Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

FOLLOWING THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD: EXPLORING COMMUNAL MEAL AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE, A CRITICAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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FOLLOWING THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD: Exploring Communal Meal as a Spiritual Practice, a Critical Participatory Action Research Study

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Lauren Elizabeth Morton

This study examines how structured communal meals serve as a spiritual practice in higher education. Addressing concerns about spiritual fragmentation and relational isolation among college students, the research employed a qualitative case study with nine participants engaged in recurring, facilitated communal meals over one academic semester. Data collection involved participant observation and semi-structured interviews, analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that communal meals fostered (1) shared identity formation, (2) embodied belonging, and (3) collective meaning-making around purpose and vocation. The study advances practical theology by reinterpreting communal ritual as a formative, relational practice that nurtures spiritual depth outside traditional doctrinal structures.

Contents

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Chapter 1

Addressing the Problem of Education and Spirituality

"Can we get together to have dinner with each other like we did our freshman year?"
- Huey

Recently, there has been a regression in college students' ability to mature through societal practices of the past and the historical goals of adulthood, such as long-term employment, stable marital partnerships, financial independence, or vocational exploration unconnected to employment.

In 1983, *U.S. News and World Report* published its first ranking of colleges and universities. Each year, national, regional, and industry-specific publications compile rankings and quantitative statistics, such as affordability, return on investment, and time to graduation, that have driven higher education institutions to assess their effectiveness using a capitalist profit-margin model. This has caused higher education institutions to shift their priorities away from whole-person-centered education focused on making meaningful connections within a community or on preparing them for the communities they will join as they mature. Instead, these institutions have deemphasized the role of community in student life.

Students are navigating the academic rigor of an engineering degree while simultaneously undergoing their own human development within the human life cycle. Antonio Dias de Figueiredo[1] acknowledges that engineering is not about the application

[1] Antonio Dias de Figueiredo, "Toward an Epistemology of Engineering," paper presented at 2008 Workshop on Philosophy and Engineering, November 10, 2008.

of scientific and technical advancements. Engineering, as a discipline, should adopt an interdisciplinary epistemological approach to deepen understanding of why its work impacts the community and society at large. Research in engineering education has found that engineering students experience isolation and identity confusion, as well as personal and vocational confusion, in performance-driven academic environments that neglect spiritual self-understanding. This disconnection is linked to attrition and student persistence in engineering studies.[2,3] For engineering students, spiritual self-understanding is essential if they are to experience holistic development that integrates their professional and personal capabilities with societal responsibilities. Failure to develop the skills necessary to navigate the nuances of their profession in society can have unintended consequences.

Purpose and Thesis

The explicit purpose of this study is to critically respond to how higher education institutions deprioritize whole-person formation. The research presented in the following pages will engage academic theories central to theology, education, sociology, and psychology, impacting the formation of emerging adults studying engineering. Quoting William Shakespeare, "A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet." While it may not be explicitly called out or referenced by a different name, it is present. Within

[2] Elena Liquete et al., "From Student to Engineer: Identity Formation in Engineering Education.," *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 2025, 1–24, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2025.2537694.

[3] Mary Elizabeth Lockhart and Karen Rambo-Hernandez, "Investigating Engineering Identity Development and Stability amongst First-Year Engineering Students: A Person-Centered Approach," *European Journal of Engineering Education* 49, no. 3 (2024): 411–33, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2023.2262412.

each field of study, the foundational disciplines are interdependent and frame whole-person-centered education, namely, spiritual self-understanding. Their interdependence is often woven into theories and innovations that propel our world forward through societal and technological advancements. Responding to these shifts, this study examines the role of structured communal meals as a formative spiritual practice that cultivates identity, agency, and relational belonging among emerging adult engineering students.

In early life cycle and identity-development research, Erik Erikson categorizes this age group as young adulthood. Jeffrey Arnett expanded on Erikson's research in response to societal and technological shifts that have delayed maturation, a process essential for the later stages of a person's life cycle. Arnett termed this phase of human development as emerging adulthood, recognizing that they are no longer adolescents or younger adults. This period of development is distinct, marked by an intense focus on their values, limits, and capabilities.

In this study, I observe students aged 19 to 21 years who are at the beginning stage of emerging adulthood. As third-year college students from diverse communities and familial backgrounds, they are further shaped by the collegiate environment in social and intellectual ways. In recent years, research studies have found that a culture of high productivity among college students has led to increased anxiety and depression, exacerbated by a lack of a sense of belonging, which adds to emerging adults' feelings of disconnect and spiritual ambiguity. My goal is to highlight communal meals as a possible means of exploring spiritual self-understanding among college students in engineering, a STEM-focused major.

Guiding Question

How does participation in a structured communal meal shape students' spiritual self-understanding and relational identity?

Defining Key Terms

Numerous psychology and neuroscience studies explore the power of words and their meaning, which, when heard, can influence a person's thoughts and actions. In academic disciplines ranging from theology to the sciences, there are foundational words that underpin the development of theories and concepts, advancing their respective fields and improving society. Now, my interest in the intended use of words anchors the structure of my classrooms. The words we use to structure our communal environments carry power and inevitably prompt us to imagine what transformations and social reimagination might occur if we modeled our actions on the intended uses of those words.

Before delving further into this study, let us ground ourselves in words central to this research: *community, love, and hospitality.* The Oxford English Dictionary[4] is the primary source for defining words and their etymology throughout this research study.

[4] The Oxford English Dictionary was initially proposed in 1857 by a London organization named the Philological Society, dedicated to the study of scholarly language. The purpose of the dictionary was to create a compilation of the English language to provide context for how words are used in various sources throughout history. Since its origins, the Oxford English Dictionary is regarded as the primary authority for words in the English language and their usage.

Community[5]

Community refers to the research participants in the project.

Love[6]

Borrowed from the Greek word philos, meaning "warm affection" or "friendship", love is an intentional act that binds one another, thus allowing research participants to share vulnerably without judgment or prejudice.

Hospitality[7]

In this study, hospitality is curating a physical and emotional space where students' curiosities can be spoken aloud and heard without the expectation of advice. Creating hospitable conditions for power dynamics to shift, with the participants serving as the expert voice around the table.

Spiritual Self-Understanding

In this research, the term refers to a reflective process through which students articulate their identity, values, and meaning in the context of their existence, independent of any particular religious tradition.

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5 The word *community* originates from Middle English between 1100 and 1500 C.E., borrowed from the French word *communité*. In the context of this research, the second definition, "a shared or common quality or state," and the sub-definition, "social cohesion; mutual support and affinity such as is derived from living in a community," are the most applicable.

6 The word *love* is a noun rooted in Old English; through conversion, it also became a verb. Therefore, its status as a verb reminds us that love is an intentional action. Love has become a common vernacular descriptor, used as a passing phrase: "I love that for you" or "I love what you are wearing."

7 *Hospitality* is an adjective borrowing from French, meaning the act or practice of being hospitable, the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers, with liberality and goodwill.

Communal Meal

For this research study, communal meals are monthly shared dining experiences with participants. The meals were centered on food and dialogue with fellow participants.

Emerging Adults

In this research study, this term refers to study participants aged 19 to 21.

Group Spiritual Direction

A way of listening, seeking, and reflecting through storytelling with their peers, honoring various faith and non-faith beliefs.

Researcher Positionality

As a program administrator and researcher, I occupy both relational and evaluative roles, which require transparency and clear boundaries. During my tenure with emerging adults, there have been noticeable changes in the complexities of their matriculation beyond degree completion. One such change was the COVID-19 global pandemic, the effects of which we are still learning to this day. The symptoms of these effects are felt by all groups within society. In recent years, much has been publicly written about the epidemic of loneliness exacerbated by the pandemic.[8] Within the context of higher education, the symptoms were acutely magnified, as institutional structures had already shifted away from whole-person-centered education. The

[8] Office of the Surgeon General (OSG), *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*, Publications and Reports of the Surgeon General (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK595227/.

pandemic itself was a symptom of a larger problem that existed within the landscape of higher ed.

Harvard College was the first American university, founded in 1636, with the primary intention of training male clergy, doctors, and lawyers from elite White families. Since the first universities were founded, their curricular focus has expanded, and new higher education institutions have been established to include elite White women and African Americans. In 1836, Georgia Female College in Macon, Georgia, was the first college to grant degrees to White women of a particular social standing. The following year, in 1837, Cheyney University was established by northern abolitionists as the first Historically Black College and University. In 1944, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act ("the G.I. Bill") was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, increasing college attendance for mostly White men from working-class families. Over time, demographic shifts, global socio-economic changes, and broader institutional changes in the United States have expanded the diversity of experiences on average college campuses and created tensions as students transition into post-collegiate life. While these advances on college campuses may benefit the student body, there are factors that limit or prevent their full maturation.

The pandemic exposed a series of societal impacts that have shaped a generation's development and institutional structures that frequently engage with them. The students have a deep desire for connection outside the classroom and away from social media; however, they lack the tools or self-confidence to act on that desire. There are common themes that have emerged from conversations with students over the past four years – opportunities for connection beyond the classroom and to ask questions

about life in a safe, non-judgmental space. Expressing their lived experience of highly curated experiences throughout their childhood to get into elite schools and summer programs felt liberating. While they may manage to get into an elite college and a highly selective scholarship program, they may also struggle to identify their values and personal gifts beyond academics. As students at an elite institution, they are not identified as high achievers; they are the norm. Since these students are no longer identified as the "smart kid", they are invited to journey towards self-understanding for an identity that feels authentic. The current structure of higher education does not allow students to explore these aspects of themselves because of the academic and professional requirements they must meet from the start of their matriculation through to degree completion.

I argue that creating space for students to define and redefine their spiritual self-understanding through reflection on their lived experience is an essential skill for navigating both personal and professional worlds. Exploring formative experiences outside the traditional classroom and research lab can help them better understand themselves. What if students could share meals with their peers to fellowship and discuss their questions as they explore their deep curiosities? How do those curiosities connect to their community? Would they have space to feel human or explore what it means to be human?

Articles examining the characteristics of an engineer consistently cite curiosity, collaboration, adaptability, innovation, problem-solving, and communication as

essential.[9] The Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) developed a set of student outcomes for engineering students, aligned with the characteristics of an engineer.[10] Recent research on student belonging has highlighted their desire, which aligns with a trait identified as essential for a proficient engineer: collaboration.[11,12,13,14] Collaboration fosters inclusion from diverse voices to address the greatest challenges in our communities and world. Is collaboration taught in a traditional classroom?

These student outcomes align with Georgia Tech's institutional values, such as championing innovation and celebrating collaboration in engineering. These characteristics are not confined to the classroom or lab and ignoring their exploration and application in today's career-oriented higher education landscape would be myopic. Introducing the communal meal into emerging adults experience serves as a perfect example of this process in action.

[9] Ravishi De Zoysa et al., "Motivation and the Role of Empathy in Engineering Work," *Australasian Journal of Engineering Education* 29, no. 1 (2024): 55–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/22054952.2024.236410.

[10] Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), Criteria for Accrediting Engineering Programs, 2025 – 2026 (n.d.), accessed November 22, 2025, https://www.abet.org/accreditation/accreditation-criteria/criteria-for-accrediting-engineering-programs-2025-2026/.

[11] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Company, 2000).

[12] Geoffrey L. Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2022).

[13] Maithreyi Gopalan and Shannon T. Brady, "College Students' Sense of Belonging: A National Perspective," *Educational Researcher* 49, no. 2 (n.d.): 134–37.

[14] Peter Felten and Leo M. Lambert, *Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

Throughout history, a communal meal has created space for dialogue and community amongst people. This can be exemplified in several spiritual traditions, whether an actual meal or ritualized in Abrahamic religions, such as a seder meal during Passover, an iftar meal during Ramadan, or a weekly or monthly communion meal. For our brothers and sisters in Eastern traditions, these meals often occur during Diwali or the Chinese New Year. According to the 2025 World Happiness Report, communal meals have become less common as a White Western societal norm due to shifts in our personal and professional environments from a community-based to a productivity-based society. Most notably, their report finds that meal sharing is less common among young people and connects these findings to the US Surgeon General's report on the epidemic of loneliness.

One of our greatest challenges with the current population of future engineers is how to be available for restoration and self in a society that encourages overproduction, table gatherings as a means of social ladder climbing, and the overconsumption of information. Conversations shift, and curiosities are articulated with greater clarity when students sit down with their peers over a cup of coffee and a pastry or a meal. These experiences became ritualized and integrated into their ethos. Simple and communal.

Rationale and Theoretical Commitments

In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks writes, “The classroom is one of the most dynamic work settings precisely because we are given such a short amount of time to do so much.”[15] The classroom can be a place where community

[15] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, First (Routledge, 2003). 14

can take shape, guided by love, mutuality, reciprocity, and friendship. How might daily encounters in our classrooms affect our physical and emotional lives as students and teachers? What hooks and other thinkers across disciplines have determined is that much can be done to assist with the formation of students' spiritual self-understanding after their post-collegiate experience, as they return to or enter a community.

To examine this claim, I employed Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR), the methodological framework for this study, with nine third-year engineering students. This section is a high-level framing of the monthly communal meals with the research participants. The findings from the study are presented using mixed-methods analysis that adheres to the principles of CPAR, with qualitative analysis from narrative interviews with study participants and quantitative analysis conducted pre- and post-study using the Identity Style Inventory (ISI-5) tool developed by Dr. Michael D. Berzonsky. In Chapter 5, a fuller description of how CPAR was used in this study will be provided.

The study's design and conclusions will attract the attention of diverse constituents who work closely with emerging adults; therefore, it is critical that the concepts introduced in the study are accessible to all groups.

Ministry Site

The Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) is a public university within the University System of Georgia, founded in 1885 in Atlanta, Georgia. Georgia Tech comprises the College of Engineering, College of Computing, Scheller College of Business, Ivan College of Liberal Arts, College of Science, College of Design, and College of Lifetime Learning across three campuses (Atlanta, Georgia; Savannah,

Georgia; Metz, France) with approximately 50,000 undergraduate and graduate students. It is one of the preeminent research universities in the United States. The College of Engineering (COE) is the largest college within the institution, with eight schools focused on a variety of engineering disciplines, including mechanical, aerospace, civil, and biomedical engineering. This research will focus on engineering students at Georgia Tech in the Clark Scholars and COE Dean's Scholars Program at the main campus in downtown Atlanta.

Audience

The immediate audience for this research project is students in higher education or vocational schools, with an invitation to be empowered to seek and co-create third spaces on campuses. Such spaces will allow them to embrace spiritual self-understanding that fosters a culture of collaborative community building without shame, judgment, or competition. Our current process only addresses part of the brain that centers on achievement, productivity, and career advancement, while ignoring other aspects such as spiritual self-understanding, meaning-making, and personal growth.

The secondary audience addresses individuals, boards, faculty, and administrators within higher education and scholarship-granting organizations. This research study asks them to be held accountable for exploring integrative ways to implement whole-person-centered education in curriculum and programming that recognize human development processes that complement a student's career achievements. The social-psychological and educational research is clear that it is time to expand historical education and scholarship

administration models that honor the multifaceted approach to students' human development as conceived in the first universities.

Significance and Contribution

This project contributes to practical theology by demonstrating how structured communal practices function as sites of spiritual formation within secular educational institutions. This study centered on the voices and experiences of nine third-year engineering students at Georgia Tech, who gathered for a communal meal and asked questions designed by the study participants to connect with their peers. It was our hope to explore how, as program administrators and teachers, we might collaborate with students to reimagine ways to build a community based on mutuality and reciprocity. It is my hope that this project offers a way forward to creating spaces of spiritual self-understanding connected to their community, regardless of diverging perspectives. The findings from this research study could have far-reaching implications for the higher education landscape.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study has a few named limitations. As a scholar program administrator and researcher, it was critical to the study's integrity that I be fully transparent about my role as a student. When recruiting research participants, I stated to students, both in writing and verbally, that their participation was strictly voluntary and not contingent on receiving scholarship funds. At each meal, conversation was limited to personal updates about life since we last gathered and to updates on my writing.

The research study is designed with and for college students; however, this was a small sample of the larger scholarship program and the COE. Therefore, the findings of this study do not claim that this intervention is the only tool for reimagining ways to develop whole-person education models. The study design intentionally focused on students who had just completed their second year of college studies and had experienced two full years of integration in the Georgia Tech community. By limiting participation to third-year students, the perspectives of students from different matriculation years are not represented.

Ethical Commitments

All participants were asked to complete an informed consent document. Study participants provided an alias to be quoted pseudonymously in the narrative and survey data. The study design prioritized students' psychological safety, centering their expertise and communal support.

Organization of the Project

This project unfolds in seven chapters. Chapter One establishes the problem, thesis, positionality, and research context. Chapter Two surveys interdisciplinary literature informing identity development and community formation. Chapter Three provides biblical and theological grounding for communal practice. Chapter Four outlines the Critical Participatory Action Research methodology and ethical commitments. Chapter Five presents data analysis and theological interpretations from the findings. Chapter Six offers theological integration, ministry implications, and recommendations for replication.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

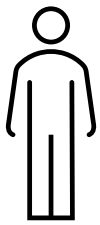
"What are my limits? I have to give myself room to grow."

- *Daniel H*

In St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the writer states, "There is one body, but many parts." (1 Cor. 12; NRSV) As the early Christian community was forming, strong views emerged about the way forward after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The role of the Apostles and followers of the early Christian movement was to reconcile differing vantage points and develop a cohesive voice. Paul presented a more reconciliatory approach in a series of letters, inviting each community to understand that no group or individual is more important than the other. The formation of the early Christian community will not succeed if divisions emerge that may lead to subordination and perceptions of inferiority among groups and individuals. This understanding of how to form a healthy and thriving community is grounded in Paul's thesis that all aspects of the community are important. The foundation of my research is the experiences of college students in a STEM-focused discipline; however, I believe this research is transferable to all aspects of human experience as they integrate into diverse communities. The changing dynamics of human development and post-secondary education conflict with social, political, and economic realities, complicating how communities progress. Each human experience is complex and shaped by several factors that influence how we present ourselves to the world.[1]

[1] Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory: Revised and Expanded* (Oxford University Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197617182.001.0001.

Considering how we might understand our own complexities and being open to receiving others, I invite us to begin with a mindfulness exercise called a body scan. A body scan is an exercise associated with yoga or meditation, sometimes offered at the beginning of an individual or group spiritual direction session, helping us become free from distraction and connected to our senses. The body scan exercise below is a way we might engage with the research presented in the following pages.



The image above is an outline of a human being, with outward descriptors such as eye, hair, or skin color omitted.

- As we begin, we are invited to get comfortable in a seated or standing position and take a few deep inhalations and exhalations.
- I invite you to look at the image and fill it in with inward descriptions of you.
- Beginning with the head, how did informal and formal education shape you? In what type of learning environment do you thrive? What was a transformational learning moment for you?
- I invite you to move to the torso where the heart is located. How do you define spirituality? Is your idea of spirituality rooted in a faith tradition? Have you formed through formal or informal spiritual practice? How does your spirituality shape how you move through the world?

- We are invited to look at the image and locate our hands. Are my hands used as a gesture of embrace or harm towards others? How do I use my hands to build or damage the community?
- Finally, we are invited to locate the feet on the image. What values or beliefs have shaped my sense of self? Does my environment influence my identity and sense of self? When seeking new possibilities or reexamining beliefs that I once held, do I feel grounded?
- When you are ready, take two deep inhalations and exhalations and bring your awareness back to the pages in front of you.

Grounded theories in theological, psychological, sociological, educational, and biological research provide insight into the intentions and motivating factors that lead humans to seek community. While this chapter is not a comprehensive review of the extensive sources that shaped this research, it is intended to provide a review of theoretical works considered foundational to this interdisciplinary review of college students and spirituality as a universal experience. My aim is that by reading the referenced theoretical literature, I have told the story of why this applied research is imperative to today's human experience and development, particularly for emerging adults. As a pretext, I would like to begin with my own story.

Communal meals: A story of origins

"Heaven can be found in the most unlikely corners[2]*."*

[2] Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (Hyperion, 2003).

When I die, my heaven will be me running around my Grandma Carmen's dining table as a 4-year-old sneaking cups of Puerto Rican coffee. A friend gave me a copy of Mitch Albom's recently released novel, The Five People You Meet in Heaven, when my maternal grandmother, Carmen Sanchez, passed away in 2003. The book gave me great peace and became a way for her and me to remain connected in my grief. As my mother and uncles were cleaning out her apartment, where she had lived for over thirty years, I became the keeper of family photo albums that serve as a time capsule of our family's history. As I have gotten older, I revisit these albums when other family members pass or when a relative is looking for a particular picture. In those moments, I am always drawn to the memories captured around Grandma Carmen's dining room table in her small Parkchester apartment in the South Bronx. Somehow, the pictures made the apartment seem like a mansion because there was always room for family, friends, children playing, dancing, eating, and laughing. I can smell cigarette smoke and hear Spanglish filling the space as if it were yesterday. My grandmother's dining room held the tears of friends and family who received difficult news, celebrations of her grandchildren's birthdays, weekly conversations between two sisters, her daily New York Times crossword puzzle, and TV Guide. The richness of these gatherings tells a story of familial belonging and the tethering that binds us, creating a legacy that spans generations. I have spent my adult years desiring to capture that love, rooted in the belief that community is nurtured around a table.

I was born in 1980. In many of the pictures taken before that time, Jim Battaglia and Robert Vargas were present. Jim and my grandmother were colleagues at PS 54 elementary school in Brooklyn, New York, in the mid-1970s. Their friendship spanned

two pivotal moments in United States history, specifically in New York City. The Stonewall riots happened in 1967 with subsequent protests in the 1970s for LGBTQIA equality in New York City, and miscegenation laws were being overturned in parts of the United States. Jim was a first-generation Italian man, and my grandmother was a first-generation Puerto Rican married to a Black man from Virginia. Their friendship was strengthening as the city and country navigated the evolving civil rights landscape toward recognition and full acceptance of the many expressions of love and partnership. Their radical acceptance of each other made room for my grandmother to welcome Robert as Jim's loving partner. Over the years, they went from colleagues to best friends to chosen family. In diasporic communities, the concept of chosen family represents the expansion of bonds beyond transactional friendship to those you choose to accompany through all of life's complications, characteristics that one may attribute to family. They chose to "adopt" each other, and for the generations that follow, the lines are erased, and we introduce them as cousins, aunties, and uncles to demonstrate our deep bond with one another. I call Jim and Robert my uncles because I cannot remember a time they were not there, and we have chosen each other for decades. They knew me before I was born and have been present through all the joys and tragedies my family has experienced.

My uncles have been together for fifty-one years. I learned from them that love comes from creating a welcoming space that nurtures the community. When they retired twenty years ago from their respective careers as a special education teacher and accountant in New York City and relocated to Albuquerque, New Mexico, everything was new, and they chose to create a community in their new home. Their community has become family, with a calendar filled with meals with friends and their expanding

families around a table built in the early 1900s that they acquired when they purchased their home in Queens, New York. Years of love and community have sat at that table. As my Uncle Jim transitioned in late Fall to join the ancestors, their table holds the love of family by choice, helping to sustain my Uncle Robert. I have learned, by choice, how to create a communal table with family from my uncles Jim and Robert.

Since birth, I have witnessed and experienced the connection and community-building that come from sharing meals and gathering with family, by blood or choice. It is core to who I am. This research is important because I believe the transformative work of acceptance and understanding begins when we create communal spaces that welcome all parts of who we are.

Grounded to Self

Erik Erikson was a developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst whose work was influenced by Sigmund Freud's theory of human development. Building upon Freud's earlier work, Erikson believed that human development occurred in eight stages throughout the entire life cycle. According to Erikson's eight stages, students participating in the study will navigate two distinct stages of conflict present in adolescence and young adulthood. In adolescence, Erikson identified the conflict as identity vs. role confusion. In this context, confusion centers on their role in interacting with their peers, prompting the question, *"Who am I, really?"* This is the process of students becoming acclimated with newfound independence, being away from an authoritative family or guardian relationship, and entering young adulthood. Erikson identified intimacy vs. isolation as the basic conflict of this stage, which will evolve over

their college matriculation as they establish relationships with others and choose a career path. Most of the students' interactions in their ecosystem are with those experiencing similar internal conflicts. As an example, incoming students may experience grief over the loss of connections or changes in their relationships with childhood friends or new friends they made during their first weeks of college. Some may experience their first heartbreak or sexual relationship during these years.

Jeffrey Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood (ages 18–29) examines how modern societal shifts have delayed traditional milestones, such as marriage and stable careers, to the late 20s or 30s. In his research, Arnett noted that identity development no longer concludes by age 20, primarily due to revolutionary shifts in technology and societal norms from the 1950s to today's post-industrial era. Arnett theorizes that emerging adulthood is a period of waiting before the intimacy and stability phase of adulthood that Erikson described. Erikson's earlier stages of psychosocial development particularly bridge the gap between adolescence and young adulthood. Arnett and Erikson interpreted this period as one of instability, identity exploration, and the need to make crucial life choices. Erikson and Arnett together show why identity formation is prolonged in emerging adulthood, which makes structured communal practices especially relevant in higher education contexts.

Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood is in conversation with Jan Stets and Peter Burke's theory of identity development. Arnett states that intense identity exploration continues through the late teens and 20s, which is an age of identity exploration and is the primary feature of emerging adulthood. Where these two theories are complementary is that Arnett identifies community as playing an active role in identity formation during

this developmental stage. Stets and Burke believe that one's development and their community are actively in communication with each other. This theory prompts a reexamination of students previously held beliefs and encourages reengagement with past experiences. Therefore, recognizing these two theories is integral to understanding what makes up a person's identity.[3,4] Throughout this research study, I delve further into their respective theories and connections to my ministry context.

Connected to the community

The ministry of spiritual direction, from a Christian perspective, began with the Desert Mothers and Fathers, who searched for our true selves and served as spiritual guides. The informal communities created by those who chose to live in the desert, away from the Roman Empire, operated as a family, forming a faith-centered lifestyle that preceded the formalized theological doctrine we understand today. At the center of their faith mission was inner freedom and surrender. Their lives serve as witnesses to deeper prayer practices, creating interior conditions that keep us tethered to God's love for us. The wisdom from the Desert Mothers and Fathers invites us to honor the sacredness of human life and to question how God desires freedom or indifference for each one of us. The monastic life of these informal communities encourages us to go into our inner cell, serving as "a symbol of the deep soul work we are called to become fully awake. It is the place where we come into full presence with ourselves and all our inner voices, emotions, and challenges. We are encouraged not to abandon ourselves in the process through

[3] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory: Revised and Expanded*.

[4] Jeffrey Arnett et al., *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century* (American Psychological Association, 2006).

distraction or numbing. It is also the place where we encounter God deep in our own hearts."[5] The informal prayer practices of the desert communities led to the spiritual practices of early Christianity, which have carried forward into today in contemplative practices, such as the Ignatian examen and silent prayer in nature. The practice of spiritual direction is anchored in their witness, present in various forms across belief and non-belief systems.

This study focuses on the practice of small-group spiritual direction, which has grown in popularity over the past thirty years as people long for community. In the book entitled *Where Two or Three Are Gathered*, Prechtel writes, "We are not made, as the Genesis creation says, to be alone. We are hard-wired for community."[6] In his chapter titled "Essentials of Spiritual Companionship," Prechtel discusses the basic structure of spiritual companionship groups, which served as a guide for this project. Group Spiritual Direction is a model of ministry that meets everyone where they are in their most vulnerable place. Through invitation, participants in the group speak aloud about their deepest questions or desires. It should be noted that the participants and models of spiritual direction are not limited to a particular religion or belief system. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and grief support groups are a few examples where religious affiliation is not a prerequisite for participation. An essay written by Evan J. Miller entitled "Appreciative Inquiry and Group Direction" begins by quoting Paul's Letter to the

[5] Christine Valters Painter, "The Desert Mothers and Fathers Showed All Life Is Sacred," *U.S Catholic*, February 2020.

[6] Daniel Prechtel, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Spiritual Direction for Small Groups* (Morehouse Publishing, 2012). 5

Philippians, "…if there is any excellence and if there is anything worth of praise, think about these things."[7] The scripture used illustrates what Miller explores as the hallmark of group spiritual direction: curiosity and inquiry to see the other. Both texts engage applied praxis within sociological and theological theories by structuring conversations through group accompaniment and questions accessible to all.

Peter L. Berger's *The Sacred Canopy,* written in 1967, is recognized as one of the foundational works that illustrate how the early church and subsequent religious communities were formed at the macro level. In the opening sentences, Berger states that, "Every human society is an enterprise of world-building. Religion occupies a distinctive place within the enterprise."[8] After the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples were missioned to go out to build communities throughout the land. Constructing the early church required established communities to accept that a hospitable and welcoming space does not equate to uniformity.

In a collegiate community, this is yet another tension when intersecting with the conflicts present in one's identity, shaped by the community they are leaving behind and the one they are entering. Establishing new communities or expanding within existing ones takes time and intentional effort. Berger argues that "Society is a product of man. It has no other being except that which is bestowed upon it by human activity and

[7] Marlene Kropf, "Longing for Community: Hospitality and Group Direction," in *An Open Place: The Ministry of Group Spiritual Direction* (Morehouse Publishing, 2012). 69

[8] Peter L Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1967). 3

consciousness."[9] With our current understanding of established communities, we may overlook the tensions that arise during the formation of a new community.

The tension between society and human interaction in world construction is illustrated by the founding of the Society of Jesus, commonly referred to as the Jesuits, by Saint Ignatius of Loyola. John W. O'Malley's "The First Jesuits" is a historical review of the formation. O'Malley writes, "As an early social body, subsequent generations magnified to distortion certain aspects of the earlier tradition, while they minimized others, let some atrophy, and even repudiated a few…"[10] Early members agreed that their new religious community would be spiritually grounded in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, governed by the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, and that their central ministry would be education.[11] As we know the Jesuits today, focusing their central ministry on education aligns with Ignatius' view of one's relationship with the Creator. This is explained within the Exercises, "the Creator deals directly with the creature, and the creature with the Creator...:[12] Informed by The Spiritual Exercises, Jesuit education is designed around the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP), which is grounded in five characteristics: context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation. The intention of this pedagogical design is to offer students a way to engage in deep, transformative learning through course design and delivery. IPP is a collaborative process that centers

[9] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy,* 3

[10] John W. O' Malley, *The First Jesuits*, Fifth (Harvard University Press, 1993). 369

[11] O' Malley. *The First Jesuits,* 201

[12] O' Malley. *The First Jesuits,* 373

student learning through reflective action, producing greater freedom in the classroom and vocational exploration.

Neil Postman adds to the conversation by framing education and schooling as "the central institution through which the young may find reasons for continuing to educate themselves." In *The End of Education*, Postman suggests that educators should create a learning environment structured so that students see themselves as part of the desired objectives. Creator and creature – creature and Creator. We examine these three theoretical approaches to spirituality and education, not as passive experiences for a student, but as an active one on their journey towards spiritual self-understanding. The benefit of this journey for students is a path to exploration and freedom through education; however, the current educational model has shifted toward productivity rather than exploration. By recognizing the interconnection of spiritual and educational philosophies in a shifting model, this research explores the application of practical theology, engaging with Paolo Freire's arguments in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed". In Freire's opening thesis, he states,

> While the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind's central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern. Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization… But while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is the people's vocation. This vocation is constantly negated, yet it is affirmed by that very negation. It is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity. Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human.[13]

[13] Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2022). 42

The concluding summation of this research project will also attempt to expose the tension in continuing to build community in educational spaces, as St. Paul did in shaping the early church, and to draw parallels with Ignatius's shaping of educational philosophy and institutions. While identity development and community formation have been widely studied, little research explores communal meals as a structured spiritual practice within secular engineering education. This study addresses that gap.

The theories engaged in this project encompass two realities: those facing modern higher education and those occurring in a student's human development. In his article, "Morality and Happiness: Book IV of Plato's *Republic*", Dr. Richard Parry examines how the moral philosophical argument remains relevant in our understanding of human formation. He writes, "The spiritual good is a kind of psychological good, a good of the soul, then. However, it is not necessary to believe that the soul is immortal to understand this psychological good." Educational philosopher Chris Higgins' book "undeclared" leans into that question and offers a critical perspective: "education, then, is not about shaping a thing but rather about fostering conditions for self-formation…formative education begins by awakening agency and orienting the student to the task of formation."[14] What he is offering is that the formative experience of education requires educators and administrators to see each step during matriculation as an accompaniment to their human development. Higgins, like Plato, sees this as a moral and justice issue

[14] Chris Higgins, *Undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education* (The MIT Press, 2024). 18

regarding how education is structured in the United States. Can the communal meal create a teaching and learning experience that is different and honors the students' humanity?

Chapter 3

Biblical and theological grounding

"I know God's got me." - Raquel

The research within this chapter is grounded in Christian biblical and theological foundations, with three operative themes: hospitality, invitation, and welcome. Feasting at a common table has been represented over millennia as ritual, community-building, and wisdom, all within an environment of welcome and belonging. Using a theological intertextual approach, biblical passages from Proverbs 9:1-6 and Luke 14:12-14 will serve as embodiments of the three central themes operative in this project. The scriptures and themes will be in conversation with interdisciplinary sociological theory and Ignatian pedagogy to raise awareness of God's love in our societal interactions with engineering students participating in the study, as a potential intervention to define spiritual self-understanding and its connection to the community in which they exist. Finally, the researcher will provide practical theological applications and interpretive commentaries informed by the research participants' experiences.

Christian hospitality, grounded in biblical practices of table fellowship and shaped by Ignatian Spirituality, serves as a formative theological practice that resists exclusion, reconfigures power dynamics, and cultivates communal discernment in pluralistic educational contexts.

> 1 Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars. 2 She has slaughtered her animals; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table. 3 She has sent out her female servants; she calls from the highest places in the town, 4 "You who are simple, turn in here!" To those without sense she says, 5 "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. 6 Lay aside immaturity and live and walk in the way of insight." (Prov. 9:1-6; NRSV)

The Book of Proverbs in both the Judaic and Christian sacred texts personifies Wisdom, often using gendered language through an anthology of instructions written with the explicit intent of sharing the lessons of wisdom. Unlike the transference of power from the gods who granted wisdom to humanity, Proverbs offers wisdom to all humanity within a community. The action required humans to obtain wisdom by developing a discerning spirit, thus connecting with those of goodwill, which is paramount to radical hospitality and welcome. One could argue that the personification of Wisdom as a woman aligns with the perception that invitation and welcome are qualities that belong to women in the role of the keeper of relationality within society, anchoring its formation and continuation for generations.

Proverbs 9 frames hospitality as a formative moral practice that shapes communal identity, which informs the design of this study's communal meals. Competing tables are set by Wisdom and Folly, inviting passersby into their respective homes. Wisdom invited guests to her table and opened her doors wide, calling on all to enter and partake of the food offered with the assistance of her maidservants. The invitation offered by wisdom is an active and imaginative moral posture of true welcome, drawing one out to bring those into her home and to her table. Wisdom invites all to create spaces of radical hospitality and to lay aside their immaturity, opening themselves to the anticipation of transformation. This invitation contrasts with Folly's invitation and banquet table of deceit and stolen food, bringing figurative death to those who choose to sit at the table where formation is absent. Folly's table is ignorant of the needs and gifts of the community, does not outwardly seek to invite guests to the table, and lacks imagination

of welcome through a passive posture. Perhaps, in our current times, we experience Folly's invitation through isolation and pluralism, drawing us away from one another. Whereas Wisdom's banquet table represents formative joy through relationship with God, acknowledging that we belong to one another. The structure of a communal meal

The Gospel of Luke is also referred to as the Gospel of Mercy, a historical account of Jesus' salvific work with humanity during his life and ministry. Luke's gospel is an image of how one can operationalize Wisdom's invitation to the banquet. The writers of Luke's gospel, like the Book of Proverbs, speak directly to the reversal of power from the wealthy, who might be seen by some as gods due to their control over others' basic needs. What the gospel offers is a reimagination of social order that centers hospitality to all through mercy and humility. Luke's reordering of power at the banquet table provides a theological framework for centering marginalized voices within the structured meal conversations of this study. For example, Luke 14:7-14 speaks to how invited guests and hosts should behave, considering who is invited to dine at the table and where a guest should sit as a sign of humility. What Jesus was offering in his parable is that, regardless of your position within a community, your invitation as a guest at someone's banquet table is not the same as your own table. In verses 12-14, Jesus speaks directly to the host, recognizing who is missing from the table and, through the parable, indicating that true hospitality is inclusive regardless of social position.

The biblical message in both Proverbs and Luke is foundational to the intersectional and relational framing woven into practical and contextual theology, the lens through which this project is grounded. These two scriptures are a *leitmotif* of inclusive welcoming and radical hospitality. What follows is an imaginative approach to

the project interventions that sought to establish formative communal practices in which Wisdom's table and power lie in kinship.

Biblical Exegesis

In this research project, the call in Luke's gospel serves as an interpretation of the theological, political, and social commentary in the written account of Christ's ministry. It illuminates some barriers humans create that limit true welcome at tables set before us. In Luke 14:12-14, scripture challenges us to show humility about who is invited to the table and to be open to transformative experiences with one another. In our current academic and societal culture, we should be mindful of who is invited to dine at the table and shift away from a transactional dynamic to create a space transformed by seeing others' experiences. The students are experts on their own experiences and how society has impacted their lives.

Building on the scripture presented in Proverbs at the beginning of this chapter, a deeper analysis of extending hospitality in this project focused on creating spaces that intentionally recognize our belonging to one another, regardless of our differences. Wisdom and transformative opportunities increase for all students when we gather in spaces filled with neighbors, strangers, family, and friends. Through creating formative kinship and social reimagination, we see one another as God's children and are more likely to extend hospitality to the stranger who passes by, inviting them in without expectation. On a college campus, the stranger might be identified by religious or cultural beliefs, area of study, or visible societal norms that are unfamiliar to our way of being. An unknown stranger to the community presents an opportunity to cultivate shared

discernment about God's love and dream for us by seeking common ground in their burdens and curiosities.

Although the students participating in this research project are familiar with one another and part of the same scholarship program, they experienced intimacy and vulnerability as they verbalized fears and desires that lay deep within their hearts. There were times during their sharing that they learned something unknown about someone they called a friend. This type of facilitated research conversation is unlike what is experienced in a research lab. The students are invited to Wisdom's table by reintroducing themselves to one another. This was imperative because, when they met two years ago, they introduced themselves with surface-level definitions as they entered the broader scholarship community. Taking an intentional moment at our first dinner to welcome one another was important because time and distance have shaped who they have become since they first met two years ago and gathered around the table. We were all given the privilege of meeting the person they are now. They spoke with joy about a hidden talent for thrift shopping and learning to mend clothes to give them new life, or about teaching Sunday school to eighth graders each week. Each participant gathered at the table shared in depth about their vocational interests such as family, a change in their major, or merging their minor to better support interventions for patients with prosthetic limbs. The depth of insight shared at the table created a welcoming space to meet each other as they gain more insight into how they see themselves beyond their majors and hometowns. This insight and being reintroduced to their peers created a new level of intimacy in our relationship with one another, inviting radical welcome and soul friendship, thus creating a deeper relationship to God and one another.

This research study was centered on students' shared generosity and kinship, giving their time and sharing vulnerably with their peers and me. The tables were adorned with soul-filling food, such as Puerto Rican cuisine or a catered Thanksgiving meal, with vibrant colors and smells engaging each of the five senses. Each meal included leftovers for students to take back to their dorm rooms, mirroring the abundance we all received as we listened to one another. Wisdom's table is an offering to thoughtfully give to your guests, and receiving their presence abundantly without expectation is a priceless gift. The invitation is to provide radical hospitality and welcome each participant, acknowledging their full humanity. It would have been easier to order pizza for delivery, offering a meal they can access at any time. This table would have been "good enough" for the students seated around it without intentionally welcoming them or honoring their expertise. As evidenced at our last gathering, Grant, one of the students, provided powerful credence to this message, saying, "I am thankful for this time because I don't think I would have ever said these things out loud."

Theological Methods

A quote attributed to Buddhist and Taoist Eastern philosophies states, "when the student is ready, the teacher will appear." My spiritual journey has been influenced by teachers whom I have met in the most unlikely places. As mentioned in the previous chapters, their influence on my life is interdisciplinary, intercultural, and interfaith; therefore, the biblical and theological grounding within this chapter is from that perspective. My identity as a Black Catholic woman and educator, shaped by Ignatian Spirituality and its pedagogy, has empowered me to seek God in all things and all people.

My spiritual journey is continuously shaped by various faith and non-faith traditions, enabling me to actively practice radical hospitality and welcome.

The duality of my identities is connected to womanist, Ignatian spirituality, informing my work as a sociologist and scholarship program educator. These identities have made me keenly attuned to the tensions that arise as a community begins to form in ways like those that have existed for millennia. While the setting of a college campus is different from that of early Christian churches, there are similarities between them. Tensions more often arise when a cultural norm within a society is critically examined to interrogate how outsiders are excluded. Today's higher education environment, with its development of emerging adults, is not immune to that tension. Vocational formation and career placement are contrasted with societal shifts in psychosocial development amongst the largest and least powerful groups in the community. In Chapter 2 of this project, St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians is introduced in recognition of the fact that we belong to one another at Wisdom's table. It would be naïve to deny that most educational spaces limit their responses to tensions within communities, thereby running counter to human development and to social, political, and economic realities. In the following chapters, practical interventions that shaped this research project are offered as an invitation to higher education communities to navigate community tensions. As stated in Galatians 6:9-10 NSRV, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith." This scripture is a call to do the work of building community even when it is hard. Paul is inviting the communities to free themselves from the easy urge to exclude outsiders. Chapter 6 opens

with an acknowledgement that bearing each other's burdens fulfills Christ's law. Paul recognized this was an arduous task to bear when doing what is right by steering a community through change and tension.

The journey to extend hospitality to the stranger takes time and intentionality, and navigating tensions as a new community forms is an unending process until new cultural norms are established. Oftentimes, for numerous reasons, new tensions arise when the originating leader departs from the community. As the early Christian church was being formed, the churches had to maintain forward progression after the first Apostles died. The church that we know today is the product of work that would tear down the "walls of hostility that has not come down."[1] We are still creating paths to tear down those walls and welcome the stranger, both known and unknown.

Contextual Theology

Peter L. Berger published "The Sacred Canopy" in 1967, and it remains one of the seminal books examining the sociology of religion, occupying "a distinctive place in this enterprise"[2] of constructing our world. Berger's thesis to enhance our understanding of the worlds in which we live is summarized in the opening pages of "The Sacred Canopy":

> Society is a dialectic phenomenon in that it is a human product and nothing but a human product…There can be no social reality apart from man. Yet it may be also stated that man is a product of society. Every individual biography is an

[1] Raymond E Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (Paulist Press, 1984).

[2] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Anchor Books, 1967). 3

> episode within the history of society, which both precedes and survives it…Man cannot exist apart from society.[3]

As our world has become more pluralistic, there are tensions in our current society that are driven by power and ideology from a capitalist Christian lens that is stitched into the biography of everyone. Titus Hjelm's 2019 essay, *Rethinking the theoretical base of Peter L. Berger's Sociology of Religion: Social construction, power, and discourse*, offers a reexamination of this new construction of an expansive world. Hjelm acknowledges the tensions of negotiating a path towards our new way of being. He asks the reader to consider our secular society, juxtaposed with pervasive globalization, to examine whether we are witnessing a decline in religion or a change in its form and our understanding of it. As an example, Hjelm references Nilüfer Göle's observation of the shift from invisibility to full visibility of Muslim migrants. On today's college campuses, In our current society, we are challenged to contend with the reality that interfaith communities are not new; therefore, our intercultural systems are now revisiting the origins of this reality in early societies.

As my professional work expands to differing communities, a tension within me arises and calls for further exploration: *What have we lost when we erased our understanding of how early interfaith and intercultural societies existed? How do we reconcile our present, divided and siloed society with a past existence that was based on harmony and unity in diversity?"* For me, this question can be answered by a comment from one of the research participants, Grant, who stated, "This is all a façade."

[3] Berger. *The Sacred Canopy,* 3

Ignatian Spirituality

My awareness of and spiritual journey with the Jesuits began in 2013, a few months before the election of Pope Francis as the first Jesuit priest to be elevated to the papacy. I was familiar with the Jesuit-founded educational institutions, such as Fordham University and Georgetown University, from my own pursuit of higher education. However, I was unaware that there were spiritual charisms within Catholicism. My introduction to the Jesuits and Ignatian Spirituality was an answered prayer in my own crisis of faith. I was immediately drawn to Ignatian spirituality after being introduced to the idea that God was present in everything and everyone, and I began exploring what it meant to bring that awareness into my daily walk. I attended my first silent retreats, began volunteering at a Jesuit-founded Catholic high school that recently opened in Atlanta, and became a student of Ignatian spirituality. Perhaps I had never wondered why my experience with Catholicism was different from those who had engaged with these spiritual experiences since they were much younger. It never occurred to me that some parts of my spiritual journey were complicated and intertwined with this country's dark history.

In 2016, Rachel L. Swarns published an article in the Sunday edition of The New York Times that landed on doorsteps as many were heading to Sunday Mass. The headline read, *272 Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown. What Does It Owe Their Descendants?*[4] The article was another reality that hit the news cycle at a climactic

[4] Rachel L. Swarns, "272 Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown. What Does It Owe Their Descendants?," Race/Related, *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 16, 2016.

moment of deep tensions within higher education and protests on college campuses about slaveholding and harms to indigenous people at the foundations of many prestigious institutions in America. As I read the opening paragraphs of the article, the tension was palpable within my body.

> The human cargo was loaded on ships at a bustling wharf in the nation's capital, destined for the plantations of the Deep South. Some slaves pleaded for rosaries as they were rounded up, praying for deliverance…Their panic and desperation would be mostly forgotten for more than a century. But this was no ordinary slave sale. The enslaved African Americans had belonged to the nation's most prominent Jesuit priests. And they were sold, along with scores of others, to help secure the future of the premier Catholic institution of higher learning at the time, known today as Georgetown University.[5]

Despite the pain I felt, and still feel, reading the article about those who were forcibly boarded onto cargo ships "grasping for rosaries and praying for deliverance"[6] I felt a deeper call to take time to investigate where God was present. This new tension was being revealed in this new spiritual community, to which I felt spiritually aligned, that has existed for over five hundred years. My identity and spiritual journey were stressed when I became aware of the sins of the past that were buried within the nostalgia of my religious community's founding in the 16th century.

Practical Theology

St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, the "Jesuits," underwent a spiritual conversion and wrote a set of spiritual exercises in 1522, through various prayers and meditations, to draw one closer to God. At the root of Ignatian Spirituality is St.

[5] Swarns. *"272 Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown. What Does It Owe Their Descendants?"*

[6] Swarns,*"272 Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown. What Does It Owe Their Descendants?"*

Ignatius' meditation to find God in all things, thus inviting us to become aware of God in all things and all people. In the opening of the spiritual exercises, St. Ignatius writes,

> God freely created us so that we might know, love, and serve him in this life and be happy with him forever. God's purpose in creating us is to draw forth from us a response of love and service here on earth, so that we may attain our goal of everlasting happiness with him in heaven. All the things in this world are gifts of God, created for us, to be the means by which we can come to know him better, love him more surely, and serve him more faithfully.[7]

The invitation offered by Ignatius unfolds over time through the creation of intentional experiences and encounters that expand one's knowledge. When we choose to accept the invitation, we are drawn into greater or new awareness about our relationship with the world around us. This is at the crux of the Christian sacred text that Ignatius encountered while convalescing, which led to his spiritual conversion, his encounters during his pilgrimage, and his eventual search for companions to journey with him, culminating in the formation of what became the Society of Jesus.[8] Perhaps it was natural, influenced by Ignatius' experience, that the first Jesuits agreed that their ministry would focus on the wisdom of giving the spiritual exercises and education. As I explore my own spiritual journey, I have come into an ever-growing awareness that the journey between the head and heart is connected to meaning-making in our human and communal development. What the Jesuits did in developing their ministry around education is at the heart of *cura personalis, meaning care of the whole person.*[9]

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[7] Kevin O'Brien, SJ, *The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in Daily Life* (Loyola Press, A Jesuit Press, n.d.).

[8] *Ignatius of Loyola – Finding God In All Things*, directed by Rick Timmermans (The Jesuits of the European Low Countries, 2021), Video, 9:36.

[9] Catherine Peters, "Cura Personalis: The Incarnational Heart of Jesuit Education," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 11, nos. 1, Article 3 (2022), https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol11/iss1/3.

The Heart of Learning: Spirituality of Education, edited by Steven Glazer, is a practical application of caring for the whole person "by moving inside to the core of our experience – and working out from there – the apparent duality of 'sides' is pierced…the real work of integration and healing can begin."[10] Ancient Greek concepts of instruction shaped the structure of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP), a distinctive quality of Jesuit education reflected in Ignatian Spirituality. The IPP has five characteristics: context, experience, reflection, evaluation, and action. I would argue that the practical application of Paul's letter to the Galatians is shaped by his appeal for inclusion and is applicable in today's educational spaces, which call for inclusion, despite existing in an age of anti-inclusion, anti-equity, anti-immigrant, antisemitism, and a rejection of teachings regarding community formation that is not male, cisgendered, White, and Western. This conflicts with our intercultural and interfaith society, as Berger articulated in *The Sacred Canopy*, in which society's culture is constantly producing and renegotiating how it reproduces itself to ensure full inclusion or participation by its citizens.[11]

bell hooks presented another critique on reflection and needed renegotiation within the classroom, wherein all persons "to be guided by love is to live in community with all life"[12] and affirms a belief that the teacher must include themselves in this commitment. Her reflections suggest that there is no separation between her humanity,

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[10] Steven Glazer, *The Heart of Learning (New Consciousness Reader)*, First (Tarcher, 1999).

[11] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*.

[12] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994).

her lived experience, and her vocation in the classroom. Like Ignatius' meditations at the beginning of the Exercises, it is a formative influence on the first Jesuit communities and a call to freedom that draws one closer to God and the people of God. In the "Heart of Learning", hooks reflects that an educator reviews what one can concretely do to be in greater community with their students. hooks recognized in her writings that the gifts each student brings into the classroom are an opportunity to reflect those gifts back to transform the learning community. In her collection of essays entitled "Teaching to Transgress", she saw the classroom as a place that should serve as a liberatory space that requires those with responsibility for learning within the community to ensure they reflect "a place of promise and possibility."[13] Yet tensions arise in determining what freedom should and could be when differing opinions are present within the community.

The ongoing work to construct the global catholic[14] community is filled with tension as we progress towards constructing the church the Apostles left behind.

Society has impacted their lives. These tensions are all façades.

[13] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

[14] The word *catholic* in this context reflects the Greek word meaning "through the whole" reflecting universal understanding of people of God.

Chapter 4

Critical Participatory Action Research: Methodological Approach

"I find peace by accepting things as they are…giving things time as I learn to accept them." – Nia

This project is a mixed-methods research design grounded in Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR). CPAR is a collaborative approach to a practical theology project seeking to address a problem with those affected by structural systems impacting to their maturation. In this project, the problem being investigated is the formation of spiritual self-understanding amongst emerging adults at higher education institutions that have shifted away from whole-person formative education towards capitalist-based, career-focused education.

The methodological principles in CPAR align with the project's theological commitments and formative principles of Ignatian spirituality. This approach centers each participant's wisdom and insights about their lives, which have been impacted by structural systems. In this project, the students are not the objects of the study but co-designers to investigate, critique, and develop solutions through reflection.

In practice, this chapter will explain CPAR and its importance to the methodological design of this project. I will outline the specific research design, articulate the procedures for data collection and analysis, address ethical considerations, and name the trustworthiness and limitations throughout the project. Additionally, this chapter explains how the research process is part of the project's aims of hospitality by inviting participants to become co-researchers and theological collaborators.

CPAR as a Framework

Engaged Research

CPAR has its roots in Participatory Action Research (PAR). The origins of PAR are rooted in grassroots organizing, Western educational models, and liberation movements worldwide. The commitments of PAR work with and in communities with people directly impacted by social injustice and expose privilege. This research methodology lays the groundwork for reimagining what is possible within existing structural systems.[1]

The foundation of the CPAR methodological approach affirms a commitment to everyone having a "right to research" through democratization. This praxis of CPAR centers voices in the community that are often ignored, leading towards transformative action.[2] Fine and Torre reflect that "CPAR signals a distinct way of thinking about who has knowledge, who holds expertise, and how new knowledge can be produced, across differences, when the perspective of those most impacted by injustice are privileged and fueling movements for change are prioritized."[3]

Distinguishing Features of CPAR[4]

The features of CPAR shape the project design in the following ways:

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[1] Michelle Fine and Maria Elena Torre, *Essentials of Critical Participatory Action Research* (American Psychological Association, 2021).

[2] Fine and Torres, *Essentials of Critical Participatory Action Research,* 3

[3] Fine and Torres, *Essentials of Critical Participatory Action Research,* 10

[4] Fine and Torres. *Essentials of Critical Participatory Action Research.* 81

1. Inquisitive and interdisciplinary.

CPAR invites researchers and participants to collaborate as co-researchers to investigate power structures. Our role as co-researchers is to critically examine how decisions made by those with authority impact multiple dimensions of their lives.

2. Concrete and collaborative.

Participants explore their social practices as they navigate relational development on the college campus. Participants work together to create research questions that examine how their co-researchers contribute to shared knowledge to inform their own growth.

3. Searching and liberatory.

The elements of CPAR in this study are designed to examine how educational models have limited their exploration of interests outside the classroom. Through shared insights, study participants are empowered to pursue liberatory practices.

4. Systematic Reflection.

Study participants engage in contextual, experiential, and reflective systemic reflections to guide concrete actions and evaluation through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method data collection.

5. Theory in practice.

CPAR examines applicable theories to inform current practices and reimagine new ones that could inform institutional systems.

6. Shared research relationships.

Traditional research models have a hierarchical structure in which research is conducted on participants rather than with them. CPAR studies aim to create shared research relationships in which participants are co-creators in design and analysis, and collaborate on the future implications of the findings.

Why CPAR?

The features present in CPAR align with this practical and intertextual ministry project design along three aims. First, students participating in this study are not separated from an inquiry exploring their spiritual self-understanding as emerging adults. The co-researchers attend the communal meal as a spiritual practice that centers their lived expertise, showing that God is already present in both individual and communal formation. Designing the meal as a practical theological method creates a place to give attention to the deep questions they are exploring and a collective reflection to their curiosities.

Second, approaching this research through an intertextual lens honors exploration of the whole person, which is at the foundation of *cura personalis.* Ignatian spirituality and its pedagogy recognize that the summation of a human's experience does not occur in isolation; therefore, students are given authority to engage and interrogate theories used across disciplines to shape their development first as humans.

Finally, the project serves the goal of formation in emerging adults and institutional change in higher education. The project seeks to offer insight into current practices and reimagine practices that engage in holistic learning.

Research Design: The Communal Meal and the CPAR Cycle

Hospitable Settings

In Chapter 1, the ministry site for this project is a cohort-based scholarship program at an engineering institution located in Atlanta, Georgia. The project was designed to have nine second-year engineering students in the two scholar programs participate in a device-free, monthly communal meal and engage in dialogue with their peers. At each meal, the participants selected two questions to guide their conversation from a curated set of questions submitted by their peers. The participants' questions were inspired by their own curiosities and from the podcast show "Wild Card" hosted by National Public Radio's Rachel Martin.

The researcher serves as both scholarship administrator and facilitator. Within the elements of CPAR, the researcher participates as a facilitator with expertise in spiritual self-understanding and CPAR's integration with Ignatian pedagogy; however, the researcher is not the sole expert or decision-maker in the research group. The researcher had four discrete responsibilities during the study: to convene the group, design the communal meals in consultation with participants and doctoral advisor, facilitate the beginning and end of meals, and coordinate data collection and analysis that invited shared ownership.

CPAR as a Place of Welcome

Developing a research study with students as participants follows the essentials of a CPAR cycle adapted to a nonconventional ministry setting that includes various beliefs

and non-beliefs. Understanding this context with the design, CPAR was applied to the design by:

1. Critical analysis and planning (preparing for the meal)

Initial conversations with students should focus on their participation in co-curricular activities to build a resume that attracts their first internship, rather than exploring their identity with curiosity. Professionally, there has been a shift in higher education over the last twenty years, encouraging first-year, first-semester students to begin acquiring skills to prepare them for their careers for four to five years in the future, rather than creating opportunities to explore who they are. Finally, reviewing interdisciplinary research regarding student success amongst underrepresented students[5] and affluent students revealed a tension present in spiritual formation and identity connected to the campus community. Collectively, these steps shaped the design of a communal meal as an intervention to support identity exploration within the community.

2. The act of gathering.

The monthly meals functioned as the chosen intervention and primary action for this study. Over the course of six sessions, participants gathered for a communal meal and engaged in device-free conversation with questions developed by their fellow

[5] The term "*underrepresented population*" means a population that is typically underrepresented in service provision, and includes populations such as individuals who have low-incidence disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, low income individuals, homeless individuals (including children and youth), children in foster care, individuals with limited English proficiency, individuals living in institutions seeking to transition to the community from institutional settings, youth with disabilities aging into adulthood, older individuals, or individuals living in rural areas. (29 USC § 3002(18) https://www.law.cornell.edu/definitions/uscode.php)

participants. This practice was formative for the study participants and the researcher and informed data collection through a mixed-methods approach.

3. Data collection

Data from participants was collected before and after the retreat using the Identity Style Inventory (ISI-5), developed by Dr. Michael Brozonsky. The researcher's field notes captured verbal dialogue and observed non-verbal cues during conversations. During data collection, the primary goal is to capture emotions and insights presented by participants.

4. Reflection and reimagining (after gathering)

Due to the academic calendar, research participants gathered one month after the final meal. Participants were served a chef-prepared gourmet meal. The researcher presented findings from the pre- and post-surveys, as well as themes that emerged during meals through storytelling, wondering, and sacred listening. This practice ensured that study participants had a voice in their experience with the research study. Together, the study participants and researcher can discern possible next steps for communal meals and other practices outside of the classroom for identity exploration. The application of research findings to other campus programs and communities is beyond the scope of this project.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

This project used a mixed-methods approach to capture participants' experiences and self-reflections.

Pre-Meal Preparation

Participants were asked to complete a basic demographic survey in Qualtrics, including their legal name, hometown, major, and alias. The information collected from the survey will be used in all study materials. Research shows that communal dining has declined significantly in the United States over the past 30 years. To prepare for communal eating, participants were instructed to watch the film "Babette's Feast," two advertisements about eating together from Canada and China, and to listen to an episode of the NPR show "Wild Card," hosted by Rachel Martin. "Babette's Feast" is a 1987 film adapted from a short story of the same name written by Isak Dinesen. The film explores deep spiritual themes related to hospitality and welcoming strangers. To celebrate Canada's 150th birthday, the #EatTogether campaign was launched with the goal of:

> When we eat together, good things happen. We share a bit of our lives. We talk, we laugh, and we share the foods we love. We get a little closer. That's why in 2017, for Canada's 150th birthday, Loblaws and it's President's Choice brand are on a mission to get Canadians to eat together. To put down their phones, turn off the TV, and sit down to share a meal. Whether it's poutine, pad thai, paella or perogies. Nothing brings us together like eating together.

In the ad, a woman comes home from work to find her neighbors distracted by their devices, passing one another as strangers despite living in the same hallway. You see the woman and her daughter bring a dining table into the hallway. As neighbors get off the elevator, they see others gathered around a table in the hallway, sharing dinner. Toward the end of the commercial, you see a little girl crawling under the table in the hallway and knocking on the door of a neighbor who was not present. An older man answers the door, closes it, and initially seems to ignore the girl, but then opens it again, holding out a

bottle of wine and food to share. The commercial directly references the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, where Jesus was asked, “Who is my neighbor?”

Each participant was asked to watch a 2018 advertisement that aired on China Central Television (CCTV) entitled “Chopsticks”. This advertisement was shown at a meeting concerning racial justice and inclusion in schools with education practitioners. The speaker shared his experience of not being welcomed when he made a dinner for the Chinese New Year, as part of his heritage, and gave everyone chopsticks to eat. The speaker recounted how one of the dinner guests tossed the chopsticks aside and said, “I am not using those. Give me a fork.” The intention of asking participants to view the advertisement was to establish that these dinners would be about radical hospitality as we were gathering around the table to listen to one another.

Finally, participants listened to an episode of Wild Card, the NPR podcast hosted by Rachel Martin mentioned above. The show's premise "invites guests to play a game about life's biggest questions… on a choose-your-own-adventure conversation that lets them open up about their fears, their joys, and how they've built meaning from experience.” The questions featured on the show inspired students to submit four questions that guided our communal meal conversations. From these preparatory materials, each participant was invited to submit questions they had for themselves or for each other.

Dinner Questions

After watching the curated visual materials and listening to the podcast, the participants were asked to develop at least two questions to be selected for our communal

meals. Each set of questions reflected their curiosities about their major and how they see themselves. The participants appointed one group member to review the questions with the researcher to eliminate or combine similar questions. The appointed participant and researcher determined the twelve questions for the six sessions. The questions were printed, cut into thin strips, and placed in a Pyrex bowl.

At each gathering, the bowl with the questions was placed in the center of the table. One participant at each meal selected a question for discussion, then repeated the process for the second question. After participants believed the conversation had reached a natural stopping point, the facilitator thanked them for their wisdom and confirmed the details for the next communal meal. Later that evening, the two questions discussed at dinner were sent to the group's text message chain for personal journaling or reflection. The survey questions and communal meal format will be included in an appendix.

Facilitator Field Notes

The group chose not to record conversations to keep their focus on the discussion. They understood that recording devices can be distracting and affect the setting. Participants agreed to allow the facilitator to take field notes on verbal and nonverbal communication during their talk. Torre and Fine noted that “our participatory analyses marinate in dialogues about power and difference, divergent interpretations, and a search for new understandings. Seeking not consensus but democratic knowledge production...” The facilitator's field notes will mainly document the dinners, including the questions asked and the order in which they were asked at each meal. The notes also include:

- reflective accounts of group and individual direct verbal responses to questions.

- summary of themes that arose from discussions; and
- facilitator's own reflections and clarifying questions to ensure accuracy of what was stated by a participant.

Pre- and Post-Survey

Participants completed a 36-question ISI-5 survey developed by Dr. Michael Brozonsky before the first communal meal, which was sent electronically via Microsoft Forms. Participants' responses were interpreted by clinical psychologist Dr. Allyson Wood. After the final meal, participants will complete the survey again, which will be sent electronically via Microsoft Forms within 24 hours. Dr. Wood received the anonymized raw dataset containing participants' pre- and post-survey responses in Microsoft Excel, the program used by Microsoft Forms to gather responses for analysis. After analyzing the results, Dr. Wood reviewed individual scores and collectively observed identity styles both before and after.

Data Analysis

Familiarity

The researcher reviewed survey responses, field notes, and meal questions to identify common themes and connections, gaining insight into the emotions and theological questions explored in this study.

Coding

The researcher developed coding for qualitative data analysis using inductive coding, a ground-up approach that aligns with the principles of CPAR. This approach

allows curiosity, memory, and personal hopes to guide coding from participants' own words rather than being imposed by previous research.

Thematic Dialogue

Codes were clustered into macro and micro themes, capturing patterns aligned with the quantitative dataset from the ISI-5 survey. These themes and corresponding findings are in conversation with the biblical and theological foundations presented in Chapter 3 and its commitments to the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradox rooted in Ignatian Spirituality.

Clarification

Study participants were invited to a final group meal, where they would learn about the main themes identified during the study and share the collective identity styles from their survey responses. The purpose of this final meal is to validate what they shared and to gather their reactions to what was observed.

Theological Integration

The researcher connected the themes with theological reflection observed at Wisdom’s table, a space of radical welcome and hospitality among study participants. These themes are contrasted with presuppositions about how best to serve and care for students in higher education.

Reflexivity

It was important to build trust with study participants at every step of the research. I was very transparent that their participation was strictly voluntary, and I joined them as

a student. There were clear boundaries established early on and maintained throughout the study: we never discussed scholarship program operations and administrative processes during our meetings together. I modeled, as well, by not asking about classes, financial aid, or reminders about program requirements. This consistency reaffirmed my initial communication and prepared me for the study about them as emerging adults. When discussing the research with other scholars and students not participating in the study, I speak in general terms, focusing only on my writing. As such, the other scholars refer to themselves as the "guinea pigs" even though they are not involved in the research study.

In reviewing the data, I used desensitization methods to view it as a researcher. For example, I have created clear boundaries in my daily schedule to focus on doctoral research and to take breaks that allow me to transition my focus to my role as a program administrator.

Ethical Considerations

This study was a small group in a non-traditional ministry context that raises ethical concerns, including confidentiality, hierarchical power dynamics, and emotional vulnerability in a peer group setting.

Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

The researcher had an informational meeting with second-year scholars enrolled in the Clark Scholars (Cohort 6) and Dean's Scholars (Cohort 4) programs. During the meeting, potential study participants received an overview of the research project, including its aims, time commitment, risks, and benefits. Afterward, interested

participants sent a text message to the researcher expressing their interest in participating. The researcher will then schedule a research interest meeting with scholars who indicated interest via text message to answer questions and review the consent form. The consent form was sent via the Georgia Institute of Technology's DocuSign account to all study participants at their institute email addresses. The following language was included in the consent form and was stated verbally at each meeting:

> Participation in the study is voluntary, and you can refuse to take part before it starts, stop at any time, or skip any questions or procedures that make you uncomfortable. There will be no penalty for any of these actions, and your compensation will not be affected if you decide to withdraw. Additionally, your academic standing, record, or relationship with the university or any involved organization or service will remain unaffected.

Confidentiality

Participants provided preferred pseudonyms to be used in all written reports. Any identifying details will be altered or omitted to maintain participants' anonymity. Data will be securely stored on Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary's OneDrive, which is accessible to the researcher and, if applicable, the researcher's academic advisors.

Scholarship Administrator-Researcher Role

The position of being both a scholarship administrator and researcher has both strengths and risks. The existing relationship fosters trust and a deeper level of sharing; however, it can also create pressure to participate in the study. To mitigate these risks, the researcher:

- reminded participants that they may withdraw or decline participation in the study.

- restricted conversation at the communal meals to research only; and
- exercise flexibility to participants' academic schedules and find alternative times for meals, if necessary.

Emotional and Spiritual Safety

The communal meals explored topics such as vulnerability, vocational desires, family trauma, and engagement with spiritual themes across a variety of belief systems. This may cause emotions to arise in participants. The participants followed a standard rhythm for each meal, clear agreements about confidentiality, and a closing practice to transition back to academic life.

Data Handling and Credibility

In this section, I will outline how data was managed during the research study over the six communal meal sessions.

Field Note Protocol

The six sessions were designed with the study participants to follow the essential structure of CPAR. Each session followed a scripted protocol for the students; this is consistent with the research practices in their STEM classes. At each session, I sat within the circle to be an active and holy listener as the study participants spoke. In my notes, I summarized the themes identified as participants processed their thoughts and paid attention to nonverbal cues before speaking. I listened to insightful reflections offered that were affirmed by audible sounds or body movements such as head nodding. As I documented what was spoken, I would seek clarification when an insightful reflection

was shared by stating, “I want to make sure I heard you correctly,” repeating back what they shared. Participants would affirm what was repeated back or clarify what they said, and the conversation would continue with a natural rhythm. This required me to be a holy listener by engaging all my senses. In my field notes, nonverbal cues were indicated with an asterisk, and I wrote the cue.

Member Checking

It was important during, after, and while preparing to present the research findings to consistently confirm and clarify what was shared and observed. This ensured a commitment that I, as a researcher, made to study participants — that we are doing this together.

Audit Trail

To ensure transparency in the research study, the following are included: a session guide, screenshots of group text messages confirming session meetings, and post-session screenshots of question slips for further reflection. The appendix provides the complete list of questions available for selection during the study. Additionally, the questions from the ISI-5 pre- and post-survey are included in a separate appendix.

A group text message called “Research Crew” was created solely for sharing information about the research study. This chat made sure all study participants received the same details about the study. If I needed to talk to participants about urgent matters unrelated to the study, I would message each person individually through a separate text thread.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

In both qualitative and quantitative research, trustworthiness is established by adhering to ethical standards that ensure credibility, dependability, and effective knowledge transfer. Credibility was achieved through data sources such as field notes and surveys, as well as a concluding dinner to discuss the research findings. The researcher maintained an audit trail of collaborative decisions related to study design, analysis, and continuity at each session. Knowledge transfer was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the non-traditional ministry context, study design, and participants' narratives to help readers understand how the study connects to their own ministry environments.

This study had clear limitations that preclude a statistically significant conclusion about the impact of communal meals as a tool for spiritual self-understanding. The researcher's role as a scholarship administrator may introduce some bias, particularly mirroring their own lived experiences. Therefore, the researcher restricted the words spoken to asking, clarifying questions, and not sitting at the head of the table. This posture upheld an established CPAR principle: that research happens with study participants, ensuring they are at the center.

Chapter Conclusions

This chapter outlined the methodological framework and study design for this project with college students. Designing the project aligns with the principles of Critical Participatory Action Research, centering the experiences and narratives of college students as co-researchers and spiritual partners. The knowledge gained from these meals

offered a practical, contextual theological approach that enabled participants to reflect and evaluate through conversations with peers. The next chapter provides more detail on the study design; additional chapters revisit the methodological commitments and theological themes present throughout.

Chapter 5

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Do you need help? – Andrea

Overview of Findings

This chapter presents the qualitative and quantitative findings that emerged from the communal meal gatherings and pre-/post-survey data. The results are organized into qualitative themes and quantitative outcomes. There were five themes that emerged from the communal meal as ritual and reimagined practice for spiritual self-understanding. They are listed below:

1. Performance Pressure and the Illusion of Busyness: a belief rooted in capitalist ideology that productivity is correlated to being busy as the determinant of connecting with self, others, and the community.
2. Identity Beyond Engineering and Beyond Achievement: exploring identity and vocational interests outside the classroom, empowering students to redefine personal achievement.
3. Longing for Non-Transactional Community: a desire for transformative relationships and communal interaction with peers to create rich community.
4. Meaning and Faith as a Grounding Resource: seeking meaning and exploring what faith means to ground their values and intrinsic motivations.

5. Emerging Spiritual Companionship in Emerging Adulthood: cultivating a personal connection to others during this developmental stage, exploring isolation and identity within new communities.

Thematic Frameworks

Our shared meals served participants with four objectives – sacred time, holy listening, sacramental gathering, and relationality as a response to the five thematic frameworks.

Performance Pressure and the Illusion of Busyness

As the new semester started, I reminded study participants about our communal meals. They preferred quick scheduling via text, so I facilitated a series of texts to coordinate their move-in and academic schedules. Participants shared their availability, and within an hour, we agreed on a date for our first meeting. From my perspective, the quick scheduling indicated their strong interest in fully engaging in this research and reflecting on their first two years. They asked about meeting at my home near campus to avoid transportation issues and create a more personal setting. My home is within the Georgia Tech Police Department's jurisdiction, making it accessible through multiple transportation options.

The students initially arrived in staggered groups. As the study progressed, they started arriving together with their backpacks. When they entered my home, they enthusiastically hugged and called each other the familiar nicknames they had given each other when they first met two years ago. Study participants shared their summer experiences and laughed about their adventures. They agreed with Rubi's comments on

the monotony of office work, and Nia talked about her experiences with managers. Huey shared stories from studying abroad in Europe and highlights from his travels. John discussed his work with a local organization in his hometown. Mattia recounted his travel mishaps during his spring semester studying abroad. The others shared summer mishaps they could now laugh about. After catching up, each participant found a spot on my sectional sofa and adjacent piano bench, choosing to sit close together while leaving other chairs around the circle empty for additional guests not part of the study. I placed the meal on a table decorated with fresh flowers, cloth napkins, and colorful glasses, inviting them to help themselves and eat. Wisdom's Table was set near a college campus in Atlanta, Georgia.

Identity Beyond Engineering and Beyond Achievement

After the participants finished their meal and cleared their plates, I asked if they were ready to begin and confirmed their willingness to continue. I reviewed the study's design and restated my role as a researcher. I told the participants that I would be listening to their conversation and would only speak to ask clarifying questions. Although I initially planned to record the sessions, I decided against it because I noticed that having a recording device might cause participants to hold back out of fear of saying the wrong thing, rather than speaking naturally. The participants agreed and expressed their preference for conversations without devices and not being recorded. Their feedback confirmed that technology was a distracting performance that conflicted with the purpose of their time together. All the students expressed a desire to learn more about themselves and each other.

I encouraged participants to reintroduce themselves without explanations. As each research participant introduced themselves, they no longer started with their major and hometown. Participants mentioned their major only if they had changed majors since starting at Georgia Tech. It was not who they were. Over the past two years, they had established boundaries with each other that made them feel comfortable sharing their interests in reading, mending clothes, theater, or volunteer work they actively participate in. After everyone had introduced themselves, the participants asked me to do the same. Then Huey picked up a bowl that contained their different curiosities and drew the first question. He read it aloud: “What is a hard truth you have learned about yourself since coming to college?”

Longing for Non-Transactional Community

Raquel began responding to the question by saying, "That my measure of success had changed because my cup was full enough. My time in college doesn’t need to be all-consuming.” She shared with the group that her time in college reinforced a truth: “That people will still love me regardless of my grades or internships that I get.”

John expressed that his parents made him “focus on results.” He attended a mindfulness retreat with scholars at Ignatius House Jesuit Retreat Center in Atlanta, GA. John acknowledged that the retreat introduced him to journaling, embracing silence, and listening more deeply to himself and others.

As Raquel and John shared, I observed the other participants leaning in, showing they were engaged with what was being shared. After a pause, Huey questioned what he saw on campus—that people avoid making eye contact—and he expressed that he was

"longing for deep connection." The other study participants faced a reality of the campus culture; Grant said that "people need more enjoyment at this school." Mattias replied, "sometimes it's not that serious." I noticed that Rubi nodded in agreement. They were openly rejecting a culture that constantly pressured them to form transactional connections, creating an illusion of busyness. The study participants questioned the ongoing push by administrators to build networks for securing internships at well-known companies or research labs. They said they valued meaningful connections with friends and a network based on mutual understanding and support. They also noted that a campus and society built on transactional relationships sometimes led to jealousy and unnecessary doubt about their progress. Grant and John agreed that "LinkedIn is [sic] the worst social media."

Meaning and Faith as a Grounding Resource

During our second dinner, the first question for the study participants was: What are some qualities that you admire in other people that you would like to emulate? Nia spoke with empathy, "We are all are on our own path." She pondered with the other participants, "What is driving my jealousy towards seeing posts on LinkedIn or Instagram? Is it superficial or passion?" Huey responded to her inquiry about developing his own "clutch factor" by creating a to-do list that allowed him to focus on what he wanted to do. This helped him understand his own goals better now.

John opened the door with his fellow participants to share his exploration of faith. He noted that this newfound contentment grounds him in his dedication to silence and in protecting his peace by not letting trivial things disturb him. In each of the six sessions,

the discussion of faith or their spiritual journey came up. When the topic arose, participants spoke in a way that did not ostracize others with different perspectives or relationships to spirituality or organized religion. I observed the other participants staying engaged in the conversation, listening to what was shared without judgment or feeling judged.

Over the six sessions, the central theme was love as a grounding principle. Participants shared ways they set boundaries with themselves to reduce negative thoughts caused by imposter syndrome. Nia discussed the effects of letting imposter syndrome take control, which led her to falsely believe she was not doing enough. While reviewing the notes, I noticed that during sessions, participants talked about vocational exploration, finding a romantic partner, or becoming a parent. They expressed doubts about whether it would be possible to balance a future engineering career with an intimate relationship or parenthood.

Emerging Spiritual Companionship in Emerging Adulthood

With each meal, I observed participants closing their eyes as they listened to one another, helping to share vulnerabilities. The conversations paved the way for ease and depth in what was shared, creating a model of emerging spiritual companionship. In *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Spiritual Direction for Small Groups,* Daniel Pretchel highlights several types of small groups along two axes: task/problem-solving/information-action-oriented and support/guidance/formation-contemplative. The research focused on the support-guidance/formation-contemplative axis. In my work with small groups, both personally and professionally, there is a kinship and connection to the

group's primary purpose, which serves as a welcoming entry point. When people join groups for support and guidance, a basic level of trust develops through shared narratives. I have participated in Nar-Anon groups and a contemplative group for spiritual directors of color for the past three years. Although our lived experiences differ, we seek mutual support that fosters growth. The research participants were students at the same university, studying engineering, in the same cohort-based scholarship program, and in the same year of matriculation. While this level of commonality is not required for small groups, it was significant because they experienced formation in ways similar to engineering students who had just completed their second year. They are all contemplating their future paths at Georgia Tech and considering life after college. As the communal meal gathering continued, participants shared more deeply in each session, drawing on insights from previous meetings. They stayed fully present to what their peers shared by revisiting thoughts they had reflected on since the last session. I witnessed sacred listening and meaningful conversations as each participant wondered how the words shared might apply to their own lives. During discussions, they sometimes referred to formative and contemplative conversations with friends, family, or significant others. This experience created space for participants to include others in transformative conversations across various contexts and communities in which they exist.

Theological Integrations

"Boredom is a luxury." – Mattia

The explicit purpose of this study was to critically respond to how higher education institutions have deprioritized whole-person formation. The research engaged

with academic theories central to theology, education, sociology, and psychology, impacting the formation of emerging adults studying engineering. The study examined the role of structured communal meals as a formative spiritual practice that cultivated identity, agency, and relational belonging among emerging adult engineering students.

The meals established a sacred structure for experiencing hospitality, vocational formation, discernment, and reflection, using the foundational principles of Ignatian Spirituality.

Previous chapters outlined the design and facilitation of the meals that honored holy listening, relationality, and sacramental gathering by establishing a sacred time for participants. This section will focus on the meaning and significance of the study to advance formation in higher education. The first part of this section is an integrated thematic approach we used during each meal. These themes include hospitality and wisdom-sharing, empathetic understanding, normalizing formative practices for discernment, and developing insights that increase awareness to care for the whole person.

Each theme presented integrates theological reflections, expressed in their own words, to illustrate that spirituality is universal, not limited to a particular religious doctrine, but rather a relational process experienced by the study participants. The themes presented will conclude with a bridge that helps participants understand the significance of student formation in higher education.

In section two, I will provide a summary of the final meal, during which study participants verbally articulated their awareness of developmental identity and communal formation. Additionally, constructive critiques for higher education were offered.

Practical Theological Approaches

Hospitality and Wisdom Sharing

The first integrated approach with study participants was hospitality. In late June, a Zoom meeting was held with study participants to explain the study and answer any questions from individual or group participants. The group established a set of guiding principles to maintain an additional layer of confidentiality,[1] and all sessions would be device-free. We all agreed that, as the researcher, my role during our sessions was to take notes. As the researcher, I could ask clarifying questions, but their voices would be the prominent ones during our meals. We established a set meeting day and time each month, and the participants[2] requesting their legal name, hometown, major, preferred name, or alias to be used to maintain confidentiality.

Recognizing that each participant's experience and definition of communal dining differed amongst the nine participants, it was important to ensure that the group had the same entry point for the conversational themes and communal dining experience. Participants were asked them to watch the film Babette's Feast, two advertisements about eating together from Canada and China, and listen to an episode from the NPR show *Wild*

[1] Double confidentiality is an agreement that the students will not disclose what they share outside of the group, and the students will not bring up what was shared in a previous session without permission.

[2] Qualtrics is a web-based tool for creating surveys for research, user experience, etc.

Card, hosted by Rachel Martin.[3] *Babette's Feast* is a 1987 film adapted from a short story with the same name written by Isak Dinesen.[4] The film has deeply spiritual themes about hospitality and welcoming the stranger. At the start of each meal, a Pyrex glass bowl containing the questions submitted by each study participant was placed on an empty chair. Prior to beginning our time of wisdom sharing, I reminded participants that silence is an acceptable way to gather their thoughts and feelings or to wonder aloud about the question being asked. The authors of the selected questions were encouraged to share the intentions and curiosities behind them. Finally, I reminded the participants that my role as a researcher was to listen and ask clarifying questions.

For the first meal, I offered the bowl for one of the participants to draw a question. The study participants looked at one another, wondering silently who would select the first question. Huey extended his hand and read the question aloud. The participants closed their eyes and nodded their heads to gather their thoughts. Then, Raquel spoke, and the conversation commenced. For this and subsequent meals, the sessions developed a natural rhythm of having a meal, giving a brief update on the writing process, and having participants identify a peer to read two of the unread questions and facilitate the discussion. The first question was retrieved from the bowl by one of the participants and read aloud. This action indicated to other participants that they were welcome to begin responding to the prompts when they were ready. Though, I was

[3] *Why We Made Wild Card (Wild Card+)*, episode 2, "Wild Card with Rachel Martin," directed by Rachel Martin, aired May 1, 2024, on National Public Radio, Podcast, 10 mins.

[4] *Babette's Feast*, Drama/International, directed by Gabriel Axel (Nordisk Film, 1987), Film, 102 minutes.

positioned within the circle to capture words, thoughts, and nonverbal cues observed my voice was deliberately excluded. As they began to converse, their attention focused on one another.

In the book of Proverbs, we are introduced to Wisdom's table, which amplifies the attainment of wisdom for all of humanity within a community. For this study, communal meals offered an experience that required participants to connect with their humanity. Participants established connections that created paths to strengthen their internal wisdom and spiritual self-understanding by introducing opportunities to explore a discerning spirit. Unlike Folly's table, which invites isolation and pluralism, these meals build a trusted space that connects each participant with those of goodwill, which is paramount to radical hospitality and welcome.

At the end of our third session in October, the students requested a Thanksgiving meal for our November gathering. I saw that request as a nonverbalized expression of gratitude for what they were experiencing. As the research participants were leaving, Grant turned to me and said, "Thank you, Mort.[5] I don't think I would have ever had these conversations and spoken these thoughts aloud." The meal became a safe, transparent space for conversation, enabling them to bring their full, authentic selves.

The findings suggest that structured communal meals function analogously to a contemporary Means of Grace — cultivating belonging and discernment through repeated embodied practice rather than sacramental rite.

[5] "Mort" is one of the nicknames that the students have given me.

Formation and Empathetic Understanding

In *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Spiritual Direction for Small Groups*, Daniel Prechtel emphasizes diverse types of small groups along two axes: task/problem-solving/information-action-oriented and support/guidance/formation-contemplative.[6] The research study design focused on the support-guidance/formation-contemplative axis, centering on kinship and connection to the group's intended purpose, which is a welcoming entry point for participation. In groups such as Nar-Anon,[7] there is a basic level of trust because participants share narratives in search of formative mutual support. While this is not a requirement for small groups, this study focused on participants who had commonalities. For example, they were students at the same university, studying engineering in the same cohort-based scholarship program, and in the same year of matriculation. It was important to limit participation in this group of students because they were undergoing formation similar to that of engineering students who had just completed their second year. They are all discerning what they wish to further explore in their remaining time at Georgia Tech and thinking deeper about their vocation to life after college.

One evening, I received a private text message from one of the participants, Raquel wrote:

[6] Prechtel, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Spiritual Direction for Small Groups*.

[7] The Nar-Anon Family Groups is primarily for those who know or have known a feeling of desperation concerning the addiction problem of someone near to you. It is similar is structure to other support networks such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA). Al-Anon is similar group for family members and friends of alcoholics.

> I'm naturally a silly person, but I like [sic] I get in my own way by giving off the perception to other people that I'm unserious about my goals for the future. Sometimes, I think this forces me to have to prove to myself or "come back" from being underestimated. Maybe it even shies [sic] away opportunities because I wasn't up front or didn't clearly state what I wanted from someone that could've given me help in some way.

The research participants established a covenant with one another and themselves. They have kept a promise outlined in the guiding principles: to be present to one another when they gather and to show up to welcome each other as friends on a journey. Evaluating the group's rhythm during our monthly gatherings, modeling Prechtel's observations: "we hold ourselves as accountable to each other for the spiritual well-being of the group and its members, and that we invite and see God's presence in our midst."[8] The study participants reframed their relationship, as members of a scholarship program, to include a commitment to each other as spiritual companions.

Normative Practices for Discernment

Throughout the study, I observed participants leaning in and closing their eyes as they began speaking to one another vulnerably. Their conversations flowed with ease and depth as the sessions progressed, allowing participants to witness what they, too, were discerning.

During our fourth meal, Andrea asked the study participants, *"What is a deep desire you have for your life?"* Huey countered with a question he had been contemplating: "Why do I work or why do I earn money?" He affirmed his desire to create opportunities for his future children to eliminate the "barriers to entry" and cultivate their own desires without societal or parental pressures. Each participant

[8] Prechtel, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Spiritual Direction for Small Groups*. 8

restated their views in separate ways, summarizing that they did not wish to "chase material things" and reflected a desire to make "an impact on the world or field of my chosen profession."

In a previous session, they discussed which major they would choose if not engineering and inquired how their peers might incorporate their interests into this discipline. John responded to the question by discussing his desire to be connected to education, either in a traditional classroom setting or in his future place of employment. I asked John a clarifying question: "Could you think of ways you could incorporate that into engineering?" He simply responded, "I would be happy with that." The lack of depth indicated that he had not had an opportunity to connect the two disciplines before. Grant wondered how the other study participants envisioned achieving a balance between family life and a career in engineering, given that it often does not "seem possible with what we are told". To Grant and others, the pursuits of partnership and an engineering career appeared fundamentally incompatible. Huey responded that, "I am creatively thinking about jobs that have a work-life balance to allow me to have a family and be there for them." Returning to Luke's gospel in Chapter 2, their conversation illuminated the limitations in creating true welcome, even for ourselves. In this case, these limitations were processed by participants confronting a reality where they may not be able to imagine a vocation of intimate partnership and parenthood. Dr. Arnett's scholarship regarding emerging adulthood supports their perceived reality.

Raquel spoke about her grandmother and father, reflecting with gratitude on what her grandmother created for her family. As a law school professor, she insisted on hosting her grandchildren, who lived on two continents, over Christmas and summer breaks to

ensure that distance did not keep them from staying connected to one another. To Raquel, this communicated to her a commitment to family and God first.

It was almost divine that the second question selected from the bowl was, “How do you get in your own way?” Grant mentioned self-doubt. John discussed being stuck on past thoughts about whether he had enough experience to be competitive. Nia talked about feeling that she is “not doing enough.” Unintentionally, they were naming experiences of imposter syndrome and how it has held them back on campus and in preparation for life after college. Huey offered to the other participants that he had been reading about a martial arts mindset, articulating to the others that “as long as I have a direction, I will be okay…when I set a goal of a certain number of resumes that I want to hand out when I go to the career fair.” He talked about putting too much pressure on himself and shared about having a panic attack last summer prior to taking an exam while studying abroad. Huey and Grant discussed moments when they put unnecessary pressure on themselves, saying, “It wasn’t that bad,” and “nothing is that important to your mental state.” Both emphasized the importance of managing your expectations. In their own way, each of them reflected on the need to find balance.

The data from the meals show that discernment, particularly among emerging adults, is primarily a community-driven process rather than merely an individual practice, indicating relational growth in Ignatian attentiveness. The dialogue around the communal table modeled an opportunity for a transformative experience with one another. In our current academic and societal culture, we should be mindful of how conversations are shared around literal and figurative tables with emerging adults and shift away from a

transactional dynamic to create a space transformed by seeing others' experiences and the ways society has impacted their lives.

Cura Personalis as a Reflective Experience

Joseph was absorbing everyone's words and reflecting on how participating in campus ministry and being part of the Clark Scholars Program had encouraged him to explore "What are my limits?" Throughout the meal gatherings, participants increasingly shared more deeply in each session. Returning to insights they had gained earlier indicated they were actively reflecting on their own lives and experiences. This is the core and relatability of Ignatian Spirituality—an invitation to find God in all things, encouraging us to become aware of God's presence in everything and everyone. The gatherings were a sacred time and relational experience structured by the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP), a distinctive aspect of Jesuit education that reflects Ignatian Spirituality.

The contours of this study challenged the belief that the IPP is absent from or cannot be present in secular educational environments. Study participants were seeking applicability for their own curiosities, at times, referring to reflective conversations with their friends, family, or significant others. These actions demonstrated an emphatic response to the heart of *cura personalis.* As they care for themselves, they have the capacity to care for others.

Findings from the final meal

In Chapter 2, we used the body to imaginatively reflect how theories do not work in isolation but are interdependent on the formation of human development.

The current model of higher education has become increasingly transactional. We are shifting toward a student experience that focuses mainly on competition and dominance to secure the best internship or job, rather than on self-discovery. On the contrary, moving higher education toward a transformative experience does not conflict with students learning outcomes and securing jobs after graduation. Rather, they enhance that process.

At the last session, participants continued their usual routine. After processing what had transpired in the previous sessions, I asked for their permission to pose one more question: "What did this experience mean to you?" Their responses are provided below:

> Huey: “It was enlightening. I became aware of my peers who have been through a lot. The ability to connect over shared [sic] struggles was nice to have this outlet…hard to build this.”
>
> Grant: “I loved getting to know each other on a deeper level. It grounded me.”
>
> John: “Great way to build community…make an effort with friends for a meal, coffee [sic] It’s a reminder of community”
>
> Joseph: “Created a deeper connection than what we had before.”
>
> Raquel (via text): “It reinforced the importance of community for me and also made me realized [sic] how much I love my cohort and this scholarship program. Every time we meet, I’m amazed by how different we all are but how cohesive we are at the same time. There is genuinely a special place in my heart for CSP6 and I really appreciate Lauren for cultivating a space where we can connect deeper and prioritize our relationship with each other.”

Their responses highlighted that the meals and the sacred time shared with one another gave them a deeper understanding of their spiritual connection to themselves.

Jeffrey Arnett's theory of emerging adults[9] validates the shared human experience as study participants amplify their voices. Rubi reflected on our time together and said, "We have a solid foundation to be accessible to one another." Their final observations reassured participants that their curiosities and inner conflicts were not unique, helping to normalize shared struggles and uncertainties. The ritualized mealtimes established a sense of predictability, allowing them to exist without being performative. The shared meals were grounding for themselves and one another, fostering a sense of belonging.

Jan E. Stets' and Peter J. Burke's theory on identity formation and social identity within groups suggests that belonging is a functional condition that supports engagement and persistence in demanding academic environments. They summarized that the "self and society mutually influence each other," reflecting how opportunities and experiences within culture—such as language and customs—shape an individual's self-development. Stets and Burke's theory confirms the findings from this study exploring the communal meal as a spiritual practice and supports their future application in working with emerging adults in collegiate environments.

Conclusion

The final communal meal followed a structured pattern: establishing a sacred time, engaging in holy listening, participating in a sacramental gathering, and fostering

[9] The theory on emerging adulthood is influenced by Erik Erickson's life cycle development published in the 1950s. The advancement in technology and evolution of society supported Arnett's findings interpreting the need to reexamine the adolescence and young adulthood.

relationality. The participants' experience of receiving hospitality and sharing wisdom around the table provided them with an opportunity to deepen their spiritual self-understanding through normative practices of discernment and reflection. The findings of the study reaffirm that organized communal practices support the core principle of cura personalis during times of academic stress and developmental change.

Chapter 6 will point towards formative practices for emerging adults. What does this research offer to educators, chaplains, and institutions that accompany this population, recognizing their humanity and self-defined spirituality?

Chapter 6

Conclusions and Implications

"There is a disconnect. What they say we need versus what the industry says are vastly different." – Huey

The purpose of this study is to address higher education's failure to prioritize whole-person formation and to offer a low-stakes intervention, such as a communal meal, to supplement developmental and spiritual self-understanding practices that remain present in whole-person-centered education. This study suggests that structured, recurring communal meals with guided reflective prompts can serve as a replicable formation practice in high-performance university contexts where belonging is fragile. This closing chapter interprets the findings from the six communal meals and explores insights into educators, chaplains, pastors, or institutions who accompany emerging adults. Throughout the sessions, participants developed tools to discern and explore whole–person–centered education in and out of the classroom within a sacred environment they helped curate.

This chapter explores the meaning of the transformative experiences discussed in Chapter 5, examining the theological insights that emerged, the strength of educators and institutions needed to support them, and the value of understanding and reflection in welcoming environments.

Integration of Communal Reflection and Relationality

The rhythm of the six sessions confirmed that spiritual development is a socially situated, accessible process reflected in interactive patterns, participant stories, and relational results. The four outcomes identified in the study were: belonging, engagement, emotional insights, and persistence. The spiritual practices within the study helped normalize the tensions experienced by participants through the cyclical rhythm of the academic semester and human developmental changes. Spiritual practice within the higher education context is examined as a framework through which participants collectively interpret challenge, identity, and purpose via structured, recurring communal meals with peers. The study participants are students at Georgia Tech; therefore, the study's conclusions align with the institution's strategic values.

- **Belonging:** prioritizing a student's sense of belonging is associated with retention, motivation, and academic performance in higher education.
- **Engagement:** developing clarity predicts academic engagement, degree commitment, and professional persistence in engineering and STEM education.
- **Emotional Insights:** stabilizing experiences that helped them "reset" before re-engaging with the rigors of academic life.
- **Persistence:** an outcome shaped by relational and spiritual infrastructure, rather than as an attribute of individual resilience alone.

The spiritual practice experienced during the communal meals was a relational, participatory process through which participants shared in meaning-making, embodied presence, and value alignment in a collegiate environment.

Implications for the Ministry Site: Georgia Institute of Technology[1]

The conclusions drawn from the research findings indicate that communal meals served as structured relational and spiritual practices that supported belonging, identity development, engagement, emotional regulation, and persistence within a rigorous academic context. Rather than operating as merely symbolic activities, the meals served as a group spiritual direction experience that addressed the diverse relationships with faith and non-faith traditions within the community—such as universality, altruism, interpersonal learning, and group cohesion, thereby activating and sustaining them. These mechanisms converge with established literature on student persistence, communities of practice, and psychological safety in higher education, suggesting that communal meal practices can function as a legitimate, transferable infrastructure for student success and well-being.

Belonging

"Rigor is important, but it can't come at the expense of a person." – Francis

The six meals provided a social experience that fostered a sense of belonging and integration at the cohort level in a high-demand academic environment. The study confirmed this assertion with the following evidence:

[1] In this context, "ministry site" refers to the social location of this study, not to the traditional usage of the word, which does not refer to Georgia Tech as a monastic institution.

- As the study progressed, the communal meals normalized study participants' shared struggle and uncertainty, recognizing the universality of their experience is not unique.
- The monthly rhythm and repeated participation strengthened their social-emotional integration within the study cohort.
- Participants reflected a decreased feeling of isolation and increased accessibility to peers and mentors. These observations are linked to higher motivation, engagement, and retention amongst emerging adults in the literature.[2,3,4]

This evidence for a student's sense of belonging has universal applicability to higher education institutions. For this research study, I focused on why it matters to Georgia Tech, specifically the College of Engineering, connected to its strategic value, identifying students as its top priority.

- A sense of belonging is empirically associated with retention, motivation, and academic performance in higher education.[5]

[2] Arnett et al., *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*.

[3] Ravishi De Zoysa et al., "Motivation and the Role of Empathy in Engineering Work," *Australasian Journal of Engineering Education* 29, no. 1 (2024): 55–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/22054952.2024.236410.

[4] Higgins, *undeclared*.

[5] Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides*.

- The academic rigor required for an engineering degree can lead to feeling isolation and performance anxiety. A sense of belonging mitigates student disengagement, thus reducing the likelihood of early departure.

- The study design is a modifiable, relational lever for improving persistence at scale and honoring an established or redefined culture of student groups within Georgia Tech.

Engagement

> *I've realized that scholar engagement is about more than showing up; it's about connecting, growing, and giving back. This program has poured so much into me, from incredible opportunities like research experiences and study abroad to lasting friendships, and I feel truly blessed to play a part in giving that same experience to others while passing on lessons I've learned throughout college. - Flynn*

Engagement is characterized by sustained participation, verbal contributions, initiative-taking, help-seeking, and ongoing involvement. The structured, non-evaluative design of communal meals in this study fostered a psychologically supportive environment that enhanced engagement, participation, and adaptive help-seeking behaviors among participants. The research study supported the participants' experience by:

- Creating predictable, non-judgmental spaces for meals and conversations, lowering barriers for participants and gradually reducing the fear of negative evaluation by their peers.

- Fostering psychological safety, which boosted participants' willingness to discuss uncertainty and academic challenges. This approach demonstrates group cohesion and promotes interpersonal learning.

- Sharing peer presence and normalizing vulnerability and process meaning as expected, rather than as exceptional behaviors.

The findings from this study recommend that, as higher education leaders and educators at Georgia Tech, we must engage the whole person. Programs and processes that ignore aspects of their whole selves risk not being seen by students as true education that leads to knowledge and growth, both academically and developmentally. Within the contours of the study, this is connected to celebrating collaborative environments by:

- Recognizing that engagement is a key factor for academic success and is linked to retention and performance.
- Normalizing help-seeking, which reduces attrition risk, especially in high-stakes, high-rigor programs.
- Facilitating psychologically safe collaborative learning environments that promote innovation aligned with institutional priorities.

Emotional Insights

"Georgia Tech does a wonderful job providing career opportunities, eclipsing social opportunities to support connection and belonging. Most opportunities are connected to some career development opportunity." – Melvin

The study's findings suggest that structured communal practices contribute to emotional regulation during periods of academic stress, serving as a stabilizing factor that supports sustained engagement and performance. Collectively, this generation of students expressed experiencing a transactional society. Christian Smith noted in his 2011 book, *Lost in Translation: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, that "we use our sociological

imaginations…to ask certain kinds of questions and look for specific kinds of answers."[6] Smith's inquiry speaks to the interdependence of social and cultural influences in the formation of communities. This study confirmed that his observations in 2011, shortly after the launch of Instagram, were a clarion call to pay attention to how the current generation of future emerging adults could be developmentally impacted by the growing competition for community across in-person, virtual, and hybrid spaces. Jonathan Haight's The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness expands on Smith's work, offering this reflection:

> Gen Z became the first generation in history to go through puberty with a portal in their pockets that called them away from the people nearby and into an alternative universe that was exciting, addictive, unstable, and – as I will show – unsuitable for children and adolescents. Succeeding socially in that universe required them to devote a large part of their consciousness – perpetually – to managing what became their online brand. This was now necessary to gain acceptance from peers, which is the oxygen of adolescence, and to avoid online shaming, which is the nightmare of adolescence.[7]

- Within the study, emotional insights are evidenced by ritualizing structured meals, which provide predictability and containment that students described as grounding during periods of academic stress.

[6] Christian Smith et al., *Lost In Translation: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[7] Jonathan Haight, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024).

- Embodying co-presence by eating together in shared space contributed to downregulating anxiety and restoring focus, consistent with literature on communal practices and spiritual-caritative meals.[8,9]
- Characterizing meals as a calming experience that helped them "reset" before re-engaging with demanding academic tasks.

This feedback provides a clear path for Georgia Tech to enhance student well-being by protecting their ability to explore their own experiences and express curiosity through both personal and academic perspectives. In practice, Georgia Tech can create safe spaces and recognize reflective practices that support focus, persistence, and collaborative inquiry for emotional regulation in challenging settings. These efforts result in:

- a reduction in burnout-related disengagement and withdrawal.
- encouraging sustained cognitive performance, which is central to success in intensive STEM-based curricula.

Persistence

"It's hard at the school to not [sic] compare yourself to others" – Rubi

Communal meals build a relational and spiritual foundation, strengthening persistence by encouraging peer connections, shared meaning-making, and a commitment

[8] Jazmin A. Reyes-Portillo et al., *The Psychological, Academic, and Economic Impact of COVID-19 on College Students in the Epicenter of the Pandemic*, n.d.

[9] John F. Helliwell et al., *Sharing Meals with Other: How Sharing Meals Supports Happiness and Social Connections*, World Happiness Report, WHR 2025 (University of Oxford: Wellbeing Research Centre., 2025).

to transformative experiences over time. Tim Clydesdale's *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation*[10] examined the impact of not discussing vocation on campuses, which is "wholly different from an indoctrination…invites intelligent participants into conversation with one another," shifting engagement with intellectual curiosity and citizenship to the world around them. Clydesdale's examination of the purpose of undergraduate education should focus on students' exploration of meaning and purpose. Chris Higgins confirms Clydesdale's assertion, writing in *undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education*[11], that as a society, "formative education begins by awakening agency and orienting the student on the task of formation." The value proposition for students is then "what is in it for me?"

Participants' responses reflected that:

- Enriching peer relationships during communal meals serves as a trusted support system throughout their college journey.
- Repeated interactions strengthened the commitment to the study participant group.
- Sharing challenges and purpose with one another since matriculating at Tech has heightened the perceived value of ongoing engagement, encouraging persistence.

[10] Tim Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduation: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation* (The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[11] Higgins, *undeclared*. 18

One of Georgia Tech's strategic values is to serve as responsible stewards[12] of the resources entrusted to us in pursuit of providing education. Redefining stewardship as a responsibility to our students reframes the student experience toward persistence, fostering attitudes and behaviors that support academic, vocational, and developmental growth. The findings explicitly point out:

- Naming persistence and retention as institutional priorities that are routinely measured outcomes.
- Building durable relational interventions that are scalable across cohorts and programs.
- Adapting relational practices that can be transferred across different disciplinary contexts.

Invitation for Replication: Considerations Across Different Contexts

While the project was created for second-year engineering students in a cohort-based scholarship program at Georgia Tech, the research study design includes transferable elements for others aiming to incorporate formative education principles that support both academic and developmental goals.

Hospitality

Designing a CPAR study centered on radical hospitality and incorporating theological and social psychology theories that promote spiritual wholeness on a journey

[12] For the purposes of the research project, the term *"steward"* refers to students currently attending Georgia Tech.

toward self-education was essential. Each study participant has different views on religion, shaped by diverse beliefs and non-belief traditions. It is important to support the varied personal relationships and to focus on the concept of spirituality as defined in the Oxford Dictionary: "the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things." Even within a campus ministry or pastoral setting, one's relationship with the various names of God, the divine spirit, or a higher power is not homogeneous.

This shifts the participant's focus inward to their internal experiences, which is crucial in group spiritual direction. In this study, both the researcher and participants agreed that spirituality was seen as a connection with their peers. It also promotes openness about my own spiritual journey. As educators, pastors, or chaplains, we should value students' stories and experiences and bring our authentic selves to foster empowering learning spaces. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks states,

> When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives, but who are themselves unwilling to share, are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share.[13]

The classroom can and should be the most radically hospitable place to allow freedom and exploration to flourish for this current generation as should other spaces on campus.

[13] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

Turning to higher education institutions, Ray Oldenburg states that third spaces exist where one can be their most authentic self, away from home (first place) and work (second place). [14] Oldenburg states that "the most important function of third places is that of uniting neighborhoods." Is the third space always the classroom or should the college campus be considered a third space? How can you cry for unity when there is a spirit of destruction and disconnection due to political shifts and division? If a sense of belonging is still a priority, what institutions are unifying around to support persistence? These questions are important to ponder in higher education and other spaces meant for emerging adults.

Community

Over the past twenty years, there has been a reduction in curated, in-person spaces to promote community building for students. Every day, new articles or books are published about Gen Z, examining their attitudes towards work, commitment, and delays in achieving social milestones such as driving or marriage. Andre 3000's acceptance speech at the 1995 Source Awards said to the crowd, "The South got somethin' [sic] to say."[15] These students do as well. Our job as educators, pastors, and chaplains within higher education institutions and community organizations is to provide them with a safe space to be heard and acknowledged as experts on their own experiences.

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[14] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 3rd Edition (Marlowe & Company, 1999).

[15] "OutKast Stands Up For The South After Being Boo'd At The 1995 Source Awards," *Hip Hop Awards 20*, BET Networks, November 5, 2020, 15:02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg4A6umDzDQ.

Discernment

Fr. Pedro Arrupe, serving as the Superior General of the Jesuits, gave a speech in 1973[16] to Jesuit Alumni of Europe, emphasizing that graduates of Jesuit-sponsored primary, high school, and university had not been properly educated to participate "in the promotion of justice and the liberation of the oppressed," their education was an extension of the founding principles of the Society of Jesus to be "men for and with others."

Higher education institutions can look towards Ignatian discernment and bell hooks' reflections that "We refuse to allow either/or thinking to cloud our judgment. We embrace the logic of both/and. We acknowledge the limits of what we know."[17] Students have opportunities to engage in various communities throughout their college years, often as resume-building activities. As educators, we accompany students for four to five years, providing a transitional space for self-discovery and connection with others. The evolving financial aid system and concerns about affordability can create pressure for students to reevaluate their priorities and values. Students often perceive that stepping away from their studies within the current academic framework puts them behind in an imaginary race towards their future goals. Should higher education administrators, educators, and chaplains consider how they are creating space for holistic education? Is their education limited to the classroom? How are we addressing affordability and accessibility beyond just tuition and fees?

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[16] Pedro Arrupe, SJ, "Men for Others," Speech, 10th International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe, Valenica, Spain, July 31, 1973.

[17] hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. 10

bell hooks' reflects in *Teaching Community* that*,* "Education as the practice of freedom affirms healthy self-esteem in students as it promotes their capacity to be aware and live consciously. It teaches them to reflect and act in ways that further self-actualization, rather than conformity to the status quo." Collectively, educators, chaplains, and institutions should discern how we adapt our approaches to meet the shifting needs of students, recognizing social, political, and economic change.

Limitations and Reflections

This project is a synthesis of an exploration of the human experience towards spiritual self-understanding, engaging theology, sociology, social psychology, and education, and its application to college students at an engineering university in Georgia. This section evaluates limitations and challenges within the study design. Finally, I will offer a reflection, as a researcher and administrator, on the study and its participants.

Limitations and Challenges

There were nine study participants across six sessions from August 2025 to January 2026, representing 10% of the current scholars in the program, ranging from first to fifth year and majoring in engineering. Georgia Tech's College of Engineering enrolls full and part-time undergraduate students totaling a population of 8,334.[18] The sample size is not statistically significant; however, the findings invite further investigation among engineering students. The study participants are enrolled in a cohort-based scholarship program model and are familiar with intimate discussion. I recommend that future studies

[18] *Institutional Research & Planning*, Enrollment by Major, accessed November 2, 2025, https://irp.gatech.edu/dashboards/COE/Enrollment.

invite participants to self-select based on their affinity group (e.g., major, commuter vs. residential student).

The original study design intended to record each session. However, before the first session, I decided not to record with their input, noting that the presence of a recording device might deter participants from speaking freely. I communicated this decision to them after the fact, to which the participants agreed and expressed their preference for device-free, unrecorded conversations. Their feedback supported the idea that technology could possibly be a performance distraction, conflicting with the purpose of their time together. In hindsight, the decision should have been made together. This temporarily shifted the power dynamics at the start of the study.

Reflection as the researcher and administrator

One of my mother's favorite movies was The Wizard of Oz, an adaptation of L. Frank Baum's novel. In the novel he writes, "A heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others." I find myself loved beyond measure, and, in disbelief, this first-generation college graduate will be the first in her maternal family to earn her doctorate.

French Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." His words helped me become spiritually grounded and gave me the confidence to pursue this research study. The study required me to examine my own internal movements. I practiced the following: a daily Ignatian examen, regular meetings with my therapist and

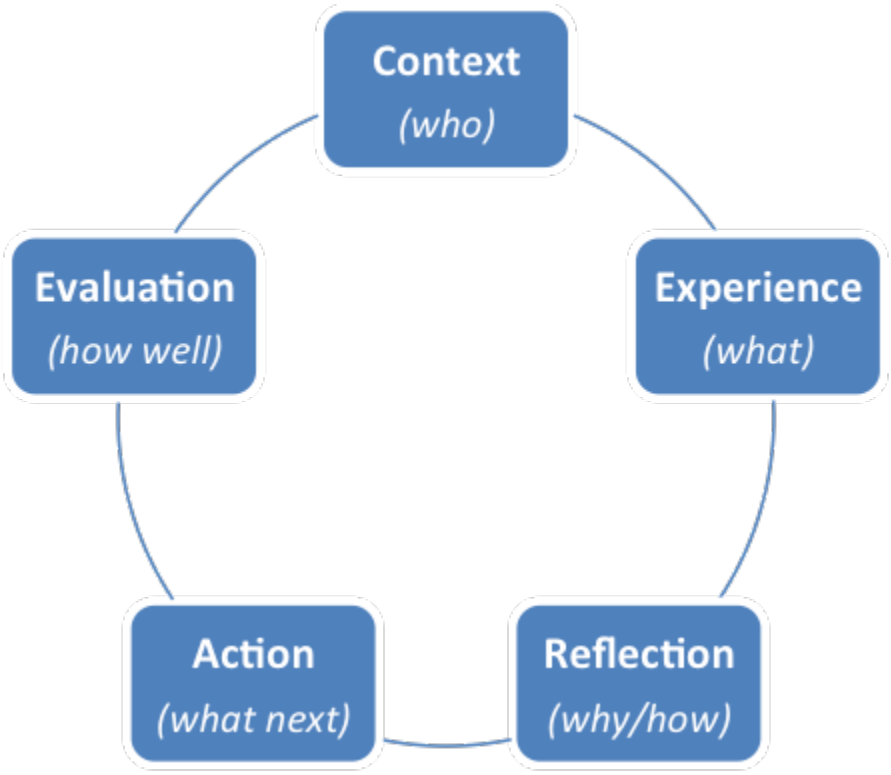
spiritual director, and watching a film in theaters each week. It was important to model the practices the study participants shared, balancing academics and their personal lives.

Holding the roles of both scholarship administrator and researcher has its strengths and risks, and navigating both realms required me to establish clear boundaries. The final research study design confirmed the influence of facilitated group therapy, spiritual direction, or conversations across diverse communities in professional, social, and religious settings. There is applicability for higher education to engage with philosopher-educator John Dewey, who stressed that "students learn by doing" and viewed the classroom as a space for experiential learning.

As emerging adults, the students have voices worth hearing. With this in mind, I encourage the consideration of one final question: Are we prepared to listen and allow them space to explore their identities more deeply?

APPENDCIES

Appendix A: Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP)



Source: https://www.slu.edu/cttl/resources/ignatian-pedagogical-paradigm.php

Appendix B: Communal Meal Questions

1. If you could choose any major outside of STEM, what would it be and why?
2. How could you integrate it into your current major and career goals?
3. What does the concept of inner peace mean to you, and how do you work to protect it?
4. How has your peace been challenged since coming to college? How did that feel in your body, or how did you handle it?
5. When was the first time you felt proud of yourself?
6. What is something you are working on about yourself?
7. Or what is something you have become aware of about yourself since starting college?
8. What are some qualities you admire in other people that you would like to emulate?
    a. How do you get in your own way?
9. Do you feel love towards yourself?
10. What are some ways you are aiming to show more love to yourself?
11. What is a hard truth you have learned about yourself since coming to college?
12. What do you consider successful right now?
13. Has that changed since coming to college?
14. What is a deep desire you have for your life? fe?
15. What is something you think about differently after two years of college?

Appendix C: Identity Style Inventory – ISI-5 Questions

1. I know basically what I believe and don't believe.
2. I automatically adopt and follow the values I was brought up with.
3. I'm not sure where I'm heading in my life; I guess things will work themselves out.
4. Talking to others helps me explore my personal beliefs.
5. I know what I want to do with my future.
6. I strive to achieve the goals that my family and friends hold for me.
7. It doesn't pay to worry about values in advance; I decide things as they happen.
8. When facing a life decision, I take into account different points of view before making a choice.
9. I am not really sure what I believe.
10. I have always known what I believe and don't believe; I never really have doubts about my beliefs.
11. I am not really thinking about my future now, it is still a long way off.
12. I spend a lot of time reading or talking to others trying to develop a set of values that makes sense to me.
13. I am not sure which values I really hold.
14. I never question what I want to do with my life because I tend to follow what important people expect me to do.
15. When I have to make a decision, I try to wait as long as possible in order to see what will happen.
16. When facing a life decision, I try to analyze the situation in order to understand it.
17. I am not sure what I want to do in the future.

18. I think it is better to adopt a firm set of beliefs than to be open-minded.
19. I try not to think about or deal with problems as long as I can.
20. When making important decisions, I like to spend time thinking about my options.
21. I have clear and definite life goals.
22. I think it's better to hold on to fixed values rather than to consider alternative value systems.
23. I try to avoid personal situations that require me to think a lot and deal with them on my own.
24. When making important decisions, I like to have as much information as possible.
25. I am not sure what I want out of life.
26. When I make a decision about my future, I automatically follow what close friends or relatives expect from me.
27. My life plans tend to change whenever I talk to different people.
28. I handle problems in my life by actively reflecting on them.
29. I have a definite set of values that I use to make personal decisions.
30. When others say something that challenges my personal values or beliefs, I automatically disregard what they have to say.
31. Who I am changes from situation to situation.
32. I periodically think about and examine the logical consistency between my values and life goals.
33. I am emotionally involved and committed to specific values and ideals.
34. I prefer to deal with situations in which I can rely on social norms and standards.
35. When personal problems arise, I try to delay acting as long as possible.

36. It is important for me to obtain and evaluate information from a variety of sources before I make important life decisions.

Appendix D: ISI-5 Participant Scores

Participant	**Pre-Survey – Identity Style (highest)**	**Post-Survey – Identity Style (highest)**
1	Informational	Diffuse
2	Informational	Informational
3	Informational	Diffuse
4	Informational	Informational
5	Diffuse	Diffuse
6	Informational	Normative
7	No data available	Informational
8	No data available	No data available
9	Informational	Normative

Appendix E: Communal Meal Intention and Session Outline

Communal Meal Session	Meal Intention and Agenda
Session 1 **Meal Served:** Breakfast for Dinner **Question:** Research Participant introductions What is a hard truth you have learned about yourself since coming to college?	Welcome 1. One study participant draws a question from Appendix B, reads it aloud to the participants, and hands it to the researcher. 2. Facilitated discussion by participant co-researchers utilizing questions pulled by a study participant. 3. Discuss next communal meal logistics. 4. Thank you by researcher *Note: selected questions will be removed from the bowl and will not be used again.
Session 2 **Meal Served:** Sunday Wings Party **Questions:** What are some qualities that you admire in other people that you would like to emulate?	Welcome 1. One study participant draws a question from Appendix B, reads it aloud to the participants, and hands it to the researcher. 2. Facilitated discussion by participant co-researchers utilizing questions pulled by a study participant. 3. Same study participant pulls the second question listed in Appendix B from the bowl and reads it to the participants. 4. Discuss next communal meal logistics. 5. Thank you by researcher

What does the concept of inner peace mean to you, and how do you work to protect it?	*Note: selected questions will be removed from the bowl and will not be used again.
Session 3 **Meal Served:** Puerto Rican Sunday Dinner **Questions:** If you could choose any major outside of STEM, what would it be and why? a) How could you integrate it into your current major and career goals?	Welcome 1. One study participant draws a question from Appendix B, reads it aloud to the participants, and hands it to the researcher. 2. Facilitated discussion by participant co-researchers utilizing questions pulled by a study participant. 3. Same study participant pulls the second question listed in Appendix B from the bowl and reads it to the participants. 4. Discuss next communal meal logistics. 5. Thank you by researcher *Note: selected questions will be removed from the bowl and will not be used again.
Session 4 **Meal Served:** Thanksgiving Dinner **Questions:**	Welcome 1. One study participant draws a question from Appendix B, reads it aloud to the participants, and hands it to the researcher. 2. Facilitated discussion by participant co-researchers utilizing questions pulled by a study participant.

What is something you are working on about yourself? Or what is something you have become aware of about yourself since starting college? What are some ways that you are aiming to show more love to yourself?	3. Same study participant pulls the second question listed in Appendix B from the bowl and reads it to the participants. 4. Discuss next communal meal logistics. 5. Thank you by researcher *Note: selected questions will be removed from the bowl and will not be used again.
Session 5 **Meal Served:** Teatime over Zoom **Questions:** What is a deep desire you have for your life? How do you get in your own way?	Welcome 1. One study participant draws a question from Appendix B, reads it aloud to the participants, and hands it to the researcher. 2. Facilitated discussion by participant co-researchers utilizing questions pulled by a study participant. 3. Same study participant pulls the second question listed in Appendix B from the bowl and reads it to the participants. 4. Discuss next communal meal logistics. 5. Thank you by researcher *Note: selected questions will be removed from the bowl and will not be used again.

Session 6 **Meal Served:** Private Chef prepared Short Ribs Dinner **Qualitative and Quantitative Data Review**	Welcome 1. Researcher shared themes, quotes, and observations from study sessions. Cumulative results from the ISI-5 survey. 2. Discuss reactions to observations and note any corrections from study participants. 3. Free discussion time 4. Discuss next steps in doctoral research process 5. Thank you by researcher

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