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**Beyond The Field: Exploring Identity, Spiritual Growth, and Community through the
Fellowship of Christian Athletes**

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Abstract

For this Capstone Project, the researchers investigated Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) representatives' views on bringing student-athletes to have a relationship with Christ and why they think it is important. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researchers used what they have learned to formulate an action that responds to improving FCA in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience. This is important because student-athletes need a sense of community and safe space to express their relationship with God. It is argued that having a relationship with Christ is important, especially for student-athletes.

Beyond The Field: Exploring Identity, Spiritual Growth, and Community through the Fellowship of Christian Athletes

When I turned 18 and graduated from high school, I thought I had my life all figured out. I thought I was going to the Major Leagues for baseball and school was only there because I had to go to college to reach my ultimate goal. It was baseball or nothing. I went to California State University of Bakersfield. I figured since Bakersfield is Division 1, I was right on track to go professional. Little did I know that COVID was going to hit and my future had me transferring to multiple schools and then realize that going to the MLB is way out of the picture now. When I was 18, I thought I knew everything about myself. I lived a life of working hard in baseball, drinking with my teammates, and running away from the good values I had growing up with my parents. I knew my parents would not advise me to drink every weekend and basically get rid of my religion by not acknowledging God. I had no idea of the way I should act and present myself around others. I had no identity in the person God made me to be.

Through God's good grace and guidance, I was blessed with a roommate my second year that took me back to church and taught me things about God I never knew. He taught me it's not just a religion that I am following, it is a relationship with God that I am building. Even though I still went out on weekends and made mistakes, I was starting to find my true self again. As I continued on this path at Bakersfield, I felt alone in my faith journey sometimes because I only had my roommate. I needed a safe community around me that I could depend on to grow my faith and express my troubles and feelings. While I was still there, I also felt I was not able to take my faith journey to the next step because of how busy I was with baseball. We played on weekends and practiced so many hours they were uncountable. I was at a plateau with my

spiritual exploration due to putting my relationship with God on the backburner while I was occupied with baseball and my weekend slip-ups.

I transferred to my second school, Ohlone College. It is a junior college in Fremont, California. This is when I started to notice God working in my life. I was then blessed by God with two more God-fearing roommates who enhanced my relationship with God. They held me accountable for the words coming out of my mouth, my actions on the weekend, and even checked in with me on how my relationship with God is going. I never regretted a weekend at that school because I felt I had my Jesus-loving brothers that helped me mold and form my relationship with Jesus. Again, I wished there was a way I could build my relationship with God with others around me besides just my roommates.

It was not until I came to my third school. I attended California State University of Monterey Bay and have not been more blessed by God. My senior capstone professor mentioned to my classmate and I that we should do our project on FCA. At first, I had no idea what FCA was until I did some research. I figured out it is an organization that promotes student-athletes to build their relationship with God through fellowship and making a difference in their community. My classmate and I thought to ourselves, it would be a great idea to create FCA here at CSUMB since there is not one currently here on campus. Through the guidance of God, He led us to the right people to make it possible for us. We made a community of student-athletes that build up one another, inspire leadership, and provide a safe space for people to express their feelings and love for Jesus. This is exactly what I have been looking for my whole time in college and to say I am one of the people who created FCA here at CSUMB is something I will forever give thanks to God for. Not only for me, but FCA here is touching the hearts of the student-athletes and making a difference in their lives.

I look back at the journey of my college time and it is so relieving to know that the times that I ran away from God, He was still right there leading me on the path He had for me before I even knew it. I am so grateful for all the people who have made a difference in my life so far and my only prayer is to make a difference through FCA and guide them on the right path to building a relationship with God.

Literature Synthesis

The FCA or Fellowship of Christian Athletes is an organization that aims to help student athletes build their relationship with God, build themselves, and build others around as well. FCA is a collaboration of coaches, administration, and student-athletes to build a strong supportive community. The FCA has grown in the last 60 years since the creation of this organization. Through the process of this organization, people have been able to transform their lives for the better. The first theme has presented itself which is transformation of athletes. Coaches are able to mold student-athletes. According to Adkinson (2019), “Our mission is to see the world transformed through Jesus Christ through the influence of coaches and athletes...A coach influences more people in a year than we do in a lifetime” (para. 16). Coaches are with athletes majority of the time, especially in college. Coaches are able to connect with athletes in a way that other staff of the school are able to connect with students. They are able to find connections with teaching them lessons from God and connect it to their sport that these students are able to relate to.

There are different types of coaches in life that people utilize to help them become a well rounded human being. Athletes utilize coaches and also other types of people to help coach other aspects in their life. In accordance with Ramsey (2015), “...A coach(spiritual coordinator) who

works with student athletes and can also help student athletes with the constant battle they face in balancing their roles, in dealing with competitive success, and in coping with other life responsibilities” (p.2). The ability of being involved with FCA brings a sense of peace to athletes as people around them transform their lives for the better. Even though a spiritual coordinator is not necessarily a coach for these athletes, they are able to help transform the ability to cope with other life responsibilities and working through the ups and downs of athletics. An example of this is from McDaniel (n.d), “I took a deep breath and remembered there’s more to life than this one mistake” (para.5). With the work of FCA members and advisors, there becomes an ability to understand that even the failures from sports do not define the athletes.

Spiritual development is a huge part of growing in faith. FCA does just this as this organization builds a community for athletes and coaches for transformation in all aspects. As stated from Flowers (2022), “research maintains that participation enhances both learning and character development, including leadership, interpersonal skills, social self-esteem, discipline, personal health, motivation, dedication, and life lessons” (p.2). Athletes are able to learn new skills along with growth of other character traits that were sharpened by the involvement with FCA. Many people that experience the goodness of FCA are able to grow as a community as well. From Waller, Flowers, and Crooms (2023), “The spiritual development of athletes has been identified as a significant factor in improving sporting performance, nurturing excellence and individual growth, and overall well-being” (pg.1). As seen from multiple articles, the ability to participate in FCA builds individuals in many ways that only sharpens them. Spiritual development is part of the transformation that athletes and coaches undergo from the support of

others around. The community that is built helps transform people to being the best versions of themselves that they can.

This transformation can also be seen in others around the world. The people of FCA travel the world to serve others, gain leadership skills, and develop sport ministry programs. According to (*Global Impact Summer Internship*, 2016)

In South Africa, interns will implement discipleship and global sports ministry training in a cross-cultural outreach environment, coupled with discipleship and personal growth experiences. Participants will also host sports camps for 10- to 14-year-old children from diverse backgrounds, be involved in whole-life coaching in an impoverished township using sports, and engage in relational development and discipleship through living and working together as a team. (para.8)

The ability to go to other nations and serve others is a feeling that is unexplainable. Sports bring people together and build a community for people to love one another. People coming from different backgrounds bring so many opportunities to learn from one another and make a true team. The God fearing people are able to grow individually and transform themselves in a positive way to make an impact that will rub off on others.

Why is it a good thing?

FCA has many benefits for athletes and coaches alike. Being an athlete and also being a full-time student takes tremendous amounts of responsibility and time management. There are many hours spent at practice along with balancing academics. Since everyone is human, stress and anxiety of performing in sports and in the classroom can be extremely overwhelming

sometimes. Said from McDaniel (n.d), “Our meetings give me a chance to step away from the struggles of being a student-athlete and spend time in an environment with people who understand what I go through, and that is what helps me get through the challenges—knowing there are others walking in my shoes” (para.4). Since everyone is an athlete and understands the commitment, it is nice to be able to relate with other people that have the same struggles. It is easier to keep pushing through challenges when you know you have the support of those around you. All athletes walk in similar shoes so there is a clarity that many people have done before so it is possible.

FCA provides people with support and encouragement from athletes and coaches that truly care about the balance of being able to handle the stress of being a student-athlete. According to Adkinson (2019), “It was that sense of support that helped carry her through high school and college. But it was further strengthened by the program that helped bring her to Christ in the first place -- the Fellowship of Christian Athletes” (para. 8). The coaches bring support that is sometimes hard to find at highschools and universities. When there is support from other people when your family may be many miles away, it gives a sense of belonging. That's what students want to feel, that they belong and feel loved and supported by others. In line with Ramsey (2015), “Fellowship of Christian Athletes chaplains have been used as agents to combat some of the problems these students face. Football team chaplains are often used as a voluntary support system for these players” (p. 7). Everyone in FCA has one goal which is to build a community of God fearing people that want to build people up along with building people up with Jesus. The team chaplains or coaches want to serve the athletes just like we were all called to do.

The ability to not be able to express your religious freedom is something that many people today do not have to deal with, in the United States at least. Luckily in the United States, people are able to express their religious freedoms even on campuses across the nation. People can not be denied to express what they believe. According to (*Campus Rights*, 2024) “FCA has the legal right to meet on high school and college campuses across the country where other student-led groups meet as well. Students have religious rights to FCA meetings on many campuses around the country” (para.1). People do not have to be ashamed of what they believe. This is such a beautiful thing, people are able to get support from others and relate. Students are able to freely run this organization and bring fellow student-athletes to build their relationship with Christ and others.

What Has/Should Be Done?

Over the years, FCA has grown nationwide since it was established around 70 years ago. From the finding of Ramsey (2015), “The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) was founded in the 1950s to aid in the spiritual development of middle and high school student athletes” (p.1). The aim from when it started was the same as it is now. Now, spiritual development is not the only benefit from FCA, student-athletes are able to gain many other benefits and experiences. Student-athletes can build an extremely strong community along with support and transformation for all that are involved.

Community is one of the main things that has come from the establishment of FCA. Community is one of the main core values of FCA, the empowerment from people around can truly can a person. In agreement with Ramsey (2015), “ This can (connecting with a chaplain) help create and build relationships that become an outlet for student athletes to express their

emotional, physical, personal, social, athletic and spiritual needs to someone they can trust and confide in” (p.9). Mentioned earlier, the stress of being an athlete can be overwhelming sometimes. The community of those around can ease those tensions. Anything that the student-athlete may be feeling can be helped by the beautiful community formed by the people chasing the same goal. McDaniel (n.d) adds to this by saying, “The group meets weekly to talk about their struggles, how to deal with temptations, how to balance the demands on their time, and how to impact their fellow athletes and the world at large” (para. 3). The trials and tribulations of existence are taxing. The ability to impact people and make a positive difference in someone’s life is so gratifying. The community of FCA does just that, the people involved give light to a world that is very dark. That being said, all schools across the nation should have FCA. Many schools do not have FCA. Students are missing out on growth. All student-athletes should at least have an opportunity to express their faith along with being in a community where they are accepted, supported, and loved.

In all, FCA transforms people’s capacity, builds a community full of support, and influences a relationship with the most high. Thankfully, people of the past have created this organization that are serving people within the nation along with serving others outside this nation. The opportunity for those to be surrounded by coaches and other athletes that strive to have the same goals, build an ability to become the best people that they can possibly be. People see growth within themselves and the support from others. The community that FCA builds is one that is so special. To conclude, Fellowship of Christian Athletes is an organization that strives for student-athletes and coaches to guide one another and to glorify the Lord during the lows and highs of life.

Method

For this Capstone Project, the researchers investigated FCA representatives' views on bringing student-athletes to have a relationship with Christ and what they think could be done to improve it. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what they have learned to formulate an action that responds to improving FCA in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

Context

The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) meets at sports fields, schools, and churches. According to the FCA's vision and mission, the FCA focuses on serving local communities around the globe by engaging, equipping and empowering coaches and athletes to unite and inspire, and change the world through the gospel. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes aims to see the world transformed by Jesus Christ through the influence of coaches and athletes (Vision & Mission). The FCA includes people of all races and ethnicities. The FCA hosts six different types of camps; sports camp, leadership camp, coaches camp, power/youth sports camp, team camp, and partnership camp. Along with camps, the FCA holds huddles, which are small local groups or chapters of individuals who have a heart for Christ, athletics, and the mission and vision of FCA. These huddles usually meet a few times a month at schools.

The data collection was done at a local highschool in Monterey County, with a total of 1,151 students. There are 565 males and 586 females. The demographic of the school is 74.4% Hispanic or Latino and 17% white. The rest of the population is spread out to other ethnicities like African American, Asian, and Filipino.

Participants and Participant Selection

The FCA representatives the researchers focused on are relative to the researchers sphere of influence. Researchers met with some FCA representatives at a local highschool in Monterey county in a classroom during lunch time. The classroom had standard desks that were arranged in a way to interview participants face to face. The classroom belonged to a history teacher that had history content written on the white boards. Other participants were interviewed via Zoom, a virtual way to connect with the participants that had a busy schedule or were out of state.

Daniel R. A white male who has been a state director for FCA for 12 years.

Jeremiah R. A white male who has a relatively new position for FCA as a county director in California

Mrs. M. A white female who has been an advisor for an FCA club at the local highschool in Monterey county for multiple years. She is a counselor at the highschool and oversees event planning for the FCA club.

Mr. A. A white male who has been a history teacher at the local highschool in Monterey county for multiple years. He is a mountain biking coach and acts as another advisor for the FCA club at the highschool.

Thomas M. A white male who is a student at the local highschool in Monterey county. He is the vice president of the FCA club at the highschool.

Ella C. A white female who is a student at the highschool in Monterey county. She is the president of the FCA club at the highschool.

Researchers

Haylee. This topic was meaningful to me because being a part of FCA my first couple years of college was life changing. I wish that all student-athletes of all ages had the same opportunity I had. I was similar to my participants because I am very familiar with how the FCA functions, and I was different to them because they have experienced FCA in a different location than I had and from a different position. I needed to be mindful of others' opinions on how to improve FCA. I have only experienced FCA on the surface and needed to be mindful of the participants that have had more background experience within FCA. I also knew that religion in public schools was a topic that was not receptive to all people and I respected their opinions on that.

Kyle. This topic was meaningful to me because this was something I am truly passionate about. Being an athlete at a school has been a very stressful task. I felt that being in a community with God fearing individuals was important to me. Through FCA and through other individuals I was able to grow in my faith and individually as a human. I also wanted to be able to help other people and help them grow their relationship with God. I was similar to my participants because I believe in God and want to build the kingdom. I was different because I was not very experienced with FCA but wanted to learn all about it. Some people may not have wanted to share opinions they may have had. Some people may have felt that the questions I was asking were something they may not have wanted to talk about.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

1. Describe your experiences with FCA.
2. What do you see as the challenges with supporting student-athletes in their relationship with Christ through FCA?

3. What is FCA currently doing to bring and/or support student-athletes to God- by whom - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?
4. What do you think should be done to improve FCA's ability to bring student-athletes to have a relationship with Christ through FCA?
5. What personal experiences or insights have you gained from your involvement with FCA that you believe have positively impacted your faith journey?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to say about bringing athletes to having a relationship with Christ through FCA and/or the improvement of FCA?

Procedure¹

Participants were interviewed. All interviews were done individually. When it was not possible to interview participants in person, they were invited to complete a virtual interview via zoom of the same questions. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour, were audio-recorded (with participant consent), and took place at a highschool in Monterey county. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses. All interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee and took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, six FCA representatives were interviewed to see what they have to say about bringing student-athletes to have a relationship with Christ through FCA and

¹ <http://my.ilstu.edu/~jhkahn/>

why it is important. This is important because student athletes are able to explore identity, grow spiritually, and have people to rely on when the times are good and tough. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1).

Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: Time; Reach; and Money. Time, Reach and Money are crucial considerations when starting a club on a college campus because these three criteria directly impact the feasibility, sustainability, and effectiveness of the club. When starting a club, it requires a serious time commitment. The ability to organize meetings with flow takes time. Reach is important because FCA is targeted for christian athletes to build that quality community surrounded by spiritual growth within oneself and each other. The more people that are able to get involved the better off the club will be. FCA highlights the ability to bring people together and one way to bring people to these meetings is bringing food. Food is not free and the power to feed 30 people each week is not cheap. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	TIME	REACH	MONEY
FCA community at CSUMB	High	High	Medium
Instagram Page	Medium	High	None
Make “How to start Huddle” video	Medium	Low	None

FCA community at CSUMB Option 1

Our first action option was to create an FCA community here at CSUMB. This action took a large amount of time because we had to fill out paperwork to be an official club on campus. We had to plan certain activities, find locations, and meet with the FCA area director. The most difficult part of this action was searching for an advisor on campus to be a part of FCA.

Instagram Page Option 2

Our second action option was to spread awareness about this community through an instagram page. This instagram page took a medium amount of time. To create announcements we had to plan the day before a meeting and also be sure to capture a picture at every meeting. We were limited in this action because not everyone has access to instagram so we were unsure of how far this information was going to reach.

“How to start a club video” Option 3

Our third action option was to make a “How to start a Club” video. This video would entail the steps we had to take to begin the FCA community here. It is an opportunity for other students interested in beginning their own campus community and to have an easier time starting their own club. This video would have taken a medium amount of time to make and the reach was low because not many people were interested in starting their own club.

Recommendation.

After analysis and reflection, we believe in creating FCA at CSUMB and starting an Instagram page is in our best interest. Important factors that influenced the choosing of the recommendation was the ability to help Christian athletes explore identity within themselves, grow spiritually, and build a lifelong community.

Concessions.

By not recommending creating a “how to start your own huddle” video, Christian athletes are at risk of going through the same struggles we faced when starting our own FCA huddle on campus such as searching for an FCA area director, searching for a campus advisor, and figuring out first steps for our first huddle meetings.

Limitations.

One of the biggest limitations is assuming that our target audience of Christian athletes on campus have Instagram or check the app frequently. The main way of spreading the word about FCA meetings is through the Instagram page so if our target audience does not have access to the instagram page then we are not reaching the maximum potential audience.

Potential negative outcomes.

Possible negative outcomes of choosing to start FCA at CSUMB could be people being placed in a group or situation that makes them uncomfortable. While being a part of the FCA community, an athlete could feel judged and uncomfortable to attend another meeting.

Possible negative outcome of starting an Instagram page for the FCA club could be someone being uncomfortable being put on the internet through a photo or video.

Conclusion.

In all, by starting our own FCA community here at CSUMB, we began a conversation that many student-athletes were afraid to talk about, which is religion. The student-athletes we interviewed mentioned that it is hard to be seen as someone who is associated with a religious club at school, but FCA uplifts and encourages people to begin this conversation. The research proves that spirituality is oftentimes neglected in development, so beginning this conversation is essential to a holistic development. As student-athletes, life can be crazy. We also know how important it is to continue developing as a person, and we believe that God is the primary source

for this. FCA helps student-athletes like us grow closer to God and we believe that every person should have an opportunity to explore that relationship with Him. As one of our interviewees gave praise to FCA for this, she says “It’s a little bit of Christ in the school-filled day.”

Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

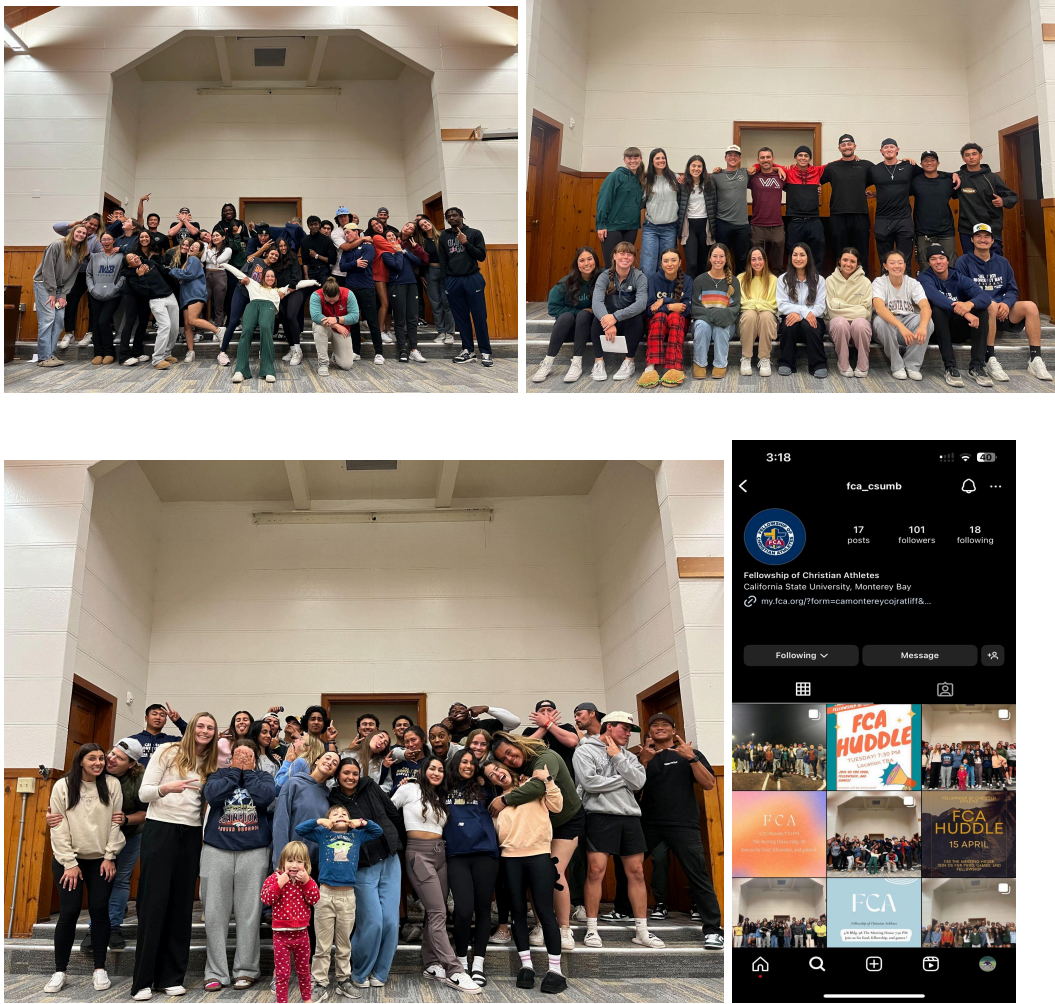
Christian student athletes appreciate being able to have a community and express their beliefs or explore religion in a safe space. We found the importance of Student athletes having the opportunity to grow closer to God to have a more holistic development. We had the opportunity to interview four people from a FCA huddle at a local high school. Two are advisors that also are faculty at the highschool and two are student-athletes that are on the leadership team for the same local highschool. We also interviewed two FCA Directors, one is the director of the Monterey area and the other is the director of Hawaii.

Our first action option was to create an FCA community here at CSUMB. We had to fill out paperwork to be an official club on campus. We had to plan certain activities, find locations, and meet with the FCA area director. The most difficult part of this action was searching for an advisor on campus to be a part of FCA. Our second action option was to spread awareness about this community through an instagram page. We had to plan the day before a meeting and also be sure to capture a picture at every meeting. We were limited in this action because not everyone has access to instagram so we were unsure of how far this information was going to reach. Our third action option was to make a “How to start a Club” video. This video would entail the steps we had to take to begin the FCA community here. It is an opportunity for other students interested in beginning their own campus community and to have an easier time starting their own club.

We chose to go through with two of these action options. We created an FCA community here at CSUMB and created an instagram to spread the news about our community. At these meetings we play a game, eat some pizza, and listen to a speaker. We have about 30 student-athletes attend regularly, many of which agree that they need a space like FCA.

We chose these options because we believe that the meetings and the instagram page will give student athletes the opportunity to expand their identity, spiritual growth, and be comfortable in a community that loves them.

Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection



These are some of the photos from our meetings that we created. We met once a week every Monday at 7:30. We spread the word by the Instagram page and word of mouth. We invited as many people as we could and the student athletes loved the opportunity. Ever since the start of the FCA meetings, we kept the structure and flow the same and it ran perfectly every time. We have noticed people from the meetings talked about the message days after and applied it to their life. The only wish was that we could have started this beautiful community from the beginning of the semester. The next step we took was electing new leaders for the coming year. We gave them everything that we did to succeed this year. We learned that having a community where people are wanting to better themselves is extremely important. It brought us peace to know that people are going through the same struggles as us and there are people to support.

Critical Reflection

Through this whole process of FCA, I learned that I need a community to better myself spiritually, personally, and as a person of society. I learned that I am a leader and I am able to bring the best out of people. In terms of teaching others, I found new knowledge in the understanding that people care about the energy you give. If you bring your 100% forward, the majority of the people will reciprocate the same back to you. In FCA I had to lead activities and prayers, so if I was energetic and excited then others would feed off of that. Change is something that anyone can do, all it takes is a passion and desire to make a difference.

Synthesis and Integration

The Liberal Studies MLO's, the required coursework, and this Action Research Project has impacted my professional development. MLO 4 is about Social Justice Collaboration. Through FCA, I have the knowledge that I have reflected on my personal values and also helped

my peers to build a community that is working towards a just and sustainable world.

MLO 3 talks about being an Innovative Technology Practitioner. With the creation of the FCA instagram page, we used today's technology to reach out to many people ourselves of our community that see a difference being made. We collaborate with other instagram pages that are working towards the same goal. We also post ways to interact with the community and work towards a positive environment.

The steps I need to take to be a professional would be to be consistent with my actions and give everyone my best effort. It takes a whole community to make a difference and through FCA at CSUMB, I hope to leave a positive impact and a change in the community.

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