my heart.” And then texts me right afterwards and stated and just told me like, “whatever it is that you're going through, no weapon formed against you shall prosper.” And I was just looking, like “I just said that.”
Catherine, Kym, Olivia, Ashely, and Lina shared with me that their faith in God, their spiritual walk with a higher power, or the religious practices of prayer, meditation, Bible study, singing in the choir, or tapping into positive affirmations helped them when their mental health was challenged. They discussed their strength and fortitude needed to walk through their college experience to endure the murder of a brother, the death of a father, or the lack of supportive friends or relationships. As they shared their mental health challenges, despite the expectation to be fully present in the college process, the participants referenced how their spirituality, faith, and religion was engaged. The next section addresses the participants’ academic challenges as another component of their spiritual or religious journey.

**Academic Challenges**

Academics represent the last barrier within this theme of challenges faced by the participants. Study participants spoke to this reality of academic challenges. Kym applied to her major program three times before being admitted. She discussed her feelings and the impact on her faith during that process:

My faith, in particular, because when I didn't get in, I was like, “why should I even go? What am I going for if I didn't get in?” Like, going back. I was so mad when I came back that first semester. I was just doing repeat classes and trying to get my GPA higher. And I was like, “this is stupid. I don't want to do this. I should have just got in.” I was so mad. But, once I got into the program, and now that I'm here, I saw, it makes so much more sense that I'm here now.

Lina pointed to the lack of mentorship within in her major, as well as the lack of Black women in her professional field, as one of her academic challenges:
So I was going through this really rough time. And then I was having trouble trying to get forward in the sports psychology field because it's not a big field. And it's also not a lot of Black women in that field either. So I was just looking through my email… where it said, “apply for this scholarship opportunity to go to New York, to go to a sports psychology conference for minorities.” I was like, “well this is something weird.” I was like, “what?” This is after having this really bad, like couple of weeks. And then thinking like, “after I graduate, I'm not going to have anything to do cause I can't find anything. I can't even find a person to talk to or even a person that looks like me to talk to.”

Kym and Lina’s commentary reflected the importance of Black college women having support, mentorship, and guidance throughout their academic career. Kym and Lina’s academic challenges were also matched with a lack of self-confidence which can fuel issues of self-efficacy.

The next finding which spoke to the role of spirituality, faith, and religion in supporting the success of Black college women focused on a sense of belonging, community, and building relationships. Having a sense of belonging was connected to finding spiritual support on-campus and also aligned with religious practices. Religious practices such as prayer, Bible study, reading biblical scriptures, and listening to music was a part of their spiritual and religious journey, but was also influenced by how the participants grew up which formed their understanding and how they made meaning of the phenomenon itself. This section also responded to the main research question. The phenomenon of spirituality, faith, and religion expressed by the seven Black women in this study provided comfort, encouragement, support, and healing in various ways to support their college success. Next, I will discuss how having a
sense of belonging through finding community and religious practices provided participants spiritual support.

Finding/Theme: Belonging, Finding Community, and Building Relationships

As soon as I accepted, I guess, to come to RSU, the first thing that popped into my head was, “I have to find a choir.” Specifically, a gospel choir because that's just what I've known…It's like, “we're together.” Because it was the first organization I joined when I got to campus my freshman year back in fall of 2015. I was up in my room, and one of my friends was like, “It's a choir downstairs.” My RA was like, “Yeah, you can hear them with the windows open,” and we were on the eighth floor. You could hear them all the way downstairs in the lobby singing. As soon as I went down there, they were like, “Oh, my gosh. Hi. Welcome.” From there, it was just like they took me in and a bunch of big brothers, big sisters ... Automatically, a support system as soon as I hit campus…like a family.

Catherine’s comments introduced the meaning behind the theme of belonging, finding community, and building relationships. Catherine’s experience pointed to a spirituality, faith, and religious journey rooted in a foundation created long before she entered college—another theme to be addressed in later in this chapter. Catherine looked for a space to belong where she found spiritual support in a community of “like-minded” individuals through campus groups, such as her participation in gospel choir. Catherine grew up in church singing in the choir and her natural inclination was to find the same space once she got to campus. Catherine joined the gospel choir as a freshman and now holds a leadership position as a senior. She talked about how meeting this group of students was critical for her as she entered RSU. Catherine
acknowledged the importance of being connected to other students who shared similar interests. She recalled the joy and excitement she felt when she found that connective tribe:

But immediately finding them [gospel choir] was just the best day ... I think it was the best night. I didn't expect to find them so soon, I guess you can say. I had a feeling that I would find one, or I could just say, “I was hoping to find one.” And then, for one to literally just be down ... to practice every Tuesday, Thursday in my hall lobby, I was like, “This is perfect.” I would say students like me that have either just been in church forever, or even just specifically African American students because even though we're [gospel choir] open, obviously, it's a diverse choir. We want everybody and anybody to come and sing, but the majority of the participants were and still are African Americans because ... I don't know. We just tend to just find each other.

Catherine’s experience with the gospel choir characterized the importance of wanting to find and connect to the familiar—like home. For Catherine, being a part of the campus gospel choir provided her with spiritual support, a way to be involved on campus, and a place where she found community, meaningful relationships, and a sense of belonging. Ashely shared earlier about the the importance of finding people who shared similar interests and beliefs. She also sought ways to make connections and find community on-campus. Ashely was very specific about her needs and how those needs translated into finding spaces with others who believe in God as she:

I would say, I don't know, basically just having somebody else to talk to, like feeling so alone but knowing that you're not alone. So having that other person to pray to or to talk to and to be like, “okay well like everything's going to be okay” because God's going to
get me through it. Like I believe in a higher power who can do more for me than any person can do. So just believe in that, having faith in that.

Most of the study participants identified with a particular Protestant-Christian background where they found community. Lynelle’s family background is Protestant Christian. She attended church with her grandmother. Lynelle considers herself as a spiritual person who does not identify with a specific religion. She shared her challenge in finding space and community where she belonged:

I did find an org recently which I'm going to start getting involved with, and they try to not promote themselves as a Christian org. It's just for women who want to develop their relationship with God. So I came across that, and I want to get involved with that. But before, it was really hard to find a place to fit in with that because the other orgs and groups identify as a specific religion, and I never did. So I didn't feel like I belonged there because I don't identify as a Christian. That's not what I want to do… that part has been hard. Like trying to find ... as far as what I believe in, trying to find a group that I fit in with.

Like Lynelle, Lina’s experience provided another counternarrative to belonging through an encounter where she joined an on-campus religious group, CRU:

I started my freshman year, I started going to CRU because that was the first interaction that I've had with some type of anything religious, that seemed religious. But I just really didn't like it so I stopped going to CRU.

Although campus organizations serve as spaces for students to connect and belong in finding community, Lina described the circumstances in which she left CRU:
And then I started to branch away from CRU because I was the only Black person there, and I know that sometimes that shouldn't matter, but it just did because it was one of the bigger group meetings, and they [CRU] were showing the videos of all the killings that were happening, involving Black men, and so one of the ladies went up on stage and they were like, “We should embrace all people, especially people of color. If you have people like minority friends then you need to ask them about their experiences,” and stuff like that. To me, I understand wanting to know someone, but I didn't want to be an experiment. Because after she said that everyone was looking around for the Black people in the rooms. And I just didn't want to be somebody's, “Oh, I have a Black friend,” I didn't want to be that person for somebody. If we had a genuine connection, I wanted it to be natural.

Lina noted that her leaving CRU should not have mattered, but for Lina, it did matter. It is within these intersectional spaces, such as race, which impacts the places where students are affirmed in their belonging or find shame, pity, and embarrassment in seeking community. These encounters, both positive and the counternarrative, instead give meaning and matter to students like Catherine, Ashely, Lynelle, and Lina.

Another way these women found a sense of belonging through community and relationships was through interpersonal relationships. Lina shared her challenge in finding friends and developing relationships. She talked about how her mother had established close relationships during her time in college: “I wanted like real friendships. And my mom had always talked about how she had these great friends, like friends that she's had since college or since she was in elementary school.” Lina described how her social relationships in college were different from what she expected:
I really didn't have a lot of friends. So something that I was seeking, were friends that were genuine connections. My roommates and I didn't necessarily get along. It wasn't like arguing. But we just didn't connect or we didn't talk about anything other than like sharing our room together, necessarily. So I was trying to find friends that I actually had something in common with.

However, through Pinky Promise (n.d.), a national organization that encourages women to honor God with their life and body, Lina made friends. RSU’s affiliate of Pinky Promise is an on-campus religious group that offers support to women, particularly Black women, through monthly Christian Bible studies, sermon teachings, praise, and worship. Lina connected to this community of Black women, eventually took an executive leadership role within the group, found community, built relationships, and a sense of belonging:

my freshman year I was exploring…And so going to Pinky Promise, it was that interest of wanting to get closer to God. And that's why I initially went because I didn't have a church here… But then I've met girls who've become my friends, like really good friends actually. And it was through trying to get closer to God that I've met people who also wanted to get closer to God. But they also want to get closer to me in the sense that they actually care about my wellbeing and they want to make sure that I'm okay and that they're interested in me as well.

Belonging, finding community, and building relationships through spirituality, faith, and religion helped answer the main research question on the success of the Black college women in this study.
Finding/Theme: Practices

This next theme focused on the participants' reliable and familiar space of religious practices. I saw an undeniable hope reflected in the participants' tangible practices of prayer, engaging in a campus Bible study group, studying Bible scriptures, and attending church services, whether in a brick mortar location or via the internet. I heard an unyielding hope in a higher power, an unseen presence, or connecting to the Spirit through prayer, meditation, or listening to gospel music to find positive affirmations. The participants’ experiences bring light to their use of religious practices, many of which were learned as a child growing up in church. These practices provided meaningful connections to their spirituality, faith, and religion—learned and influenced by these women who also grew up in church.

Participants shared different experiences around church attendance including what it looks like for them and how that practice impacts their life. Ashely talked about the process she went through in finding a church during her time at RSU:

So once I got to college, I knew that I wanted to get involved religiously, obviously go to church on Sundays. And the only church I knew about was, and I'm forgetting the name right now, but it's the one across the street from Dixon Hall [residence hall]. That's where I used to live at on-campus. Fellows Church [church]. So yeah, that was the only Christian church that I knew of on campus. So I would tell myself like every Sunday, “I'm going to go here, every time, I'm going to go there.” But I never got to it. But my mentor at the time, one day I met up with her for lunch on a Sunday morning and I was telling her how everything was going and I was going through a rough time and she's like, “You know, I really want you to come to Alive Neighborhood Church with me since
church, our group services didn't start until 12:30. I really think you'll like it.” I'm like, “Okay, cool. We'll try it.”

Robin asserted that going to church is not just about fulfilling a religious practice, but about having a relationship with God:

I intend to live the fullness of this life. And that's why I say, “it's really about relationship. It's not about ritualistic, about going to church every day because momma, grandma and grandpa, great-grandpa and grandma did it. It's about, who is God to you?” You know? I read my word and I have a conversation with my Lord every day... I create that relationship and interpret it for myself of who He has designated me to be.

Kym shared her feelings about church and what she receives from attending:

I love church. I really do. I love like the whole praising worship and listening to music and listen to them talk. Half the time when I go is always completely related to me. It doesn't matter if he's like preaching directly to me or if there was like 50 people. It always seem[ed] to directly relate to me somehow. So I like experiencing that just because I find it helpful.

Church attendance was not the only religious practice shared by the participants; other practices also included prayer and Bible study. Lynelle shared the following exchange among her peers on matters of religion and prayer: “We've had conversations about praying. We prayed together; we have done that. We just never talked about church or what our exact religious affiliation is.” Catherine explained how a consistent prayer life as a college student helped her in managing mental health challenges, such as depression—also discussed in an earlier finding:
just as far as me, I just know I need to be more consistent with myself and prayer and then just studying and looking up things like the different feelings I may have about school, being depressed, or how do you get out of that? What's a good scripture for this? Really just knowing what to turn to instead of what they call things of the world like substances and stuff like that.

Olivia also talked about her use of prayer and listening to gospel music in dealing with challenges around mental health and personal relationships:

In terms of like mental health and relationships, and whatever it might be. So, I'm doing better now. I wake up in the morning and most mornings I'll pray, and I actually start all of my mornings off with listening to gospel music, just to set the tone for the day.

Lina described the circumstances in which she had become less engaged with prayer and maintaining a connection with God. She called attention to times when she felt distant from God due to her lack of prayer and going to church:

I've seen a difference in the way that, in my relationship with God, and it seemed a little untimely to me because I've noticed that between my junior and my senior year, I had been branching apart from being consistent and prayer, or even acknowledging God on an everyday basis... I would watch the videos [televangelist preachers] on Sundays instead of going to church. I would watch church videos and I even stopped doing that.

Participants also utilized practices such as, reading the Bible and the use of Bible scriptures. Robin declared, “the Bible is your guide” and as a practice, reading and studying the Bible seemed to serve as a barometer in gauging their relationship with God. Lynelle shared the following:
So yeah. I've done better at it recently. Just working on my personal relationship, trying to read the Bible which has always been tricky for me because I feel like it's a little contradictory, but trying to read certain Bible scriptures that have helped me get through certain situations.

Oliva referred to reading the Bible as an important exercise that she incorporated into her life:

I think that I lack more so in being very disciplined, and I'm going to sit down and study every single day, and I'm going to sit down and read the Bible every day. I can tell you that I don't do that. But there's not a week that goes by where I'm not reading my Bible or that I'm not studying in some way, shape or form.

Lina described her involvement in Pinky Promise, where she participated in a regular Bible study:

I really liked how Pinky Promise had a flexible structure. And so we would talk about things that Black college women went through in their everyday life. And they were always attached to a Bible verse so they would just do a study based on a specific topic like stress, or love or something and then it was pretty much discussion based so you heard everyone's different point of views but they always managed to point it back to the word of God, which I felt was cool, because it was for people who didn't know God, it was a good introduction to the Bible or different verses and different people who were familiar it was like “Okay, I know what you're talking about, I can understand this.”

Lina went on to explain that she would be leading the next Bible study. She described what takes place at the weekly meetings:

at Pinky Promise there isn't really outside interaction, well distractions…Because we're talking to each other or we're focused on one message. And so we're listening to
everyone's perspectives, but we're also gaining our own perspective on the topic… So I'm presenting today and then I'm doing my topic on self-worth.

Kym offered a different perspective on reading the Bible. She grew up attending church and was accustomed to reading the Bible. However, Kym added that adjusting to college life at RSU and it being different than community college was difficult for her. She shared a conversation that she had with her pastor from home:

I got here [RSU] and I was like, “yeah, I got to study [for classes and], I, I'm not doing well.” So I actually called my pastor and he was like, “you had to believe in yourself and read Psalms and blah blah blah.” And I was like, “this is not helping.” Like “I, I, this is not helping me. I'm not getting anything.” Like, “I'm still confused and stuck and challenged.” So I think actually sitting down and listening to like some gospel music like lifted my spirit and then helped a lot to put me in a better mindset. Cause once you get in that negative mindset, it's just there. Like there's nothing that can change it. So it was more so of like finding something that helps me bring back that positive light in my life so I could move past it.

Many of the participants shared how they used Bible study and reading sacred texts such as the Bible as a way of practice in using their spirituality, faith, and religion. Kym’s reference to gospel music was another religious practice used among the participants. Whether the music genre was gospel or secular, the music itself and the impact of its words affirmed the spirituality, faith, and religion of these women. I returned to Kym, who communicated her thoughts about the power of gospel music:

It [gospel music] just gives you a, a feeling of like positivity and like no matter what's going on, you can get through something. A lot of gospel songs are like that. So it kind
of helped me like I can relate to it rather than like listening to some rap or some sad music. Like I can relate to something that somebody else had went through. So it was able to lift me up like, okay, somebody else just, I can do this too. We're almost there.

Olivia clarified how the words within the music support her:

I'm also a very word heavy person. I need words of affirmation, so just hearing the words that they're saying in those songs really help to reaffirm me that everything's going to be okay. Then I'll listen to it throughout the day.

Notwithstanding depression, grief and loss, stress and anxiety, academic failures, lack of personal relationships, or fear of an uncertain future, these women called upon the practices of prayer, Bible study, and listening to music to see them thorough. Whether it was the incremental success of being admitted to an academic major or moving past the hurt feelings of a broken relationship, these women used these practices to benefit their spirituality, faith, and religion. Nevertheless, the practices of prayer, Bible study, reading biblical scriptures, and listening to music functioned as expressed practices of the phenomenon and acted as a force pushing these women through the many ebbs and flows of their college journey.

Finding/Theme: Intersectionality of Spirituality, Faith, and Religion

The final theme to address the main research question of the role of spirituality, faith, and religion in supporting the success of Black college women is related to the intersection between the race, gender, and the spiritual, faith, and religious identities of the participants. This finding is reflective of the participants who experienced uncertainty when considering whether or not their spirituality, faith, and religion could intersect with their identity as Black college
women. Olivia noted that she did not even think about how her faith could be related to her identity as a Black woman:

I don't even think that I've ever really thought about my faith and how that plays a role into me being a Black woman. If I'm being completely honest. It plays a role into my life as a whole, but I don't know if I've ever really thought of it as I am a Black woman and my faith plays a specific role in this way, like as a college student at all. I don't know…Yeah. Because I don't want to sit here and say, “being a Black woman,” because it has its ups and downs for sure. It's got its challenges; it’s got its advantages. But I don't want to sit here and say, “I was put into this space and didn't know what to do. So I looked to God and he helped me.” You know what I'm saying?

However, at the end of the interview, I asked Olivia if there was anything I left out of the conversation, and she returned to this question and shared the following:

I've thought about it, just me as Olivia, and of course me identifying as Olivia as a Black woman and what that means to me, but just in this everyday life of being a college student and being a Black woman and that intertwined within the two. I don't know how far I've actually really dove into that. I would like to more, just seeing what role it does play in terms of how I identify and the role that faith plays. But I don't know how deep I've dove into that specifically. If I can be honest.

Olivia’s uncertainty with the question and her response provided the beauty for the initial question and the overall inquiry of this study. The question baffled her as well as others in the group. Other responses revealed an attention to being Black, a woman, and a person of faith. Robin noted the following about being a Black woman who is also a Christian:
My faith as a Black woman in a predominantly White space, for me plays a huge role. I don't believe that God sees color. But He sees us all as human, but I am a realist. We are separated if not by color, by class, by sex; and one of the hugest things, like you said, is “by color.” And I think the way my faith has played in me as being a Black woman in a predominantly White space is to change the stereotypes of what they believe a Black woman is to be. Or a Black woman of faith is to be. I think that a lot of times when people hear the word Christian, they feel like we are judges, like we point the finger at everybody else. To me the biggest commandment is love thy neighbor like thyself. And I, as a Christian and a Black woman, I live my life in love. And I hope to change what they believe a Christian and also a Black woman is to be… The Bible says that “faith, hope, and love abide; but out of all these things, love is the greatest.” So, I abide love. I hope to make a difference, and change what they see a Black woman is to be, and a Christian.

Lynelle talked with me about being a Black woman at a predominantly White university and the connection to her spirituality. She also addressed the intersectional space of belonging to religious spaces within the Black community and the generational gap:

I'm trying to think. I don't know. I would say it's being here at a PWI. It makes it harder to find a place to fit in just because I don't identify with the religion and I feel like a lot of the groups that are focused on stuff like that are for a specific religion and not just people who want to practice their faith as much as spirituality and being Black on top of that, that makes it harder to find a group of people who I feel like I relate to. But then at the same time, I feel like within the Black community, a lot of people don't identify with religion, or at least people of my generation, the people that I know don't identify with a
religion. So it's like within the Black community it feels like I have somewhat of a place, or I have to relate to people because I'm not the only one that doesn't at my age, identify with a religion.

Lynelle also shared the challenges of ascribing to a religion or being a part of a group that marginalizes and oppresses others:

I feel like a religion is like a whole system of beliefs that are drilled into your head and I don't necessarily agree with all of those ways. And so being Black, I don't know, I'm not a person... I can't do racism, sexism, like any isms. So when someone has negative towards a group of people, I don't like it because to me it's on the same level of having negative feelings towards Black people and I feel like I'm saying a bunch of words and I know what I'm trying to say.

Participants struggled when asked to think about their race, gender, and spiritual identities—they were challenged in their responses. Therefore, when the participants were confronted with locating themselves as Black college women within the intersection of spirituality, faith, and religion, that also raises uncertainty on how to best identify those needs, protect their authentic voice and experience in the college setting, and ultimately serve women who find themselves within these spaces.

Sub-Research Question 1: How do Black college women define spirituality, faith, and religion?

To answer this sub-research question, I returned to the protocol where I asked the participants to define the terms for me on two different occasions: during the first and second interview sessions. This research question presented two findings related to how the Black college women in this study defined spirituality, faith, and religion. The first finding is the
uncertainty experienced by the participants in defining the phenomena and the second is the
definitions themselves. To answer this research question, I asked the participants during the first
round of interviews to define spirituality, faith, and religion.

**Finding/Theme: Uncertainty in Defining**

Lynelle informed me during the first interview that she struggled to define the terms:

So for me, I never thought about the difference between spirituality and faith. I kind of
grouped those together in a way…Yeah, I never thought about the difference between
spirituality and faith … I don't know. I don't know the difference between them…As of
right now, no. I'm sure if I heard someone break it down to me, I could understand, but
in my own definition right now I don't think there's a difference.

I got the sense that each of the participants wanted to give me a precise answer—possibly
thinking that I was looking for a specific or the right answer. I was intrigued by the uneasiness
created around locating a right response. Ashely noted, “I feel like that's what I… I don't even
know if this is right, but that's what I think of when I think of spirituality. I think of that aspect
of learning and believing or being.” Catherine also shared a similar struggle in defining the
terms separately. As we discussed the definitions, I asked which one of the terms most resonated
with her and she referred to all three:

I would say spirituality. I'm real spiritual in a way. Because of my upbringing, I would
say I still have religious ways or something like that. I think about things in a certain
way. For me, and I guess just how I think about things is real specific. It's like, “yes or
no.” Certain things that go on around me, I feel like it's based from my religious
background. But I'm like ... Some things are, but a lot of things just aren't. It's like,
“Okay, I don't think I'm religious.” A person of faith, I'm just like, “Okay.” But spiritual more than anything. I feel like it deals more with feeling rather than what you're doing. What you got to do to feel that, in a way I guess… I don't know how to explain it, but yeah.

The uncertainty of Ashely, Lynelle, and Catherine left me feeling like I needed to ensure my understanding matched the meaning of the participants and for them to hear themselves respond again. Specifically, Lynelle’s remarks reminded me that matters of spirituality, faith, and religion are not discussed let alone attempting to define and give meaning to them. Her forthright response of “I don't know. I don't know the difference between them” inspired me to begin the second interview with the same question about the definitions for clarification because of the uncertainty and the interchangeable use of the terms. I also wanted to make sure that my understanding matched the participants—it was difficult for me to follow. However, during the second round of interviews, it was apparent to me that I was not the only person at the interview table re-thinking these definitions. When I asked Ashely to give me her definitions again during the second interview, she remarked the following:

Okay, so actually, after our last interview, I talked to my mom about it because she's a really good person. So I was like, “How do you described these?” Because I felt like, I don't know, I don't know if I had the definitions correct.

Olivia’s response was similar. She sought counsel from campus staff member, Hugh, about the definitions because she too was struggling with the meaning:

I don't know if it is maybe defining it for myself or just defining it period. I just don't know. Honestly, I probably wouldn't have been able to give you those three separate definitions. I mean I know I would have for faith, but the difference between spirituality
and religion, unless I had that conversation with Hugh where he was kind of breaking it down for me.

Kym also grappled in defining the phenomenon: “Okay. This question seems harder this time. Now I know why.” She went on to give me her definitions, and then I queried as to why the request to define the terms seemed harder this time around. Kym responded:

Yeah, I don't know why, it seems harder today… Cause it's just like you don't, you don't, think about this every day, you don't think about what the differences are. You don't think about how you think about it or how others see it. So it's just, it just felt different today.

Robin, however, was the only participant who did not pause or vacillate in her response to my second round of questioning. She responded with succinct confidence:

Okay. For religion, religion is a group of people who come together with the same belief or faith system. For spirituality, that's more of, I believe, outside of these physical bodies, these fleshy bodies, we all have a spirit. So it's more about the, I call it auras, attractions, things like that that can't be explained by science. That's what I believe spirituality is. “Faith,” the Bible says that, “faith are things that are hoped for yet not seen.” So, it's when you don't have any physical evidence of something, but you know it to be real to you. So that is what faith is.

Although most participants struggled in their attempt to construct definitions of spirituality, faith, and religion, their collective effort towards meaning still reflects an individualized experience to reveal a personalized definition. The next theme also helped answer the sub-research question to provide definitions for the phenomena.
Finding/Theme: Definitions of Spirituality, Faith, and Religion

The next finding defined spirituality, faith, and religion from the participants’ perspective. Depending on which term resonated most with the participants, spirituality, faith, and religion had similar meanings among them, but were informed by their individualized experiences. Because I asked the question, the participants provided me with their own definitions of spirituality, faith, and religion out of their own voice and experience. However, their language and accompanying experiences presented much overlap. Participants applied the same words while describing meaning to another phenomenon. For example, in Olivia’s definition for faith, she referenced religion in her description: “Then faith I always think is believing in something. So it doesn't necessarily have to be the believing in a specific religion, but I think faith is more so having a hope for some kind of higher power.” Therefore, my initial search to find isolated meanings for each word were doused due to the overlap in meaning. However, the overlap in use and meaning makes sense, because there is an overlap of experience among these women that was influenced by their prior personal experiences all rooted in growing up in church and influenced by family. One of the most interesting comments related to this theme, as previously shared, were the participants who noted that they had never thought of the difference between spirituality, faith, and religion. Because of these statements, I began to realize that they had never been asked to think about these concepts let alone clearly articulate those definitions aloud.

Initially, when I sought to present these complex constructs separately, I looked for isolated meanings which proved challenging in the analysis as well as the discussion. However, in reading through the interview transcripts, I coded spirituality, faith, and religion based on the language and experiences of the participants and subsequently assigned codes to themes. For
the women in this study, there seemed to be no distinct meaning, effort, or intention to isolate these terms aside from my direct inquiry. These women constructed meaning out of their prior and personal experiences, which were influenced by their family—namely, a mother, grandmother, or grandparent. The terms that resonated most with the participants reflected their upbringing and what was found to be a valued behavior or practice, such as prayer, Bible study, or church attendance as discussed in the previous section. Regardless of how the participants understood or expressed the phenomenon of spirituality, faith, and religion, meaning was informed by their own experiences. These findings suggest that meaningful differences do not exist between these terms and the ways in which the participants described their use. Therefore, my attempt to parse out these differences is beyond the scope and focus of this study.

*Spirituality*

Kym shared that “spirituality is kind of like, I think it's like a mixture of religion and faith. So you kind of have a little bit of both, but you don't fall directly under one of those categories.” Ashely provided another perspective on how she views spirituality:

spirituality I think is more of... How would I explain it? “Not like a mental thing, but you can be just a spiritual person, but you may not necessarily believe in God, but you may be spiritual within yourself and spiritually connected to yourself and more of the earth kind of.” When I think of spirituality, I think more of... How do I explain it? Like more like, “I don't even know the words for it, like those rock shops, crystals and stuff.” And then spirituality, I would say, “just being like a spiritual being, kind of believing in that higher power, believing in a God, believing in something.”
Along the same lines, Robin noted, “for spirituality, that's more of, I believe, outside of these physical bodies, these fleshy bodies, we all have a spirit. So it's more about the, I call it auras, attractions, things like that that can't be explained by science. That's what I believe spirituality is.” Lina also provided her own definition of spirituality:

Spirituality, it's pretty much you have a belief in a higher power, but it's more focused on, I would say, “you and that higher power.” It's a little bit more intimate and ... I know people who are spiritual but they may not have ... who classify as spiritual, they may not go to church just because they don't like the church structure....spirituality asks... I think is more intimate between you and the higher power that you believe in. So if you do pray, praying between or you have more conversations, it's more... maybe church might not be your thing or you just don't believe in what all churches preach. So you kind of work on their relationship or like between you and your higher power or God.

**Faith**

The women provided various definitions of faith. Some definitions were biblically described and related to God or a higher power working on one’s behalf in life situations. Ashely articulated her definition of faith:

Faith is like, it's like kind of like the idea, like I have faith in God or I have faith in the spiritual being that everything's going to work out or they're going to do what I need them to do for me. So it's like a feeling that you have, like you have faith.

Robin defined faith as it is described in a Christian context—through the Bible. She related faith to God, as a needed life source accessed in unforeseeable events and challenging times, such as the death of her brother:
“Faith,” the Bible says that, “faith are things that are hoped for yet not seen.” So, it's when you don't have any physical evidence of something, but you know it to be real to you. So that is what faith is. [Like] when tragedy, when ... like I said I buried my brother. When certain things happen, people lose sight, but that's what faith is.

Kym also talked about faith and having that faith tested. She expressed an optimistic reliance upon faith working in matters that appeared hopeless, such as getting admitted to an academic program. During the interview, I followed up on a response:

[What’s been tested?] My faith, in particular, because when I didn't get in, I was like, “why should I even go? What am I going for if I didn't get in?” Like, going back. I was so mad when I came back that first semester. And then faith to me is having the faith to do and believe in things. So believing in yourself or believing in others. Kind of like the optimism characteristic of it.

Religion

Religion seemed to be a more familiar term to the participants. Kym defined religion as such:

So religion in my opinion is like church goers. Like, “this is what I live by every day. I'm going to Bible study, reading the Bible, praying.” That's what I look at as a religion. It reminds me of clubs almost. I don't know why.

Lynelle linked the term religion directly to Christianity, something more familiar to her youth experiences. Again, religion referred to practices such as church attendance, Bible study, and the presence of a higher power:
I feel like religion is making that commitment to go to church or whatever the religion praises and stuff like that. I don't know the terms for other religions. I only know like more so Christian. But going to church, doing the Bible studies, doing all of those things that come along with a religion. And then I feel like religion is that blending in a higher power, but you do things outside of your home or with other people to practice that. So going to church and going to different events and stuff.

Olivia’s definition reaffirmed the structured practices of religion and having a committed routine:

Religion is more structured and biblical, I think, and doing things by the book. I think religion is more the structure, the biblical. I would say religion is more structured in terms of you're sitting down and reading the Bible every day. If you wake up and you don't pray in the morning or you don't do a devotional every day, then you're going against what God wants for you. You're just, I don't know, not living your life according to how he has that planned for you. So I guess it's more structured in discipline.

Lina’s definition called attention to a negative effect of religion and the impact it can have on people as shown in Lynelle’s experience:

I feel like, too, religion has a really bad negative connotation behind it because, I don't know, some people take it out of context. But I feel like I originally said that, “religion was like, in the way that they kind of talk about it, it's a way of doing something,” I guess the only way of doing something.

The participants definitions of spirituality, faith, and religion were connected to their individualized experiences. This underscored how their prior experiences with the phenomenon
were influenced by family members who were also responsible for planting the spiritual, faith and religious seeds in their lives.

Sub-Research Question 2: How do Black college women describe their spirituality, faith, or religious journey?

Before addressing the next research question, I must pause and call attention to the participants prior experiences; the critical foundation from which these Black college women could draw from—the theme, growing up in church.

Finding/Theme: Growing Up in Church

The participants all shared a common foundational experience of growing up in church, which also served as a bridge connecting the participants prior experiences with spirituality, faith, and religion to their present-day college journey. This bridge created patterns of behavior and influenced how these Black college women thought about and integrated the phenomenon into their present-day college experiences. Participants discussed family members, such as a mother or a grandparent, who introduced them to spirituality, faith, and religion through going to church, learning about and participating in other religious practices such as prayer, Bible study, or singing in the choir. Robin noted a tradition of going to church, a precedent established by her grandparents:

We go to church on Sunday because papa or my daddy, I mean his mother and father did it. Grandma and grandpa did it. So we're going to go to church on Sunday…we do this because this is the norm for us.

Robin, like the rest of the women talked about the practice of going to church. However, this engagement of going to church extends beyond a normalized religious practice. Growing up in
church was an intricate part of their lives—a tradition. Every participant related going to church and being involved in church as a matter of family upbringing, background, and influenced by a mother, grandmother, grandparents, or other family member; hence, the theme growing up in church. Catherine also reflected on how she grew up in church:

But church has been a part of my life since before I came out the womb. Of course, my mom ... They were a part of services, and then after we were born, it was something that we was always active in. And then, as I got older, I participated in more things like being a youth usher or being in the choir.

In addition to the worship experience, church attendance was not only a ritualized practice, but provided space to get involved, learn leadership skills, and find community. For participants like Catherine and Lina, either a parent or the grandparents took them to church and made sure they got involved. Lina also described the influence of her mother and grandparents, who took her and her sister to church:

My mom always pushed for us to go to church. My grandparents have also always pushed us to go to church so it was kind of something that we had to do, me and my sister. And then we got involved in the church, so I worked as one of the group leaders and we would referee at the soccer games...So we always were connected somehow to the church.

This theme also pointed to the importance of family where church played a significant role as noted by Olivia, “I think all of us, just being Black a lot of us have grown up just with the church in our household. With our families making that a big part of our lives.” Although Lynelle does not identify herself with a specific religion at this time in her life, she shared, “my mom’s side
never pushed a religion.” However, Lynelle described how her grandmother laid that spiritual foundation for her beliefs by connecting Lynelle with Christianity:

My grandmother on my dad’s side, she identifies as Christian, and that’s who I always went to church with when I was younger…. We went to church every week. I had Sunday school when I was with her [grandmother]. We did Bible study. My best friends at that age were from the church. We went to different church events. I went to camp with the church every summer. So yeah, I was really involved in the church when I was younger.

Growing up in church was also reflected in Catherine’s experience. She shared her family traditions around regular church attendance:

The main family influence for me at the time was my mom. When we were going to church, my home church, we lived right across the street from it. It was like, “Hey, every Sunday we're going to church,” and then even when we moved away, it was like, “Okay, every Sunday we're going to church.” Then, sometimes when we were a little smaller, we would be with her for Sunday School, which is kind of like Bible study in the morning because she would teach the classes. Even as I got older, I would still come to Bible study until I was just like, “It's a little too early.” But going to church on Sunday was a regular thing. I didn't think nothing of it like, “Oh, I'm going to church on Sunday.” They're like, “You go to church?” I'm like, “Yeah, that's where I go.”

The statements made by these women showed how religious practices and instruction came from a foundation of prior experiences—growing up in church.

Growing up in church included regular attendance at weekly services like Robin, Ashely, and Lynelle, participating in Sunday school or Bible study like Olivia, being a youth leader like Kym, being an usher or signing in the choir like Catherine, or being a volunteer soccer coach for
the church’s outreach efforts like Lina. Olivia’s comments revealed the influence that her grandparents had on her spiritual life: “So I don't think that I would have faith or be a spiritual person without them, and them taking me to Church and some of the conversations that they have.” I connected the reverence related to the influence of a family legacy rooted in spirituality, faith, and religion. Its importance was reflected in the conversations I had with these Black college women where they talked about growing up in church and going to church with a mom, grandmother, or grandparent. Kym’s experience provided another example of this influential upbringing:

So, I've been in church since I was born. My mom and my grandmother have very strong church ties, so that's always been a part of me. But it was like, I don't really know. I'm just here, and then you come. So, it took a little soul searching to figure out what was going on.

Participants revealed that their religious church roots were influenced by their families, who introduced them to a spiritual life of faith attached to religious practices; a bridge connecting prior experiences to those beliefs and behaviors now used as current resource by these participants who are learning how to engage their spirituality, faith, and religion as college students and accessing the phenomenon in their time of need.

Two additional themes that further address this sub-research question also described their spiritual or religious journey. This theme includes navigating the pivotal moments and life events faced as a Black college woman. Pivotal moments reflect significant life events which could be depicted as a negative experience with a religious teaching among church members or the death of a parent or sibling. These significant life events influenced their present journey as Black college women. These pivotal moments were inclusive of the challenges noted in the
main research questions which spoke to their mental and emotional state, academics, relationships, and the barriers encountered from being centered in a marginalized race and oppressed gender, Black women—in college.

Finding/Theme: Pivotal Moments and Life Events

After a while, I was just like, “Okay, I got to know what that really, really feels like.” I was taking the time to go with my mom to women's conferences where it was girls my age. We used to go every year to the AIM Convention, which is Auxiliaries in Ministries Convention. That's held anywhere, really, throughout the Midwest or the South. We would go there and see other women or other girls my age just, what they say, “on fire for God.” I'm like, “Yo, that's got to be me.” There goes the vulnerability. I see it. I really want to experience it for myself, and so that's when it shifted. I was just watching how people manage to do it. After a while, it was just like, “As long as you want it, it will come to you.” And I'm like, “Okay.”

Catherine’s opening narrative to this theme highlighted a pivotal moment in her faith and relationship with God. In the earlier theme related to challenges faced by the participants, she explained how her father passed away prior to enrolling at RSU. Here, I point to the spirituality, faith, and religious foundation of the participants rooted and influenced by a family legacy made it possible for women in this study, like Catherine, to endure those pivotal life moments that entered their lives.

All of the women in the study shared significant moments that changed their lives and made an impact on how they engaged their spirituality, faith, and religion. Similar to the challenges discussed earlier, these life-altering moments moved the participants to rely on a
higher power which that helped them make sense of life when life made no sense. Robin described a pivotal life moment from the grief endured at the loss of her brother who was murdered:

My brother was recently murdered ... my little brother. And just being able to deal with grief and sadness while still ... because going to school, getting my education, that was hard for me; but what I had to realize is, now, “regardless of that tragedy, how can we make this into a positive? How can we make his life mean something?” And I had an abundance of support, not only through my own city and my people of my city and my family, but this college gave me all the support in the world.... So I took out the initiative to make sure that I was okay emotionally; and that was one sense that God had helped me to get over, not through.

Kym explained how she tried to make sense of God in light of an abuse she faced during her adolescent years:

So, there was a couple events in my life where I was just like, "Are you real or are you not? Because I'm confused as to why these things are happening to me." So, one of those, I was ... What grade was I in? I think I was in the sixth grade, and I went through a sexual assault situation. And, I was like, I am 11. There's no reason. I'm not understanding. And, my mom tried to explain. When you're 11, you're like, I'm still not understanding what you're talking about. So then, when I got older it was like, okay, I know what happened now, but I'm still not okay with it. So, I had to do some soul searching to figure out why it was so upsetting, and why it happened to me. Because I was like, why would He let that happen to me? That doesn't make sense.
Olivia also commented on her attempt to make sense out of the uncertainty and stressfulness of life itself:

So, I rely on Him... Well, that's how I was raised and I believe in Him, and I really do. But it's also a big piece of some things you just can't comprehend. So, knowing that He has a plan, and things are always working together for some kind of common purpose. I don't know what it is, but to be able to believe in that, alleviate some of the anxiety and stress that I think that I have about the universe.

Lynelle recalled an experience with members from her church. This pivotal moment shifted her perspective about how she thought about her relationship to her religion:

So I grew up in a church, in a Christian church, and I hadn't been for some years, and I went back as a semi-adult. I was like 16 or 17, and they just said some things that me now being able to have my own mindset, I don't agree with. More specifically about gay marriage, and my mother is a gay woman, and so I just wasn't comfortable with what they were saying, and so it kind of just turned me away from the whole experience and gave me a negative view on the entire religion. Because it was like I grew up around these people, and so to think that they was thinking that this whole time that I've known them was like wow. Since that experience going to my childhood church, I didn't only turn away from that church. I somewhat in a way turned away from God, and so I just didn't want anything to do with religion at all. And so I turned that off too.

Ashely also discussed her thoughts about church and religion and coming into her own understanding about God:

So as I started to get older, because like I feel like when I joined the church in Pontiac I because my mom did. Like I knew what it meant to join the church, but I joined like,
okay, believe in God, I want to join this church, I'm going to get involved. But then as I started growing up and I started to learn I can pick what church I want to go to. I didn't really care for the church. And to this day I don't. I just didn't. I don't know, they just wasn't giving me what I needed in terms of like the preacher or what they were asking for, like the community of the church. I still believed in God, but I just didn't like the church.

These pivotal moment as described by the participants made an indelible impact on how they view religion and ultimately their relationship with God. Pivotal moments are those experiences, negative and/or positive, which impact how these women viewed their spirituality, faith, or religion while other life events altered their perspective and moved them to closer to God. I call this a reset for the “bounce-back” (Robin) and will summarize this theme with the sub-research question related to what spirituality and religiousness looks like for Black college women—indeed a life requiring constant reset for the “bounce-back.”

The next section presents the findings connected to the sub-research question: What does spirituality, faith, and religiousness look like for Black college women? The theme: A reset for the “The bounce-back” addressed this question.

Sub-Research Question 3: What does spirituality, faith, and religiousness look like for Black college women?

Finding/Theme: A Reset for “The Bounce-Back”

In answering the main research question, the participants described how they used their spirituality, faith, and religion to respond during challenging life events. Another facet of these experiences also supports the research question of what spirituality, faith, and religiousness look
like. Participants’ prior experiences with spirituality, faith, and religion facilitated their understanding and allowed them to reset or reposition themselves using the phenomenon. Spirituality, faith, and religion for these Black college women provided space for a reset when that pivotal moment or life event happened. As Robin shared, “you're going to fall down so many times. We all do it. It's life. But it's about your bounce back. It's about your ability to get up despite that.” Robin’s statement eloquently characterized this space of the reset as a shift where the participants refocused and aligned their priorities. During each interview, I listened as each woman shared with me some of their life’s most challenging moments where they described doing things differently, making different choices, and getting back into relationship with God or reconnecting to their spirituality, which has always been an integral part of who they are as a person.

For these Black college women, this ability to reset or to refocus promoted their ability to get up again, keep moving forward, to “bounce-back” (Robin) from the challenges I discussed earlier around racism, family, relationships, mental health and academics. Participants realigned themselves with what was already innate for them—their spirituality, faith, and religion. It is these phenomena that form the space to allow for a reset or “bounce-back” (Robin) to occur and move them forward. Kym spoke about her faith as she dealt with denials to her program major:

My faith, in particular, because when I didn't get in, I was like, “why should I even go? What am I going for if I didn't get in?” Like, going back. I was so mad when I came back that first semester. I was just doing repeat classes and trying to get my GPA higher. And I was like, “this is stupid. I don't want to do this. I should have just got in.” I was so mad. But, once I got into the program, and now that I'm here, I saw, it makes so much more sense that I'm here now.
Lynelle talked about her reset or “bounce-back” in the challenges she faced with personal relationships and family and the impact it was having on her academics:

last year was my most struggling year of college. I had a lot going on personally. I was failing classes and a lot was just happening, and for me it felt like my life was just falling apart. And so that's when I had to like sit down and evaluate what I wanted to do moving forward. And so I came to the conclusion I need to work on my relationship with God. And so I started doing my prayers.

Olivia’s perspective shifted following the break-up of a relationship with her partner:

So after that happened, I don't know if I would call it a fast, or just a realignment of life, but I wasn't doing anything outside of being a child of God. I felt like I was really just watching those videos. I was reading the Bible every day. I was listening to my music. I wasn't on social media, I wasn't drinking, I wasn't going out. I didn't talk to a lot of people during that time either, it was just more so of like an intentional rediscovery of who am I? Who do I want to be? Where am I right now? What are my goals, aspirations in life?

Catherine’s comments illustrated her feelings of being disconnected from God because of her lack of praying, but she maintained a position of always being taken care of by God:

I know me personally, sometimes I feel like when I'm disconnected from God, almost ... When I'm disconnected from him, he's not disconnected from me and sometimes I don't understand that, if that makes sense. Like understanding how I haven't, let's say prayed and stuff like that, but even in the midst of that, things are still happening, I'm still covered, still my ways are being made and everything like that.
Lynelle also spoke to this same understanding of not really knowing why things happen the way they do, but she also recognized God when positive situations happened in her life:

I know that I have said before when something happens, look at God… My mindset is now, “Everything happens for a reason,” and God wouldn't put me in a situation that I can't handle, and you can't have the flowers without the rain…everything happens for a reason.

Like Lynelle and Catherine, other participants also referenced a reliance on their spirituality, faith, and religion wherein they were raised. Whether it was going to church, prayer, reading Bible scriptures or positive affirmations, listening to gospel music, singing in a choir or meditating, these practices were instrumental in helping them navigate pivotal life moments and “bounce-back” from disappointing situations. Ashely did not reference one particular life event, but she discussed the impact of loneliness as a challenge that she had to conquer and explained how she views her spirituality, faith, and religion as a college student:

Well, basically it goes into like feeling alone, like having so many friends but still feeling alone. So that same idea of like no matter how alone I feel I still have somebody else, which is God I can go to, talk to, pray to. So like I'm never really alone even though I may feel alone or feel lonely. So having that faith that like it's just a feeling but it's not like a true feeling. Well, because I'm not really alone, because I'm never in it alone…I feel like as a college student it got a lot easier for me to get to see God because going through a lot of stuff and going through it by myself because my parents weren't here. So it was like when I didn't have anybody, it was like, “well, you have this person you can lean on.” So I was kind of like getting more connected to God in my own way. And it kind of like gave me that gateway. And it kind of even made me feel like being in
college, even if I don't 100% agree with the whole, I guess what churches agree with, I
can still believe in God. And that could be a relationship that I have with God and I don't
necessarily have to go to church every Sunday or I don't have to join a certain church. I
can just be a person who believes in God generally.
The resetting or re-establishing of a relationship with God was critical to the spirituality and faith
of these women. However, Lina described a different reset experience as a moment of conflict
where she did not want to go to the church where she grew up attending with her mom even
though this was one of the major religious practices shared among all the participants:

Even when I was home for the summer, I probably only went to church with my mom
once. And it was one time, and I remember it, and I feel so bad for it. And I just did not
want to go to church and she was like “Well, why don't you want to go? Why don't you
want to go?” And I said, “I just don't want to go.” And I just saw her face and she just
looked disappointed.

However, Lina’s reset was exhibited in her decision to find another church home that attended to
her spiritual needs:

But even going to Hosanna, it just seemed like they weren't talking about anything that
related to me, or even things that interested me, or I just didn't feel a message coming
from it so I didn't want to continue to go. But I did find there is a church in Detroit, it's
called Magnificent Church, and there is a difference. I can't tell what the difference is,
but I do feel more involved in that church and it's easier for me to receive a message
when I did go to that church, but I can't figure out what the differences are from or
between Magnificent Church and Hosanna Church. It might be the people who are
giving the message, but, at Hosanna, their preacher is an older White guy, and at the
Magnificent Church the first time I went, they did the whole sermon was based on women. So it was three different women and they were talking about three different topics related to women. I think the first woman was telling a testimony about her and her relationship with God and how that kind of formed, and how she knew it was something important for her. The second lady, she incorporated her art, so I think she was a singer and a poet, and she talked about…she actually read one of her poems and then she sang it too, but that was all that she presented, so it was her love for God and her love for herself through her form of art. Then the third lady, she actually just preached, but I don’t remember what she was talking about, but I just felt like I liked how it was constantly switching but it was non-traditional. I think that’s why I liked it.

Lina made a choice not to attend the church where she grew up. She recognized that her spirituality also needed to connect to other parts of her identity, such as race and gender—this issue of intersectionality of spirituality has been discussed as part of the academic challenges related to race, racism, and microaggressions.

The narratives relayed in this section responded to the sub-research question of what spirituality and religiousness look like for Black college women. The participants described pivotal moments or life events which triggered their reset followed by corresponding actions such as prayer, meditation, Bible study, or church attendance. This reset provided the participants with the ability to “bounce-back” (Robin) as they navigated their college experience and reconnected to their higher power and their purpose.
Sub-Research Question 4: How have Black college women navigated campus resources related to their spirituality, faith, and religion?

To address this research question, I connected the participants’ description of what spirituality, faith, and religion look like through various on- and off-campus resources as their support.

**Finding/Theme: Navigating Resources**

The theme, navigating resources, responded to this last sub-research question. Participants described various on- and off-campus resources found to meet their spiritual, faith, and religious needs. These resources also provided insight to the sub-research question: What does the phenomenon looks like for these Black college women? I have already discussed how participants like Lynelle and Lina found a sense of belonging and a supportive community by accessing religious organizations such as, Pinky Promise, and Catherine’s involvement with the gospel choir. Off-campus churches are also a resource used by participants to support their spirituality, faith, and religion. Ashley discussed her involvement in a local church located off-campus that engaged her spirituality, faith, and religion:

So since then I've been going to Alive Neighborhood Church. I started to volunteer there last semester in the daycare and I'd been going there…And I feel like after coming in contact with a lot of people, I want to get more in tune with my spiritual self and my spirituality, like I know that I'm religious and I believe in God and I go to church, but I want to be like a spiritual person in my everyday life.
I asked Kym if she had found a local area church and she shared the following:

No, I have not. I did meet a very nice young lady though …she's just so amazing and she wanted to talk to me all about her sorority experience. I was like, “okay cool.” And I was thinking about it but I'm not really sure. You know? And then like somehow we got to talking about like my spirituality and like I just really connected with her and I didn't go to her church…she texts me often…She also [goes to] church here and she has like, “it's very nice, you should come and diverse and my church home is diverse.” I was like, “maybe I'll come, try it out,” but I haven't been yet.

I asked Kym a follow-up question to see if she thought of going to this church and she replied:

I might. I might. She's a sweetheart, so she makes it like she makes me want to go the way she talks about it, so…yeah, that makes me want to like, “okay, maybe I should try going. It might be helpful to me.”

Lina, Lynelle, and Kym connected to resources with people who shared similar interests, such as the campus religious groups, Pinky Promise, and the gospel choir as well as a local church which offered Ashley a resource used for spiritual support and involvement. Furthermore, these groups and spaces offered the participants a sense of belonging and where they found community, as noted in an earlier theme, through supportive relationships which aided them in navigating on- and off-campus resources for their spiritual, faith, and religious support.

Participants also shared about the campus resources where they could go and vent, ask questions, seek guidance, and find a listening ear. As previously discussed in the theme on mental health challenges, other participants, Lina, Kym, Robin, Ashley, along with Olivia, all referenced the counseling center as a place where they received support but did not mention any specific staff members. Although, Robin did not specifically mention a campus staff person
needed for spiritual support, she described an experience with the counseling center which she believed offered the type of support she needed at that time while recognizing her faith in God:

It was a very positive experience, very positive. It helped me to realize, yes, it's a good thing to pray to God. Yes, it is a good thing to read His word, yes, those are amazing things, but like I said before, a lot of us ... Yes, God has a way of helping you, but He truly has a way of putting people in positions for your journey. And it doesn't make you weak to go and seek that help. It doesn't make you weak to accept that help. If anything, you denying help makes you prideful.

Kym also took advantage of the counseling center as a trusted resource when she encountered the academic hurdle of being denied admission twice to her major. She also noted the supportive reassurance received from her family as well:

Because, I was discouraged, like, really discouraged. And they [family] were like, “Kym, it's okay that you didn't get in. You can apply again. It's going to be fine. Just go harder this year.” And I was like, “Okay, but I'm still not feeling it.” So, having them support me in both mentally and physically, because I was losing my mind... I was, I really was. I went to the counseling center, and I was like, “I cannot do this.” She was like, “What are you talking about?” I was like, “This is too much. I can't do school. I'm not doing well.” I was trying to maintain two jobs at the same time, so I was really struggling.

Campus staff members, which has also been previously addressed and connected to the theme on belonging, finding community, and building relationships also served as another resource used by participants for spiritual support. Olivia accessed trusted campus personnel, who served as spiritual mentors and provided her with a safe space where she could ask questions and receive
guidance without judgement. She mentioned several staff members whom she reached out to as a source of support:

I was just talking to Dale Jefferson and he was actually talking to me a little bit about spirituality, and you were talking a lot about the values and experiences that you have had shape your spirituality and that's different for everyone… I talked to Hugh Bellows a lot about my spirituality. He's one of my mentors, probably my largest influential mentor… Yeah, I would say when it comes to my faith, the main people that I talk to, definitely Hugh, definitely Dr. Lewis, sometimes Rodney Lennox. Some of my friends that are spiritual as well, don't have a ton.

It is interesting to note that Olivia was the only participant who readily mentioned campus staff members by name and talked about how this resource supported her spiritual inquiries.

Participants also mentioned technology and social media platforms such as YouTube videos and other avenues used for spiritual support. Olivia talked to me about Michael Todd, pastor of Transformation Church located in Tulsa, Oklahoma and the impact of his teaching ministry on her life:

I started watching Michael Todd. Do you know who that is? He's my favorite. He is really what got me out of what happened this summer… He makes faith practical in my opinion… I like how practical he is. So he'll talk about something, but then always relate it back to life so you understand it. And I think a lot of the time when I was growing up, some of the stuff just wasn't resonating with me. I would hear it, but the minister or the pastors that I was listening to, they wouldn't apply it back to every day. So I was like, “okay, you're telling me these things, but really what does this mean? How am I going to
see that in the things that I do, the way that people treat me and the different things that are happening to me?”

Olivia also talked about the importance of daily affirmations as a resource she found on Pinterest. The declarative language found within these affirmations, Bible scriptures, and in the gospel music, all readily accessible from a mobile cell phone device, sets the tone for her day:

But I would say every single morning as I told you before, before I wake up and I start my day off with gospel music. I'm very big on words of affirmation. So I'll be scrolling on Pinterest looking through Bible scriptures that relate to whatever it is that I'm going through at that specific moment. Whether that's I need something to talk to me about healing or positivity or grief, or whatever it might be.

During a difficult time with classes, friends, and family, Lynelle shared how she used technology as a resource to find prayer, encouragement, and spiritual support with a ministry located back in her hometown:

I don't know if you know who Mikaih Keener is? She's a minister from Detroit and she's my age, but she's a really popular minister from Detroit and she does prayer calls and she has this app where she sends out text messages. So I signed up for them because she says like encouraging text messages every day and she does her prayer calls on Instagram live. So I tune in to those and just sit there for probably like 15, 20 minutes and she just prays the whole time. So I do that. And yeah, just trying different little things like that to make me feel more comfortable with talking to God and then that relationship.

Kym spoke about a different experience with her church, who offered online services as a resource: “My church does do like online what's it called? ‘Services?’ But it isn't the same. It
doesn't feel the same. You can't feel like the vibes in the room and experiences. It doesn't feel the same.”

Although evangelists using social media, online church services, campus staff members, local churches, campus offices, such as the counseling center or family members are not God or a higher power, they still represent a type of spiritual support that the participants accessed. Even though outlets such as campus organizations, staff, and offices, or local churches which supported the participants spirituality, faith, and religion were limited, these young women navigated through these resources and found ways to connect, belong, build relationships, and find community.

Summary

The findings discussed in this chapter shared a unique connection between the participants’ prior experiences with spirituality, faith, and religion and a personal background that was influenced by family. The participants’ college journey, as well as their understanding and use of the phenomenon, was informed by prior experiences rooted in religious practices, such as prayer, Bible study, meditation, reading scriptures, listening to gospel music, and church attendance. These prior experiences served as a bridge leading the way for spirituality, faith, and religion to be engaged throughout their time in college, which helped them remain connected to the phenomenon. Findings also revealed how the participants described themselves as Black women living and learning in a predominately White space, and what that shared space looks like when intersected with their spiritual, faith, or religious identities. Participants were challenged in defining the phenomenon, because spirituality, faith, and religion are lived experiences that are rarely discussed. Similar to their uncertainty and struggle in defining
spirituality, faith, and religion, some participants nixed the notion of locating themselves among the intersectional spaces of being a Black college woman in relation to their spirituality, faith, and religion. Therefore, when it was time to articulate, there was some uncertainty while other responses were lengthy and ambiguous as participants searched for their own level of clarity and understanding surrounding the phenomenon. The diversity of the participants’ prior and present experiences matched their varied responses to the definitions—all of which were rooted in a background influenced by a mom, grandparent, or other family member who participated in their spiritual, faith, or religious upbringing. Findings also included the importance of students belonging through finding community and building relationships within spirituality, faith, and religious spaces; communities which supported the participants through those challenging life moments. Participants described significant life events that led them back to a place of resetting or reestablishing their relationship with God. Participants also described how they navigated resources within on- and off-campus spaces and people as a means of accessing spiritual support. Other notable discoveries, such as the importance of pseudonyms and the ethics related to their use, words of wisdom (see Appendix O), and inspirational songs of motivation offered by the participants are also shared in the appendices. The final chapter will discuss my analysis, interpretations, and synthesis of the findings related to the research questions. I will also share conclusions and implications for theory and practice and offer recommendations for current practices and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The conclusions offered in this section derived from the conversations with seven Black women attending R-State University (RSU), who described how they used their spirituality, faith, and religion. The previous chapter discussed the analysis of interview data used to address the main research question: What is the role of faith, spirituality, and religion in supporting the success of Black college women?, and the following sub-questions used in support of the main research question:

1. How do Black college women define spirituality, faith, and religion?
2. How do Black college women describe their spirituality, faith or religious journey?
3. What does spirituality, faith, and religiousness look like for Black college women?
4. How have Black college women navigated campus resources related to their spirituality and religion?

Through the analysis of interview data, Table 2 provides a meaning-themed overview of findings to address the research questions:
This chapter [re]presents my conclusions garnered from the study in addition to the implications for theory, research, and practice as well as recommendations for future research. I intentionally use the word [re]present, because, in being a Black woman, I represent a level of power that also holds tension between power gained from the participants and power wielded as the researcher who humbly [re]presents or presents again their lived experiences (Collins, 2014). This is the beautiful tension of Black Feminist Theory, which guided the data analysis and interpretation to [re]present meaning to you, the reader, and, for me, the researcher. The study’s findings [re]present what Collins (2014) viewed as Black women’s diverse responses to common challenges. Black Feminist Theory “encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional
practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a
collectivity” (p. 9). As the researcher, I am an outsider, but inside of a collective experience—of
both the phenomenon and the research experience. This chapter concludes with my personal
reflections on the scholarly research process in [re]presenting such an intimate phenomenon.

Conclusions

Conclusion One

Participants’ definitions of spirituality, religion, and faith rooted in their personal experiences
and influenced how they grew up—family legacy. Participants brought these prior experiences
and implemented these learned practices as college students.

Participants grew up in church, which influenced how they defined spirituality, faith, and
religion. The influence of a family legacy rooted in church laid the foundation for how the
participants defined and brought meaning to the phenomena and carried out their present college
experiences. As a collective, the participants shared similar definitions of spirituality, faith, and
religion. They seemed more comfortable and confident in assigning meaning to religion using
phrases such as, “a consistent way of doing or following rules” (Catherine); “doing things right
or wrong” (Kym); “guidance or direction” (Ashely); “structured, routine,” “checking a box”
(Lina); “committed” or “system of beliefs” (Lynelle); or, “structured” (Olivia). The participants
meanings of the phenomenon were based on their personal experiences, which were influenced
by their family upbringing. These prior encounters reflect the definitions from the literature. A
familiar definition comes from Nash (2001), who noted that religion is characteristic of
structured and organized practices among groups. Participants also prescribed meaning to these
religious practices, such as church attendance, bible reading, and praying, and was focused on a
higher power such as God which is also consistent with Donahoo and Caffey (2010). Parks’ (2008) notion that religion is “the way in which we are spiritual together” (p.5) is affirmed by Robin’s statement:

When most people think about religion, it's a group of people, which we all should come together in the name of whatever you're doing, whatever belief system is, you're coming…That's where religion is your, whatever that belief is, is a group of people coming together and to worship.

The literature speaks to the difficulty of defining and measuring spirituality and religion, because these terms possess different, and often peculiar, meanings based on the background experiences of the individual (Astin et al., 2011; Conyers, 2015; Dillard, 2008; Donahoo, 2011; Richards, 1985; Shahid, 2014). The literature affirmed that spirituality, faith, and religion have different meanings for different people, even among the Black women in this study. Although prior literature noted the challenge in providing a consistent meaning for spirituality, faith, and religion (Donahoo, 2011; Hill, 2009; Love, n.d.; Mattis, 2000), I conclude that the meanings resonating with each participant were directly influenced and attached to a personal experience where meaning outweighed definition. The participant’s encounter with the phenomenon, whether that was through attending church with a grandparent, singing in the choir, being encouraged by gospel music, or being prayed for by a mom, was the catalyst which framed the participants’ definition. The phenomenon was more than a term to be defined, but an experience to be understood—their lived experiences spoke for the definition.
Conclusion Two

Participants use their spirituality, faith, and religion to help them navigate challenging times related to their race, racism, and microaggressions, family and personal relationships, mental health, and academics.

Spirituality, faith, and religion provided a way for these Black college women to steer their way through challenges, such as those dealing with racism and microaggressions; piloting through relationships; managing the mental health stressors of depression, anxiety, or stress due to the death of a loved one, isolation, or feelings of inferiority; and pursuing their academic studies. Commodore et al. (2018) found relevant themes among Black women, which also included mental health, academic, and social relationship challenges. Black college women, because of their marginalized race and gender, face racism and other oppressive acts such as microaggressions (Commodore et al., 2018; Moses, 1989; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). The women in this study shared the oppression felt under the issues of racism and microaggressions as a consequence of their race and gender. Participants described racially motivated acts, which created a hostile climate for them as found in Commodore et al. (2018), Solórzano et al. (2000), Tatum (1997), and Weedle-West et al. (2013). These racially motivated and prejudicial acts intersected every other challenge faced by the participants and impeded their academic progress, because they are found within the institution itself. In a televised concert recorded at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, *Homecoming: The Live Album* (Carter-Knowles & Dixie, 2019), Beyoncé Carter-Knowles brought forth a powerful 1962 recording of the late Malcolm X. In the song, *Don’t Hurt Yourself (featuring Jack White)* (Carter-Knowles et al., 2016), Malcolm X’s poignant words reverberated, “The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most
neglected person in America is the Black woman.” I offered Beyoncé’s use of Malcolm X because her concert, *HOMECOMING*, extols Black culture, celebrates women’s empowerment, applauds Black leaders and honors the work of HBCUs. Her music, work ethic, and philanthropic service to others is recognized by, and also relevant to, the population of Black college women. As Black women, the participants described living and learning on a campus environment, which at times, could be hostile. However, Andrews (2015) spoke to Black women possessing “an arsenal of emotional and psychological weaponry against the cumulative effects of the gendered racism and racist sexism that many of us experience” (p. 79). Although Andrews referred to the experiences of Black female faculty, I surmised from my study participants that Black college women experience the same double oppression as scholars in the making while navigating their college experience. Likewise, the participants demonstrated their utility of a well-informed arsenal using spirituality, faith, and religion to care for their mental and emotional needs while combating racially insensitive acts. To navigate the psychological stressors of race, racism, and microaggressions, which were also mentally taxing predicaments for the participants, this study found spirituality, faith, and religion to be key elements of a much-needed arsenal.

The participants engaged to their spirituality, faith, and religion when dealing with family and social relationships, which Olivia described as a way to “…just cling to it [faith] when something really bad happened, because I can't make sense of things”—simply when life became overwhelming at times. Porter and Dean (2015) found that Black women in college become enmeshed as they engage with other Black women in relationships, articulate and recognize the impact of their racial and gender identities within the campus climate, manage maternal and familial influences, and seek out support systems. Commodore et al. (2018) further affirmed that
feelings of isolation spur challenges for Black college women. Participants spoke to their personal challenges in dealing with family members. For example, Lynelle talked about a strained relationship with her family, Kym discussed how she missed her family, Olivia and Catherine pointed to dissolved relationships with their boyfriends, Ashely and Lina shared challenges in locating meaningful friendships, and Robin communicated how she walked through the death of her brother. All of these lived experiences speak to the critical life encounters which the participants managed as college students. Yet, in their own way, they all leaned into their spirituality, faith and religion as a way to traverse uncertain times.

Participants also used their spirituality, faith, and religion to navigate mental health issues manifested as depression, anxiety, and stress. Chatters et al. (2018) found their African American study participants, 58% of whom were women, experienced higher levels of depression and were also prone to “experience life circumstances [poverty] and events [life stressors] that represent risk factors for the development of depression” (p. 404). Participants from my study described how they turned to religious practices, such as prayer, meditation, church attendance, relying on biblical scriptures and attending Bible study as ways to help them navigate the mental strain. In addition, all participants found relevant utility in listening to music, particularly the affirming words found in gospel music. For additional discussion and insight on the relevance of music see Appendix G. Spiritual practices which promote positive mental health among African American women are consistent with Eugene (1995). Participants also connected to the spaces within the campus community to establish a sense of belonging and to build relationships for themselves, but also in support of their spirituality, faith, and religion.

In Singing in a Foreign Land: An Exploratory of Gospel Choir Participation Among African American Undergraduates at a Predominately White Institution, Strayhorn (2011) discussed the
relevance of gospel choirs on college campuses and their impact on student belonging and building connections. For example, Catherine’s involvement in RSU’s gospel choir helped her find a “family” within a community of like-minded individuals who enjoyed singing gospel music.

_The Student Learning Imperative_ (ACPA, 1994) affirmed Catherine’s involvement in gospel choir, Lina’s involvement in Pinky Promise, and Olivia, Kym, Ashely, and Robin’s connection to campus counseling services and staff who made themselves available to support them. The participants involvement in, and connection to, activities, support services, and staff speak to campuses that "create conditions that motivate and inspire students to devote time and energy to educationally-purposeful activities, both inside and outside the classroom" (ACPA, 1994, para. 2). Another example of meaningful activities that help to establish a sense of belonging is Ashely’s experience in finding a church where she could attend that also reflected the need to find community, make connections, and establish a sense of belonging—also consistent with Donahoo and Caffey’s (2010) findings that church plays an important role in the lives of African American college students.

Strayhorn (2012) examined the need for belonging among college students. He posited that students were concerned about not only making friendships, but whether they would be missed if no longer around. The women in this study shared that developing, needing, and wanting relationships with friends and connecting to others was important. Strayhorn (2012) addressed the importance of being connected to a group or activity where others recognized the presence and value of the person entering the group. If belonging, as described by Strayhorn (2012), holds fast when a student like Lina, who left the religious group CRU due to racial insensitivity and microaggression, her presence which supposedly added value to the group,
would be missed. However, did someone from CRU take notice or care when this incident took place? The participants’ experiences pointed to this understanding and the need for their presence being cared for and valued (Strayhorn, 2012). College campuses must be concerned about matters of belonging, finding community, and building relationships, which also impact the spirituality, faith, and religious needs of the participants. Therefore, I conclude that the use of religious practices and finding campus spaces helped these Black college women find ways to belong and build relationships through a community of like-minded peers and believers.

Participants also used their spirituality, faith, and religion to manage their academic challenges. Commodore et al. (2018) specifically spoke to academic issues faced by Black college women, which included adjustment issues, meeting expectations, feelings of inferiority, lack of mentoring, and of course, attainment or completion. These academic challenges contributed to the participants’ feelings of frustration and, at times, an uncertain future—all consistent with the literature addressing issues faced by Black college women (Commodore et al., 2018; Constantine et al., 2003; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). None of the participants spoke in great detail about grades, with the exception of Kym and Ashely. Kym mentioned that it was due to her grades that she was denied twice to the physical therapy program—an academically competitive program. Ashely attends RSU as a scholarship student and noted that academics is her main focus:

of course school is my priority, so I do that well…After I graduate from undergrad, I want to go to graduate school and get my MBA with a concentration in finance and accounting… and then I want to start working…I came here for academics so I'm getting what I came here for.
Aside from Kym and Ashely, all participants referred to challenging situations that could impede their academic progress, such as stress or anxiety caused by microaggressions as noted earlier in Chapter IV. For example, Lina’s classroom experience mentioned related to the findings on race, racism, and microaggressions speaks to her having to defend assumptions and combat stereotypes within the academic setting. Although grades were not mentioned, the environment of the classroom where Lina and others must engage in the learning process are still compromised due to issues of race. Isolation is not only related to the lack of friendships as mentioned earlier by Ashely, troubled relationships with partners as discussed by Lynelle, Olivia, and Catherine, or loneliness as discussed by Lina, but also experiencing feeling secluded within the classroom setting. In Using Spirituality to Cope, Resist, and Develop Identity, Watt (2003) posited that “African American college women often turn to spiritual beliefs to cope with everyday struggles that come with living in a socially and politically oppressive system” (p. 29). She further noted that Black women used spirituality as a means of survival or psychological resistance. For the participants, this resistance can be viewed as a way of survival whenever they feel that they are not good enough to occupy whatever space that they are in—in this case the classroom. This resistance can also be connected to when the participants feel the need to diminish their existence, become less than or remove herself from situations to stay sane and feel the need to fit in and belong. I conclude that participants use their spirituality, faith, and religion to help them navigate matters related to their race, family and personal relationships, mental health, and academic challenges.
Conclusion Three

*Although participants struggled spiritually at times, their spirituality, faith, and religion provided a way for them to reposition themselves, reset their focus, or bounce-back through their relationship with God.*

Spirituality, faith, and religion provided a way for these Black college women to realign their focus and “bounce-back” (Robin) during pivotal moments in their life. Participants shared life changing events which caused them to experience times of spiritual struggle (Rockenback et al., 2012) faced during their college years. Because these women experienced their spirituality, faith, or religion prior to entering college, there was an expectation, whether intentional or unspoken, that they would find support for this space of their lives. This expectation is consistent with the findings on spirituality and religion among college students from Astin (1999, 2011), Astin et al. (2004), and Lindholm et al. (2011), who found that students are expecting to find support for their spiritual and religious identities. Collectively, the women from my study referenced their own personal relationship with God. They used language such as, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or some other higher power that they had faith in, called upon, or returned to as a point of re-focusing their lives. Participants engaged in religious practices, such as prayer, meditation, yoga, attending church, belonging to a choir, or other campus religious groups, such as Pinky Promise. Participants also accessed online devotionals, prayer calls, daily text messages, and social media platforms, such as Instagram’s iammiketodd and online faith ministries such as, *Transformation Church*, to find spiritual support, consistency in their religious practices, and encouragement.

Pivotal life events, such as grief and loss or challenges with racist behaviors, relationships, mental health, and academics pointed the participants to experience a reset or
re-alignment. This reset created the space for them to explore and re-assess what works for them. This private and inner re-evaluation is congruent with Rockenbach et al.’s (2012) study, which found that college students struggle with the tension between the internal expectations of who they want to be spiritually and what is actually manifested in their daily lives. I believe that the Black women in this study also wrestled with this same tension of spiritual struggles. Lynelle talked about returning to her prayers and Lina noted the lack of prayer in her life. Olivia spoke of a time wherein she distanced herself from outside distractions. She referred to this space as “a fast, or just a re-alignment of life,” where she “wasn't doing anything outside of being a child of God.” Olivia described it as “an intentional rediscovery of, who am I? Who do I want to be? Where am I right now? What are my goals, aspirations in life?” Like Olivia, other participants such as Lynelle, Lina, and Ashely talked about engaging in religious practices, such as prayer, reading their Bible, having time for devotionals, and going to church. All the participants also called attention to the times when they were inconsistent in their religious practices and mentioning times not feeling as close to God. The participants’ spiritual struggles seemed to arise for reassessment out of difficult times, such as relationships, academics, or other moments when they were just uncertain of what was going to happen in their lives and why. Rockenbach et al. (2012) also noted that these struggles are often experienced underground and untold to others. Yet, participants such as Olivia found space to share her concerns with campus staff, Lynelle engaged her with her friends and took advantage of a prayer group offered through text messaging, Catherine leaned on her gospel choir members, and Lina connected to the members in Pinky Promise. Therefore, I conclude that spirituality, faith, and religion offer participants the necessary space to reassess themselves and reposition them for success.
Conclusion Four

Participants’ journey of spirituality, faith, and religion was active and engaged prior to entering college.

The participants’ spiritual, faith, and religious journey was already operational prior to entering college. Their personal relationship with the phenomenon was built upon a foundation influenced by a family legacy which undergirded their understanding of how and what spirituality, faith, and religion looked like in their lives and influenced how they managed the spiritual tensions as they engaged their faith in college. Essentially, the participants took their prior experiences with the phenomenon and learned how to live out their spirituality, faith, and religion as college students. In her essay, *My Mother’s God is Mine: Finally the Most Powerful Recognition of the Importance of Women to the African American Religion*, Gilkes (2011) noted, “women in African American Christianity have given us litanies and legacies of resistance to oppression and inspiration to survive physically and psychically” (p.364). All of the participants spoke of the Christian centered and religious influences that their family backgrounds had on their prior journey to college. This influence is consistent with Christian biblical teachings, of which all the participants had formative exposure, where a mother or grandmother, like Lois and Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5, King James Version Bible) who seized the godly mandate to ensure their kids were raised “in the training [instruction] and admonition [discipline] of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4, King James Version Bible). In her essay, *My Soul is a Witness: African American Women’s Spirituality*, Wade-Gayles (1995) pointed to the previous generation of mothers, Black women, who realized the necessity of wisdom gained from a relationship with the Spirit endowed her with a supernatural power and the ability to overcome any situation. This ancestral past, much like the study’s participants knew that if they “trained up a child in the way
that he [she] should go, when [she] he is old, he [she] will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:26, King James Version Bible). Johnson (1979) pointed me to see the formative experiences of the participants who gained something so quintessential to their spiritual and faith development. She wrote, “We seek our grandmother’s strengths, our great-grandmother’s strategies—we find our sources. We discover/recover ourselves” (Johnson, 1979, p. 117). The legacy of family members, such as a mom or grandmother, who believed in God and introduced the participants to that same higher power is what began this great work of a spiritual life of faith that the participants presently use.

Any discussion on the influence of spirituality, faith, and religion must also include presence of the Black Church. The Black Church served as an important base in the Black community—a liberating resource of social justice, self-determination, and racial uplift for the Black community (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Karoub, 2019; Masci, 2018; Rostic, 2018; Townes, 1995). Black churches were the center of everything happening in the Black community—educationally, socially, politically, and spiritually. The participants spoke about their involvement in church, where they formed social bonds such as Ashely, learned to become leaders like Catherine in the gospel choir, and even in forming their own political and personal opinions, such as Lynelle’s religious pushback against the religious community who spoke against her mother for being gay, or Lina’s decision to find a church where members looked like her and addressed her spiritual needs as a Black woman.

Being raised in the Black church also spoke to the theme inspired by the participants own phrasing, “I grew up in church.” Both are familiar vernacular among Black Protestant Christian church goers meaning, they were raised in church, attended church, or were involved in church activities on a regular basis, such as the late world-renown artists, Aretha Franklin and Whitney
Houston, or as previously discussed, Lucy Diggs-Slowe, the first Black Dean of Women at Howard University and one of the founders of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, as well as the study participants. I intentionally placed the phrase, “growing up in church” in proverbial “air quotes,” because growing up in church in this present day is like a badge of honor—because it is almost an anomaly. The Pew Research Center’s (2014) Religious Landscape Study found that the number of 18 to 21-year-olds who seldom attend religious services dropped 5% from 2007 to 2014. The study also reported the number of those believing in God with absolute certainty decreased 13% (64% to 51%) from 2007 to 2014. However, in the same study, those among Historically Black Protestant Traditions, the number of who seldom attend religious services was only seven percent. The study also reported the number of those believing in God with absolute certainty increased from 84% in 2014 to 88% in 2017. The numbers among Historically Black Protestant Traditions reflect a moral value that remains centered around the institution of church, historically recognized as an integral part in many Black communities (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Townes, 1995; Wade-Gayles, 1991).

The participants’ beliefs were cultivated in religious church settings under the influence of a family background connected to the Black church. Prior to them entering college, they adapted their religious and faith-based practices for use in their current situation as college students—managing the expectations of their spirituality, faith, religion, and themselves. The spiritual persistence and endurance demonstrated by the participants in this study are reminiscent of Thompson (2012) who remarked, “staring down obstacles has become routine—what some Black women describe as a make it happen attitude” (para. 27). I conclude that spirituality, faith, and religion is what informs and produces this enduring attitude despite the challenges, which can cultivate feelings of fear, uncertainty, distress, and pressure, all faced by these Black college
women. In Appendix O, I placed Words of Wisdom proposed by the participants who represent expert generational voices; offering pearls of knowledge from the essence of what spirituality, faith, and religiousness look like for them and how it was utilized. The participants spoke to future Black college women who would come after this study affirming what Commodore et al. (2018) declared as the passing on of information and thereby, investing in the lives of other Black college women.

Conclusion Five

*Participants hold their spirituality, faith, and religious backgrounds as essential components adding depth to their lives, occupying valuable space within their identity; therefore, must be considered in their holistic development.*

The spirituality, faith, or religious backgrounds are not separate from the Black college women in this study. These phenomena were a part of participants’ existence as well as their intersected experiences with race and gender. These identities are internal to Black women and must not be ignored, but acknowledged, celebrated, cultivated, and supported while in college. Participants struggled when asked to think about their race, gender, and spiritual identities—they were challenged in their responses. Therefore, if the participants are confronted with locating themselves as Black college women within the intersection of spirituality, faith, and religion, that also raises uncertainty on how to best identify those needs, protect their authentic voice and experience in the college setting, and ultimately serve women who live and learn within these spaces. Crenshaw (1991) posited Black women live and move within their various identities. The participants’ experiences with their spiritual, faith, and religious identities also intersect across race, gender, class, education, socioeconomic status, and others. Each one of those areas
presents its own need and challenge whenever assigned to Black women. This conclusion speaks to Black Feminist Theory, which places the needs of Black women at the center of research and includes all of her identities and accompanying experiences (Collins, 2014). Furthermore, Black Feminist Theory gives rise to Astin’s (1999, 2011) and Astin et al.’s (2004, 2011) notion that college students expect to engage the spiritual and religious parts of themselves while in college. I conclude that Black women and all of her identities want, need, and would benefit from the same.

Implications

The implications of a study use the research findings to effect how people think about theory, future research, policy, and practice. To help me think about the implications of my research, I recalled a commencement speech given by former United States Attorney General, Loretta Lynch, who served as the commencement speaker for the Class of 2016 at Spelman College. Spelman College is an HBCU originally established to educate Black women and is located in Atlanta, Georgia. I attended the formal ceremony, which brimmed with inspirational songs, edifying prayers, encouraging words, and numerous thanks and praise to God for helping these Black women navigate their college experience and carrying them into this present season of graduation. In a crowded room filled with supportive faculty, staff, family, friends, and even celebrities, such as Oprah Winfrey, the Attorney General, also a Black woman, spoke to the graduates. She lovingly remarked, “when you [Black women] graduate from college, we [your family] all graduate. We want to know are you going to church?” (L. Lynch, personal communication, May 15, 2016). Like many others in the audience, I was part of an extended family who came to applaud the hard work and effort of my student. Lynch’s words resonated
within me, because, as a researcher and higher education practitioner, I too, held the same questions: Where are you going to church? How are you getting your spiritual, faith, and religious needs met? Who are you connected to during this time? Lynch’s inquiry represented the challenge this study brings to those communities who engage Black women. This study offered scholarly support to raise awareness of the practical implications of what it means for Black women who access and use their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursue their college education.

The research findings along with other scholarship cited in this study adds to the current literature around spirituality, faith, and religion within higher education. The lived experiences of these seven Black college women add another perspective to the phenomenon. The participants’ lived experiences give power and energizing voice, shifting the narrative and conversation in a new direction. Therefore, in considering how the participants access, use, and call upon their spirituality, faith, and religion while in college, I offer the following implications for theory, research, and practice.

Implications for Theory

Theories about how college students develop is a mainstay for graduate programs related to student affairs, educational leadership, and higher education. Ladson-Billings (2012) asserted that the traditional cannon from where we acquire truth and knowledge also informs conventional theory and therefore must be challenged. This research expands the perspective of how spirituality, faith, and religion manifested themselves through the lived experiences of these Black college women. The perspective of Black women, their experiences, their knowledge, and their truth is what shaped and informed this study—[re]presenting an endarkened epistemology
to help us to [re]think about the phenomenon through the eyes of the Black women represented in this study and beyond what is offered by Fowler (1981) and Parks (1986, 2000).

Current theories about how students move through the college process such as grit (Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler, 2013; McGee & Stovall, 2015), belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), student involvement (Astin, 1999), and retention (Tinto, 1975) could further speak to the impact of spirituality, faith, and religion as a factor in how students take advantage of various tools for their success. Social identity theories such as those connected to race and ethnicity (Cross, 1971, 1978; Helms, 1990) and sexual orientation and identity (Cass, 1979) position faculty, staff, and researchers to form policy and establish best practices in working with college students. However, racial identity theories also intersect with sexual identities and also transverse the arena of spirituality, faith, and religion. For the participants, spirituality, faith, and religion hold an inner position, discovered to be steady as they engaged their other identities. A further discussion of these intersecting identities can also be found in Square (2015) and Stewart (2002, 2009, 2010) and Stewart and Lozano (2009). In addition, seminal theoretical works on faith development by Fowler (1981) and Parks (2008) must consider for how Black women develop their faith—accounting for a tumultuous and brutal history, which caused them to rely on their spirituality and faith as a means of mental, emotional, and physical survival. Using Black Feminist Theory as a guide, this study deconstructed the concepts of the cannon—challenging what is considered normal and valued. During a panel discussion hosted by the 2016 National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, Dr. Hudson remarked that “faith is not done alone, but in community and through relationships” (T. Hudson, personal communication, July 31, 2016)—of which the participants’ narratives also described. For a critical analysis of Fowler and Parks in relation to the development of faith for Black students—see Donahoo
(2011), Evans et al. (2010), Hill (2009), and Hughes and Howard-Hamilton (2003). Prior scholarship should never stand alone. There is always room for improvement, more space to include various voices—this dissertation provided more experiences to consider through the voices of seven Black women.

Commodore et al (2018) further challenged me in my research to create new ways to theorize and study Black college women, while Ladson-Billings (2012) advocated for culturally relevant pedagogy that places the lived experiences of Black people at the helm. Ladson-Billings noted that very little is known about the “faith commitments” of Black students (p. 118)—meaning it is an under-researched area of college student development, but one that has relevancy to their lives (Constantine et al., 2006; Dennis, Hicks, Banerjee, & Dennis, 2005; Donahoo, 2011; Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Gehrke, 2013; Herndon, 2010; Hill, 2009; Hughes 1987; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Stewart, 2002, 2009, 2010; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Watt, 2003). Yet, this study placed the lived spiritual, faith, and religious experiences of Black college women at the center of the research by finding value in her voice which encompassed their racialized and gender experiences with the phenomena. The lived experiences of the Black college women study participants served as the unit or focus of study I used to understand spirituality, faith, and religion. However, Collins (2014) cautioned me to remember that Black women have “multifaceted legacies of struggle” depending on the time and place which intersecting identity will be oppressed, exploited, or misunderstood (p. 26). Therefore, the “faith commitments,” as mentioned by Ladson-Billings (2012, p. 118), along with the phenomenon for Black college women must continue to be explored. At the end of the second interview, I asked Catherine what she felt that other Black women needed to know about this study and being a woman, being Black, and their spirituality? With pride, she articulated the following:
We are one of the most, I feel like people study us. We're like the most studied creatures per se. They love the way we walk. They love the way our hair looks. They idolize us in a way… as a Black woman, I feel like we should just be proud of being a Black woman. We come with so much, we are automatically just creative.

Catherine’s comments made my heart implode from the inside out—another “why” behind this research project. For me, this research began with a personal quest for truth and became inflamed with a shared, yet authentic, experience of the political. Catherine’s comments speak to the external traits of Black women, which are envied and copied, but felt under a historical purview of physical bodies that are loved, yet still abused with words and deeds. Therefore, the implications for theory must first reconsider how the research community views Black women, inclusive of all her identities which having have their own set of needs but also include spirituality, faith, and religion. Then theory can evolve in finding new ways to meet and attend to the spirituality, faith, and religious needs of Black college women. Theories that address the spiritual, faith, or religious identities and development of Black college women must be genuinely attentive to the individual Black college woman, as well as the collective, because as Winkle-Wagner (2015) noted, Black women are not all the same. Yet, a Black Feminist perspective asserts that they share a socially constructed racial background with a plethora of historical experiences, intersecting both the good and the bad—but always yielding a collective wisdom (Collins, 2014). Black women no longer subsist and serve on plantation fields; we live, move, and learn on college campuses through this country. The NCES data quantifies the existence of Black women moving throughout higher education. Yet, there is still room to improve and cultivate how Black women are guided and how they make progress on college campuses using spirituality, faith, and religion.
McEwen et al. (1990) noted that traditional theories do not consider the historical perspectives of Black people. Ladson-Billings (2012) further argued that race must be unpacked as a part of any culturally relevant practices. This dissertation offered a historical framework as its background with supportive literature inviting the reader to consider a perspective, which feeds the spirituality, faith, and religious experiences of Black women and is embedded in a turbulent past that must be considered. Therefore, any attempt to theorize spirituality, faith, or religion for Black students—or in the case of this study, Black college women, must honor to what Camille A. Brown, choreographer of Metropolitan Opera’s presentation of *Porgy and Bess*, called, “blood memory” (C. Brown, personal communication, February 1, 2020). Brown asserted that these “blood memories” are the recollections of those African slaves who came to this country and risked their lives for our present existence and those blood memories “require a gesture.” This dissertation is my evocation, my active gesture, my response to honor the blood memory of my ancestors who sat on the moaning benches of their segregated Negro churches grieving the loss of their loved ones and laying their burdens at the feet of Jesus, an altar of hope—the same hope which carried today’s participants.

Implications for Research

How and what the research community thinks about how Black college women who use their spirituality, faith, and religion has implications for theory. In addition, there are implications for research which take what the study has introduced about the lived experiences of the seven Black women in this study to impact where future research should focus. I will discuss the pertinent implications for research related to the spirituality, faith, and religion for the study participants. Using prior scholarship to inform me of the definitions of spirituality, faith, and
religion as well as their conflicting meanings (Astin et al., 2011; Fowler, 1981; Love, n.d.; Mattis, 2000, 2002; Nash, 1999, 2001; Parks, 1986, 2000; Walker & Dixon, 2002), I originally planned to find standardized definitions for spirituality, faith, and religion. However, I did find conflict, but it was of my volition. Van Manen (2002) prompted me that writing through phenomenology means that there is no need to isolate the phenomena’s connotations, because meaning is indeed rooted in the participants’ individual experiences. He asserted that any attempt to define an experience limits the possibilities of that encounter—where its meaning is immediately lost. This methodology is consistent with Dillard (2008), but from an endarkened feminist epistemology which centers its understanding on how Black women experience the world—in this case, the Black college women who experienced spirituality, faith, and religion. These participants provided similar definitions rooted in experiences that were undergirded by the influence of family. The legacy of faith in a family influenced how the participants perceived spirituality, faith, and religion for them. With that said, I was overwhelmed by the coding process due to the varied phrases, accompanying language use, and meaning connected to spirituality, faith, and religion. Taken together with Dillard’s (2008) assessment of language, wherein a research project must “resist and transform these social arrangements” (pp. 280-281). Therefore, within this study, Black women redefined and reconstructed these terms—“a talking back [and taking back or reclaiming] to the oppressive and alienation conditions of Western conceptions of knowledge and the marginalization of indigenous, feminist ways of knowing and being” (Dillard, 2008, pp. 280-281). Indeed this research offered a foundation to consider this phenomenon as used among Black college women; however, more research needs to be cultivated so that it can evolve, grow, and meet the needs of these women and other college students.
Future research must recognize the similarities and the nuanced dichotomies among Black women. Regardless of a shared history, there remains diversity in those early experiences as well as those which presently exist among Black college women. I was challenged to find and use intentional language that did not depict Black women as a monolithic group. Although Black women share similar experiences because of the history related to being Black in America, Black women are not the same. Consistent with Collins (2014), I found beauty, humility, and power in a shared experience amid a violent history that called Black women to survive, resist, and empower themselves beyond oppression. Another area for future research would seek to ensure diverse representation of spiritual, faith, and religious backgrounds and beliefs within the sample. A larger sample size with sampling criteria could be used to reflect diversity of experiences among the participants (Jones et al., 2006). Next, conducting interviews at different time points within the academic year or a longitudinal study that follows students from undergraduate to post-graduate experiences could provide different perspectives on how students experienced these phenomena throughout their lives. Future research could also focus on the spirituality, faith, or religious experiences within various undergraduate and graduate student populations, such as:

- Black LGBTQ+ students
- Diversity of Black students from spiritual, faith, or religious minorities, such as Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Universalist, Secular, Humanist, or Atheist

In addition, the use of other qualitative inquiry methods would provide a more in-depth analysis of spirituality, faith, or religion. Participants described religious groups on-campus, such as the gospel choir, CRU, and Pinky Promise, as well involvement in off-campus churches.
An ethnographic study would not only provide an in-depth exploration of groups which support spirituality, faith, and religion, but also look at the meaning, behaviors, shared values, language, and patterns of the group’s interactions (Creswell, 2014). Another method of inquiry used for future research could be a narrative study highlighting one to two of the current participants who would account their experiences with the phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1995). Each study participant offered their own experience of the phenomenon—in particular, a prior journey that would be worth a more in-depth investigation. A participant’s narrative experiences would then be reported in chronological order based on their prior experience with the phenomenon to their present-day college journey. For example, a narrative or case study could focus on the experiences of Black women attending an HBCU compared to those women attending a PWI. In keeping with support of a Black Feminist perspective that affirms a culturally relevant pedagogy, these research comparisons would respond to multi-faceted and intersecting identities of race, gender, socioeconomic status, education, and first-generation status, just to name a few. In doing so, the research also embraces a transformative nature to provide spaces for those voices to be heard and therefore affect change.

Other qualitative research questions could ask the following: How do Black college women use the phenomenon to develop equanimity, which is the ability to see the silver lining in a difficulty situation? The next question could include an expanded view of the maternal support, such as How do Black college women use their connection to their grandmother or mother as spiritual support? Another question could extend the conversation on the use of digital faith expressions, such as How do Black college women use social media platforms to support their spiritual growth? These research questions indicate the breadth and depth of this topic and its nuanced influences around the spiritual, faith, and religious lives of Black college women.
Quantitative Research

A quantitative research design would allow the constructs of spirituality, religion, and faith to be studied separately. In the present study, participants were challenged in providing definitions with a clear context of their use and meaning, because the terms overlapped in their meaning and use. The language used to describe the terms referenced all three, regardless of which term or terms resonated the most for them. A quantitative study would allow participants to define the terms separately in their own language using an open-ended response format. Additional survey questions could be designed with appropriate language to guide the respondent’s answers.

A quantitative study with a larger and more diverse sample size would allow for generalizability to a population of Black college women on a single campus or multiple sites. Empirical data could be ascertained to account for possible differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, age, class rank, grade point average, religious affiliation, secular or religious identities, or type of institution, such as secular or faith-based using the constructs of spirituality, faith, and religion. Therefore, future research using a quantitative design could address isolated differences between spirituality, faith, and religion. In addition, I am particularly interested in Astin et al.’s (2011) longitudinal research, which looked at spirituality and religion among college students. As discussed earlier, the HERI research was restrictive in its discussion due to having limited responses from Black students—only eight percent. Using the College Students’ Beliefs and Values Survey, Astin et al. (2011) measured undergraduate college students’ spirituality and religiousness. They developed 12 different measures such as spirituality, spiritual quest, equanimity, religious commitment, religious engagement, charitable involvement, and ecumenical worldview. Using the same instrument, a quantitative study could propose the
following research questions: (a) Do Black women who attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) differ from Black women who attend a predominately White institution (PWI) in their spirituality and religiousness; and (b) Are there differences in the sub-scale measures of spirituality and religiousness for Black college women as compared to Astin et al.’s (2011) original sample population of college student respondents. In addition, a quantitative study with a critical perspective using the same instrumentation would provide additional information on how Black women apply these constructs within their college journey and at their respective institutions. Also, a critical perspective would offer a more nuanced experience by pointing to the needs of Black women using empirical data to give voice to their unique experiences and promote change.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice use the knowledge gained from the research study which informs the theory used to promote policy, institute change, and ultimately impact how the spirituality, faith, and religious needs of Black college are met. This study explored how spirituality, faith, and religion are utilized among Black college women and provides student affairs practitioners in higher education with the space to dialogue and even debate around the types of support needed and offered to the Black women on their campuses. In addition, I offer my implications for practice for those in higher education and those in the religious and faith communities, both of whom engage and prepare Black women for their college experience.

Higher Education

Spirituality, faith, and religion as identities for Black college women, and as a worldview, exist on the mind of Black college women and impact standards of practice. Therefore, higher
education practitioners, such as faculty, staff, and administrators must address these needs as part of the holistic development of Black college women. For example, this study noted the lack of critical space to address these spiritual needs of students outside of a few staff members. What happens when those staff members who took the time to attend to those needs leave RSU? At the printing of this dissertation, one staff member moved to another department and another left the university. Who takes their place for these women and for other students who maybe seeking spiritual support? Faculty and staff may be afraid to venture into these matters because of an internal conflict over their own personal beliefs (Astin, 1999). Student affairs personnel may have thoughts of trepidation in thinking about the separation of church and state as they engage students (Love & Talbot, 1999). I am not advocating proselytizing a preferred faith or religious affiliation, but acknowledging that, similar to students, as practitioners we hold or withhold our spirituality, faith, and religion in areas of our lives. The women in this study represented that they have the ability to recognize internally when their spirituality, faith, or religion presented itself, whether in a college classroom, residence hall, relationship, or leadership role. Therefore, they should have the ability to share when it matters to them and find supportive dialogue to engage that tension whenever it arises.

Astin et al. (2011) affirmed that college students are looking to develop this side of who they are—their spirituality. Yet when they have spiritual struggles, as noted by Rockenbach et al. (2012), who is there to provide guidance, support, or even challenge those notions when the tools of spirituality, faith, and religion become a hindrance to academic progress? Commodore et al. (2018) explained that sometimes in college, Black women will utilize a well-intended tool meant to cultivate success, but this same tool can also work against student progress causing undue stress and pressure and eventually becomes a “burden” (p. 68). Catherine and Lina both
held executive leadership positions in their respective religious organizations, gospel choir and Pinky Promise. Catherine talked about the pressure of leading the group and lack of other people to step into those positions:

I managed to be on their e-board [Gospel choir] for three years straight. Two of those years I served as the president and that was crazy… But I've grown a lot from that. And it was a choir on campus…And so just praying on guidance or how to guide people, how to extend grace… because even if they're choosing to be ignorant, it's just a matter of knowing how to handle that, knowing how to speak about it, how to address it… but when you talk about gospel choir you're like, “okay He [God] is literally in this, so I'm really going to need your help to guide your people, because they a little annoying.”

Commodore et al. (2018) discussed external assets, which are the various support systems that Black women secure for themselves to ensure their college success. The authors suggested that these self-identified priorities hold value and are reflected in the commitments that Black women make as college students. This commitment is seen in the executive leadership roles held by Catherine and Lina. Both women proudly spoke about holding executive board positions within their groups for an extended period of time. In fact, Catherine’s commented earlier on the lack of term limits within the group and expressed her frustration in dealing with members. Not only did Lina serve as President for Pinky Promise, she is responsible for conducting group presentations, but she must also be a role model for other women in the group:

I made it clear to them that I did not want to be the president of Pinky Promise just because it was my senior year and I did it on such a heavy load. I just wanted to graduate, that was pretty much it. I still wanted to be hands-on, but I didn't want to be the president. But something that was always brought up in my time at Pinky Promise, was
that because we were in a religious or spiritual organization, we have to be careful about the way that we presented ourselves to the rest of the girls on-campus.

Both women are committed and connected to their external assets of Pinky Promise and the gospel choir. These organizations fulfill their spiritual needs and are connected to a religious practice that is already familiar to them. Their decision to remain involved and maintain leadership roles within these groups responds to the powerful influences of these external assets, which also created their own set of challenges. Self-identified priorities such as holding campus leadership roles can work for or against the students’ progress (Commodore et al., 2018).

Spirituality, faith, and religion cuts across the influence of student’s values and commitments. The participants’ experiences give substance to what Commodore et al. (2018) noted, “some values and commitments can destabilize, disorient, and distract the student from her path. The student must focus intently on identifying and cultivating values and commitments that contribute to success” (p. 76). Their participation in these organizations is a way for them to be sustained spiritually, but their leadership presents an exhaustive tension. McGee and Stovall (2015) presented the conflict between students exhibiting grit and resilience where students are involved, attending classes, and successfully passing their course, yet this persistence can be overwhelming. I am not besmirching Catherine or Lina’s leadership roles; however, any level of college student involvement must have balance. Nor am I implying that spiritual, faith, or religious matters are not important; that would derail the intent of this study. I am, however, a proponent of being a practitioner that advocates for students finding balance, especially when it comes to being involved on-campus—even in sensitive areas such as the studied phenomenon.

The implications for the higher education practitioner, who serves as the advisor or mentor for
Black college women, must understand that even those commitments which add personal value to their students’ lives such as, spirituality, faith, and religion, must also have balance.

Where does the mentorship and guidance come from when these Black women need guidance on how to manage their expectations from a valuable space that provides spiritual, faith or religious support and encouragement? Where do Black college women go when they have spiritual struggles, to whom do they go to for support? If there is a lack of student organizations or local churches where students can find a sense of belonging, then where do they receive support and encouragement for their spirituality, faith, or religion? I recommend that campuses establish spaces on campus where Black college women can find support for their spiritual, faith, and religious identities. In addition, staff must be ready to have what may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable conversations with students without fear of proselytizing or giving preference to a particular religious outlook or teaching, but in support of Black women and their holistic development which includes spirituality, faith, and religion.

*Spiritual and Religious Communities*

What are religious organizations and institutions doing to prepare Black women to engage their spirituality, faith, and religion while in college? What conversations must churches have to provide the kind of experiences for aspiring Black college going women in their congregations? Are church youth groups intentional about preparing Black women for managing the various religions they will encounter on a college campus? What about the need to connect with local churches in college towns that can provide watch care and support for students? I believe there is an understanding that students will leave the safety and security of their family and a home church to venture out and attempt this faith walk without the comfort and support of
what they are accustomed. Yet, when students do not have access to the familiar, they struggle to find spaces where they belong and matter—thus their spirituality suffers. This is not to detract from students engaging in new ways of thinking and learning as they adjust to the college environment where they experience discomfort and cognitive dissonance (Tinto, 2012). However, Strayhorn (2015) argued that “mattering to others seemed to build lasting connections that made belonging possible in college” (p. 42). The spiritual and faith communities can innovatively collaborate with colleges and universities within their curricular and co-curricular spaces where students can connect to their spirituality, faith, and religion. During my doctoral coursework, I presented at an RSU student leadership conference on how the influence of spiritual, secular, and faith identities impact and influence college student leadership. After my presentation, a Black woman, also a student, approached me and stated, “I just wait until I get home to go to church because there is nothing up here like at home” (RSU Student, personal communication, February 17, 2018). The commentary of the study participants and this simple encounter with that student pointed to a need where churches or other faith-based institutions must be intentional in preparing Black college women to engage their spirituality, faith, and religion outside of their normal manner of practice. In addition, students must be prepared to encounter various forms of religious pluralism. Eboo Patel (2015), director of Interfaith Youth Core, noted higher education’s lack of attention to religious diversity and getting college students to engage interfaith is a growing necessity. He admonished higher education leaders to develop programming and institute practices to help students develop tolerance, awareness of interfaith relationships, respect for religious freedom, and appreciate pluralism. A student’s spiritual growth impacts their college experience, affecting academics, leadership skills, and building awareness and appreciation for other cultures and racial groups.
This research calls upon the spiritual, faith, and religious centers, where all of the participants spent time in the formative years, to assist their growing adults to live, worship, and think outside of their brick and mortar institutions. At the writing of this study, the world is experiencing a global pandemic due to the COVID-19 virus. The participants, as well as the RSU student leader mentioned above, no longer have physical contact to their campus communities where those religious organizations may have offered them support. At the same time, churches, mosques, synagogues, and all other physical places of worship are closed due to the impact of social distancing. Religious and faith leaders have been forced to quickly find non-traditional methods to help congregants stay connected to their religious practices and spirituality. What a catalyst to spark conversation to transform the way leaders from all religious or secular backgrounds lean in and understand that spirituality, faith, and religion does not happen in a physical vacuum. I challenge our religious and faith leaders to begin the conversation on how to help students have the freedom to find community and build relationships around their personal belief systems so they may obtain the spiritual help and support they expect and need.

I have already acknowledged the data on millennials reported in the Religious Landscape Study (Pew Research Center, 2014). In particular, Black millennials do not worship or serve God in the same way as previous generations. However, churches also must understand the generational impact and implications that traditional-age college students in 2020, more commonly known as, Generation Z or Gen Z bring to matters of spirituality, faith, and religion. According to their website, Barna Group (2020) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization that conducts research to understand cultural trend related to values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. In a recent article, Do Americans Replace Traditional Church With Digital efaith...
Expressions? Barna Group (2020) noted a generational shift in the access and use of technology and other digital platforms among Generation Z, or those born between 1999 to 2015. Participants like Lina, Lynelle, and Olivia pointed to their own use of technology and social media outlets for spiritual teachings, growth, and encouragement. These digital platforms have the potential to reconnect and engage the spirituality and faith of this generation. Churches and their larger governing denominational bodies risk losing this population and face challenges in preparing new leaders for the next generation. Churches must embrace this generation to provide leadership, support, and training. I pose the question: What are our churches doing to capture and engage this generation of Black college-going women? Study participants discussed the increased presence of faith ministries used in an online format which provided community, guidance, and teaching as an outlet for spiritual support. Olivia is a regular online follower of Pastor Michael Todd from Transformation Church out of Tulsa, Oklahoma, who also has over one million followers on Instagram and YouTube. Lynelle also talked about connecting to a weekly telephone prayer call with Minister Mikaih Keener from Detroit, Michigan. These faith related ministries have recognized that there is a need to reach people outside of the traditional Sunday Church service that relies solely connecting within a physical building. How are institutions of organized religion meeting this need for college students? Who is connecting to our Black college women and the overall college population of students and how? This study presented a remnant of Black college women and their lived experiences. These women needed and found support that recognized their different values, experiences, and expectations of what it means to be spiritual, a person of faith, or religious—they were looking for something that can impact their lives. Olivia’s comments clearly illustrated the impact Pastor Michael Todd’s Transformation Church ministry has made in her life:
I like how practical he is. So he'll talk about something, but then always relate it back to life so you understand it…But what he does is, he really shows you those real-world examples... It helps me to make sense of things.

Olivia’s comments align with Stephens and Watkins’s (2009) claim in *From Jay-Z to Jesus: Reaching & Teaching Young Adults in the Black Church* that young adults are caught in an intense period of transition where they are second guessing themselves, their God, and their faith. “They need a place to ask questions express doubts and fears and deal with the wonderment as they close the first quarter of their lives” (Stephens & Watkins, 2009, p. 2).

Parks (2008) also discussed these transitional years where students are asking questions, seeking clarity and guidance for the numerous life decisions to be made which can impact the journey of college adults. This study points to the challenges faced by the participants, but also has relevance for all college-going students. Students who grow up in church or have some level spiritual, faith, or religious engagement prior to college arrive on campus and find no support for their identities or practices. Study participants described times when they got so far away from God's word and his voice that they began walk in their own strength and relied on their own mind to guide them. During their time of reset when instead of listening to and depending on themselves, they returned to what they knew to be familiar and authentic—their spirituality, faith, and religion. Whether it was relying on the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit, prayers, daily affirmations, or listening to gospel music, these Black college women learned that time was not to be wasted in wandering through an uncalled for and unwanted wilderness experience. Indeed, it was their spirituality, faith, and religion that made a way out of no way.

Higher education is the ideal place to engage the conversation of spirituality, faith, and religion. In a 2003 *About Campus* interview, Alexander Astin noted, “we don’t understand
ourselves—our inner lives and as result we end up with all kinds of problems dealing with each other” (Astin & Schroeder, 2003, p.14). Rogers (2003) argued that faculty must relinquish their control and become vulnerable to “leading from the heart” (p. 23). I believe that these are leaders who understand the importance of being in touch with self, being vulnerable, and not being fearful to reveal that it is in these tough places that the process of the journey is worth the end whatever it may be. The research from Astin (2011, 2016) and other scholars from the Higher Education Research Institute spoke to the necessity of higher education providing opportunities to help students connect with their spirituality. There is also supporting scholarship that addresses the spiritual needs of Black women. For example, Constantine et al. (2003) shared a case study where a Black woman, Brenda, receiving therapy was experiencing frustration and feelings of isolation. She was ostracized by her peers due to her sexual identity and not meeting the expectation of others, including her parents. The study recommendations did not specifically mention spirituality or religious support areas as a campus resource. In the article, however, Brenda was referred to a local church that was inclusive and affirming to her sexual identity. A critical point in the study was that the counselor had knowledge of and the relationships needed to make a referral which connected Brenda to a resource that could address her spiritual needs. Although none of the participants disclosed their sexual identity, Lynelle raised this issue in relation to her mom’s sexual orientation and she described her conflicted feelings about God and religion. What space on campus is available to help Lynelle walk through this challenging space? Donahoo (2011) focused on the supportive value that spirituality and religion brings to the lives of Black women. She asserted that Black women rely on the phenomena which also influences how they experienced college. The participants arrived to RSU with their sense of spirituality, faith, and religion already in motion. They expressed
themselves, whether through organized religious practices such as prayer, attending church, meeting for Bible study or listening to gospel music. Are higher education leaders ready to receive students regardless of where they may fall on the spectrum of spiritual or religious identities? Higher education practitioners must be prepared to provide students with the necessary resources to attend to their spiritual and religious needs (Love & Talbot, 1999; Rogers & Dantley, 2001).

The participants lived experiences allowed me to see how students access and use their spirituality, faith, and religion. This awareness is just as important as understanding their racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender, physical limitations, cognitive or emotional ability, or sexual orientation. Each of these spaces possesses its own identity and norms as well as the treatment received within the intersections. Building community and finding supportive relationships, which intersect at all points, can broaden how campuses create and provide services to meet a sundry of needs in a more diverse student population.

Implications for Higher Education

Who do students meet in the residence halls, classroom, library, financial aid, in major selection, and during career advising? As faculty and staff, do we place our fears and insecurities surrounding spirituality, faith, and religion on our students. As practitioners, are we providing direction under the guise of living out our un-fulfilled dreams and aspirations on students? We are unable to give, teach, lead, advise, mentor, coach, facilitate, or engage students from a place of emptiness. We must operate in these roles from a full cup with a full sense of who we are as individuals. We must do the hard work first—taking inventory, doing our own inner inquiry (Astin & Schroeder, 2003). Many of us have settled into jobs, roles, and positions,
where we never intended to stay as long as we have. Yet, semester after semester, we remain unable to offer anything fresh or new to our students because we see nothing new within ourselves. Although one’s spiritual life can be seen as a personal matter, Palmer (1998) called for an inward journey where we deal with our deepest fears and even our faults. It is the only way to present and represent our most authentic and committed selves to the university community (Rogers & Dantley, 2001).

As college educators and practitioners, we spend anywhere between 4 to 6 years with undergraduate students and more if they extend their studies with graduate work. However, if positions, units, and departments work within the same limited thinking and trepidation about the separation of church and state, what do we then offer to our students who hold value to their spirituality, faith, and religion? We inadvertently bring our whole selves into the spaces of our [higher education] organizations, which includes the classroom, advising office, judicial hearings, or the executive boardroom (Bolman & Deal, 1995; Love & Talbot, 1999; Rogers & Dantley 2001). As higher education professionals, “we are searching for something more meaningful in our lives – new relationships, connected communities, meaningful work” (Rogers & Dantley, 2001, p. 589). If spirituality, faith, and religion make sense for these seven Black college women, there could also be space for the higher education practitioner to consider its usefulness in how we serve Black college women and all of our students. “Higher education has shied away from using the vernacular of spirituality” (Rogers & Dantley, 2001, p. 590). Yet, our daily interactions with students calls for a new level of awareness, intelligence, and skill. Students are seeking the answers to big questions in their lives – this is the place of the spiritual (Parks, 1986, 2006; Rogers & Dantley, 2001). I am not saying that staff need to believe in a certain higher being, whether that is God, Buddah, or Allah. I argue for staff who understand the
students entering their offices, classrooms, and other spaces of influence also have a spiritual, faith, and religious identity that needs engagement. As faculty or staff, we must possess the wherewithal to connect with students in their spiritual, faith, or religious identities. Moreover, as collegiate practitioners, we must be ready to engage, listen, understand, and respect this integral part of a student’s identity. As higher education professionals, we are not alone in this quest. In the same manner that we collaborate with various offices to assess student needs, implement programs, obtain grants, formulate policies, and operate daily, we must also collaborate and be prepared to receive our students who seek to have their spiritual needs met. We are not called to be all things to all people, but to be open sans condescending judgment and ready with the necessary resources to move students forward. Engaging in dialogue “is not necessarily about reaching consensus, rather it is about one can learn from difference and from seeing truth the eyes of those whose worldview is in contrast to one's own” (Rogers & Dantley, 2001, p. 599).

Robert Ellis, writer and pastor of Living Faith Church, suggested that as humans, “we are tri-part beings: we are spirit, have a soul and live in a body” that is connected to our spirit. Our spirit transcends who we are in our physical reality. However, our soul consists of our mind, will, and emotions” (R. Ellis, personal communication, August 2015). Our soul is “our core, our emotional and moral center – the seat of our spirituality” – easily influenced and malleable (Rogers & Dantley, 2001, p. 591). Our human soul is connected to our spirituality where we are “connected with one’s complete self, others, the entire universe, and a higher power” (Mitroff & Denton, 1999 as cited by Rogers & Dantley, 2001, p. 591). These are the spaces of inner reconciliation that must be addressed before engaging students.

Spirituality is “an on-going process of meaning-making about one’s purposes in life and the belief that one should give one’s mind and heart to something greater than oneself” (Rogers
& Dantley, 2001, p. 591). The participants discourse supported that spirituality, faith, and religion is functioning and has its place in the academy. College students are traipsing along through the same journey as many adults (Parks, 2008), but with their own set of needs. The participants in this study used their prior knowledge and experience about spirituality, faith, and religion while struggling to make sense of it all in their respective spaces and time. Similar to the discussion in Parks (1998, 2000), the participants queried on the big and tough regarding their existence, vocation, purpose in life, relationships, and even the value of a college education. These inner contemplations operate on a spiritual dimension which is what Rogers and Dantley (2001) referred to as the “deep layer of the self where they [college students] are in touch with questions or meaning, value, vision, wholeness, and connection” (p. 591). Even if college students do not readily disclose, the participants shared how they navigated through life altering events on a daily basis. Whether it was the racist behavior in a classroom or residence hall, lack of faculty role models, roommate conflicts, death of a family member, or suffering from stress due to academic progress or anxiety about relationships, the participants called upon what they knew could offer them a sense of peace and strength to endure.

In keeping to Ethic of Profession and the Ethic of Care, as student affairs professionals, we are bound and obligated to carry out the professional competencies and adhere to the core values that speak to the holistic development of all students meaning that we are aware of students identities and that their needs are addressed (ACE, 1937/1944; ACPA, 1994; Shapiro & Gross, 2013). This also means spirituality, faith, and religion attends to the whole well-being of the individual, which must be the first priority. Therefore, campuses must take note of how they engage Black college women. This research invites the practitioner, faculty, administrator, and those in the faith communities to find out the spiritual, religious or faith backgrounds of students
and begin the conversation. Stewart (2002) noted that “students were hungry for a space to discuss spirituality and the meaning of having a center of value and meaning that is transcendent” (p.12). Through their narratives, the Black women in this study had that discussion with me and illustrated that spirituality, faith, and religion are useful, they matter, and why.

Summary

In summary, who is asking these questions about the spirituality, faith and religion of Black college women? Is there utility for matters of the spirit and faith in the curriculum? What about the classroom where aspiring higher education practitioners and future researchers are trained for master’s and doctoral programs? Is a student’s religion or faith deemed valuable in classroom discussions or on the field of intercollegiate athletics? What about spaces where students share struggle their struggles such as, academic advising, counseling centers, or faculty one-on-one meetings? Are faculty sensitive to these matters in the classroom or when advising students? Are admissions, orientation, and residence life staff, who are some of the first level encounters with the university, aware of the various spiritual and religious outlets on- or off-campus where they can direct students? Who is responsible for gathering this information? Are student programming staff and student leaders prepared to address these questions for the students with whom they provide engagement? When students have spiritual struggles as they walk through their college experience, who is available, prepared, and ready to engage? Why does this topic matter in student affairs areas, such as freshman orientation, career services, meal service? Why should we care if there is support for clubs and organizations?
The seven Black women who participated in this study affirmed why this research matters. Because the aforementioned questions still need answers, this research furthers the conversation of the valuable presence of spirituality, faith, and religion in the lives of all college students, but especially to those institutions who engage and work with Black college women. Space must be given to consider and dialogue about the use and impact of spirituality, faith, and religion as Black women navigate their college experience and towards developing new theories and practices to meet those needs.

Researcher Reflections

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, For this is [woman’s] all” (Ecclesiastes 12:13, New King James Version Bible).

I surmised that any good researcher understands that there is always more that can be learned from research—more questions to be posed and presented for answers. The Ecclesiastes scripture assumes there is a conclusion—an end, but even in a life of faith, there remains a level to be revealed among the answers received, which are still limited. The women in this study reverenced God—a power higher than themselves, but more importantly they understood that their spirituality, faith, and religion offered value and when they engaged it, change happened for them. My conclusion of the whole matter is that there is no single conclusion. The spirituality, faith, and religion of Black college women will continue to evolve and manifest itself in different ways. The family legacy laid the foundation in which the participants were raised and exposed them to a life connected to faith. A spiritual connection filled with religious doctrine and practices that they could draw upon in times of need. As Black college women, the participants noted challenges, such as mental health, family, and social relationships; managing the demands
of academic coursework; living and learning in a predominately White space; enduring daily microaggressions and racist acts; and, navigating their race and gender as Black and a woman were more than enough to send one into a posture of prayer and reflection. Yet, my own experience with spirituality, faith, and religion as a college student afforded me to witness the beauty of an unmerited favor gained from a yielded space where these women reevaluated their priorities thus making a reset possible despite those pivotal moments which shook their very lives. Nevertheless, the spirituality, faith, and religion used among the Black college women in this study, reflect the art of the “bounce-back” (Robin). These Black college women were able to rebound from life’s challenges by having access to, and the ability to, re-engage their spirituality, faith, and religion. I wholeheartedly maintain that it has been through my own faith in God and diligence to “knock and ask,” “to seek and to find” (Matthew 7:7, King James Version Bible) that a door was opened for me to discover an authentic experience among these Black women. God continues to be the strong habitation for these Black college women and for myself as we collectively strive to be faithful to every task or challenge placed before us.

van Manen (2002) argued that any attempt to define a phenomenon is immediately lost. The essence of that experience, its meaning, is only good for that moment, with those people, and under those circumstances. That is the beauty of what I discovered in the research process. I could always ask another question to obtain another revelation—attempting to move beyond the limits of the participants experiences which pushed me to see more than what I expected. The Black women in this study are rooted in their spirituality, faith, and religion; formed in their youth and now springing up to serve them as they navigate their lives as college students. Phenomenology “is always a matter of attempts, bids, and hopeful risks” (van Manen, 2002, p. 28). I took a risk on using phenomenology to attempt an explanation of spirituality, faith, and
religion. In and of itself, phenomenology presents as a delimitation constraining my research design, participants, methods, and literature—yet all were within the control of me, the researcher. Jones (2002) constantly reminded me of my privilege I had as a researcher. I understand the power I hold as a researcher in that I got to decide the story told through my research. I chose to present the historical perspective of Black women in this country and the legacy of spirituality, faith, and religion which influenced the women in this study. Robin provided her perspective in understanding how Black women galvanized such a strength to endure:

God. God. Before we could ever read a Bible, our people did not know how to read, but yet we were singing Negro spirituals in the fields, you know what I'm saying? Faith is not ... is a thing to hope for, but not see. We knew God was going to bring us through, we didn't know how, but we knew that we would overcome.

The women in this study took their spiritual, faith, and religion cues from their ancestors: a mother, grandmother, grandfather, or other family members. The participants’ experiences spoke to a legacy that was influenced by the seeds of faith planted in their hearts and minds. Their understanding of spirituality, faith, and religion was shaped by that family legacy which moved them to access and use those religious practices. These religious practices of going to church, prayer, reading the Bible, attending Bible study, meditation, and listening to gospel aided these Black women in their belief of God. However, it was through their lived experiences that brought on the various life challenges with academics, mental health, family, and relationships which grounded the participants in accessing and using their spirituality, faith, and religion. These women understood that a higher power was already in place, ready and accessible to help them navigate through any challenge or need.
I offer a scripture that compliments Robin’s statement. It is found in Psalm 46:1-3 (King James Version Bible):

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah.

This scripture was gleaned through my understanding of the participants lived experiences, but it also connects to the title of this dissertation, “Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort: thou hast given commandment to save me; for thou art my rock and my fortress” (Psalms 71:3, King James Version Bible). In her essay, Navigating Race-Gendered Microaggressions: The Experiences of Tenure-Track Black Female Scholar, Dorinda Carter Andrews (2015) noted the stress caused by race and gender has become normalized in higher education settings where Black women must prove credibility and legitimacy. Therefore, even in the light of an endarkened epistemology, which views the world through the eyes of Black women, as a Black woman who is also the researcher, I joined the participants in illustrating the phenomena. I returned to Johnson (1979) who articulated, “we seek our grandmother’s strengths, our great-grandmother’s strategies—we find our sources. We discover/recover ourselves” (p. 117). Like these women, the study’s participants collectively pulled on the strengths and strategies of their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers to rise beyond feelings of inferiority, racism, and the psychological stressors awaiting them. Moreover, I was blessed with the opportunity to enter in and wonder about the lived experiences of seven phenomenal Black college women who collectively showed me how spirituality, faith, and religion have been a strong habitation for them—Black college women.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

FACULTY/STAFF/DEPARTMENTAL EMAIL TO ANNOUNCE/ADVERTISE STUDY

[INSERT DATE]:

[INSERT DEPARTMENTAL CHAIR, FACULTY/STAFF STAFF NAME, AND/OR OFFICE]:

My name is Montisa A. Watkins and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at Central Michigan University (CMU). I am currently working on collecting data for my dissertation study entitled, *My Strong Habitation: Spirituality, Faith, and Religion of Black College Women*. The purpose of my study is to provide voices and experiences of Black college women who use spirituality, faith, and religion as a tool as they navigate their college experience. I am very excited about this deeply personal work given my experience as a former CMU staff member and current doctoral student.

I am recruiting Black women students with junior or senior class standing who attend CMU and interested in sharing their spiritual, faith or religious experiences with me. Would you please post the attached flyer on your departmental/office boards to announce this study to your students? I have enclosed a flyer with pertinent information that you can share with fellow faculty and staff as well as with students during your classes and/or advisee meetings. Students will be asked to complete two (1.5 hour) interviews and will receive a $15 gift card at the end of each interview phase. If you have any questions regarding the study, please contact me by email or phone at (313) 215-0738. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you in advance for your assistance with my project.

Respectfully,
Montisa A. Watkins
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership Program
Central Michigan University
King, Chavez, Parks Future Faculty Fellow
PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Title:
Be Thou My Strong Habitation: Spirituality, Faith, and Religion of Black College Women

A study to explore how Black women use spirituality, faith, and religion as a tool as they navigate their college experience.

Participants will complete two interviews. Each interview is estimated to take 1.5 hours. The first interview will be scheduled for September/early October with a second interview scheduled for October/early November. Interviews will be audio recorded per consent of the participant. Participants will also be asked to review and approve their individual interview transcripts prior to their use in the study. All transcriptions will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Participants will receive a $15 gift card to the campus bookstore or food court vendor at the end of each interview phase as an incentive to thank them for volunteering their time and effort by participating in this study.

If you are a CMU Junior or Senior interested in participating in this study, please contact Montisa A. Watkins, Doctoral Candidate, CMU Educational Leadership Program and KCP Future Faculty Fellow at count1ma@cmich.edu or (313) 215-0738
APPENDIX C

EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE TO INVITE PARTICIPANTS TO INTERVIEW

[INSERT DATE]:

Good afternoon [Black College Woman]:

I am looking to interview Black college women for my dissertation study, *My Strong Habitation: Spirituality, Faith, and Religion of Black College Women*. The purpose of my study is to provide voices and experiences of Black college women who use spirituality, faith, and religion as a tool as they navigate their college experience. Would you please consider taking time to share your experiences with me for this research project? If interested, please email me back at count1ma@cmich.edu. I will contact you next week to discuss your availability for the one-on-one interview. During that phone call, please let me know what your schedule will allow so that I am able to establish possible dates for one to two hour interview time frame. I will follow-up with you on available dates, times, and locations for the interview.

Thank you in advance for your participation. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Respectfully,

Montisa A. Watkins  
Doctoral Candidate  
Educational Leadership Program  
Central Michigan University  
King, Chavez, Parks Future Faculty Fellow
APPENDIX D

EMAIL THANK YOU TO SELECTED PARTICIPANTS

Date:

Dear [Black College Woman]:

Thank you for your consideration and willingness to participate in my study: *My Strong Habitation: Spirituality, Faith, and Religion for Black College Women*. As a college student, I understand you have numerous responsibilities; however, I greatly appreciate your contribution to my research at this time. Please select an interview date and time from the schedule listed below—preferably one that is most comfortable for you. I will confirm the final details with you by email. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at count1ma@cmich.edu or by phone at (313) 215-0738. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to speaking with you.

[TENTATIVE DATES] [TENTATIVE TIMES] [TENTATIVE LOCATION]

Respectfully,

Montisa A. Watkins
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership Program
Central Michigan University
King, Chavez, Parks Future Faculty Fellow
Study Title: My Strong Habitation: Spirituality, Faith, and Religion for Black College Women

Research Investigators’ Names and Departments:

Montisa A. Watkins, Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership
Dr. Ethan Kolek, Advisor, Educational Leadership

Contact information for researcher:
Montisa A. Watkins (313) 215-0738 count1ma@cmich.edu
Dr. Ethan Kolek (989) 774-2041 kolek1e@cmich.edu

Introductory Statement

I am a current doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership at Central Michigan University. Under the leadership of my advisor, Ethan Kolek, I am conducting a qualitative inquiry on the role of spirituality, faith, and religion for Black college women.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black college women who use their spirituality, faith, and religion as they pursue their education at one Midwestern University.

What will I do in this study?
You are invited to participate in a research study to explore the lived experiences of the role that spirituality, faith, and religion plays in the life of Black college women. I will ask you to discuss how you define and experience spirituality, faith, and religion and how you believe it impacts your college experience as a Black woman.

How long will it take me to do this?
You will be invited to participate in two interviews. Each interview is estimated to take 1.5 hours. The first interview will be scheduled for September/early October with a second interview scheduled for October/early November.

Are there any risks of participating in the study?
The proposed research does not pose any physical, legal, financial risks or loss of personally identifiable confidential information. Being in this type of study involves discussion similar to that of everyday life conversations including those related to this study which will include your collegiate experiences along with spirituality, faith, and religion. For this study, you may find spirituality, faith, and religion to be sensitive and introspective topics. However, being in this
study would not pose any further foreseeable risk to your safety or well-being. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time or decline to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You will not be asked to do anything that exposes you to risks caused by this inquiry. Any breaches of protocol will be reported to the primary investigator, Ethan Kolek.

What are the benefits of participating in the study?
There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. This study may provide a time for critical self-reflection of your personal experiences and the nature of your spirituality, faith, and religion as a method for gaining/sustaining strength while facing challenging situations in college. In addition, this research will aid university officials, faculty, and student affairs practitioners in their efforts to provide support for this community by further understanding about how Black college women might use their spirituality, faith, and religion to navigate a successful college experience.

Upon completion of this study, the researcher will make the results available to you. The results will be submitted as part of a doctoral dissertation, presented at professional conferences and/or published in articles describing the results of the research.

Is there a different way for me to receive the benefits of this study?
No.

Will anyone know what I do or say in this study (Confidentiality)?
You will be given a pseudonym in order to protect your identity. The name of your institutional affiliation will also be kept confidential. Your pseudonym will be attached to demographic information concerning your race, faith, religion, and/or spiritual affiliation, which are important to the nature of the study.

Your interviews will be recorded using audio recording to assist with the accuracy of your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording by giving your response at the end of this form. In all other instances, any data under the investigator’s control will, if disclosed, be presented in a manner that does not reveal the subject’s identity, except as may be required by law. Recordings and transcripts will be stored in a password protected platform to ensure data confidentiality. If you withdraw from the study before completion, your data will be destroyed.

The safety of the research participants is paramount. In the event of a participant’s disclosure of risk or harm to self or others, investigator will disclose a confidence to an appropriate authority; however, the investigator will keep the breach of privacy to a minimum. Reasons for a breach of confidentiality may include but not limited to the following:

- Disclosure of risk or harm to self or others from sexual abuse
- Disclosure of a past offence they have knowledge of or have committed
- Disclosure of a serious danger to unsuspecting third parties
- Disclosure of the commission of a criminal offense
Participants will be informed that the investigator will take the following precautions to minimize harm during the study by reporting disclosures of sexual assault or abuse. The investigator will be break confidentiality and report disclosures of sexual assault or abuse to the Office of Civil Rights and Institutional Equity/Title IX Coordinator. CMU staff and faculty are responsible employees who are required to report any information they know about sexual misconduct.

In addition, the investigator will provide list of confidential counseling and support services to participants impacted by alleged acts of Sexual Misconduct, whether or not that person choses to file a Complaint, file criminal charges, or otherwise participate in any processes referenced in the campus Sexual Misconduct Policy as referenced in the CMU Policy Handbook—refer to https://www.cmich.edu/office_president/general_counsel/Documents/p03039.pdf).

**Will I receive any compensation for participation?**
Participants will receive a total compensation in the amount of $30 in gift cards from the campus bookstore or food court for completion of both interview phases. Participants will receive a $15.00 gift card at the end of each interview phase, which includes the actual interview, review and approval of the transcription. If a participant declines to participate in the 2nd interview phase, she will receive a $15.00 gift card for completing the first interview phase and no other compensation will be provided. A completed interview phase includes the interview, the review and approval of the interview transcript.

**Who can I contact outside of the study team for information about this study?**
If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, wish to obtain information or report a case of research-related injury, ask questions, discuss any concerns about this study, or wish to offer input about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the:

Central Michigan University Institutional Review Board  
600 East Preston Street  
Foust Hall 104  
Mount Pleasant, MI 48859  
Phone: (989) 774-6401  
Email: IRB@cmich.edu

You are free to refuse to participate in this research project or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your participation will not affect your relationship with the institution(s) involved in this research project.

I am a participating in this research study on spirituality, faith, and religion for Black college women. My interview responses will be audio recorded with the understanding that recordings are for transcription purposes only and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

_____ I give my consent to have my interview responses audio recorded.
(Please initial in the line above)

My signature below indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and all my questions have been answered. I agree to participate in the project as described above.

______________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant  Date Signed

I have received a copy of this form.

______________________________
Participants’ Initials: _________

______________________________  __________________________
Signature of Responsible Investigator  Date Signed
APPENDIX F

EMAIL CONFIRMATION LETTER FOR INTERVIEW

Date:

Dear [Black College Woman]:

Thank you for participating in my doctoral dissertation research pilot study entitled: *My Strong Habitation: Spirituality, Faith, and Religion of Black College Women.* Per our conversation, I look forward to meeting with you on [INSERT DATE AND TIME] at [INSERT LOCATION].

Attached to this correspondence is a copy of the Consent Form. This form is your acknowledgment that you have read, understand, and agree to volunteer in this process (I will review this information again during our meeting). Should you have any questions prior to our scheduled interview, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone at (313) 215-0738 or by email at count1ma@cmich.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to our conversation.

Respectfully submitted,

Montisa A. Watkins
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership Program
Central Michigan University
APPENDIX G

INSPIRATIONAL SONGS FOR MOTIVATION

At the end of the second interview, I asked each of the women to share with me a song that inspires or motivates them to keep going. Ashely stated, “I have one of my head, but I got to think of what it's called. It can be any song, right? I responded that it could be any song and it didn’t necessarily have to be a religious song and when in doubt, she could “always go to [her] the playlist.” Ashely shared, “It’s called, Soulmate by Lizzo. Robin shared, “my go-to... Honestly, I don't know why this is sticking in my mind so hard right now. Demi Lovato, Confidence, and she says in that, she says, ‘what's wrong with being confident?’ It's to be unapologetically you.” Lina’s song was Running Back To You by Commissioned. I was surprised by her response because this song was released in 1986. Jokingly, I asked Lina her age. She smiled and responded, “Yeah, it's probably my favorite gospel song ever.” However, Lina had already revealed to me, “I really like music. That's probably like a very deep passion of mine.” Olivia’s explained why she selected the song; The Battle is the Lord's by Yolanda Adams:

I listen to that. That's my song. I told you a lot of my faith is you can't make sense of life and the things that happen or take place. So that is my song to listen to when I am worrying about life and forgetting that I'm not in control. So just giving it all to God. Some things you can't make sense of and some things, a lot of things, everything, you're not controlling. Just the battle, whatever you're facing, give it to God. He's in control. He'll handle it. I listen to that probably once a day.

When I asked Catherine for her song selection, she stated, “Only one?” We both laughed as she responded, “Yeah…honestly, I know it's in my gospel playlist. Oh, that inspires me. Something
that just always kind of does the trick. See, it's so hard to think of one song or just to choose one song. I asked Catherine to give me the last thing she listened to and she gave me a few options. “The last thing I listened to was called, *Take Over* by Anthony Evans featuring Tamela Mann.”

Then Catherine offered me another song, *I am Loved Medley* by Covenant Worship and replied:

> Yeah. This is one of them songs like ... Yeah, it's one of them songs that I feel like sometimes you just don't feel like love is for you or in the air or just in your favor. And every time I turn it on it's just, I'm like, Oh my God, okay. The words that they keep saying is, I am loved. I am loved. And I'm like, okay, this is [Interviewer: Good reminder, huh?] Yeah, it is.

Lynelle said her “first thought was *The Climb* by Miley Cyrus.” Lynelle’s shared what the song meant to her:

> I don't know when, now, I feel like now being older I appreciate the song much more and the meaning behind the song. When I was younger, I was just singing my heart out to it and didn’t understand why I was singing it. I just love Miley Cyrus. But now being older, I appreciate the meaning and what was put into the song.

Kym’s selection, *Better* by Jessica Reedy moved her emotionally wherein she divulged, “It’s a great song…I cry a little bit when it plays, but we'll get there.”
APPENDIX H

PARTICIPANT PROFILE/DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Please provide the following demographic data:

Age: _______ Race and/or Ethnic Background: ________________________________

Please check the box that applies to you - Year in school: □ Junior □ Senior

Major: ______________________________

Do you consider yourself? (Check all that apply)
□ Religious □ Spiritual □ Person of Faith □ Other ______________________________
(please explain)

What is your religious affiliation and/or background? ______________________________

Which of the following best describes how often you attend church, synagogue, Mosque or any other type of religious, spiritual, and/or faith services?

One or more times per week Two to three times per month
About once a month About once a semester
About once a year Never

If other, please describe: ______________________________

If you attend services, are any of these located on campus? YES NO

Which of the following best describes your spiritual, faith and/or religious practices or reflects your beliefs? (Circle as many as apply)

Prayer Singing in a choir Community Service/Outreach
Bible Study Meditation Participation in religious
Yoga Group Prayer club/organization
Group Bible Study

Others not listed above: ______________________________
APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—FIRST INTERVIEW

Your participation in this pilot study is appreciated and respected. I assure you that what you share with me is valuable and will be respected. Our conversation today will be audio-recorded for transcription. You will receive a transcribed summary of your interview. You will be asked to review the summary to check for accuracy and return any comments to me for revising. Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with me.

The following protocol will be used during the open-ended interviews. Participant’ responses will help answer the main research question: What is the role of faith, spirituality and religion in supporting the success of Black college women?

The following criterion must be met by participants: Participants must self-identify as Black, African American or of African descent and attend CMU with junior or senior class status. Participants must also self-identify as having a strong sense of spirituality, faith, and/or religion. You have been invited to participate in two interviews. Each interview is estimated to take 1.5 hours. Interview protocol will be divided into two parts: Interview Phase 1 will be scheduled for September/early October and Interview Phase 2 for October/early November. Interviews will be audio recorded per consent of the participant. Participants will also be asked to review and approve their individual interview transcripts prior to their use in the study. All transcriptions will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

Participants will receive a total compensation in the amount of $30 in gift cards from the campus bookstore or food court for completion of both interview phases. Participants will receive a $15.00 gift card at the end of each interview phase, which includes the actual interview, review and approval of the transcription. If a participant declines to participate in the 2nd interview phase, she will receive a $15.00 gift card for completing the first interview phase and no other compensation will be provided. A completed interview phase includes the interview, the review and approval of the interview transcript.

**Interview Questions - Interview Phase I**

**Student Name:**

**Pseudonym:**

Date:

Begin interview by explaining purpose of study and convey the importance of them sharing their journey through the interview process. Establishing rapport is critical to opening the conversation and engaging the participant to allow them to tell me their story.

**Establish Rapport**

1. Tell me about you.
2. Tell me about your journey in coming to college?
   Probes:
   a. What was your journey?
   b. How did you get here?
**Spirituality, Religion, and Faith**

3. How do you understand spirituality, faith, and religion?
   Probes:
   a. Does one of these terms more resonate with you? Focus remainder of questions based on the one that resonates the most—allows their story to rise forward (spirituality, faith, and/or religion)
   b. How has your understanding of these terms changed (or not) since you began college?
   c. Which term (s) did your family and/or background identify with?

4. Talk to me about your experiences with spirituality, faith, and religion prior to entering college?
   Probes:
   a. Family influences
   b. Participation in activities
   c. Church attendance and/or involvement

5. Talk to me about what your spirituality, faith, and religion means to you as a college student.
   Probes:
   a. Do you see any differences?
   b. If so, please explain.
   c. If not, explain how you see them?

Thank student for their participation in this 1st interview. Select date and time for 2nd interview; location be confirmed by email prior to interview.

**Next Interview Scheduled:** __________________________

Changes to Contact Info: __________________________

Ok to text reminders? □ Yes □ No

Pseudonym Selected: □ Yes □ No    Selected Name: ____________________________________________
APPENDIX J

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—SECOND INTERVIEW

Your participation in this pilot study is appreciated and respected. I assure you that what you share with me is valuable and will be respected. Our conversation today will be audio-recorded for transcription. You will receive a transcribed summary of your interview. You will be asked to review the summary to check for accuracy and return any comments to me for revising. Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with me.

The following protocol will be used during the open-ended interviews. Participant’s responses will help answer the main research question: What is the role of faith, spirituality and religion in supporting the success of Black college women?

The following criterion must be met by participants: Participants must self-identify as Black, African American or of African descent and attend CMU with junior or senior class status. Participants must also self-identify as having a strong sense of spirituality, faith, and/or religion. You have been invited to participate in two interviews. Each interview is estimated to take 1.5 hours. Interview protocol will be divided into two parts: Interview Phase 1 will be scheduled for September/early October and Interview Phase 2 for October/early November. Interviews will be audio recorded per consent of the participant. Participants will also be asked to review and approve their individual interview transcripts prior to their use in the study. All transcriptions will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

Participants will receive a total compensation in the amount of $30 in gift cards from the campus bookstore or food court for completion of both interview phases. Participants will receive a $15.00 gift card at the end of each interview phase, which includes the actual interview, review and approval of the transcription. If a participant declines to participate in the 2nd interview phase, she will receive a $15.00 gift card for completing the first interview phase and no other compensation will be provided. A completed interview phase includes the interview, the review and approval of the interview transcript.

Interview Questions - Interview Phase 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name:</th>
<th>Pseudonym:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Begin interview by explaining purpose of study and convey the importance of them sharing their journey through the interview process. Establishing rapport is critical to opening the conversation and engaging the participant to allow them to tell me their story. Revisit definitions of spirituality, faith, and religion—ask for clarification of their definitions.

College Experiences with Spirituality, Religion, and Faith

1. Everyone experiences their own set of challenges while in college. Can you share with me about how you engage your spirituality, religion, and faith as you walk through or handle challenges [while in college]?
2. Talk about how your spirituality, religion, and faith works with your life as a college student?
   Probes:
   a. Tell me a story…can you reflect back to when you experienced success or challenges?
   b. What about in areas of work, involvement, leadership, socially, culturally, academically?

3. Talk to me about how you engage your spirituality, religion, and faith while in college?
   a. How do you think about your identity as a Black woman in a PWI and your spirituality, faith, or religion?

4. What have you found while in college to support your spirituality, religious or faith?

5. Share with me the name of a song that inspires or motivates you to keep moving forward in your college career?

6. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me or feel that I should know regarding your spirituality, religion, or faith?
   Probes:
   a. Anything else that I have left out of our conversation?
   b. Are there things you would like to share that I have not asked that might help me to understand your experiences as a Black woman in college who uses her spirituality, faith, and/or religion as a means of support for college success?

Conclusion of Interview Phase 2
Thank student for their participation in this 2nd interview. Inform them of next steps (e.g., transcripts, gift card receipt dates). Ask if there are any questions regarding next steps?

Transcripts Approved from 1st Interview □ Yes □ No

1st Gift Gard Signature: ______________________ Date: ________________
Date:

Dear [Black College Woman]:

Thank you for allowing me to interview you on [INSERT DATE]. You are making an invaluable contribution to my research project. I appreciate your time as well as your input. You will receive a summary of the interview transcript. The purpose of the transcript review is to give you an opportunity to reflect on your overall views, while allowing you to elucidate and/or amend prior to the analysis phase of the study. Please review the transcript to ensure that the summary is what you would like considered during the analysis phase of this study. The transcript will be revised based on any modifications or additional comments you make at this time.

To allow for timely analysis of your contribution, I would greatly appreciate receiving your feedback by [INSERT DATE]. If after this date I have not received your feedback, I will move forward with the analysis phase of this project with an understanding that you agree with the interview transcript summary as it stands.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone at (313) 215-0738 or by email at count1ma@cmich.edu. Again, I sincerely thank you for your participation in this study.

Respectfully submitted,

Montisa A. Watkins
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership Program
Central Michigan University
APPENDIX L

FINAL THANK YOU NOTE TO STUDY PARTICIPANTS—COMPLETED STUDY

Date:

Dear [Black College Woman]:

I am writing to thank you for offering your time to participating in my study: *My Strong Habitation: Spirituality, Faith, and Religion of Black College Women*. Your contribution proved invaluable to my research. I have finally completed the study and have attached the published document for your consideration.

I would again like to sincerely thank you for considering this research to be worthy of your time and effort. Your candor and insights are reflective of this important topic. My hope is that this study will continue to inspire you and motivate others to courageously call upon their own spirituality, faith, and religious beliefs while in college and beyond. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone at (313) 215-0738 or by email at count1ma@cmich.edu.

Respectfully,

Montisa A. Watkins
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership
Central Michigan University
APPENDIX M

ON/OFF CAMPUS SUPPORT SERVICES AND RESOURCE LIST

If you have an emergency or if you need immediate assistance, call 911 or call CMU Police at (989) 774-30181.

**Title IX Coordinator**  
Mary Martinez, Interim Executive Director  
Office of Civil Rights and Institutional Equity  
Bovee University Center 306  
Phone: 989-774-3252  
Email: marti14@cmich.edu

**Counseling Department**  
Foust Hall 102  
Email: counsel@cmich.edu  
Phone: (989) 774-3381  
Fax: (989) 774-1124

**Listening Ear Crisis Center**  
http://www.listeningear.com/  
(989) 772-2918 - For students enrolled in courses on the Mt. Pleasant campus.  
(989) 775-1520 - For students enrolled in courses online or outside the Mt. Pleasant area.

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**  
http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/  
800-273-TALK (8255)  
(online chat available)

**Crisis Text Line**  
http://www.crisistextline.org/  
Text START to 741-741

**CMU Sexual Aggression Peer Advocates***  
https://www.cmich.edu/ess/studentaffairs/SAPA/Pages/default.aspx  
989-774-CALL (2255)  
*SAPA operates during the CMU academic year. Services are not operational during CMU recognized breaks nor during the Summer semester sessions.

**McLaren Central Michigan Hospital Emergency Room**  
http://www.mclaren.org/centralmichigan/centralmichigan.aspx  
1221 South Drive  
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858  
989-772-6700

**MidMichigan Medical Center - Mt. Pleasant**  
https://www.midmichigan.org/about/our-affiliates/Hospitals/mtpleasant/  
4851 E. Pickard Street  
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858  
989-775-1600  
989-956-9060 (Emergency Department)

**RISE (Recovery, Independence, Safety & Empowerment)**  
https://www.riseadvocacy.org/  
Formally Women's Aid  
989-773-0078 General Business Line  
844-349-6177 24 Hour Crisis Line

**Community Mental Health for Central Michigan**  
http://www.cmhcm.org/  
989-772-5938  
1-800-317-0708  
989-772-2890 TTY

**Emergency Management at CMU**  
https://www.cmich.edu/about/emergency_management/Pages/default.aspx
Psychological First Aid
https://www.cmich.edu/ess/studentaffairs/Co
unselingCenter/Pages/Introduction.as
APPENDIX N

PSEUDONYMS

During the first phase of interviews, none of the participants except for one, wanted a pseudonym. I found this interesting because I just assumed that they would select one. Many of the women looked surprised or simply unbothered when I asked for a pseudonym. Kym stated, “No, I really don't care. That's okay.” Catherine, another participant noted, “once I lived it, I want my name attached to that”. I sensed that each of the women in their own way, were proud to be a part of this study and took great ownership of their voice and experience. Given (2008) affirmed this right of the participants belief “that their contributions are valuable enough to make a difference” (p. 693). However, in the middle of her first interview and after having shared some sensitive issues, Olivia stated, “Yeah, you can’t use my name anywhere, but it’s ok”. At the end of the interview, she reiterated her request for a pseudonym. Noting Olivia’s request and having read through the transcripts, I realized the ethics of having pseudonyms. I vacillated between respecting their present request to not take an alias, but weighed it against future readings. What was this about being proud of a name and having that name attached to an experience regardless of how good or bad it is? What is it about the inherent pride and strength of Black women? Catherine shared the following when as about Black women and their spirituality:

“We are one of the most ... I feel like people study us. We're like the most studied creatures per se. They love the way we walk. They love the way our hair looks. They idolize us in a way. Now, obviously, that's not what I want to walk around like I am that, but as a Black woman, I feel like we should just be proud of being a Black woman. We come with so much, we are automatically just creative. I have not met a Black woman
that wasn't creative in something, that didn't have her hands on something that ... Or a Black woman that just sits down and she's like, okay, I'm good. I'm done with this. All of the Black women's around me don't know how to sit down. Always active. Always doing something. Always have an idea. Our brains are always turning. We're always trying to find new ways to do things, always wanting to see things differently.”

Olivia shared a conversant phrase passed down from generations of Black women:

We always have to work twice as hard to get to where we are. So I know that I busted my ass to be where I am today, and it didn't just come. I worked very, very hard to be where I am today.

Wallace (1982) affirmed Olivia’s familiar logic of Black Feminist Theory noting, “there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle--because; being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else done: we would have to fight the world” (p. 12). There is a balance between the pride of struggle and accomplishment. The women who decided not to have a pseudonym acknowledged the Negro spiritual, *No Where To Hide*, recorded by gospel legend, Dorothy Love-Coates (1970), which says, “There's no hidin' place down here; you know, there's no hidin' place down here; I went to the rock to hide my face; But the rock cried out, no, no hiding place down here.”

Although the participant names were anonymized, the collective legacy of these seven Black women represented a snapshot of stories.
APPENDIX O

WORDS OF WISDOM

Spirituality, faith, and religiousness do not encompass a distinct definition or experience; therefore, they do not possess a singular look for the participants. I asked each participant for any advice that they would like to offer what spirituality, faith and religion looks like for the participants to then be shared with those Black college women who will come behind them. Asking for their words of wisdom is consistent with Commodore et al. (2018) who posited that Black college women receive support and assistance and in turn offer that same gift back to their communities to make a difference. The researchers also posited that the Black college woman gives back to her community by reinvesting the gifts and talents she developed as an intended result of her collegiate experience. Therefore, she [re] affirms and [re] builds her community—lifting as she climbs, a historical mantra from the early days of Reconstruction (Dubois, 1914; Giddings, 1984; Laney, 1899; Perkins, 1981; 1983; 1996; Pruitt-Logan & Miller, 2012; Sheftall, 1995; Terrell, 1904). I believe the statement put forth by Dr. Truman Hudson, educational leader, scholar, and social justice activist, “research has the power to change the narrative” (T. Hudson, personal communication, July 31, 2016) and reposition our dialogue towards new ways of thinking and practice. Here in this research project, we learned how Black college women view and use their spirituality, faith, and religion.

The participants offered their words of wisdom as perspectives of what spirituality, faith, and religion look like for Black college women. For example, Kym shared the following:

I would say just like keep in mind that your environment doesn't describe who you are because it is really hard to remember who you are. And when you come to a canvas it resembles, like it doesn't resemble anything that you believe in. So I would say kind of
just keeping that mental space that you are amazing and unique it does matter. Like if you're in an environment where you feel like you're outnumbered or you, you don't belong there and you do, you're here for a reason. So keeping that in mind, I would say definitely helps your spirituality. Cause once you, once you start getting into that mindset, I'm telling you once get into a negative mindset, it's hard to get out. You started spiraling fast.

Lynelle suggested the importance of trying new environments:

…making sure that they step out of their comfort zone to find those support groups and find what groups they do relate to? Because I know in the past, the group of girls that I was hanging out with, I can say they didn't walk the talk. They talked about certain things but we weren't supportive of each other like the group of friends that I'm hanging out with now. So just finding that support group, stepping outside of your comfort zone to talk to people and finding out who is really good for your faith and who gives good positive energy and it helps uplift you and encourage you to find that part of yourself.

Olivia offered the following:

Whatever your faith and your spirituality means to you, and wherever you would like to get in that journey or that destination. So don't necessarily compare your journey to someone else's, because you don't know also what they had to go through to get to where they are. Or really what that journey looks like to them. Because it could look like something on the outside that is not actually on the inside of my relationship with that individual and God. So it's not a race to be in the journey with yourself. Take your time. Don't compare.
Robin’s words of wisdom reminded me that she chooses to live a life of freedom in relationship with God:

I intend to live the fullness of this life. And that's why I say it's really about relationship. It's not about ritualistic, about going to church every day because momma, grandma and grandpa, great-grandpa and grandma did it. It's about, who is God to you? You know? I read my word and I have a conversation with my Lord every day, and He ... I create that relationship and interpret it for myself of who He has designated me to be. He talks to me through my experiences. You know? I don't want to be a shoulda-coulda-woulda individual. I don't. I intend to live every dream fulfilled. I don't want to live it unfulfilled. And that's just is what it is. Be you. Be you. I can't stress that enough, because a lot of people, when you get into the Lord and Christ, they're going to tell you who you should be. You define that with God. And that's what I believe is relationship.

Ashely shared her perspective:

Maybe to be true to themselves. So if they came in as a religious person or like that's just their background to stay to that, stick to that. Like find a church that's for them, find people to connect with, find organizations to join. There's a lot of religious based organizations on campus, a lot of groups that meet and do Bible Study, little stuff like that. So kind of just like staying true to themselves and not changing because maybe like their environment change or their friend group changed.

Lina’s comments centered around being spiritual, religious and having faith:

I think that there’s nothing wrong with having faith or being spiritual or being strictly with religious. I don’t think that there’s like... like I have to be either or. I think that it just kind of depends on the person you are. Like some people who I would say maybe are
type A, they may fit with a really structured routine like going to church and making sure that they follow up with everything and that’s completely fine because at the end of the day I think that your relationship with God is the most important part. So it really doesn’t... I don’t think that it matters what other people may say to you as long as you know that you are his and that he cares about you more than probably anybody ever will. And so working on that in whatever way that you can.

Catherine’s comments reflected on her parents where she offered words of wisdom to her generation shared from her father:

… I'm brought up with the generation that's like, "It's always more than one way to skin a cat." "It's more than one route, more than one way." I always heard that. For me, it was almost advice or something to keep going. Okay, you failed here, but you have these other ideas, and all these other tries. My dad, "Nothing beats a failure but a try," and so I'm like, "All right, I'll try." Now it's like, okay, if I can't click with one way of doing something, I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to go try this way." I just get it from my parents really.

These words of advice offered by the participants reaffirmed the purpose of the study and the intention that this research would become a public voice, read and shared among many, including other Black college women. Although my research paradigm is not transformational, I do believe that my research ultimately transforms the lay person/reader, future researchers, and practitioners because of its content.
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