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The Role of Religious and Spiritual Beliefs in the Academic Success of College Students

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THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL BELIEFS IN THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL BELIEFS IN THE ACADEMIC

SUCCESS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE

HONORS COLLEGE

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BY

SHAUNQUELLE A. D. SAPP

ABSTRACT

The college environment can be very demanding for students. Students are often challenged by many new experiences as they adjust to their new environment and learn to balance their academic responsibilities and social life. Previous research has examined two factors, religiosity and spirituality, that can contribute to the academic success of college students. The present study was conducted to examine the correlation between religiosity and spirituality and college students' grade point averages (GPA) which was operationally defined to measure academic success. It was hypothesized that higher levels of religiosity and spirituality would correlate with higher GPAs. Participants were asked to complete three scales of measurement to assess their religious and spiritual behaviors, as well as a demographics survey. Results indicated a negative correlation between religiosity and spirituality and student GPAs. Future research should explore what factors influenced negative correlations between religiosity, spirituality and GPAs.

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The Role of Religious and Spiritual Beliefs in the Academic Success of College Students

Students enter college confronted by many new experiences. This period of transition is often characterized as a time for change and self-identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; Lau, Hui, Lam, Lau, & Cheung, 2015; Reymann, Fialkowski, & Stewart-Sicking, 2015). The transition to a college environment also can be an overwhelming and stressful time because students endure many cognitive, psychosocial, physical and emotional changes (Lau et al., 2015; Hales, 2009). Kneipp, Kelly and Cyphers (2009) reported that students are concerned with discovering their new environment during the beginning weeks of college. They further reported that students form new relationships with other students as they start their classes and develop plans to fulfill their academic responsibilities and goals. Reymann et al. (2015) found that students are expected to balance their academic obligations and social responsibilities, adjust to their new living environments and cope with family and other relationship problems. Overall, the college environment tends to be demanding for students as they face many academic, social and emotional challenges. Researchers have examined how these challenges can affect college students.

The demands of college can contribute to students experiencing various stressors from being in a new environment. Students may develop problems focusing in classes, experience fatigue and lack of motivation to complete academic responsibilities, even entertain thoughts of suicide or other harmful behaviors as a result of stress, develop eating disorders (Burris, Brechting, Salsman, & Carlson, 2009). The researchers further reported that students may suffer from other psychiatric illnesses (Burris et al., 2009). The experience of these problems can affect the mental well-being of college students. As a result, students may be distracted by such issues, which can impact their academic performance in college.

Researchers have identified two factors, religiosity and spirituality, that can contribute to helping students overcome the challenges of transitioning to college and achieving academic success (Rennick, Smedley, Fisher, Wallace, & Kim, 2013). The college years are considered to be formative times for students as they are expected to learn who they want to be as adults, and become more independent and responsible (Arnett, 2000). Arnett (2000) further stated that students are expected to develop better time-management and problem-solving skills, while finding a balance between the rigors of academic coursework and the demands of a social life. This balance can contribute to overall academic success in a college environment. Therefore, the present study was conducted to examine the impact of religiosity and spirituality on the academic success of college students.

Religiosity and spirituality have a positive impact on the academic achievement of students in college. The practice of religious and spiritual behaviors can help students develop a sense of direction for their goals in life, find meaning and purpose for their life, and maintain focus on their priorities (Sang Min, Ana, & Clark, 2007; McDonald, 2004). Religious and spiritual behaviors can include worship and fellowship in a church or other religious institution, active involvement within that community or church group, celebration of religious holidays, participation in communion, desire to seek a personal relationship with a higher power, and involvement in religious activities outside of the established institutions (Andreeva & Andreeva, 2012).

Fallot (2001) found that religiosity and spirituality can help students develop an understanding of life and learn lessons from their individual life experiences. Students who engage in religious and spiritual behaviors tend to be more mature and display more altruistic behaviors and fewer risky or antisocial behaviors (Nadal, Hardy, & Barry, 2016). Other research

stated that religiosity and spirituality promotes better mental stability and life satisfaction, particularly in family and other social relationships (Kress, Newgent, Whitlock, & Mease, 2015; Sawatzsky, Gadermann, & Pesut, 2009; Webb, Charbonneau, McCann, & Gayle, 2011). College students, who are religious and spiritual, also tend to form good relationships, seek sources of social support, establish codes of conduct, and search for opportunities of personal growth and development (Crawford, Wright, & Masten, 2006). Johnson and Hayes (2003) concluded that the impact of having religious and spiritual beliefs can help students maintain academic progress and high achievement throughout their college education.

Research has provided evidence of the positive impact of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices for college students. These terms are often used interchangeably in research because of its overlapping concepts (Piedmont, 2004). However, there are distinctions. The present study will examine how religious and spiritual beliefs and practices affect the academic success of college students.

Religiosity

There are different views of the meaning of religiosity. Davis, Kerr and Kurpius (2003) defined religiosity as the identification of a specific religion of faith and worship, such as Christianity or Judaism, and devotion to following the set doctrines, beliefs and religious activities. Religiosity has also been defined as an organized system of shared beliefs, feelings and actions among a cultural group (Hay, Reich, & Utsch, 2006). Their research further included regular attendance at religious institutions, obedience to beliefs and other practices of religion, and desire to connect to the sacred and divine. Miller and Thoresen (1999) defined religiosity as an individual's personal experience with a transcendent being, or deity, and how this is externally shown to others. Burris et al. (2009), Nadal et al. (2016), and Fallot (2001) defined

religiosity as an individual's involvement in following the beliefs and practices of a religious institution. Pargament (1999) defined religious involvement as both a public and private expression of faith. Religiosity as a public expression means that a person's vow of faith is openly expressed for others to see, which can be seen by their attendance to religious activities, fellowship with other members, and devotion to teachings and communal worship. As a private expression, religiosity is seen as an individual's connection to their religion outside of the institution and in their personal lives. The present study defined religiosity as a student's public expression of faith. This research assessed college students' attendance at regular religious services and participation in religious activities outside of religious services. The present study also assessed students' personal level of commitment to their religion.

According to Taylor (2002), religion plays a role in college students adjusting to their new environment. Open expressions of religious behaviors are reported to have a positive influence on the well-being of college students and their overall academic achievement (Zem, 1989). Research studies have found that religiosity has a positive impact on students' grade point averages (GPA; Walker & Dixon, 2002; Sang Min et al., 2007). Mooney (2005) reported that religious students may attend at least one church service or other related activity throughout the week as well as spend more time studying on a daily basis. Researchers have also shown that identifying with a religion can help college students develop a sense of control over their lives, adapt to the social environments, and perform better in the classrooms compared to non-religious students (Schubmehl, Cubbellotti, & Ornum, 2009). The previous research also found that involvement in religious activities helps students to develop better communication skills to interact with other people. Other research reported that the practice of religious behaviors also positively influences the formation of healthy relationships with family and the development of

social control, which further contributes to positive academic achievement. According to Mooney (2010), religious students tend to focus on studying, achieving their academic goals and participating in constructive extracurricular activities.

Studies have shown a positive relationship between religious involvement and high academic achievement (Walker & Dixon, 2002; Park, 2007; Mooney, 2010; Jeynes, 2002). Their level of engagement in religious activities serves as a coping mechanism for overcoming the academic, social and emotional demands of college and achieving academic success. This is not to say that nonreligious students do not use effective coping mechanisms for the same reasons as religious students. They may seek other sources of social support. However, the present study aimed to assess the relationship between the practice of religious behaviors and academic success in college students. It was hypothesized that students who demonstrated higher levels of religious behaviors would report higher grade point averages [GPA] compared to nonreligious students.

Spirituality

Like religiosity, spirituality has also been defined in different ways in research. Davis et al. (2003) defined spirituality as recognizing the existence of a higher power that is greater than oneself. The previous research further defined spirituality as an individual's journey to spiritual growth and realization of purpose and meaning for their life (Davis et al., 2003; The Higher Education Research Institute, 2004). Miller and Thoresen (1999) defined spirituality as an individual's personal relationship with their deity, and their understanding of the quality of life. Kim and Esquivel (2011) viewed spirituality as an inherent part of the human experience that has a significant influence on human behavior and interconnects with religiosity. Sperry (2001) explained that spirituality emerges early as a natural awareness and develops into a quest for a

sense of purpose for life. Burris et al. (2009) and Nadal et al. (2016) defined spiritualty as a person's desire to seek a personal relationship with a transcendent being, or deity. Duffy (2006) defined spirituality as personal guidance from a higher power or belief in a system for common good. The present study defined spirituality as a students' private expression of faith. This definition focuses on a student's connection to a higher power to seek spiritual growth in finding purpose for their life, occurrence of spiritual activities, and development of a private prayer life.

Spirituality encompasses many concepts, but research has shown that it has a positive impact on college students' well-being and academic achievement. Students can engage in spiritual activities as a coping mechanism to manage the academic, social and emotional challenges while in college (Lau et al., 2015; Labbe & Fobes, 2010). The results of a UCLA study reported that students who engage in spiritual behaviors experience a better satisfaction with their social life on campus, have more positive interactions with fellow students, rate a more positive overall college experience, and report higher GPAs compared to non-spiritual students (Mooney, 2010). Sawatzky et al., (2009) also found that that spirituality influenced positive relationships with family and peers, which may help them adjust to a new college environment and achieve academic success.

Spirituality can help students who struggle with other issues while in college. For example, some college students may have self-esteem issues (Hayman et al., 2007). Self-esteem issues can distract students from focusing on their academic responsibilities. Spirituality can help students deal with those emotional challenges and maintain focus on their academics. Students who have mental health issues or other psychiatric disorders can also benefit from the influence of spirituality (Labbe & Fobes, 2010; Taliaferro, Rienzo, Pigg, Miller, & Dodd, 2009). Another study concluded that spirituality leads to a healthy psychological well-being and encourages

more altruistic behaviors (Rippentrop, Altmaier, & Burns, 2006; Saslow et al., 2013). Compared to non-spiritual college students, students who are spiritual tend to be more optimistic about their overall academic success (Labbe & Fobes, 2010). Therefore, this present study aims to assess the relation between the practice of spiritual behaviors and academic achievement in college students. It is hypothesized that students who seek a spiritual connection with a higher power, or deity, and have other spiritual practices will report high GPAs compared to non-spiritual students.

Academic Success

Like religiosity and spirituality, previous research has used different factors to measure academic success. Earlier research has assessed college students' academic success by looking at the cumulative grade point average (GPA), number of years to graduate, and student retention rates (Seidman, 2005). Another research study found that students assessed their levels of academic success based upon the number of years it took to complete their degree, and their overall physical, mental, emotional and social health (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006). Students believed that their overall health and well-being affects their ability to demonstrate high academic performance. Other researchers have identified additional factors that play a role in measuring overall academic success for college students (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek (2006). These factors fall under levels of student engagement, student's pre-college experiences, post-college outcomes, and other factors.

Kuh et al. (2006) explained that student engagement describes student behaviors, such as study habits, relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, involvement on campus, access to academic support services, and student's learning methods. These researchers defined pre-college experiences as student's readiness for college, family and peer support, and levels of

motivation to learn. Post-college outcomes included student's degree attainment, learning outcomes, and career or graduate school preparation (Kuh et al., 2006). According to the previous research, other factors found to affect academic success in college students included unmet financial aid, employment off campus, and status of transfer student. Transfer students usually face new academic, psychological and environment changes when they attend new colleges (Laanan, 2001). Transfer students' GPAs tend to drop within the first or second semester after starting at a new college. There are various factors that can be used to measure academic success. However, the present study will use GPA scores to measure the academic success of college students.

As stated before, students enter college confronted with many new challenges. Due to the academic, social and emotional demands of college, the use of effective and supportive coping mechanisms, such as religiosity and spirituality, can help students overcome these challenges and achieve academic success. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the effect of religiosity and spirituality to help college students achieve academic success, as indicated by their GPA.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited by convenience sampling through an online research participation system (SONA), provided by the Psychology Department at Columbus State University. A power analysis was conducted using G*Power Software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). It was determined that the study needed a sample size of at least 91 people to detect a small effect size, $r^2 = .10$. Researchers anticipated participant attrition, so we included an additional 10 participants, with data collection concluding with a final sample size of $N=141$.

Participants ranged in age from 17-43 years of age (33 males and 108 females). The sample was 23.4% males and 76.6% females.

A demographics survey assessed information about participants' age, gender/sex, socioeconomic status, academic standing and amount of current credit hours, occupational background, first generation student, religious affiliation, and additional questions concerning religious involvement and spiritual practices (i.e. how often they pray, attend religious services, etc.). Data was analyzed for 141 participants (33 males and 108 females). The sample consisted of the following students: 77 freshmen, 30 sophomores, 21 juniors, and 13 seniors. The racial distribution of the data were analyzed for all 141 participants and included: 70 Black or African Americans, 54 Whites, 2 American Indian or Alaska Natives, 4 Asians, 7 Hispanic or Latinos, 1 Middle Eastern or North Africans, and 3 who preferred not to answer. The religious affiliation of the participants is as follows: 69 Protestants, which included Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and any other Protestant denomination; 1 Roman Catholic, 3 Muslim, 31 people who specified "other," and 35 people who did not identify with a religion.

Procedure

The survey was administered through Qualtrics software. Participants who signed up through the online SONA system were directed to the link of the survey. After opening the survey, participants were given a standard informed consent. If they chose not to consent, then they were immediately redirected to the debriefing page of the survey. If they chose to consent, they began the survey questionnaires. After completion, participants were shown a debriefing page, signaling the end of the survey session. Participants received course credit for their classes.

Measures

This study used three scales of measurement. The Duke University Religion Index and the Religious Influence Acceptance Scale measures religious involvement and impact of religiosity. The Spiritual Transcendence Scale has three subscales that measure different aspects of spirituality, including prayer fulfillment, universality, and connectedness. A demographic survey was used to collect more information about participants.

Duke University Religion Index

The Duke University Religion Index (DUREL; Harold & Arndt, 2010) is a five-item scale that measures three dimensions of religious involvement: organizational religious activity, non-organizational religious activity, and intrinsic religiosity. Each of these dimensions are measured on a 1-6 Likert scale. This scale consists of statements, such as "How often do you attend church or other religious meetings?" Higher scores indicated a greater religiosity, with students more religiously involved in both organizational and non-organizational religious activity as well as those who identified religion as a core part of their life.

Of the sample, data was analyzed from 140 participants. Data for one participant was excluded from analysis due to failure to answer all of the questions. The previous research stated that the scale has internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha = 0.78$ to 0.91. The full five-item scale had good reliability, $\alpha = .91$ (see Table 1). The scores ranged from 1.00-5.00 ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.22$).

RIAS Scale

The Religious Influence Acceptance Scale (RIAS; Smith & Zárate, in prep) is an eight-item scale that measures religiosity. This scale is measured on a 1-7 Likert-type scale. This scale consists of statements, such as "Religion is an important foundation for our values." Higher

scores indicated that religiosity plays an important role in students' daily life and that religion can be useful in governing society and its moral standards.

Of the sample, data was analyzed from 140 participants. Data for one participant was excluded from analysis due to failure to answer all of the questions. The full eight-item scale had good reliability, $\alpha = .91$ (see Table 1). The scores ranged from 1.00-7.00 ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.57$).

Spiritual Transcendence Scale

Designed by Piedmont (1999), this 24-item questionnaire measures three subscales: prayer fulfillment, universality and connectedness. This scale is measured on a 1-5 Likert scale. The previous research reported acceptable reliability for the full scale, $\alpha = 0.87$. The full scale had acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .91$. Each subscale measured different aspects of spirituality. High scores indicated greater involvement in spiritual beliefs and practices as a core part of life and as feeling shared responsibility for other people and connection to community.

Prayer fulfillment is also a 9-item scale that measures the feelings felt from praying, which influences a sense of personal strength. This subscale consists of statement's like "I meditate and/or pray so that I can reach a higher spiritual plane of consciousness." Of the sample, data was analyzed from 135 participants. Data for six participants was excluded from analysis due to failure to answer all the questions. This subscale had good reliability, $\alpha = .80$ (see Table 1). The scores ranged from 1.89-5.00 ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.67$).

Universality is a 9-item scale that measures the belief in meaning and purpose of life and acknowledgement of intertwined lives and shared responsibility between people. This subscale consists of statements like, "I believe that there is a larger meaning in life." Of the sample, data was analyzed from 137 participants. Data for four participants was excluded from analysis due to

failure to answer all the questions. The subscale had good reliability, α= .80. The scores ranged

from 1.67-4.89 (*M* = 3.58, *SD* = 0.77).

Connectedness is a 6-item subscale that measures the feeling of personal responsibility

for other people and connection to surrounding community. This subscale consists of statements

like, "It is important for me to give something back to the community." Of the sample, data was

analyzed from 137 participants. Data for four participants was excluded from analysis due to

failure to answer all the questions. The subscale had good reliability, α= .71. The scores ranged

from 1.17-5.00 (*M* = 3.38, *SD* = 0.88).

Table 1.
Survey Measures Descriptive Statistics

Scales	α	M	SD	Range
1. DUREL	0.91	2.75	1.22	1.00-5.00
2. RIAS	0.91	4.87	1.57	1.00-7.00
3. STP	0.80	3.86	0.67	1.89-5.00
4. STU	0.80	3.58	0.77	1.67-4.89
5. STC	0.71	3.38	0.88	1.17-5.00

Note: DUREL= Duke University Religion Index; RIAS= Religious Index Acceptance Scale;
STP= Spiritual Transcendence Scale- Prayer Fulfillment; STU= Spiritual Transcendence Scale-
Universality; STC= Spiritual Transcendence Scale- Connectedness

Results

Normality Tests

The assumption of normality was conducted for each scale to examine the normality of

the sample distributions. The DUREL scale and the STP scale both met the skewness criteria

under Doane and Seward (2001). The DUREL scale reported (SK_2= -.039) and the STP scale

reported (SK_2= -.309). The other scales did not meet the skewness criteria. A Shapiro-Wilk test

was conducted for all of the scales, which assumes normality as the null hypothesis. All of the

scales reported p-values ($p < 0.05$) which indicated that the tests were significant (see Table 2);

therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and normality was not assumed. As a result of non-normality sample distributions, nonparametric correlations, such as Kendall's τ, was used to assess the relationships between religiosity, spirituality and GPA scores. The original values of each scale were squared to perform nonparametric correlations.

Table 2.
Assumption of Normality Tests Using Shapiro-Wilk for Survey Measures

	Skewness	Statistic	df	Sig.
Scales				
1. DUREL	-.04	.928	130	.000
2. RIAS	-.66	.934	130	.000
3. STP	-.31	.975	130	.018
4. STU	-.43	.971	130	.007
5. STC	-.49	.968	130	.004

Note: DUREL= Duke University Religion Index; RIAS= Religious Index Acceptance Scale; STP= Spiritual Transcendence Scale- Prayer Fulfillment; STU= Spiritual Transcendence Scale-Universality; STC= Spiritual Transcendence Scale- Connectedness

Primary Hypothesis

A Kendall's τ correlation was run to examine the relationship between the scores on the DUREL scale, RIAS scale, and the three subscales of the Spiritual Transcendence scale and their overall effect on college students' grade point averages (GPAs). It was hypothesized that higher scores of religiosity and spirituality would correlate with higher GPA levels, indicating positive correlations. The scales were significantly correlated with each other. A strong, negative correlation was found between each of the scales and the overall GPA, which was not statistically significant (see Table 3). Therefore, both high religious and spiritual involvement negatively correlated with GPA scores. This indicated that as students demonstrated more religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, their GPA scores decreased as a result. For example, as students' scores on the DUREL increased, their GPA decreased by .10 points (see Table 3 for the correlations of other scales and GPAs).

Table 3.
Kendall's τ Correlations Between Survey Measures and Student GPA

Scales	DUREL	RIAS	STP	STU	STC	GPA
1. DUREL	1					
2. RIAS	.59**	1				
3. STP	.39**	.33**	1			
4. STU	.54**	.44**	.60**	1		
5. STC	.62**	.50**	.55**	.62**	1	
6. GPA	-.10	-.08	-.10	-.10	-.12	1

Note: Significance is denoted as $P < .01$**; DUREL= Duke University Religion Index; RIAS= Religious Index Acceptance Scale; STP= Spiritual Transcendence Scale- Prayer Fulfillment; STU= Spiritual Transcendence Scale- Universality; STC= Spiritual Transcendence Scale- Connectedness

Discussion/ Conclusion

The findings in the present study were not as hypothesized. The present study had aimed to provide further support to previous research findings about the impact of religiosity and spirituality on college students' well-being as they seek to achieve undergraduate degrees. It was hypothesized that the practice of religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors would have a positive impact on students' academic success, indicated by their GPA. Inconsistent with prior research, the results showed a negative correlation between higher levels of religiosity and spirituality and students' GPA scores. These were rather interesting findings, but later research provided conclusions for these results. Ecklund (2007) and Tobin and Weinberg (2007) found that religious students may be less content with their college environment if they encounter college faculty and staff who do not identify with a religion. The study did not clearly state that students were aware of the faculty or staff's religion. However, the researchers further reported that these students may find aggression and opposition to their religious beliefs, and as a result, fail to perform well academically or interact within the college environment. Other studies stated

that some religious organizations may demand a lot of the students' time, which can hinder their studying time and decrease their academic performance (McMurtrie, 2000; Young, 2002).

Though these results are not as hypothesized, there is still research that has shown the positive impact of religiosity and spirituality on college students' academic success. Kim and Esquivel (2011) found that religiosity and spirituality can help promote better academic performance, encourage students to seek purpose for their lives, grow and develop personally, and remain optimistic. Overall, religiosity and spirituality can serve as adaptive coping mechanisms for handling the academic, physical, mental and emotional demands of adjusting to college. It is also important to note that other factors should be used along with GPA to determine overall adjustment to college and academic success.

Implications/ Future Directions

First, the present study conducted this research to mostly students who were in Psychology courses. According to the participant demographics, 77 freshmen, 30 sophomores, 21 juniors, and 13 seniors participated. This is not a representative sample of the Columbus State University campus. Therefore, future research may extend the study to include more classes of students outside of the Psychology department. Research may prove to be conclusive with research findings from previous studies. Second, this study did not clearly assess whether students identified themselves to be both religious and spiritual. Future research may assess this information to compare to make inferences from the results and analyze if both play a role together in mitigating the academic, social and emotional challenges of college.

As mentioned earlier, many factors can interact to measure academic success. Future research should examine these factors to predict correlations and interactions with religiosity and spirituality to analyze its influence on college students. The present study had students self-report

their GPAs. Therefore, this may lower reliability. Future research should further examine the balance that college students demonstrate between their religious and spiritual involvement and devotion to their academic work. This may provide further insight into the earlier results about higher levels of religious and spiritual demands negatively impacting students' study time and campus involvement. Students may benefit from college environments that encourage them to seek religious and spiritual fulfillment. Therefore, future research may examine the current state of college campuses and determine how they can better assist students who desire this fulfillment through support for different on-campus religious organizations or off-campus churches or other religious institutions.

This study did not find similar results to previous research about the impact of religiosity and spirituality on the academic success of college students. Results do tend to vary across college campus. Further experimental research may explore these differences and provide more research on the current study and the factors that influenced negative correlations between religiosity, spirituality, and GPAs.

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THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL BELIEFS IN THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS
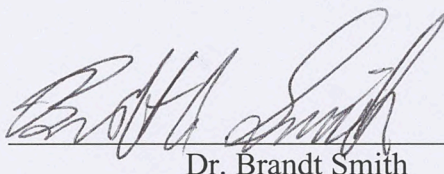
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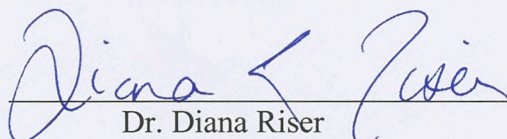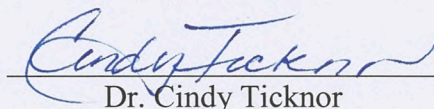COLLEGE OF LETTERS & SCIENCES

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