A recent college graduate shares her reflections on the involvement opportunities she had in college and how they impacted her spiritual development and career choices. As a Christian student, Macias represents one common perspective that many other students share regarding testing of one’s faith and development of spiritual identity through college experiences. Through the support she received through her Student Affairs positions and supervisors, Macias demonstrates the impact these experiences and relationships can have on students’ exploration of faith, values, and encounters with diversity in college. Her story encourages us to continue investing in our students in order to provide positive examples and spiritually significant opportunities for their growth and development.

I still remember the night my parents handed me the acceptance letter to the University of Illinois. I couldn’t believe I was accepted to such an amazing institution! I gripped the letter and smiled with joy knowing that I was going to have the opportunity to go to college and have many new experiences for the next four years of my life. As a first-generation college student, this moment was monumental for both my family and me.

Even though I was filled with excitement, many questions and concerns also bombarded me. Leaving home was not the “right” thing for a Latina woman to do in my house. I looked at my dad, who was proud of me, but was not enthusiastic about the thought of his only female daughter leaving the house. I knew that this step was going to be hard for both of my parents, but I was determined to start a new chapter in my life. Going away for college was also going to be personally challenging; yet I saw it as an opportunity for me to discover who I really am and what I truly believe.
I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior my sophomore year in high school. Even though I had heard about Jesus at a young age, I was never interested in living a “devoted” life like my mother. It wasn’t until I hit the very rock bottom during the beginning of high school that I started seeking God intentionally. As I began to search for truth, I found Jesus and felt His mercy, grace, and love in my life. Through God’s strength, I was able to overcome many things, and I knew that if I went to the University of Illinois, I was going to as well. This is how I decided that going away for school was going to be the perfect opportunity to learn more about myself, while learning more about others and further developing my spiritual identity in college.

As I reflect back, freshman and sophomore years were a significant time in my life regarding my spiritual development. I was far away from home and from my close circle of Christian friends. While I was still involved in a local Christian fellowship, the difference between my church at home and the one at school made it hard for me to speak to people about all the questions I had. The classes I was taking and the topics we dialogued about made me question things about my own faith. It was not that I did not believe in God anymore; I was just not sure of why God allowed certain things or why Christians acted a certain way in this new environment.

These circumstances led me to prayer and the word of God to find answers. I grasped to verses like Luke 11:9, "So I say to you: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." These experiences of struggling through complex questions opened my eyes to see that God created all of us differently. This time also strengthened my faith because as I prayed and asked God for answers, I got them! I decided that investing more in the experiences and opportunities in college would help me not only meet new people, but grow spiritually as well.

During my sophomore year, I became involved in Student Affairs through my position as a Multicultural Advocate (MA) in University Housing. One of my core responsibilities as an MA was to coordinate programs in the residential halls about social justice issues on topics of race, gender, religion, class, and other identity groups. Before we led dialogues or planned programs, we were trained on how to speak to students about these topics; we took classes, read books and articles, held retreats, and engaged in dialogue around these topics to better prepare for our work in the residence halls.

I specifically remember a diversity class we had to take because it was not like a regular college class. Each time the class met, we spoke about a specific social justice topic. It was this class that opened my eyes to see that not everyone thought the same as I, not everyone believed the same thing I did, but above all not everyone shared my same background.

The day that the topic of religion came up in the class, our instructors asked all of us to share what we believed. As each person shared about his/her faith, I started to realize that a large majority of the class was not Christian. There were only three people left before I had to share, and I had already heard things like, “I really don’t like Christians…they just condemn people. They do it all the time on the quad” or “I used to be a radical Christian, but then I realized that I was being ignorant.”
When it was my turn to share, I was not sure if I should be honest to my future co-workers or if I should hide my religious identity so I wasn’t marginalized in the group. I took a deep breath and decided to be brutally honest about my faith, and even shared some of my personal background, making myself vulnerable in front of all of them. I also addressed some of the things they said about Christians, and personally apologized for these experiences.

When I was done sharing, I thought that I was going to be seen differently or even be criticized for my faith. The beautiful thing is that none of these things happened! Some of my classmates even came up after class to tell me that they really liked hearing what I shared. Moments like this in college were the ones that challenged me and opened my eyes to see beyond my own perspective on topics of faith.

My job as a MA also awakened a passion within me about social justice issues and how to work with college students within a Student Affairs context to address identity development. I was able to see and learn about the inequality and prejudice that many people in today’s society face – sometimes even firsthand! I knew that I wanted to be a voice for these issues, but more than that, I recognized that I had a burden to teach others about these things. This is why I continued to do programs for University students as I sought out additional opportunities within Student Affairs.

I became a student programmer at the Latino minority house named La Casa Cultural Latina. In this role, I worked closely with Latino students as we coordinated programs for the entire campus around cultural issues. I loved the opportunity and the support that Student Affairs provided for us to be a voice on these important issues. I also appreciated the fact that I could count on La Casa’s staff for any help I needed. They too, were interested in discussing topics of racism, class, injustices in the educational system, and many others. That was an encouragement for me as a Christian, too, because I believe that they are issues that God considers important.

As a Christian, I try to stand for truth and for justice. While the easy thing to do in life sometimes is to conform to society, I realized that the best thing I can do is to stand up for what I believe and live with integrity of heart. There were so many times that I was tempted to do the things that my college friends were doing that I knew were contrary to my personal values. One of them was to do anything I could to do well in school, even if it meant putting my values aside just to get a good GPA. Other times I saw students offend others and put aside morality and integrity to achieve certain opportunities. When I became consumed in this same idea, I always had to stop and think of my values before I did something I knew I would regret.

This process of reflection and understanding how to act with congruency between my beliefs and values helped me develop spiritually in college. I was better able to deal with these issues firsthand at a leadership program called INTEGRITY that was run through the Illinois Leadership® Center that helped participants clarify personal values, distinguish moral issues, and learn to practice ethical decision making in their daily lives.
During my senior year, I became a student intern at the Leadership Center where I helped coordinate these leadership programs for other college students. Attending programs like INTEGRITY was a perfect way for students to realize that true leadership is portrayed through understanding and practicing integrity and morality. It is a lesson I learned through this experience, and I hope the students who participate have similar learning opportunities.

Upon graduation from the University of Illinois this past spring, I began reflecting upon the significance of all of these opportunities in college that helped me explore and develop my faith even further. Through all of my involvement experiences in college, I began to understand the true meaning of service. There is a passage in Mark 10:45 in the bible that says, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

As a Christian, I gain inspiration and motivation from this verse and Jesus’ example of service that I try and emulate in my own work in Student Affairs. While a human’s instant reaction is to think of themselves, I have tried to change that mindset and think of others first. I find this really hard sometimes, but I am encouraged when I realize that serving in little ways can really make a difference in the lives of others. This is one way I live out my faith on a daily basis in all that I set out to do.

Now that I have graduated, I realize my deep desire and dream is to work in Student Affairs professionally in the future because I truly enjoy working with college students! I love learning from them, listening to their concerns, but most of all I want to be a support to them like people were to me when I was in college. I also one day hope to lead dialogues and social justice classes like the ones I had the opportunity to take in college. These events help open our eyes to see beyond what we know as individuals and understand the perspectives of others to gain a deeper and richer experience.

Before I start graduate school in the spring, I will be traveling to India this fall. As I live abroad for a few months, I will have the amazing opportunity to volunteer at a college campus and see first hand how Student Affairs operates overseas! I feel incredibly blessed for this opportunity, because it will help me better prepare for my future goals and continue to help me develop both personally and professionally.

I hope that when I return, I can hold the lessons learned close to my heart so I can share these cultural experiences with others in the United States. I know this opportunity is just one more step to becoming a future Student Affairs practitioner and supporting other students’ spiritual development in college and I am excited for the journey ahead!

**Cecilia Macias** is a recent graduate from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. After completing her Bachelors degree in Communication, she hopes to begin her Masters Degree this spring in Student Affairs. Macias’ desire is to work in Student Affairs in the future, and ultimately to work abroad. In her spare time, she loves to sing and volunteer in her community. Macias helps local high school students with the college application process and motivates many students to attend college.