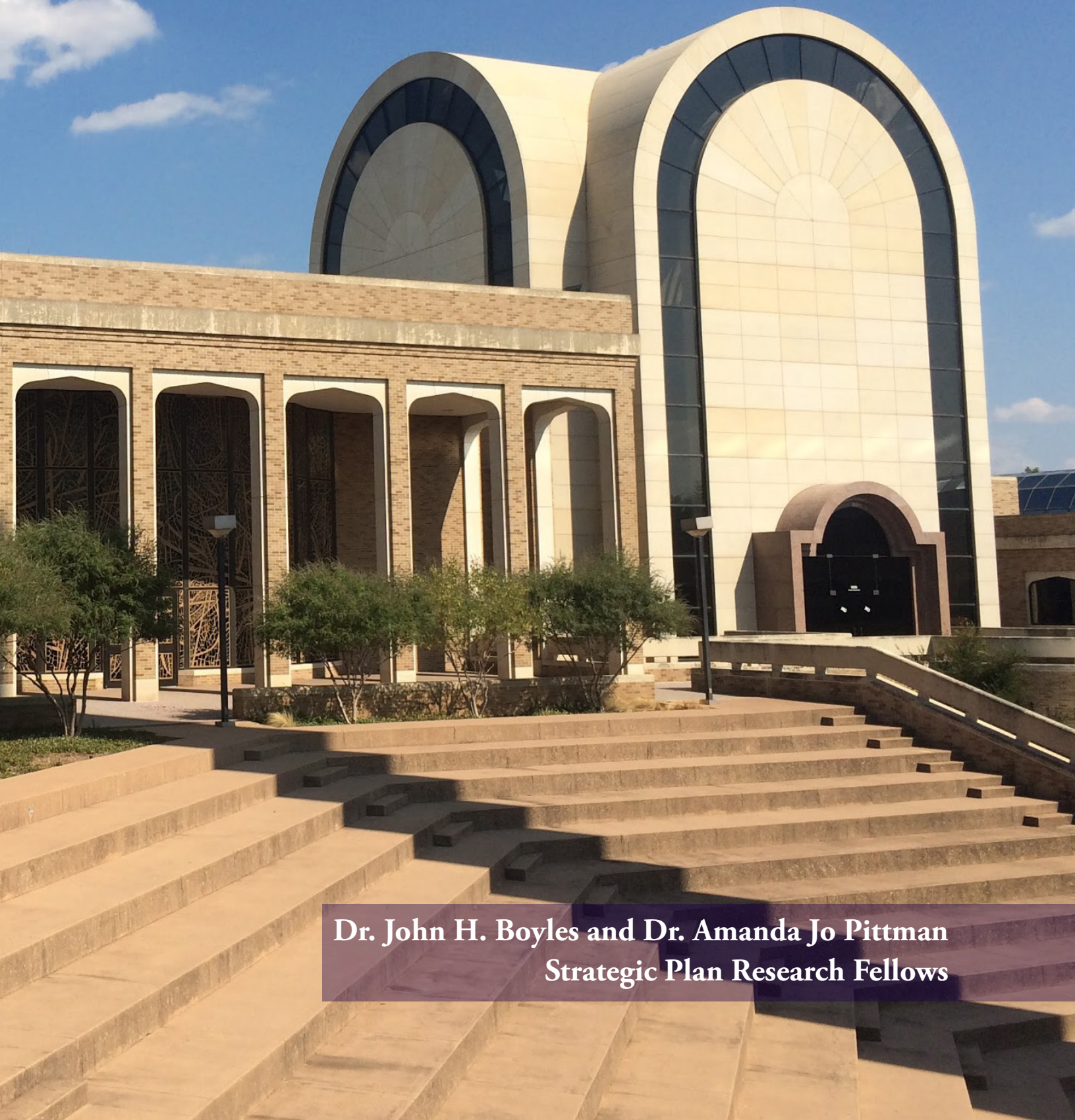


# Faith in their First Year

The Spiritual Lives of Incoming ACU Students



Dr. John H. Boyles and Dr. Amanda Jo Pittman  
Strategic Plan Research Fellows

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## **Introduction to the Report**

The 2016-2021 Strategic Plan states, “because ACU’s mission is to educate students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world, spiritual formation is of paramount importance.” This component of the Strategic Plan also calls for “inaugural cross-disciplinary research in the area of spiritual formation of college students” in service of enhanced opportunities and models for this work. Past board reports, such as the 2012 Vision and Identity Statement, noted that the changing cultural context brings students with different spiritual views, needs, and experiences to campus.

In light of both the call for research and in recognition of the changing cultural context, we were awarded funding that allowed us to examine various dimensions of the spiritual lives of first year ACU students. Our broadest questions are and were: What is the state of the spiritual lives students bring to campus with them? And what happens in their spiritual lives over the course of their first year on campus? We sought answers to those questions in the following way. Across the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years, we collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data from first year students at ACU. In partnership with others on campus, particularly Dr. Suzie Macaluso, we focused our analysis on 1) the intellectual or doctrinal, affective or relational, and practical or behavioral dimensions of students’ spiritual lives and 2) what changed and what remained the same across students’ first year in college. We completed our research under the oversight of the chairs of the Spiritual Formation Task Force.

This report summarizes findings from the quantitative portion of that research, organized around the various dimensions of faith investigated: knowledge of and engagement with the Bible, participation in Christian practices, persistence of faith across different areas of life, and faith formation experiences at ACU.



## **The Scope and Limitations of the Research**

This report summarizes findings from two years of data collection. We administered a survey at the beginning and end of the '17-'18 and '18-'19 academic years. To simplify reporting, we have combined the data from both fall semesters, giving us the capacity to describe and analyze what we will call an “incoming cohort” of 1783 incoming students. We did the same with the spring surveys, leaving us with an “end of year cohort” of 1164 students who completed both freshman level Bible courses in their first year on campus.

The “incoming cohort” is the more comprehensive picture of students arriving on campus. Students completed the survey in all sections of BIBL 101, a required course for first semester students. Eighty-six percent of students consented to participate in the research, so the descriptions of this cohort are a comprehensive snapshot of students arriving on campus in either fall 2017 or fall 2018.

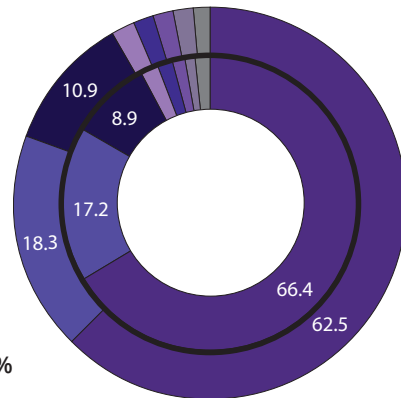
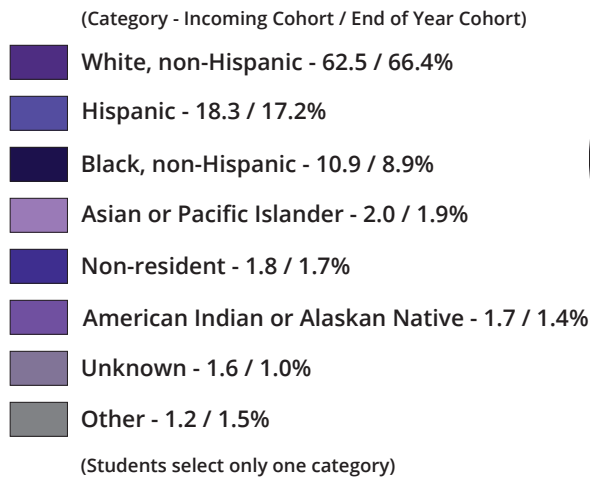
The “end of year cohort” is smaller and not as comprehensive. The follow up survey was given in the final two weeks of the second course in the introductory Bible sequence, which is designed (but not mandated) for students to take in the spring of their first year. Only 66.8% of students who participated in the fall also participated in the spring; however, 96.4% of the students who took both courses consecutively participated. Some explanations for why only 66.8% of the incoming cohort participated in the second round of data collection include 1) students left the university between semesters, 2) students did not enroll in that second required course in the following spring semester for some reason (ie: failed to pass the first semester course, chose to take the second course at another time, etc), 3) students dropped the course in the middle of the spring semester, etc.

Students who completed both surveys are somewhat more likely to be white than non-white, Christian than non-Christian, female than male, and high academic performers than low. Specific breakdowns appear on the demographics page that follows. When we report “change across the year” in the following sections, we calculated this “change across the year” using only participants who completed both surveys, as opposed to subtracting the end of year cohort’s average from the full incoming cohort’s average. When reading the results from the end of year cohort or calculations of change across the year, bear in mind the more limited nature of the participants. Who is missing, in this case, is both influential and important.

## Demographics of the Research Population

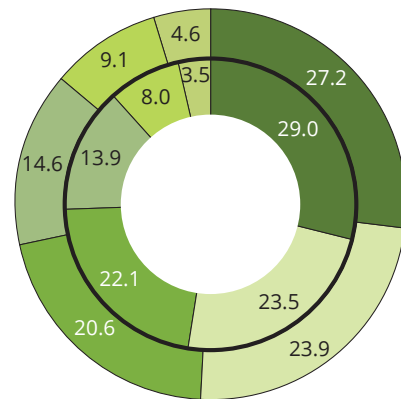
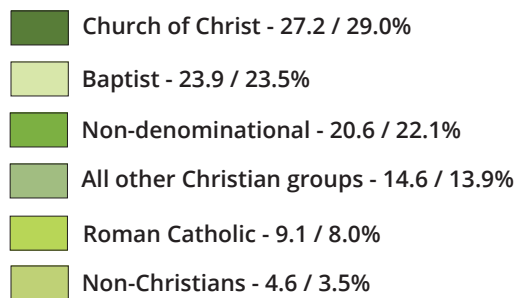
In what follows, information concerning gender, race/ethnicity, and first-generation college students comes from data collected by the University upon students' enrollment. We asked students to self-report their religious affiliation. See the previous section for an explanation on the distinction between cohorts.

### IPEDS Demographic Categories

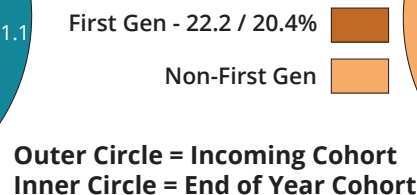
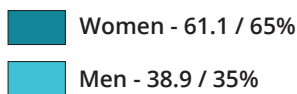
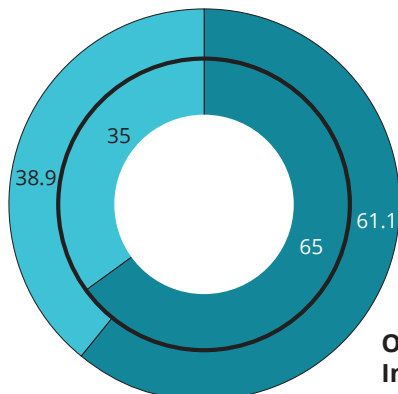


Outer Circle = Incoming Cohort  
Inner Circle = End of Year Cohort

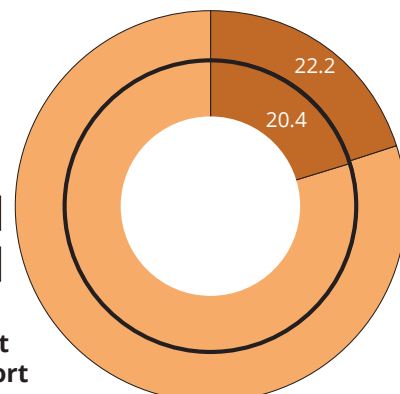
### Religious Affiliation



### Men and Women



### First Generation



## Student Participation in Christian Spiritual Practices

As a reflection of our interest in the behavioral and practical aspects of students' spiritual lives, we asked students to identify how often they participate in some traditional Christian practices, listed in the chart below. Students selected the number that best indicates how frequently they engage in each practice: 1 = never, 2 = a few times a year, 3 = about once a month, 4 = about once a week, 5 = at least once a day.

This set of items functions as a scale because answers to these questions directly and highly correlate with one another (e.g. a person who very frequently practices one item is likely to do the same for other items, and the reverse). The practices scale score measures both the breadth and frequency of students' Christian practices. A person with a practices scale score of 5 would participate in each of these practices every day (even practices like fasting, which would be highly unusual daily practice). On the other extreme, a practices scale score of 1 indicates no practice, since 1 = never. In what follows, we occasionally discuss the overall practices scale score, while at other times we look more specifically at individual items of interest.

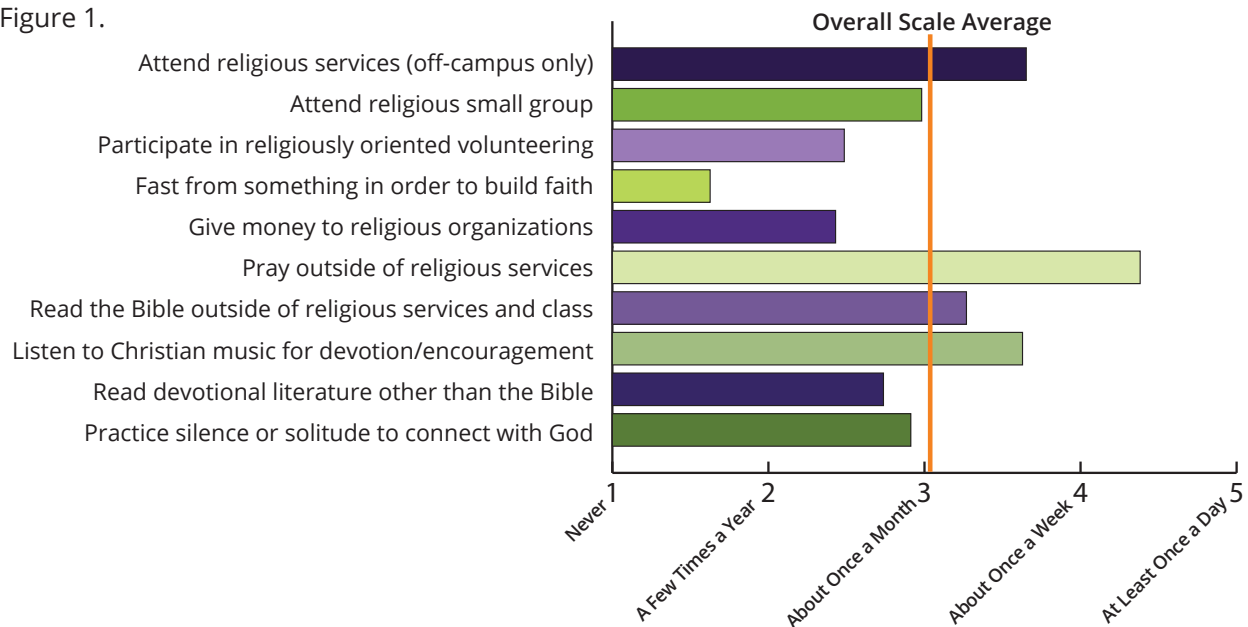
### Christian Practices Among the Incoming Cohort

When these students arrived on campus, they reported consistently participating in a variety of Christian practices, with a scale score of 3.05 (out of 5) When we consider some items that are more typically practiced on a weekly or daily basis, we see:

- 79.1% reported attending religious services once a week or more.
- 49.2% reported reading the Bible outside of service once a week or more.
- 62.1% reported praying outside of religious services on a daily basis

In figure 1, you can quickly compare the average rates of practice for each item:

Figure 1.



### Christian Practices among the End of Year Cohort

The practices scale score increased a negligible amount (+.0212) across the first year. Closer analysis also shows that rates of practice for certain items changed more noticeably, with some increasing and others decreasing (see figure 2).

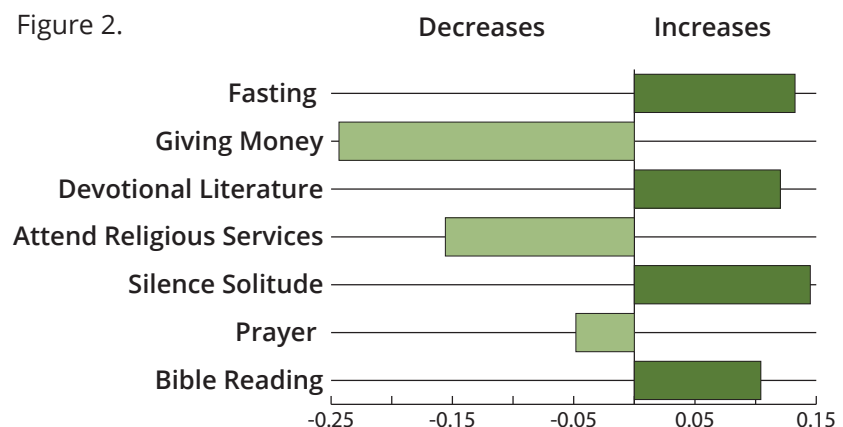
Since students reported a decrease in attendance at off-campus religious services, and since ACU students’ participation in church is a matter of concern for university stakeholders, it merits a closer look. First, it’s worth noting that overall there is more continuity than change: 686 students (57% of the end of year cohort) reported attending religious services once a week at both the beginning and the end of the year, and these frequent attenders were more likely than other groups to remain consistent. Second, among students who reported a change in their rate of attendance, that change was typically of one level (ie: from 3 = about once a month to 4 = about once a week). 7% of students reported an increase in attendance of one level, but 16.6% reported a decrease of one level (most of them from “about once a week” to “about once a month”). In short, when there is a decline in attending religious services, it is not characteristic of the majority of students and is not precipitous. Instead, commitment to attending religious services shows surprising durability across this first year.

With prayer, as with religious services, there is far more continuity than change. The majority of students, 792 or 69.4%, reported the same level of prayer at the beginning and the end of the year. 196 students reported lower rates of prayer; 106 of those went from praying once a day to once a week. This drop could be explained by the change in student environment. We wonder if their individual levels of prayer decreased in response to increased levels of corporate prayer (e.g. in chapel or in classes).

### Strengths and Opportunities

ACU students come to us as practicing Christians and they maintain their practice across their first year. Since we do not see a precipitous decline in practices among this group, ACU has the opportunity to focus on equipping students for the long-term sustainability of their Christian practices. This includes both expanding and deepening their forms of practice and inviting them to view Christian practices as the sustaining, nourishing center of their lives, rather than optional enhancements.

Figure 2.

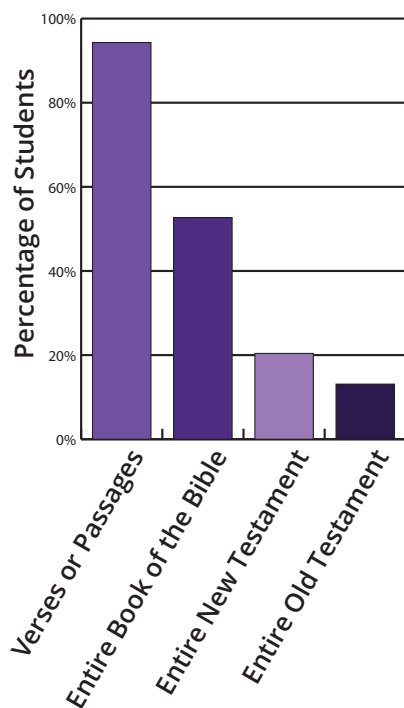


## First Year Students and the Bible

In keeping with our interest in the intellectual or doctrinal dimensions of our students' faith, we asked a variety of questions focused on students' relationship to the Bible. ACU places high priority on rigorous biblical study by requiring graduates to complete five courses offered by the College of Biblical Studies, the first three of which are mandated Bible survey courses. Students' knowledge of and engagement with the Bible merits closer examination for two reasons: 1) ACU students come from a wider range of Christian traditions than ever, and thus have a wider range of Christian education experiences, and 2) the broader cultural context and level of biblical literacy has changed. These factors inevitably shape a student's experience in spiritual formation-related programming on campus, including their required Bible classes. In what follows, we discuss what students know from the Bible, what students believe about the Bible, and how they have read the Bible.

### Bible Reading and Knowledge among the Incoming Cohort

Figure 3.



Almost all of the incoming cohort value the Bible and have read it; 91.3% of students agreed that the Bible is the word of God and 94.3% have read the Bible. Overall, students are far more likely to have read the Bible in small sections (individual verses or passages), than to have read large units such as entire books (see fig. 3).

We also wanted to gain some measure of students' knowledge of the content of the Bible. We created a Bible knowledge assessment that students took during their first week on campus. We selected from Bible knowledge exams ACU has given in the past to create this assessment, which includes questions from different periods of biblical history and different biblical genres, questions about some specific details, and broader questions of meaning or order of events.

- The average score was 44.5%, approximately 9 out of 21
- 15.1% of students answered 20% or fewer of the questions correctly, while only 2.9% answered more than 80% of the questions correctly.

Some care is needed in interpreting these results. The scores may seem low, but we cannot compare them with the scores of another group of people (e.g. a cohort of incoming students from 1985 or 1961, a contemporary congregation, etc). These scores do at least imply that ACU has an important opportunity to increase students' knowledge of the contents of the Bible, while also narrating the value of such knowledge and connecting it to the broader biblical story.



## **Views of the Bible among the End of Year Cohort**

We asked students to indicate their level of agreement with several claims about the Bible, which allows us to track changes across the year. For each claim, students selected the number from 1-5 that best indicated their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree). Students continue to view the Bible as the word of God (91% of the end of year cohort agree or strongly agree), but move toward a more nuanced and complex understanding of the Bible.

By the end of their first year, students were more likely to *agree* that:

- The Bible contains many different kinds of literature.
- Different books of the Bible offer different perspectives on God.
- Understanding the historical backgrounds of the Bible is important for understanding it.
- The Bible requires interpretation
- The Bible is difficult to understand.

On the other hand, students are more likely to *disagree* that:

- Some people are more qualified to read the Bible
- All interpretations of the Bible are equally valid.

Though students now hold a more complex understanding of the Bible, that complexity does not generate rampant relativism (all interpretations of the Bible are equally valid), or a sense that only certain “experts” can read the Bible (some people are more qualified than others).

## **Strengths and Opportunities**

ACU students begin their time with us valuing the Bible and having had some exposure to it. Across their first year, they maintain this value and develop a more complex view of the Bible as sacred scripture. ACU has the opportunity to show students the possibilities for a Christian life grounded in a wide and deep knowledge of the Bible’s content. Further, ACU has the opportunity to form students with practices of reading scripture that complement the increased complexity of their view of the Bible, such as reading entire books as units.

## The Persistence of Student's Faith

Given our interest in the affective and relational dimensions of students' spiritual lives, we presented students with eleven descriptive statements about their life of faith, including their personal and internal sense of faith as well as their integration within a community that supports their faith. For each statement, students selected the number from 1-5 that best indicated their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

Student responses to these eleven statements (fig. 4) formed a consistent pattern and so can be reported as a scale (see the description of a scale in the practices section). A persistence of faith score demonstrates both the intimacy students feel with God and the closeness they feel to other Christians. Interestingly, the scale includes the statement, "I have experienced a time of spiritual doubt or struggle," suggesting that students who are aware of and willing to acknowledge enduring a time of spiritual doubt or struggle are more likely to have a strong relationship to God as well as to other people who support their faith. Scores on the scale that are above 3.5 indicate that a student agrees with more prompts than they disagree with or are neutral on, where scores in excess of 4 show a general pattern of agreement.

Figure 4:

- I thoughtfully consider my religious beliefs when I make daily decisions.
- I have experienced a time of spiritual doubt or struggle.
- Faith was an important part of my family life growing up.
- Most of my friends share my faith and convictions.
- I have worked hard on my spiritual life in the past year.
- A peer has helped me on my spiritual journey.
- Someone older than me has helped me on my spiritual journey.
- I believe God has a plan for the details of my life.
- I can recall a time when God acted in my life.
- God feels close to me.
- I can name at least one specific experience in which I felt that my faith was deepened.

### Persistence of Faith and the Incoming Student Cohort

The incoming student cohort generally reported high persistence of faith, with an average scale score of 4.0179 (out of 5). When we consider individual items, we see that the items with lower scores ask students about the role of faith in their day to day life and their relationships with peers. For example, 60.6% of the incoming cohort said they thoughtfully consider their religious beliefs when making daily decisions, and 54.5% of the incoming cohort said a peer had helped them on their spiritual journey. Given the amount of time spent with peers, the documented influence of peer

relationships, and the emphasis on youth ministry in North American churches, this number is of great interest. Furthermore, since many students are now enrolled in a private Christian school for the first time, we might expect some of these numbers to change across the year.

### **Persistence of Faith and the End of Year Cohort**

The end of year cohort maintained a high persistence of faith score at an average of 4.0570 (a negligible decrease of -.0027). Comparison across the year revealed the following changes:

- More students felt that a peer had helped them on their spiritual journey: 70.4%, up from 66.1% of the incoming cohort.
- More students said that they thoughtfully consider their religious beliefs in daily decisions: 66.3%, up from 63.7%
- Fewer students agreed that someone older has helped them on their spiritual journey: 74.2%, down from 76%

When we separate the incoming cohort by factors such as race, gender, level of parental education, and socio-economic status, the average scores of some sub-groups are notably higher than others. By the end of the year, however, most of these factors no longer correlate with major differences in the scale score. Gender is the exception. Women both begin and end the year with higher average scores than men. Additionally, women's average scores increased from fall to spring while men's decreased. That difference is mostly driven by differences in men's and women's faith connection with their peers. Across the year, on the following items, women's scores noticeably increased, while men's average scores on these items either did not increase or increased only a negligible amount: 1) my friends share my faith and convictions, 2) a peer has helped me on my spiritual journey, and 3) I have worked hard on my spiritual life in the past year.

### **Strengths and Opportunities**

Our students arrive here and finish their first year with robust relationships to God and to other Christians. While a clear majority of students reported that they have received spiritual help from an older person, students' responses indicate that they are less practiced in receiving spiritual help from (and likely giving help to) their peers. In addition, students' responses indicate they are less practiced in connecting their faith with their daily decision-making and in taking ownership of their own spiritual growth. ACU has the opportunity to teach and form students how to have peer-to-peer relationships where "iron sharpens iron" (Prov. 27:17) and how to walk together in ways that support a full integration of their faith into their decision-making, which will in turn form patterns of students taking ownership of their own spiritual lives and investing in that of their peers.

## First Year Students and ACU

For the end of year cohort, we added an additional set of ten statements about experience at ACU (see fig. 5).

Figure 5:

- 1) If something bad happened to me or I was struggling with my faith, there is someone at ACU with whom I would feel comfortable talking (e.g., faculty, student, friend).
- 2) ACU helps me understand my calling as a Christian.
- 3) ACU helps me connect my personal story to God's bigger story and the Spirit's leading.
- 4) ACU's overall atmosphere contributes to my spiritual formation.
- 5) My courses at ACU have so far contributed to my spiritual growth.
- 6) My introductory New Testament course(s) so far have contributed to my spiritual growth.
- 7) Faculty and staff at ACU care about the spiritual lives of students.
- 8) Students at ACU are honestly trying to follow Jesus.
- 9) Students at ACU are hypocrites
- 10) Faculty and/or staff at ACU are hypocrites.

Students rated their level of agreement with these statements (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). In general, the responses are positive (see fig. 6 for a summary).

Figure 6:

- 81.8% of students have someone they can talk to
- 66.8% said ACU helps them understand their calling as a Christian
- 66.6% said ACU helps them connect their story to God's story
- 71% said ACU's overall atmosphere contributes to their spiritual formation
- 67.8% said their ACU courses have contributed to their spiritual growth
- 72.3% said their introductory NT courses contributed to their spiritual growth
- 84% said faculty and staff care about the spiritual lives of students

In contrast to the strong positive responses, students are much more likely to respond with “neutral” to prompts that employ the kind of theological and institutional language often found in university materials, such as “calling” and “story.” This may indicate that they do not know what this language means at the end of their first year. Further, they are also much more likely to respond with neutral when asked about the hypocrisy of their peers or of faculty and staff, though they judge their peers more harshly than older adults (33.5% said their peers are hypocrites while only 14.3% said this of faculty and staff).

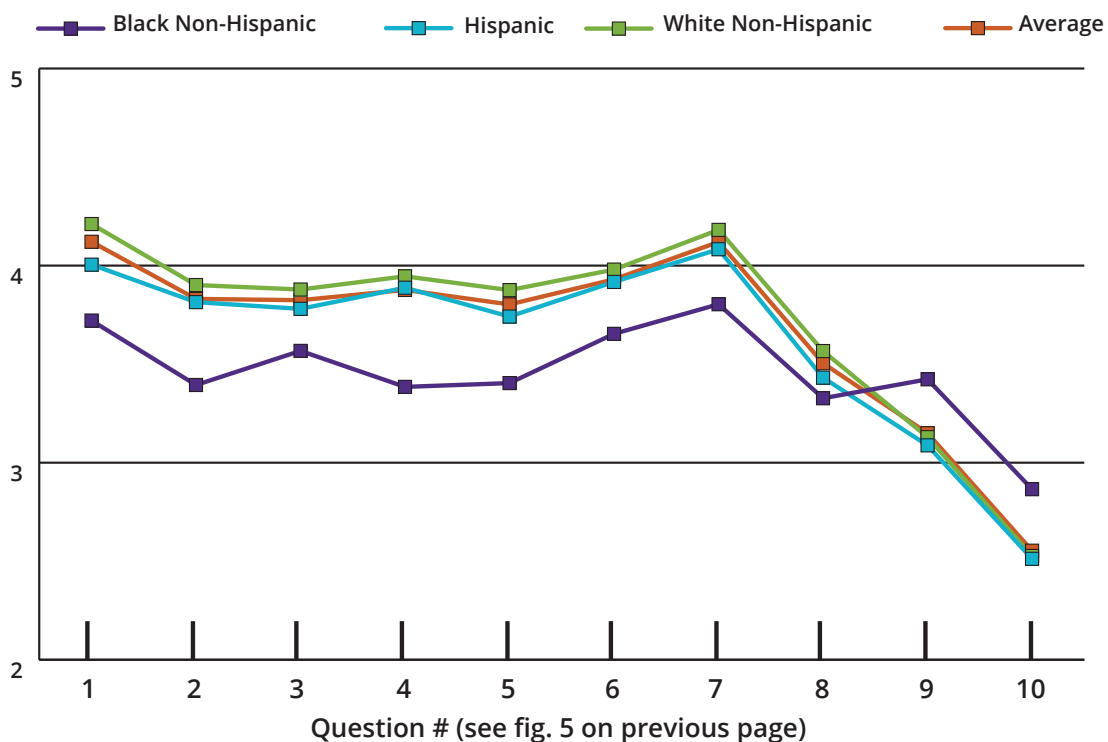
When we look at how different racial groups responded to these statements, discernible patterns emerge. Black students consistently indicated that they are having a different experience at ACU than their peers (see the graph in fig. 7). The most striking difference is between Black and White

students. Black students responded to every statement except those specifically about their peers (statements 9 and 10 in fig. 5) in noticeably different and more negative patterns. Two examples are:

- 1) 64.5% of Black students said they have someone to talk to if something bad happened, while 86% of their White peers said they do
- 2) 64.7% of Black students said faculty and/or staff care about the spiritual lives of students as opposed to 88.7% of their White peers.

By contrast, Hispanic and White students did not respond to any of these statements in a discernibly different pattern. Finally, for most statements, Black and Hispanic students answered in similar ways. However, their responses clearly differ on a set of statements that indicate Black students experienced faculty and staff and ACU’s general atmosphere more negatively than their Hispanic peers did.

Figure 7.



(Note: The range has been reduced so that the differences, which are statistically significant, can be more readily seen.)

We also see differences in the way men and women responded to these statements, though the differences are not as large as those between Black and White students. Somewhat regularly, men have lower rates of agreement with these statements than women. One striking example is that 78.7% of men said faculty and/or staff care about their spiritual lives, while 88.6% of women said this. These trends, in which men reported lower levels of relational support for their faith, mirror those reported in the persistence of faith section.



## **Strengths and Opportunities**

The fact that students overwhelmingly reported positive experiences at ACU over their first year highlights the powerful opportunities ACU has to make a difference in their lives. In general, first year students are connected to faculty and staff and believe faculty and staff care about them and their spiritual lives. ACU has an opportunity to attend to the experience of our Black students and male students. With respect to our Black students, the recommendations of the diversity task force concerning hiring diverse faculty and staff as well as training our current faculty and staff become even more paramount. Since male students are less connected to their peers and older adults (see the persistence of students' faith section), ACU has the opportunity to focus attention on relationship building and strengthening among male students, which will also benefit female students.

## **Conclusion: Bringing it all Together**

In the preceding pages, we reported findings in four separate areas: participation in Christian practices, engagement with the Bible, persistence of faith, and spiritual formation experiences at ACU. Reporting in this way provided an opportunity to speak in detail about these different dimensions of students' spiritual lives, and to offer some targeted reflections on ACU's opportunities to support the spiritual growth of students. At the same time, none of these dimensions stands alone; each interrelates with all of the others. For instance:

- Spiritually supportive relationships with older adults correlate with higher rates of participation in Christian practices.
- Higher scores on both the practices scale and the persistence of faith scale correlate with higher scores on the Bible knowledge assessment.
- Indications of positive experience with spiritual formation at ACU correlate with higher persistence of faith scores.

In our view, this research indicates the need for both focused attention on certain areas of opportunity and more holistic consideration that attends to curricular, co-curricular, and congregational aspects of students experience at ACU.

In conclusion, based on this research our top three recommendations are as follows:

1. Increase existing support and develop new ways to incentivize and reward the efforts of faculty and staff who build spiritually formative relationships with students (e.g. as a consideration in faculty tenure and promotion and staff raises and promotions, awards or bonuses based on exemplary investment in this area). This support would concretize the appropriately high value the university places on the role of relationship in spiritual formation and begin to address several of the opportunities identified in our report. In light of both the findings in the first year at ACU

section, and ACU's desire to continue growing in our student diversity, we want to highlight again the recommendation of the Diversity Task Force to hire additional diverse faculty and staff, especially Black and Hispanic professionals, and to train our current faculty and staff.

2. Develop (or employ existing) committee structures to facilitate more effective cooperation between curricular and co-curricular elements of university life, in keeping with the Spiritual Formation Tasks Forces' integrated approach. As an example, there are untapped possibilities between required curricular components (freshmen Bible and Cornerstone) and required spiritual formation events (chapel, small groups, etc.). Explicit efforts to help students integrate these experiences would make the whole greater than the sum of the parts and powerfully reinforce the institution's fundamental belief that all of life and learning falls under the Lordship of Christ.

3. Create regular opportunities for combined groups of different members of the ACU community to explicitly reflect on our responsibilities, opportunities, resources, and aims as disciples of Christ. Like recommendation one, this would also effect greater relational integration across the university while also promoting greater intentionality and investment in participants' spiritual formation. This latter effect would provide students with a vision for what a Christian life looks like at different stages of life and creates potential for generative conversations about both Christian discipleship and ACU's environment and mission.