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## **Spirituality as a Validating Factor and Intrinsic Motivator to Persistence: A Study of Nontraditional Female Students in Community/Technical Colleges**

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Spirituality as a Validating Factor and Intrinsic Motivator to Persistence: A Study of  
Nontraditional Female Students in Community/Technical Colleges

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Educational Administration

by

Camille Laperouse Jarrell

B.A. University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1971  
M.Ed. University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1992

December, 2009

## Dedication

Dedicated to the women who helped to birth my own spirituality  
my mother, Helen Grace  
my grandmothers, Alice and Olive

To my daughter, Elizabeth, who accompanies me on my spiritual  
journey today

And to my granddaughters  
Lauren, Laci, Riley, Abigail and Emma Grace  
and my grand niece, Grace

with hopes that you will follow in the footsteps of the women before  
you who have shown you how to find your strength from the great  
Mystery within.

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## Abstract

While traditional theories are useful in the study of persistence in some nontraditional students, many nontraditional female students are at high risk of not successfully persisting towards their educational goals. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of spirituality, as a validating factor and an intrinsic motivator to persist, in nontraditional female students in community and technical colleges.

A hermeneutic phenomenology research design was used with the “lived experiences” of these women articulated through their own voices. Although the study did not have a rigid set of fixed procedures, van Manens (1990) suggested activities for human science research were followed. Individual interviews, as well as two focus group interviews, were conducted to gather the data. A purposeful research sampling approach was used to select the participants from a community college and a technical college in the southern United States.

The conceptual framework that informs this study is that of Sharon Daloz Parks’ (2000) theories of faith development in the college years. In regards to persistence, Rendon’s (2000) model of Academics of the Heart framed the validating environment that nurtured the nontraditional women’s motivation to persist towards their educational goals. This framework reconnects the intellect with the spirit.

In this study, it was found that spirituality was an internal validating factor for these nontraditional female students and this intrinsic motivation supports them in their persistence to achieve their goals. From the study emerged five major themes: spiritual development/growth, challenges, validation, support and perseverance. Supportive environments in educational settings may nurture and affirm this spirituality that exists in the increasing numbers of nontraditional female students attending our colleges today.

These findings make a contribution to the present literature in that the results of the study provide insight as to how programs may be modified for nontraditional female students to support them in their persistence in an educational setting. In understanding where the students are on their continuum of developing spirituality, administrators, faculty, and support staff, could better provide the environments that are needed to nurture the growth of this internal validating factor and intrinsic motivator of spirituality.

Keywords: Persistence, Spirituality, Nontraditional female students, Community College, Technical College.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### *Introduction*

While traditional theories are useful in the study of persistence in some nontraditional students, many nontraditional female students are at a high risk of not successfully persisting towards their educational goals. Retaining nontraditional students at small open admission institutions requires innovative, comprehensive interventions to meet their needs (Leonard, 2002). Leonard makes the strong case that to initiate more progressive interventions for nontraditional students “researchers should explore quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the efficacy of past and current methods with the goal of improving and expanding support services” (p. 72).

The issue of persistence in nontraditional women is particularly significant because, according to Freeman (2004), women make-up the majority of the U.S. undergraduate population and have increased their representation from 42 percent to 56 percent undergraduates between 1970 and 2001. Women have surpassed their male peers in both educational expectations and degree attainment (Freeman). Women will continue to outpace men in degree completions according to enrollment projections to 2013 (Gerald & Hussar, 2003).

It is important to note that women have outpaced males and increased their representation among younger (below 25 years of age), full-time students, who tend to be more successful in completing a degree. However, 43% of all community college students are older than the age of 24 (U. S. Department of Education, 2005). The persistence rates of these nontraditional women are lower than their traditional counterparts due to the fact that nontraditional students possess more of the high risk factors that place them at a disadvantage in succeeding in postsecondary education than traditional students. Horn and Premo (1995) examined seven risk factors found to

be negatively associated with persistence and degree attainment. These factors include: (1) delaying enrollment by a year or more (2) attending part time (3) being financially independent (for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid) (4) having children (5) being a single parent (6) working full time while enrolled and (7) being a high school dropout or a GED recipient. According to a study of persistence in postsecondary education conducted by Berkner, Cuccaro-Alamin, and McCormick (1996), 64 percent of beginning students with one risk factor persisted in their postsecondary program or completed a degree or vocational certificate within 5 years, compared with 43 percent of those with three or more risk factors. Among the 1999-2000 undergraduate students with three or more risk factors, they determined that at least half might be expected to leave postsecondary education without completing a degree or certificate.

Examining new ways to address persistence issues with the nontraditional female student population is key because of the increasing numbers of these students in our community and technical colleges. This study assumes that as women develop and mature, new factors that relate to their persistence need to be considered. In this study, I examined if, and how, spirituality as an intrinsic motivator may serve as a factor in the persistence of nontraditional female students in community and technical colleges. The study focused on female non- traditional students who self-identified themselves as being a spiritual person. The following definition framed the concept of spirituality as it is used in this study. Spirituality is an awareness of a Divine source of power within that is greater than ourselves and fosters strength, hope and meaning in our lives and supports us in our work for the common good of our world.

Researchers have previously alluded to the existence of both intrinsic motivators and spirituality in our educational environments (Knowles, 1980; Astin, 2004; Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Tisdell, 2003; Burgis & Rendon , 2006; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006).

Knowles (1980), in his theory of andragogy, proposed that adult learners are intrinsically motivated to succeed in higher education. Astin (2004) proposes that in our academic environments we are beginning to have a focus on the interiors of our students which encompasses “their sense of meaning and purpose in life” (p. 40). Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss meaning-making and purpose in our lives without including our spirituality. Tisdell (2003), in her assumptions about the nature of spirituality in relation to education, states that “spirituality is fundamentally about meaning-making” and then “spirituality is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment” (p. 29).

Other scholarly researchers (Love & Talbot, 1999; Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; Rendon, 2000), reflecting on our educational institutions today, also contend that we are gradually moving towards addressing an often neglected dimension of our being, that is the spiritual. It is best stated by Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson (2000) in the following quote “the heretofore silencing of the spiritual voice through privileging the academic voice is increasingly being drowned out by the emphatic chorus of those whose underlying versions of truth cry out “We are a spiritual people!” (p. 448) As spiritual people, we rely on our spirituality in all facets of our life, why not in the educational environment?

As educators begin to acknowledge the existence of spirituality in students, envisioning ways of how it can serve as a support to them can be examined. When examining persistence, there are a myriad of factors that can be examined as sources of support including extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. Thus, in this study, I explored if, and how, spirituality may serve as an intrinsic motivator to persist towards a degree in this population of nontraditional women.

## *Spirituality and Religion*

Spirituality cannot be examined effectively in this study without clarifying its relationship with religion. Tisdell (2003), in her study of spirituality and culture, states that spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many people they are interrelated (p. 28). Spirituality often has its traditional roots in religion. However, most of the literature that exists today separates spirituality from a religious context (Tisdell, 2003; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Palmer, 1983; Borysenko, 1999; Kelly, 1995; Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Aside from examining how religion has influenced participant's spirituality, this investigation will also separate spirituality from a religious context. The following definitions are presented as a way of distinguishing religion from spirituality.

Religion is embodied in a structured or organized religious institution which shares a system of beliefs and practices that are often institutionalized in creeds, rituals, and moral codes. These structured religious institutions are frequently considered to restrict or limit personal potential. (Kelly, 1995; Tisdell, 2003; Fowler, 1981; Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003).

To define spirituality is difficult. Paintner (2007) compares it to the field of expressive arts which is a path of self discovery as is the spiritual life.

The spiritual life...is largely about process rather than product. A dominant metaphor for spirituality is the journey, which evokes a sense of constant movement and progression. We never fully arrive but are always unfolding and discovering. Spirituality is also about a process of integration – of slowly bringing the whole of our selves and our experiences to our crafting of meaning. (Paintner, 2007, p. 4)

In this study, a new discourse was used to understand spirituality which was taken from a qualitative study carried out by Estanek (2006). She examined all of the varied definitions of spirituality in higher education literature and from this process she recognized that every definition is an interpretation of experiences. Estanek further posits that “once one understands that how one defines spirituality shapes the experience of spirituality, it becomes of practical importance to understand how spirituality is defined in this new discourse” (p. 273). Estanek proposed that “the emerging discussion of spirituality can be understood as a new discourse because it separates the understanding of spirituality from its roots in religion and thus changes its meaning” and “that no common definition of spirituality exists” (p. 270). Like Estanek, this new discourse that I used in my study also separated spirituality from its roots in religion. However, for the purposes of this study, a definition of spirituality was used and it is defined as follows: Spirituality is an awareness of a Divine source of power within that is greater than ourselves and fosters strength, hope and meaning in our lives and supports us in our work for the common good of our world. In addition to this definition it is important to understand that our faith or spirituality enables us to open to this power that is within us. As our spirituality / faith develop, it enables us to grow more and more open to this power that is within.

It is both important and necessary to make this distinction between religion and spirituality in this study because of the legality that surrounds the issue of separation of church and state. Some argue that religion and spirituality are interrelated, while others view the two as separate constructs (Tisdell, 2003; Estanek, 2006; Parks, 2000) “Religion gives us a rubric for working with the deity, while spirituality is the energy that connects us...it is a sacred narrative that gives us a sense of larger purpose” (Houston, 2002, pp. 6-7). Although there is acknowledgment that spirituality and religion may be interrelated constructs in some situation,



the church/state issue will be avoided for purposes of this study by examining spirituality separate from religion.

Another clarification, with regards to spirituality, is included in this introduction. It is important to note that both faith and spirituality can be used interchangeably as they are closely related and it is difficult to separate the two. The works of Fowler (1981) and Parks (1981, 2000) and their faith developmental models are discussed and make up a part of the conceptual framework of this study. Although there are “other understandings of spirituality that do not include a developmental dimension” (Estanek, 2006, p. 273), for the purposes of this study, a spiritual development approach was taken to examine the spirituality of the participants.

Fowler (1981) is the premiere pioneer of the study of faith development and in his book, *Stages of Faith*, he identifies six stages through which people of faith invariably travel. The first stage he called Intuitive-Projective faith usually occurs between the ages of three and seven. During this stage, self awareness begins to surface and imagination is born. Stage two is called Mythic-Literal faith and it is in this stage that the person begins to integrate symbols, rituals, and stories into their experiences. A narrative construction of meaning is brought about in this stage of faith development. The third stage is labeled Synthetic-Conventional faith and the person’s experience of the world now extends beyond the family. It is in this stage that the majority of the population finds themselves. This stage begins in adolescence and is called the conformist stage because it does not have autonomous judgment or an individual identity. The expectations and judgment of others is placed as a priority at this stage. Stage four most appropriately takes form in young adulthood but for a significant group of adults it will not emerge until their thirties or forties. In this transition, “the late adolescent or adult must begin to bear the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes” (p. 182). Stage

five, Conjunctive faith, is unusual before mid-life. During this time, one begins to rework their past and begins to listen to the voices of their deeper self. “This involves a critical recognition of one’s social unconscious –the myths, ideal images and prejudices built deeply into the self-system by virtue of one’s nurture within a particular social class, religious tradition, ethnic group or the like” (p. 198). Stage six, Universalizing faith is the last stage and is exceedingly rare. At this point, persons have completed the process of the decentralization of self. Their environment is now open and accepting of all being. “They have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community” (p. 200). They work to liberate humanity from the “shackles” of social, political, economic, and ideological expectations and constraints. Examples of persons who have reached this level of mature faith are Mother Teresa of Kolkata, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Thomas Merton.

Parks (2000) elaborated on Fowler’s stages of faith development by formulating a theory of faith development specific to the young adult years of the college population. Within her theory, she also proposed stages of adult development beyond the young adult years. This particular model enhances the framework of this study because it addresses the varied group of women who are in their college years. With today’s diverse population of students, the women who are attending our community/technical colleges may fit into many different niches in this continuum of development that Parks has defined. She recognized that “not only the quality of young adult lives but also our future as a culture depends in no small measure upon our capacity to recognize the emerging competence of young adults, to initiate them into big questions, and to give them access to worthy dreams” (p. xi). Parks work is grounded in traditional student development theory as well as her knowledge of theology and faith in practice as a teacher, counselor and researcher of young adults.

Parks (2000) refines Fowler's theory by including an additional stage of faith development between adolescence and adulthood which she describes as young adult faith. Her theory includes two separate stages within Fowler's fourth stage of Individuative-Reflective Faith. She further differentiates adulthood into what she calls tested adults and mature adults as described below. Park's resulting model of faith development is a four-stage model which consists of (1) adolescent, (2) young adult, (3) tested adult, and (4) mature adult faith. The process of faith development, within her conceptual framework, involves a series of transformations. These transformations begin with an authority bound form of meaning making which then moves through the wilderness of counter-dependence and unqualified relativism. The next stage is a committed inner-dependent and unqualified relativism and the last stage is a committed, inner-dependent mode of composing meaning.

A developmental approach includes a call for the researcher to walk with these women participants as they ask the "big questions" to enable them to realize their "worthy dreams" (Parks, 2000, p. 219). It was important to the study to note where these participants were in their spiritual development which, as defined above, was identified by transformational growth and not an age factor. Their faith / spiritual development influenced the depth of support that existed in their persistence towards a degree. As their stories unfolded in the interviews, so too was their place on the continuum of spiritual / faith development revealed.

#### *Community/Technical College Nontraditional Students*

The majority of our students in community and technical colleges today are nontraditional, as well as multicultural, women. Community colleges are traditionally known for having a more diverse student population than four year colleges and institutions (Bryant, 2001). Approximately 59 percent of community college students enrolled in 2003-2004 were women,

and non-white students constituted almost 40 percent of community college enrollments nationally (NCES, 2006). Implications that result from this population of students are that they will enter the institution with multiple barriers to success. Obstacles may include family obligations, work issues, single parenting, involvement in abusive relationships, low socioeconomic group, a poor academic background, lack of family support, and members of an older age group. Many of these women are pursuing an education to make a better life for their families. It is imperative that they persist towards the attainment of a degree. Having been a single working parent in an older age group during the time that I was obtaining my masters degree, I have empathy for these women and would like in some way to help to aid in our understanding of their success.

It is my hope that with their educational experiences and personal growth they will be able to overcome many of the barriers in their life that have prevented their success. After attainment of their degree, they will emerge into society with a stronger, new voice. As a result, they will provide a better life for themselves and their children. Additionally, they will contribute to the “common good” of our society. (Daloiz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996, p. 5)

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Although traditional women students have outpaced males in degree attainment, 60% or more of women overall represent students with characteristics that place them at a disadvantage in succeeding in postsecondary education (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). More specifically, women make up 60 percent of students in the lowest 25 percent income level, 62 percent of students age 40 or older, 62 percent of students with children or dependents (among married or separated students), and 69 percent of single parents (Berkner, et al.). All are factors that may present barriers to success in obtaining their educational goals..

Additionally, in regards to persistence, nontraditional women in community and technical colleges do not fit into the theoretical frameworks of student engagement and socialization applicable to traditional students. For example, Tinto's (1993) model of student engagement posits that at the very outset students must be integrated into both the social and academic life of the college to persist and be successful. However, nontraditional women do not typically integrate into these environments (Calhoun, 2003). In spite of this, some of these nontraditional women in community/technical colleges persist towards the attainment of a degree. Therefore, there are other factors which need to be examined that may support these nontraditional students in their persistence efforts.

Recent studies indicate that "strong intrinsic motivation may be necessary for nontraditional students to persist and succeed" (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007, 143). Nontraditional women are sometimes at a different stage of development, both cognitively and in their spiritual/faith development, than their traditional counterparts and have different needs and motivators. Women in the later stages of their cognitive development "are seriously preoccupied with the moral or spiritual dimension of their lives" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, p. 150.) As such, this study investigated spirituality as an intrinsic motivator to persist towards a degree in nontraditional women. My focus was to gain the perspectives of the women themselves and how their spirituality might serve as an intrinsic motivator to persist, amidst obstacles, in the attainment of their goals.

### *Research Questions*

The central research question that was addressed in this qualitative study is:

What is the role of spirituality in the persistence of nontraditional female community/technical college students?

The following sub-questions provided topical focus for the study.

- 1) How do nontraditional community/technical college female students describe their ability to meet life's challenges as they have matured?
- 2) How do nontraditional community/technical college students define their spirituality as it exists in their lives today?
- 3) How does an understanding of nontraditional community/technical college female students' spirituality contribute to persistence theories and attainment of educational goals?
- 4) Does spirituality play a role in creating a validating environment for these students?

This research project was one of emergent design and the questions were defined and re-defined several times during the life of the study.

#### *Overview of the Conceptual Framework*

The conceptual framework that informed the study was that of Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) theories of faith development for the college years. Her theory of faith development stands within and elaborates on James Fowlers' (1981) six stages of faith development. The work of Parks reinforces the relationship of spiritually related developmental theories and traditional ones. Both sets of theories focus on how people make meaning of their worlds and the experiences they have (Love, 2001).

In regards to persistence, Rendon's (2000) model of Academics of the Heart framed the nontraditional women's motivation to persist in a different context than that of the traditional student. Rendon states that there is a deep imbalance in higher education that stems from a disconnected, fragmented view of teaching, learning, and research. She further posits that "a new model or framework is needed that reconnects the intellect with the spirit, that allows us to bridge both our inner and outer knowing" (p. 5).

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of the study was to examine the role of spirituality in defining a validating environment as an intrinsic motivator for these nontraditional female students and how it informs their educational experiences and contributes to their persistence and success in an academic setting.

As a technical college administrator and a leader in the postsecondary educational environment, the researcher has a personal interest in the success of these students. She hopes to learn how they are able to cope and persist amidst obstacles during their time in school. The results of the study will provide insight as to how programs can be developed and/or modified for these students to support them in their persistence and success in reaching their educational goals.

### *Significance*

The study is important because there are increasing numbers of nontraditional women attending our institutions of higher education today and these students are showing lower rates of persistence and completion than their traditional age counterparts (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2002), nontraditional students are highly likely to leave in their first year of postsecondary education.

The information that is gained from this qualitative research study will help to address a significant gap in the literature that exists concerning spirituality and persistence in attaining a degree with students in a community/technical college setting. As a result of the study, educators will be better informed as to how to draw from, and enhance, this spiritual support that already exists in their students, and consequently make their education a more holistic experience. Dungy (2003) posits that during the first decade of the twenty-first century, there exists a

prominent issue concerning spiritual development and college students. Dungy states that the issue involves “how students will adopt and integrate their spiritual development into the content of their academic learning and into the collegiate context of their lives” (p. 355). This study will allow educators to consider a different perspective in supporting and retaining nontraditional women than previously researched and help to contribute to the literature on persistence as well as student development.

### *Overview of Methodology*

A qualitative research design has been chosen for this study because this type of research is used to give the details of phenomena such as spirituality that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While quantitative methods measure entities being studied in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency, qualitative methods have an emphasis on the qualities of entities like spirituality and on processes and meanings which cannot be measured or experimentally examined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Within this type of design, a hermeneutic phenomenology study was employed as most appropriate given the researcher’s personal experience with the phenomenon of spirituality that was explored.

### *Organization of the Study*

Chapter one has provided an introduction to the study and a discussion of spirituality and religion, a description of community/technical college nontraditional female students, the research questions, a statement of the problem, an overview of the conceptual framework, purpose and significance of the study, and the methodology.

Chapter two provides a review of the literature on spirituality and persistence as well as the presentation of the conceptual framework for this study. In the review of persistence studies, there is a focus on traditional students to provide a background on persistence studies followed



by studies of nontraditional students and factors influencing their persistence. Validation is discussed as a positive influencer on nontraditional female students in academic environments. A discussion of the distinction between religion and spirituality is included because religion is commonly associated with spirituality. Stage theories are presented which include Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarules's (1986) *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) theories of faith development for the college years and Fowlers (1981) developmental stages of faith. Lastly, the conceptual framework for the study is discussed and it includes Parks theories of faith development and Rendon's (2000) *Model of Academics of the Heart*.

The study's methodology is addressed in Chapter three. This includes the research questions, methodological framework, a description of the role of the researcher, review of the pilot study, discussion of the study participants, and a plan for data collection and analysis.

Chapter four presents the results of the data analysis. In the first part of the chapter, the participants are introduced and basic demographic information is provided. In the second section, the findings of the study are reported.

The concluding chapter provides a discussion of the findings of the study in relation to each of the research questions and also includes a revised conceptual framework. The limitations of the study are addressed and implications of this study are examined. Finally, recommendations for future research and concluding remarks are given.

## Chapter Two: Review of Literature

There is a goodness, a Wisdom that arises, sometimes gracefully, sometimes gently, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes fiercely, but it will arise to save us if we let it, and it arises from *within* us, like the force that drives green shoots to break the winter ground, it will arise and drive us into a great blossoming like a pear tree, into flowering, into fragrance, fruit, and song, into the wild wind dancing, sun shimmering, into the aliveness of it all, into that part of ourselves that can never be defiled, defeated, or destroyed, but that comes back to life, time and time again, that lives – always – that does not die. Into the Divine.

(China Galland, 1998)

### *Introduction*

This dissertation explored the perceptions and experiences of spirituality, as a validating factor and an intrinsic motivator to persist, in community and technical college nontraditional female students' pursuit of their educational goals. The major areas of research covered in this chapter include persistence studies, with support and criticism, as it relates to nontraditional female students in community and technical college settings. The literature review provides a discussion of persistence models of college students with an emphasis on Rendon's (1994, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2006) Academics of the Heart as a conceptual framework for the discussion of persistence of nontraditional women. Key influences of validation and spirituality are highlighted in these studies in reference to persistence and this population of women. Women's cognitive development was examined through Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) cognitive-structural theory of women's ways of knowing. As women develop cognitively, they go through changes in how they come to know, think, and believe. It is important to understand

the women's cognitive development because these changes are closely tied to how their growth occurs in their spiritual/faith development. "Understanding these cognitive pathways of development, which involves changes in how the person knows, thinks, and believes, provides a framework for examining the developmental pathways through which individuals will embark to arrive at their own religious and spiritual definitions and beliefs" (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006, p. 52). Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) theory of faith development is described as it provides the conceptual framework for my investigation of the spiritual development of women. Parks (2000) theory focuses on faith development as making meaning in our lives during the college years and beyond. This faith development theory posited by Parks is closely related to the understanding of spirituality, in contrast to religion, proposed in this study. Spirituality is defined as a new discourse, separate from religion, as it relates to these women and higher education. Implications of spirituality as a validating factor and intrinsic motivator to persist towards the completion of educational goals in these nontraditional women is also illuminated in the research literature discussed.

### *Review of Persistence Studies*

#### *Background Persistence Studies – Focus on Traditional Students*

Spady (1970), who is attributed with one of the earliest models of student attrition, posited that students who do not share like values and orientations as others in their college environment, do not interact socially, and do not feel compatible with the social system of the college they attend are more likely to drop out. Spady's (1970) model was influenced by the work of Durkheim (1951) who found that people who were not integrated socially and normatively into their social systems were more prone to suicidal tendencies. In effect, this integration is defined as follows: (1) social integration would be the collective affiliation with

other members of the community and (2) normative integration would be achieved through sharing a similarity of beliefs and values. If a person is not able to share a sense of meaning through group involvement, Durkheim (1951) posited that his personal sense of happiness is threatened and suicide may result. Along the same vein, Spady (1970) based a student's satisfaction with the institution as an outcome of the social integration with the college. Social integration includes all of the interactions among students, faculty, and staff that take place both inside and outside the classroom. Social integration, or the students' ability to integrate and establish membership with the college environment, results in a student's commitment to the institution and possible future persistence and success.

Building on Spady's (1970) earlier work, Tinto's (1975, 1993) model is one of the most widely recognized persistence models in higher education. Tinto's early model was also influenced by Durkheim's (1951) work. Tinto's model of college student attrition derives its strength from Durkheim's conception of solidarity. Tinto (1993) states that the route to college completion lies in ensuring from the very outset of student contact with the institution that entering students are integrated into both the social and academic life of the college. Tinto (1993) considers how entrance into an institution of higher education necessitates a complete severance of ties to the student's past social ties. This severance creates a state of confusion and insecurity which can lead to academic suicide in the form of student departure. Many of the nontraditional women referred to in this study do not fit into the framework that Tinto proposes in his early model. A vast number of them are part time students or have family/work obligations that do not allow them to remain on campus to interact socially and become engaged in the campus environment. Tinto (1993), in his later work, recognized these factors of non-resident or commuter students, age, and part-time attendance in nontraditional students. Although he did not

refer to this population as “nontraditional” but rather as “commuter” students, “part-time” students, “older” students, etc., he did describe the nontraditional population. He recognized that not all students are enrolled in four year residential institutions. In addition, he acknowledged that many students were attending commuter community colleges and spent much of their time off campus. These students had multiple roles as parents and employees and these responsibilities required them to spend much of their time away from campus. Since most of these students’ time is spent in the college classroom when on campus, Tinto proposed that the classroom serve as the intersector of the academic and social systems and he acknowledged that if integration is to occur, it must take place here.

In this same vein as the previous research by Tinto (1993), Gamble (2001) finds that fostering a sense of community among students is important because students grow and learn collaboratively, together with and separate from educators. For example, since the events of September 11 our nation’s psyche has changed and there have been many economic and social changes in our world. Gamble (2001), in focusing on student development theory, believes that our colleges should assist students in recognizing and adjusting to these changes and promoting student growth.

These models of persistence can be tied to Astin’s (1984) involvement theory of student development. He refers to this involvement as the amount of energy (both physical and psychological) that the student spends on the academic experience. He further proposes that for learning and growth to take place, students must be engaged in their environment. Astin’s (1993) study, *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited*, was a study of student outcomes and how they are affected by the college environment. This longitudinal study, which spanned four years, employed 82 different outcome measures, 150 student input measures, and 200

different environmental measures. The three broad categories he studied were academic development, personal development, and satisfaction. He found that almost any form of student involvement in college is a benefit to both learning and student development. It was found that peer group effects were the strongest influencers on enhancing student learning and development with student-faculty interaction being the second most significant aspect. For nontraditional students, opportunities for this involvement are much less than for traditional students because most of the nontraditional students are commuter students. Commuting students do not have the same opportunities for this involvement as do residential students who spend more time interacting with others on campus. Therefore, for this nontraditional population of students, other factors which may potentially contribute to student persistence need to be examined.

Not all theorists agree on the importance of social integration for students in the college environment. Tierney (1992) takes issue with Tinto's (1993) widely accepted theoretical model that views college participation as if it were a "rite of passage" where academic and social integration is essential for student persistence (p. 603). Tierney used data derived from interviews of Native Americans on ten different campuses to analyze the discourse of two individuals in order to underscore how social integrationist notions are enacted. It was found that "American Indians do not have both feet firmly planted in the university's soil. Their 'roots' are in another culture." (p. 613) He proposes that "Native Americans will need to undergo a cultural suicide of sorts to avoid an intellectual suicide" (p. 614). In deconstructing the discourse of two college administrators who were involved in a two year investigation of the college-going patterns of American Indian college students, Tierney (1992) focuses on the implications of the social integrationist stance of Tinto (1993). Tierney proposes that "if we want our colleges and universities to be multicultural we need theoretical models different from those of the social

integrationists” (p. 604). The social integrationists propose that all individuals, regardless of race, class or gender, must undergo a “rite of passage” to develop fully in society. The view taken by the integrationists is that a uniform set of values and attitudes exists in the institution and every individual is to adapt to the same system. This means that in American higher education institutions the dominant culture is white and it is to this system all students are expected to adapt. Until recently, white males who came from middle to upper classes dominated our institutions. Tierney (1993) asserts that when using Tinto’s (1992) model, “the analytic tool being used is dysfunctional: individuals from one culture, such as Apache, are to undergo a ritual in another culture, such as Anglo” (p. 609). The second problem as seen by Tierney (1993) in using ritual to pertain to higher education is “the assumption of one’s leave-taking from such a ritual. In traditional cultures rites of passage do not have notions such as ‘departure,’ ‘failure,’ or ‘dropout.’ Choice does not exist about whether to undergo the ritual; one simply partakes of it” (p. 609). The third and fourth anthropological problems with Tinto’s (1992) model are that of “Durkheimian reliance on individuals and integration” (p. 610). An individualist level, and not a collective one, has been conceptualized by Tinto in regard to college-going. Tinto proposes that “conformity is the norm and it is the responsibility of the individual” (p. 610).

My thoughts on Tinto’s (1992) theory are closely aligned with Tierney’s (1993), as previously discussed. In regards to my study of nontraditional women, Tierney’s critique of Tinto’s theory could also apply to the women I studied. In the summation of his article he purports a need to “reconfigure the social conditions of power that give voice to some and silence others. In doing so, we will be moving away from a model of social integration and assimilation and toward a framework of emancipation and empowerment” (p. 616). Instead of trying to fit the nontraditional women into the integrationist and socialization theories, we need

to look for new ways to understand and support the persistence and success of these women.

Thus I propose that we need to examine the spirituality of these women, which has been silenced in our educational settings, and explore ways that it may serve as a support or empowering factor in their persistence.

In summary, after critiquing the models of persistence previously mentioned by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975, 1993), Astin (1984), and Gamble (2001), it was found that they rely heavily on the concept of integration into the prevailing culture of the institutions. Since the nontraditional student does not have as much opportunity to be socially integrated in the institution, a different model is needed. Tierney's (1992) critique of Tinto's (1993) model further validates the need for a different model of persistence for these nontraditional women based on a power differential that has historically existed on our nation's campuses which operates to disadvantage women. Since many of these women are part-time students with the added responsibilities of raising children and being employed, they do not have the advantage of being engaged in the campus environment. The gender, race, and age of the nontraditional students are often at odds with the dominant educational culture. Furthermore, they do not have the benefit of fitting into the persistence models which were proposed by predominantly white males in our academies.

#### *Nontraditional Students and Persistence*

Tinto (1993) explains that although there have been numerous studies on persistence in recent years, "we still know relatively little about the specific attributes of attrition among females and adults" (p. 76). Although over a decade has passed since Tinto (1993) made this claim, this statement continues to ring true today. Up to the present, many studies have been conducted on factors that lead to student persistence but few studies have examined



nontraditional women and factors that affect them in obtaining a degree. What motivates these women towards obtaining a degree amidst varied obstacles in their lives? Are these motivators intrinsic or extrinsic?

Jarrell (2004) conducted a review of the research on persistence and developed a program for student success at an emerging community college. Her research study entitled, *Creating a foundation for student success: From research to practice*, found that “the advances in understanding the characteristics of community colleges and the unique and increasingly diverse needs of community college students in recent years creates new opportunities to refine and strengthen existing programs and to aid in developing new ones” (p. 524). In this previous research study, there was a focus on some of the support programs that were implemented for students at risk such as Freshmen Academic Seminar courses, early alert programs, student development workshops, etc. to support some of the needs of these diverse students in their persistence. My present research study contributes to the understanding of community college students’ diverse needs, specifically nontraditional women. There exists very little research on this specific population of students and factors which encourage their persistence towards obtaining a degree. After examining the needs of this group of nontraditional women, new programs can be designed to support them using the results of this study.

Bean and Metzger’s (1996) conceptual model of persistence was specifically designed for nontraditional students. Their model considers environmental variables, as well as psychological outcomes, important enough to influence persistence and retention. Environmental factors that may affect nontraditional student retention are family obligations, work, and students’ enrollment intentions or goals. Whereas an example of the effect of psychological outcomes on persistence, would be for the nontraditional student who has poor academic outcomes to remain

in college if the psychological outcomes are positive. Psychological outcomes are related to intentions or intent to leave college. Reduction of the intent to leave college is influenced by utility, satisfaction and goal commitment while stress would increase the student's intent to leave.

Calhoun (2003) more recently contributed research on adult student persistence in a community college setting. Using a qualitative study, she set out to obtain first-hand information from adult students to examine their perceptions of the role and influence of academic and social integration, faculty-student interaction, and external environment and intentions on their persistence in a community college setting. She used hermeneutic phenomenology as her methodology and conducted interviews, semi-structured follow-up interviews and a focus group to gain insight into the individual perceptions and experiences of her participants. The participants were six associate degree seeking adult students, 25 years of age or older, who had completed at least two or more consecutive semesters at a public community college. Four of the participants were female and two were male. The challenges encountered by male and female participants were not addressed in regard to gender but were instead generalized. There were, however, some gender differences noted pertaining to external factor such as with family support and gender roles, for male and female adult students. She suggested further investigation to address the similarities and differences among adult male and female students and persistence in community colleges. As a result of her research study, she found that there were four critical factors that strongly influenced the participants to persist. The factors were described as: (1) goals matter (2) relationships are important (3) problem solving and transformation are necessary and (4) intrinsic motivation affects all factors. Further elaborations on these factors follow.

In regard to goals, it was found that all participants enrolled with a goal in mind and these goals strongly influenced their persistence decisions. When the adult students entered the college, they were self directed learners with an intrinsic motivation to reach their goal. An implication in the findings is that if the adult students do “intend to pursue a degree; they are likely to be ‘determined’ to do so” (p. 117). This implication is relevant for my study as one of the criteria for the nontraditional women will be that they are persisting towards an educational goal they have set for themselves. The second factor found to have a strong influence is that family and peer relationships were very important. When they knew their goals were supported and valued by others outside the college, their determination to persist was enhanced. Conversely, unsupportive family members and peers had a negative influence on their persistence. Internal relationships in the college were also important in the pursuit to achieve their goals. Faculty and peer relationships were found to play a major role in building the participants’ self-confidence. The third factor involved problem solving and transformation. Dilemmas relating to scheduling conflicts for females involving family and school, unsupportive faculty, academic deficiencies, etc. required participants to seek solutions to their problems. It was found that in taking action to solve their problems, the participants were transformed into more confident and empowered students who were able to take charge of their lives. Finally, with the last factor, which involved intrinsic reasons to persist, it was found that this factor affected all the other factors. An intrinsic drive of self-empowerment and the drive to persist were fueled by the participants will and determination to stay focused on their goal.

This trend towards intrinsic motivation for nontraditional students and persistence was more recently studied by Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007). Bye, et al’s study explored the phenomenological distinction between older and younger students’ experiences by testing two

age groups, 18 to 21 years vs. 27 or more years, on levels of motivation to learn, and relationships between age, trait interest, intrinsic motivation, and positive affect. The sample was drawn from the full university population and was composed of 300 undergraduates who volunteered to participate. The goal of the study was to investigate the two motivational types, intrinsic and extrinsic, within the academic environment. The hypothesis stated that nontraditional (older) students would report higher levels of intrinsic motivation and traditional (younger) students would conversely report higher levels of extrinsic motivation. In this study, it was found that the nontraditional students reported higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning than did traditional students.

In summarizing the literature on nontraditional students and persistence presented in this previous section, it was found that intrinsic motivation is a strong factor in persistence towards obtaining a degree. In this dissertation study, intrinsic motivation is a concept that was examined. Within the concept of intrinsic motivation, there are influencers which provide the means through which the participants develop this intrinsic motivation. One of these influencers is that of validation.

In the following section, validation is discussed as a positive influencer on nontraditional female students in academic environments. The following discussion of validation is closely tied to persistence theory in that for these women to persist towards their pursuit of a degree, they must have experiences which enhance or are consistent with their internal motivations.

#### *Validation and non-traditional women*

Rendon (1994) proposed validation as another facet to persistence. She found that nontraditional students were often doubtful of their academic ability but when validated they developed confidence in their ability to learn and succeed. Rendon (1994) defined validation as

“an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p.44). She determined that the external agents could be faculty, counselors, administrators, classmates, friends, family members, colleagues at the workplace, etc.; all of whom had the capacity to transform even the most vulnerable nontraditional student. Building on Astin’s (1985) theory of involvement, Rendon (1994) demonstrated in the study, The Transition to College Project, that “nontraditional students, no matter how fragile, can be transformed into full members of the college academic and social community” (p. 51). There was noted, however, a distinct difference between Astin’s (1985) involvement theory and Rendons’ (1994) theory of validation. Astin (1985), in his theory of involvement, purports that as the student begins to invest psychological and physical energy in the tasks, people, and activities in the college environment, the students learning and growth is influenced in a positive way and persistence follows. Rendon (1994) found in her study that “nontraditional students do not perceive involvement as *them* taking the initiative...they perceive it when someone takes an active role in assisting them” (p. 44). This validation, however, does encourage involvement and the end result of persistence is accomplished. In Rendon’s (1994) study, she sought to answer two questions (1) How do students become active and involved participants in the academic community? and (2) How do students’ out-of-class experiences, particularly their interpersonal interactions, reinforce, augment, or attenuate curricular and classroom learning and achievement of broader general education goals? One hundred and thirty two first year students at four different institutional settings were interviewed in focus groups of culturally diverse selected samples with specific characteristics such as females, males, commuter, African Americans, etc. An interesting dynamic took place during this study. Nontraditional students who came to college expecting to fail suddenly began to believe in their

innate capacity to learn and to become successful college students. One of the findings of the study was that involvement in college is not easy for nontraditional students and the missing link may be that they need validation. It was learned that when these students felt validated, both in and out of the classroom, students began to believe that success was possible. This validation could be either academic or interpersonal.

In an additional study, another dimension of validation was noted that involved nontraditional women. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) discussed the concept of women and validation in the educational setting. In thinking about the education of women in their study included in their book, *Women's ways of knowing*, Belenky, et al. found in the interviews of their participants that “every woman, regardless of age, social class, ethnicity, and academic achievement, needs to know that she is capable of intelligent thought, and she needs to know it right away” (p. 193). They found that “this worry was especially acute among older women returning to college or entering it for the first time” (p. 195). These women have sometimes been away from an educational environment for some time and validation is especially important to them at this time. Many are entering with obstacles such as lack of support at home from spouse, family or peers, low academic skills, low self esteem, and generally a sense of fear that they may not succeed. If validation is not felt at this time, they will leave.

To further her study on the extent to which in and out-of-class academic, social, and spiritual experiences are associated with persistence, Laura Rendon (2004) engaged in a research study of American Indian and Alaska Native students at an American Bible college. Using a focus group methodology, an interview protocol was designed and included questions on how faculty, staff, other students, family members, and programs enhanced their desire to persist

beyond their first year. The study revealed that there were three key influences that assisted them to stay in college: family, spirituality, and validation. This study did focus on students who attend a Bible college and they may differ from those who attend nonreligious institutions. However, this further exploration of student persistence factors does contribute to existing literature. More importantly, it establishes a precedent for the importance of the relationship between spirituality and persistence. For the purposes of my study, this finding that a relationship exists between spirituality and the decision to remain in college lends credibility to my exploration of spirituality as an intrinsic motivator to persist in obtaining educational goals. The study also confirms that validation is a key influencer on the decision of nontraditional women to remain in college.

In an additional study which used Rendon's (2000) Academics of the Heart model as a conceptual framework, Burgis and Rendon (2006) investigated "if and how holistic practices (encompassing intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual pedagogy) can be employed as a complement to traditional teaching and learning experiences" (p. 2). A purposeful sample of four learning communities was chosen and a multiple case study research design was employed. By using this conceptual model of Academics of the Heart, it was found that "the blending of heart and mind learning seemed to happen naturally, perhaps speaking to the intuitive ways in which faculty who want to transcend traditional teaching and learning approaches take risks to do things differently" (p. 16). Burgis and Rendon (2006) offer that "academic and student affairs educators who are willing to take the risk of doing things differently, even in the face of resistance to deal with issues of heart and spirituality, have the opportunity to rewrite the story about what really matters....and what is important in education" (p. 18).

## *Summary*

Recent studies confirm that new ways of examining persistence for different populations of students are necessary for these students to experience success. Tierney (1992) suggests that we need “theoretical models different from those of the social integrationists” (p 604). His idea of “moving away from a model of social integration and assimilation and toward a framework of emancipation and empowerment” supports my study and the ways in which the gender, race, and age of these women may be at odds with the dominant educational culture and environment they find themselves in (p. 616).

Studies of adult students (Calhoun, 2003; Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007) seem to confirm that intrinsic motivation is a main factor in their persistence. In addition, other studies support the idea that validation is empowering and develops confidence in these women in educational environments (Rendon, 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

Another area of persistence research which shed preliminary evidence on the role of spirituality in the lives of nontraditional women is that of Rendon’s (2000) model of Academics of the Heart. In Rendon’s model, she purports a blending of the heart and mind in our educational environment. Holistic practices which encompass spirituality can be used to complement traditional practices of teaching and learning.

The assimilation of these studies and theories of recent years on persistence of nontraditional women bears credence to my study of spirituality and persistence in these students. Scant research exists on how the spirituality of these women may validate and empower them and thus serve as an intrinsic motivation to persist towards a degree in spite of obstacles in their lives. Therefore, these factors have a bearing on my study and are the heart of my research efforts.



### *Spirituality as a New Discourse*

Astin and Astin (2006) purport that our American higher education institutions of late have paid relatively little attention to the student's interior development. Interior development of the student, according to Astin and Astin, encompasses areas such as their values, beliefs, spirituality, moral development, and self-understanding.

As noted in the works of researchers (Tisdell, 2003; Parks, 2000; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Dalton, 2001; Love, 2001; Palmer, 1999b; Stamm, 2003; Walsh, 2000; Durka, 2002; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; Rendon, 2000; Estanek, 2006; Rogers & Love, 2007) in higher education in this new millennium, the pendulum is now swinging towards inclusion of spirituality in our higher educational academies. This inclusion of spirituality, meaning-making, and purpose into our academies will be evidenced by their integration into our curriculum, student affairs, professional development and other areas. Programs are beginning to be reshaped with inclusion of these areas to better support our students in their holistic development – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. In a report by the Higher Education Research Institute, April 13, 2005, today's entering college freshmen have high expectations that college will help them develop emotionally and spiritually. Nearly half (48%) say that it is 'essential' or 'very important' that college encourage their personal expression of spirituality.

Spirituality is not an easy concept to define especially in reference to our public educational institutions. Estanek (2006), using qualitative research methods, examined definitions of spirituality in higher education literature. She argues that

- (1) the emerging discussion of spirituality can be understood as a new discourse because it separates the understanding of spirituality from its roots in religion and thus changes its meaning;
- (2) that no common definition of spirituality exists; but that
- (3) the definitions

contain five recurring patterns that illuminate the parameters of the new discourse (p. 270).

She was interested in “illuminating this new meaning being conveyed in the definitions and not simply in the definitions per se” (p. 271). The study was conducted between May 2003 and May 2004 and the first step was to conduct a literature review of sources on spirituality in higher education literature. This included journal articles, books, dissertations and master’s theses as well as web sites and conference presentations on the topic of spirituality. A purposeful sample of texts was selected that clearly articulated a specific definition of spirituality. This resulted in the selection of fifteen different texts for inclusion in the sample. A content analysis was conducted to discover common non-redundant themes using a methodology for analyzing narrative data. Two different methods of peer review were employed to promote validity and reliability.

Through Estanek’s (2006) research study, it was found that there were five common themes that identify the parameters of the understanding of spirituality:

- a) spirituality defined as spiritual development, b) spirituality used as critique,
- c) spirituality understood as an empty container for individual meaning, d) spirituality understood as common ground or “field,” and e) spirituality as quasi-religion. (p. 272-273)

These themes will be further defined throughout this next section. It is of practical importance to understand how spirituality is defined in what is referred to as this new discourse. An understanding of this definition will clarify how the experience of spirituality has been examined in this study. Furthermore, spirituality and faith development is used interchangeably in this study. An understanding of the definition of spirituality helped to shed light on Parks

(2000) faith development theory which makes up a part of the conceptual framework of this study.

*Spirituality Defined as Spiritual Development.*

Not all researchers equate spirituality with models of spiritual development. For the purposes of this study, developmental models have been examined. A developmental approach to spirituality is consistent with the theoretical assumptions of student development literature (Love, 2001; 2002) as well as with the work of both Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000). The definitions in the literature that equate spirituality with spiritual development that have been used are those of Tisdell (2003) and Love and Talbot (1999).

Love and Talbot's (1999) definition of spirituality is based on three assumptions: (1) "the quest for spiritual development is an innate aspect of human development" (2) "spiritual development and spirituality are interchangeable concepts" and (3) "openness is a prerequisite to spiritual development" (p. 364). Based on these assumptions Love and Talbot (1999) offer five propositions that forms their definition of spiritual development:

1) Developing spiritually involves an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development as well as 2) the process of continually transcending one's current locus of centrality. 3) Additionally, through relationships, a greater connectedness to self and others is developed which in turn facilitates a way 4) to derive meaning, purpose, and direction in one's life. As a result of this growth, 5) an increasing openness to explore a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing evolves (pp. 364 -367).

Tisdell's (2003) definition of spirituality is closely related to that of Love and Talbot. Although Tisdell posits that spirituality and religion are not the same, she states that they are

interrelated. Tisdell (2003) refers to spirituality as awareness and honoring of wholeness and interconnectedness of all things through the mystery of what may be referred to as the Life-force, God, higher power, higher self, cosmic energy, Buddha, nature, or Great Spirit. She proposes that spirituality is about meaning making, a movement towards a more authentic self, and is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment. Spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes, often made more concrete in art forms such as music, art, image, symbol, and ritual which are manifested culturally. When one encounters the spiritual, Tisdell offers that it often happens by surprise, or in the least expected ways (pp. 28-29).

In both of these definitions, Estanek (2006) surmises that some common themes exist: spirituality is both deeply individual and communal, there is some sort of power beyond human existence, and humans develop in trying to make sense (meaning-making) of their existence in light of this power.

### *Spirituality Used as Critique*

In the literature, there are two versions of the understanding of spirituality used as critique. One is spirituality as critique of mainstream religion and the second, spirituality as critique of the dominant epistemology of the academy. These two versions can be expanded on as follows:

As critique of religion, spirituality can be summarized in this statement, “I am not religious but I am spiritual” (Parks, 2000, p. 16). Many of the definitions of spirituality have emerged from studying the lived experiences of participants in research studies. These adults often move away from their childhood religious tradition or begin to question it. However, while

developing a more meaningful adult spirituality they often ‘spiral back’ to incorporate elements of their religious background into this new eclectic spirituality (Tisdell, 2003).

The second understanding of spirituality as critique emerges from the academic community. Estanek (2006) explains that this critique is of the dominant epistemology in academe of rationalism and objectivism. She states that “in this epistemology the dominant mode of thinking is to understand the world without recourse to any concept of God or a higher power, overarching intelligence, or any form of transrational phenomena, that is, experience beyond human reason and experience” (p. 274). This is being challenged as alternative ways of knowing are being brought into the academy such as when student centered education engages students as whole persons, the spiritual dimension will be included.

#### *Spirituality Understood as an Empty Container for Individual Meaning.*

This concept of the empty container is important because the separation of church and state in public institutions makes it difficult to discuss issues related to spirituality. Practitioners have developed the definition of spirituality as an open container to enable each individual to fill in their own meaning to the work. By doing this, spirituality in and of itself has no real meaning. Estanek (2006) proposes that “what gives meaning to one’s life or what is at the center of one’s sense of being is intensely personal and is left to the individual to fill in” (p. 275). This helps to understand the concept of spirituality as having different interpretations depending on who is being questioned as to their definition of it.

#### *Spirituality Understood as Common Ground or Field.*

Again, the interpretation of spirituality in regards to it being a common ground or field is left to individual interpretation. Estanek (2006) states that the concept of “field” is derived from the new science of quantum physics (p. 275). It is an invisible connective energy and in

understanding the definition of spirituality as field, it can be said that spirituality is the unseen web that connects all religions. On the other hand, this understanding of spirituality as field can also be understood without any reference to religion. It can be understood as an internal cohesion which is common to all human beings. Spirit may be defined as a life force which is present in all elements such as air, water, etc.

### *Spirituality as Quasi-Religion.*

The final theme identified, spirituality as quasi-religion, can best be described as New Age. New Age spirituality is a coherent alternative worldview that contains elements from both Western and non-Western cultures. Again, this alternative of “new age” is defined in many different ways and is left open to interpretation.

### *Summary*

From the result of her study, Estanek (2006) concluded that the implications for practice would be that practitioners, especially in the area of student affairs, take a developmental approach to spirituality. In this study as well, a developmental approach was also the best framework to use in examining nontraditional women in terms of their faith development and environments conducive to their persistence. It was important to discern where the women were on the continuum with their faith development. Their sense of spirituality / faith development would determine whether their spirituality served as an intrinsic motivation to persist. If a sense of spirituality does not exist or has not developed, then it is a moot point in their persistence efforts.

Although Estanek (2006), in her study, initially referred to spirituality as a new discourse, this study also viewed spirituality as a new discourse separate from religion. Unlike Estanek, who states that “no common definition of spirituality exists”, I proposed a definition of

spirituality for the purpose of this study: spirituality is an awareness of a Divine source of power within that is greater than ourselves and fosters strength, hope and meaning in our lives and supports us in our work for the common good of our world.

In the next section, stage theories of development models will be discussed and include those that will have significance in studying nontraditional women. The first is the model proposed by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) known as Women's Ways of Knowing, secondly, James Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development are presented to provide an understanding of Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) model of faith development for college students. Parks model is significant in that it makes up a part of the conceptual framework for this study.

### *Stage Theories of Development*

While we know much about stage theories for this population, the stages are fluid and don't follow a set timeline. Each individual woman is unique and stage theory cannot capture the complexities they present with in fixed categories. In addition, our college population is ever changing. Today, as stated by Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito (1998), "our student populations and the developmental issues they confront are more diverse and complex than ever in the history of higher education" (p. xi). Chickering and Reisser (1993), in their analyses of stage models of development, posit that "development for college students, which today includes persons of virtually all ages, is a process of infinite complexity. Just as students are notorious for not proceeding through the institution according to schedule, they rarely fit into oversimplified paths or pigeonholes" with respect to where they are in their development (p. 34). In past decades, student development theory fit into a nicely organized diagram and students went through the stages at a set age. Most of the students were traditional age students, full-time students, and the majority of the students were not members of a minority group. Today our

college campuses are composed of students at all age levels, composed of different cultural backgrounds, and many are attending part-time. There is no longer a set model of college student development tied to age and the paradigms are more complicated. The stages of development are fluid and not always tied to a set pattern or time frame. To better understand where these nontraditional female students in this study are in their stages of development, both cognitively and spiritually, several of these theories need to be addressed to help us to better understand these women and their process of growth. As a result, practitioners in the field of higher education will gain a better understanding of this population of nontraditional female learners and will better be able to implement proactive strategies to meet their needs during the college years.

### *Cognitive-Structural Theories of Development*

Some of the developmental theories that are applicable to college students are in the cognitive structural tradition such as Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) faith development theory, James Fowler's (1981) faith development theory, Carol Gilligan's (1982) women's moral development, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule's (1986) Women's Ways of Knowing, to mention just a sampling of those that exist. Cognitive structural theories focus on *how* people think, reason, and make meaning of the experiences in their lives. More recently, cognitive-structural theorists who have examined both intellectual and moral development have turned their focus on gender differences. Belenky (1986), et al are a group of these theorists who inform our view about gender differences in the cognitive domain. For purposes of this study, I have included three theories in the cognitive-structural tradition that I believe are relevant to the topic of this study. The three that will be focused on are Parks (2000) and Fowlers (1981) stages of faith development and Belenky (1986), et al.s Women's Ways of Knowing.



The theory proposed by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), *Women's Ways of Knowing*, provides background on the development of how women make meaning in their lives. Since meaning making is closely tied to spirituality, the researcher believes it is important to include this discussion on women's ways of knowing. Tisdell (2003) proposes that people construct knowledge and meaning making through their spirituality. Spirituality works in consort with the affective, the rational or cognitive. To ignore our spirituality is to ignore one of our main avenues to meaning making in our lives. The spiritual or faith development theories included in this study are those of James Fowler (1981) and Sharon Daloz Parks (1986, 2000) and are also considered developmental as well as cognitively related theories. These theories will make up a portion of the conceptual framework of the study.

#### *Women's Ways of Knowing*

Many of the nontraditional women who enter our academies today are arriving there via a different route than does the traditional student. The traditional student usually enters after graduating from high school. Nontraditional women who enter community/technical colleges often arrive there as a result of events in their lives which have precipitated a change such as a divorce, loss of a job, death of a spouse, etc. These transitional or life altering factors often set the students up for failure if the support they need to bring them through the crisis is not provided. A developmental process is needed to move them through these life events (or events that failed to occur such as marriages, employment, etc.) over time. It is the belief of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) that real life lessons that women learn in their lives are not gleaned from the academic world but instead from relationships with friends and teachers, as well as the crises they experience in their lives and community involvements. Their development

has often progressed to stages beyond that which college students have presented with in the past.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) have contributed a cognitive-structural theory, Women's Ways of Knowing, which can be used as a framework in examining women's cognitive development. It is important to examine their cognitive development as it is closely tied to meaning making as is their spiritual development. Tisdell (1999a) observes that spirituality is "all encompassing and cannot be torn from other aspects of adult development" (p. 94). Women view their world and make meaning through five perspectives which are silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. Women have different needs than men and these ways of knowing need to be understood in order to have a successful experience in an academic setting. Connected teaching is advocated by Belenky (1986), et al. and the teacher's role should be that of a mid-wife to learning in which the students produce their own ideas and their own voice is nurtured by emphasizing connection rather than separation. These ways of knowing, however, are not always supported in college classrooms. Belenky, et al. posit that many classrooms still adhere to the banking model described by Paulo Freire (2000) as one which simply deposits knowledge into the students' head.

For women, according to Belenky (1986), et al, the development of voice, mind, and self are "intricately intertwined" (p.18). The five epistemological or cognitive perspectives that were determined for women by Belenky, et al. are described as follows:

*silence*, a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority; *received knowledge*, a perspective from which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge

from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own, *subjective knowledge*, a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited; *procedural knowledge*, a position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge, and *constructed knowledge*, a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing (p. 15).

Women come to the basic insights of constructivist thought, which is “all knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known,” (p. 137) through the process of sorting out the pieces of the self and of searching for a unique and authentic voice. Belenky (1986), et al proposes that “the opening of the mind *and* the heart to embrace the *world* was characteristic only of the women at the position of constructed knowledge” (p. 141). They determined that “more than any other group,” they (meaning the constructivist women), “are seriously preoccupied with the moral or spiritual dimension of their lives” (p. 150).

Belenky (1986), et al. believes in development as the aim of education and in their book, *Women’s ways of knowing*”, they argue

that educators can help women develop their own voices if they emphasize connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate; if they accord respect to and allow time for the knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience; if instead of imposing their own expectations and arbitrary requirements, they encourage students to evolve their own patterns of work based on the problems they are pursuing. These are the lessons we have learned in listening to women’s voices (p. 229).

These developmental stages where women will eventually develop their own “voice” and become creators of their own way of knowing are closely tied to the stages proposed by James Fowler (1981) and Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) in their models of faith/spiritual development. In their later stages of faith development, the person moves from listening to voices of authority to becoming autonomous in their thinking. An inner dependence develops and the person listens to the voice of their deeper self. Finally, it is interesting to note that it was found that when the last developmental stage, or constructivist stage, as proposed by Belenky (1986), et al is reached the women “are seriously preoccupied with the moral or spiritual dimension of their lives” (p. 150). It is almost as if the stages of development in the different areas all begin to converge in the latter stages.

In the following section, the models of faith development, as proposed by Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000), will be discussed. The connection between Women’s Ways of Knowing and the stages of faith as noted above will become clearer after this discussion. It will become more evident why the researcher believes that a background on how women develop their own voice is needed to set the stage for how they develop in their spiritual journey.

### *Faith/Spiritual Development*

#### *Introduction*

“On what or whom do you set your heart? To what vision of right-relatedness between humans, nature and the transcendent are you loyal, what hope and what ground of hope animate you and give shape to the force field of your life and to how you move into it?”  
(Fowler, 1981, p. 14)

According to the above quote of Fowler (1981), these are all questions of faith which help us to get in touch with “the dynamic, patterned process by which we find life meaningful”

(p. 3). He contends that faith is not always religious in content or context. It is rather a person or groups way of moving into the force field of life. He further defines faith as “a person’s way of seeing him - or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (p. 4).

Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) theory of faith development for the college years stands within and elaborates on James Fowlers’ (1981) six stages of faith development. The work of Parks reinforces the relationship of spiritually related developmental theories and traditional ones such as Belenky (1986) et al.’s *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. Like Fowler (1981), she focuses attention on the concept of faith rather than on that of religion. Making meaning in our lives, according to Parks, is associated with faith.

Faith goes far beyond religious belief....Faith is more adequately recognized as the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience. Faith is a broad generic human phenomenon. To be human is to dwell in faith, to dwell in the sense one makes out of life – what seems ultimately true and dependable about self, world, cosmos (p. 7).

It should be noted that for the purposes of this study, these two faith development theories could also be called spiritual development theories. Chickering, Dalton and Stamm (2006) state that “it should be noted that in many respects Fowler’s (1981) conception of faith is similar to the understanding of spirituality, in contrast to religion, in common usage among Americans today” (p. 40). To further build on this clarification, Parks (2000) believes that this concept of faith “addresses our culture’s current hunger for a shared language about things ‘spiritual’ (p. 7). A further discussion of these two theories, Fowlers (1981) stages of faith

development and Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) theory of faith development in the college years, follows in the next sections.

*Fowler's developmental stages of faith*

Fowler (1981) is the premiere pioneer of the study of faith development and in his book, *Stages of Faith*, he identifies six stages through which people of faith invariably travel. The first stage he calls Intuitive-Projective faith usually occurs between the ages of three and seven. During this stage, self awareness begins to surface and imagination is born. Stage two is called Mythic-Literal faith and it is in this stage that the person begins to integrate symbols, rituals, and stories into their experiences. A narrative construction of meaning is brought about in this stage of faith development. The third stage is labeled Synthetic-Conventional faith and the person's experience of the world now extends beyond the family. According to Fowler (1981), it is in this stage that the majority of the population finds themselves. This stage begins in adolescence and is called the conformist stage because it does not have autonomous judgment or an individual identity. The expectations and judgment of others is placed as a priority at this stage. Stage four most appropriately takes form in young adulthood but for a significant group of adults it will not emerge until their thirties or forties. In this transition, "the late adolescent or adult must begin to bear the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes" (p. 182). Stage five, Conjunctive faith, is unusual before mid-life. During this time, one begins to rework their past and begins to listen to the voices of their deeper self. "This involves a critical recognition of one's social unconscious –the myths, ideal images and prejudices built deeply into the self-system by virtue of one's nurture within a particular social class, religious tradition, ethnic group or the like" (p. 198). Stage six, Universalizing faith is the last stage and is exceedingly rare. At this point, persons have completed the process of the

decentralization of self. Their environment is now open and accepting of all being. “They have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community” (p. 200). They work to liberate humanity from the “shackles” of social, political, economic, and ideological expectations and constraints. Examples of persons who have reached this level of mature faith are Mother Teresa of Kolkata, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Thomas Merton.

*Challenges to Fowlers’ model.*

Slee (2000) challenges Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith development as it pertains to women’s faith development. She conducted a qualitative study with open-ended interviews of 30 Christian or previously Christian women who ranged in age from 30 to 67 to explore the faith lives of these women. The purpose of the study was to examine the patterns and processes of women’s spirituality and faith development in a group of women who identified themselves as Christian or previously Christian. She drew on feminist research principles, Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory and feminist theological and psychological studies of women’s faith in conducting the study. Three major generative themes, or patterns, of women’s faith emerged from the study: paralysis, awakenings, and relationality. Paralysis signifies the crises which women face in a patriarchal culture in coming to an ownership of their lives as meaningful, spirit-inspired and intentional. The women in the study used powerful images to describe this time in their faith lives. Some described it as a wilderness, desert, confinement, and a type of enclosure. Others used metaphors to describe this period such as deadness, loss of feeling, not knowing the self or God. They described it as being divided from their faith and had feelings of powerlessness and being robbed of their selfhood. Awakenings describe the moments and struggles in which women come to some resolution of paralysis. During these times of

awakenings, some enter into deeper levels of meaning transparency to truth and ability to act significantly in the world. They were able to share significant marker events which triggered these awakenings. For some it was making a break from a relationship, job, community, etc., or travel to another country or place to be able to see their situation more clearly. Being in a love relationship was for some the core experience that returned them to feeling valuable and empowered by love. One spoke of the birth of her child as a gateway to an encounter with God. Relationality or connectedness represents not so much a specific developmental phase, as the underlying sense of connectedness to God, self and others. Although during paralysis this sense of connection is threatened, it survives and guarantees meaning even during the most apparently bleak and hopeless times. Slee (2000) found that “in contrast to the phenomena of paralysis and awakenings within women’s spirituality, relationality appears to represent not so much a moment or phase within a developmental sequence of faith as a more fundamental epistemology which under pins the whole of a woman’s spiritual journey” (p. 13). Stated more simply, women’s faith, or spirituality, is rooted in a relational awareness. Slee (2000) challenges Fowler’s (1981) claim to provide a normative account of faith development, however, her findings do not invalidate Fowler’s theory as such. They do reveal aspects of women’s experience which do not “fit” neatly within his theory and thus support a need for further exploration by other models in order to better account for women’s experiences.

Parks (2000), in her model of faith development during the college years, fills this need for further exploration to better account for women’s experiences that was proposed by Slee (2000).

*Sharon Daloz Parks – Meaning making and faith development*

Parks (2000) elaborates on Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith development by formulating a theory of faith development specific to the young adult years of the college population. She



recognizes that “not only the quality of young adult lives but also our future as a culture depends in no small measure upon our capacity to recognize the emerging competence of young adults, to initiate them into big questions, and to give them access to worthy dreams” (p. xi). Parks (2000) work is grounded in traditional student development theory as well as her knowledge of theology and faith in practice as a teacher, counselor and researcher of young adults.

Parks (2000) refines Fowler’s (1981) theory by including an additional stage of faith development between adolescence and adulthood which she describes as young adult faith. Her theory includes two separate stages within Fowler’s fourth stage of Individuative-Reflective Faith. She further differentiates adulthood into what she calls tested adults and mature adults as described below. Park’s (2000) resulting model of faith development is a four-stage model which consists of (1) adolescent, (2) young adult, (3) tested adult, and (4) mature adult faith. The process of faith development, within her conceptual framework, involves a series of transformations. These transformations begin with an authority bound form of meaning making which then moves through the wilderness of counter-dependence and unqualified relativism. The next stage is a committed inner-dependent and unqualified relativism and the last stage is a committed, inner-dependent mode of composing meaning.

In stage one, adolescent or conventional faith, faith can be characterized by “authority-bound, dualistic forms of knowing; dependent/counterdependent forms of dependence; and conventional forms of community” (p. 55 -57). Stage two, young adult faith, can be described in terms of probing commitment forms of knowing; fragile inner-dependent forms of dependence and mentoring forms of community. This can be best described as a transitional period for the young adult. During this second stage, it is Parks (2000) belief that a mentoring community is necessary for the student to move into an adult faith. She refers to this in her model as the “gifts”

of mentoring. She proposes that when this type of relationship works the meaning and satisfaction it yields are gifts to both; protégé and mentor. In the third stage, the tested adult faith, a confident inner-dependence is manifested and those who were once the student's mentors now become their peers. Interiority begins to be cultivated which can be defined as a dialogue within the self. Mature adult faith, stage four, is rarely evident before post- midlife. This stage is typified by "convictional commitment (paradoxical) forms of knowing, interdependent forms of dependence and openness to other forms of community" (p. 86).

Parks (2000) asserts that although her model of faith development appears to be linear and fixed, it is a "dynamic, multidimensional, creative process" (p. 102) unlike Fowler's (1981) theory. She posits that her theory brings into the foreground a mode of meaning-making that has been overlooked by existing theories and institutional structures. In her theory, cognition and affect, or mind and heart, are interwoven. The women's ways of knowing, or cognitive development of women, discussed earlier are woven in with the faith/spiritual development stages that are proposed by Parks (2000). It is for this reason that this model of faith development has been chosen to provide a part of the conceptual framework of this study.

### *Summary*

The preceding discussion of cognitive-structural theories of development is important when studying nontraditional women and their spirituality and meaning making in their lives. It is imperative to know where they are on the continuum in their development in order to determine if their spirituality can serve as an intrinsic motivator to persist in their educational endeavors. The further along they are in their cognitive and spiritual development, the better the chance they will be supported by their spirituality in their persistence in the educational environment.

All three of the models discussed are interrelated and will add to the understanding of these nontraditional women and their development. Parks (2000) theory for college students will be the main focus in the conceptual framework of this study because it highlights the college student population. Although the participants in this study are the nontraditional population, Parks (2000) also includes these nontraditional women in her model by referring to the tested adult and mature adult stages. The influences of the other two theories, Fowlers' (1981) Stages of Faith Development and Belenky (1986), et al.'s theory of Women's Ways of Knowing, will also be addressed in the discussion of the conceptual framework. It would be remiss to leave them out of the discussion as their interrelatedness is imperative to the understanding of the framework.

### *Conceptual Framework*

A portion of the conceptual framework that informs this study is that of Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) theories of faith development for the college years as discussed in the previous section. Her theory informs how people make meaning of their world and the experiences they have. In her theory, cognition and affect, or mind and heart, are interwoven. Thus, the inclusion of Belenky (1986), et al. and Fowler's (1981) theories as added influences on the framework.

Along the same vein, and in addition, Rendon's (2000) Model of Academics of the Heart proposes a balance of reason and spirit in her model for educating for authenticity which she defines as spirituality. These two models, Parks (2000) and Rendon (2000), work together to provide the framework that this study is anchored in. Rendon's Model of Academics of the Heart will frame the validating environment that will nurture the persistence of these nontraditional women in the academic arena. Further discussion of Rendon's (2000) Model of Academics of

the Heart is included below. Following the discussion of Rendon's model, a discussion of the conceptual framework in its entirety, along with a diagram of the model, will be presented.

#### *Rendon's Model of Academics of the Heart*

The Cheyenne say that 'our first teacher is our heart'. Our hearts are calling to us. It is time to answer the calling to restore *flor y canto* (flower and song) in higher education.

All we have to do is open our hearts to change, to get into the mystery that will allow us to learn the truth of all that we are and can be. As we open our hearts, I can assure you that nothing short of a miracle will happen. We will be shown the way. (Rendon, 2000)

The previous quote can be interpreted to mean that it is time for higher education to begin to consider how spirituality can have a place in our academic environment. It speaks to the topic of this dissertation which has a focus on spirituality as an intrinsic motivator to persist towards an educational goal in nontraditional women.

Along this same vein, Rendon (2000) constructed a model of Academics of the Heart in higher education which is based on the philosophical essence of *flor y canto*. In constructing this model, she turned to her past and the indigenous people of Mexico, the Aztec culture. They believed that "the only truth on earth was poetic and artistic creation as embodied in what they called *in xochitl, in cuicatl, or flor y canto*, flower and song" (p. 3). *Flor y canto* was an education of the heart and "those who were able to create beautiful things such as music, literature, poetry, philosophy, art, and buildings were said to have God in their hearts and to be able to communicate with the divine" (p. 3). She set out in her new model "to reconceptualize the traditions that have worked against community, the balance of reason and spirit, and the education of the whole person in higher education" (p. 3).

Rendon's (2000) model of Academics of the Heart has five features:

*1. Create a learning environment that engages the heart, as well as the intellect.*

She posits that the place where learning communities meet should be treated as a sacred space. The environment should be one that is inspiring and uplifting to encourage “holy work” (p. 5). As a result, these communities of learning will become places that attend to educating the whole person. Emphasis will be placed not only on the intellect but personal growth and spiritual development as well. Nontraditional women are already developing in their spirituality and many of them are at the young adult or the tested adult stage. Within this learning environment proposed by Rendon (2000), their spirituality can be nurtured and affirmed as it continues to serve as an intrinsic motivator to their success.

*2. Make teaching and learning a relationship-centered process.*

This is where Rendon’s (2000) previous research on validation is addressed. A validating in and out-of-class environment is fostered to enable the students to see themselves as powerful learners. I would propose that the women’s spirituality could also serve as a validating agent in their lives. This interior motivation becomes for them a dialogue with the self. Their spirituality is how they make meaning in their lives and it serves as a means of validating their ‘mattering’. Additionally, women learn best in relationship centered environments. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) refer to this as connected knowing.

*3. Honor and respect diverse ways of knowing.*

Different voices, especially those that have been silenced, need to be listened to. Our community and technical colleges are enrolling a diverse population of women today, many of whom have been silenced. In this environment, more than one way of knowing can be realized.

4. *Attend to matters of difference, as well as togetherness.*

Rendon (2000) proposes that “we must learn to live and function within the paradox of individualistic freedom and collective community” (p. 5). In this environment, we can learn to celebrate our differences and grow in our own development, both intellectually and spiritually.

5. *Engage in contemplative practice.*

To bring this model to fruition, we must find ways for both students and faculty to make contemplative practice and reflection a part of teaching, learning, research and practice. Rendon (2000) purports that contemplation is seen not just as a form of religious practice. It is a method to develop concentration, to deepen understanding, and to cultivate awareness. “Contemplative practice is the heart of Academics of the Heart” (p. 5). It has been said that contemplation feeds the soul. To grow spiritually, this is perhaps the most important element and truly is at the heart of the model as well as this study.

In order to fully understand this scholar’s works, one must first get a glimpse of who Laura Rendon is as a person and how she became a part of these new academics. Thus, I include in this section a short discussion of Rendon’s (2000) background. In the book, *Succeeding in an academic career: A guide for faculty of color*, in which she writes a chapter on herself, she states that she is a child of working-class parents who had less than an elementary school education and she is a baby boomer who grew up in the 60’s. She further describes herself in this way: “Chicana/Mejicana/Latina, *mujer*, soul mate/partner/friend, artist, scholar, spiritual being” (p. 141). She is now faced with a new challenge in her professional life that she calls being a part of a *movimiento*, a movement that will take the academy to all that it should be: a place of inquiry and discovery, a place of truth, a place of authenticity, a place of imperfection, a place of acceptance and validation, a place of love. She is a part of a new kind of academic. One she calls

“Academics of the Heart” (p. 142). Rendon discusses that she also sees evidence of this *movimiento* in other members of the academy’s work such as Belenky et al. (1986) and their book, *Women’s Ways of Knowing* in which a new model of “connected teaching” is introduced; Parker Palmer’s (1997), *The Courage to Teach* which asks faculty to abandon the linear model of teaching and bring students into a community of learning around the subject itself; and Parks Daloz et al. (1996) with *Common Fire* which presents profiles of people who lead lives of commitment and community (p. 150). I would also add to her list another recently published work, *Encouraging authenticity and spirituality in higher education*, by Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006). This resource addresses the growing movement for incorporating spirituality as an important aspect of the meaning and purpose of higher education.

During a retreat sponsored by the Fetzer Institute around the time of the new millennium, Rendon (2000) was called to look at ways to be more authentic. It was at this retreat that she went back to her room and wrote an entry in her journal which stated: “Today I have learned that there is a new kind of academics – Academics of the Heart” (p. 152). In Academics of the Heart there is a focus on artistry, authenticity, self renewal, connectedness and she defines being authentic as being spiritual, ethical, committed, connected, centered, artistic, loving, imperfect, rhythmic, and harmonious. She calls herself “a missionary for change toward authenticity in the academy, to be a part of an exotic group of individuals who believe there has to be a better way for our educational system (indeed, the world) to operate” (p. 154).

Based on Rendon’s (2000) experience, a better understanding of her work has been revealed. The connection she makes between the intellect and the heart resonates with what I am trying to conceptualize in my study. For many, there already exists within an authentic self, which encompasses our spirituality, and is so much a part of who we are. Our educational

settings often do not acknowledge this part of our being and it is time, as Rendon acknowledges, to embrace this wholeness of self in our communities of learning.

### *Conceptual Framework Narrative*

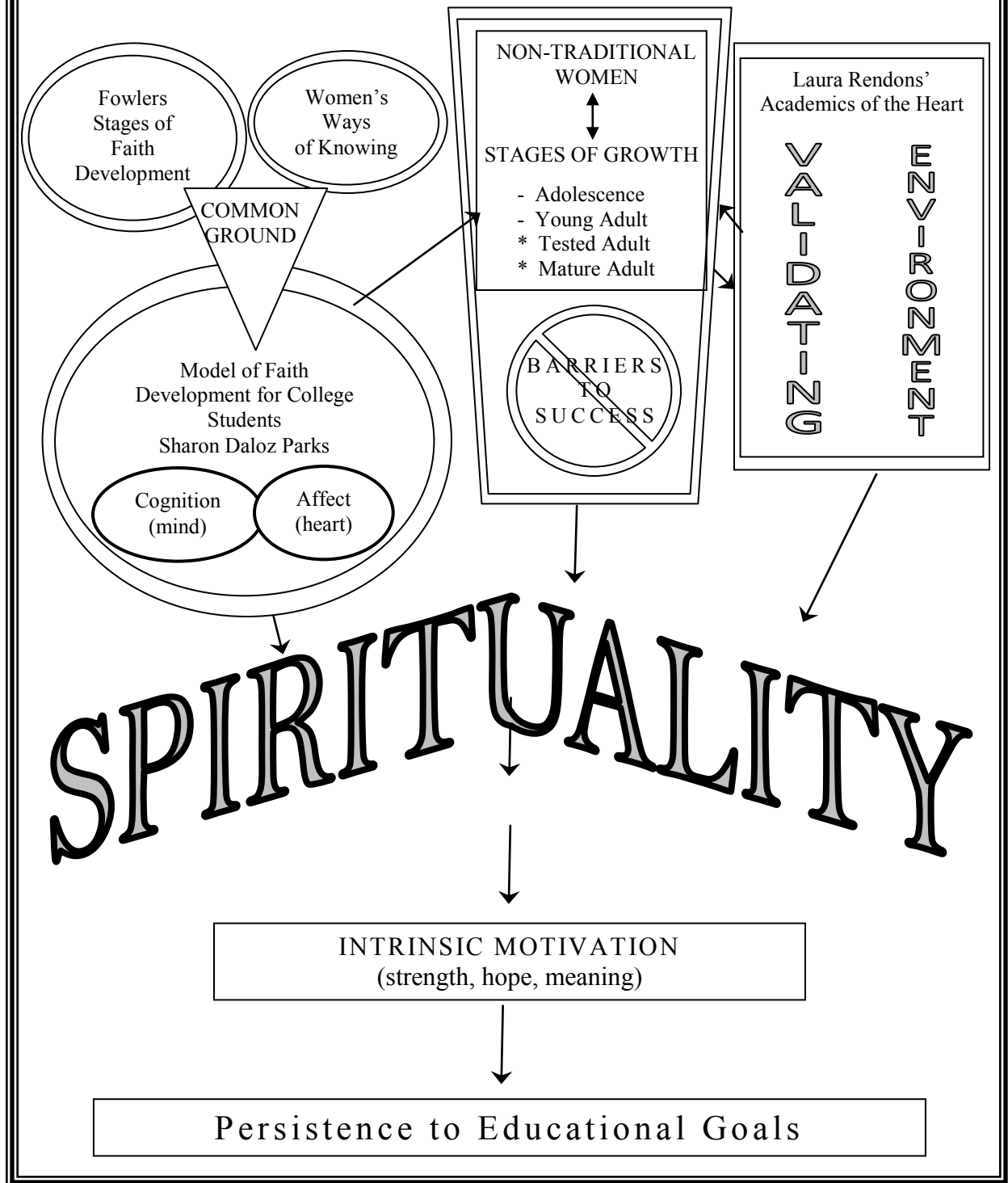
The persistence model for nontraditional women in community/technical colleges that I propose is to examine the stages of faith/spiritual development in Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) model for college students along with Laura Rendon's (2000) persistence model of Academics of the Heart. It is proposed that the nontraditional women interviewed in this study will have matured into stages of their faith development that Parks (2000) refers to as tested adult and mature adult. In these stages the women will have transformed from an authority bound form of meaning making to a committed inner-dependent and unqualified relativism and finally to a committed, inner-dependent mode of composing meaning. In simpler terms, their spirituality will be developed and will make up an important part of their inner being and how they envision their world. If the educational environment they enter is one that is modeled after Laura Rendon's (2000) Academics of the Heart, this spirituality will be nurtured and the environment will be validating. If, however, their spirituality is not as developed and this validating environment exists, their spirituality will have a better chance of being nurtured and developing. It is proposed by Rendon (2000) that an education of the whole person which includes our spiritual development be included in our academies (p. 3). She proposes that when this type of environment exists it is very validating to the person and persistence in their education follows. In this study, I propose to take it a step further and want to examine how the women's spirituality could serve as a validating agent in their lives. This interior motivation becomes for them a dialogue with the self. Their spirituality is how they make meaning in their lives and it serves as a means of validating their 'mattering'. For the purposes of this study, the following definition of



spirituality is offered: spirituality is an awareness of a Divine source of power within that is greater than ourselves and fosters strength, hope and meaning in our lives and supports us in our work for the common good of our world. This spirituality is their intrinsic motivation that will support them and give them the strength, hope, and meaning in their lives that will afford them the opportunity to succeed in the pursuit of their educational goals.

The conceptual framework of the study is illustrated in the following diagram. The diagram provides clarity to how Parks (2000) model of faith/spiritual development and Rendon's (2000) Academics of the Heart work in concert to develop and nurture spirituality. This spirituality in turn serves as an intrinsic motivator to persist to obtaining a degree.

Figure 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK  
A Persistence Model of Non-traditional Female Students  
in Community/Technical Colleges



### *Summary*

As described in the literature review, there is evidence that new ways of examining persistence for nontraditional female students need to be examined. It appears that many of the models that are used for traditional students are not a good fit for our nontraditional population that is growing in numbers in our community/technical colleges today. We need to move from models of social integration and assimilation to new models that will have positive influences on this expanding population of students. In summarizing the literature on nontraditional students, research reveals that intrinsic motivation exists for non traditional students in pursuit of their educational goals. Additionally, validation can be viewed as a positive influence or enhancer of this internal motivation therefore we need to explore these new avenues.

One of the avenues proposed in this study is that of spirituality as an intrinsic motivator to persist in nontraditional female students in community/technical colleges. It is important to study spirituality and consider potential implications for its place in institutions of higher education. Astin (2004) points out that “academia has for far too long encouraged us to lead fragmented and inauthentic lives, in which we act either as if we were not spiritual beings or as if our spiritual side were irrelevant to our vocation or work” (p. 38). Educational scholars are just beginning to question the place spirituality holds in our twenty first century academies, these theorists are contributing to the value of inner reflection, connectedness, empathy, care, relationships, and self motivation in our students, as well as ourselves as educators.

Building on the conceptual frameworks of Parks (2000) model of faith development/spirituality, and Rendons (2000) Model of Academics of the Heart, the researcher examined why the nontraditional women chose to persist in their studies towards a goal. In exploring their life experiences, obstacles they have encountered were revealed, and how

spirituality may have served as a force field in their lives was discovered. To gain the perceptions of nontraditional female students and spirituality as an intrinsic motivation to persist towards a degree, it was necessary to examine the voices of these students. It is my hope that, by having listened to the voices of some of these students in selected community/technical colleges, new light has been shed on this topic.

The following chapter is a description of the study's phenomenological methodology, research questions, and data analysis.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

In doing research we question the world's very secrets and intimacies which are constitutive of the world, and which bring the world into being for us and in us. Then research is a caring act: we want to know that which is most essential to being. To care is to serve and to share our being with the one we love. We desire to truly know our loved one's very nature. And if our love is strong enough, we not only will learn much about life, we also will come face to face with its mystery.

(van Manen, 1990, p. 5-6)

### *Purpose*

This chapter describes the specific qualitative methodology that was utilized in this study. Hermeneutic phenomenology in particular will be discussed using Max van Manen's methodological structure of human science research. van Manen proposed that hermeneutic phenomenological research may be seen as a dynamic interplay among six research activities. An overview of the methodological framework of this study along with the data collection techniques, specifically the individual unstructured interviews and the unstructured focus group interviews, as well as the analysis and interpretation procedures will also be presented. Additionally, methods for establishing trustworthiness of the inquiry and findings will be included.

### *Research Questions*

The central research question that guided this study is:  
What is the role of spirituality in the persistence of nontraditional, female community/technical college students?

Secondary research questions that guided the study include:

- How do nontraditional community/technical college female students describe their ability to meet life's challenges as they have matured?
- How do nontraditional community/technical college students define their spirituality as it exists in their lives today?
- How does an understanding of nontraditional community/technical college female students' spirituality contribute to persistence theories in attaining their educational goals?
- Does spirituality play a role in creating a validating environment for these students?

In qualitative research, some aspects may emerge or change during the study; therefore, tight pre-configuration is not generally used (Creswell, 2003). Since this research project was one of emergent design, the questions were defined and re-defined several times during the life of the study.

### *Methodological Framework*

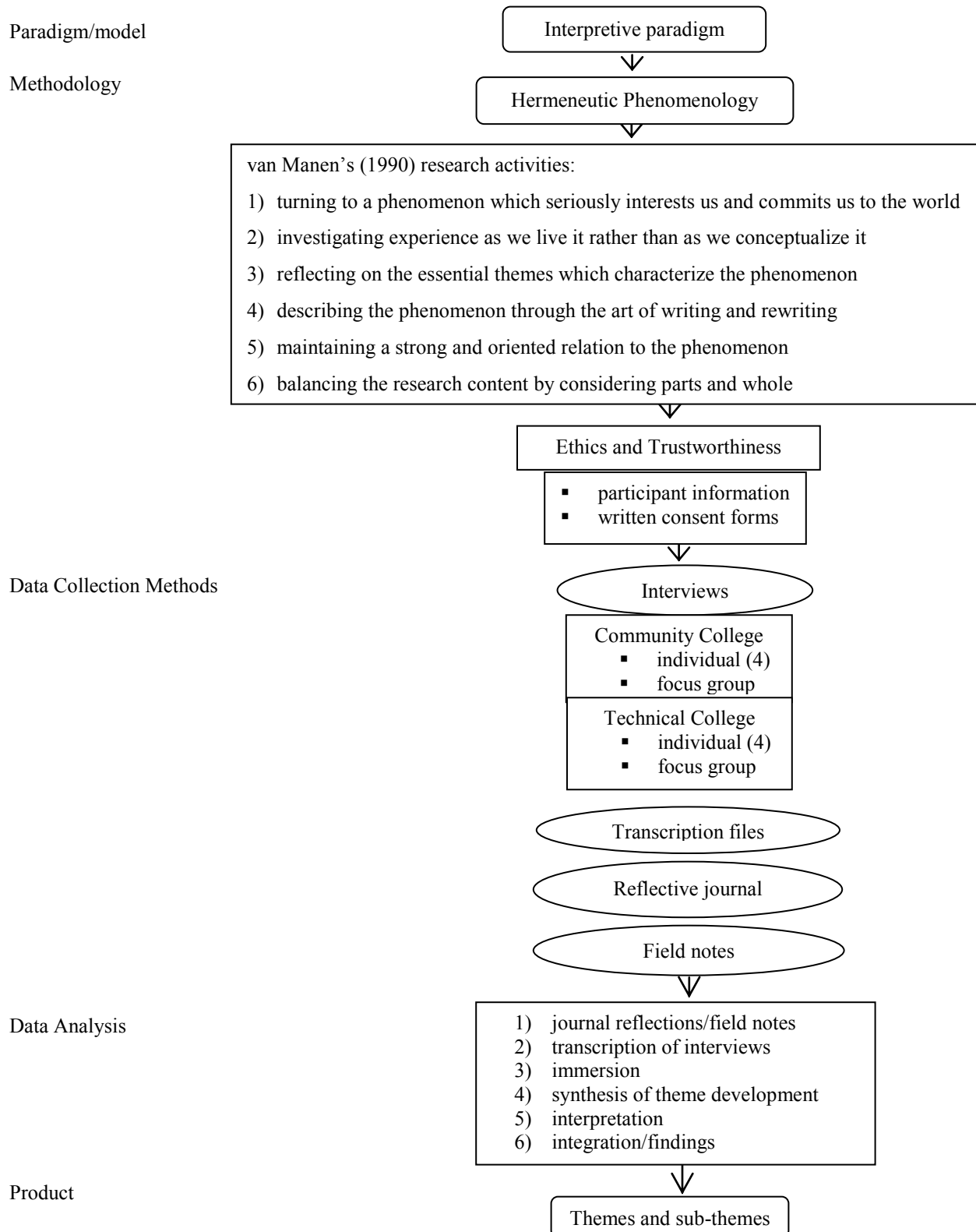
A qualitative research design has been chosen for this study because this type of research is used to give the details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The experience and perception of spirituality is sometimes difficult to express and is not easily defined. In general, quantitative research focuses on the description and explanation of a research problem, whereas qualitative research seeks to explore and understand a problem (Creswell, 2002). This methodology attempts to find out how people make meaning or interpret phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). In this arena, the student's spirituality was examined in light of its role of meaning making in the participant's lives and specifically in an educational setting. This type of research is also concerned with giving voice to those whose perspectives have been silenced or marginalized. Tisdell (1998) posits that when this kind of framework is

used it suggests that the positionality (race, gender, class, etc.) of researchers, participants, students, etc. affects how one gathers and accesses data, how one constructs and views knowledge, and how one deals with “crossing borders” in research. Women’s spirituality has often been “sidelined, ignored, undervalued, and displaced in our institutions” and this methodology provides a way to make these voices heard (Slee, 2003, p. 105). This qualitative approach solicited the perspectives of the women in this study in regards to the issue of persistence and the women’s spirituality as an intrinsic motivator. Literature reviews reveal that no studies exist on spirituality as a validating factor and persistence; this qualitative study allowed for the exploration of this relationship.

Within this qualitative research design, a hermeneutic phenomenology study was used because in this typology of research the researcher often has personal experience with the phenomenon being explored and is seriously interested in it (van Manen, 1990). The intense spirituality of the researcher and strong belief in the importance of bringing a spiritual perspective to the adult education environment to enhance persistence and success qualifies this study as being one that fits this description. As outlined by van Manen (1990), hermeneutic phenomenology is a process of exploring one’s interests and understanding of a phenomenon, uncovering the essence of that phenomenon by gathering stories from those living it, interpreting those stories, and offering implications for practice. As a research method, phenomenology tries to “ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project” (van Manen, 1990, p. 29). While this study did not have a rigid set of fixed procedures, it did follow van Manen’s methodological structure of human science research. van Manen (1990) proposes that this type of

Figure 2

Overview of the Research Approach Adopted in this Research





research may be seen as a dynamic interplay among six research activities as shown in Figure 2. Following is a description of each of these activities as it occurred in this study:

*1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world:*

According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological research is some type of quest or a true task, as well as a deep questioning of something that restores an original sense of what it means to be “a thinker, a researcher, a theorist” (p. 31). van Manen proposes to the researcher that the task of phenomenological research and writing is to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience which deeply interests the researcher and identifying this interest as a true phenomenon. In this study, the human experience that was made topical for this investigation was that of spirituality as an intrinsic motivator to persist to educational goals in nontraditional female students. In following van Manens’ (1990) proposed starting point in phenomenological research, this study is one that is of deep interest to me and is of significance to the nontraditional female students being studied. Participants for phenomenological research are generally chosen as a result of their experience with the phenomena being studied and their ability to articulate that experience (Milligan, 2001). It was established when selecting the participants for the study that they were women who professed to be spiritual and have experienced this phenomenon. Additionally, the students met the following criteria set by van Manen (1990) of being articulate and being able to share their experiences which will allow rich descriptions to emerge. The participants were enrolled in a program of study and in at least their second semester in pursuing a degree, interested in communicating with the researcher, and able to articulate their experiences to the researcher.

*2) investigating the experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it:*

Max van Manen (1990) posits that the ‘data’ of human science research are human experiences and “in drawing up personal descriptions of lived experiences, the phenomenologist knows that one’s own experiences are also the possible experiences of others” (p. 54). Just as one’s own experiences are possibly the experiences of others, he proposes that “the experiences of others may also be possible experiences of oneself” (p. 58). In this study, the following definition of spirituality was presented to the participants: spirituality is an awareness of a Divine source of power within that is greater than ourselves and fosters strength, hope and meaning in our lives and supports us in our work for the common good of our world. This definition is one that resonates with the researcher and the participants were chosen for the study if they could also qualify it as one they had lived experience with. The lived experiences of the participants were examined by collecting data from the following sources: the individual interviews conducted between the participants and the researcher, the focus group interviews, field notes and reflective journal entries by the researcher. In using open ended interview questions, the lived experiences of the participants were explored. The interview questions were open-ended and promoted discussion and led to deep reflection. It was suggested by van Manen (1990) that participants would elaborate on the lived aspect of the experience rather than their conceptions of it. Rather than conceptualizing what it is like to experience spirituality for these female students, I sought to understand this experience from the participants themselves and how they have lived it as a part of their being-in-the-world. The gathering and the analyzing of the research work are in tandem and these two acts are not really separable and should be seen as part of the same process. Therefore, I was conscious throughout the research process of my need to reflect and understand how my preconceptions and biases may influence my interpretations. One of the tools

that the researcher may use in this process is that of a journal, diary, or log. It can be very helpful for keeping a record of insights gained, for discerning patterns of the work in progress, and for reflecting on one's own experiences, as well as the participants in the study. In this study, I utilized reflective journal entries to reflect on and better understand the lived experiences of the participants. It was important for me to reflect on the experiences being told to get a deeper understanding that would yield rich descriptions of the phenomenon being explored in the study. The two prior research activities are focused on data collection whereas the following are moving towards data analysis.

*3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon:*

To make an attempt to grasp the essential meaning of something is the purpose of phenomenological reflection. According to van Manen (1990), this can sometimes be difficult as well as labor intensive. van Manen suggests a process be used to approach the meaning of the phenomenon. He breaks it down in terms of meaning units, structures of meaning, or themes. In this research activity, van Manen (1990) proposes that reflecting on lived experience will then become reflectively analyzing either the structural or the thematic aspects of that experience. He suggests we can take three approaches to uncovering or isolating thematic aspects of a phenomenon in the text. These approaches are line by line reading, highlighting and detailed reading approach. van Manen (1990) proposes that the researcher could use all three or choose one of these approaches. I used all three in my research to allow all possible ideas to emerge from the data. It is through the interpretation of the dialogue and stories of the participants that the researcher will make decisions about essential and non-essential themes of the text. This approach helped me to form some sort of structure out of my data and made the task of analyzing

more systematic. I was able to interpret and then chart my themes which facilitated and supported the reporting of my findings.

*4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting:*

Glesne (1999) states that it is through writing that the researcher gives form to the clumps of data that have been carefully categorized and organized. The thoughts that have been developed throughout the research process are linked together through the writing and rewriting process and new thoughts and connections are stimulated. van Manen (1990) noted that phenomenology could not ensure that understanding would eventuate, only that the potential for understanding existed when the experiences and meanings given to those experiences were illuminated. Writing will externalize that which may have been internal and bring to light for the reader the meaning of the living experience for both the participant and the researcher. For the researcher in this study, writing and rewriting is at the heart of data analysis. Journaling is a medium that I have used in all areas of my life for many years. Maintaining a journal through this research activity “illuminated” the lived experiences of the participants in regards to their spirituality and persistence in their education. It provided me with a deeper means of data analysis that would not be possible without the writing, reflection, and re-writing process. In addition, it provided another means through which I could immerse myself in the data.

*5) maintaining a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon:*

It is essential, according to van Manen (1990), that the researcher reflects on the phenomenon being studied throughout the research study to maintain a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon. It is also important to address issues of trustworthiness and validity during this research activity. According to van Manen (1990), the conditions needed to fulfill these methodological requirements that render a text to have this validity can be summarized as

follows: “our texts need to be oriented, strong, rich, and deep” (p. 151). In an effort to have an oriented relation to the phenomenon, I continuously had a clear focus on the research question “What is the role of spirituality in the persistence of nontraditional, female community/technical college students?” In terms of text strength, it was important to continually reflect on my interpretations by journaling. Through my writings and reflections, I was also able to separate the non-essential themes from the essential themes. The participants in the study contributed to the richness and depth of the text through their interviews and the sharing of their lived experiences. The lived experiences of their spirituality and persistence were revealed through their stories and anecdotes. In exploring the participants’ life experiences, the unique, particular and irreplaceable experiences that had meaning for them were captured (van Manen, 1990).

*6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole:*

This activity proposed by van Manen (1990) encompasses elements such as the research proposal, the research plan and the ethics adhered to during the research study. It is easy to get so buried in the research process and writing that one loses their way and no longer knows where to go. van Manen (1990) states that one needs to continually measure the overall design of the study against the significance that the parts must play in the whole. The researcher needs to allow for a certain degree of openness when doing human science research because not everything is foreseeable at the outset of a research project. Plans may need to change and new procedures introduced. van Manen (1990) proposes several ways that the phenomenological study can be structured: thematically, analytically, exemplificatively, exegetically, existentially, or inventing ones own approach. In this study, the structure that was most adhered to would be that of themes and sub-themes to unify the parts and further describe the whole.

### *Summary*

In summary, it is important to note that although a certain order is implied in the above methodological presentation of van Manen's (1990), this does not mean that one must complete each step nor does it have to be followed in any specific order. Although the steps may help the researcher, van Manen (1990) posits that it is often difficult to apply a systematic approach during critical moments of inquiry when performing research. He further states that these critical moments depend more on abilities of the human science researcher such as writing talent, scholarly tact, inventive thoughtfulness and a sensitivity with regards to interpretation. The researcher was aware of the six research activities proposed by van Manen (1990) throughout the life of the study; however, the steps were not followed with rigidity or in any particular order. As noted in the previous section, there were components of each step utilized in the execution of the study.

### *The Researcher*

When engaging in qualitative research, it is the intent of the researcher to obtain data which includes the interior perceptions of the participants. A process is used by the researcher which fosters deep attentiveness, empathetic understanding, and a suspension or bracketing of preconceptions about the topics under discussion (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Lavery (2003) posits that in contrast to this phenomenological perspective, a hermeneutical approach asks the researcher to take a different approach to self reflection. She states that "the biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside, but rather are embedded and essential to the interpretive process" (p. 17). In this approach, the researcher is called upon to give considerable thought throughout the investigation to their own experiences and to claim ways their experiences relate to the researched issue. Additionally, Patton (2002) states that a

qualitative report should include some information about the researcher because the researcher is the instrument in qualitative inquiry. As such, this reflection provides background information for the reader to aid in their understanding of the personal experiences the researcher brings to this research issue.

### *Faith Background*

My own faith journey began as a young child while being raised in a predominantly Roman Catholic area of the country, into a “very Catholic” family, and attending a Catholic, Carmelite all girls academy. I continued to follow my Catholic faith throughout my upbringing and graduated from this school and sheltered “Catholic environment” to go on to a public state university away from home. My church attendance at this time “waxed and waned” but my faith remained strong. I was exposed to other religions and faith beliefs as my academic, as well as social, environment began to grow. Through the Catholic student center, I participated in a “Big Sister” outreach to impoverished children in the community. During my university days, I grew in new areas with my faith development as I encountered a larger vision of the world.

Towards the end of my college career, I married in my hometown Catholic Church and remained in the town where I grew up to raise my family. I had three children during this marriage and while they were still very young, (ages 1, 3 and 4) my husband asked for a divorce and later an annulment of this marriage. I felt betrayed by my husband, my faith, my Church, and my God. Reflecting on this dark time in my life, I realize now that this is the point at which, what I now call my spirituality, was given birth. Through years of support from counseling sessions, support groups, women friends, family, and countless hours of prayer and reflection, I survived and developed in my faith. However, this faith development was of a different kind

than during my earlier years. It was deeper, stronger, and more mature. It was about a “relationship” with a higher power and it became a driving innate force in my life.

### *Professional Background*

After graduating from college in elementary education, I taught second and third grades. When I became pregnant for my first child, I resigned and remained home with my children until a few years after my divorce. I returned to the classroom as a seventh grade science teacher and during the five years I was there, I went back to school and pursued a Master’s degree in Counseling. This prepared me for my move to a post-secondary educational environment. I became the Counselor at the local technical college and I followed this by becoming a founding member of the then emerging community college for nine years.

It was during my experiences with the students in the post-secondary setting that I began to realize something existed in these nontraditional women that I wanted to examine further. As a counselor, the sharing I was able to be privy to was deeper and richer than on a usual collegial basis but it was not only in these settings that I made an observation. I noticed that a very deep spirituality existed in many of these students and it was rarely recognized. I witnessed some of these women persisting towards their educational goals in spite of obstacles that at times appeared insurmountable. I began to question what this force was within them that enabled them to continue to persist and succeed in this academic environment in spite of their trials.

While working in this setting, an opportunity arose for me to enter a Ph.D. program in higher education administration. It was during my doctoral work that I realized what an important role my spirituality played in my education. I began to experience what I believe some of my persisting students experience in their educational endeavors, an internal, spiritual motivation to persist. I started to observe others in my cohort group and dialogue with them



about their diverse spiritualities, and more insights were revealed to me. Thus my interest and background on this topic for my dissertation study.

### *Pilot Study*

An initial pilot study on this topic was conducted by the researcher. The research questions were addressed by collecting data from individual interviews from four participants and a focus group interview composed of four different group members. The participants were nontraditional female students who were pursuing an associate degree at either the Nouveau Community College or a technical college located in the southern middle states region. The women in this study ranged in age from thirty-one years old to fifty-five with the average age being 44.86. Participants represented four different programs and were in school for at least their second semester at either the community or technical college. Three of the students were Caucasian, three were African American and one was Hispanic/ Native American which provided a multicultural group of participants.

There were seven patterns that emerged from the questions that were proposed to the participants from the interview guide. First, it was revealed by the participants in their interviews that their early years of faith development/spirituality were experienced in a religious context. The second pattern was that of the socio-cultural influences on the participant's lives that had an influence on the development of their spirituality and faith development in both the early and later years of their lives. The third and fourth patterns developed were that spirituality and religion, for each of the participant's, had very different meanings in their lives. The fifth pattern was the significance of spirituality in the lives of the participants and the prominent role it plays in all areas of their lives. Spirituality, as a factor of internal support, was the sixth pattern revealed by the nontraditional female students in the study. The seventh and last pattern was

spirituality in the educational setting and its influence on the participants as an intrinsic motivator to persist.

In relation to the findings of the pilot study, the legality that surrounds the issue of separation of church and state warrants the importance of a clarification of spirituality as a “new discourse” be included. This concept of a “new discourse” was coined by Estanek (2006) in her research study that was discussed in chapter two on the review of the literature. She found that

(1) the emerging discussion of spirituality can be understood as a new discourse because it separates the understanding of spirituality from its roots in religion and thus changes its meaning; (2) that no common definition of spirituality exists; but that (3) the definitions contain five recurring patterns that illuminate the parameters of the new discourse (p. 270).

Estanek (2006) proposed that a person’s definition of spirituality shapes how they experience their spirituality, therefore the definition of spirituality is this new discourse becomes of utmost importance. Through the findings in the pilot study, a new discourse which is closely aligned with Estanek’s discourse, was developed. When asked to explore their interpretations of the meaning of religion and also of spirituality, the participants responded with the following themes or descriptions. Religion consisted of religious institutions, organized groups, a standard of belief, rules, rituals, and regulations. It was referred to as habitual and an external force or drive which may contribute to internal motivations. On the other hand, spirituality was referred to as an internal motivation or drive that could then be reflected as an external force. More specifically, spirituality begins internally and then can be witnessed outwardly by others by its effects. This is best understood through the following quote from one of the participants, “when it’s inside, it’s gonna show outside...it’s gonna come from in to out”. It is described as a feeling

or “heart matters” by most of the women. It is both an individual experience and found or expressed in relationships with others. Some of them said that their spirituality encouraged them to be role models for their children and one even referred to her kids as a part of her spirituality. She described it in this way, “I have my kids on my mind all the time...that’s the biggest blessing God could give...I consider my kids a part of my spirituality because they are a gift from God and they are a positive energy...it’s positive that’s flowing”. Finally, their spirituality was referred to as a searching, their strength in difficult times, and their faith development. The different questions proposed to the women in this study inspired discussions in which you could easily recognize their sense of spirituality as an intrinsic motivation in all areas of their lives.

The pilot study of these women, in this particular community college and technical college, enhances the existing literature on persistence in nontraditional women by contributing to the scant research that exists on spirituality as an intrinsic motivator to persist. In addition, from this pilot study, a definition of spirituality was developed by the researcher for the purposes of this study. In Estaneks’ (2006) study she proposed that the concept of spirituality as a “new discourse” had no common definition. However, for the purposes of this study, and the “new discourse” proposed which separates religion and spirituality, the following definition of spirituality will be used. Spirituality is an awareness of a Divine source of power within that is greater than ourselves and fosters strength, hope and meaning in our lives and supports us in our work for the common good of our world.

Additionally, the pilot study findings revealed that spirituality could serve as a validating factor in these nontraditional women. The conceptual framework of Rendon’s (2006), *Academics of the Heart*, proposes that a validating environment, both in-and-out of the classroom environment is essential for persistence in the nontraditional women in our colleges

today. Rendon (2006) further states that “validation is an enabling; confirming and supporting process, initiated by in-and-out of class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p. 4). Based on the findings in the pilot study, it is proposed that the spirituality which exists in these nontraditional college women, although “internal”, may serve as one of these validating agents.

After completing this pilot study, areas were identified that needed to be addressed in a subsequent study. Although the pilot study was rich in data collected, additional participants to draw from would be beneficial. In the future interviews, all participants in the focus group were interviewed individually. Additionally the number of individual interviews was increased from four to eight. This allowed for more participants and the collection of richer data.

Secondly, there were questions asked in the interview guide which did not add to the data collected so these questions have been eliminated. It was decided that other questions would be added in its place such as one that inquires as to if there was any way they felt their spirituality could be supported or enhanced in the educational environment and if so, in which ways? This was a piece that had been left out on the participant’s part, as well as my own, in the initial pilot study and discussion. This question is important to the study because it may reveal suggested ways that practitioners in educational settings could help to develop and/or enhance spirituality in their students.

### *Participants*

The number of participants for this dissertation study was four female students from the community college who participated in individual interview sessions as well as a focus group interview. Additionally, four participants from the technical college were also involved in individual interviews and a focus group interview session. By selecting two different institutions

a larger and more diverse group was provided. One institution is located in a rural area whereas the other is located in a metropolitan area. Again, this provided for increased diversity in the participants and additional depth to the study. In phenomenological research the richness of the data collected is more important than the number of participants involved (van Manen, 1990). The participants are typically chosen in phenomenological research because of their experience of the phenomenon being studied and being able to articulate these experiences (Milligan, 2001). The participants in this study self identified as being spiritual and were persisting towards their educational goals; both criteria which will provide rich data for the study.

### *Community College*

A combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling was employed in selecting participants for the study at the community college. (Creswell, 2002) In keeping with guidelines of purposeful sampling, the participants were chosen from a particular program, Early Childhood Education, at the college because the majority of these students are female and nontraditional. The department head recommended several classes of students and the researcher asked for volunteers from the group. Each person who volunteered was then asked to recruit others she may know who possibly would be interested. The requirement was that they fulfill the set criteria for the study and are working towards a degree and in at least their second semester in the Early Childhood program. This was in keeping in line with snowball sampling which is a process through which the researcher asks participants to identify others to become members of the sample (Creswell, 2002). The criteria for inclusion established was that participants be over 25 years of age, female, attending at least their second semester and pursuing an associate degree.

### *Technical College*

The participants chosen at the technical college were identified by the counselor and departmental chair following the criteria requirements for the study. The students are nontraditional (defined as over 25 years of age), female, and pursuing a degree, diploma, or certificate and in at least their second semester in school. Four individual interview participants and a focus group of the same four students were selected to participate.

The focus group format was included in this study for varied reasons, all with the ultimate goal of enriching the data collected. Unlike small groups which focus on consensus building or problem solving, the goal of the focus group was to find out each person's ideas and to encourage the individuals to share a range of opinions, perceptions, feelings, attitudes and ideas about a central topic or experience. Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996) state that focus group interviews are better organized than small group discussions, are more formal, and the findings are a result of an analysis of transcriptions obtained from the interview. The group format allows some advantages that are not afforded with the individual interview. One is that of the "loosening effect" referred to by Vaughn et al. (p. 19). In this type of group setting, participants are more relaxed and open. As a result, a feeling that their experiences are valued was more likely to exist which resulted in a greater depth to their shared reflections. Morgan and Spanish (1984) purport that focus group interviews will elicit more dynamic and interactive discussions which do not exist in individual interview sessions. This provides for additional information that is richer and more in depth and will enhance the results of the study. Another deciding factor for choosing to use a focus group interview session in this study was that the phenomenological approach can be used when implementing the focus group approach and is one of the most common approaches that is used (Calder, 1981). In this approach, the researcher

has had experiences with and possesses knowledge about the topic. An interest already exists with the researcher and facilitates a desire to explore for more in depth understanding and clarification of the topic. Finally, focus groups can be included simultaneously with individual interviews to triangulate the data (Morgan & Spanish, 1984).

### *Pre-study Activities*

For the purposes of this project, the following data sections are distinguished by referring to the two institutions as the community college and the technical college.

Neither of the institutions has an Institutional Review Board; therefore, this was not a necessary component of the pre-study activities at the campuses. However, prior to my initial visit to both of these sites, I obtained IRB approval from the University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board to conduct this study. The documentation was provided to the initial contacts on both campuses, the Campus Dean at the technical college and the Vice Chancellor of Academic and Student Affairs at the community college. In addition, a detailed description of the study and interview protocol was also submitted. A request for a private area on the campus was made to secure an available meeting space for the student interviews on their respective campuses.

### *Community College*

Prior to the study, I obtained verbal permission from the Vice Chancellor of Academic and Student Affairs as well as the Department head for the Early Childhood Education program from which the participants were selected. I requested that the department head of the Early Childhood Education program serve as the gatekeeper. The department head was asked to recommend a particular class section and faculty member that I could visit to solicit participants for my study. She had a better idea as to which classes were composed of a greater number of

nontraditional women. Additionally, she was very familiar with most of her students and was able to recommend classes that included women who believe that spirituality is important to them. I distributed letters to each of the class member volunteers describing the study and asked for participation (see Appendix B for Potential Research Participant letter). I set the criteria for participants as follows: nontraditional women (over 25 years of age), and persisting in school (in at least the second semester of classes at this or another institution). I also explained to the students that the study is based on spirituality being an important part of their life. I solicited only those women who felt that their spirituality was significant in their lives. I spoke to them individually and gave them a copy of the definition of spirituality that was used in the study. I asked them if they could relate to this definition and if they would be willing to share their experiences with their spirituality. I included all students who revealed that spirituality was important in their life. I obtained signed informed consent forms from each participant and returned copies to each student (see Appendix C for sample form). In addition, I had the students complete a demographic survey form (see Appendix F for Demographic Survey form). The survey informed me of the student's persistence and whether they have set educational goals for themselves. It also gave information as to the number of barriers the students may have concerning their educational experience such as being a single parent, employed, and course load. Additionally, their age may be a factor as to where they are in their faith/spiritual development. I conducted four individual interviews at the community college followed by one focus group interview with these same participants.

### *Technical College*

In advance of the interviews, I obtained verbal permission from the Campus Dean to conduct four individual interviews on the campus as well as a focus group interview. I requested



that the counselor in student affairs serve as the gatekeeper. She provided access to the department head that assisted with identifying participants for the study. She was familiar with some of the students and was able to introduce me to possible participants who have lives that include spirituality as an important focus. As with the community college participants, I set the criteria as follows: nontraditional women (over 25 years of age), and persisting in school (in at least the second semester of classes at this or another institution). In addition, when describing the study to the students, I also informed them that I was interested in participants who felt that spirituality was a significant part of their life. I spoke to them individually and gave them a copy of the definition of spirituality that was used in the study. I asked them if they could relate to this definition and if they were willing to share their experiences with their spirituality. I included all students who revealed that spirituality was important in their lives. I provided each selected participant with a letter (see Appendix B for Potential Research Participant letter) which provided information concerning the study. Interview sessions were scheduled at their convenience. I then obtained signed informed consent forms (see Appendix C for sample form) from each participant and returned copies to each student. In addition, I had the students complete a demographic survey form (see Appendix F for Demographic Survey form). The survey informed me of the student's persistence and whether they have set educational goals for themselves. It also gave information as to the number of barriers the students may have concerning their educational experience such as being a single parent, employment, and course load. Additionally, their age may be a factor as to where they are in their faith/spiritual development.

### *Confidentiality*

All participants, as well as the names of the colleges, were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities. The students signed an informed consent form after having it explained by the researcher. Each participant was given a copy of the signed form.

Interview materials and other necessary documents were secured in a locked cabinet during the time period of the study. Any names or information which identifies the participants will be destroyed after the completion of the project.

### *Data Collection*

This section will describe the two settings, the community college and the technical college, where the data for the study was collected. Additionally, the procedures that were followed for conducting the dissertation study will be presented.

### *Setting*

Both colleges are state funded and within the same community and technical college system and under one state governing board. As previously stated, the first data collection was performed at Nouveau Community College in south Louisiana. The second round of data collection was implemented at Lower Middle States Technical College which is in a neighboring city to the community college. Fictitious names were used to identify the two institutions where the study was conducted to provide anonymity of the institution as well as the students. Nouveau Community College has one main campus, as well as a branch campus and a site, all located within fifty miles of each other. This study was conducted at the branch campus in a rural community which is located twenty miles from the main campus. The college offers students various educational options such as the following: (1) general education courses that transfer to four-year institutions, (2) associate degree programs that can serve as a terminal degree or be

used to transfer to four year baccalaureate programs, (3) a developmental program to assist academically under prepared students with college level work, (4) job training and technical skill development, and (5) continuing education courses. The Colleges provision of these programs and services is supported by an open-admissions policy which provides access to students from diverse racial, religious, economic, educational and cultural backgrounds. There were approximately 250 students enrolled at the branch campus during the summer semester 2008 during which the study was conducted.

Lower Middle States Technical College is located approximately twenty miles from the community colleges branch campus in a larger urban community. The college's mission is to provide training which assists students in acquiring the skills necessary for employment. Students have been enrolling at this campus since 1978 and the school has grown to include approximately 87 administrators, faculty, and staff. During the summer 2008 semester in which the study was conducted, there were approximately 800 students registered to attend the college. The technical college adheres to an open entry policy and students are placed according to ACT scores or the ACT compass administered on the campus. Training programs include business and industry specific training and occupational and technical fields which have as an end goal certificates, technical diplomas or associate of applied science degrees. The Associate of Applied Science degrees are terminal degrees and only the general education components are transferable to colleges and universities. The general education courses are obtained through a memorandum of understanding with the neighboring community college.

The intent in qualitative inquiry is not to generalize to a population as in quantitative research. The purpose of qualitative inquiry is to develop an in-depth, or "information rich" exploration of a central phenomenon (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Creswell (2002) purports that

researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon when employing purposeful sampling. Therefore, in this study, both a community college and a technical college were selected as the sites from which to choose their participants. According to Cohen and Brawer (2003), there is a rise in occupational enrollments and the population of students included are students with disabilities, women, disadvantaged and older students as well as those who attend part-time. Since this study is focused on nontraditional women, choosing both a community and technical college provided an ample and information rich pool of participants for the study. Many of these nontraditional women are attending the community and technical college for the occupational programs that they offer. Furthermore, since the researcher was able to gain relatively easy access to both populations, it was decided that by selecting two different institutions a larger and more diverse group of participants was provided. The decision to choose the two different colleges was also based on one institution being located in a rural area and the other in a metropolitan setting. Again, this would provide for increased diversity in the participants and additional depth to the study.

### *Procedures*

The following procedures were followed for conducting the dissertation study. Data was collected for this study by conducting both individual and focus group interviews. The first four individual interviews were facilitated at the community college in the summer 2008 semester. One interview for each participant was conducted. Data transcription was completed as soon as possible after the interviews were completed. If further clarification of data was needed after the data transcription was completed, the researcher visited with the participant a second time to clarify the transcription notes.

The four individual interviews at the technical college was scheduled a week after all data collection was completed at the community college. After these interviews were conducted, the focus group interview was planned and implemented.

The interviews at both colleges, individual and focus group, were conducted by following the same interview guide to assure that all participants were given an equal opportunity to address all of the subject areas. Field notes in a reflective journal were also recorded by the researcher to capture nonverbal behaviors and provide further descriptions and data. These notes were recorded after the interviews as the researcher reflected back on each interview as soon as possible after the close of the interview session. Field notes include both descriptive and reflective material. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) state that during the time that data is collected and reflected on in a qualitative study, a written account known as field notes are recorded. These notes include what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks during the process. In this study, the field notes were collected after each interview by the researcher. Some of the areas that were noted and reflected on are descriptions of participants' behavior, appearance, mannerisms, and whatever else may have affected the gathered data. After reflecting on the interviews, the notes also included feelings, speculations, ideas, and hunches. All of these notes were used to describe the participants and enhance the data analysis.

### *Qualitative Interviewing*

Through the qualitative interview, the researcher can capture the interior experiences of the participants experiences that could not be obtained in any other way (Weiss, 1994). Four different basic approaches to collecting data can be engaged in when performing qualitative interviewing. These four approaches are informal conversational interviews, general interview

guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview and closed, fixed response interview (Patton, 2002).

All of the interviews in this study were conducted according to the interview guide approach to ensure that all subject areas were covered with all of the participants yet it still allowed for probing and greater depth in some areas (Patton, 2002). An unstructured interview guide (see Appendix D for guide) was used to gather insights and opinions of the participants at both the community and technical colleges on their past and present experiences. In the unstructured interview, which is the most frequently used form of interviewing in qualitative research, the researcher asks open-ended questions that permit the participants to create response possibilities (Creswell, 2002, p. 205). In describing the interview guide Patton posits that:

The interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. Thus, the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with a focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined (p.343).

#### *Individual interviews*

The questions that were used in the individual interview guide at both the community and technical colleges are informed by the conceptual framework of the study and were used to collect data that in effect shed light on the research sub-questions (see Appendix D for Individual Interview Guide). The individual interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes each. They took place in a small area of each school that was reserved by the researcher ahead of time for this purpose. All interviews were tape recorded with two recorders to insure that there would be back-up in the event of technical equipment problems. Each participant was asked permission for me to audio

tape the interview session. The tape was labeled with their pseudonym to ensure anonymity. The tapes were transcribed by the researcher, as opposed to a transcriber, within days of the interviews. The verbatim transcripts were prepared in accordance with suggestions prescribed by Weiss (1994). According to Weiss, using a tape recorder makes it easier to attend to the respondent, have accuracy of content, and the fidelity of the transcripts adds value to the study. Transcribing the data verbatim creates a set of data to be saved for possible use later. He advises the researcher that when using this form, it should be accepted that much of the data will never be used. According to Patton (2002), verbatim transcription allows the researcher to become immersed in the data, “an experience that usually generates emergent insights” (p. 441). It was a valuable experience for me as the researcher because there were insights gained in the transcription that I may have missed during the actual interviews. A digital recorder was used to aid in the transcription as this type provides for a shorter transcription period than older types of recorders.

#### *Focus group interviews*

The goal of focus group interviews is “to create a candid, normal conversation that addresses, in depth, the selected topic” (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996, p. 4). It is important to remember that focus groups are not about consensus building, as are small groups, but rather on obtaining a range of opinions on an issue. (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub) The two focus groups in this study consisted of four members each. The same criterion was set for these participants as for the individual interviews and the same protocol was used. In addition, in the spirit of creating a relaxed atmosphere which encouraged interaction between the participants, snacks and beverages were provided. (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub) Each of the two focus group interviews was approximately one and a half hours in length. The questions that were used

in the individual interview guide at both the community and technical colleges were also used in the focus group interview (see Appendix E for the Focus Group Interview Guide). By using the original interview guide used in the individual interview session the data collected previously could be enriched by additional personal accounts and discussions. The participants have had time since the initial interviews to reflect on their answers and expand on them during these sessions. The purpose of the focus group was to stimulate discussions of other personal accounts that might be recalled since the completion of the individual interviews. The focus groups were dynamic and interactive and provided additional data that I was not able to acquire with the individual interviews. I was able to witness the experiences of the participants when they were interacting in relation to other women. One limitation of the focus groups was that the groups were small in number (4 participants per group) and a larger group would have contributed additional data. However, the participants were very relaxed in these smaller groups and willing to share openly with each other. They did not want the sessions to end and both groups lingered after the sessions were over and continued to dialogue with each other. One of the main topics discussed was that they expressed a desire to have opportunities to meet to discuss their spirituality with each other again in the future. They were allowed to stay a while longer and continue to enjoy the refreshments and their discussion until time to go to their next class. At the close of the sessions, they were encouraged by the researcher to try to find opportunities where they could get together with each other or other women to have informal sharing sessions again in the future. It was suggested that they could take the initiative and form informal small group sharing sessions on campus during a designated time. This brought a sense of closure to the session and gave them an idea for ways to connect in the future with other peers.



### *Summary*

In summary, data collection included eight individual interviews as well as two focus group interviews with the same participants from both a community and a technical college. Data were collected through demographic data surveys, audio taping, field notes and a reflective journal. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The following section includes the data analysis used for the study.

### *Data Analysis*

#### *Procedure*

The data analysis consisted of transcribing the individual interview and focus group interview tapes myself as soon as possible after the interviews were completed. Additionally, journal reflections were written between interviews and during the transcriptions in a journal for that purpose. The next step after the transcriptions of the interviews were completed was to begin coding of the data collected. This consisted of reading the transcripts and sorting out different factors, patterns and themes that emerged. These were then grouped by the questions from the interview guide. A consolidated picture was then developed using the themes and sub-themes and the findings were prepared to be reported.

Analyzing the data did not have a scheduled time to begin. Data analysis done simultaneously with data collection enables you to focus and shape the study as it proceeds (Creswell, 1994; Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). My plan to transcribe the interview tapes myself made this data analysis process even more of an on-going activity. During the transcription of the tapes in my pilot study is when I felt that the analysis was really beginning to take shape. In this study, I was also my own transcriber as a means to facilitate the analysis early on.

Methodological organization is required during data analysis in order to deal with “fat data” (Glesne, p. 134). Examples of types of fat data that can be collected are interview transcriptions, observation notes, field notes, documents, researcher memos, and journal entries by either the participant or researcher. In this study, interview transcription and researchers’ journal reflections and field notes were used. In qualitative studies, vast amounts of data are collected and the data collection is never really complete, you just stop collecting. I collected data from a total of eight participants using individual and focus group interviews.

In this study, a hand analysis of the qualitative data was used. With this process, the data is read by the researcher who then marks it by hand and divides it into manageable parts. (Creswell, 1994) Analysis was performed after the interviews were completed and the tapes were transcribed so as not to lose any of the meaning that may be subtle and lost over time. At some point, you begin to make connections between the stories collected and start looking for themes and sub-themes. Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining data. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), “coding is analysis” (p. 56). They define codes as “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information completed during a study” (p. 56). The data was grouped by the interview guide questions and developing themes were described. To aid in this process, the participants’ transcripts were each copied on a different colored paper beforehand to facilitate identifying each participant’s quotes. The different colored transcription quotes from each participant was organized and coded. The themes and sub-themes were then identified from these groupings.

Qualitative writers vary considerably in their approaches to data analysis; therefore, it is an eclectic process. (Creswell, 1994) There is no one right way to conduct data analysis. The goal, however, is the same for all researchers; that is, to break into categories, themes, patterns,

the data taken from the interviews and generate a “larger, consolidated picture” (Tesch, 1990, p. 97). Each transcript was interpreted in the same way and a consolidated picture was then developed. The narrative was then composed and the findings were ready to be reported.

### *Trustworthiness*

The credibility of your findings and interpretations depend upon your careful attention to establishing trustworthiness (Glesne, 1999) This concept of trustworthiness was introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and is used by qualitative researchers as a means of establishing credibility of the data as well as inferences they make about the data. They outlined four criteria to determine trustworthiness which are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria were used to determine the trustworthiness of this study.

The first criterion, credibility, refers to the evaluation of the findings to determine whether they are a credible representation of the data. In an effort to ensure that all information obtained from the participants is credible, I ensured that I transcribed each tape verbatim. Additionally, as the researcher, I clarified statements made by the participants during the interviews by repeating their responses and asking that they validate if my understandings are correct. In addition, I enlisted the assistance of a peer with no stake in this research to review my transcripts and findings. This was done to ensure that the experiences of my participants were portrayed and not my own biases.

The second criterion, transferability, relates to the applicability of the study’s findings to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two factors in this study support the possibility of the study being generalized to other situations. First, the diverse selection of participants for the study encourages broader application and secondly, “thick descriptions” was used for the reader

to assess the potential transferability, appropriateness for their own settings. (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p 279).

Dependability, the third criterion, determines how consistent or reliable the data collection methods and findings of the qualitative inquiry are. To insure dependability in this study, multiple data gathering procedures were used. This included individual interviews at two different institutions, two focus group interviews. and a reflective journal.

Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to the last criterion, confirmability, as analogous to external reliability. They propose that “the basic issue here can be framed as one of relative neutrality and reasonable freedom from unacknowledged researcher biases – at the minimum, explicitness about the inevitable biases that exist” (p. 278). The methods and procedures in this study were described explicitly and in enough detail that an audit trail was established that could be followed by other researchers.

### *Summary*

This chapter reviewed the purposes of qualitative research in general and hermeneutic phenomenology in particular. The researchers own experiences and preconceptions were outlined. The methodological framework, description of the participants included in the study, planned data collection techniques and analysis procedures were presented. The chapter concluded with a discussion of methods for establishing trustworthiness of the inquiry and findings. The findings and the results of the analysis will be presented in Chapter four of the study while a discussion of these findings, conclusions, limitations of the study, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research, will be offered in Chapter five.

## Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter presents the findings that were based on four individual interviews and a focus group interview in a community college setting and four individual interviews and a focus group interview in a technical college. The primary purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences related to spirituality as a factor in the persistence of nontraditional female students in a community and technical college. The phenomenon of the experience of spirituality as a validating factor and an intrinsic motivator and its influence on persistence guided and directed the research allowing the essence and nature of the phenomenon to reveal itself. This discussion of findings will consist of two sections. First, the participants will be introduced and basic demographic information that was obtained from data sheets will be shared (see Appendix F for Demographic Survey). In the second section, categories of responses will be presented in the form of participants own words (quotations) describing their “lived experiences”. Findings were organized and coded in separate units of experiences and perceptions which correspond to the interview guide that was used in both the individual interviews and the focus group interviews with the participants. From these findings, an analysis of the data uncovered emergent themes that frame the nontraditional female students’ experiences and allows their own voices to be heard.

### *Nontraditional Female Student Participants*

The nontraditional female student participants in this study were pursuing an associate degree/diploma in early childhood education at either the community or technical college. For the purposes of this study, nontraditional student has been defined as over the age of twenty five years of age. The female students in this study ranged in age from twenty six years old to forty nine years old with the average age being 36.50. Table 1 on page ninety one presents a graphic

display of the demographic information of research participants at both the community and technical colleges. A summary of each student's profile followed by a brief narrative introduction of each of the eight participants in the study will be presented in this section.

The first four individual interviews for the study were conducted in late June at the community college in an empty classroom that was available. The four interviews were completed over a two-day period and were followed up with a focus group interview the following week with the same four participants.

Martha was the first female student to be interviewed. Martha is twenty-six years of age, a Caucasian, single with no children, and the youngest participant in the study. She was attending school full-time during this semester and had a part-time job on campus. Martha revealed that she was raised by an aunt and uncle and is the first in her family to attend college. When I first approached Martha and invited her to be a participant she was very quiet and did not appear to be very receptive. Martha was a student worker at the college and was identified as a possible participant by the Assistant Registrar. The second time that I met with Martha to discuss her consent form and to see if she could identify with the definition of spirituality she appeared to be somewhat apprehensive but willing. Her comment was "What can it hurt?" She agreed to meet with me later during the afternoon when her shift at work was over. Although she was in her third semester in the Early Childhood Education program she had some concerns as to whether this was the right career track for her. She was contemplating changing to another degree program, possibly Business or a Computer Technology program, for the next semester. Martha appeared to be very relaxed once the interview began and very willing to talk to me about her experiences. The interview lasted about an hour and she gave me positive feedback when asked about her time availability to participate in the focus group interview at a later date.

Table 1

General Demographic Information on Participants

<b>Pseudonym of Participants</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Credit hours this semester</b>	<b>Employment</b>	<b>College Attended</b>
Sandy	49	African American	Single	4	FT	PT	Technical College
Tara	37	African American	Single	3	FT	No	Technical College
Ricki	33	African American	Single	0	PT	PT	Technical College
Riley	29	Caucasian	Single	3	FT	No	Technical College
Dana	34	African American	Single	1	PT	FT	Community College
Martha	26	Caucasian	Single	0	FT	PT	Community College
Natalie	45	Caucasian	Married	3	PT	FT	Community College
Claire	40	African American	Single	3	PT	FT	Community College
* FT Fulltime  * PT Partime							

The second participant interviewed later that same afternoon at the community college was Natalie. She was forty five years old, a Caucasian, married with three older children who did not live with her at the time, worked full time and attended school during the summer on a part time basis. She was presently completing her program of study and this would be her last semester at the community college. Natalie was very willing and anxious to meet with me. I got the impression that she was glad to have the opportunity to speak with someone. She shared that her father is very ill and near death and her mother is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Natalie has lived with a disability, epilepsy, since she was a young child. She also has a daughter with a disability who is now living with her father. Natalie shared that her life is extremely difficult right now. She remarried a year ago and her husband had a nervous breakdown due to post traumatic stress disorder and is in a hospital over a hundred miles from her home. The price of gas has been a deterrent to her visiting with him which has been very hard on her. At times during the interview she seemed like a very fragile and lost little bird and at other times she seemed very strong. She appeared at the outset to be very spiritual and it was apparent that she relies a great deal on her faith. The interview flowed very easily and we concluded it after an hour when it was time for her to attend her night class.

When I arrived at the community college early the next morning for my third interview session, my next participant, Claire, was waiting for me outside. Claire is forty years of age, African American, single with three grown children, attending school part-time that semester and had a full-time job. She was happy to see me when I arrived but not as happy as I was that she had shown up so early. I was worried that she may be late or not show at all because she works two jobs and has many responsibilities. I knew she was willing to participate but feared her life may get in the way. In addition, she depended on her family members for her transportation to



class. As mentioned previously, Claire had many responsibilities both outside and within the home. She is the mother of three children, ages twenty two, twenty, and nineteen and grandmother to four young grandbabies. Her children and grandchildren presently live in her household with her. She is a pre-school teacher through the SMILE program (a tri-parish community action agency) during the day and a sitter/caretaker of an elderly client at night. Claire was at the end of her program and was currently taking Business classes so she can open her own daycare. The interview lasted over an hour because she was so eager to share her experiences with me. It was very evident by the end of the interview that Claire is a very spiritual and faith filled woman as she continuously mentioned her relationship with her higher power.

The fourth community college participant, Dana, met with me for her interview later the same morning after her class. She is thirty four years of age, African American, single with one daughter, fifteen years of age, attended school part-time that summer, and was working full-time. Dana works for the parish school system as a pre-kindergarten paraprofessional. She completed the Early Childhood program at the technical college several years ago but since it was an Associate Degree of Applied Technology, and a terminal degree which could not be transferred, the school board would not accept it to meet the job requirements for her position. She is now attending the community college and completing the Early Childhood degree requirements for her present employment. She was continuing her studies during this summer with the goal of later transferring to the university to pursue her Bachelor's degree in Child and Family Studies. Dana appeared a bit apprehensive at the beginning of the interview session but it did not take her very long to "warm up". She was very open with sharing her experiences and talked at length on each topic. It was sometimes difficult to keep her on track with the interview guide questions and she often went off on her own tangents. She was very willing to share and it appeared that she

very much enjoyed being heard. The interview went over the one hour planned time and we wrapped it up at about an hour and a half. At the end of her session, when asked of her time availability for the focus group session, she was willing to return to campus at any time to participate in that session even if it did not coincide with her class meeting times.

The individual interviews at the technical college were conducted in early July in an available office space provided by one of the instructors in the Early Childhood Education department. The office was in a very quiet, private area and provided a warm and comfortable environment for the interviews. The interviews took place over a period of four days and were followed by a focus group interview with the participants the following week.

Sandy was the first participant to be interviewed at the technical college. Sandy was an extremely animated, pleasant, attractive African American woman who was forty eight years old at the time of the interview. She was very well dressed especially considering the program she is in working with children. Sandy is a single woman with four children; three grown sons who are on their own and a thirteen year old daughter who at the time was still living with her. She was in her fifth semester of her program and attended school full time. She tries to limit her employment to part time work to enable her to spend time with her teenage daughter. The first day that I arrived at the college to set up my interviews she was waiting for me and eager to be a part of the study. Her department head had told her about my visit and invited her to meet with me to be a possible participant. After talking to her about the study and having her read over and sign the consent forms, we set her interview time for later in the day after her class was over. When it was time for the interview, we met in the designated office space provided for the interviews. Sandy was very nervous about the interview but anxious and willing to participate. I had some challenges getting my recorders ready which seemed to allow her some time to relax.

Once we started the interview session it did not take long for her to appear to be comfortable sharing her experiences. During the course of the week, when I was completing my interviews at the technical college, Sandy was always trying to help me out with anything I may need. She would make sure to remind the others of their interview times, call them for me if they were late arriving, etc. She appeared to be the “mother hen” of the other students in the program.

Tara was my second participant at the technical college whom I interviewed a couple of days after Sandy. She was thirty seven years old, African American, and a single parent with three children ages thirteen, twelve, and seven living at home. Tara was in her third semester of her program and attending school full time. She was at that time not working outside of the home. She had to drop out of school over the previous semester because one of her children had an accident and broke his foot. She was playing catch up during the summer session of the interviews and was carrying a full load of classes. Tara shared that she has had some challenges in her life but is very dedicated to finishing this program. She has a son who is twelve years of age who is a nonverbal autistic child and requires a great deal of her time. She also had breast cancer several years ago but was presently in remission. In spite of the many stressors and challenges she has in her life, Tara had a very calm and gentle demeanor throughout the interview.

Later that afternoon, the third participant interviewed was Riley, a twenty nine year old, Caucasian, divorced mother of three children. She has a nine year old daughter, a six year old son and a five year old son. She was not presently working so that she could care for her young children; however, she was doing a practicum all day (when not in class) in the daycare center at the technical college to fulfill her requirements for graduation. She was in school fulltime and hoping to pass her Math class at the community college during the summer session so that she

could graduate after the present semester. During the interview, Riley was extremely comfortable and relaxed and was willing to help me in any way with my study. The interview lasted approximately fifty minutes because she had to bring her young son home from the day care center and we concluded the session early. She appeared very eager to get someone to take her place in the daycare center next week so she can participate in the focus group interview during the groups planned time for the session.

The last interview session took place the next week during the same morning that the focus group interview took place. The last participant had some transportation problems and was not able to attend her scheduled interview session last week. She met with me before the focus group interview instead. Ricki was thirty three years old, an African American, single with no children, lived alone and worked part time at a day care facility. She was attending the technical college part time during this summer session and this was her fourth semester of her program. Ricki was very shy and not as outspoken as the other participants. I had to draw her into the discussion as best I could during the beginning of the session. After she became more comfortable with me, she began to open up and share her experiences. Ricki had many obstacles to overcome to be successful in school. Major obstacles were her lack of finances as well as lack of transportation to get to school. Two of the other participants that were interviewed at the technical college talked about the struggles that Ricki has to endure and how they have tried to support her.

### *Research Study Findings*

The research study findings will be presented in the following section. The organizers for this part of the chapter will be the interview guide questions, which evolved from the research question and sub-questions, as well as the themes and sub-themes that resulted from the findings.

My discussion will examine the participant's stories through interpreting meanings and striving to better understand what meaning spirituality has for them in their lives. Furthermore, this analysis and discussion will result in an exposition of the themes and sub-themes determined by the participants responses to the questions asked through the interview guide. The summary will include interpretations and data analysis for the study which is centered on emergent themes from the nontraditional female students interviews both individually and in a focus group. The following statements made by the participants are in their own words, without any grammatical corrections by the researcher.

*Prior Experiences in their Spiritual Development / Growth*

**I would like for you to think back to your early years when you were growing up and how you may have experienced spirituality in your life. Please share these experiences with me.**

When the participants were asked to reflect back to their experiences with spirituality in the early years of their spiritual development, the participants in the study referred to their prior experiences as being within organized religions and religious institutions. They all mentioned some type of church organization and also referred to the rituals associated with them. This major theme of spiritual development and growth will be reflected on as it was experienced in their early years in this section.

Tara, who was brought up in the Catholic faith responded by sharing this experience of her early years:

Growing up we were always in church... every Wednesday night we had Bible study and every Sunday morning we were there. All day Sunday we were in church and at that time I thought it was the worst thing in the world but cause I mean all day but as I got older I understood it... the importance of it.

Martha, who did not reveal during her interview that she belonged to any organized religious institutions today, shared her experiences of her early years as follows:

I was raised Catholic so we went to Catechism, church, the whole nine yards...church, catechism, doing my lessons, major holidays and family getting together, Easter, Christmas...

Sandy is very involved in her church today and commented on the influences of her early years and spirituality as follows:

Growing up uh I come from a religious background...very religious background...my mother had never seen or knew my great grandmother as a worldly woman and my mother has never seen my grandmother as a worldly woman so they were very strict religious family and my great grandmother was in the ministries so we had to live in strict regulations when growing up...We start off with Sunday school...I would say I learned most of my learning through Sunday school because the church services you know the church of God and Christ there was a lot of noise and the preacher who was preaching was very strong and we would call him the “whooping” preacher... During Sunday school was my best teaching early on because you know the teacher she was the mother of the church and she was wonderful... she was kind... she was sweet and she would deliver her messages and you would feel special.

It is of interest to note that at the age of forty nine Sandy is still very involved with a religious institution and is following what I would describe as very strict religious traditions just as her mentors before did. She describes her present practice as follows:

Now I continue to go to church and continue to be a participant with my church and uh also a member of the 7<sup>th</sup> district Baptist association. We go to Congress and theological classes and choirs and it's very seldom....it's a major part of my life.

These previous quotes are a sample of the types of experiences the participants shared concerning their spiritual growth in their early years. All of the participants mentioned organized religions and churches when they spoke of their early years and experiences with spirituality. In addition, some of the participants also mentioned other rituals and experiences as noted in the following quotes.

Claire noted that she was raised a Catholic in her early years and later joined a Baptist congregation. When asked of her experiences in her early years she spoke of her mother and grandmothers influences on her spirituality:

I remember when I was young like old enough to talk and my momma started out with like getting on our knees at night and saying our prayers and at that time I didn't really understand about spirituality or God or anything. I just knew that He existed because He was a major part of our life because my momma and my grandmother they stressed it a lot you know always be thankful for God and what He give you...always praise Him for things even when it was bad times....I always had a passion to know more about God and I started studying the Bible...and I would go to Catechism when they had Catechism in school.

Two of the participants spoke of their Catholic school influences on their spirituality during their early years. Natalie, who is still a practicing Catholic today, stated the following: "When I was growing up I went to a private school, a Catholic school, all of my life just about and it gave me a wonderful foundation that put the groundwork down along with my parents."

Riley also told of her Catholic school influence as follows:

My parents sent me to a private school my whole life...it was Catholic religion...it was a Catholic school...we had religion classes and we had to do activities on a daily basis, so I was exposed you know from kindergarten all the way to high school you know in religion class we did something with spirituality every day.

After a careful analysis of the participant responses, one of the important things that I noticed across all of the stories of the participants, in describing their prior experiences and the development of their spirituality, was that the influence of authoritarian figures was very strong. These figures were often their parents or other family members as well as leaders in their church or schools as noted in the previous quotes in this section. Their influencers were external rather than internal and the participants did not appear to be intrinsically motivated in any way in regards to their spirituality in their early years of development. The ways in which the participants referred to their prior experiences of spiritual development shared a common thread of a seed being planted. This was evidenced through the following: Tara shared that “as I got older I understood it...the importance of it” and Claire said, “I didn’t really understand back then about spirituality or God or anything”. It was very explicitly stated by Natalie as “growing up in a Catholic school...gave me a wonderful foundation” and for Riley “I was exposed to spirituality”. Although they spoke of their spirituality more in terms of what I would define as religion, their spiritual development was in the early stages of growth and a foundation was being built on which their spirituality would grow and develop.

Throughout the interview process with the participants, I sought to better understand how their spirituality had developed and grown over their life span. Along these lines, the second question was then asked to move the discussion towards their perceptions and experiences of



spirituality as well as religion in their current lives. This is a continuation of a search for understanding of how the women in the study are developing and growing through their present experiences of spirituality.

*Present Experiences in their Spiritual Development / Growth (Part 1)*

**Do you think that religion and spirituality are the same? How would you define religion?**

**How would you define spirituality?**

In regards to the first question, do you think that religion and spirituality are the same; the following responses were initially given by the participants:

Sandra:	go hand in hand
Tara:	the same
Ricki:	separate; not the same
Riley:	similar
Martha:	intertwined
Natalie:	work together but different
Claire:	not the same
Dana:	two different things

As I read all of the transcripts, both individual and focus groups, and reflected on the data, I found that the initial descriptions and definitions did not always reflect their overall perceptions. Tara was the only one of the participants that initially felt religion and spirituality were the same. However, later in her description of the two in both the individual interview and the focus group interview she seemed to separate the two. The following are her own words to describe her experience with the two: “I think they would probably be the same um religion then

I just think of as church...spirituality would be beliefs...I think it would be beliefs.” And then in the focus group Tara comments on Sandra’s description:

But I think that like you said that spirituality and religion is hand in hand cause I think that the more you’re into the religion the more you hear that I think that it just seems it fills you up it makes you more spiritual you know so I think the religion I think religion is first and then comes spirituality but the more you feel something you know the fellowship you know it makes you more spiritual.

Ricki, on the other hand, did not feel that religion and spirituality were the same and she described her perceptions of the two in her individual interview as follows:

No I don’t think religion and spirituality is the same. I think religion is just something you are brought up in... you are brought up Baptist, Catholic, Moslem, you know that’s just your religion...like religion is something that is out there that you might just happen to choose cause maybe like if you are brought up a certain way and you thought oh well maybe I’ll try that and see what that’s about but spirituality is something its between you and what you feel God and a higher power whatever that may be and how you relate with that in your daily life.

And then in the focus group interview she reiterated her same response again: “I say it’s separate you know religion and all that you know is a building you go to you worship at whereas spirituality is something that’s inside of you and you know its strong”.

After I transcribed the interviews and then reviewed them to begin looking for coding tags and themes, I found that most of the participants struggled in trying to define religion and spirituality in their individual interviews even though they did not feel they were the same. I saw evidence through their discussions and quotes that their spirituality was developing and

growing and was more internal than it had been in their prior years of development. It appeared that they were able to give richer definitions with more clarity by the time we got to the focus group interviews. This is evidenced in the following participant's quotes.

Dana in describing the two stated that:

Spirituality and religion I believe are two different things...because religion is just what it says...it's religion... religion is where you go to church you pray you know certain things um you stand you clap you sing that's religion. Spirituality is I believe just totally different. Spirituality comes from within.

And then Claire shared her definitions of religion and spirituality as follows:

Like our religions are different but we have the same base knowledge...my religion is you go you have traditional laws in the church we have our cultures ...your ancestors where they taught you like I said we all of us have different religions but we go to church and we have the same thing...we pray to God...that's our purpose so the way you pray to God the way I pray to God may not be the way she prays to God but its all our religion. Whereas spirituality like I was telling you comes from within... how you feel about God...what relationship you have with God....because I might talk to God in a totally different way than she do but He knows my heart and He knows I'm sincere and I'm humble and He dwells within me.

Sandy, who is the oldest participant in the study, shares some insight from her perspective at this point in her life in the following reflection:

With my Christian background um I've always thought that spirituality and religion is hand in hand it goes together. As I have gotten older there is a spiritual you know a Divine Being that causes you...from trials and tribulations...causes you to become a

better person ...causes you to become more aware of life itself um you know it's like being a young person growing up. You get older...and trials and tribulations...you begin to take things more seriously...take life more seriously...sometimes you become a single parent and you have to take life by the arms so you have this you really have this spirituality that comes from within that drives you to reach your goals to have a better life for yourself.

Finally, Natalie sums up her perceptions of religion and spirituality in a neat package by responding to her definition of religion as “I know some people go to church and they are just going along because that's what they been taught”. And then Natalie's definition of spirituality is quite simply: “But to have it in here is different”.

In the previous section, the prior experiences of the participants spiritual development was explored and it was found that organized religion and authoritarian figures had an influence on their development. The factors of influence were external rather than internal. In this discussion, as we move to an exploration of their present experiences with their spiritual development it is found that it becomes more of an internal factor as noted in the next section.

There may be an unusually large number of quotes from participants in this section; however, I found it was important to include the noticeable distinctions between religion and spirituality that were perceived by the participants. In this study, it is the spirituality that will be focused on but it is hard to leave out the religious influences in their prior experiences that are brought to reflect upon it. The participants, in my opinion, have shown a distinction, in their own words and descriptions of their “lived experiences” that allows us to separate spirituality as separate from religion in our further discussions. To support this conclusion, I offer the following reflection on this distinction between religion and spirituality for purposes of this study. I believe

it was summed up best by Sandy who said that she always felt religion and spirituality went hand in hand but now that she has grown older it has changed. She describes it in this way: “you really have this spirituality that comes from within that drives you to reach your goals to have a better life for yourself”. Sandy refers to her spirituality as “coming from within”. As I read, journaled on, and reflected on the descriptions from the other participants, I found “coming from within” to be a common factor which distinguishes their definitions of the two, religion and spirituality. For example, Dana describes religion as something external, “a church where you go, you stand, you clap, you sing”; whereas spirituality “comes from within”. Claire refers to religion as “the traditional laws in the church” and states that “spirituality comes from within”. She describes it as “how you feel about God” and “your relationship with God”. Natalie’s opinion was that they work together but are different and when referring to spirituality she stated that “to have it in here is different”. And then again, Ricki referred to religion as “a building you go to worship at” and spirituality is “something that’s inside of you”. Throughout this discussion, I analyzed and interpreted what I believed to be a common theme that was being exposed through the voices of these female students. I could clearly see that their spirituality was developing and growing and it was clearly different than it had been in their earlier years of development. Their prior experiences were very different than their present experiences of spirituality were evolving into. The next section will expand on their present experiences with their spiritual development and growth.

#### *Present Experiences in their Spiritual Development/Growth (Part 2)*

##### **Can you tell me about your spirituality and the part it plays in your life today?**

This question serves to further delineate the participant’s perceptions of religion and spirituality in their lives today. This question was also used in my pilot study and at that time the

participants had some difficulty answering it. I decided to use it again because I wanted to continue their discussion of their spirituality and further explore their experiences and perceptions of their spirituality today.

Most of the responses that were given in answer to the part they felt that spirituality plays in their life today was that it played a big part. Natalie responded with “oh goodness it plays a huge part!” and Sandy said “a major part”. Dana expressed it by saying “everything on a daily basis I mean His word pacifically [*sic*] says in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path”. Claire expresses it by stating that “as I got older and I been through so many obstacles and the only person who was there that had never left me was God”.

Two of the participants brought in prayer as a part of their spirituality today. The two following quotes from Ricki and Tara will give some insight as to their perceptions and experiences with their spirituality in their lives today. First I quote Tara as follows:

Well now being a single parent of three and one that has the disability he has oh my goodness prayer is a big part of our family life and I do believe that God makes things happen if you pray and if you have you are obedient and you are able to just trust and know that something is going to happen and it will.

In that same vein, Ricki responded by adding her perceptions as stated below:

Well it plays a big part in my life today because when I was really messed up out there you know and I mean I needed to find some peace some calmness in my life you know so I started praying I started thinking I started making lists to see well where I’m at in my life what I want out of my life what I’m willing to do to get that and how far I’m willing to go for that and I had to pray about getting those answers to say okay you are on the

wrong path you need to go down a different road and I couldn't do that if I didn't have spirituality.

The other participants also spoke of their spirituality as being an important part of their lives today. Sandy spoke of the importance of spirituality in her life by pointing out that as she has matured it is "a major part not just on weekends but during the week" and "it has to go with you everywhere". Natalie shared its importance in her life by exclaiming "Oh goodness, it plays a huge part!" And she continued

being an epileptic I have had to work a lot harder and I've had to understand God will always be there for me no matter what happens...when I went through a divorce I really leaned on God for a long time to help me out...He's never gonna leave me and so yes it really has played a huge part".

In listening to the responses from the participants as to the part their spirituality plays in their life today, it was found that for all of them it played a major role in their daily life. Again there was a focus on their spiritual development and growth which is a major theme that crosses all of the previous sections and participant responses. They all referred in same way as to how their spirituality has taken on a more important part and has a deeper and more mature meaning than in their earlier years. For some of them it is experienced in prayer and for others it is described as their inner strength during trials. They are moving towards their spirituality as being more of an internal support and motivation rather than relying on only externals for their support.

The previous analysis and discussion on the development of their spirituality as it exists in their lives now will help to illuminate the next section which refers to their internal support or strength that helps them to manage their life today.

### *Spirituality as Support*

#### **Do you have a sense of an internal support system or strength that helps you to manage your life today? Can you describe this support?**

In the focus group interviews at the community and technical colleges, the participants all agreed that their internal support system or strength comes from their spirituality. When asked during the interview at the technical college to put it into words for me Sandy responded for the group with this description, “your faith, the Divine spirituality that you have in your hand”. At the community college, Claire summed it up for the group by saying “and that’s why I love the footprints prayer so much...I have the coffee cup, the throw, I live by it because as I said through trials and tribulations it was Him that was carrying me”. This support is a major theme that was identified in the focus group interviews as well as the individual interviews with each participant.

In the individual interviews, when Tara was asked if she had an internal support system today she exclaimed in a very loud voice “oh Lord yes because I think that I probably would have lost it a long time ago”. Tara has had many obstacles in her life to overcome and she sums it up in her response to this question and attributes her strength as coming from her spirituality which she refers to as God. The following quote from Tara is a good summation of how she presently experiences her spirituality:

I think that I would have lost it a long time ago and I just sometimes have to hold my breath or I’ll go into the bathroom and I just say God take me through this because first things first and the first thing was that Nikolas was diagnosed with non-verbal autism and I was like, oh my God, how am I going to do this um stress just being stressed and my next child was born prematurely so I was like okay so I have this one and now I have this one. Two years later I was diagnosed with breast cancer and I was like oh my God what



in the world is going on so I questioned myself, I questioned my parents, I questioned my children and I was like God there is a reason that I am going through this and I said God I know that I am not in this position alone and that you are going to take me through it if I am here I said that I know that I am not going to stay here and you are going to take me through it and that was that... its been... Nicholas is twelve now and he's doing awesome.

When a different participant, Ricki, at the technical college was interviewed and asked to describe her internal support, she responded as follows, "I'm not sure I could actually like place a name on it I mean like I just know that when I'm in that state, that position in time you know it's about peace, clarity, you know and forgiveness". When asked who gives you this sense of peace and helps you to forgive she responded by saying "God".

And again, with a participant at the community college, this internal support that was referred to as their spirituality was also named God as evidenced in the following quote from Claire when describing this support that was internal for her:

You know God, whatever, I would pray everyday and then I would go take my test I would pass and then the next time I would take another test I would pass. I kept going up and up and I started like in June by December I had my GED. I was reading at a twelfth grade level scoring 13.0, 12.9, and I was like man prayer does work and that's when I wanted more and I started asking God for guidance, and a lot of times 9 out of 10 if I pray about something he'll show it to me. I'll follow that path and it always works out... always.

Not all of the participants, however, had the same name or description for what they considered to be their spirituality. Many times throughout the individual and focus group

interviews these names do change but I give the following two quotes to reiterate that there are many different experiences and perceptions possible.

Natalie, at the community college used religion and spirituality interchangeably in her description as follows:

Like I said that religion is my internal support, the spirituality has really played a big part in it and without that... I needed that help to keep going...I needed that religion to help me to keep going or otherwise I don't think I could have gotten this far...it's a type of peace..internal...it's a type of peace and I find that it feels wonderful...it feels great. (said with a great deal of expression and a big smile)

Finally, Dana referred to one of the sacred books associated with her religion as her internal support as indicated in the following quote, "yes, there are a few scriptures in the Bible that I lean on and um one is - No weapon turned against me will prosper". When asked to further clarify this quote for me she responded by saying, "now people that read that may say a weapon being a gun, a knife, or something but no any type of weapon that's negative that's going to come against you...any type of sickness, disease, anything negative in this world I consider a weapon".

It was found through the interviews with each one of the participants that their spirituality serves as an internal support. This was clearly evidenced throughout the previous quotes from the participants. Although this support may have had different names such as God, my faith, my spirituality, my rock, prayer, and grace, it was a similar internal strength for each one of them. This intrinsic support which helps them to manage their life may serve as a factor in their persistence towards their educational goals and was a common theme that I found to be evident for all of them.

This interview question concerning their internal support system will be revisited in one of the later questions in regards to their educational setting. This will bring further insight and understanding of their internal support system and strength and an additional focus on the major theme of support in a college environment.

### *Challenges*

#### **Do you feel that there exist any barriers in your life to your success in obtaining your degree? Can you tell me about them?**

One of the reasons I chose this topic for my dissertation was while I was working in a higher education environment I observed many nontraditional women who overcame many barriers to attend school. I wanted to explore what it was that existed in these nontraditional female students that enabled them to persist in spite of these many challenges in their lives. Many of these barriers have already been evidenced in the previous quotes of these participants. I included this interview question as a way to shed light in my study on these barriers that many of these women overcome to achieve success on their educational journey. Most of the challenges were not unique to any one of the participants but instead shared by many of them. I begin this section by simply naming the barriers that were mentioned by the participants in my study. Quotes from the participants will be highlighted at the end of the section to better illuminate the effects of some of these challenges on the participant's lives.

#### **Barriers identified:**

- Lack of self confidence
- Single parenting issues
- Family (illness, death)
- Children (disabilities, illness, accidents, time factor)
- Money
- Transportation
- Lack of computer knowledge
- Math achievement/success

Disabilities  
Divorce  
Bad relationships  
Housework  
Deciding on a program of study

The first quote that I include in this section was chosen because it is one that resonated with many of the participants although it was shared by Claire and focused on her perceptions and experiences. Claire shared the following in response to the question on barriers in her life that may exist and become obstacles to success in school. Claire is at the end of her program so it is evident that she has met these challenges successfully during her journey to obtain a degree in this educational setting. She stated:

Well first it was me having the fear of myself not being smart...being incompetent...to come to school and learn. I thought that I was going to fail and was always scared of that. That was the biggest obstacle was myself. I didn't believe in myself and most times you have failed in certain life situations and people tell you that you are not going to make it you know they give you their negative vibes and their negative vibes jumps on to you so then you start feeling it and you have low self esteem. And then I have my husband...we not together now...and when he seen that I was leaning more towards that (school) and trying to do better he started like being very abusive physically, functionally, mentally, and then finally I just feel that God removed him from me because it was never meant to be.

Claire was not the only participant that felt that she was a barrier to herself due to low self esteem. Dana, in the focus group interview, shared with the group, "like I said the only barrier that each and every one of us in this room has is ourselves, we hold ourselves back, we stop ourselves from doing things, we stop our blessings, we bring on our cursing".

Five of the eight women were experiencing single parenting issues while in school and expressed these struggles in many different ways. Dana feels that she must set an example for her daughter that she is raising. She expresses it in this way “me being a single parent I’m always looking that’s not enough. I want more than that because I know what I’m capable of doing and there’s nobody pushing me to do it I say look at me I’m thirty four years old and still in college...I don’t want me to slip with my daughter.” Tara has a child with a disability and struggles with his behavior in his school. She does not always have help with him and has to do it alone. She shared that “every now and then with Nicholas he’ll have a bad day in school and Mrs. C is awesome because she is just totally understands and I’ll tell her I have to go because Nicholas is ‘whatever’...”

Along these same lines, there are also challenges from others which are the result of family issues such as illness or deaths as well as issues with their children such as disabilities, illness, accidents or time factors. Some of these issues were shared in the following quotes. When Riley was asked about barriers to her success in school, she point blank mentioned “like sick children and deaths in the family”. Natalie spoke of her struggles with her parents, and her daughter who has a disability throughout her interview. When questioned as to what her barriers are she stated that “I have my mom who has had Alzheimer’s for seven years and my dad is dying right now...my daughter has a severe handicap and my husband is in the hospital for mental illness”. Tara shared that “her plate is full” with her three children and one being autistic. She even had to drop for a semester because her thirteen year old broke his foot playing basketball. In this particular section, there were many more quotes too numerous to include pertaining to these barriers.

Situations in the women's lives which bring varied trials are another sub-theme noted when examining challenges in their lives. One of these challenges for this group of women was money for expenses to attend school, as well as pay for expenses while in school. Dana shared that "being a single Mom financially its hard with bills you know stuff comes up the car breaks my daughter needs something for school". On the other hand, money was also a barrier for those without children such as Ricki. She stated that "at first when I finally decided to come to school it took a long time for me to even get here because number one I didn't know how I was going to pay to go to school you know I want to do it but I don't have the money".

In addition to the financial obstacles, transportation also put up a barrier to attending school for two of the women. Ricki does not have any transportation available to attend school and depends on walking the two miles to get there. She often misses her classes when the weather is bad and she is unable to get to school. Claire has to depend on family members for her transportation and they are not always reliable. Both women struggle each day to get to school but persist in spite of these obstacles.

In the area of academics, there were challenges identified that could also be a hindrance to their success. Sandy answered in this way "the only thing as far as goals and a barrier is one of my courses the math part I never was really good with the math thing and then early on I was kind of ashamed of it so I tried to bypass the math part...you know even with the computers I was reluctant I'd say computers...I'll never get that...and it just looked like it was so difficult ...whoa how you turn it on...you go to the computer like you supposed to know what you doing and I didn't know". Claire also struggled with her Math and described it in this way "my biggest struggle here was Math...I skipped Math several times". Another participant, Riley, is struggling with her Math and it is her last obstacle to overcome to graduate. She took it during

the semester of her interview and if she passed it she would graduate. Natalie also has only her Math class to pass to complete her degree.

One of the students, the youngest of the participants, was having a challenge deciding on a program of study. This was an obstacle for her and she described it in this way “making a choice...which degree I want to go in...which direction I want to go in because they are going in completely opposite directions...early childhood and computers or MSI...they are two different sides”. Later after the focus group interview, Mary shared with me that she would probably switch from the early childhood program and pursue a degree in the area of computer science.

Another barrier for one of the participants was a disability she has had to overcome. She has epilepsy and did not feel confident that she could attend college with this barrier. Natalie shared that “I know with me I have a disability and I had to overcome that and I had to find a way how I could overcome it”. She has been in school since 2001 and said that “I can only take two courses at a time because of my disability and because I have to work at the same time”. She is now at the end of her coursework and graduation is an accomplished goal for her.

Divorce and bad relationships were also described as challenges to success in school. Riley states that “I had to sit out two semesters for the divorce issues”. She goes on to describe a new relationship in her life after the divorce as a barrier to her success in school. She expresses it in this way “the only thing I found that when I was going through school I had a relationship...I found that going through school and having a relationship and being with the children...it was harder to you know concentrate on school work and children and having to balance out a relationship so I’m single”. Claire was married and had a bad relationship that created a barrier for her also. She responded to the question on obstacles in the following way “and when he seen

that I was learning more towards that and trying to do better he started like being very abusive physically, mentally, ...

The last barrier that was shared by several of the participants may not seem as serious as some of the other barriers; however, for these women it was an added pressure and one more responsibility in their busy lives to deal with. This obstacle was that of housework and daily chores to keep up with. Sandy referred to it in a jovial way by stating that “going home I have to take a little nap cause I know I will be up awhile and I get into my work, my books, and this part of the house is accumulating dust (laughs) and I’m trying to balance that out”. Riley shares that she has to use the time when her children are with their father every other weekend to “actually clean house”.

It was evident throughout the interviews that nontraditional female students present with a myriad of challenges to their success in achieving their educational goals. Not only in the quotes in this section but throughout the study there is mention of the obstacles they have had to overcome. It was found in this study that a multitude of challenges exist for these women and specific ones were identified by the participants. This common theme of challenges encountered in the educational environment is expressed throughout the interview transcripts in many different ways and became a major theme that I noted throughout the interpretation and data analysis. The sub-themes noted within this major theme of challenges were encapsulated in the following: self as a challenge, others as a challenge and trials in their lives presenting challenges. These did not come as a surprise to me because as I suggested earlier in this discussion, the many challenges experienced by other nontraditional women had already been revealed to me. As a counselor in both a technical and community college, this was information that had been shared with me quite frequently over the course of my work experiences.



**Can you describe some ways in which you have felt validated during your life? in an educational setting?**

The responses that were given to this question drew out many different ways as well as varied sources of validation. The respondents talked about validation from their instructors, fellow students, husbands, moms, friends, other employees of the college other than faculty members, grades, as well as the positive environment of the program they are in serving as validation. Additionally, they spoke of themselves as providing validation to each other, as well as themselves, and shared that simply being a student was validation itself. One of the students spoke of the program that was paying for her expenses in school as being a source of validation for her. The theme of validation was expressed throughout the quotes from the participants. In the following paragraphs I will provide quotes from different participants expressing ways and sources of validation experienced in their lives while they are attending college. I found that these sources of validation were noted as being from both internal as well as external sources.

Ricki, spoke about a program, Pathways, that was funding her expenses for school, as validating her. This financial aid program was one that provided money for expenses in college and was provided to students who had been impacted by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. She spoke of the program as follows:

I found out about Pathways...Pathways can help you out...how Pathways works you have to do the legwork you know and well I've done this and all these other things....where do I go from here...and they let you know well cause you did this well we're giving you this to show that well you've made it this far and if you go further this

is what you get...just the idea of coming back to school you did this as a good thing you know...they validate you and encourage you to come.

One of the sources of validation was from the faculty members. Claire spoke of the instructors in her program at the community college by saying “they believed in me” and then “they believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself...they see something in me that I don’t see in myself”.

Sandy spoke very positively throughout the interview of her instructors and the following excerpt from her transcribed data evidences the feelings of validation that are felt by her as well as her classmates:

Here at school our instructors you know I just salute to them because they are...they receive a lot of different personalities and characters who come here and they just always act kind and they act like... wow I want to be just like that and okay (laughs) and have time and give and I really salute them cause like I said there are so many characters and personalities and different attitudes and they just take the time to make them feel real good about themselves and they definitely make me feel good about myself because I was like OHHHHHH I think I am a little too old for all of this...and they just make me feel more confident.

Sandy continued by describing one of her instructors in the following way:

Just the other day I was typing up something on the computer for a class project and I got to a particular point and I was like done and I was going over it to see if everything was okay and she comes through the classroom and it caught her eye and she just said “that is beautiful” and you know my chest grew 10 times in size... that and yeah along with like taking time off to listen...she listens...she

sees what I'm trying to do she doesn't make me feel belittled...is what I'm trying to say she makes me feel like I'm somebody...yeah and she does it with the other students also you know.

There were several students at both institutions who spoke of being validated by other students. Claire had a student worker who worked in the admissions office that encouraged her to tap into her spirituality for support and she shared this experience:

I had that Math that I kept failing and I was fighting that math and I was ready to quit and then Ms. Evelyn she looked at me and I said I'm at the breaking point...that math I've taken it several times and I can't pass it. She said Claire I took it seven times and you better not stop...she said God is not gonna put more than you can bear...keep praying and ask Him...ask Him for wisdom and knowledge and I did. When I got past it the first person I thanked was God and the second was her.

Along this same line of support, there were two students at the technical college in their separate interviews, who referred to this in an interesting way when speaking of each other. Tara told me "well Sandy is a wonderful, wonderful person because she sees the good in everything and she'll tell you this is awesome this is good". Later, Sandy of whom she spoke, shared this:

I've accomplished a lot and coming back to school is a major accomplishment for me and I'm thinking that this barrier of my Math class but I want to believe that uh I can go on and finish school and that's quite an accomplishment for me. So when you go through trials and tribulations strictly where you're weakest and it gives you confidence to go on and you can share that with someone else and strengthen them when they are sitting there and start thinking that they are stuck somewhere in life and you know you can share what you know and let them know that you know there is hope.

Both of these students, Tara and Sandy, are validating each other just in different ways. In validating Tara, Sandy is able to validate herself by reflecting on her own situation and how she came through it. She is self validating as well as validating her fellow student. In hearing the students discussing validation, in both individual and focus group interviews, I found there was a great deal of support and validation for each other at both colleges. I noted the way the women related to each other in the focus group interviews and witnessed many instances when they validated each other during these sessions. The environments in these focus groups became for them safe, affirming and what appeared to be an experience that supported their spirituality.

Some of the women spoke of being in school as a form of validation itself. Ricki at the technical college said “well, like when I made it into school that’s a big validation for myself because it’s not like somebody else took this test I took it”. Martha, a community college participant, shared this statement “I am the first one if you go into my biological family, my mom and dad, my brother, I am the first one to get a diploma and I went to college...that’s two things that everybody said that I wouldn’t do”.

In both the technical college participants and the community college participants, it was mentioned that the environment itself can be validating when it is positive. Martha, who is a student worker at the community college, as well as one of the participants, said that she felt validated by many of the people at the community college. The Dean, registrar, secretary, counselors, in fact most of her coworkers at the college often compliment her, cheer her on, and validate her by saying “good job”.

During the focus group interview at the technical college, the students discussed how they felt like the early childhood department was a very positive and validating environment. Some of the students had attended other colleges and universities and they found that this

atmosphere felt more “family” oriented and more “personal”. Riley, in speaking of her experience at the university as a student, said “they just treat you like a branded cow”.

The students also spoke of internal means such as their spirituality as being a validating factor for them. Sandy described it in the following way:

I can meditate on the Lord, say the word or some scriptures like I can do all things through Christ the Lord you know. I can do this and I try to encourage myself. I tell myself you can do this and I wouldn't know unless I tried school.

The example that Riley used was an experience she had in a work environment. She referred to spirituality as creating a positive reinforcement or validating factor in the environment she worked in. She described it in the following way:

I mean if you had this work environment and your boss is constantly making you feel better about yourself, I was in this type of environment, I used to work at a pharmacy and my boss was not really very religious but he goes to church and you know he prays every day and he had things in his life that brought him to that...you know made him open his eyes and things like that and that caused him to be a better person and once he was a better person then everybody around him was more positive. It felt like a family environment instead of a working environment.

There were numerous examples of validating experiences that the participants provided in this section. Spirituality as a validating factor was an important finding in that it confirmed for me that when these women felt encouraged and validated by this spiritual factor they remained constant to pursuing their goals. This spirituality was something that I had noticed in these women through my years of working with them and it was a factor I anticipated that I would find through my research. This is also confirmed by Rendon's (2000) research in her Academics of

the Heart in which she encourages creating a learning environment which engages the heart. In these environments, educating the whole person will occur and emphasis will be placed not only on the intellect but personal and spiritual growth as well. Their spirituality can be nurtured and affirmed and will serve as a validating factor as they persevere in their educational environments. Although the environments they described were not always identified by the participants as spiritual influences, it is my belief that a sense of spirituality was often present in some way in these environments. An example would be an instructor who is a spiritual person providing a nurturing, caring and validating environment for the students. During my reflection on this data, I found that validation was a major theme across the previous quotes given by the participants. This validation may often be spiritual in nature and can come through internal or external sources.

#### *Support in an Educational Setting (Part 1)*

#### **In regards to an educational setting, can you describe your internal support system (if there is one) that enables you to persist and succeed?**

This question was confusing to some of the participants because Question #4 in the interview guide was very similar in that they were asked about their internal support system that helped to manage their life today. Since they had already answered a similar question earlier I believe that a couple of the participants were searching for a different answer in this response. Tara and Riley were both off with their answers and did not address the question at all but instead got side tracked. Tara started to talk about her children and how she was doing it all for them and from there started to talk about her brother and his problems. Riley began by talking about the childcare program and how this positive environment helped her to succeed. In the earlier question concerning their internal support, both spoke of God and their spirituality

providing this support to them. I did not want to lead them or influence their answers so I did not try to clarify it for them which in hindsight I believe was a mistake on my part. I should have rephrased the question and tried to get them to refocus on their responses.

The summation of the responses I received from the other six participants was as follows:

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| Claire   | “God and spirituality” “grace, faith, prayer”   |
| Ricki:   | “yes, I do believe I have an internal support because at one point in time at one semester I really wanted to give up...I prayed to see if I was making the right decision” later identified this as her “spirituality” |
| Martha   | “it all comes from spirituality and religion  |
| Sandy    | “spirituality”  |
| Natalie: | “God”   |
| Dana     | “oh God definitely God”   |

This question, along with the previous question on an internal support system that helps manage your life today, could be combined for the reporting process of this study. The findings in both were the same. It was found that spirituality does serve as their internal support in various settings in their life today that enables them to persist and succeed. This major theme of support will be further addressed in the following discussion.

#### *Support in an Educational Setting (Part 2)*

#### **Do you think that your spirituality could be supported or enhanced in an educational setting? If so, in which ways?**

When asked this question, the youngest participant, Martha who is 26, responded in the following way “there probably are ways but I just can’t think of any” and she then followed this comment with “you have to watch your boundaries with other people...they may not believe in

the same things you do they may not want to discuss their beliefs and their backgrounds with anybody”.

On the other hand, when asked this same question, Claire, who is forty years of age and older than Martha, responded by saying:

Its strange that you should say that (referring to the researcher) because I have a class now that is kind of open minded and lets you talk about God and religions and you know you are not being criticized for what you say and whatever... they are open minded and that's a good thing.

Later in the focus group interview, Claire suggested “I think one of the things the school can do is have like a support group...where sometimes we can sit down just be ...sometimes you don't have to say nothing just be there with a person...sympathize with them and that's where spirituality is”.

Several of the women participants also answered this question in this same vein concerning having some type of groups to support spirituality in an educational environment.

Dana, in her individual interview, spoke about a possible group or organization by suggesting the following:

Well, its just a matter of giving your own personal experiences you know...it's just like those clubs and sororities you know on campus...they should have something to the fact where its not offending or you know um degrading anyone's religion...to me if they had an organization to gather women, married or single, to share their experience...life experiences, college experiences, it would help...it would really help people to be better achievers cause like I said you never know what the next person is going through you



don't know if its worser [*sic*] than yours or maybe you just giving them enough courage and faith to cross over to the next day.

And then to reiterate, in the focus group interview Dana contributed by stating “we can do an organization where we just sitting down you know we meet maybe once a month twice a month it don't even have to be on the school campus”. The purpose of the organization was to talk about their spirituality in a safe place because the state colleges are not open to these groups on campus.

Tara also suggested a support group or organizational setting to support each others spirituality in the following way:

I think that with the spirituality and the prayer questions and stuff like that I think that should have been choice and that if you want to go into one of those type groups then its your choice and the whole school doesn't have to participate in it because it's a choice thing...they would meet like once a month and where you could still be around people who have the same interest that you do (concerning spirituality) and not offend the next one.

Finally, Ricki suggested another way of bringing in our spirituality into the educational environment by using a more subtle way:

Maybe one way is like talk to like other students and faculty about certain problems without going too far into religion you know... they may be able to help you...you know even if you praying and you may still not be getting the answer you're not asking the right questions and they may help you out to ask the right questions to get your answer so when you are able to talk and if you can talk in a certain way then you are not going to be judged by what you ask or what you say.

Claire talked about respecting each other's beliefs as being important in an educational environment to support our spirituality. She said that "to enhance anybody's spirituality, be open-minded and let them share their beliefs with you". She gave an example as follows:

I have a class now where the instructor is open minded and lets you talk about God...you know, you are not being criticized for what you say...they have a lot of teachers that I have encountered that has different beliefs but they are open-minded and that's a good thing.

Natalie described one of her instructors as being a spiritual person and sharing her stories with the class. She said that "in sharing their spirituality, it enhances yours".

I found through the aforementioned comments from the participants that it was important to them to have their spirituality supported and enhanced in their educational environments. This importance became especially clear to me while listening to a discussion between the women in the focus group at the community college. When the focus group was ending and they were finishing the snacks and drinks I had provided, they became very engaged in a conversation about women and their spirituality. They shared that there were not many places where women were comfortable speaking about their spirituality and having others to support them in their spirituality other than at church. With the increasing number of older women in colleges today, they felt it was important to have this opportunity offered at their educational institutions. This discussion reinforced my findings that their spirituality could be supported or enhanced in an educational environment. This focus on support was encapsulated in many of the quotes in the previous sections and for this reason I found support to be a major theme in this study. The participants referred to the respect they received from their instructors to be an important element

of this support. Additionally, relational support was also extremely important to them. In this section this was noted over and over again in their discussions. The intensity of this need in the female students I encountered to be in relationship with others in groups or organizations surprised me and were an unexpected finding in this study.

Table 2 on page 129 illustrates the emergent themes and sub-themes that were identified. A discussion of each theme and their identified sub-themes are included in the summary following the table.

Table 2

THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

Themes	Sub-Themes
Spiritual Development/Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ prior experiences</li> <li>➤ present experiences</li> <li>➤ future experiences</li> </ul>
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ self</li> <li>➤ others</li> <li>➤ trials</li> </ul>
Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ internal</li> <li>➤ external</li> </ul>
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ respect</li> <li>➤ relational</li> </ul>
Perseverance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ purpose and meaning</li> <li>➤ strong belief system</li> <li>➤ re-motivation</li> </ul>

### *Summary of Emergent Themes*

The data from the individual interviews and the focus group interviews were sorted and coded for themes and sub-themes to emerge. The participants in the study brought with them prior and current experiences as well as future aspirations in regards to their spirituality and persistence towards their goals. In the discussions of the study participants, I searched for common experiences and meanings among the female community and technical college students interviewed. Initially, the data from the individual interviews and the focus group interviews were sorted and coded for themes and sub-themes to emerge. The result of this search was a compilation of eight themes and fifty one sub-themes. After further analysis and interpretation of the interview transcripts, and a period of reflection on this data, five major emergent themes were encapsulated along with sub-themes that further elaborate on the experiences and meanings for these female students. Some themes were combined to form one theme and one additional common thread of perseverance was identified. The fifty one sub-themes became descriptive points in the discussion of the findings. These themes and sub-themes are a result of a search for meaning and understanding and not for conclusions in regards to spirituality and its relationship to persistence in nontraditional female students in community and technical colleges.

The five emergent themes that were identified are discussed in the following section along with their sub-themes. Supporting quotes have been discussed in the prior section of this chapter and an analysis will be focused on in the final chapter. The five emergent themes were spiritual development/growth, challenges, validation, support and perseverance. The concepts which serve as sub-themes under these essential themes are included with the following synopsis of the themes.

Reflecting on the first theme, it was revealed by the nontraditional female students in the study that their spiritual development and growth is on-going and has grown and changed through the course of their lives. Their prior experiences with spirituality were external in nature and occurred in the context of religious structures. They were influenced by authoritarian figures in their lives such as family and church figures. Present experiences of spirituality may be related to religious structures but have different meanings in their lives. The experiences with spirituality are intrinsic in nature and a strong factor of internal support in their lives today. When discussing spirituality and its development and growth in their life, there are no set divisions or stages. It is fluid in its development and there are crossovers between stages. The last sub-theme which was that of future experiences was expressed as a present need as well as future desired experience. During the sharing of their stories in the interview sessions, it was noted that their spirituality has moved away from authoritarian experiences to internal influences. A present and future need that seemed to evolve was one of a relational experience. This relationship was noted as being in two forms: a relationship with a Divine Presence within and a sharing of this relational awareness with others.

The second theme was one of challenges that were encountered throughout their lives by the women in the study. These challenges have a bearing on their persistence towards their goals in an educational setting. They perceive these factors as presenting in many different venues. One of the biggest challenges was described as themselves. A lack of confidence in their own abilities often gets in the way of persevering towards their goal. Another factor was that of “others” in their lives and could be a number of different people such as children or family members. Finally, they spoke of trials in their lives which encompassed a myriad of factors that present challenges to them. These trials permeated the discussions in the interviews. Not all of

the trials however were causes of their lack of success. There is wisdom to be gained by tough experiences in life and these women often gained this through their challenges.

The third theme noted was that of validation. The study participants were both internally and externally validated over the course of their college experience. A constant thread throughout the interviews was the way in which the students were validated internally by spirituality. The validating factor of spirituality provided the intrinsic motivation they needed to persist. The validation that was external also often came in the way of a spiritual type of encounter. The participants spoke of their environments being open, accepting of others beliefs, nurturing, caring, etc and also spoke of their instructors being spiritual people. They felt that their environments were supportive and validating at times and expressed a need to have it occur more often.

Closely tied to the theme of validation was that of support. The women in the study wanted to have their beliefs respected and yearned for an open environment to nurture their spirituality. They enjoyed the focus group interviews and felt that having opportunities to be in relationship with other women was very important to them. They all expressed a desire for administrators and school personnel to work towards providing these supportive environments for them on the college campus.

The last major theme noted was that of the perseverance of the women to work towards achieving their goals. In spite of the challenges that may present, they continue to be re-motivated over and over again to continue to persevere toward their goals. During their interviews, the women spoke of their challenges and their ability to overcome them with a sense of pride. The women had both a strong sense of purpose and meaning which was fed by their spirituality, as well as a strong belief system, which were constant and driving factors to encourage them to

persevere. Their perseverance was evident throughout the interviews and was expressed by the women over and over again throughout all of the discussions. The evidence of perseverance being a common thread that links all of the women in the study permeates the quotes of the participants. In addition, all of the women in the study were persisting toward their goals by remaining in school semester after semester. Two of the participants were in their last semester of college. This is in itself supporting data that perseverance was a major theme to be noted in the data collection.

In the following chapter, a discussion and analysis of these findings will be presented with a connection between the findings, the literature, and the conceptual framework of the study indicated. Limitations of the study, study implications, recommendations for future research and concluding remarks will also be included.



## Chapter Five: Discussion, Limitations, Implications, Recommendations and Conclusions

### *Overview of the Study*

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative study was to explore spirituality and its relationship to persistence in nontraditional female students in a community and technical college. With increasing numbers of nontraditional women in our colleges today, researchers in persistence education today note that it is important to address new innovative ways to retain these students (Astin, 2004; Rendon, 2000; Bean & Metzger, 1996).

The theoretical perspectives guiding this study were those of Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) theories of faith development for the college years, and in regards to persistence, Rendon's (2000) model of Academics of the Heart. Rendon's model framed the nontraditional female students' motivation to persist in a different context than that of the traditional student.

The focus of the study was to gain the perspectives and experiences of the women themselves in order to find out if, and how, spirituality might serve as a validating factor and an intrinsic motivator to persist in achieving their educational goals. The participants consisted of four community college women and four women from a technical college.

The central research question that guided this study was:  
What is the role of spirituality in the persistence of nontraditional female community/technical college students?

The following four sub-questions provided topical focus for the study:

- 1) How do nontraditional community/technical college female students describe their ability to meet life's challenges as they have matured?
- 2) How do nontraditional community/technical college female students define their spirituality as it exists in their lives today?

- 3) How does an understanding of nontraditional community/technical college female students' spirituality contribute to persistence theories and attainment of educational goals?
- 4) Does spirituality play a role in creating a validating environment for these students?

These questions were created to gain an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of these women and were based on the conceptual framework that guided this study. The literature on persistence, as well as that of faith/spiritual development, contributed to the development of this framework.

This chapter provides a discussion and analysis of the findings of the study in relation to each of the themes that emerged from the study. The themes are included in the discussion of each research question. The themes were centered on the participants' responses to the interview questions and include quoted and actual accounts using the students own voice. A revised conceptual framework is also included in the discussion of the study findings. Secondly, the limitations of the study are addressed. Next the implications of this study for community and technical colleges are examined. Finally, recommendations for future research and concluding remarks are given.

### *Discussion of Study Findings*

In the previous chapter, I have compared and analyzed the transcripts of the participants to identify themes and sub-themes in the study. This chapter will include an analysis and discussion of the study findings as they relate to the literature in chapter two. Emerging themes have presented across the spectrum of the study through common threads noted in the voices of the female students. From the study emerged five major themes: spiritual development/growth, challenges, validation, support and perseverance. Additionally, each of these themes had sub-

theme that further enlightened the researcher on the nontraditional female students' perceptions and experiences.

Within the first theme, spiritual development and growth, it was found through the student interviews, that prior experiences, present experiences as well as desired future experiences all influence the growth and transformation of these women as they develop in their spirituality. These three sub-themes of prior, present, and future experiences were common sub-themes noted throughout the interview transcripts. The second theme was that of challenges encountered by the women in the study. The sub-themes were self, others, and trials and these defined the avenues through which the challenges often presented. Thirdly, the theme validation was found and the sub-themes were that both internal and external validation existed and influenced these female students. Closely tied to the theme of validation was the fourth theme, support. After careful analysis, it was found that respect as well as relational support was desired by these women and became common threads. The fifth and last theme, perseverance, had three sub-themes: purpose and meaning, a strong belief system and re-motivation.

Following is a discussion of the findings identified in the study by the themes and sub-themes and how they relate to each research question. The research questions were addressed through data collected from eight individual interviews and two focus group interviews. A discussion of each research question with regard to the findings from the themes and sub-themes identified is presented. Additionally, the findings will be related to the literature in Chapter two of the study.

## What is the Role of Spirituality in the Persistence of Nontraditional Female Community/Technical College Students?

After the data was coded and themes and sub-themes emerged, the findings revealed that spirituality influenced persistence in nontraditional female students in a community college and technical college examined in this study. It was found that the nontraditional female students in the study were at different stages of growth in their spiritual development than traditional students as described by Parks (2000) in her model of faith development for college students. The further along they were in their stages of faith development, the more influence their spirituality had on their lives today. Parks proposed that In the later stages of their spiritual development, a series of transformations have occurred in the women moving from authority bound forms of meaning making to a committed, inner-dependent mode of composing meaning. As their spirituality transforms into an intrinsic mode of purpose and meaning making, it serves as a validating factor in their lives. Additionally, the women in the study presented with a plethora of challenges to their success in achieving their educational goals. However, when spirituality existed as a validating factor in their lives, they were able to persevere and succeed in spite of these challenges. Spirituality appeared to validate the women both intrinsically as well as from extrinsic factors in their environment. This validating factor of spirituality in their lives provided strength, hope and meaning which gave them the intrinsic motivation to persist towards their educational goals. Rendon's (2000) model of Academics of the Heart illuminates this validating environment of spirituality that will nurture the persistence of these nontraditional women in their academic arena. Within this validating environment proposed by Rendon (2000), which she refers to as "sacred space", the women will grow and develop spiritually. This validating class environment is fostered to enable the students to see themselves as powerful

learners. This validation, in effect, will result in their success in persisting towards their goals. This intrinsic, as well as extrinsic motivation of spirituality, serves as their validating factor to persist.

### *Spiritual Development/Growth as a Major Theme*

Not all researchers equate spirituality with models of spiritual development; however, for the purposes of this study, developmental models were examined. A developmental approach to spirituality is consistent with the theoretical assumptions of student development literature (Love, 2001, 2002) as well as with the work of both Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000). During the data collection and after the data analysis of the transcriptions, I realized that this developmental model clearly existed in the participants I interviewed. Only one of the participants, Martha, who was twenty six years of age, was at the earlier young adult stage of the developmental model. The other seven participants, who ranged in age from twenty nine years of age to forty nine, were further along the spectrum with Sandy being at the more mature adult faith stage of development. I determined where the female students were in their development by researching developmental theories and determining where they fit into these developmental structures. Although these developmental stages are fluid, after listening to these women's stories in their interviews, a determination could be made as to how some of them had experienced their developmental growth and transformations. Considering the input from participants in their discussions, I noted that some of the women appeared to be at different stages of development in their spirituality than the others. This was consistent with the stage models of development proposed by Parks (2000). In Park's four stage model of adolescent, young adult, tested adult and mature adult faith, it appeared that each stage of the model was represented by one or more of the women. This suggests to me that the women in the later stages of growth have gone from

authority modes of thinking to more interior modes of knowing. This further suggests that this interior spiritual development can be accessed to serve as a validating factor in their persistence.

The findings in this study indicate that an understanding of cognitive-structural theories of development is important in determining where they are in their development and in meeting the needs of this population of students. Our student populations and the developmental issues they confront are more diverse and complex than ever in the history of higher education (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. xi). Nontraditional women, in our community and technical colleges today, present with their development progressed to stages beyond that which college students have presented with in the past. Many of the nontraditional women who enter our academies today are arriving there via a different route than does the traditional student. The traditional student usually enters after graduating from high school. Nontraditional women who enter community/technical colleges often arrive there as a result of events in their lives which have precipitated a change such as a divorce, loss of a job, death of a spouse, etc. Seven of the participants in this study clearly fit into this group of students who have experienced major challenges in their lives. They are older students who have experienced divorce, single parenting, bad relationships, as well as other life changing events in their lives. Belenky et al. (1986) proposes that real life lessons that women learn in their lives are not gleaned from the academic world but instead from relationships they have experienced or crises they have gone through in their lives. As a result of this, their emotional, spiritual and cognitive development has often progressed to stages beyond that which college students presented with in the past. This is important in understanding persistence because prior research on persistence has focused on student engagement, socialization, and integration into the college environment. The spiritual element that exists in these women was not included in the previous research. These women have

developed not only cognitively but in their faith and spiritual growth as well and this spirituality becomes a validating factor in their persistence. This research study is original and unique because spirituality is introduced as a new facet of the nontraditional students college experience as a possible support structure not previously identified.

Research findings within the study parallel the cognitive developmental models that were frameworks for this research study. One of the major themes noted in the study was spiritual development and growth for these women. An examination of the women in the study and their development in their spirituality was evidenced by the participants' comments. Martha stood out for me during the interviews in that I noted she has not appeared to move beyond some of the developmental stages in her life today as have the other participants in the study. Martha was still very concerned with conforming to the opinions of others and I would attribute this to her being the youngest participant at twenty six years of age. She was the only one who did not have any ideas of how spirituality could be supported for women in an educational environment. I find that Martha's responses are an interesting contrast to the other women participants who were all older than she was. During this early period of development, according to Parks (2000) what we "know" and believe in is "authority bound" (p. 54). And so it is in our early spiritual development. Our parents "know", the authorities in our religious institutions "know". This is an important factor in the study of all female students and their spirituality as an element in persistence studies. If students are at the early stages of their cognitive/spiritual development, and are in environments that nurture their growth, they will benefit. Their spiritualities will begin to deepen and growth will occur at an earlier time in their lives. They will move from the authority bound ways of knowing to interior modes of knowing. This reliance on their interior modes occurs as their developmental growth progresses and enables them to tap into their

spirituality as a supportive force in their lives. They will begin to transform and listen to their own internal voice. This nurturing of their spirituality in positive environments will in effect be an important element in their spirituality becoming a validating factor in their lives. This parallels the research of Rendon (2000) in her model of Academics of the Heart which fosters these environments of spiritual growth.

In regards to the developmental process, a question that could be raised is how could the women who are more advanced in their development help to nurture the women at levels not as developed in their spirituality as they are? This question aligns with Parks (2000) as she promotes in her model the “gifts” of a mentoring environment. She proposes that when this mentoring type of relationship works, the meaning and satisfaction it yields are gifts to both; protégé and mentor. This external environment in relation to women’s spirituality and their development becomes an important issue and one that merits further research.

An example of this concept of mentoring does exist in the present study in the following discussion. Sandy was at the later stages of development and would be considered a mature adult. She has moved from authority bound modes of thinking to a committed, inner dependent mode of composing meaning. It was very evident that she served as a mentor to the other students in the program. She respected her instructors and they validated her ability to succeed; however, most of her motivation was intrinsic in nature. Sandy listened to her own voice in finding meaning in her life and was guided by interior modes of thinking. In observing Sandy, it was very evident that she was independent in her thinking. She noticed areas where I may need help in setting up my interviews and she was always ready to help. During my time with Sandy, I noticed that she had a deep sense of spirituality and was guided by her interior modes of meaning making. This intrinsic motivation is what led her back to the classroom and appeared to be the



driving force in her perseverance in this environment. She was very much a “gift” to others in her program as she mentored them daily.

My purpose in qualifying where the participants are on the continuum of development is as they move towards the later stages of development they become independent in their thinking and are able to move from authority bound to interior bound modes of thinking. In Fowlers (1981) developmental stages of faith, it is during the conjunctive faith stage, which usually occurs around mid life, when one “begins to listen to the voices of their deeper self” (p. 198). They have new depths of experience in spirituality. They are “freed from the confines of tribe, class, religious community or nation” and can listen to their own voice (p. 198). Along these same lines, as women develop cognitively, they go through changes in how they come to know, think, and believe. (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) The women referred to this development as their spirituality having “a more mature meaning”. In the later stages they develop their own voice. These changes are closely aligned with their spiritual growth.

With this type of thinking and spiritual growth, the women are moving towards becoming intrinsically motivated. This brings up a question that needs to be examined in terms of spirituality as an intrinsic motivator. If one can access spirituality anytime to serve as an intrinsic motivator, then why is external validation also a factor? Drawing from my own experiences of spirituality and those of the participants in the study, spirituality in our lives will sometimes be stronger than at other times. Furthermore, women are relational by nature and these external factors of spirituality will further validate them and deepen their sense of spirituality. Both internal and external sources of spirituality are important for not only nontraditional women but all women on their spiritual journeys.

Along these same lines, Estanek (2006) carried out a qualitative research study in which she examined definitions of spirituality in higher education for the purpose of “illuminating this new meaning being conveyed in the definitions” (p. 271). As a result of her study, she concluded that the implications for practice would be that practitioners, especially in the area of student affairs, take a developmental approach to spirituality. There are similarities to Estanek’s study, and in the findings of this study, in that the women had progressed in their development spiritually along the stages suggested in the faith development models mentioned in this review of the literature. This was an important finding because it indicates that in this study a developmental approach is the best framework to use in examining nontraditional women and their spiritual development. It is important in this study to discern where the women are on the continuum with their faith development because this will determine whether a sense of spirituality exists. If so, it may serve as an intrinsic motivator to persist. If a sense of spirituality does not exist or has not developed, then it is a moot point in determining if it may serve as a validating factor and intrinsic motivator to persist in an educational setting. It appeared that of the eight participants in this study, one was in the early stages of development whereas seven of the women were further along the continuum in their spiritual growth. With a nurturing environment, the women can progress to a more developed sense of spirituality in the future.

#### *Challenges as a Major Theme*

The primary question in this study also examines the role of this spirituality in these nontraditional female students in their persistence towards their goals in an educational setting. In examining persistence, it was found that the nontraditional women had many challenges to overcome to persist and be successful in the pursuit of their goals. One of the biggest challenges they encounter is their lack of self confidence. This sub-theme of self as a barrier was reiterated

over and over again by the women. Claire referred to it by stating “having the fear of myself not being smart....being incompetent”. In the focus group interview, Dana told the group that “the only barrier that each and every one of us in this room has is ourselves”. The literature is consistent with the findings in this study in regards to obstacles encountered by nontraditional women in an educational setting. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) in their study of validation and nontraditional women discussed in chapter two also noted that obstacles are a deterrent to success in these women. Their results also found that many are entering with challenges such as a lack of support at home from spouse, family or peers, low academic skills, low self esteem and generally a sense of fear they may not succeed. Throughout the interviews in this study, the female students spoke of many of these same challenges, as well as additional ones. These are the sub-themes that run throughout the interviews. They refer to themselves, as mentioned earlier, as being their biggest challenge. Additionally, they refer to others, as well as many trials they encounter, as being challenges to their success in persisting in the college environment.

### *Validation as a Major Theme*

As a result of the challenges encountered, Belenky et al.(1986) found that if validation is not felt by these women, they will leave the institution. The participants of the present study’s responses were consistent with Belenky et al.’s findings. They referred to their spirituality as being their internal support and a source of validation which empowers them to overcome the myriad of challenges they encounter. Rendon (1994) also supports the idea that validation is empowering and develops confidence in these nontraditional women. She proposed that involvement in academic institutions for nontraditional students is not easy and the missing link is their feeling of validation. The participants in the present study expressed that they were both

internally and externally validated and these are sub-themes of validation in the study. Internal sources of validation for these students were through their own spirituality, their idea of themselves as a student and self. Instructors, grades, other students, friends and a positive school environment were mentioned as external validations. The positive school environment that was mentioned by many of the participants in the present study was similar to the holistic learning environment that was proposed by Rendon (2000) in her *Academics of the Heart*. In this environment, both the heart and the mind are engaged.

### *Support as a Major Theme*

A strong sentiment of the need for support in their educational environment was expressed by the participants in the study. The sub-themes were respect and relational in terms of the support that they felt was needed to nurture and support their spirituality. In relation to the sub-theme respect, Claire referred to a class she was in that was open and “lets you talk about God and religions and you know you are not being criticized for what you say”. All of the students expressed a desire to have groups, organizations, or some type of safe place on campus to meet and be able to discuss and nurture each others spiritual growth. They wanted to feel that their support was in the context of a sense of respect and that they would not be ridiculed or criticized for their beliefs. Additionally, as they grow and develop, the women feel a need to have these discussions and experiences with their spirituality in relationship with others. This relational support is a need that has been addressed by Slee (2000) in the findings of her study. The concept of relationality and connectedness to God, self and others was found to be necessary in women’s spirituality and faith development. The findings in my study are in alignment with those of Slee’s in regards to this fundamental need to be in relationship with others as a necessary support system.

After listening to these women's needs and desires, it affirmed for me that Rendon's (2000) model of Academics of the Heart and Parks (2000) model of faith (spiritual) development in college students can work in tandem to provide an understanding of what is needed to support spirituality and how it influences the persistence of students towards their goals. The nontraditional women's spirituality can be nurtured and developed in the environment proposed by Rendon (2000) in Academics of the Heart. The developmental model proposed by Parks (2000) will flourish in this type of environment and the women will see transformational changes in their development in this supportive environment. The findings in my study confirm the positive effects this assimilation of Parks (2000) developmental model and Rendon's (2000) model, which both include a merging of the heart and mind, could have towards persistence models in the future. The findings in this study are that the types of support that are needed by these women to support them in their persistence are that they be respected in their beliefs and have opportunities to be in relation with others to share their spiritualities. The environment proposed by Rendon (2000) fosters this type of support. She suggests a learning environment that engages the heart as well as the intellect, includes a relationship-centered process, honors and respects diverse ways of knowing, attends to matters of difference, as well as togetherness, and engages in contemplative practice. If faculties engage in this type of learning environment with their students, they can provide validating environments that support their persistence efforts. This concept of validation, both internal and external, was a strong factor that influenced persistence in the students in this study.

Along these same lines, an additional finding was the need for their spirituality, which serves as this validating factor, to be supported in an educational setting. In understanding where the students are on their continuum of developing spirituality, administrators, faculty, and

support staff, could better provide the environments that are needed to nurture the growth of this internal validating factor. Parks (2000) theory brings into the foreground a mode of meaning making that has been overlooked by many of our existing theories and institutional structures. In her theory, cognition and affect, or mind and heart, are interwoven and introduced into our educational settings. This study also illuminates the mind and heart as important factors to be included in persistence theory.

In regards to using the models discussed in the previous section, some questions have been raised for me that may create a state of dissonance with what has been proposed. This framework suggested to nurture and support the spiritual growth of these nontraditional women may be met with opposition by some of the existing faculty in our community/technical colleges. Burgis and Rendon (2006) studied four learning communities and used models of Academics of the Heart to complement the traditional methods. They found this blending of heart and mind seemed to happen naturally if faculty wanted to transcend traditional teaching and take risks to do things differently. An important question comes out of this: What if they don't want to do things differently? Perhaps not all faculties have a developed sense of spirituality, what kind of environment do they provide for the nontraditional students, or any students for that matter? How then can these supportive environments be provided for these nontraditional women? This was encountered by the students in my study and was discussed in their interviews. They felt very supported and validated by some faculty members and these were usually the ones in their specific early childhood program areas. However, they were also required to take some general educational courses or developmental courses with faculty outside of the early childhood program area. During their discussions, there appeared to be a real disconnect with the faculty in other classes they mentioned which did not have this same supportive environment. This contrast

would be an issue that could be an area of further research concerning persistence and these validating environments and support for these students.

Another factor that may be considered is that when examining the stage development models addressed in this study, the nontraditional women are further along in their development than the traditional students. Most traditional students may not fit into this model because they may not be as advanced in their spiritual development as the nontraditional women. However, their spirituality and modes of meaning making could be nurtured in this environment and growth could possibly develop sooner. One of the findings in the study was that the nontraditional women felt that their spirituality had grown and it had a more mature meaning in their lives today. The finding was that it played a prominent role in their lives today and was a strong factor of internal support. This is very much in line with the developmental models included in the review of the literature. In these models, the later stages of spiritual development are described as a moving away from authoritarian modes of meaning making to interior modes of listening to the voice of one's deeper self. This study has confirmed for me that the persistence models that serve the nontraditional students well may not be the same as the preferred models for traditional students. These students are still listening to voices of authority and their validation will come from other sources than the nontraditional women's. This does not mean that parts of this model would not also enhance persistence for traditional students but existing models for them appear to be working well for this population. This proposed model is most effective when used with the nontraditional women being served in our community and technical colleges today.

The primary research question proposed in this study was the role of spirituality in the persistence of nontraditional female community/technical college students. The findings in this

study, with support from the literature, are that nontraditional female student's spirituality may serve as a validating factor and an intrinsic motivator to persistence in a community college and technical college environment. For the purposes of this study, spirituality has been defined as an awareness of a Divine source of power within that is greater than ourselves and fosters strength, hope and meaning in our lives and supports us in our work for the common good of our world. This spirituality provides the validation and intrinsic motivation which becomes for them a dialogue with the self and validates their "mattering".

Subquestion #1: How Do Nontraditional Community/Technical College Female Students Describe Their Ability to Meet Life's Challenges as They Have Matured?

*Challenges as a Major Theme*

The nontraditional community/technical college female students in this study refer to their spirituality as a strong factor of internal support in their lives today. Their spirituality plays a prominent role in their lives and they rely on it to provide the strength they need to meet life's challenges. As discussed in the previous section, their spirituality has grown and developed as they have matured.

The persistence I have observed in the nontraditional women I have worked with over the past years evoked a strong interest in me to research this subject. I was often in awe of these women as I noted the challenges they overcame to reach their goals and the perseverance they exhibited as they encountered these many challenges. In listening to the stories of the women during the interviews in this present study, some of their life experiences were shared and the many challenges they have encountered were revealed. An analysis of study responses reveals that these challenges were cited by participants very often throughout the interviews and is a major theme found throughout the study. One of the participants in the present study, Tara, had



a large number of challenges in her life to overcome in order to persist in her educational goals. She attributed her strength and support as coming from her spirituality which she referred to as God. All eight of the participants referred to their spirituality as their internal support and motivator to persist towards their goals. This intrinsic motivation, influenced by their spirituality, which exists in the women in this study, is necessary to overcome the many challenges to success that exist for them. The sub-themes of this major theme of challenges are the challenge of self, the challenges that come through others and finally, the trials that are presented through their life situations that need to be overcome in order to succeed. Bye, Pushkar, and Conway's (2007) study discussed in chapter two found a distinction between older and younger students when studying intrinsic motivation for nontraditional students and persistence. Additionally, Calhoun (2003), in her study on adult student persistence, in a community college setting, found that there were four critical factors that strongly influenced participants in her study to persist. One of the factors was intrinsic motivation and she found that it also influenced all of the other factors. The reported higher levels of intrinsic motivation, influenced by their spirituality, in the nontraditional students shed light on the findings in my study.

The results of this internal support of spirituality, as an intrinsic motivation to meet life's challenges in these nontraditional women, is supported by the following research. As these women grow and develop, they have moved from listening to voices of authority to becoming autonomous. At the higher levels of their development, they are opening their mind and heart to embrace the world (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). During the more advanced stages, their spirituality plays a prominent role in all areas of their lives. Belenky, et al. posit that at this stage of development they "are seriously preoccupied with the moral or spiritual dimension of their lives (p. 150). To further confirm the existence of this spiritual dimension of

their lives in nontraditional women, Tisdell (1999a) observed that spirituality is “all encompassing and cannot be torn from other aspects of adult development” (p. 94).

### *Perseverance as a Major Theme*

This study has provided ways to identify how spirituality has contributed to the nontraditional female student's perseverance. The three sub-themes identified for this major theme are: purpose and meaning, strong belief system and re-motivation. Participants were adamant concerning their strong belief system that served as a support for them and cited it frequently as necessary for their perseverance. When asked what part their spirituality played in their lives today they responded with some of the following comments: “a huge part, a major part, it has to go with you everywhere, he's never going to leave me, taken on a deeper meaning”. These comments exemplify the strong belief system that exists in these women and serves as a strong support to persevere in spite of challenges in their lives. In regards to the sub-theme of purpose and meaning, spirituality is about meaning making and our purpose in life. This is closely tied to the literature in that Tisdell (2003) states that our spirituality is about meaning making and is a movement to a more authentic self. She contends that it is always present in our learning environments though it is often unacknowledged. The third sub-theme is that of re-motivation. With the many challenges that the women in this study have encountered from cancer to finding time to clean their home, and numerous other trials and challenges along this spectrum, they must find a way to re-motivate themselves after each “tumble”. In their interviews, it was found that their spirituality was their internal strength and the factor that re-motivates them to persevere. Although this support may have had different names such as God, my faith, my spirituality, my rock, prayer, and grace, it was a similar internal strength for each one of them.

It was noted that seven of the women in this study were either single or divorced. The one woman who was married shared that her husband was in an institution as a result of a mental breakdown. This does bring a question to light concerning the impact of being single and the women's perseverance. Is being married a drawback to one's furthering of their education? Are the women persisting because of the challenges of being single which often include a need to support themselves and sometimes children in addition? It could be that because of challenges in their lives they have persevered. This causes me to reflect on my educational journey as I pursue a doctorate. I began my journey through a Masters Degree program as a single parent and persisted to my goal. During my doctoral journey, I have been married and have persevered with the same intrinsic motivation – my spirituality. Therefore, this does not appear to hold true for myself. However, on reflecting on my own journey, I also know that there are other motivators that have also influenced my persistence at times. This concept of married nontraditional women versus single may be an area that merits further examination. Also, exploring challenges and their possibility of being a motivator to persist would bring up additional areas to research.

However, in this study it was found that this internal support of spirituality empowers these predominantly single participants and gives them the intrinsic motivation that is needed to meet life's challenges and overcome obstacles. The participants all agreed that this intrinsic motivation, influenced by their spirituality, has grown and changed as they have matured. These changes will be noted in the following section.

Subquestion #2: How Do Nontraditional Community/Technical College Female Students Define Their Spirituality as it Exists in Their Lives Today?

The nontraditional community/technical college female students define their spirituality as it exists in their lives today as being in the context of an internal concept. They view

spirituality as being related to religion but different. They define religion as being more external and organized. It is embodied in churches, laws, beliefs, and rituals. When defining their spirituality, they express it in the following way: internal, indwelling, God, Higher Power, inner divine, peace and relationship. Additionally, they feel that it plays a prominent role and is a major part of their lives. It has a more mature meaning than in their early years of development, provides their strength during trials, and it may be experienced during prayer. The following section will relate the definitions of the participants with the literature discussed in chapter 2.

### *Spiritual Development/Growth as a Major Theme*

One of the findings of the study was that the prior experiences of the participants spiritual development during their childhood was experienced in a religious context. It was also noted that during this time external authoritarian influences were evident. It is difficult to define the participant's spirituality today without first referencing their religious roots from which their spirituality developed. This finding can be aligned with the views of Tisdell (2003) in the review of the literature. Tisdell posits that spirituality and religion are not the same; however, she states that they are interrelated. She proposes that adults often move away from their childhood religious tradition or begin to question it. However, while developing a more meaningful adult spirituality they often 'spiral back' to incorporate elements of their religious background into this new eclectic spirituality (Tisdell, 2003). The findings in this study agree with this eclectic spirituality proposed by Tisdell. Although the participants in the study did not feel that religion and spirituality were the same, many of them made comments as follows in reference to the two: "go hand in hand", "similar", "intertwined", and "work together but different". One of the unexpected challenges to emerge during the study was the participants struggle to define religion

and spirituality during their individual interviews. Although they all felt they were not necessarily the same, it was difficult for them to define them individually.

All of the eight participants in the study described their prior experiences, a sub-theme of spiritual development/growth, as being in a religious context. Although they had varied religious orientations, each one of them referred to an organized religion having some type of influence on their early years of spiritual development. This was noted in comments such as: “we were born and raised Catholic”, “we started going to the First Apostolic Church”, “the church services...the Church of God”, and “I went to the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church”. This finding illuminates Tisdell’s (2003) previous research which found a connection between religion and spirituality.

Although there was a connection found between spirituality/faith development and religion in the literature, the literature in chapter two clarified that there is also a distinction between faith development and religion. Chickering, Dalton and Stamm (2006) state that “it should be noted that in many respects Fowler’s (1981) conception of faith is similar to the understanding of spirituality, in contrast to religion, in common usage among Americans today” (p. 40). To further build on this clarification, Parks (2000) believes that this concept of faith “addresses our culture’s current hunger for a shared language about things ‘spiritual’ (p. 7). During the study, when the participants were asked to give their own descriptors of spirituality they listed the following: “internal”, “indwelling”, “God”, “Higher Power”, “inner Divine”, “peace”, “calm” and “relationship”. There were similarities noted by the researcher between the literature and the participants’ perceptions of spirituality as it exists in their lives today.

Tisdell (2003) refers to spirituality as awareness and honoring of wholeness and interconnectedness of all things through the mystery of what may be referred to as the Life-force,

God, higher power, higher self, cosmic energy, Budha, nature, or Great Spirit. She further proposes that spirituality is about meaning making, a movement towards a more authentic self, and is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment. (pp. 28-29).

My findings illuminate the definition of spirituality as a new discourse separate from religion found in the literature. As suggested in the literature by Estanek (2006), the participants in the study could be viewed as an empty container that was filled with their own individual meanings of spirituality. As a result, the eclectic view of spirituality has developed with elements of their own cultural and religious backgrounds. They acknowledge a power greater than themselves and develop spiritually as they attempt to make meaning of their lives in light of this power. The findings in the study reflect a desire to develop in their spirituality individually as well as in relationship with others. This spirituality becomes a validating factor in their lives and is a connective energy that can be defined in many different ways. Existing theories of persistence can be expanded to take this population of nontraditional students into account by including this validating factor of spirituality as an intrinsic motivator to persist and succeed.

Tisdell (2003) proposed that many of the definitions of spirituality have emerged from studying the lived experiences of participants in research studies. This present study, and the definitions the participants have given to their spirituality, may contribute to this body of knowledge.

### Subquestion #3: How Does an Understanding of Nontraditional Community/Technical College Female Students' Spirituality Contribute to Persistence Theories and Attainment of Educational Goals?

It was noted in this study that the nontraditional women in this community college and technical college presented with many challenges to their success in obtaining their educational

goals. In spite of these barriers these women are succeeding in their educational programs that they are pursuing. Spirituality appears to be the intrinsic motivation that allows them to persist and attain their goals. All of the women in the study are considered successful because they are beyond their first semester of school and are progressing in their educational pursuit of a degree. Two of the participants were finishing their program of study at the end of the summer semester during which the interviews were conducted.

### *Challenges as a Major Theme*

My research on nontraditional women in our colleges today produced many articles that showed these women to be at risk in achieving their goals. Horn and Premo (1995) examined seven risk factors which include: (1) delaying enrollment by a year or more (2) attending part time (3) being financially independent (for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid) (4) having children (5) being a single parent (6) working full time while enrolled and (7) being a high school dropout or a GED recipient. The present study is in agreement with all of these factors as challenges to persistence in an educational environment for these participants. I was not surprised by the many different challenges that were mentioned by the participants in this study. My amazement is how many of these women are able to succeed in an educational setting in spite of these barriers. One of the questions that emerged for me in one of my journal entries that was used to reflect on my findings during the course of the study is the following:

With the steady increase of nontraditional women entering our institutions of education today, and the increase of female versus males attending, what new factors are being introduced in regards to persistence? One that comes up for me is the possibility that this larger number of women in attendance is an empowering factor for the women. This important aspect that women

are relational beings and supportive of each other are a factor worth exploring. This support structure that exists from other women may empower them to meet some of these challenges.

### *Perseverance as a Major Theme*

In recent articles in my review of the literature, I found that new ways of examining persistence are necessary for these students to experience success. Tierney's (1992) idea of "moving away from a model of social integration and assimilation and toward a framework of emancipation and empowerment" supports my study and the ways in which the gender, race, and age of these women may be at odds with the dominant educational culture and environment they find themselves in (p. 616). Other studies support the idea that validation is empowering and develops confidence in these women in educational environments (Rendon, 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). The student's responses were consistent with this research as illustrated in the following comments through their own voices. Claire spoke of the instructors in her program at the community college by saying "they believed in me" and then "they believed in me when I didn't believe in myself". Along these same lines, Sandy voiced her sense of validation from her instructors in this way, "I think I am a little too old for all of this...and they just make me feel more confident". Sandy also commented that the instructors validate all the other students as well. She described the instructors validation of them in this way, "she listens...she sees what I'm trying to do she doesn't make me feel belittled...she makes me feel like I am somebody". Additionally, preliminary evidence on the role of spirituality in the lives of nontraditional women has been shed on persistence research in Rendon's (2000) model of Academics of the Heart. The results of the study concerning spirituality as a validating factor parallels research as evidenced by a participant, Claire, and her experience. Claire spoke of a student worker in the admissions office that encouraged her to tap into her spirituality for support



and validation and she shared this experience. She related that she was having trouble passing a Math class and the student worker encouraged her to “keep praying and ask Him...ask Him for wisdom and knowledge and I did”. These factors of validation and spirituality were at the heart of my research efforts and bring us to a better understanding of nontraditional community/technical college female students’ spirituality and how it contributes to persistence theories and attainment of their educational goals.

There are a limited number of studies in the research that examined factors that lead to the nontraditional female students in community and technical colleges persistence and ways to support them in their pursuit of their goals. This research study adds to my previous research, Jarrell (2004), which examined ways to support community college students by strengthening existing programs and developing new ones. In my previous research, the focus was on support programs such as Freshman Academic Seminar courses, early alert programs, and student development workshops to support diverse needs. This present research continues to examine student’s diverse needs with a focus on nontraditional women. The number of nontraditional female students in community and technical colleges is rapidly increasing on our campuses today. This present research is very timely in that it will help to contribute to existing research literature by introducing a new factor, spirituality, which suggests new ways to contribute to their perseverance in the pursuit of their goals.

#### *Support as a Major Theme*

In this study, I found that there was a deep hunger, in the nontraditional female students I interviewed, for support of their spirituality in an educational setting. At the end of both of the focus group interviews, I found that the participants were not eager to end the group session but instead wanted to continue their discussions. The research process itself was found to be a very

supportive system for these women. Being able to relate to each other in an educational setting on this spiritual level was very motivating for the participants. They expressed a desire to be able to have groups like this on their campuses for women to discuss their spirituality and support each other. They all felt that respecting each other's beliefs and being open and able to talk to each other about their spirituality is very supportive and validating for them. When discussing their instructors in their program, Early Childhood Education, at both the community college as well as the technical college, it was found that many of them did provide this type of environment for them. A larger question emerges for me regarding how teachers' beliefs are translated into classroom practice. Findings were that some of the students expressed how they were validated by teachers who appeared to be caring, spiritual beings, or felt nurtured and supported by those who seemed to share a sense of spirituality as they did. This nurturing of their internal support, which is their spirituality, enhances their persistence efforts to succeed in accomplishing their goals. I found this need to be supported in their spirituality to be reiterated in the literature. Slee (2000), in her study of women's faith development, found that women's spirituality is rooted in a relational awareness. This relationality appears to represent not so much a moment or phase within a developmental sequence of faith but a more fundamental epistemology which underpins the whole of a woman's spiritual journey (p.13). This need to be supported in their spirituality by being in relationship with others is a sub-theme in this study and is important to not only the development of their spirituality but the nurturing of their internal spiritual motivation. The theme of support was cited frequently throughout the study and this support was most desired in relationships with others. The participants referred to instructors, deans, other students, administrators, counselors, admissions personnel, and many others who are on our campuses as being a support to them. However, the means of support they felt most

strongly about was in group situations in relationship with other women on the campus. This study adds to the literature by further exploring this relationality. As a result, it was found that this internal motivation, enhanced by their spirituality, is important to their persistence in their educational settings.

In spite of this previous discussion of the need for this support of the nontraditional women, a state of dissonance on our campuses prevents this support from being implemented. Though the study participants acknowledged the importance of sharing their spirituality with others and the literature supports this need in nontraditional women, the reality is that our college environments today do not support this relational sharing and support of their spiritualities on our campuses.

There is, however, hope for the future as some scholarly researchers (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; Love & Talbot, 1999; Rendon, 2000) reflecting on our educational institutions today, contend that we are gradually moving towards addressing an often neglected dimension of our being, that is the spiritual. The findings in my study point to a need for this support especially in our nontraditional female population in community colleges and technical colleges today. Through the voices of the participants in this study, a cry was heard for their spirituality to be nurtured and supported in their educational environments. A better understanding of these nontraditional female students spirituality contributes to the existing persistence theories and may help to create new theories which will support these women in their attainment of their educational goals.

The value of the research process to the participants in the study helped to fill a need they have to be able to share their spirituality in a safe, respectful, and nonjudgmental arena. Opportunities for women to share their spiritual journeys are not easily found especially in an

educational setting. The women enjoyed sharing their stories in individual interviews and it was an additional place for them to be validated. As a researcher, I tried to be merely an instrument and not give my opinions, however, just the act of openly listening was validating for these women. It was very evident in the focus group interviews that the women empowered each other and enjoyed being in a sharing community with other women. Times of being able to reflect on areas of our lives are necessary to grow and to transform. My hope is that these interview sessions have in some way served as one of these times in their lives and perhaps stimulated them to find more opportunities for these types of sharing of their spirituality.

#### Subquestion #4: Does Spirituality Play a Role in Creating a Validating Environment for These Students?

Spirituality plays a role in creating a validating environment for these nontraditional female students in this study, as well as serving as a validating factor and intrinsic motivator to persist, in an educational environment. These roles will be expanded and discussed in relation to the literature in the following section.

##### *Validation as a Major Theme*

Rendon (1994, 2000, 2002, 2005), in her studies, found that nontraditional students were often doubtful of their academic ability but when validated they developed the confidence they needed to succeed. She defined validation as “an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in-and-out-of class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). Some of the external agents that were mentioned by Rendon as possible sources of validation are faculty, counselors, administrators, classmates, friends, family members, colleagues at the workplace, etc.

For the participants of this study, the sources of validation were similar to the ones that were mentioned in the literature. The ones that were mentioned by most of the participants and are both internal and external include: self, spirituality, other students/friends, instructors, grades, idea of self as a student, and positive school environment. The one factor that does stand out and is one of the major findings of this study was that of spirituality as a validating factor. This validating factor of spirituality was pervasive throughout the study as an internal validation for the women. It was also found in my study that external validation that was spiritually based created what was referred to as a positive environment for these students. They referred to some of their instructors as being very spiritual and also alluded to their program of study, Early Childhood Education, as being one that included elements of spirituality. This brought up a question for me as to whether or not this concept of spirituality could be included in other program areas throughout the institution. Would other programs areas such as Accounting, Welding, Industrial Technology, Computer Technology, to just mention a few, have the same type of environment as found in Early Childhood Education?

A further similarity was found in the literature that enhances my findings on spirituality and validation for these nontraditional women. In a research study Rendon (2004) used a focus group methodology and included American Indian and Alaska Native students at an American Bible college. She explored how faculty, staff, other students, family members, and programs enhanced the students desire to persist beyond their first year. She found that there were three key influences that assisted them to stay in college: family, spirituality, and validation. This further confirms the similarity of my study findings on validation and Rendon's (2002, 2004) in her studies. More importantly, this study conducted by Rendon (2004) establishes a precedent for the importance of the relationship between spirituality and persistence. This finding that a

relationship exists between spirituality and the decision to remain in college has similarities to my finding that spirituality may serve as a validating factor and an intrinsic motivator to persist in obtaining educational goals.

### *Summary*

It was my contention, at the beginning of this study, that spirituality would serve as a validating factor and intrinsic motivation to persist in nontraditional female students in community and technical colleges and indeed this is what the study findings revealed. In fact, this study makes a contribution to the existing literature in that spirituality was found to be an internal validating factor in these nontraditional women and supported them in their persistence to their goals.

Earlier studies (Durkheim, 1951; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Gamble, 2001; Astin, 1984) explored social integration and the students engagement and involvement in the college environment as a factor in persistence. Tierney (1992) suggested we move away from this model of social integration and assimilation to one of emancipation and empowerment. Later studies (Tinto, 1993; Bean & Metzger, 1996; Calhoun, 2003; Jarrell, 2004) were introduced which examined nontraditional students and external environments and intentions on their persistence. More recently, a study was introduced (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007) that indicated there is a tendency towards studying intrinsic motivation for nontraditional students and persistence in the literature. Additionally, other studies by Rendon (1999) proposed validation is yet another facet to persistence. Although validation encompasses a blending of the heart (spirituality) and mind in her study, this validation suggested by Rendon (1999) was external and coming from others. Although the previous studies on persistence in nontraditional female students and spirituality lend credence to my study, a new factor has been introduced in this study which contributes to

the existing literature. In my study, it was found that the spirituality of these women serves as an internal validating factor and intrinsically motivates them in their persistence to their goals.

In addition, I would like to add some of the thoughts that I entered in my journal that I kept throughout the research process. These were thoughts concerning the effects of the study on me and surprises I encountered during my journey with these women in my study. One of the surprises was that the women in my study became an inspiration to me as I encountered my own challenges in my doctoral journey. Their perseverance challenged me to persist and overcome my own obstacles. Additionally, both my own experiences and my work with nontraditional women as a counselor at both a technical and community college informed some assumptions I had in the beginning of the research process. I expected to find that spirituality would be a factor in their motivation to persist. However, I did not know the depth of their spirituality would be as prominent as it was in their interviews. Many of the questions I asked my participants became my own reflection questions. In some instances their sharing resonated with me whereas in other instances they challenged my own search. There were times I felt the costs of my efforts were causing me to lose sight of my purpose. It was during these times, I felt most inspired by the participants in my study. Allowing myself time for reflection and contemplation, I went to the same source I witnessed them tapping into and “re-motivated” myself to persevere in the achievement of my goal and to remain congruent with the high expectations I set for myself in my attempt to succeed.

Also noted in my journal was that it was my contention, at the beginning of this study, that these women had a strong force within them that enabled them to persevere in spite of their challenges and continue to adhere to the goals they set for themselves. I believed this force to be a strong sense of spirituality which guided them. I was often in awe of these women as their

stories unfolded and I realized how they never let the costs of their efforts overcome their purpose. I found that it was indeed their deep sense of spirituality that continued to validate them and intrinsically motivate them over and over again. Finally, this research process in itself has been a very valuable learning experience beyond measure and numerous and varied surprises awaited me every step of the journey.

In summary, this section presented a discussion of the findings of the study in relation to the exposition of the major themes and sub-themes as noted in the responses of the participants as they relate to the research questions of the study. The overarching themes of spiritual development/growth, challenges, validation, support and perseverance were used to analyze the experiences of spirituality in these nontraditional female students. In addition, their responses were also related to the literature included in Chapter two of this study. The similarities and differences between the literature and the findings for the themes identified were examined and presented. The perceptions and experiences of spirituality for the participants were examined for understanding and meanings. These findings offer a new perspective on spirituality and persistence for nontraditional female students in community and technical colleges. The themes and sub-themes encapsulated the experience of spirituality as an internal validating factor and an intrinsic motivator and its influence on persistence.

The next section will discuss the revised conceptual framework that resulted from the findings in the study.

#### *Revised Conceptual Framework*

The original conceptual framework proposed a persistence model for nontraditional women in community/technical colleges which included Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) faith/spiritual development model for college students and Laura Rendon's (2000) persistence



model of Academics of the Heart. Parks (2000) model of faith/spiritual development and Rendons (2000) Academics of the Heart work in concert to develop and nurture spirituality in these women. It is proposed that this developed spirituality will in turn serve as a validating factor and an intrinsic motivator to persist in achieving their educational goals.

After completing the research and interpreting and analyzing the data, there are areas in the original framework that were enhanced by the findings. Several changes have been made to the framework to better represent the experiences of the nontraditional female students. The Revised Conceptual Framework is a visual representation of the findings of the study. The changes to the original conceptual framework (see Figure 1) are discussed below in Figure 3.

The findings in the study provided implications that supported and confirmed the integration of the Rendon (2000) and Parks (2000) models in explaining spirituality and nontraditional female student's persistence. In the environment proposed by Rendon (2000), the spiritual development model that Parks (2000) addresses will grow and develop. Both propose a merging of the intellect with the heart to grow and to be validated.

Heart is as Parker Palmer (1997) indicates "the place where intellect and emotion and spirit will converge in the human self" (p. 11). In this revised conceptual framework, Rendon's (2000) model of Academics of the Heart frames the validating environment that will nurture the nontraditional women's motivation to persist towards their educational goals. This framework reconnects the intellect with the spirit. The findings in the study of these nontraditional women revealed that this spirit plays a prominent role in these women today and it serves as a strong factor of internal support. Additionally, it is this spirit, or spirituality as it is referred to in this study, that enables them to overcome their barriers to success that are encountered. Their success depends on validation which may be both external and internal. In Rendon's model, spirituality

is a part of the external validating environment. A space is created that attends to education of the whole person. It emphasizes the intellect as well as personal growth and spiritual development. The student's spirituality can be nurtured and developed here and it then becomes the validating factor and intrinsic motivation which leads to persistence toward their educational goals.

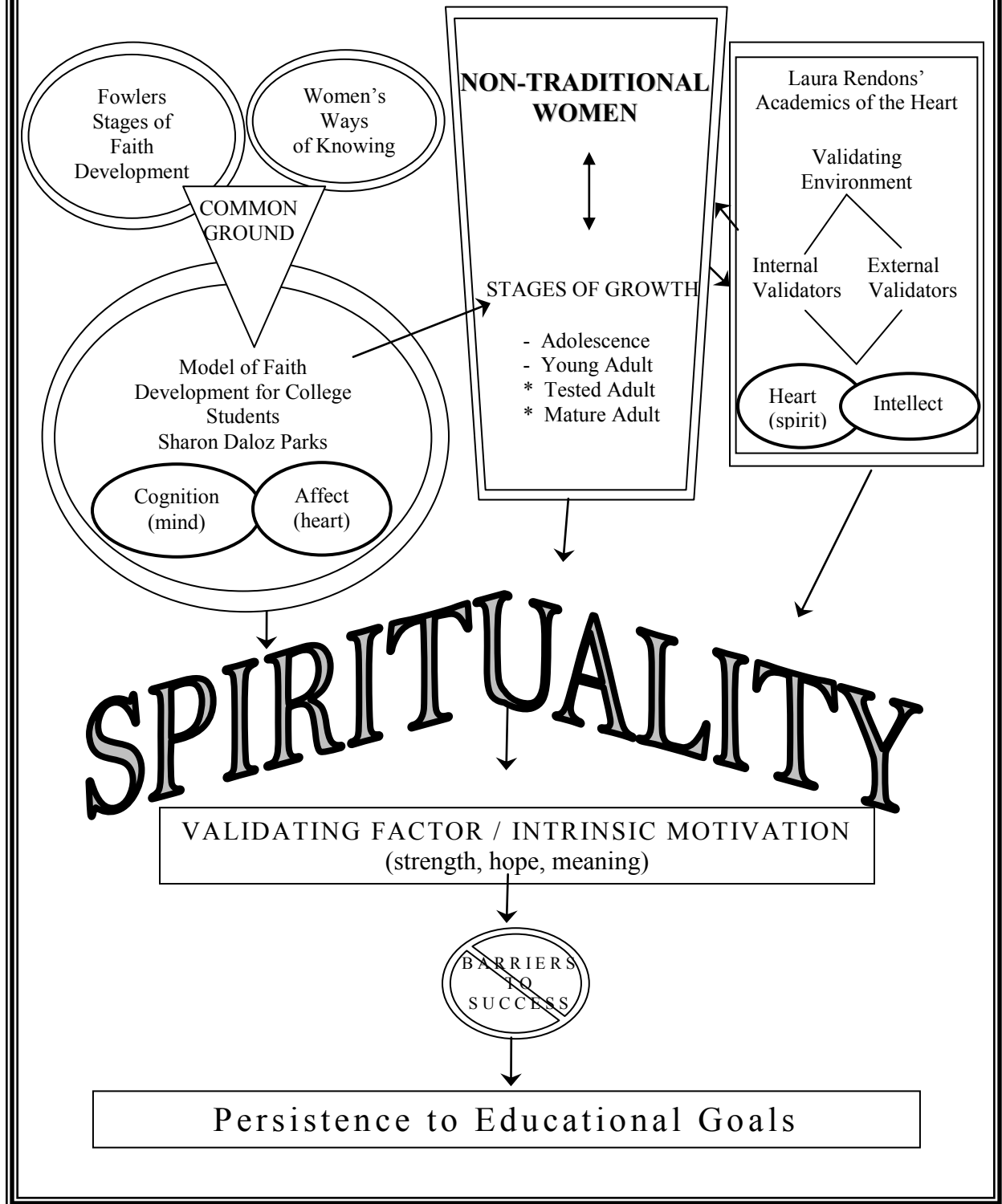
We need these validating environments which merge the intellect and the heart in our institutions to accommodate the growing number of nontraditional women in attendance today. These women have a strong sense of spirituality and this spirituality is what drives them to persevere and to reach their goals. It was found in this study that their spirituality is an internal validating factor and intrinsic motivation that drives them in their persistence towards their educational goals. The women in the study defined it as "a heart thing which comes from within". Life lessons have taught them that through their "trials and tribulations" this "spirit" or internal source has validated them and pulled them through each crisis. One of the major findings was that it is very important to these women to have this spirituality enhanced and supported in their educational environment and there are not many opportunities currently to do this. This need was very evident as I noted a changed demeanor and a sense of excitement as they engaged in "heart talk" in our focus groups.

As a result of these findings and an analysis of the data, the Revised Conceptual Framework has some changes to the visual diagram. Most importantly, validating factor was added to the box with intrinsic motivation to illustrate that spirituality serves as both a validating factor and intrinsic motivator. The participants in the study spoke of validation as being an important factor in creating a nurturing and spiritual environment which supports their persistence towards achieving their goals. This factor of validation was a major theme cited

frequently by the female students in the study. More specifically, the validation was described as being both external as well as internal. Their spirituality is an intrinsic motivator which provides strength, hope and meaning in their lives which in turn validates them and encourages them to persevere. The barriers to success were moved below spirituality to better illustrate that their spirituality helped them to overcome these challenges as evidenced in the women's interviews. Another major theme throughout the interview sessions was that of meeting challenges. The participants referred to spirituality as being a major part of their lives today and noted that without it they could not have overcome their many challenges and persevered toward their goals. Also, additions were made to Rendons (2000) model to emphasize that the whole person is included, both heart (spirit) and intellect just as in Parks (2000) model. In the diagram of the original conceptual framework (see Figure 1), heart (spirit) and intellect were not noted and should have been because it is a major component of Rendons (2000) model. Also noted in the revised framework was the inclusion in the validating environment of both internal and external validations. After listening to the nontraditional women's stories in the interviews, it was found that they were validated both internally as well as externally by spirituality and these became sub-themes to the major theme of validation. In this holistic environment which exists within Rendon's (2000) model of Academics of the Heart, the women are nurtured and can further develop in their spirituality. Thus, as a result of this study, it was found that spirituality is an internal validating factor and an intrinsic motivator which will support their persistence efforts in their college environment.

The limitations of the study will be included in the following section.

Figure 3: REVISED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK  
A Persistence Model of Non-traditional Female Students



### *Limitations of the Study*

In every research study there are potential weaknesses or limitations. (Creswell, 2003)  
Some of the limitations of this study will be pointed out in this section.

One limitation of this study is that all of the participants were recruited from the same program, early childhood education, at the community college and the technical college. Such a group may have a particular view of the world, different from students in other programs. This will limit generalizing the findings to other types of programs.

The participants were recruited by having them identify with a definition of spirituality that was given to them by the researcher. This group may have a particular view of the world, and their spirituality, that is different from other groups of students.

If other literature had been explored, such as feminist literature, the results may have been different. It could be that other factors would enter in and spirituality may be less prominent.

Although this study was rich in data collected, a future study using a case study methodology may be a way to have more depth in the interview process. I would include journaling by the students as a part of the process to allow them some time to reflect on the meaning and experiences of their spirituality. A topic such as spirituality needs more time allowed for reflection than was available in this study with only one hour interviews and one focus group interview.

Finally, the most limiting aspect of this study was that it only included two institutions and the study cannot be generalized to other populations. Implications of this research and ideas of future research are discussed below.

### *Study Implications*

Implications from the findings in this study on nontraditional female students in a community college and a technical college, and the role spirituality plays in their persistence are discussed in this section. It is through the women's own voices in the telling of their stories that we glean a better understanding of the significant role spirituality plays in the lives of these students, as well as the part it plays in their educational environment, and the implications it has for future practice.

The major findings from this research add new understandings and knowledge to the nature and meaning of spirituality in an educational environment. As such these findings present major implications for leaders in education, faculty members, counselors and nontraditional female students.

Educational leaders in community colleges and technical colleges are concerned with increasing the retention rates of their students. As the college population of nontraditional female students increases, it is imperative that innovative ways to retain these students be addressed. The majority of the existing theories on persistence do not "fit" the nontraditional female students in community colleges and technical colleges today. College leaders could implement programs to support spiritual development, which in turn would serve as a validating measure to nourish the spirituality of nontraditional females, and have it serve as an intrinsic motivation to persist. One of the findings of the study was that the participants felt that they needed to have support groups or organizations on the campus to provide a place to nourish their spirituality in relationship with others. College leaders could provide the space and facilitators to begin these groups/organizations on the campus. Despite the separation of church and state, the notion of

spirituality as an important support system for female students could indeed be reflected in student and academic affairs policy.

The implication for faculty members, drawn from the study findings, is the importance of creating a classroom environment that is conducive to the spiritual development of their students. The exploration or support of student spirituality is rarely, if ever, a part of a student's classroom experience. Rendon's (2000) model of Academics of the Heart provides an ideal framework to create this environment. She proposes that five components be included: (1) Create a learning environment that engages the heart as well as the intellect. Faculty members should attend to education of the whole person which emphasizes the intellect as well as personal growth and spiritual development. Activities which encourage the students to be more authentic and develop their sense of purpose and meaning should be included. (2) Make teaching and learning a relationship-centered process. This could include collaborative learning activities as well as service learning projects. A validating class environment should be created and fostered by faculty taking an active role in the care and support of their students. Teachers should become mentors and their teaching should move from the authoritarian or expert model of teaching to connective knowing. (3) Honor and respect diverse ways of knowing. Diversity work and curriculums of inclusion could be implemented and enhanced in the college classroom. There is great concern among educators today concerning intolerance, hate crimes, racism, sexism and homophobia. This would help to affirm and celebrate these differences. (4) Attend to matters of difference, as well as togetherness. Although sometimes difficult, instructors should create an environment that encourages both individualism and collective community. Teachers could acknowledge to students that there are multiple sources of truth and have discussions centered on these differences. (5) Engage in contemplative practice. Faculty members can embrace a

curriculum that fosters the inner work of reflection and introspection and provide time and the proper environment for these activities. Through self-reflection, contemplation, journal writing and sharing with others in class and discussion, students will gain the tools they need to become successful.

For counselors, an open and caring environment in which students can attend to “matters of the heart” need to be provided. Nontraditional women present, especially in community and technical colleges, with doubts about their ability to succeed (Rendon, 1994). The most important task that counselors have in supporting their students is to validate them and nurture their self esteem. These women need active interventions from others such as counselors to help them to succeed in this environment. This can be done in individual counseling sessions, group sessions, or workshops provided to inform and nurture their development. One of the major findings from the study indicates that women can be nurtured by providing them with a safe place to “share their stories”. The area of student services is an ideal place to offer this space through group work where they can support each other. This support should be offered early in their enrollment to provide the necessary validation and nurturing of self esteem they will need to succeed.

The most important implications are for the nontraditional female students themselves. Most of these women enter the educational environment with some sense of their spiritual development already present. A study of the cognitive theories of development indicates that the nontraditional women are more advanced in stages of development than their traditional counterparts. With support from their teachers, counselors, administrators, and fellow students, this intrinsic motivation that already exists can be tapped into. When programs are implemented which support the spiritual dimension of the students and an open atmosphere to support this



spiritual dimension is created, the student will grow in their spirituality. This validating factor of their spirituality will then motivate them to succeed in their educational environment.

Finally, the implications for the institutions are greater persistence rates for the nontraditional women in community and technical colleges. Whether the women have been supported in their spiritual dimension through service learning opportunities, the mentoring of a faculty member, a support group through student services, the results for the institution will be the same – a student who is being validated through a spiritual dimension and supported in their persistence.

Although the results of this study cannot be generalized across community colleges and technical colleges, it adds to the limited number of qualitative studies that focus on the lived experiences of students and their spirituality. Additionally, the study increases our knowledge of perceptions and experiences of nontraditional female students in a selected community and technical college and their spirituality as a validating factor and an intrinsic motivation to persist.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Future research on spirituality and persistence is needed to further understand the implications of this concept and to assist students and the teachers who support them. There are several avenues to consider and will be included in this discussion. The students who were interviewed for the pilot study (N=8) and the current study (N=8) expressed gratitude for being asked to share their experiences. One of the participants, Natalie, stated “I wish we could meet like this in groups more often to support each other and share our spirituality”. It is the researcher’s opinion that future research should focus on doing more interviewing of this population of students. The sharing of their stories could bring more insight as to their

perceptions and experiences of spirituality that would further contribute to the research on this topic of spirituality and persistence.

To further explore spirituality as a validating factor and intrinsic motivation to persist in nontraditional female students, future research might consider spirituality as an internal validating factor within Rendons (2000) model of Academics of the Heart. The connection Rendon makes between the intellect and the heart resonates with what I conceptualized in my study. A merging of Rendons' external spiritually validating environment with spirituality as an internal validating factor in nontraditional female students may be an ideal model to support them in their persistence.

In the future, a study which would examine feminist literature would add to the depth of this study. One of the issues that could be explored would be the patriarchal issues facing our churches today and the impact it could have on this present study and women's spirituality. The general topic of patriarchy of the churches today and its impact on women's spirituality would be an interesting topic in itself.

This study occurred at a community college and a technical college. It would be relevant to include four year institutions in the study and consider how there may or may not be different findings across the types of institutions. For example, when classes are smaller, there is likely to be more opportunity for student/ teacher interaction. Therefore, there may be different results if the investigation was expanded to students in a variety of disciplinary areas. It is likely that the setting of this study allowed for students to offer different perceptions of their teachers and fellow class members than if they were enrolled in a class of 300 students.

The findings in the study had implications in regards to the cognitive structural theories of development. Further research studies could investigate other areas where these nontraditional

women and their advanced developmental areas could affect existing theories. Could these women serve as mentors in the college environment to students in beginning stages of development? Could an added validating factor be introduced by these women in later stages of development teaming up with other women in earlier stages of development? Could this mentoring of others enhance their own sense of meaning and their contribution to the common good of our world?

For a smaller group of participants, a case study research method could be used, along with journaling by the participant, to have a more in-depth study of the participant's perceptions and experiences. Additionally, the study could take place over a longer time frame with more individual interview sessions to obtain data and reflections over time. This would enhance the depth, as well as the richness of data, of the study.

A quantitative method could consist of the use of a survey instrument and could also include a spirituality inventory. This study could potentially reach a larger sample of students. This would enable the researcher to generalize the findings. Additionally, if the study was expanded to include more institutions it would also allow generalized findings.

Seven of the eight participants in the study were single. Further research in this area could examine the impact of being single versus married for these women. Did the women who were single depend more on their spirituality as a support than married women would? Or were the single women more driven to succeed due to the mere fact they were on their own and the need to survive and support their family was a motivating force in itself?

Research suggests that women's educational needs differ from that of the male population. It would be interesting to include male participants in the study to see if there is a

gender difference in the area of spirituality and what effects this may have on their rates of persistence.

It has been found that validating environments are important to nurture the students and promote persistence efforts toward their goals. It would be interesting to study how faculty belief systems or their own sense of spirituality may affect the type of environments they create for their students. Would this have an effect on how they mentor or fail to mentor their students?

A final recommendation is to replicate the study in other contexts, especially in geographical regions that differ in representation of religious denominations. Although religion and spirituality are separate in this study, cultural and foundational religious influences may have had an effect on this study.

### *Concluding Remarks*

In order to focus on nontraditional women in our academies today, we must look back at where their past has led them. In the 1980's, in a ground breaking study, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), a group of researchers found that women who had been treated as incompetent yearned for acceptance and validation. The 1990's brought a study entitled, *The Transition to College Project* (Rendon, 1994), which found nontraditional students, predominantly those in community colleges, communicated doubts about their ability to succeed. In order to succeed, it was found that they needed validation both in and out of the classroom environment.

Nontraditional women in the twenty first century arrive at our academies with basically these same needs to be met for success to occur. This present study introduces a new factor to support nontraditional female students in their persistence toward achieving their goals. Building on the premise of validating factors, spirituality is introduced as a new validating factor and an

intrinsic motivator to persist toward their educational goals. As the population of nontraditional women in our community colleges and technical colleges expands, we need to continue to replace the persistence practices of the past with new findings such as suggested in the present research for this new study majority. This study is meant to awaken us to new channels to be explored which already exist in these women. It is time to acknowledge, nurture and tap into these existing channels and open up new ways to support the nontraditional women in our colleges today.

The students in this study reminded me of why, at the age of sixty-one, I am still working in a technical college setting and also pursuing a doctorate in higher education. They offered insightful responses to questions concerning spirituality in their lives and in their educational environments. Their responses both resonated with me and challenged me. They have awakened me to new avenues to be explored to support the nontraditional women in our colleges today. It is my hope that this research study will serve as a catalyst for further studies that will continue to investigate areas of spirituality and student persistence in higher educational environments. As a result, strengthening of nontraditional female student's persistence rates will occur and all students will benefit from support of their faith development and their spirituality during their college years.

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## Appendix A

### Definition of Terms

In this study, the following definitions are used:

spirituality: used to describe a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality; a contemplative attitude, a disposition to a life of depth, and the search for ultimate meaning, direction, and belonging (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006, p.70). a personal search for purpose and meaning in life (Parks, 2000); spirituality is an awareness of a Divine source of power within that is greater than ourselves and fosters strength, hope and meaning in our lives and supports us in our work for the common good of our world (Jarrell, 2008, this document).

religion: organized religions have institutional components to them: written doctrines, codes of regulatory behavior, and organized communities of faith and worship; systems of belief and practice that are often institutionalized in creeds, rituals, and moral codes; religion is embodied in religions. (Kelly, 1995, p. xiv)

faith: the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience; it addresses our culture's current hunger for a shared language about things "spiritual" (Parks, 2000, p. 7). "a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief" (Fowler, 1981, p.14).

community colleges: institutions that offer associate degrees and occupational certificates to their students and a variety of other services to the communities in which they are located.

technical colleges: institutions that award occupational certificates and diplomas as well as applied associate degrees and other workforce training as needed by business/industry in the community in which they are located.

nontraditional student: characteristics may include: over the age of 25, majority are female, may attend part-time, multicultural, poverty level incomes, may have a full-time job while enrolled, may have dependents (Rendon, 1994).

traditional student: characteristics may include: immediately enrolling into post-secondary education after high school, having a high school diploma, enrolling full-time, having no dependents, and not having a full-time job while enrolled, have family support (Drew, 1990, p.54)

multicultural: will be defined for the purposes of this study as women with varied cultural backgrounds

attrition: will be defined for purposes of this study as leaving the institution before completing the planned degree or diploma program.

persistence: for purposes of this study, students enrolled in at least the second continuous semester and pursuing a career goal such as a certificate, diploma, or associate degree; refers to the effort on the part of the student to remain enrolled until their career goal is met.

retention: the extent to which students who began actually completed a course of study; retention refers to the efforts on the part of the institution to retain the student until their goals are met

Board of Regents (BoR) : policy and coordinating board for post-secondary education in the State of Louisiana.

associate's degree (A.S.): an academic degree program with a significant general education core, designed to prepare students for immediate employment or career entry, but may also serve as preparatory education for transfer to a related baccalaureate program (BoR).

Associate of Applied Science (AAS): an applied academic degree program (60-72 hours) with a limited general education components core (15 hours), primarily designed to prepare students for immediate employment or career entry (BoR).

diploma: a formal document certifying the successful completion of a prescribed program of study (BoR).

## Appendix B

June 15, 2008

Potential Research Participant  
512 Allen Street  
New Iberia, La. 70563

Dear Potential Research Participant,

As a doctoral student, I am responsible for gaining extensive experience with the methods and procedures to conduct independent research. In accordance with my dissertation requirements, I am pleased to be conducting a part of my research project based on the experiences of eight nontraditional female students attending a community or technical college. Specifically, I am interested in learning about the relationship between spirituality and education and how it contributes to nontraditional female students' persistence and success in the academic setting. By learning more about this relationship, I hope to contribute to the professional knowledge base on this important topic. Counselors, teachers, and administrators may use this information in helping students to achieve academic success.

You will probably not be surprised that there is very little research focusing on the experiences of female students in our area attending community/technical colleges and how their spirituality is integrated into their educational experiences. For this study, I plan to recruit eight female students to participate in this project. Four of the participants will be selected from the community college and four from the technical college. One individual interview session per participant will be conducted for approximately one hour each. In addition, two focus group interview sessions will be conducted with the four participants at the community college and the four from the technical college. These sessions will last approximately one and one-half hours. If you choose to participate in the study, your anonymity will be respected when I do my reporting in my dissertation study. The interviews will be scheduled at an agreed upon time that will be convenient to your time schedule. There will be a \$30 gift certificate for each person who participates in **both** an individual interview session as well as a focus group session. The card will be given to each participant as the focus group interview is completed. If the participant is not able to complete both sessions, the honorarium will be reduced to a lesser amount of \$15. Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. I fully understand if you wish to decline or if you are simply too busy to participate.

I hope that you will choose to be a part of this important work, and I look forward to an opportunity to talk with you. I believe that sharing your experiences will make a valuable contribution to this research. I will be contacting you via telephone or e-mail within the upcoming week to ascertain whether or not you are still interested in participating. If you agree to contribute, we can schedule a convenient time for you to participate in an individual and a focus group interview session. If you have any questions concerning this research study, you may contact me at (337) 519-1336 or Dr. Marietta Del Favero at (504) 280-6446. Thank you very much for your time and consideration and I am looking forward to the opportunity to talk with you.

Respectfully,

Camille L. Jarrell  
Doctoral student  
University of New Orleans  
Daytime: (337) 373-0011 Evenings: (337) 519-1336  
E-mail: cjarrell@luc.edu





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COUNSELING AND FOUNDATIONS

## Appendix C

### CONSENT FORM

**1. Title of Research Study:**

Spirituality as an Intrinsic Motivator to Persistence: A Study of Non-traditional Female Students in Community/Technical Colleges

**2. Investigator:**

Camille L. Jarrell, Graduate student, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana 70148. Daytime: (337) 373-0011. Evening: (337) 519-1336. E-mail: [cjarrell@ltc.edu](mailto:cjarrell@ltc.edu)

This research project is under the supervision of Dr. Marietta Del Favero, Associate Professor, Education Administration Graduate Coordinator, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA 70148. If you have any questions concerning this research study, please call Dr. Del Favero at (504) 280-6446 or e-mail: [mdelfave@uno.edu](mailto:mdelfave@uno.edu)

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in this research study, please contact the University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board, at (504-280-5454) or e-mail: [rlaird@uno.edu](mailto:rlaird@uno.edu).

**3. Purpose of the Research:**

The purpose of this research study is to examine how the spirituality of non-traditional female students has served as an intrinsic motivator in their lives and how it now informs their educational experiences and contributes to their persistence and success in an academic setting.

**4. Procedures for this Research:**

To qualify as a participant for this study, you will be required to be female, over 25 years of age, and in at least your second semester of college. In addition, you will be asked to self identify yourself to be a spiritual person. You will be asked to read the following definition of spirituality that will be used for purposes of this study. The definition is: Spirituality is an awareness of a Divine source of power within that is greater than ourselves and fosters strength, hope, and meaning in our lives and supports us in our work for the common good of our world. If you can identify with the definition and fulfill all other requirements mentioned, you will be invited to participate. You will voluntarily take part in an individual interview session which will take approximately one hour and a focus group interview session which will take approximately 1 ½ hours. The interview transcription notes will be labeled with a pseudonym rather than your name to assure anonymity. Individual interview sessions will be scheduled with eight different voluntary participants; four from the community college and four from the technical college. The investigator will facilitate the group session. These interview sessions will be digitally recorded and then transcribed by the investigator. As a participant, you will be assigned a pseudonym to assure anonymity of your responses during my reporting.



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**5. Potential Risks or Discomforts:**

As a participant, you may experience stress in the process of recalling past experiences during the focus group interviews or the individual session. You will be allowed to take breaks if needed. In addition, your anonymity will be breached when you agree to participate in the focus group interview sessions. Confidentiality will be a requirement of all participants in the focus group interviews. All aspects of participation are voluntary and you may choose to terminate their participation in the individual or group session at any time. If you would like to discuss these or other potential discomforts you may contact the Investigator listed in #2 of this form.

**6. Potential Benefits to You or Others:**

The results of this study may be used to assist teachers, administrators, and counselors in understanding the spiritual needs of adult nontraditional female students in the community/technical college. It will help them to recognize this spiritual base they can draw from and enhance as they help these students to reach their full potential in the community/technical college setting. Sometimes people find participating in an interview to be beneficial insofar as it gives them a chance to talk about things that matter to them. If chosen for the interview, you will be receiving a \$30 gift card to thank you for your time. You will receive the full honorarium if you participate in both the individual and focus group interview.

**6. Alternative Procedures**

Participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw consent and terminate participation at any time without consequences.

**7. Protection of Confidentiality**

Your name and identifying information will be kept confidential except during the focus group session with other participants. At all other times you and your institution will be assigned a pseudonym and the pseudonym will be used in any reporting of your comments. The signed consent forms, notes, tape recordings, and any other materials related to this project will be maintained in a secure locked file and accessible only to the investigator in number 2 above. If the results of this study are published, your name and identifying information will be disguised using a pseudonym.

**8. Signatures and Consent to Participate**

**This study has been discussed with me and I have been informed of all procedures, possible benefits, and potential risks involved in this investigation. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form. By signing this form, I give my permission to participate in this study.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Investigator (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D

### Dissertation Study

#### Individual Interview Guide

RESEARCH QUESTION: What is spirituality for nontraditional female students at a community/technical college?

#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- 1) I would like for you to think back to your early years when you were growing up and how you may have experienced spirituality in your life. Please share these experiences with me.
- 2) Do you think that religion and spirituality are the same? How would you define religion? How would you define spirituality?
- 3) Can you tell me about your spirituality and the part it plays in your life today?
- 4) Do you have a sense of an internal support system or strength that helps you to manage your life today? Can you describe this support?
- 5) Do you feel that there exist any barriers in your life to your success in obtaining your degree? Can you tell me about them?
- 6) Can you describe some ways in which you have felt validated during your life? in an educational setting?
- 7) In regards to an educational setting, can you describe your internal support system (if there is one) that enables you to persist and succeed?
- 8) Do you think that your spirituality could be supported or enhanced in an educational setting? If so, in which ways?

## Appendix E

### Dissertation Study

#### Focus Group Interview Guide

RESEARCH QUESTION: What is spirituality for nontraditional female students at a community/technical college?

#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- 1) I would like for you to think back to your early years when you were growing up and how you may have experienced spirituality in your life. Please share these experiences with me.
- 2) Do you think that religion and spirituality are the same? How would you define religion? How would you define spirituality?
- 3) Can you tell me about your spirituality and the part it plays in your life today?
- 4) Do you have a sense of an internal support system or strength that helps you to manage your life today? Can you describe this support?
- 5) Do you feel that there exist any barriers in your life to your success in obtaining your degree? Can you tell me about them?
- 6) Can you describe some ways in which you have felt validated during your life? in an educational setting?
- 7) In regards to an educational setting, can you describe your internal support system (if there is one) that enables you to persist and succeed?
- 8) Do you think that your spirituality could be supported or enhanced in an educational setting? If so, in which ways?

## Appendix F

### DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: African American \_\_\_\_\_ Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_  
Native American \_\_\_\_\_ Asian \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status: Single \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have children? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If so, how many? \_\_\_\_\_

Semester in attendance:

First \_\_\_\_\_ Second \_\_\_\_\_ Third \_\_\_\_\_ Fourth \_\_\_\_\_ Fifth or greater \_\_\_\_\_

Are you pursuing a degree? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are you pursuing a diploma program? \_\_\_\_\_ certificate program? \_\_\_\_\_

What program will you be obtaining a degree/diploma in? \_\_\_\_\_

I plan to attend this college next semester: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Not sure \_\_\_\_\_

How many credit hours are you enrolled in this semester? \_\_\_\_\_ last semester? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently employed? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G

### ***University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research University of New Orleans***

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#### *Campus Correspondence*

PI & Co-Inv: Marietta Del Favero, Ph.D.,  
Camille Laperouse Jarrell, graduate student

Date May 20, 2008

RE: Approval for protocol application entitled "Spirituality as an intrinsic  
motivator to persistence: A study of nontraditional female students in  
community/technical colleges."

IRB#: 08MAY08

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures are compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines. The above-referenced human subjects protocol is review and approved under 45 CFR 46.110(1) categories 6 & 7.

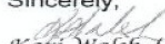
Please remember that approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. If research involving human subjects, including data analysis, will continue beyond May 19, 2009, you must submit a continuing review application before May 19, 2009. In order to provide the IRB enough time to review and approve, please submit at least a month before end date to avoid any lapse in your active protocol.

Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best of luck with your project!

Sincerely,

  
Kari Walsh, (acting for IRB Chair)  
IRB member

Robert Laird, Ph.D.  
Chair, University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

*University Committee for the Protection  
of Human Subjects in Research  
University of New Orleans*

Form Number: 08May08

(please refer to this number in all future correspondence concerning this protocol)

Principal Investigator: Marietta Del Favero Title: Associate Professor

Department: Educational Leadership, Conseling, and Foundations College: Education and Human Development

Project Title: Spirituality as a in intrinsic motivator to persistence: A study of nontraditional female students in community/technical colleges

Dates of Proposed Project Period From 6/1/08 to 5/31/09

Approval Status:

☐ Full Board Review

☒ Approved Date: 5-20-08

☒ Expedite 46.110(b) Categories 6, 7

☐ Deferred Date:

☐ Exempt

☐ Disapproved Date:

☐ Project requires review more than annually. Review every \_\_\_\_\_ months.

\*approval is for 1 year from approval date only and may be renewed yearly. EXPIRES 5-19-09

1<sup>st</sup> continuation Signature of IRB Chair \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

2<sup>nd</sup> continuation Signature of IRB Chair \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

3<sup>rd</sup> continuation Signature of IRB Chair \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

4<sup>th</sup> continuation Signature of IRB Chair \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Signatures:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Laura Scaramella, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
James Evans

\_\_\_\_\_  
Pamela Jenkins, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Robert Laird, Ph.D. (Chair)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ann O'Hanlon, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Richard B. Speaker, Ph.D. (Vice Chair)

Kari Walsh 5-20-08

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kari Walsh

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kathleen Whalen, LCSW

## VITA

Camille Laperouse Jarrell was born in New Iberia, Louisiana, in 1948 where she has lived all of her life. She is a 1966 graduate of Mt. Carmel Academy, a Catholic all girls school. In 1966, she attended Louisiana State University and transferred to the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette 1 ½ years later to be closer to home when her father became terminally ill. She graduated from USL with a Bachelors degree in Elementary Education in 1971. She began her teaching career and first taught 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and then 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for a year after which time she retired and became a wife and mother. From 1973 until 1986 she remained home to raise her family. After a divorce, she returned to teaching in a junior high school in New Iberia. During this time, she realized that although her heart was in education, teaching was not what she wanted to do. She entered graduate school and obtained a Master's degree in Guidance and Counseling from USL in 1992. With this degree, she was able to leave the classroom and begin a career as a Counselor in a technical college. She remained in this position until 1998. When the emerging community college system in Louisiana began, she was afforded the opportunity to be one of the founding members of South Louisiana Community College. During her nine years at the community college, she was privileged to be a part of the Leadership Development Institute sponsored by the La. Technical and Community College System. As a result of this experience, she decided that a position in administration was now something she aspired to. She became a member of a doctoral cohort group through the University of New Orleans in 2002 to pursue a doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration. She has recently relocated to the Louisiana Technical College system and is an administrator at Teche Area Campus, New Iberia, LA. Her crowning achievement at this time in her life is that she is the very proud grandmother of seven beautiful grandchildren.