

FAITH IN PHENOMENOGRAPHY: A NEW APPROACH
TO EVANGELICALISM IN THE COLLEGE
WRITING CLASSROOM

by

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Aimee Joy Slepicka

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DEDICATION

This thesis was written with many brothers and sisters in mind, and especially “for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance and understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Colossians 2:1-3)

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that a lack of first-person narratives and experience-based research in composition studies may be weakening the field's ability to fully understand and connect with evangelical Christians enrolled in college writing courses. I posit that, while many scholars have done a commendable job of creating new pedagogical space where evangelical students can explore issues of religious identity and faith in writing, more work still needs to be done in collecting student descriptions of and perspectives on the faith-learning integration actually undertaken (or avoided) in these secular contexts. Using phenomenography—a method that seeks to uncover the various ways that individuals experience the world around them—I conduct a pilot study of evangelical Montana Bible College undergraduates who enroll as visiting students at Montana State University in order to fulfill graduation requirements in composition. By augmenting current studies with phenomenographic observations and surveys results, I attempt to offer a more “complex” portrait of evangelical students than the one that typically emerges in most composition research on this topic. I suggest that these experience-based methods have the potential to reveal key student struggles and needs, which should be explored further as faith-learning integration pedagogies are designed and implemented in future college writing curriculums.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, researchers in the field of composition studies have initiated and sustained an active dialogue on the topic of faith in college writing classrooms. Despite the schism that developed in the 19th and 20th centuries between religion and secular higher education, some writing instructors have determined that students with faith commitments should be permitted (and perhaps even encouraged) to explore aspects of their religious identity via composition courses offered at public universities. With the intention of effectively educating and interacting with this population of students, instructors have been carefully considering and amending their professional stances toward religion's unavoidable presence in secular writing classrooms.

Amy Goodburn stood as an early advocate of faith-learning integration in secular composition with her 1997 article, "It's a Question of Faith: Discourses of Fundamentalism and Critical Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom." Goodburn encouraged readers to recognize the inconsistency of "critical educators call[ing] for pedagogies that privilege and problematize student experience" while simultaneously refusing to explore or account for religion, "a construct which intersects and envelops these categories in many students' lives" (333). Since then, publications such as Jonathon Cullick's *Religion in the 21st Century* have been written specifically for use in secular composition courses; special interest groups such as the Symposium on Rhetoric and Christian Tradition and the MLA's Religion and Literature division have presented scholarly work to increasingly wide audiences; and an expanding body of research has

coalesced with the help of master's theses and doctoral dissertations devoted to the task (Dively 1994; May 2010; McGuire 2007).

These arguments set the stage for more scholarly analysis and expansion by suggesting that an issue as encompassing and widespread as religion—and particularly Christianity in the United States—is too influential to automatically dismiss or ask college students to leave behind at the writing classroom door. This thesis is itself a testament to the increasing freedom afforded to those who wish to explore matters of faith and learning in secular arenas.

A Problem to the Solution

Trailing in the wake of this burgeoning integration is plenty of pedagogical confusion surrounding how, exactly, composition instructors at public institutions can address faith-related student assignments and discussions when they arise. When no single tradition, denomination, or affiliation can be privileged above another, how can instructors encourage students to pursue their religious interests in writing? How much space can be created for this type of personal exploration, given the care that secular educators must still take to maintain an overall separation between church and state? Furthermore, how should religious confusion or disagreement be dealt with when the conventions of rhetoric and composition prompt students to ask difficult questions of their own religious preconceptions and primary discourses?

Adding to the difficulty of these questions is the statistical fact that, over the last 20 years, college students in the United States have displayed an unexpected renewal of

spiritual and intellectual interest in religious orthodoxy. This interesting trend is traced by Colleen Carroll in her book, *The New Faithful*. According to Carroll's research, certain forms of orthodoxy lead devoted students to unquestioningly or unknowingly insist on reading, writing, and interpreting all texts using the methods ascribed by their church traditions and authorities. What this means in the arena of higher education is that conversations pertaining to faith are increasingly difficult to avoid and cannot always be relegated to churches or religious studies classrooms.

Fundamentalist and evangelical Christian students, in particular, are cited in Carroll's work and in composition research as especially outspoken about applying spiritual principles to all aspects of life, sometimes going as far as holding their sacred preconceptions over and above the reach of scrutiny or critique. This disconnect becomes problematic, of course, for writing instructors whose pedagogies seek to engage religious students by asking them to critically examine the ways that membership in a faith community shape their rhetorical interpretation of and engagement in the world around them. While laudable for their inclusivity of religious identity, some faith-learning integration methods still prove ineffective for students who refuse—or do not understand how—to analyze their own beliefs or who will not consider the epistemologies commonly valued by secular scholars.

For the sake of peace, and in response to such stringent religious stances, instructors are frequently tempted to bracket faith issues as “off-limits” in assignments and discussions. As Rhonda Leathers Dively explains, an instructor's initial experience with religious students can sometimes taint all subsequent encounters, thereby causing

him or her to assume “that when students write about religious faith, they will necessarily verbalize unintellectual positions. Consequently, [instructors] choose to ‘head off’ the problem by eliminating religious faith as a possible topic of discourse in the classroom” (92). As the odds of encountering fervent religious individuals increase, and as these individuals look to incorporate faith issues with all aspects of their lives (including academics), it seems important for composition scholars to understand the impact that diversity and inquiry might have on students whose religious rhetoric could be inhibiting them from gaining literacy in academic discourses. In my thesis, I argue that research focused specifically on the personal experiences of religious students in writing classrooms could help instructors understand this impact and might, over time, contribute to the development of more effective faith-learning integration methods.

Rethinking Solutions

Writing instructors need to recognize that critical pedagogies may trigger a host of powerful reactions in students whose worldviews stand opposite the ones adopted by most secular academic communities. Such reactions are often alluded to in composition studies, but they are rarely probed. According to Laura May, composition research tends to address a specific set of problems related to religious students in writing classrooms. The problems most commonly written about, says May, can be grouped into 3 categories: students’ lack of discourse awareness, their lack of complex thinking, and the ideological conflicts that occur between students and their instructors (26). These are important aspects of the overarching conflict, but a key element still seems to be missing. While

the topic of faith-learning integration has found an imbedded place in the field of composition, the voice of the religious students who are actually attempting (or refusing to attempt) such integration remains absent.

As Amy Goodburn states in her 1997 study, “more research is needed specifically on religious students themselves in the context of their learning to write” (202). Up to this point, composition scholars have offered readers the observations and reactions of writing instructors who encounter religious students; similarly, several surveys have collected data on instructors’ perspectives of religion and religious students in the classrooms (e.g. Dively 1994; Brandt, Cushman, et. al. 2001; Leineger 2011). Within these studies and surveys, readers are sometimes treated to religious students’ before-and-after writing samples; rarely, however, do we read reflections or descriptions offered by the writers themselves about their composition classroom experiences.

Despite religion’s overwhelming cultural presence in the United States, Ann Ruggles Gere believes that many compositionists lack a “highly complex and compelling language” for addressing it because they are on “new conceptual ground” with faith in the university setting (47). We are, as a field, still somewhat unaccustomed to discussions of religious identity in the writing classroom. To be sure, this “new ground” includes various religious traditions, and Gere argues that such unfamiliarity should naturally lead scholars and teachers to pursue a more nuanced study and analysis of religion if they are to attempt any sort of negotiation with faith in their courses. One distinctive trait that sets evangelical Christianity apart from other traditions and denominations found on college campuses is that its adherents often adopt the epistemological positions that are most

antithetical to the attitudes and values championed in American intellectual communities. As a result, evangelical Christians sometimes perceive themselves to be marginalized minorities within the secular university system, insofar as their appeals to transcendence and absolute truth are usually challenged or rejected in these academic circles. This perception (or, in some cases, reality) is an added challenge that may lead evangelical students to struggle more acutely with composition theory and faith-learning integration in secular settings. Unfortunately, such struggles are not well documented and have not been confirmed from the vantage point of evangelical college students themselves.

In my thesis, I pinpoint the lack of first-person reports and narratives as a research oversight that may be weakening compositionists' ability to effectively engage and educate evangelical Christian students in secular writing classes. I also argue that, while scholars have done an effective job of creating new research space for issues related to instructor-student or student-peer religious conflict in writing classrooms, more work needs to be done in collecting student descriptions and individual perspectives on faith-learning integration in secular classrooms. In order to do this, I collect surveys and narratives completed by evangelical college students learning to write in a secular university (with the rationale for focusing on evangelicalism discussed further in chapter 1). By augmenting current composition research with phenomenographic methods and surveys completed by these students, I hope to introduce more "complexity" into research that could potentially influence critical pedagogy on a practical level; this influence may, in turn, have a direct impact on the academic lives of religious students enrolled in college writing courses.

I concentrate my pilot study on the undergraduate students of Montana Bible College in Bozeman, MT, who identify themselves as “born again” believers and who fulfill graduation requirements (as well as certain spiritual objectives) by enrolling as visitors in Writing 101 at Montana State University, a nearby public institution. Because of their professed foundationalism and the academic priorities encouraged at the bible college they normally attend, these visiting students are often situated to encounter opposition from MSU faculty or classmates who uphold different epistemic positions. The localized goal of the study was to determine whether or not the ideological tension commonly cited in faith-learning integration research actually manifested itself in MSU’s writing classrooms, and (if it did) whether such clashes contributed to feelings of confusion or struggle among MBC’s evangelical students. On a more universal level, this setup was meant to illustrate a student-centered research style rarely utilized (but sorely needed) in composition studies dealing with college students and faith-learning integration.

Some scholars feel it necessary to reveal their research biases at the outset of their studies. I follow suit by admitting that, while I fully support the separation of church and state in higher education, I also consider myself to be a “Christian scholar.” Paul Griffiths of the University of Chicago defines this position well when he states that “One is a Christian scholar if one understands one’s work to be based upon and framed by and always in the service of one’s identity as a Christian.” Unlike a former professor, who warned that adherence to institutional religion would taint my research and lead to the “squandering of a perfectly good mind,” I do not believe that spiritual commitments

inherently compromise a scholar's position as such. This academic work stems from a desire to explore how committed evangelical Christians immersed in secular academics might remain faithful and vocal about religion while also venturing into areas of self-critical questioning and writing. I often observe intelligent evangelicals choosing to adopt aggressive methods of holy entrenchment in the classroom, which immediately sets them up for conflict with perceived "outsiders" in the university. By the same token, many faith-minded students find it more effective to wave silencing white flags of restraint over their religious voice. This may be done in the name of tolerance and harmony but it can just as easily be done out of fear or confusion, resulting in a stifling (and, in my opinion, unnecessary) bifurcation between students' "academic" and "Christian" identities.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 offers a summary of why evangelical Christianity is highlighted so often in composition studies, and why the tradition takes center stage in this particular study as well. Chapter 1 includes a brief overview of some influential literature regarding faith-learning integration and attempts to show that, despite the good intentions of these studies, a "hole" still remains in student-centered composition research. In order to supply what seems to be missing in these studies, chapter 1 suggests that student perceptions and experiences should be at the center of studies that have previously featured the observations and interpretations of instructors. In chapter 2, the methodology used to conduct a phenomenographic study of evangelical students is

outlined. Readers are given background information about the selected student population, details on the survey design, and a set of hypotheses that were considered before survey results were collected. Chapter 3 analyzes the results of this student-centered study, detailing student narratives and discussing the limitations of the study itself. Chapter 4 concludes by suggesting that phenomenography has the potential to reveal a variety of evangelical student struggles and pedagogical needs that might otherwise go undetected by composition instructors.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR PHENOMENOGRAPHIC STUDY

In his recent book *God is Not One*, Stephen Prothero, Dean of Religious Studies at Brown University, makes the following statement:

As predictably as fall follows summer, incoming college students bring into classrooms big questions...[and] just as predictably, many professors try to steer them towards smaller things—questions that can be covered in an hour-long lecture, and asked and answered on a final exam. But the students have it right. At least in this case, bigger is better (22).

The college years frequently offer students the time and resources necessary for undertaking a responsible, thoughtful journey into adulthood. As universities focus more on providing holistic opportunities for their students to develop and ask “big questions,” often away from those who have shaped potential answers up to that point (family members, traditional authority figures, etc.), it seems reasonable to expect that many of these young adults may gravitate toward religious issues during their college exploration. Considered for the first time, questioned from different angles, or explored within new contexts, religious inquiry often has a marked influence on students who choose to incorporate it into their learning processes.

According Alexander Astin and the Higher Education Research Institute’s (HERI) landmark 2003-2009 survey, which included data collected from students at 236 colleges and universities over the course of 6 years, approximately two-thirds of incoming college freshman in the United States “have an interest in spirituality” (“Forum” 28). With this widespread interest in mind, HERI suggests that academic literature aimed at studying the college student experience still needs “further in-depth interviews...to chronicle in a more detailed fashion students’ stories and experiences with spiritual struggle—the life

events that preceded and followed times of spiritual distress, points of resolution, and perceptions about the larger implications for personal growth” (Bryant 25).

Bryant’s team explains in their study’s conclusions that, “although the college years clearly hold considerable potential for students to experience ‘crisis’ or ‘shipwreck’ as they encounter perspectives and ideologies that differ from their own, very little research has examined this phenomenon and its implications for students representing a range of demographic, regional, and religious backgrounds” (15). The wealth of data provided by HERI surveys has prompted many educators, administrators, and researchers (like myself) to seriously evaluate the methods by which they study religious student experiences in the university setting. It is hoped that a clearer understanding of how religious individuals learn (as well as how they perceive themselves in the context of learning) away from their religious communities and authorities may help instructors interact more effectively with students who might otherwise be difficult to reach. It is my hope that, over time, this knowledge might also be gained by composition scholars working with religious students at secular institutions.

The work of Ference Marton, professor of Education and Education Research at the University of Goteborg, has played an important role in fostering my desire to incorporate students’ personal narratives and perceptions into the current body of composition research. Marton’s methodology aims to investigate the qualitatively different ways that people understand a particular phenomenon or an aspect of the world around them. Much like ethnography, this approach involves empirical studies that focus on the various ways of experiencing, ways of apprehending, or ways of understanding

displayed by a particular group of people. Using Marton as a guide, I began considering whether or not pheomenographic studies might prove valuable in addressing the lack of experience-related data collected from students in the field of composition studies. In order to establish a more nuanced understanding of how these religious students perceived their spiritual lives in relation to secular writing assignments, discussions, and peers/instructors, I set my sights on piloting a phenomenographic study of one small population of evangelical Christian students engaged in composition courses at a secular university.

Christianity and Composition: Exploring the Relationship

Christianity is the largest religion in the United States, with approximately 76% of the population identifying themselves as practicing adherents. Of this number, roughly 51.3% identify themselves as Protestants, with 26% of this Protestant population swinging away from mainline denominations and identifying themselves as evangelicals. I focus on evangelical Christianity not only because it is one of the most common religious traditions in south-central Montana (where my pilot study was conducted), but also because a relatively high percentage of Americans as a whole claim it as their tradition of choice. HERI's 2003-2009 survey of college students found that 83 percent of incoming freshman nationwide were affiliated with a religious denomination, and only 9 percent of this number identified themselves as non-Christians. Additionally, thirty-one percent of this Christian student population considered themselves to be "born again" Christians, a phrase commonly associated with evangelicalism (Bryant 13).

“Evangelical Christianity” is a slippery term to generalize or pin down with solid definitions, as the meaning tends to shift and adapt with surprising flexibility to an array of uses. Still, it is typically observed by writing instructors that self-proclaimed evangelical Christians are more aggressive than other religious students in writing and talking openly about their faith, and that their proselytizing forms of expression are more likely to ruffle feathers (or, at the very least, garner article pages) in composition studies. As Darren Sherkat reports in his 2007 study, “the increasing proportion of religious conservatives on college campuses has brought problems in the classroom...particularly in secular universities. Sectarian and fundamentalist Christians often come to college with little or no preparation for understanding or tolerating ideas which confront their own beliefs, or interacting with people who do not share their opinions” (Religion and Higher Education 1). These evangelical students often reveal a keen interest in writing about religious topics, but they are also identified by composition scholars as having what Davida Charney categorizes as an “absolutist” thought process and method of communicating. Although she never specifically mentions religion in her article, Charney’s definition may help writing instructors recognize how certain characteristics of evangelical Christianity can manifest themselves as obvious challenges in a secular composition classroom.

The Challenge of Christian Absolutism

Charney identifies the “absolutist” epistemology with a belief in the accessibility of truth “through objective observation of the world or in consultation with valid

authorities,” as well as with a rejection of “personal responsibility for ideas and decision” (2). Charney does not demonize the absolutist attitude or adopt a stage model that situates it in a hierarchically lower position than other epistemologies (evaluativism and relativism, for example), nor does she suggest that the other epistemologies always emerge as a result of one “growing out” of absolutism over time. It is her belief that all three epistemologies may overlap, be held in tandem, or be returned to at any age or stage of life. One attitude is not inherently better than another, according to Charney, but academic circles do value certain attitudes over others, and survey results clearly indicate that “instruction can influence a student’s belief system” (303). She points out, for example, that “for many writing instructors, the most important skills are rhetorical strategies for addressing potential readers—learning how much and what kinds of evidence to provide to support a claim...when to make concessions and qualify claims, and when to abandon a position as untenable. These pedagogic goals are most consonant with a strongly evaluativist epistemology.” Contrast this with the strongest form of absolutist epistemology, which “explicitly exempts certain beliefs from critical examination,” and conflict is bound to arise (6).

In an article titled “Invisible Domain: Religion and American Literary Studies,” Jenny Franchot writes that literary scholars are often known for preferring a certain amount of demythologization and deconstruction to take place before religious language and concepts are welcome in their classroom discussions or assignments. Because every individual enters college with preconceptions from their primary discourses that must be closely examined, this is not an unreasonable expectation in any discipline, provided that

all other traditions and identity markers (e.g. those associated with race, gender, class, etc.) are also subject to the same deconstructive requirements. Compositionists are quick to observe that this process can be more difficult for certain religious students in rhetoric and composition courses because, as Vail McGuire's 2009 doctoral dissertation indicates, so many aspects of the field itself have emerged from contexts of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and antifoundationalism, which are "philosophies that also undermine the absolute claims of much religious thought" (8).

According to Darren Sherkat, certain sectarian traditions are far more stringent about requiring their community members to maintain the belief that "religious rewards...will exclusively fall to adherents of the sectarian faith—that everyone else will receive punishment from the gods, or at least no rewards." By contrast, students coming from liberal/moderate or non-sectarian traditions (such as Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, United Church of Christ, etc.) tend to be "less exclusive in their beliefs about religious reward and punishment" (1). As a result, these students may be more flexible or comfortable with the diversity and destabilizing thought processes encouraged by critical pedagogy in writing courses. Sherkat goes on to show that, "in the United States, the majority of sectarian organizations are Christian, including groups like the Southern Baptists, Assembly of God, Nazarene, and Churches of Christ." General Social Survey results show that "among those who hold a sectarian affiliation, about 60% have fundamentalist orientations" (2). Upon entering college, students within these sectarian traditions often find themselves immediately forced to grapple with or bracket

their foundational beliefs in order to gain acceptance in a professional discourse that denies the validity of transcendence, revelation, and Biblical authority.

When viewed from the perspective of evangelical students, the requirements of critical pedagogy might be seen as colonizing practices, “as disturbing in [their] way as the anthropological translation of another culture’s ‘weak’ language into the ‘strong’ language of anthropology” (Franchot 840). For evangelical Christians who have never attempted to take a critical view of their religious foundationalism, this can be a distressing prerequisite for acceptance into the academic discourse community. What sometimes goes undetected by even the most sympathetic instructors and researchers in composition studies is just how emotionally jarring it can be for students to try and remain critically distant from something as deeply personal (and wholly different) as their evangelical commitments.

Composition scholar Roger Lundin believes that conflict between evangelical students and their instructors may arise due to the fact that “‘construction’ has replaced ‘discovery’ as the key metaphor to describe the way we make meaning, that truth is no longer considered to be ‘found’ but only ‘made’ by our manipulation of language, (and its manipulation of us)” (Rand 350). This “constructed versus discovered” debate exemplifies one of the trouble-spots where biblical-literalist Christians may become muddled or hostile in composition studies. “Discovered” meaning may be revealed by a higher power (without action necessary on the part of the receiver), whereas the responsibility necessary for “constructing” meaning may leave many evangelical students feeling uncomfortably in charge (as mentioned in Davida Charney’s work). Despite the

fact that it is one of the more difficult transitions for spiritually committed students to make, composition scholars almost never ask evangelical Christian students about the experience of moving from reliance on “discovered” meaning in biblical texts and traditions to the study of their own “created” meanings and truths in writing courses. The students may be allowed to write about religious topics, and their writing styles or premises may be corrected by instructors attempting to teach them how to address such topics “appropriately,” but seldom do instructors or researchers report how this process affects evangelical students emotionally or spiritually. One overarching goal of this thesis is to discover the degree to which secular composition courses and anti-foundational composition theories prompt spiritual questions or struggles in the lives of the absolutist students enrolled in them. In order to do this, it seemed fitting to ask students (not instructors) to report on their observations and experiences in the classroom.

Evangelical Perceptions of Marginalization

According to Sharon Parks, humans often feel “unable to survive, and certainly cannot thrive, unless [they] can make meaning.” She reminds us that we are in the business of drawing sense from our surroundings by seeking patterns, order, coherence, and relationships between even the most contrasting elements of experience. As soon as we perceive life and meaning to be fragmentary or chaotic, “we suffer confusion, distress, stagnation, and finally despair” (7). As mentioned above, for evangelical students displaying absolutist epistemologies, meaning is discovered through authority figures and religious systems that often contain firm boundaries and black-and-white concepts.

These structures may provide a strong feeling of comfort and stasis but can also reduce the flexibility available when approaching or considering other possibilities. Because of this, Darren Sherkat believes that “the focus on religious explanations for all matter of phenomenon in fundamentalist communities does not conform to the standards of secular education (5). Being asked to remove an epistemic lens for the purpose of analyzing it might seem like “business as usual” for scholars or students whose interpretations and identities are fairly permeable; for evangelical students, however, this practice may be perceived as a movement toward fragmentation, chaos, confusion, and even crisis.

Religious studies scholar Adam Kotsko believes that ideological clashes occur more often between evangelical Christian students, secular instructors, and academic course materials because these students more commonly suffer from a strong “persecution complex” (2). While it may be true that adherents of other religious traditions, such as Islam (particularly after 9/11), suffer far more from actual prejudice and persecution in the United States, these students do not always maintain epistemological positions that set up secular culture as an “other,” and their ideologies are rarely as antithetical to the values and goals of liberal academia as evangelical Christianity’s seem to be. According to Kotsko, conservative evangelical leaders sometimes teach their young charges that “the secular world...is in active opposition to Christianity, seeking its destruction.” Believing that they are under “continual attack,” these students are encouraged to “boldly defend themselves whenever possible,” which can lead to “a combination of extreme paranoia and defiance (conceived as self-defense)” (2).

Anita Gandolfo addresses this self-defense phenomenon by pointing to sociologists and political scientists who have documented the ways in which evangelical Christians “mobilize political and social resources in reaction to their *perceived* marginalization in secular American culture” (56). In responding to secularization this way, leaders can coalesce their committed flocks and reassure them to “keep the faith” through fellowship with each other, trustworthy materials/media sources, and continued adherence to religious convictions even in the face of opposition, (perceived, real, or otherwise). By amplifying the differences between evangelical and secular culture, and by assuring evangelicals that their “uniqueness” differentiates them in a good way, the state of separation may come to be valued as a place where Christians are “set apart,” together. In other words, “for the contemporary conservative Christian who feels somewhat marginalized in American culture, an emphasis on the value of being different is important and...provides support for that feeling of exclusion.” (74).

Students who adhere to this rhetoric seem to litter the pages of composition research and are shown to be most problematic and subversive to the cause of liberal education (Anderson’s “Description of an Embarrassment”; Goodburn’s “It’s a Question of Faith”; Neuleib’s “Split Religion,” VanderLei’s *Negotiating*, etc.). As a result, descriptions of fundamentalist defiance and “self-defense” are cited far more often than descriptions of other groups’ difficulties within secular culture and composition studies. Of the 100+ sources that Laura May identifies in her ample literature review (one of the first and most comprehensive compilations in religion and rhetoric/composition thus far), fewer than a quarter of the sources discuss non-Christian student ideologies in secular

classrooms; the rest deal specifically with Christianity, and especially evangelicalism or fundamentalism, in composition.

Review of Relevant Faith-Learning Integration Literature

Laura May's thesis shows that composition studies often gravitate toward the discussion of separatist-minded Christians because they are one of the most hostile and unreceptive student groups encountered by secular writing instructors. The inability to critically examine one's own starting point, preferences, and preconceptions is one of the most commonly-cited sticking points between evangelical students and writing instructors. It is an issue that has been written and re-written about in rhet/comp research, from the perspective of instructors grappling with students who maintain an attitude of absolutism. As mentioned above, one of the most common features of student-centered composition pedagogy is the description of the "proselytizing Christian." This research narrative usually involves an instructor detailing how a student uses the Bible or the teachings of the church to justify writing decisions, supply evidence for arguments, and interpret classroom texts. Generally speaking, the research conducted in relation to evangelical students in secular writing classrooms focuses on the nature of the students' all-encompassing personal or social identities, and how these are manifested in devotional-style papers or narrow-minded comments. The few studies that try to engage students directly about their writing tend to do so in a peripheral, off-hand way; readers rarely learn anything about the student's personal experiences or struggles associated with the writing course.

Shannon Carter's 2007 article "Living Inside the Bible (Belt)" encourages both instructors and students to adopt positions of "rhetorical dexterity," with the goal of "helping students to think of literacy in terms more conducive to maintaining both their faith-based and their academic literacies without being required to substitute one for the other" (574). In her study, she describes the commendable work and intellectual movement that a student named Keneshia makes through several drafts of a paper about her Christian faith. Carter concludes that, after being taught to "make sense of her own Christian literacies in terms legible and accessible to those much less literate in Christianity," Keneshia was "in a better position to support her faith- and Bible-based ways of knowing in communities of practice that may remain hostile to them" (592). This study is admirable for the way Carter allows a Christian student to write and explore matters of faith in her secular writing classroom, but she takes quite a big leap in claiming that Keneshia is in a "better position" after Carter has "forced upon [Keneshia] levels of critical consciousness only available to [her] after 'reading our world' in the ways Paulo Freire tells us we must." Carter recognizes that "this was certainly difficult for Keneshia," but does not explain this difficulty any further, nor does she report what Keneshia had to say about the challenges associated with her own shift in consciousness. It is an insightful study overall, but it stops short of revealing any emotional or spiritual difficulties experienced by the student both during and after the course.

Chris Anderson's "Description of an Embarrassment," a 1989 article cited frequently by other researchers in the field, is another example of a common research style found in faith-learning integration studies. Anderson describes how his own

ideology and style of interaction with religion in writing seems to impact the Christian students he teaches, particularly “Colleen,” who writes a paper describing her conservative Pentecostal background in relation to a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem. Anderson asks some interesting questions of himself in light of the experience and answers each one in the affirmative: “Haven’t I influenced the way [Colleen] believes, the quality, the character of her belief? . . . If we teach [Colleen] the values of academic writing, of good prose, are we not then changing the way [she] thinks? . . . This is what I believe I’ve done...” (15). Much like Carter’s second-hand report of Keneshia’s difficulties, we never actually hear from “Colleen” to find out if transformations have indeed taken place in the “character of her belief.” We read only Anderson’s interpretation of her experience, and his own feelings in relation to her writing.

Amy Goodburn’s “Luke,” Gregory Shafer’s “Danielle,” Douglas Down’s “Keith,” Joy Ritchie’s “Brad,” and Robert Yagelski’s “David”—to name a few—are all examples of studies featuring students with absolutist attitudes and descriptions of these students’ reactions (from the vantage point of their instructors) as their religious commitments conflict with critical inquiry. These are all “classic” and oft-cited studies within the realm of religion and composition pedagogy, but none of them attempt to delve into the thoughts and experiences of the students during or after the courses they describe. The majority of composition studies focusing on religion in the classroom gravitate toward students who take a fundamentalist stance before choosing one of two routes: either refusing to subject their beliefs to the requirements of critical inquiry, or

shifting toward a more acceptable epistemological style—even if only marginally or in written form—over the course of a semester.

It is more common to read about instructors studying and dealing with absolutist student writing than it is to read about their direct contact with or interviews of the students themselves, and while this may be due in part to keeping certain boundaries present while an instructor has a student in their class, it is still a troubling trend. The few exceptions within the field tend toward obscure religious populations (Marsha Penti's ethnography of Finnish Apostolic Lutherans in "Religious Identities in the Composition Class"), or they focus on graduate students who have already spent several years grappling with faith-learning integration in higher education (Toby Coley's conversations with spiritually mature graduate students in "Religions Restraint," for example).

Researchers outside the humanities, such as those at HERI, have used qualitative measures to determine that college freshmen in particular "can have difficulty articulating their religious beliefs in a meaningful fashion (Clydesdale 2007), [and] future studies should attempt to explain what impact (if any) college has on creating 'spiritual seekers'" (Maryl, 264). Without speaking to these undergraduate students directly and/or retrospectively, it seems nearly impossible to know how they navigated assignments or discussions while also juggling faith-related convictions. It seems reasonable to believe that a student's written (and subsequently graded) output can only tell an instructor so much about the "spiritual seeking" or personal difficulties experienced over the course of a semester.

Searching for Undergraduate Student Perspectives

When speaking about group identities in writing classrooms, Teresa Bruckner points out that “students or newcomers to professional practices are entering writing situations where identities are already set and into which they must fit themselves, and negotiating group identity may be difficult or unavailable. Fitting in can be a lengthy and frustrating task (Bruckner, 9). Lizabeth Rand believes that Christian students who struggle with the demands of academic discourse should be encouraged to “tap into the inherently critical nature of their faith.” She identifies reasons why students should be made to understand that “faith...is not at all necessarily opposed to skepticism. It is actually quite a searching, aggressive, and skeptical stance” (May 38). While this may be true, little is known about what kind of spiritual or emotional disorientation occurs when evangelical students are asked to make the transition from one understanding of faith to another; composition scholars rarely study the epistemic aftermath of students who begin (or refuse) to view faith, texts, and their writing in new ways.

Jim Corder describes the transition well when he says that “we see only what our eyes will let us see at a given moment but...every so often, we will see something we have not seen before and then we will have to nudge, poke, and remake our narrative, or we decide we can either ignore the thing seen or whittle it to shape the narrative we already have” (413). It is this “nudging” and “poking” of personal narrative experienced by evangelicals—and rarely studied by compositionists—that I find most fascinating, not to mention formative. Composition scholars are admirably idealistic and hopeful that students entering the writing classroom with Absolutist habits and upbringings can be

initiated into the academic discourse with faith still intact. Doug Downs acknowledges the challenge and suggests several roles that instructors might play—as the Guide, the Translator, the Mentor, the Coach—as they walk with students who struggle with critical approaches to religious commitments. Downs reminds us that “social construction, the notion that communities of humans create their own truths and naturalize them as received truths, undermines the received knowledge that grounds discourses of affirmation,” like those espoused by fundamentalist Christians (Kyburtz, 45). While this empathy and understanding of the problem is a good start, compositionists must not treat it as a sufficient end; it must instead be used as the foundation for studying the lived experiences of those who feel and respond (either positively or negatively) to a sudden epistemic shift under their absolutist groundings.

Toby Coley reminds educators that “the pain associated with forging multiple identities, identities in conflict with each other, can be both destructive and liberating in the sense of enabling the forced—by necessity—construction of justifications for each identity to communities of practice outside of, or not familiar with, the one being justified” (403). Up to this point, composition studies have not attempted to determine just how pervasive or penetrating this “pain” might be for undergraduate students who are suddenly exposed to the critical pedagogies of composition. In a larger and more general context (5,550 students attending 39 colleges across the country), 44% of college students reported experiencing at least a “little bit of religious struggle” over the course of four years at school. Of the 44%, one quarter experienced “considerable stress” surrounding religious issues, and this stress was linked by researchers to such negative

impacts as depression, anxiety, negative moods, low self-esteem, and even suicidal thoughts (Bryant 5). It was also determined that well over half the freshmen entering college with religious backgrounds and interests occasionally “felt distant from God” (65%) and questioned their religious beliefs (57%) in college. About half of these religious students “occasionally felt angry with God” (48%) and eventually came to disagree with their families about religious matters (52%). In response to the question, “How would you describe your current views about spiritual/religious matters?” fewer than half the junior or senior-level respondents indicated that they felt “secure” in their religious views (Astin and Astin, 101). Given the priorities of rhetoric and composition, students who choose to integrate faith with learning in secular composition courses may undergo comparable forms of stress as they come into contact with epistemologies unlike their own. To test this hypothesis, composition scholars must question and interact directly with students regarding their personal struggles in writing classrooms.

A New Approach to Faith-Learning Integration Studies

This study does not attempt to show that spiritual struggle and intellectual insecurity are negative aspects of the college years. Additionally, instructors who prompt it or provide an academic context for faith-related inquiry are not necessarily doing their students a disservice. Writing instructors who avoid religion in the classroom, as well as those who teach their students to focus an inquiring eye on their religious discourse, may both do so with the best of intentions. The latter often want their students to realize outside influences, discover preconceptions, and emerge with critical skills that will serve

them better in years to come; the former may simply lack the time, resources, or pedagogical tools needed to facilitate the complex and volatile process of teaching students to navigate the faith-learning integration process. Much research has been conducted on the pros and cons of both approaches—see Anderson, Rand, Vander Lei, etc.—and these respective sides will not be discussed here.

What this study aims to do is bring attention to the fact that most composition studies conducted over the past 20 years have failed to address the spiritual and emotional impact that composition pedagogy can have on evangelical students who attempt or avoid faith-learning integration in secular writing classrooms. It is this hole in the research that my thesis aims to fill by questioning a small group of evangelical Christian students about their individual experiences in composition. A description of the survey and methods used to collect this information is offered in chapter two, along with a detailed profile of the student population chosen to participate in the phenomenographic study.

PREPARATION, POPULATION, AND METHODS

Ference Marton asserts that a qualitative research methodology such as phenomenography can utilize collected empirical data to address educational issues that largely center around the “qualitatively different ways in which particular sorts of students understand a phenomenon, or experience some aspect of the world, which is central to their education.” Because of its central goal of providing educators with “collective analyses of individual experiences,” phenomenography stood out as a potentially productive methodology for this study (Akerlind, 322). No two evangelical Christian students are exactly alike; collectively, however, the students might share similar perceptions or experiences of being Christians within non-Christian communities. They might also use similar faith-learning integration techniques as they attempt to express their evangelical convictions in secular writing courses.

If, as Shirley Booth suggests, the definition of learning is “a change in the ways in which one is capable of experiencing some aspect of the world,” then writing instructors looking to encourage the changes associated with learning must first understand the initial capabilities and experiences of their students (135). At the same time, instructors must understand the struggles and confusion that may be prompted (for better or worse) by attempting to change the way a student experiences his or her world. In this chapter, I attempt to uncover some of these experiential aspects by surveying a small population of evangelical Christian students.

Survey Population

The initial challenge of designing and conducting a phenomenographic study came in finding a large enough group of like-minded evangelicals to research, as well as determining how to collect personal accounts of their time in secular writing courses. I considered contacting the Christian campus ministries of Montana State University in order to survey some of their student members, but I quickly discovered that these ministries attracted too wide a variety of students and denominations (including those who were not yet committed to any particular religion). Because of my focus on evangelical Christians with absolutist commitments and epistemologies, I believed that searching through such a large and diverse group of students would be both time consuming and inefficient. I may have encountered students with Christian beliefs in these university-sponsored ministries, but not all of them would have identified themselves as “born again” evangelicals.

The decision to draw instead from the student body of Montana Bible College (MBC) was based on the college’s evangelical Christian affiliation, its unique set of curricular requirements, and its convenient location near Montana State. Thanks to previous networking, I had already forged relationships with several MBC faculty members by attending their weekly ministry meetings and volunteering at student gatherings on campus. This familiarity proved valuable when, several months later, I sought permission to focus my thesis research on students at their college. Traditionally, I have found that small, religious institutions like MBC are often wary of “outsiders” questioning or entering their close-knit communities. During a previous project, for

example, I tried initiating conversation with 15 different Christian college English departments on the topic of “construction versus discovery of meaning” in composition classrooms. Even after multiple attempts at contact, 7 of the 15 colleges across the country refused my requests for information and dialogue. Most of these colleges had similar accreditations and doctrinal positions as MBC, and they attracted comparably conservative students with their orthodox expectations and evangelical mission statements. It is interesting to note that the opportunity to connect with the MBC community on a shared-values level before requesting to conduct a study seemed to increase the administration’s willingness to answer my questions and supply student contact information. It is possible that my status as an “insider” in their religious community alleviated some of the defensiveness and “persecution paranoia” associated with conservative religious groups that are often suspicious of secular interference (Kotsko 3).

Inside Montana Bible College

One need only peruse MBC’s evangelical “Statement of Faith” to better understand the mindset of its 120 students and small pool of staff members, who are all required to sign the document and adhere to the doctrines outlined therein. For example, students and staff must unquestioningly embrace the belief that the Old and New Testaments are “verbally inspired by God in the original writings, and that they are inerrant fact and infallible.” It is also accepted by all students and faculty that “God personally created the existing universe with all its basic systems and kinds of organisms

in the six literal days of the creation week.” The entire college community agrees, in writing, to submit their lives to the biblical text and to “conform to biblical truth in all its policies, standards and practices.” Given these expectations, it was almost certain that MBC would enroll—and that I would encounter— students with absolutist mentalities and deep-seated religious commitments.

The homogeneity within the college, while often considered to be the “downside” of religious institutions, is interestingly modulated by the fact that MBC students are required to complete their general education requirements at another (preferably secular) location. The college’s website offers the following description of this off-campus requirement:

Although MBC accepts credits from recognized Christian liberal arts universities, students are encouraged to earn their credits from a secular college or university. We believe it is important for our students to learn to engage the lost world they are called to reach with the Gospel and to do so without becoming ensnared by worldly values and philosophies (Matthew 13:24- 30). That is why Montana Bible College has chosen to have its students complete at least one full year at MBC, becoming firmly grounded in their faith and mission, before pursuing their general education courses. MBC instructs students in biblical and loving responses to and engagement with the people and experiences on the secular campus. (www.montanabiblecollege.edu)

During research conversations, more than one MBC faculty member admitted that a desire to teach students how to “engage the lost world” is only one reason for sending them off-campus to complete general education requirements; according to them, another key element behind the policy is a lack of staff and facilities available for students at MBC. During the 2010-2011 school year, the college employed 18 faculty members: of these 18 instructors, 9 specialized and taught courses in Biblical studies and languages, 3

specialized in Biblical counseling, 3 focused on sacred music, 2 offered courses in children's ministry, and one was described as an "Instructor in Communication."

Because faculty members are not generally equipped to teach subjects like composition, and because MBC does not have the classroom space needed to accommodate a wide variety of courses, sending students off-campus meets the college's practical needs just as much (if not more) as it fulfills the spiritual aims described on the college's website.

According to the 2011-2012 Academic Handbook, students at MBC must complete a course in grammar or composition after their freshman year. The college Registrar at MBC reports that more than half of second-year students choose to enroll in Writing 101 at Montana State University, which is conveniently located less than two miles from MBC. With its nearby location, Montana State annually hosts MBC students who have spent at least one academic year developing both an academic and a spiritual stance meant to be adopted and utilized while they are visiting Montana State.

It is interesting to note that, in preparation for the time they will spend in secular academics, all first-year MBC students are required to take a course titled "Effective Communication." In the 2010-2011 syllabus for this class, the instructor explains her expectation that "students will look at all aspects of communication in terms of the message, the speaker, the audience and the occasion." The desired outcome for the course is that students will gain an understanding of "the importance of words, especially for Christians." Quoting Richard M. Weavers' book, *Language is Sermonic*, the syllabus insists that "rhetoric is 'persuasive speech in the service of truth,'" and that "students will learn how much more powerful their testimony or evangelistic outreach will be when

using rhetorical skills.” Quoting Weaver again, the syllabus shows that the course aims to “cause students to appreciate the necessity of using words well ‘to provide a defense against base rhetoric and propaganda.’” During a meeting with the course instructor, it was made clear that it is typically the students’ own “base rhetoric” and Christian “propaganda” that this course is aimed at addressing; in theory, this should better prepare students to ask questions of their preconceptions and dialogue with non-evangelicals about faith issues. The instructor admitted, however, that some of her students enter and leave her course with the narrow mindsets they brought to college from their Primary Discourses (and that other instructors at MBC do not always address in their courses). One semester in “Effective Communication” is rarely enough, the instructor explained, to teach her “fire and brimstone” students the value of intelligently and sensitively critiquing the way they think and speak about their beliefs. To these students, “critique” and “inquiry” are simply forms of doubt that must be overcome by faith alone.

Another requirement for students in “Effective Communication” is the memorization and recital a quote from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which doubles as the course’s accepted definition of communication:

This skill he will not attain without a great deal of trouble, which a good man ought to undergo, not for the sake of speaking and acting before men, but in order that he may be able to say what is acceptable to God and always to act acceptably to Him as far as in him lies (67).

With a working definition such as this, it is difficult to imagine how any MBC student could learn to approach their belief system critically or in a way that would serve them well in secular academics. While the course instructor may, in theory, have horizon-expanding goals for her students, the course content of “Effective

Communication” seems only to reinforce MBC’s evangelical goal of following the “Great Commission” of Matthew 28:16, which instructs Christians to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” First-year students at MBC pursue this goal by purposely fine-tuning their Gospel-related verbal and written skills, which they in turn use to share their faith more confidently (but not necessarily more critically) with others. As mentioned above, this is a characteristic undertaking among evangelical Christians, and especially among young adults, as they have proved to be most interested in renewing orthodoxy and Gospel-sharing within the tradition (Carroll 29). It is also this kind of preparation that sets them up for potential clashes with classmates and instructors at Montana State, where being able to communicate “what is acceptable to God” is far from the pedagogical goal of any composition course.

Survey Distribution

My survey of MBC students aimed to provide composition scholars with a practical example of how they might come to understand the faith-learning integration methods that many evangelical students enter college attempting to use, as well as how certain pedagogical goals might affect individuals with absolute or evangelizing priorities. In order to do this, I turned away from the traditional method of analyzing students’ writing assignments; I also chose not to solicit MSU instructors for their observations or interpretations of students’ religiously themed writing. Instead, I

dialoged directly with MBC's students by way of individual surveys and email correspondence. As stated in my introduction, the purpose of the study was to determine whether or not evangelical students did indeed struggle with faith-related discomfort or confusion in the context of learning to write at a secular institution. It was also hoped that this small example of phenomenographic research would help educators consider how to thoughtfully consider their research and teaching methods in preparation for encountering a growing number of students who are intent on expressing their religious identities in writing.

With the goal of reaching as many students as possible during the months between April and August 2011, I distributed the online survey link to MBC students via personal email addresses and social networking applications (e.g., Facebook messaging). This link was accompanied by a request that only students who had completed a composition course at Montana State University respond to the survey. The majority of students who responded did so while they were away from campus during the summer, proving that these online tools were capable of acquiring data that would have been impossible to collect from them at that time of year via print or in-class methods.

Using contact information provided by the MBC registrar, I sent the survey link to students with upperclassman status, as they were most likely to have recently completed their composition requirement at MSU. I was also able to send the link to alumni who had graduated from MBC within the past year. I did not send the survey link to second-year students until the end of May, as some of them may have been enrolled in Writing 101 during that spring semester and asking them to comment on their classroom

experiences may have created a conflict of interest at that time. Although respondents were allowed to remain anonymous, and composition instructors at MSU were not given access to any survey results, it still seemed prudent to wait until students had received their final grades so that any potential anxiety about consequences or course performance would be dispelled. Overall, the survey link was sent to approximately 75 MBC students and recent graduates.

Survey Design

I utilized Survey Monkey's free internet software, which allowed me to design and distribute a 7-question survey link to MBC students, who were then able to access the survey online and complete it at their own convenience (Appendix A). Students who received and clicked the survey link were directed to a customized Survey Monkey page displaying a subject consent form, followed by an information page. This page supplied students with some basic examples of how the phrase "religious topic" should be treated and interpreted throughout the survey questions. The definition of "religious topic" was kept intentionally inclusive, allowing respondents to reflect upon the variety of forms and aspects of religion they may have encountered in their writing classrooms at MSU. The information page explained to students that the phrase "religious topic" was "broadly used to indicate writing assignments and discussions that focus on religion in general, individual perspectives on personal faith/spirituality, and the many traditions or denominations that might be represented in a writing class at MSU." Students were

encouraged to consider any reference to or mention of spirituality—whether their own or someone else’s—to be a type of “religious topic.”

After establishing this stipulated definition on the information page, the survey continued on to question 1, which prompted students to indicate how often they encountered various situations in their writing courses at MSU: (1) In-class discussions concerning religious topics (prompted by instructor or classmates), (2) Out-of-class discussions concerning religious topics (prompted by classmates and/or course material), (3) Written assignments requiring you to address a religious topic, (4) Written assignments giving you the option to choose your own topic. These choices (with possible answers ranging from “Very Frequently” to “Never”) attempted to determine how and where religious discussions or prompts emerged, if at all, during the students’ time at MSU.

Question 2 asked: “If/when you were given the chance to pick your own paper topic did you ever choose a religious topic in your writing course at MSU?” Short-answer space was supplied and students who answered yes were asked to describe the religious topic they chose to write about. Individuals who reported that they wrote about a religious topic or were required to do so were asked a series of range-type questions about the experience. Using the four possible answers (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, and Strongly Disagree), students answered question 3 by specifying: (1) How comfortable they felt discussing religious topics in conversation or assignments for their writing course at MSU, (2) How supportive or encouraging their instructors were of their exploration of religious topics in the course, (3) If their peers

expressed interest in religious perspectives and gave positive or helpful feedback during discussions/workshops, and (4) If the religious topic papers completed for the writing course at MSU were similar in style and content to papers typically turned in at Montana Bible College. In the same way, and using the same range-style responses, students who reported that they had never chosen to write a paper on a religious topic were asked in question 4 to “indicate the truth of the following statements”:

- Writing about religion would not have met the assignment requirements or the expectations of my instructor.
- I did not feel comfortable writing about religion at MSU.
- I was more interested in exploring non-religious topics for my writing assignments.
- I was interested in writing about religion, but I was discouraged from doing so by my instructor or peers and decided to switch topics.

All respondents continued on to answer question 5, which required them to choose the statement or statements that best described their experience in writing courses at MSU. Six possible choices were offered to further pinpoint trends among student experiences and to gain an overarching sense of whether the time at MSU had been perceived positively or negatively. These possibilities included the following statements:

- I felt welcomed and accepted by my writing course instructor and peers.
- I was challenged to think about religion or my own personal faith in new ways during or after my time in this writing course.
- I sometimes felt like an outsider in my writing course.
- I did not see many connections between my personal faith and the assignments/discussions that took place in my writing course at MSU.
- The discussions/assignments I had in my writing course at MSU influenced the way I approached discussions/assignments at Montana Bible
- If I could do it again, I would NOT choose to take a writing course at MSU to fulfill my general education requirements at Montana Bible College.

To allow more freedom in their description of classroom experiences, students were provided with a final short-answer space and a prompt asking them to “comment on

how you made your own religious beliefs more or less visible in the writing classroom, and why you chose to do so. How much was this choice based on personal preferences or convictions, and how much of it was shaped by your instructor/peers and the content of the classroom?” The survey concluded with 6 basic demographic questions (age, gender, religious denomination, etc.) as well as space to provide contact information and indicate interest in participating in future, one-on-one interviews.

Hypotheses

Using a similar phenomenographic approach to study the college experience as a whole, Alyssa Bryant and Helen Astin collected survey data from 3,000 students at 46 different institutions for their 2008 study, “The Correlates of Spiritual Struggle During the College Years.” Bryant and Astin researched the physical and psychological effects of such events as “losing or questioning one’s faith, religious conversion, and questioning spiritual values” (1). At the outset of the study, the researchers hypothesized that spiritually “engaged” students (i.e. those who regularly attended religious services, read sacred texts, and/or attended private religious colleges) would be less likely to experience spiritual struggles because of the support systems and security already built into their lives. Likewise, Bryant and Astin anticipated that situations “involving personal vulnerability and high levels of exposure to diverse ideologies and ways of life” would create more spiritual struggle in the lives of students. Because of this, the scholars predicted that religious students enrolled in public institutions and majoring in

“disciplines that cast a critical perspective on religious frameworks” would experience the highest levels of spiritual struggle (10).

Bryant and Astin reported that their first hypothesis was proved false by survey results, as students who attended religious schools admitted to struggling more than students who espoused similar religious beliefs but attended public schools. Likewise, it was reported that students who regularly encountered ideologies that conflicted with their own believed that the struggle “played a significant role as one of the strongest positive correlates of [their] growth in tolerance” (17). Although struggle was clearly experienced, survey results indicated that the diversity encountered at public schools did not necessarily result in weaker religious belief in the long run. Bryant and Astin’s survey results suggested that the faith-related challenges faced by students at public institutions eventually led to the development of attitudes and epistemologies deemed “desirable,” not only by instructors and scholarly figures but also by religious students looking favorably back on their college experience.

With this larger study and set of results in mind, it was difficult to hypothesize where Montana Bible College student survey results might fall. Given their dual enrollment at a public university and an evangelical college, the students seemed as likely to experience spiritual struggle as they were to develop the tolerant attitudes associated with Davida Charney’s evaluativist epistemology. I anticipated that surveys would reveal a blend of these two outcomes, and that some MBC student might even show evidence of “spiritual development” as defined by Dr. James Fowler in his work on the various “stages of faith,” (a map-like proposal and description of six religious phases experienced

over the course of a lifetime). Fowler's stages are closely related to the work of Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg, with his model outlining the potential thoughts and attitudes that might be expressed by individuals as they encounter religious diversity throughout their lives. Keeping in mind that his model, like any other, is still only one illustration of the complex realities existing beyond the reach of theory and abstraction, I found Fowler's observations playing a large role in shaping my own predictions of student survey results.

One stage of spiritual development described in Fowler's study is that of "Mythic-Literal Faith," which is characterized by individuals claiming for themselves the beliefs, habits, and stories that symbolize belonging to a specific community. This may also be viewed as the stage where an individual develops fluency in their Primary Discourse. Beliefs adopted from parents or authority figures are appropriated with literal interpretations, and stories become the major way in which experiences are given unity or value. Those with Mythic-Literal faith do not have the capacity to step back from the flow of learned stories to create or reflect on their conceptual meanings. In this stage, meaning is both carried by and "trapped" in the narrative that has been given to them. In order to transition to another stage of spirituality, Fowler observes that the individual must experience "implicit clash or contradictions in stories that leads to reflection on meanings...[where] literalism breaks down and often leads to disillusionment with previous teachers and teachings. Conflicts between authoritative stories (Genesis on creation versus evolutionary theory, for example) must be faced" (149). Before collecting survey results from MBC's students, I predicted that some individuals might

show evidence of being “trapped” in the religious narrative given to them by family members or churches, and that students who attempted to write or talk about religion from within this stage might then experience clashes with their instructors or peers at MSU.

Another one of Fowler’s stages, which he calls “Synthetic-Conventional Faith,” is defined by an individual's experience of the world as it begins to extend beyond those who are fluent in their same Primary Discourse. It is not only the family but other spheres of influence that begin to demand attention and response, (school, peers, media, other religious communities, etc.) Faith is looked to for ways of understanding the diversity of these new involvements, and it must also “synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook” (173). One of the most common drives within Synthetic-Conventional Faith and into all preceding stages is the experience of “leaving home”—emotionally, physically, or both. The individual becomes interested in incorporating the past with a new, anticipated future (although they may not yet know how to do so).

Factors contributing to Synthetic-Conventional Faith also include more serious clashes between valued authority figures or systems, and “encounters with new perspectives that lead to critical reflection on one's own beliefs and values have formed and changed, and on how ‘relative’ they are to one's particular group or background” (172). In light of the opposition that I assumed the evangelical MBC students might encounter at MSU (particularly those who attempted to carry out the “Great Commission” during their time away from Bible College), I hypothesized that some of

them would report experiences of feeling “torn” between past beliefs, present influences, and future academic trajectories. I also predicted that the survey results would reveal the struggles of students attempting to maintain absolute beliefs, as well as the confusion of those genuinely trying to engage in dialogue with new influences speaking to them from the opposite end of the epistemic spectrum. In my opinion, some MBC students who enrolled in writing at MSU might feel as though they had “left home” a second time.

Limitations

During the 2010-2011 school year, only 120 students were enrolled at Montana Bible College, and all first-year students were ineligible for surveying (since MBC students are only allowed to fulfill general education requirements after their first year of study). What this meant was that this study’s pool of potential survey respondents was extremely small at the outset, and smaller still as many students chose not to complete the survey. The timing of its distribution was also less than ideal, given the number of students who were away from campus or unavailable over summer break.

It also seems important to note that MBC students usually complete their composition requirements during different school years and semesters, with various MSU instructors and in accordance with diverse syllabi and expectations. Because of this, it is unlikely that two MBC students attended the same class together or encountered the same instructor/set of expectations, making the context for each student’s survey response unique to their individual experience (and therefore difficult to verify). While this may be seen as a complicating factor in terms of variable control, any first-person reports and

thoughts provided by MBC's evangelical students still seem to contribute much-needed detail to the overall study of faith-learning integration in composition.

Subsequent studies of evangelical Christian student experiences need to be conducted on larger scales in order to collect more accurate data and increase the likelihood of finding possible interviewees. Without students who were willing or available to be interviewed, my study lacked the more personal element that I was hoping to attain. In order to truly understand student experiences, more one-on-one conversations are imperative. Scholars whose aim is to understand religious students' writing and learning processes—and instructors who desire to teach their religious students how to critically examine their own religious identities—must spend more time and effort unpacking the complex nature of students' perspectives and struggles in the composition classroom.

In this chapter, I have offered rationale for preferring the methods of phenomenographic study over the more traditional forms of faith-learning integration scholarship. My chosen population has been described, my survey design outlined, and my initial hypotheses explained. In chapter 3, I report and analyze the survey results and first-person narratives contributed by evangelical students who attempted (or declined) faith-learning integration in Montana State University writing classes. Data trends are identified, patterns are explored further, and (in chapter 4) possible implications for the field of composition studies are suggested.

SURVEY FINDINGS

As mentioned in chapter two, the ultimate goal of phenomenographic research is to provide a collective analysis of individual experiences. This method of analysis is far from comprehensive, but it is valuable for the way it allows scholars to identify and respond to experiential trends within a given population. The startling lack of one-on-one dialogue with religious students in the field of composition studies led me to attempt my own phenomenographic synthesis of first-person narratives using surveys and email correspondence with evangelical Christians. In this chapter, I describe the patterns that seemed to emerge from this approach to data collection. It is my hope that more scholars will recognize the significance of experience-based research and use it to further develop faith-learning integration pedagogy, particularly as they consider how to teach composition theory to religious students who enter college with absolutist epistemologies.

Survey Demographics

My survey link was sent to approximately 75 Montana Bible College students/recent alumni and 12 respondents participated, giving the survey a 16% completion rate. 5 respondents were female and 7 were male. The most significant piece of demographic information provided by students was religious affiliation: of the 12 respondents, three used the general term “Christian” to describe their tradition-of-choice. Another three described themselves as Baptist, and one reported “Non-denominational (raised Baptist).” The remaining five did not claim specific denominations. Instead, they

used a set of phrases and descriptions to identify their religious affiliation: “Christ-follower,” “Born Again,” “Redeemed by Christ,” “Slave to Christ,” and “I love and serve Jesus Christ!” This language—which is commonly used in evangelical communities—confirmed my original prediction that individuals who enrolled at MBC would likely be members of sectarian churches and, as a result, could be prone to absolutist mindsets.

Sources of Comfort and Discomfort

The survey data revealed that 7 of the 12 respondents chose to write about religious topics during their time at Montana State, with the other 5 choosing not to write about religious topics. Of the 7 who wrote about religion, 3 indicated that they felt “somewhat” uncomfortable doing so, and 2 reported a “strong” feeling of discomfort. Two more students answered oppositely by reporting “strong” feelings of comfort in writing about and discussing religious topics at MSU. These mixed results prompted me to look more closely at the students’ particular narratives in order to understand what may have caused some individuals to experience comfort and others to experience discomfort in the process of faith-learning integration. Using the analysis tools supplied by Survey Monkey’s online software, I cross-tabulated these 7 respondents’ personal narratives with their reported levels of comfort in the classroom and found several interesting themes emerge among the students who attempted to write about religion at MSU.

I found that the 5 students who reported the highest levels of discomfort in discussing or writing about religious issues at MSU also revealed the most noticeable expressions of guilt and “ineffectiveness” in their narratives. A female students used her

short-answer space to explain that “One of the reasons why we take our gen eds outside MBC is so we can learn how to reach a world that doesn't yet know Jesus.” She describe her “burning desire to reach those who haven't accepted Christ” but continued on to admit that, “so many days during this semester I walked into my writing classroom feeling nervous and unsure of what to say/how to say it... I knew that feeling awkward shouldn't stop me from sharing, but it did sometimes. My convictions...told me to speak out and write more about religious topics when I had the option, but [when I didn't] it was based on my own fear and uncomfot [sic], which I am sorry to think about now.”

A male student in this crosstab category stated that “Even after mentally and emotionally preparing for my time at MSU I still felt uncomfortable and unprepared for what I would find there...I didn't really know how to be ‘salt and light’ in practical ways.” Despite his reported attempts at writing about a religious topic, this student revealed a feeling of dissatisfaction with his ineffectiveness at reaching his classmates and instructor; he believed that he “needed more experience and more time” if he was going to learn to share the Gospel better. Similarly, another student expressed the hope that, after his “failed” attempt a being effective for Christ at MSU, he would “learn how to share [his] beliefs more boldly in the future.” A final student insisted that he should “always ready to ' give an account for the hope I had.' (1 Peter) The fallen world does not always accept the testamony [sic] of believers, but it is our duty and honor to share the gospel with those who are perishing.” Despite this strong admission of spiritual duty, the student still reported “strong” feelings of emotional discomfort when actually attempting to write about his faith at MSU.

What this data seems to show is that, among the 7 students who attempted to write about religious topics, the individuals whose definitions of faith-learning integration included an emphasis on proselytizing and directly referencing their convictions in the classroom were the ones who also reported disappointment in themselves when they did not succeed. By marked contrast, the two students who wrote about religion and reported the highest levels of comfort in doing so had very different narratives and definitions of faith-learning integration. These two students expressed more holistic (albeit less visible) examples of faith-learning integration; to them, proselytizing was not always necessary and aggressive expressions of the Gospel message were not always the ultimate goal. One of the students put it this way:

As a Christian, the glory of God should be the overarching theme in my life that dictates all else. As a result, I felt it natural to let my faith be present in the classroom. I feel I do not necessarily need to speak of the Bible or of Christ, to make my faith present. I need to let it influence my opinions, my morals, my interactions with others, etc. When approaching assignments, I often tried to think of them from a Biblical perspective. Many times, my papers not once mentioned my faith, but were still personally very spiritually challenging, revealing, and inspiring because of my own religious mindset when writing it.

The second student offered a similar description of her own faith-learning integration style:

I've always loved what Francis of Assisi says about sharing the Word: "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." I felt like I was able to be a Christ Follower at MSU and in my writing class without writing or talking specifically about my faith in class... I didn't always write my assignments specifically on religion, but they were all written from a "Christian perspective" by default, since I am a Christian in every facet. It's taken me a long time to get to the point where I could be comfortable/confident with quietly living my faith instead of trying to shout about it so that others (and even myself, sometimes) would be convinced it was true.

This data related back to my initial research question of whether or not the tenants of evangelical Christianity (as well as the mission statement and courses at MBC) might cause some students to view all assignments and tasks through the lens of the “Great Commission” when they arrived at MSU. It was indeed the case that the students who adopted a set of mission-minded expectations felt obligated to proselytize in writing assignments or conversations and, as a result, expressed discomfort with the process when they did not accomplish this goal at MSU. On the opposite end of the faith-learning integration spectrum, students who did not measure their spiritual success or base their evangelical identities on how prolifically they shared the Gospel reported more comfortable experiences with writing and talking about religious topics at MSU.

Instructor Encouragement and Perceived Hostility

Out of the 12 total respondents, 5 students reported that they did not choose to write about religion at MSU, and the most common reason cited for not doing so was also a lack of comfort in the classroom. Instead of emerging from feelings of guilt or disappointment, however, this discomfort seemed to be linked more closely with whether or not the students perceived religious hostility among classmates and instructors. To explore this, I compared the survey responses of students who chose to write about religious topics with the responses of those who did not. Of the 7 students who chose to write about religious topics at MSU, over half reported that they “somewhat agreed” with the statement: “My instructor supported and encouraged an exploration of religious topics in their course.” The remaining 3 students “somewhat disagreed” with the statement.

When the statement was changed to “My peers expressed interest in religious perspectives and gave me positive or helpful feedback during discussions/workshops,” the responses were completely spread out among students who chose to write about religious topics: one “strongly agreed,” three “somewhat agreed,” two “somewhat disagreed,” and one “strongly disagreed.”

Student responses to the same two statements were more negative among those who chose not to write about religious topics at MSU, as 4 respondents “somewhat disagreed” and one “strongly disagreeing” with the statement, “My instructor supported and encouraged an exploration of religious topics in their course.” In the same way, 4 respondents out of 5 “strongly disagreed” with the statement, “My peers expressed interest in religious perspectives and gave me positive or helpful feedback during discussions/workshops.” The final respondent “somewhat disagreed” with it. In summary, all 5 students who reported that they chose not to write about religious topics at MSU also reported that they experienced little to no encouragement or support from instructors/peers when it came to exploring issues of religion in writing.

As mentioned above, the leading reported cause for choosing to avoid religion in written assignments was a lack of comfort in the classroom, as 4 of the 5 respondents felt “somewhat” uncomfortable and one felt “strong” discomfort. One male student admitted that he considered writing about a religious topic but, in the end, decided against it because he felt “outnumbered, like no one else believed what I did. The few times religion came up it seemed like people were closed to it, especially Christianity and

absolute truths.” A female student who also opted out of choosing a religious topic put it this way:

Christians can get a bad rap in public places because they come on too strong and can be very unloving. It's not very fair, overall, because others are allowed to share their opinions and beliefs openly about other topics without being pegged as fanatics. As soon as Christ comes up, the game changes and people make assumptions about you. (I can't say whether or not my writing teacher and classmates would have assumed anything since religion rarely came up, but its just been my past experience.)

This student's narrative is particularly interesting, as it seems to reveal the influence of perception on the actions and stances of evangelical students. Despite the fact that this student could not report specific instances of discrimination or negativity in her Writing 101 course, the preconceived (and rather stereotypical) notion of Christianity being under attack seemed to influence her decision not to express her own faith in the classroom. Another student who chose not to write about religion during his time at MSU makes a similar assumption about his writing instructor and classmates, who “maybe” and “probably” would not have supported his interests:

I brought up [religious] issues in discussion in class, but I never really stood up and said WHY I was making a certain point or anything. I never did the whole, "I'm a Christian, so I believe this or that..." I wanted to a few times, but decided it was probably a bad idea. My instructor probably would have been ok with that— my classmates seemed pretty against religion. Or maybe they just didn't care. I don't know.

Another male student claimed that, “A few times we had the option to write a paper on any subject, but I did not choose religion because I knew that the teacher would probably not take well to faith-based arguments in persuasive essays.” The fifth and final male student who chose not to write about a religious topic simply stated that it was because “other students rarely made statements about their religions. They didn't like it

when a person was had [sic] conviction and was convinced he was right.” Without knowing for sure if their peers or instructors were truly antagonistic; without providing any experiential evidence to back up the claims that faith was not a welcome topic of discussion in their secular writing classrooms; without exploring or describing which particular “convictions” were disliked by others and why, these 5 students automatically assumed that it would be a “bad idea” to identify themselves with religious topics or Christian perspectives.

As mentioned in chapter 1, evangelical Christians who come to believe that their belief system is constantly under the attack of secular society often experience feelings of paranoia, regardless of whether or not their faith is actually being threatened. As it stands, we cannot ascertain whether or not these student narratives are accurate depictions of classmate or instructor behavior at MSU; at the very least, the data may simply indicate an inverse relationship between evangelical students’ perceptions of secular hostility toward religion and their willingness to discuss or write about it in the classroom. Within this small population, the data seemed to reveal that the students who did not experience or perceive their instructors and peers taking an interest or encouraging faith-related exploration were more likely to opt out of writing and talking about their religious identities (regardless of whether or not any real hostility actually existed in the classroom).

Evangelical Students as “Outsiders”

The most clear and consistent survey result came in response to the question that allowed students to “Choose the statement or statements that best describe your experience as a student in your writing course at Montana State.” All 12 students—100% of the respondents who complete the survey—indicated that they “sometimes felt like an outsider” in their writing courses at MSU. Regardless of whether or not they chose to write about religion, felt comfortable doing so, or received encouragement to explore religious topics, every student experienced some form of alienation at MSU. Again, we cannot know for certain if the students’ peers/instructors actually said or did anything that directly excluded these evangelical students (on the basis of their faith) from dialogue or assignments; all we can know is that every student perceived that there was something fundamentally different about them compared to the community around them. This may have been due to their status as visitors, their conditioned response to avoid being “ensnared by worldly values and philosophies,” clashes of personality, confusion about course content or composition theory, and a host of other experiential factors that numbers alone cannot explain. Again, more descriptions of individual experiences and one-on-one interviews would be valuable in answering these questions.

Email Correspondence: Jake

Of the 12 students who responded to my survey, only 2 indicated an interest in being interviewed by providing contact information; the rest of the surveys were submitted anonymously, which raised the questions of whether or not students were uneasy about being connected with their particular survey answers. Upon being

contacted, only one of the two students who provided personal information was still comfortable with the idea of being interviewed. The student who declined meeting in person to discuss her experiences did agree to respond in writing via email, if more information was needed. The other student, although willing to be interviewed, was unavailable to meet one-on-one due to military service commitments. Because of these schedule and personal conflicts, in-depth follow-up emails were collected from both students in lieu of interviews, with the question prompt remaining open-ended and allowing students to write freely about their thoughts and feelings on the issue of faith-learning integration (both in their personal past and in their time at MSU).

To begin, it seems important to note that the two students who agreed to correspond in writing also: (1) Chose to write about religious topics at MSU, and (2) Reported the highest level of comfort with “discussing religious topics in conversations or assignments for my writing course at MSU.” These were the two individuals with faith-learning integration practices that did not focus on whether or not they were able to proselytize or preach the Gospel to their classmates and instructor; like every other respondent, however, these students still reported that they “sometimes felt like an outsider” during their time at MSU. In a reflection about his upbringing, second-year student Jake wrote that, “Growing up, the Bible was understood to contain all the answers to any question you might possibly have. All YOU had to do was know how to find those answers.” He continued on to describe his experiences as a young adult:

I ran into trouble when I started school at MBC and began learning new things about the Biblical text itself. Biblical hermeneutics, the history behind its compilation, the textual issues my friends and family seemed to ignore, the things my hometown pastor had hammered into us from day

one—these different perspectives began to ignite and all I wanted to do was take cover as they all exploded in my face. There’s some things they just don’t prepare you for in Sunday school, you know? In some cases, what they prepare you for is shutting your eyes, covering your ears, and singing “Jesus Loves Me” over all the noise.

According to his email narrative, Jake did his own reading outside classes at MBC and often found himself studying and considering positions or scholars that his classmates and instructors tried to avoid. This sometimes caused him to experience an internal “grappling” between his childhood traditions, his course material, and the resources he was studying independently. When asked whether or not anyone ever saw this “grappling” taking place in him, Jake responded:

My family knew, which was really hard. I tell my mom everything and when I would be wrestling with something she would assure me that I would “grow out” of my questions and turn back to a child-like faith. Personally, I think it’s “childish” not child-like, to not ask hard questions of our beliefs.

Unfortunately, Jake did not always feel that he had a support system that would allow him to think through these varying viewpoints and angles from which he could consider his evangelical beliefs. When asked to compare his experience in a secular composition course to what he saw or heard about the experiences of fellow MBC classmates who “shut their eyes” to avoid faith-related confrontation, he wrote:

Some days [at MSU] I wanted to join them and just ignore the challenges that ate at me, but something forced me to keep my eyes open. I tried to really look and truly listen to others. I think what helped was seeing those few people (sometimes classmates, but usually adults and teachers) who I considered to be on fire for Christ who ALSO weren’t afraid of intellectual issues or challenges to Christianity.

Not only did Jake report that he felt like an outsider at MSU, his email narrative also seems to reveal feelings of alienation from his own faith community due to his

broader perspective of faith-learning integration. To him, intellectual questions and exploration were not necessarily threatening, nor were they counterproductive to his spiritual growth; instead, they were necessary—albeit challenging and confusing—steps toward learning more about his Christian identity in the context of academics.

Email Correspondence: Beth

The second student who engaged in email correspondence after being surveyed expressed a similar desire to “step out of my comfort zone and look around” during her college years. Like Jake, Beth reported that certain family members and friends worried when she got in “too deep” with her thoughts about faith. She described the experience of applying to colleges as a high school student as uncomfortable, as a few of the schools she was considering had religious studies departments but no Evangelical affiliation:

Some of my parent’s friends from church warned them that, if I went [to those colleges], all the atheistic professors would try to turn me into a liberal and I’d probably come back either not believing in God or as some sort of Unitarian, (which was the equivalent [of] a dirty word around the sanctuary.)

Beth eventually chose MBC and, like Jake, spent a good amount of time studying independently or taking distance education courses (which MBC gave her permission to audit). She explained that these audited courses were vastly different from the courses she took at MBC, and that “Taking writing at MSU was similar to [auditing] my Bible as Literature course - it required me to really figure out how to think and treat certain topics that had always been second nature to me...I was learning so much but still left in the dark so much of the time too. It was such overload- whose Jesus to believe in? Which

theology?” It was not uncommon for Beth to feel that her family and friends worried about her outside studies, as Jake’s did. “A lot of it I had to do by myself,” she explained, as her peers stuck to more closed-off approaches to faith-learning integration outside the walls of MBC:

Friends at MBC saw me floundering around and worried that I was having a ‘crisis of faith’, and maybe that’s what it was but to me, I never really lost faith or doubted the gospel message. I just knew that my faith was going to look different once I sifted thru. It DOES look different and not everyone likes or agrees with the way I like to investigate into every topic and think about things- but I can’t imagine NOT doing it like that.

Beth’s feelings about this experience sound uncannily similar to Jake’s when she writes about how she “appreciated” her college years “as times of fleshing out what kind of Christian scholar God had made me to be. I do think He allows some of us to study for His glory, since study can be a form of worship as long as learning doesn’t become our God.” As mentioned by Beth and Jake, and as evidenced by my survey responses, these types of thought processes and reactions were not typical among MBC students. Additionally—and most importantly to my thesis research—these are reactions that may not have been visibly observable by MSU instructors in a classroom, nor would they have necessarily emerged in Beth and Jake’s writing assignments. Both students reported that they kept verbal proselytizing to a minimum in the classroom, even though they both considered Gospel expressions to be an important aspect of their faith, and even when they were experiencing periods of epistemic struggle.

The Need for Phenomenography

What the MBC students' contrasting (yet connected) experiences seem to show is that studying the individual experiences of evangelicals is vital to the task of understanding just how varied and complex the process of faith-learning integration can be. Composition scholars should not be satisfied with creating one-dimensional pictures of what absolutist-minded students are capable thinking or writing, particularly when the epistemic struggles (as well as developments) occurring beneath the surface cannot always be ascertained by collecting assignment samples or observing outward behavior (as compositionists habitually do). This seems to legitimize the need for phenomenographic research, which may serve as a better tool for understanding the intricacy of evangelical faith-learning integration in secular classrooms. In order to understand these students, we must know more about their experiences; in order to understand evangelical experiences, we must dialogue directly with evangelicals. In my final chapter, I discuss the potential implications of these surveys/conversations for faith-learning integration in secular institutions, how composition pedagogy could develop as a result, and what sort of future there might be for phenomenographic studies on this topic.

SURVEY IMPLICATIONS

By going beyond the issues that Laura May identifies as the most common “problems” studied in faith-learning integration research (lack of discourse awareness; lack of complex thinking; ideological conflicts between students, instructors, and by considering the possibility of new research techniques, we may find that evangelical students are impacted by secular classroom experiences in ways left unseen by traditional composition studies.

As displayed in chapter 3, some Montana Bible College students who attempted to integrate faith and learning at Montana State experienced feelings of regret if they did not attempt to faithfully engage their instructors or peers in Gospel-specific conversations; some feared coming on too strong and turning others off to religious points of view; some attempted to forge bridges between conflicting concepts and, as a result, risked alienation on both sides. These survey results suggest that, no matter how similar, traditional, or predictable a student’s evangelical beliefs may seem at first glance, the beliefs can manifest themselves in drastically different ways when carried outside a faith community and used as a starting point for engaging in (or avoiding) critical inquiry. It would be impossible to throw blanket statements and generalized descriptions over a group whose purposes, perceptions, and experiences of the world around them diverge in so many directions. In this chapter, I explore the implications of some of these divergences as they relate to composition studies and pedagogy aimed at educating evangelical students in writing courses.

Expectations and Surprises

I anticipated that survey narratives would reveal some students living and learning within the framework of James Fowler's Mythic-Literal Faith, and others attempting to branch into what Fowler calls Synthetic-Conventional Faith. I assumed that students who showed defining characteristics of Mythic-Literal Faith in their short answers and survey results would also show evidence of feeling more secure and anchored in their primary discourses, while those who transitioned closer to Synthetic-Conventional might seem (from an onlooker's or researcher's perspective) more capable of acquiring fluency in the new discourses they encountered at MSU. Again, much like Davida Charney's epistemic models and definitions, none of Fowler's stages of faith should be considered more or less "advanced" than the others, and there is always overlap between the stages. It might be said, however, the attitudes adopted within certain stages of faith (Synthetic-Conventional, in this instance) are more conducive to the writing done in secular classrooms than the kind required in most Bible College courses. It was interesting to see this hypothesis so clearly validated by student surveys and emails, but I still found myself somewhat disappointed when the results fell so heavily to the side of Mythic-Literal Faith. Consequentially, this disappointment alerted me to certain patterns in my own experiences and expectations of faith-learning integration in secular classrooms.

100% of survey respondents "felt like outsiders" during their time at MSU and, according to my data, the source of this perceived alienation varied depending on the student. What both Jake and Beth had in common, for instance, was the ability to view faith-learning integration as something that did not always hinge on whether or not their

peers and instructors were converted to Christianity. For them, faith-learning integration was a more personal, internal process of considering various ideas and approaches to faith. Interestingly, however, the grappling described by Beth and Jake occurred as they considered ideas within their own tradition, not always with the traditions or beliefs of others. They reported feeling more alienated from evangelical circles than from secular circles as they ventured further into the realm of critical inquiry (especially as it related to the study and critique of their own tradition). As these two students spent more time independently studying Christianity—sometimes outside the standard reading lists and interpretive frameworks laid out for them by authority figures at home or at MBC—and as they asked difficult questions of their own scriptures and traditions, they felt increased resistance from anxious friends and family members who worried that they might be straying off the traditional path of learning.

After reading Bryant and Astin's 2008 survey, I predicted that MBC students would experience these feelings of being "torn" between two worlds: their faith community on one hand, and secular academics on the other. In retrospect, it seems that this prediction was also based on my own desire to see it prove true in many of the students' lives. The hope was itself imbedded in a strong personal belief that struggling with faith-learning integration can actually have positive effects on the spiritual and academic lives of evangelical students. Because I have spent much of my adult life shifting back and forth between secular and religious realms, and because it has been many years since I first struggled to establish "dual citizenship" in my own academic and evangelical discourse communities, it is easy for me to forget that the process I underwent to reach my current

epistemology is far from universal. In other words, no matter how much they are prompted or encouraged to do so, not all evangelical Christians will step out of Mythic-Literal Faith in order to inquire, write, or dialogue more critically in secular settings. For many of my fellow evangelicals, this form of faith—as well as the epistemology that tends to accompany it—seems unnecessary and perhaps even a liability to them.

Despite my prediction that students would fall into both categories, I think that—deep down, and rather idealistically—what I truly wanted to see were more of the evangelical students I surveyed showing evidence of the struggles that students like Beth and Jake described (which is to say, the struggles that I experienced myself as I learned to navigate Christianity in light of critical inquiry). Especially after I began intentionally delving into the nature of my own spirituality and religious upbringing, I perceived myself to be less at odds with secular academics and more at odds with members of my own tradition. Like Beth and Jake describe in their narratives, this approach to faith-learning integration can lead to feelings of alienation from family and friends, but it can also lead to a deep satisfaction once an internal equilibrium and comfort level is reached between faith and inquiry.

Despite my own faith-learning integration preferences, I had to remind myself throughout this study not to view my own spiritual or academic development as indicative of the process that others evangelicals should or will experience (even when our starting points and subsequent journeys seem very similar). I was thankful for the very personal reminder that I must be aware of my own constructed ideals and preconceptions—however well-meaning they may be—in order to view each evangelical

student as uniquely situated in their own experience. I can only hope that other composition scholars will attempt to do the same when they study and interact with evangelical students in writing and in classrooms.

Possibilities for Future Study

I stated in chapter 2 that MBC students were as likely to maintain and defend their absolutist preconceptions as they were to adopt other epistemological habits that might allow them to more openly join in conversations with individuals outside their faith communities or denominations. To my (unchecked) delight, Jake and Beth proved to be examples of this latter approach, as they seemed to maintain strong evangelical convictions without militantly separating themselves from new possibilities revealed by their own critical inquiry. Obviously, this style of faith-learning integration is my own personal preference, as well as the preference of most (if not all) secular composition instructors. It should be remembered, however, that this can feel like a taxing and “unorthodox” approach for the evangelical students who do attempt it.

Both Beth and Jake reported less discomfort with non-Christian traditions than some of the other 10 survey respondents, who did not like the religious indifference or variety of their peers at MSU and who wrote favorably about the Gospel-centered “safety” that their home institution provided from the pressures of the outside world. Instead of constantly focusing on evangelical “persecution” as it is experienced by students who perceive themselves to be under attack by secular culture, compositionists might do well to explore the experiences of evangelical students whose own faith communities pressure

them to proselytize (not inquire) during their time in secular arenas. This is a less common approach but, as evidenced by Jake and Beth, it seems a valuable feature to add to our portrait and understanding of evangelical college students.

When students attempt critical inquiry or faith-learning integration methods that are different from the ones they learn in places like Montana Bible College, it can cause them to struggle with aspects of identity: who they are, what they believe, how they acquired said beliefs, and which beliefs they value enough to maintain in the future. As mentioned in Bryant and Astin's study, there is data to suggest that this form of struggle or strain can actually come to be viewed by the students themselves as beneficial and necessary steps in spiritual maturation (17). Exploring the ability of evangelical students like Beth and Jake to remain in "flux" between old and new—between genuine faith and critical inquiry—is an experience that, while less common (and certainly less documented), might shed new light on how evangelical students are able to write, learn, and interact in secular arenas. At this point, little is mentioned in composition studies about evangelical student experience in the writing classrooms; even less is mentioned about students like Beth and Jake, whose experiences differed greatly from their peers but whose potential to flourish in both the sacred and secular realm seems encouragingly high.

Because of the small population size and students' unwillingness to engage in one-on-one conversations after the survey, my thesis data can only scratch the surface of the questions I posed at the outset of the methods section. What my data does confirm, however, is the complexity of evangelical student experiences and the need to focus more acutely on understanding the variety of these students' educational needs. Pedagogical

methods should not be based solely on the “Bible-beating” fundamentalist portrait most commonly found in student-centered studies, and student experiences should not be left out of the research equation. Within student narratives and experiential data, a much richer illustration of evangelicalism may be found and utilized by composition instructors.

Closing Statements

As I sift through the surveys and first-person reports collected from this small population of Montana Bible College students, I see more and more evidence of what Stanley Fish claims is “a growing awareness of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of keeping the old boundaries in place of quarantining the religious impulse in the safe houses of the church” (233). This awareness bodes well for students who do not wish to compartmentalize such an important aspect of their identity when they enter college, and who recognize the value of thoughtful dialogue with themselves and others. It is also promising for writing instructors looking to gain a better understanding of spiritually-conscious students and their pedagogical needs, which are highly diverse. I am amazed by this diversity, on one hand, but I am also surprised by the amount of connectedness on the other. Many of the subtle, experiential threads uncovered by my survey respondents would have been nearly impossible to see if I had simply asked MSU instructors for descriptions of these students’ classroom behaviors, or if I had glanced at samples of their graded writing. Within many evangelical students, there existed a genuine desire to be devoted Christians in their scholarly environment, or to be devoted scholars in their

Christian environment, or perhaps both. Using phenomenographic methods allowed me to treat this group of students as distinct individuals with unique purposes and myriad definitions of “devotion” itself.

Paul Ricoeur believed that “the power of letting oneself be grasped by new possibilities precedes the power of deciding and choosing...Do we not too often think that a decision is demanded of us when perhaps what is first required is to let a field of previously unconsidered possibilities appear to us?” (qtd. in White 318). Welcoming the appearance of new possibilities can be extremely uncomfortable for students and educators alike, particularly when personal commitments and epistemic habits are concerned. For some students, the thought of questioning or critiquing their preconceptions may seem unfaithful and dangerous. For some instructors, the idea of allowing or facilitating any kind of faith-learning integration in their writing classrooms may still seem foreign and unappealing. For scholars interested in understanding how evangelical students learn in secular writing classrooms, phenomenography might seem unrealistic or unhelpful compared to more traditional forms of composition research already in use.

Just as instructors often encourage their students to do, composition scholars must be sure to check the lenses through which they view their classrooms. It is my belief that writing instructors must always be on the lookout for new ways to recognize and educate students who may be more susceptible to struggling with the expectations set by their academic discourse community. The experience of accepting or rejecting these expectations can be personally formative for the students, as well as pedagogically

difficult for their teachers, which is precisely why the experience is so important to understand better. Becoming too comfortable with any one definition or method of researching evangelical Christians seems to separate composition scholars from the rich variety of experiences found within the tradition. This, as a result, cuts instructors off from the possibility of discovering the needs of individual students who are learning to write from faith-informed perspectives. As I have attempt to show in this thesis, phenomenography is one potential way for writing scholars to plumb the depths of faith-learning integration possibilities and return with fresh thoughts on how to approach this very unique and increasingly prevalent group of college students.

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APPENDIX A

FAITH-LEARNING INTEGRATION SURVEY

**Subject Consent for Participation In Human Research
at Montana State University**

My name is Aimee Slepicka, and I am a graduate student in the English Department at Montana State University. I am conducting a survey as part of my Master's thesis research. Results from this study have the potential to add to the field of knowledge in Composition, Faith-Learning Integration, and Pedagogy. Risks to individuals responding to this survey are no more than would be encountered in everyday life, or in any college classroom.

The survey involves answering questions about your experiences as an undergraduate student attending Montana Bible College and/or Montana State University. The survey contains 9 questions and takes about 10 minutes to complete.

Participation is voluntary, and you will be given the option to remain anonymous. You can choose to not answer any question that you do not want to answer, and you can stop at anytime.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Aimee Slepicka, Graduate Student at Montana State University, via e-mail at aimee.slepicka@msu.montana.edu

____ I have read the above and I agree to participate in this research. I understand that I may later refuse to participate, and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

In this survey, the term "religious topic" is broadly used to indicate writing assignments and discussions that focus on religion in general, individual perspectives on personal faith/spirituality, and the many traditions or denominations that might be represented in a writing class at MSU. "Religious topics" in assignments and discussions might also include students or instructors approaching social/academic issues from faith-informed angles.

You do not have to limit yourself to these, but some examples of written assignments or discussions about "religious topics" might be:

- * A comparison paper showing the differences and similarities between two world religions.
- * A persuasive paper arguing that the Muslim tradition of "jihad" must be better understood by western society and not simply defined as violent Muslim "holy war."
- * A conversation where a student uses religious beliefs or certain tenants of faith to explain a personal position, (ie: "I think abortion should be illegal because I believe that the Bible is true, and that God forbids murder in the Ten Commandments.")
- * A narrative piece of writing that describes a religious community or a personal experience within one, (ie: "My youth group's summer mission trip to Mexico.")

2. Please indicate how often you encountered the following in your writing course(s) at Montana State:

	Very Frequently	Occasionally	Once or Twice	Never	N/A
In-class discussions concerning religious topics (prompted by instructor or classmates).					
Out-of-class discussions concerning religious topics (prompted by classmates and/or course material).					
Written assignments requiring you to address a religious topic.					
Written assignments giving you the option to choose your own topic.					

3. If/when you were given the chance to pick your own paper topic, did you ever choose a religious topic in your writing course at MSU?

☐ **Yes**

☐ **No**

4. If you answered YES to Question #3, or if you were ever required to write about religion, please give a brief description of the assignment(s) and the religious topic(s) you chose:

5. If you answered YES to Question #3, or if you were ever required to choose a religious topic in your writing course at MSU, please indicate the truth of the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
I felt comfortable discussing religious topics in conversation or assignments for my writing course at MSU					
My instructor supported and encouraged an exploration of religious topics in their course.					
My peers expressed interest in religious perspectives and gave me positive or helpful feedback during discussions/workshops					
The religious topic papers I completed for my writing course at MSU were similar in style and content to the papers I typically turned in at Montana Bible College.					

6. If you did not choose a religious topic when given the option in your writing course at MSU, please indicate the truth of the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
Writing about religion would not have met the assignment requirements or the expectations of my instructor.					
I did not feel comfortable writing about religion at MSU.					
I was more interested in exploring non-religious topics for my writing assignments.					
I was interested in writing about religion, but I was discouraged from doing so by my instructor or peers and decided to switch topics					

7. Please choose the statement or statements that best describe your experience as a student in your writing course at Montana State:

- * I felt welcomed and accepted by my writing course instructor and peers.
- * I was challenged to think about religion or my own personal faith in new ways during or after my time in this writing class.
- * I sometimes felt like an outsider in my writing course.
- * I did not see many connections between my personal faith and the assignments/discussions that took place in my writing course at MSU.
- * The discussions/assignments I had in my writing course at MSU influenced the way I approached discussions/assignments at Montana Bible College.
- * If I could do it again, I would NOT choose to take a writing course at MSU to fulfill my general education requirements at Montana Bible College.

8. In writing courses at MSU, some students with religious backgrounds or faith commitments tend to vocalize their beliefs in conversation or in assignments, while others choose to keep them more private. Please comment on how you made your own religious beliefs more or less visible in the writing classroom, and why you chose to do so. How much was this choice based on personal preferences or convictions, and how much of it was shaped by your instructor/peers and the content of the classroom?

9. Basic Demographic Information

Gender :

Home City/State:

Religious Affiliation:

College Major:

GPA: