

AN ANALYSIS OF THE COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE OF GAY AND LESBIAN
STUDENTS ENROLLED IN FAITH-BASED HIGHER EDUCATION

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JOEL M. WENTZ

ADVISOR: DR. ROGER D. WESSEL

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT**THESIS:** An Analysis of the Collegiate Experience of Gay and Lesbian Students

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College is a formative stage of identity development for many young adults. This study presents an in-depth analysis of how some young adults who identify as gay or lesbian experience higher education in a faith-based setting. The theoretical framework for the research was founded in the literature of two separate fields: the general experience of college students and homosexual identity formation. Utilizing models created by Chickering (1969), Cass (1984), and D'Augelli (1994), among others, the intent of this study was to discover how an explicitly faith-based college environment impacts the collegiate experiences of students who identify as gay and lesbian.

This study was grounded in qualitative, phenomenological methodology. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with students who identified as gay or lesbian while enrolled in private, faith-based institutions of higher education. Interviews were completed during the spring semester of 2010. Data analysis was conducted based on steps identified by Moustakas (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), and predominant themes were discovered.

The researcher concluded that a faith-based institutional setting impacts the collegiate experience of gay and lesbian students in considerable ways. Students

encountered significant struggles, including identity denial, pressure to conceal sexuality, and frustration regarding school policies. Based on these themes, specific conclusions were drawn regarding students' enrollment decisions, sexual identity formation during the collegiate experience, reconciliation of faith and sexual identity, encouraging supportive networks for gay and lesbian students, and policy development regarding sexual behaviors on campus. Suggestions were presented for administrators, counselors, faculty, staff, and students at faith-based universities.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter one presents a brief synopsis of the study which examined the collegiate experience of gay and lesbian undergraduates enrolled at private, faith-based institutions of higher education. This chapter introduces both the study and the researcher. Also included in this section is a statement of purpose, research questions, significance of the study, scope and delimitations of the study, definition of terms, and the organization of the project.

Introduction to the Study

College is a formative stage of identity development for many young adults. Aside from developing a vocational identity, college students also mature academically, emotionally, spiritually, and sexually. Although a significant amount of research has already been performed concerning these aspects of college students' identity development, more research is needed in regards to how the external college environment impacts this growth. The intent of this study was to discover how an explicitly Christian, undergraduate college environment impacts the collegiate experience of gay and lesbian students.

The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) is an association of intentionally faith-based colleges and universities (Council for Christian Colleges and

Universities, 2009). According to its website, the mission of CCCU is “to advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to biblical truth” (para. 2). The CCCU has grown from 38 North American members in 1976 to 111 members in 2009. Each of the three faith-based institutions represented in this study qualified for CCCU membership.

In many religious settings, specifically Christian environments, homosexual practices and behaviors are prohibited. However, in many public institutions, students are free to publicly explore and establish their sexual identity, whether or not it is heterosexual. Since American higher education began with a commitment to holistic growth, this distinction creates unique problems for gay and lesbian students in religious universities. To better serve these students, faculty and staff at faith-based institutions should understand the unique struggles of these students and how these obstacles impact their overall identity development.

Cass (1984) and D’Augelli (1994) independently produced models of homosexual identity development. According to Cass, one who identifies as homosexual will progress through six hierarchical stages before adopting a healthy sexual identity. D’Augelli argued that one who is homosexual would be in a constant state of identity development rather than progress through hierarchical stages. Other researchers, such as Troiden (1989), Fassinger (1998), and Klein (1993) also developed sequential and non-sequential identity development models. These theories hold direct implications both for students who struggle with homosexual orientation and administrators and faculty members of institutions which expressly forbid homosexuality.

By interviewing and observing the experiences of gay and lesbian students enrolled in faith-based institutions, a deeper understanding of their unique struggles was gained. Implications were also drawn from these experiences which could aid faith-based schools in meeting the developmental needs of these students.

Background of the Researcher

Currently pursuing a Master's degree at a mid-size public institution in the Midwest, I attended a small, private, faith-based school as an undergraduate student. Though I do not identify as gay, I developed personal relationships with gay and lesbian students during my undergraduate experience. Nearly all of these students were secretive, some ashamed, of this aspect of their identity. Not all of these students persisted until graduation, and those who did persist seemed to face significant obstacles in identity development and general involvement. Others found it difficult to maintain leadership positions, and at least one student I personally knew resigned from a significant leadership opportunity as a result of these difficulties.

As an alumnus of a faith-based institution, I believe gay and lesbian students enrolled in these schools often face a disadvantage early in their college careers. The students I knew who experienced feelings of same-sex attraction were not able to openly dialogue about the difficulties they faced while developing sexual identity. These students also struggled with abiding by the mandatory lifestyle agreement which prohibited outwardly demonstrating homosexual behavior. In addition, it was difficult for these students to obtain campus leadership positions because of the disparity between their orientation and the behaviors outlined in the lifestyle agreement.

Because of this personal background, I would like to better understand the experiences of these students as they seek to establish identity. I believe a stronger understanding of these issues as they pertain to religious higher education will benefit students who identify as gay or lesbian, but I also believe offices of student and academic support at faith-based institutions could benefit greatly from this. By achieving a better understanding of the role the institution plays in the struggles of these students, administrators, faculty members, and staff members at faith-based institutions may provide students who identify as gay or lesbian with a more holistic, positive experience than they are currently receiving.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was twofold. The first objective was to better understand the collegiate experience of undergraduates who identified as gay or lesbian while enrolled in private, faith-based institutions of higher education. These issues were studied to identify what factors, if any, are present which may either have positive or negative impacts on the collegiate experiences of gay and lesbian students at these particular institutions. The second objective was to better understand the roles of the student and academic support offices at the respective institutions in meeting the developmental needs of these students. This information was studied to better equip faculty and staff members in faith-based institutions for working with students who identify as gay or lesbian.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions.

What are the specific experiences of gay and lesbian students in faith-based institutions of higher education? How do these experiences relate to literature regarding the general college experience, as well as stage and non-sequential models of gay and lesbian identity formation?

Which factors at the university aided or hindered developmental progress? How could administrators and staff members at faith-based institutions improve the collegiate experience of these students?

Significance of the Study

The goal of this study was to identify developmental issues encountered by gay or lesbian students while enrolled at private, faith-based colleges or universities. Although much research has been performed to identify how young gay and lesbian adults establish identity, little research has been conducted on this topic within a religious higher education setting. The researcher hoped to better understand if students were more or less likely to progress through stage and non-sequential models of homosexual identity formation while enrolled at a faith-based school. The researcher also hoped to determine if these students were generally pleased with their experience in higher education.

If faculty and staff at faith-based institutions can further their understanding of the obstacles gay and lesbian students face, these students could be provided with a stronger developmental experience. Student and academic support offices could be better equipped to aid these students through identity development, and institutions could develop specific goals to promote the well-being of gay and lesbian students.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined for this study.

Came-out/Coming-out – A figure of speech associated with the process during which a gay or lesbian individual acknowledges and accepts his/her own sexuality and may share this information with others (Riley, 2010).

Conservative – For the purposes of this study, this term refers to traditional Christian belief maintaining that homosexual behaviors are inherently sinful.

Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) – An international association of faith-based colleges and universities based in North America. To qualify for membership in the CCCU, a university must be intentionally Christian and abide by the mission statement of the CCCU, which is to “advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education” (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2009, para. 2).

LGBT – Acronym standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Organization of the Project

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter Two is a review of related literature concerning developmental issues faced by students who attend college as well as developmental issues faced by young adults who identify as gay or lesbian. Chapter Three includes a description of both the design and methodology of the study. Chapter Four presents the major findings of the study and any implications. Chapter Five relates these findings to the research questions and includes a summary, conclusion, and recommendations for further research. A list of references and appendices are included at the end of the paper.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Summary of the Project

This study focused on the collegiate experience of gay and lesbian students as they progressed through faith-based higher education. The following literature review is organized into four sections: (1) an introduction of the literature drawn upon for the theoretical foundation of this study; (2) a description of research regarding the general college experience of students in both public and Christian higher education; (3) a summary of literature written concerning gay and lesbian identity formation; (4) a presentation of the issues students face as they identify as gay or lesbian while enrolled in Christian higher education.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework for this study rests in the literature of two separate fields: the general experience of college students and gay and lesbian identity formation. Arthur Chickering's (1969) foundational work on identity and education addressed understanding how students progress through identity development in relation to the college experience. He developed a seven stage psychosocial model which Chickering and Reisser (1993) revisited. For the purposes of this study, this model serves as a foundational model, under which other theories and research regarding the collegiate experience can be articulated. According to this model, college students develop

competence, manage emotions, move through autonomy toward interdependence, develop mature interpersonal relationships, establish identity, develop purpose, and develop integrity while progressing through their own collegiate experience. Other theorists that inform the college experience include William Perry's (1981) theory of cognitive development, and Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber (2007) who addressed how college students experience feelings of isolation and anonymity.

Concerning gay and lesbian identity formation, the theoretical models which formed the foundation of this study were organized into two groups: stage models and non-sequential models. Cass (1984) and D'Augelli (1994) independently developed and presented two foundational models within both the stage and non-sequential groups, respectively. Cass identified six stages through which homosexual adults progress while establishing identity: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. These stages are hierarchical, and foreclosure is a possible outcome of each one. D'Augelli's model of homosexual identity development differs slightly and is not considered sequential. Stages include exiting heterosexual identity, developing a personal sexual identity status, developing a sexual social identity, becoming a sexual offspring, developing a sexual intimacy status, and entering a sexual community. This study also drew upon models developed by Troiden (1989), Fassinger (1998), and Klein (1993).

The College Experience

Chickering's (1969) psychosocial model of development included seven vectors which college students progress through. While a student moves through the first vector, developing competence, three separate skill sets develop. These include intellectual,

physical and manual, and interpersonal competencies. Once these foundation skills are developed, Chickering concluded that students must learn to manage their emotions. Emotions which are not properly controlled can damage the developmental process, and students must learn to both recognize and regulate these feelings. The third vector, moving through autonomy towards interdependence, was addressed in Chickering and Reisser's (1993) later work. Students experience an emotional separation from parents, which typically results in a level of reliance on peers. College students must navigate this reliance to establish emotional autonomy while maintaining a healthy interdependence with these peers. While progressing through the fourth vector, developing mature interpersonal relationships, students build on established interdependence and develop a capacity for intimacy. The quality of relationships deepens while students recognize and tolerate differences. A student's progression through the fifth vector, establishing identity, demands growth in many various aspects of holistic identity. This sense of identity draws from every previous vector the student progressed through. Next, students address vocational planning and general priorities through the sixth vector, developing purpose. After establishing his/her sense of identity, each student must decide who they want to become and how to get there. This vector may include career decisions, but it also addresses personal interests and the priorities a student places on family, friends, and accomplishments. Finally, each student must address core beliefs and values through the seventh vector, developing integrity. The student experiences a shift away from the dualistic values held as a child. After this shift, the student is able to affirm the values he/she holds while recognizing the existence of alternative viewpoints. Finally, the

student is able to establish integrity by achieving congruence between his/her values and behavior patterns.

Perry (1981) identified nine positions, as well as specific transitions between these positions, through which individuals progress while cognitively developing. Through the first three positions, individuals experience dualistic thinking. In this dualistic mindset, the world is split into clearly right and wrong viewpoints, and authorities hold the correct answers. Through the fourth position, as an individual begins to question whether or not authorities truly do hold every correct viewpoint, the individual discovers relativism. While progressing through relativistic thinking, one begins to wonder how he/she can verify his/her own correct thinking when every perspective is equally valid. Finally, during the sixth position, one begins to develop commitments within relativism. Eventually, if this process is fully completed, an individual will establish strong commitments to specific values while admitting to and respecting the existence of other equally valid viewpoints.

As identified by Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber (2007), feelings of anonymity become a significant developmental struggle for students beginning college. Particularly at large institutions, or institutions which were a significant distance from the student's original home, this struggle is actually perpetuated by initial interaction with other students. Rather than viewing this period of time as a chance to make new social connections, the student is overwhelmed by the amount of people. This is especially true during the critical first weeks of the transition into college, making this a crucial developmental stage. Social interaction during this stage, however, eventually does

provide foundations of connectedness and interdependence. These foundations then provide students with a positive sense of belonging.

For non-traditional students, however, Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) found that factors such as age and class status especially contribute to their senses of belonging. A majority of such students at one university admitted to feelings of anxiety about academic preparedness, particularly in comparison to younger, tradition students. Older students viewed the time they spent away from school as a hindrance. This perceived obstacle immediately increased feelings of anxiety, which further increased the difficulty of achieving connectedness and interdependence within the campus community.

In addition to sense of belonging, a young adult's social class had an impact on perceived ability. According to students surveyed by Jackson (2003), those who were not able to afford private secondary education felt the need to prove their intelligence in informal conversations while adjusting to college. Students who entered college with this mindset began with a perceived disadvantage, which hindered their immediate sense of belonging. Furthermore, one-third of such students participating in a general study in Ireland reported feeling disconnected from others solely because of their class status (Read et al., 2003). Students who were raised in working-class families felt pressure to adopt the appearance and behavior of middle-class students, who made up the majority of the student body. These actions caused feelings of identity betrayal.

An additional contributor to students' feelings of isolation and anonymity was the inaccessibility of professors (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). When contact with lecturers was infrequent, students were unable to learn proper academic expectations. First-year

students especially relied on these instructors to provide general guidelines for life as a university student. However, to combat these struggles, students also depended on the afore-mentioned connectedness with other students. “If lecturers are inaccessible and fail to communicate their expectations then students, in order to negotiate the new learning situation, begin to rely on each other” (Scanlon et al., 2007, p. 237). This basis of interdependence established an identity of the surrounding population. From this point the individual was then able to explore a new sense of self within this collective identity.

In a study of 602 first-year college students, 76 percent stated university life fit them well, showing that the majority of students demonstrated a willingness to navigate the transition into college life despite its difficulties (Scanlon et al., 2007). This study was conducted after the first year of higher education was completed. In addition, 82 percent of those same students felt like an important part of the college community. The difficulties of the transition into higher education made the process of identity development extremely formative. Once students were able to achieve healthy interdependence, the inhibiting feelings of isolation and anonymity were eliminated. This was a crucial step in a student's identity formation.

The College Experience in Christian Higher Education

Cook, Larson, and Boivin (2003) found students' views of God could be placed into three categories. God may be viewed as a primarily authoritative figure, as a relational figure, or as a combination of these two characteristics. Whichever category the student adopted defined the system of morality in which he/she operated. Those who identified God as authoritative emphasized rules and hierarchies to guide daily behavior. For example, a senior male who adopted the authoritative view of God made a decision to

end the relationship with his girlfriend on the basis of such rules. He realized “she was number one and God wasn't” (p. 83), and the decision to fix this hierarchy was made without consulting her first. Similar students realized the importance of these rules, and it was everyone's responsibility to abide by them. As a result, students viewed themselves, and others, as part of a strict hierarchical system. The desire to study and follow rules governed every action and decision which was made. Those who identified a relational being believed God cared about their decisions, but this role was more abstract. Those who combined the two characteristics were labeled transcendents. The transcendents held both views of God simultaneously, resulting in a more complex, layered belief. Rather than appealing to rules and structures, transcendents, as well as those who viewed God as relational, believed they were more influential in the decision-making process. The relationship with God was growing and changing. Students' self-concept in this situation was one of a friend or family member. Important decisions could have a positive or negative impact.

In the setting of the Christian college, vocation is typically defined as a calling instead of a career (Feenstra & Brouwer, 2008). The goal becomes to find a calling which is within God's will for one's life. This is difficult if one does not have a clearly defined understanding of God's role. The resulting mindset closely associates the concept of God with the concept of vocation. In fact, a study of 191 students at a Christian liberal arts institution cited feelings of instability, anxiety, and “insecure attachment to God” (p. 91) as strong indicators of poor vocational understanding.

Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation

The following section presents a brief overview of research regarding gay and lesbian identity formation. Included in this section are explanations of several stage models of homosexual identity development, a presentation of non-sequential models, a discussion of psychosocial issues faced by gay and lesbian adolescents, and finally an overview of research concerning homosexual identity formation in Christian higher education.

Stage Models

A foundational stage model of homosexual identity formation was developed by Vivienne Cass (1984), in which gay and lesbian adults progress through six stages before achieving a fully realized sexual identity. In this model, she indicated that it was possible for an individual to undergo a traumatic experience while progressing through any of the stages, resulting in foreclosure of further development.

When an individual first perceives that his/her behavior may be identified as homosexual, he/she enters the first stage: identity confusion. Depending on this person's belief that homosexuality is correct or desirable; he/she will either consider the possibility of a homosexual identity as positive or negative or reject this possibility completely. As the individual accepts the potentiality of a homosexual identity, he/she moves into stage two: identity comparison. This stage is primarily defined by feelings of alienation, as the individual consistently compares him/herself to others of heterosexual orientation. If the individual considers making contact with other homosexuals to lessen the feelings of alienation, he/she enters the third stage: identity tolerance. This stage is defined by tolerance because the individual sees his/her contacts with homosexuals as necessary

rather than desirable. It may be common for one in this stage to maintain both a heterosexual and homosexual identity, depending on the environment he/she is in. Increased contact with a homosexual culture leads to the fourth stage: identity acceptance. As a network of gay and lesbian friendships is created, the individual begins to define how he/she may fit into society as a homosexual. Extremely selective disclosure may be made at this point to community members outside of this network. As the individual accepts that homosexuals are a generally negatively valued group in society, he/she progresses into the fifth stage: identity pride. During this stage, frequent attempts are made to validate homosexual status. These attempts typically take the form of purposeful confrontations with heterosexuals who have stigmatized the homosexual group. If these confrontations result in positive dialogues and contacts, the sixth and final stage is entered: identity synthesis. During this stage, the individual realizes not all heterosexuals have contributed to marginalizing the homosexual group. He/she also realizes that there are other aspects of one's identity aside from sexuality. Homosexuality is no longer hidden, and every aspect of identity is synthesized into a seamless whole. As peace and stability are found in this stage, identity formation is considered complete.

In a similar fashion, Troiden (1989) developed a four-stage model of homosexual identity formation. The stages in this model include sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption, and commitment. An individual typically enters the stage of sensitization before puberty, or as a child. This stage is marked by feelings of marginalization and strong concern for gender identity. As the individual enters adolescence and begins to notice same-sex attractions, he/she enters the stage of identity confusion. This stage is marked by conflict between the gender identity established in

the previous stage and the newfound sexual impulses. Individuals may encounter significant developmental issues during this phase, as previous heterosexual socialization left them unprepared to encounter same-sex attraction. As a gay or lesbian individual begins to associate with other members of the LGBT culture, he/she enters the identity assumption stage. This is the phase in which one determines how to deal with the social stigma attached to a gay or lesbian identity. One may decide to simply align with LGBT culture, conceal his/her sexual identity, or adopt exaggerated stereotypical mannerisms associated with gay and lesbian people. The final stage, commitment, occurs when sexual identity becomes a less important aspect of overall identity. One may comfortably identify as gay or lesbian to heterosexual individuals, and there will be a decreased focus on any negative social stigmas.

Ruth Fassinger's (1998) stage-based model is somewhat different in the fact that an individual simultaneously progresses through stages in two separate constructs of sexual identity: individual and group membership identity. Each is composed of four stages: awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis. An individual may progress through several stages of one construct while remaining fixed in one stage of the other. For example, If an individual experiences a traumatic event while exploring his/her sexuality within the context of the LGBT community, he/she may remain rooted in the exploration phase of group membership identity development while progressing fully to internalization/synthesis as an individual. Similar to other stage models, however, the four stages within each construct are sequential.

Non-sequential Models

D'Augelli (1994) also developed a model of homosexual identity formation. However, he concluded that identity formation does not occur in hierarchical, sequential stages, nor does it remain fixed after young adulthood. He presented three variables and six interactive processes which play important roles in identity development throughout an homosexual person's entire lifetime. These variables include personal subjectivities and actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections. The first variable, personal subjectivities and actions, is defined by specific meanings an individual attaches to perceptions and actions related to his/her sexual orientation. Interactive intimacies refer to the effects of messages received through interactions with friends, family, peers, and other intimate members of one's community concerning sexual orientation. The third variable, sociohistorical connections, refers to the setting in which the individual lives. This setting includes any cultures, laws, policies, or organizations which impact sexual orientation. D'Augelli also identified six processes which homosexuals may interact with at any point during the identity formation process: (1) exiting heterosexual identity, (2) developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status, (3) developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity, (4) becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring, (5) developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status, (6) entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community. A homosexual may enter or exit any process depending on his/her current context and environment.

Fritz Klein (1993) also recognized homosexual identity formation as an ongoing process. He developed the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid as a system for describing an individual's sexuality beyond simply heterosexual or homosexual labels. Klein identified

seven variables which compose one's sexuality, including sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, heterosexual/homosexual lifestyle, and self identification. Sexual orientation is assessed within each variable for the individual's past, present, and future, further accounting for the continual process of sexual identity formation throughout one's lifetime. The purpose of the instrument is to achieve a deeper understanding of one's own sexuality and how that sexuality may change and develop over time.

Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation in Adolescence

Gay and lesbian adults encounter many psychosocial problems while initially exploring their sexual identity. These include efforts to change sexual orientation, family conflicts, suicide ideation, and unusually high levels of grief concerning failed relationships (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989). High levels of stress are experienced specifically concerning disclosing sexuality to family members, management of sexual identity, and sexual health concerns relating to HIV and AIDS (D'Augelli, 1996). Love, Bock, Jannarone, and Richardson (2005) also reported feelings of spiritual loss and lack of socializing experiences as significant problems. This lack of socializing experiences is problematic for many marginalized groups, but especially for young gay and lesbian adults seeking to establish sexual identity as a portion of overall identity. Such adults were found to be at much higher risk of placing disproportionate focus on sexual behavior, resulting in one's full identity being solely defined by sexuality.

Coleman and Remafedi (1989) found that this focus on sexual behavior resulted in part from the increased sexual awareness and physical changes which occur during adolescence. These changes cause the period of adolescence to be extremely sensitive

and volatile. In fact, Coleman and Remafedi suggested the phase of life during which acquiring a non-heterosexual identity would be most disruptive would be adolescence. However, it is typically because of these changes that the phase of sexual identity exploration usually begins during these years (D'Augelli & Dark, 1995). Such changes make adolescence difficult for every person, but homosexuals face additional challenges in attempting to develop a positive self-image while navigating social environments which are primarily defined by heterosexual behavior.

Those progressing through adolescence develop a serious desire for seeking intimacy (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989). Considering the lack of social models for gay and lesbian behavior, young adolescents do not understand how to properly search for this intimacy. In fact, identifying as gay or lesbian may lead to a loss of intimacy which is already present in one's own life. Rowell (1996) noted that even straight persons who wish to develop supportive relationships with homosexuals often feel compelled to do so in an anonymous way. This need to be anonymous contributes to the invisibility of homosexuals and is considered one of the primary costs of homophobia. The fear of this loss, combined with the stronger need for fulfillment in adolescence, creates crippling psychosocial barriers (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989). In a comparison of 1,000 homosexual adults to heterosexual counterparts, white homosexual men were three times more likely to engage in serious suicide ideation. Black homosexual men were 12 times more likely, and the majority of attempts occurred before the subjects were 21 years old. Similarly, Hershberger and D'Augelli (1995) performed a study of homosexual youth from 14 separate metropolitan areas. This study showed 60% of the subjects had considered suicide and 42% had actually made an attempt. This high risk of suicide

attempts is attributed to the culmination of factors such as sexual changes in adolescence, stress caused by sexual identity exploration, and a history of victimization. D'Augelli and Dark (1995) suggested an inclusion of non-heterosexual literature and history into school curricula, particularly high schools and universities, would steadily reduce antilebian and antigay attitudes among students. Simply studying fiction written by homosexuals and the history of civil rights concerning sexual orientation could reduce homophobia and victimization of homosexuals.

Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation in Christian Higher Education

A barrier to development students face while identifying as gay or lesbian on a college campus is the inaccessibility of faculty (Mooney, 1992). This inaccessibility is particularly prominent during the early college years, and it is largely the result of gay and lesbian faculty leading closeted lives. Gay and lesbian professors at institutions in Alabama, Oregon, and New York admitted in interviews to being fearful of bringing dates to faculty picnics, displaying pictures of their partners in an office, or even speaking openly about homosexual issues on campus. This fear distracted these professors and prevented genuine connections with students. Further complicating this problem is the issue of the lifestyle agreement (Hill, 2001). While basic behavioral agreements at public universities outline standard living guidelines, many lifestyle agreements at Christian schools explicitly forbid homosexuality. Bethel College in Minnesota requires all faculty and staff members to sign such an agreement (Mooney, 1992). After 21 years of teaching, Kenneth Gowdy was fired from his position because he explained to a student, outside of class, how he believed homosexual sex “should be restricted to lifelong relationships” (p. 3). According to Mr. Gowdy, he signed a lifestyle agreement which

forbade homosexuality in practice, but he was never required to adopt a specific stance or believe a certain doctrine. Kenneth Gowdy does not identify as gay or lesbian.

A majority of religious institutions are affiliated with specific churches, and many such churches make a distinction between the orientation and acts of homosexuality (Love et al., 2005). This distinction has resulted in a wide variety of viewpoints. Some Christian doctrine states simply having a non-heterosexual orientation is sinful. Others conclude the orientation itself is not sinful, however, acts of homosexuality are. Still others believe neither the orientation nor the act is sinful, if it is kept within the context of a life-long relationship. This inclusive view is held by denominations such as the United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalism, and the Metropolitan Community Church. Several Methodist denominations also do not reject homosexuality as sinful (Hill, 2001). According to D'Augelli's (1994) research, religious policies and cultures fall under the label of sociohistorical connections. As mentioned above, this is one of three interrelated variables which inform and shape the identity of homosexuals.

Love et al. (2005) defined spirituality as a driving force in homosexual students' work to achieve equality. Many students who are attracted to the idea of Christian higher education place high priority on exploring the spiritual aspect of their identity, and gay and lesbian students are not an exception to this. However, in efforts to avoid confrontations with both family and fellow students, these students display a tendency to develop their sexual identity separately from their spiritual identity. As a result, unreconciled identities are found to be a significant problem in religiously-affiliated schools. Barbara, a young college student who identifies as a lesbian, recognized the conflict of the spiritual and sexual aspects of her identity. She was raised in a

conservative Christian home, and she desired openness in her relationships. At the time of her interview, however, she had not come out to her parents or any relatives. This separation of identity aspects contributes to a life of insincerity. Rowell (1996) says about homosexuals in this situation:

Persons cannot be whole when they feel they must hide from family, friends, employers, and church members who they know themselves to be as persons . . . persons whose sexual orientation makes them part of the socially enforced 'invisible' people of our times. (p. 133)

Summary

Chickering and Reisser (1993) provided a revised model of Chickering's seven vectors to show how students progressed through higher education to establish their identity and integrity. Integrity was finally achieved when a student's outward behaviors were congruent with his/her inward values and beliefs. While developing through these models in Christian higher education, the spiritual concerns of students included God's role in their lives as well as vocational calling.

Cass (1984) developed a six-stage, hierarchical model of homosexual identity formation through which homosexuals develop sexuality as a portion of overall identity. D'Augelli (1994) identified three variables and six interactive processes with which homosexuals engage during a lifetime of identity exploration. Research indicates adolescence as the formative phase in which homosexual identity is explored (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989; D'Augelli, 1996; D'Augelli & Dark, 1995). Psychosocial barriers during this phase of identity exploration include high levels of stress, fear of victimization, and high risk of suicide.

Little research had been performed concerning how gay and lesbian students in Christian higher education experience the developmental phases of higher education. Based on research available, it appears these students face barriers such as the inaccessibility of faculty members (Mooney, 1992), unreconciled spiritual and sexual identities (Love et al., 2005), and increased fear of stigmatization as a result of religious policies and lifestyle commitments which forbid homosexual behavior (Hill, 2001).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Chapter three describes the methodology used in the study which examined the collegiate experience of gay and lesbian students enrolled in private, faith-based institutions of higher education. This chapter contains a statement of purpose, research questions, the design of the study (including a review of the research method, population, and sample approach), a description of the data collection procedures, and a summary.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was twofold. The first objective was to better understand the collegiate experience of undergraduates who identified as gay or lesbian while enrolled in private, faith-based institutions of higher education. These issues were studied to identify what factors, if any, are present which may either have positive or negative impacts on the collegiate experiences of gay and lesbian students at these particular institutions. The second objective was to better understand the roles of the student and academic support offices at the respective institutions in meeting the developmental needs of these students. This information was studied to better equip faculty and staff members in faith-based institutions for working with students who identify as gay or lesbian.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions.

What are the specific experiences of gay and lesbian students in faith-based institutions of higher education? How do these experiences relate to literature regarding the general college experience, as well as stage and non-sequential models of gay and lesbian identity formation?

Which factors at the university aided or hindered developmental progress? How could administrators and staff members at faith-based institutions improve the collegiate experience of these students?

Design of the Study

Research Method

This study was grounded in qualitative methodology. This methodology was chosen for three main reasons. First, there was a need for deep exploration of the topic, which is possible through this method of research (Creswell, 1998). Second, qualitative research gave the researcher the opportunity to obtain information within the individuals' natural setting. Third, according to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), qualitative researchers “seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning” (p. 13), which was ultimately the goal of this project. This methodology was chosen because of the researcher's belief that the developmental issues faced by gay and lesbian students in faith-based institutions would be understood best through in-depth questioning and analysis of their individual experiences.

More specifically, phenomenological methodology was followed to conduct this study. There were two main reasons this approach was chosen. First, the focus of this study concerned the experiences of a group of people, rather than a single individual (Creswell, 1998). Second, the experiences of this group revolved around a similar

concept, or phenomenon. Personal interviews were conducted, which allowed for the in-depth questioning mentioned previously. A semi-structured interview protocol was created to best facilitate flexible interviews which adjusted to the flow of conversation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Students were permitted, even encouraged, to share stories and personal experiences through the interview process. All information provided by the participants was kept confidential through assigning pseudonyms prior to recording the conversations. To further protect confidentiality, any other names and locations mentioned throughout the conversations were also replaced with pseudonyms during the transcription process.

Setting

Each of the three faith-based institutions represented in this study qualified for membership in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU). The CCCCU is an international association of intentionally faith-based institutions of higher education whose mission is to “advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education” (CCCCU, 2009, para. 2). The CCCCU was founded in North America in 1976, and it has grown to include 111 members in North America in 2009, as well as affiliates in 24 countries. Additionally, at least half of the enrolled undergraduate, degree-seeking students enrolled in each of these universities lived on-campus during the previous academic year, classifying each as highly residential (Carnegie, 2009). Finally, first-year student test scores placed each university roughly in the middle percentile of undergraduate institutions, classifying each institution as selective. To protect the confidentiality of the students and institutions, the names of any colleges or universities mentioned in the interviews were replaced with pseudonyms in the transcription process.

Population

Each student who participated in this study self-identified as gay or lesbian, and was also enrolled in a private, faith-based institution of higher education which was affiliated with the CCCU. Gay and lesbian students who attended public colleges and universities were not contacted for participation. Students were not excluded based on their number of credits or class standing. Participants ranging from sophomores to seniors comprised the population. No other identifiers, including gender, race, economic status, or cultural background were used as eligibility criteria.

Sample

The first eight students who agreed to participate in this study comprised the sample. Of these eight students, five were male and three were female. Experiences were gathered from four different faith-based institutions, representing geographically diverse locations in the United States, including institutions in eastern, western, and Midwestern states.

Data Collection Procedures

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to facilitate the data collection process. The structure for this protocol (Appendix A) was organized to obtain information which was specifically relevant to the research questions. The questions were organized into two major topics. These topics included the developmental issues which the students faced in regards to their collegiate experience, as well as the overall role of the university in impacting these issues.

Before any interviews were conducted, a panel of experts skilled in both the topic and qualitative research methodology reviewed the proposed interview guide. The

members of this panel included a senior student affairs practitioner, a mid-level student affairs practitioner, and two full-time faculty members employed at various universities in the Midwest. A revised draft of the interview guide was prepared based on the suggestions of this panel. Following this revision, a pilot test was conducted in which the proposed interview guide was given to three members of the target population who were not involved in the study. Final revisions were made based on the suggestions of those involved in this pilot test. Furthermore, respondents were informed of their rights through an informed consent document (Appendix B) prior to participating in any interviews. Finally, before these interviews were conducted, the Institutional Review Board at Ball State University reviewed and approved the data collection process (Appendix C). Data were collected during the spring semester of 2010.

Data were collected through personal interviews with students who attended private, highly residential, faith-based institutions. A qualitative research technique known as purposive sampling was used to locate informants (Patton, 1990). More specifically, snowball sampling was utilized, in which an individual led the primary researcher to other individuals who were directly connected to the research topic and would be strong research subjects. This technique was also supported by Denzin and Lincoln (1998), in which a qualitative “researcher must find an insider, a member of the group studied, who is willing to be an informant and act as a guide” (p. 77). After establishing rapport and trust with these individuals, each served as this informant to locate others. Once potential research subjects were identified, an e-mail was sent to each individual, requesting participation (Appendix D). Those who responded positively

to initial contact were selected for interviews. Each interview was conducted in a mutually agreed upon environment.

Before any interviews were conducted, students were informed that participation was completely voluntary and that results would be anonymous. Each participant was also informed that approximately 90 minutes would be required to adequately complete the interview process. To interpret data collected through the interviews, the qualitative research technique of memoing was used, as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This technique involved recording reflective notes and ideas upon the completion of each interview. The notes recorded during memoing were completely theoretical, and they were used to draw emerging connections and themes during the data collection process, rather than waiting until the entire process was complete.

The qualitative research technique of member checking, or sending completed transcriptions to research subjects before data were analyzed, was not used in this study. Though Guba and Lincoln (1989) identified the process of member checking to be the “single most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 239) in qualitative research, the sensitive nature of the topic, as well as the nature of phenomenological study, negated the necessity of member checking. Sandelowski (1993) asserted that a researcher operating within qualitative techniques assumes reality to be constructed, and that “repeatability is not an essential (or necessary or sufficient) property” (p. 3). Therefore, member checking actually hindered the process of discovering patterns and themes in raw data, and “any attempt to increase [dependability] involves a forced or artificial consensus and conformity in the analysis of the data, which is usually at the expense of the . . . meaningfulness of the findings” (Rolfe, 2006, p. 305).

Once the initial data were collected, analysis was conducted based on steps identified by Moustakas (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). During the first step, horizontalization, statements from the interviews which addressed how individuals experienced the topic were identified (Moustakas, 1994). Second, statements identified from multiple interviews during the first step were organized into clusters. This step required the researcher to revisit the data and identify themes, or common experiences, among the participants. In a process known as “axial coding”, the researcher then examined these clusters to identify major categories which explained the experienced phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, a narrative was constructed, in relation to the original research questions, around these categories. Conclusions were then drawn from this narrative.

Summary

This study examined the collegiate experience of gay and lesbian students as they progressed through higher education in a faith-based setting. Data was gathered through personal interviews with self-identified gay and lesbian college students. Common experiences, as well as unique issues, expressed during these interviews were examined to better understand the overall experience of these students, as well as any developmental issues they faced. Data were collected during the spring semester of 2010.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Chapter four presents the findings from the study which examined the collegiate experience of gay and lesbian students enrolled in private, faith-based institutions of higher education. This chapter begins with a summary of the study, followed by a detailed presentation of the findings. Transcriptions of each interview are included in Appendices E-L. The confidentiality of each research subject was protected through identifying each one with a pseudonym, and any other identifying names and locations mentioned in the interviews were also assigned pseudonyms. To further protect the confidentiality of each research subject, as well as the identities of the institutions they attended, interview transcriptions were not included as appendices. Direct quotations from each interview are referenced by using the pseudonym of the research subject.

Summary of the Project

This study examined the collegiate experiences of gay and lesbian students who were enrolled in private, faith-based institutions of higher education. Common experiences were studied to better understand how gay and lesbian students progressed through higher education in a faith-based setting. Data were gathered through personal interviews with eight undergraduates who identified as gay or lesbian while in attendance at a faith-based, CCCU-affiliated institution. Each subject was interviewed during the spring semester of 2010. Themes were extracted from the responses and systematically

organized in regards to the research questions proposed in the first and third chapters. First, relevant themes were detected across all eight interviews. Second, these themes were organized and condensed into broader themes in regards to the two categories addressed by the research questions: collegiate experiences and aspects within the university. Third, data were analyzed according to these broader themes.

Findings

Demographics

Five male students and three female students participated in this study. All eight subjects attended private, faith-based, CCCU-affiliated institutions of higher education, and each one identified coming from a predominantly Christian background. None of the subjects identified as gay or lesbian before attending college. Each was also a Caucasian, traditional-aged college student. The setting of the findings was limited to four faith-based institutions, representing geographically diverse locations in the United States, including institutions in eastern, western, and Midwestern states. The identities of each university and individual were protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Though each subject came from a religious background, the contexts of each individual were slightly different.

- Aaron – Aaron grew up in the Catholic Church and became a Christian in junior high school. He came-out to his immediate family members, and at the time of this study he no longer identified as Christian.
- David – David came from a conservative, Christian family, and had not come-out to any immediate family members at the time of this study. David identified as a Christian. Both of David's brothers also attended faith-based universities.

- Elizabeth – Both of Elizabeth’s parents were pastors. She identified her family background as “moderate and open-minded” (Elizabeth, Transcription). She chose to attend a faith-based institution in an effort to maintain her Christian faith. At the time of this study she came-out to her immediate family, and she identified herself as an atheist.
- Jessica – Jessica was raised in a very conservative, fundamental Christian background and came-out to both her parents during college. Jessica was in a same-sex relationship before attending college, but she never expected to actually identify as a lesbian. She did not identify as a Christian.
- Josh – Josh was raised to believe homosexuality was sinful, and he attended a faith-based institution in an attempt to avoid identifying as gay. Josh came-out to his entire immediate family during college, and he identified himself as a Christian.
- Katie – Katie attended a faith-based university as a “naïve attempt to not become a lesbian” (Katie, Transcription). She had one sister, and came-out to all of her immediate family members. She identified herself as a Christian.
- Mike – A prominent factor in Mike’s decision to attend a faith-based university was because of his initial belief that homosexuality was a sin. His father was a pastor, his mother ran a Christian pregnancy crisis shelter, and his grandparents were both heavily involved in Evangelical Christianity. Mike came-out to each of his immediate family members while he was in college.
- Zach – Zach decided to attend a faith-based university because he did not think he wanted to be gay. He was very involved in church and youth group throughout

high school, but did not identify as a Christian at the time of this study. He came-out to his mother, but not many extended family members.

Collegiate Experience

The participants in this study encountered many specific experiences during their college education as a result of identifying as gay or lesbian. The common experiences discussed by the participants included identity denial, perceptions of homosexuality on campus, exposure to off-campus cultures, concealing their sexual identity, establishing an on-campus peer support network, and reconciling faith and sexual identity.

Identity Denial. Every student indicated a period of time where he/she denied the possibility of accepting a gay or lesbian identity. Although each one admitting to experiencing varying levels of same-sex attraction prior to attending college, none actually acknowledged a gay or lesbian identity before their freshman year. The impact of this period of denial was different for each person. Two of the eight students indicated that this denial played an active role in their decision process regarding which college to attend.

Josh felt that attending a Christian university would help him avoid establishing a gay identity.

So when looking at my university, I saw what their policies were, and for me I felt that it would be best if I was trying to change something, which at the time I felt like being gay was something that needed to change. . . . it provided the restrictions that I felt would be needed for that change to occur. (Josh, Transcription)

While deliberating over which school to enroll in, Katie felt that attending a faith-based institution would cut her off from any opportunities to explore her sexuality, which would ultimately help her maintain a straight identity.

I don't know that I was conscious to that level, but I know that in my brain I had a list of bad things that could happen at college, and especially tied into a lot of those things was if somebody gave me alcohol, well oh my God, what if they figure out I like girls? . . . so I wanted to avoid that if at all possible. (Katie, Transcription)

During their pre-college years, the other six students were not as actively worried that same-sex attraction, much less adapting a gay or lesbian identity, would ever become a major concern as a college student. The assumption among these individuals was that either their feelings of same-sex attraction would simply go away or that they could progress through their undergraduate experience without ever engaging in homosexual behavior.

In regards to choosing a faith-based university which took an open stance against homosexual behavior, Mike explained, "I was assuming the school and I would always be in agreement my whole life, and I would just find a way to let God heal me or something" (Mike, Transcription). Jessica also did not expect her sexuality to cause any problems, "Well, at the time I was very religious, and like I said, I didn't really ever expect to be 'out' or be comfortable with being a lesbian" (Jessica, Transcription). David expressed that "if it was an issue, I wouldn't have chosen to come here" (David, Transcription).

Ultimately, for each of these individuals, this period of denial eventually resulted in accepting a gay or lesbian identity. Aaron acknowledged

I came to this school with the knowledge that everyone else comes to this school with. You know, that it's wrong and it's a sin, and I just didn't accept it. Through the course of being at this school, I learned a lot of things. My eyes began to open up, and I realized that all this is who I am, and I ended up accepting myself during my time at this school. (Aaron, Transcription)

Perceptions of Homosexuality On Campus. Each student expressed that extremely negative perceptions of homosexuality were perpetuated within the general campus culture. Zach spoke about how the culture of his institution placed a disproportionate amount of focus on one's sexuality, "It's a part of who I am. I have brown eyes. I have brown hair. I'm gay. It doesn't define me. But here, it does. At this school it does" (Zach, Transcription). These perceptions seemed to be largely unquestioned by the student body, and in some settings, they were actually affirmed. Three of the eight students specifically mentioned homophobia as a significant attitude within university culture. "Like, you hear people say 'faggot' or making fun of gays. I mean, the homophobia on this campus is pretty ridiculous. It's all subtle, under-the-carpet, not directly in your face" (Aaron, Transcription). Elizabeth was exposed to these perceptions as a student employee.

I worked as a student editor for three years, so I worked with a lot of students who would need help with their papers, and a lot of them would come in with freshman writing papers, or you know, psychology articles where they would talk about "the gays." And of course . . . trying to explain to a student why saying that "gays prey on children" is not an argument that is backed up by valid scientific

work, and if you want to make that claim you're going to need to show evidence for it. (Elizabeth, Transcription)

Further negative perceptions were evident in both chapel services and classroom settings. Three individuals directly addressed chapel services as a time when the subject of homosexuality was addressed in negative ways. Jessica expressed frustration that these services were not utilized as a time to engage in healthy dialogue about sexuality. Zach referenced a specific service in which the prevailing message was, "You can be gay, as long as you're trying to be straight" (Zach, Transcription).

Elizabeth spoke about a meeting she held with a few of her institution's chapel directors.

We talked about how, when it came to the content of chapels, gay issues were very rarely mentioned. If they ever were, it was in a negative sense, and we often have chapel speakers whose opinions and views differ from the faculty and administration. (Elizabeth, Transcription)

Four of the eight students reported the attitudes of people in class settings as further evidence of these negative perceptions. Out of these four, three specifically identified professors as a source of anti-gay sentiment in the classroom. In one case, professors openly referred to homosexuality as an "abomination" (Aaron, Transcription).

According to Josh,

Comments can be thrown from out of nowhere, and are very much accepted on our campus by both students, faculty, and staff. I've heard stories of faculty members outright saying, in so many words, "It would be better if our government just killed all the homosexuals," and nothing's been done about that. (Josh, Transcription)

When Elizabeth chose to turn in a writing assignment about gay slang in the early twentieth century, her instructor strongly objected to its completion, and she indicated that during a conference after the assignment was finished, he commented on the “questionable morality of me studying gay people.” (Elizabeth, Transcription)

Jessica identified one specific classroom occurrence which exemplified the attitude of her peers towards homosexuality.

This one girl was just passionate, trying to hold back tears, being like, “there was this guy in my church, and he was living the homosexual life and he came-out to his parents, and unfortunately he had a lot of bad experiences and they cut him off financially, and he was in high school so he didn't have anywhere to go, and the church shunned him, but, you know, he prayed about it, and he saw that it was a sin, and he was able to change, so don't tell me that it's not a choice” . . . and I just wanted to turn around and be like, “Really? Because I have cried and prayed over this a bajillion times, and I have tried everything not to be, and I still am, so don't tell me that it is a choice.” (Jessica, Transcription)

Exposure to Off-Campus Cultures. In regards to sexual identity, many students indicated a period of exposure to others outside their campus culture as a significant event within their collegiate experience. In some cases this was a period of exposure to a thriving LGBT community, as it was for both Elizabeth and Josh, while for others it was simply a realization that significantly different cultures existed outside of the university. In either case, students indicated that this exposure resulted in feeling accepted by a community of peers, which was extremely valuable. Overall, five of the eight students spoke of this as a turning point in their college experience.

For David, studying abroad for one semester provided him with a valuable perspective.

So that time away, away from the Christian University campus and the community and the atmosphere, and that whole realm of a bubble of Christianity, I guess you could say, that provided me the opportunity to really become who I was inside and gave me the time to discover that. (David, Transcription)

Similarly, both Mike and Aaron spent one semester in urban environments, which was formative for each of them. Mike expressed a newfound level of confidence in his own sexuality after this experience, stating "I sort of came back to Christian University with the mindset of 'I'm not going to take this anymore'" (Mike, Transcription). Aaron indicated that the other students he spent this semester with were actually the first ones he came-out to.

There's only, like, twelve people in the class, that take classes and do the internship. So I came-out to them, pretty much first, so I had this tight group of friends that all knew, and so I made friends with their friends . . . so it's really nice to be in a community of friends where most people get it. (Aaron, Transcription)

Concealing Sexual Identity. After acknowledging and accepting a gay or lesbian identity, each student experienced significant pressure to conceal his/her sexuality. This pressure was felt in varying amounts by each individual. One student indicated a fear of losing her on-campus job if any of her supervisors were to find out she identified as a lesbian. Other concerns expressed by students included being fined, sent to mandatory counseling sessions, or being kicked out of the institution. For Zach, this constant pressure resulted in him leading a double-life, "There is the Zach that everyone

at Christian College sees, and then there is the gay Zach, and I won't let anything intersect" (Zach, Transcription).

Josh spoke about the experience of having his boyfriend visit him in this environment.

When he would come on-campus it was understood between the two of us . . . but it hurt me that I had to ask him, you know, to stay separated from him, to walk by my side and not have much physical contact, no hand-holding or anything like that, and to not really show affection. (Josh, Transcription)

Josh further indicated that this process of hiding significant aspects of his life resulted in an unhealthy pattern of hiding other pieces of his identity, which in turn damaged many of his friendships.

For Katie, this dynamic was especially uncomfortable when she became friends with other students who were employed by the university.

I had a friend last year. He's a good friend now. He was an RA, and he'd ask me things about my life, and I'd always have to say, "I'm sorry, I'll talk to you about it next year. I can't talk to you right now," and I hated it because I can't afford to tell the wrong person. I'd lose my job, I'd get fined, I'd get sent to counseling, there's a whole list of things that would happen if the wrong person told the wrong person. (Katie, Transcription)

The tension experienced during the pre-college stage of identity denial seemed insignificant in comparison to the tension created by the pressure to conceal your sexuality after accepting a gay or lesbian identity. Students had to actively work to ensure they never accidentally said or did something which would give away their

homosexual identity. This required keeping silent when derogatory comments were made about homosexuality, and emotionally distancing oneself from professors and students who perpetuated those attitudes. The result was a pervasive feeling of anxiety, constantly expecting someone to find out. According to Elizabeth, "It's a challenge here if you wish to live a life that's open and honest and full of integrity in keeping with your sexual orientation" (Elizabeth, Transcription).

Establishing an On-Campus Peer Support Network. After accepting a gay or lesbian identity, building a peer support network became extremely important for students. Seven of them spoke directly about the positive results of this relational network, and the individual who did not speak to this experience did admit that he would have explored the possibility if he were not so worried about the school discovering his sexual identity. Of these seven, each one was able to find a social group of students on-campus which accepted and encouraged him/her. These students were categorized as being more liberal, or open-minded. Elizabeth admitted, "I found all the reasonable kids at the Christian college and quickly befriended them" (Elizabeth, Transcription). One student even cited this network as the main reason he did not transfer to another school.

Students also spoke about how the coming-out process actually strengthened many of the friendships they had already established with other students. Jessica explained, "I think that most of my friends went from being a friend to a very good, close friend through that. Just through their support, and you know, those people really know me and know what I went through" (Jessica, Transcription). Aaron admitted that experiencing positive relationships with others on-campus helped him deal with the negative aspects of the campus culture (Aaron, Transcription).

Not every aspect of this process was positive, however. Students also indicated that friendships were lost, and relationships damaged, as a result of establishing a gay or lesbian identity. Both Katie and Mike took steps to intentionally distance themselves from other students who they knew would not be accepting of their sexuality. Students did admit, though, that it was more important to be honest and open with a smaller group of close friends than to hide their sexuality in order to maintain a larger friend group. Opening up about one's sexual identity was seen as a method of weeding out those individuals that were not seen as true friends. In regards to this phenomenon, David explained,

I would rather them know and treat me as an unequal than for me to have to lie to them and have to . . . be OK with someone who, in my mind, is truly unfair and maybe bigoted, or prejudiced. I would rather know that that's the way that they think than to live in this place of uncertainty. And the true friends that I want to have will then still treat me as an equal and care about my life and the experiences that I've had and what I'm going through. (David, Transcription)

Reconciling Faith and Sexual Identity. Each student specifically spoke about encountering a process in which they attempted to reconcile their Christian faith with their gay or lesbian identity. The outcome of this process ranged from active rejection to continued acceptance. Several students also indicated that these issues impacted their relationships with peers and family members.

Three students spoke about how they were in the process of attempting to maintain their faith. David described how appreciative he was of his supportive friends and family members, “especially in regards to my faith because I’m still trying to hold on

to my Christian faith and not sacrifice that for this, where so many people sacrifice it” (David, Transcription). Josh also indicated that he was appreciative of his supportive family members, although he also began to grow tired of constantly talking about his faith with them,

Every time I see them faith always has to be brought up. It gets a little tiring after a while, because I told my dad, you know, if I wasn’t still trying to figure that out and what it looks like for me, I wouldn’t be sitting here with you right now. (Josh, Transcription)

For both Mike and Zach, the Christian faith was something they explored in an attempt to ignore their feelings of same-sex attraction. Mike explained, “I mean, honestly, I was that guy that just prayed every day since junior high for God to heal me, and just assumed that it would happen” (Mike, Transcription). Similarly, Zach described his previous experience with the Christian faith,

Well, I was all about faith then. It’s what I threw myself into to ignore the stuff I didn’t want to deal with, and I was like, “Oh, it’ll go away, and God will make it go away” and the stupid, ignorant stuff that comes with not wanting to deal with things . . . but then junior year it all kind of fell apart. (Zach, Transcription)

At the time of this study, neither Mike nor Zach identified as Christian.

One student came to identify as an atheist during her collegiate experience, despite the fact that both her parents were Christian pastors. Elizabeth explained that this actually helped her along the process of establishing a lesbian identity,

I came to realize that I no longer identified as a Christian, but instead I identified as an atheist, which definitely played a large role in mitigating a lot of the

anxieties, fears, panics, neuroses, that a lot of my peers experiences. (Elizabeth, Transcription)

According to Elizabeth, this process was less confusing because she was not attempting to reconcile her sexual identity with her Christian faith, whereas the disparity between homosexuality and Christianity was a significant source of tension for her peers.

Positive and Negative Aspects of the University

Regarding the role of the university within the overall collegiate experience, research subjects emphasized both positive and negative aspects of their respective institutions. However, when asked if they would recommend their institution to another gay or lesbian individual, responses were overwhelmingly negative. Six of the eight informants blatantly stated they would encourage other gay and lesbian students not to attend their institution, while the other two recommended attendance only under specific circumstances, such as if the student obtained academic or athletic scholarships, or if he/she decided to attend with the intention of impacting the culture. Additionally, five of the eight subjects expressed regret over their own decision to attend a faith-based institution. These individuals indicated that they would choose a different university if given the chance to repeat their college experience. Specific aspects within the role of the university which were discussed included individual support from faculty and staff, counseling services, school handbook and policies, male residence hall culture, and perceptions of administrators.

Individual Support from Faculty and Staff. Every one of the subjects indicated support from faculty and staff members as an extremely positive aspect of his/her university. Zach even explained that the main reason he had not left his institution was

because his instructors did not treat him any differently after they found out he was gay. Students further appreciated the fact that faculty and staff members would support them, despite the possibility of being reprimanded by the university. In some cases, students indicated that professors actually risked their own job security by being supportive of their sexual identity. Mike explained,

I've actually had faculty and staff give me secret notes that are like, "I'm ashamed to be at an institution that takes a stance like this, and I'm sorry that we have to have all these conversations in secret, but I just want you to know that I don't think it's a sin" . . . and then they'll be like, "Please rip up this note after you read it." (Mike, Transcription)

Additionally, six of the eight students spoke about individual relationships they formed with faculty and staff members. These individual relationships were exceedingly positive, and in some cases, were integral in the student's identity development process. Aaron spoke of one teacher, "Due to her knowledge and stories and experiences, helped give me the courage to begin to accept myself and come-out. So, actually I owe a lot of my coming-out experience to one of my teachers" (Aaron, Transcription). Similarly, Katie spoke about a professor who developed a positive reputation for accepting gay students, and as a result, had several students come-out to her. One professor in particular helped Jessica come-out to her conservative, Christian family, "That bible professor I told . . . he got me resources on biblical translation stuff that I could show to my mom, and he was really helpful" (Jessica, Transcription).

Elizabeth had the opportunity to take an independent study with a faculty member who was particularly supportive. The purpose of the study was to examine gender roles and sexuality in literature.

He had to title it “Reading in English” so we could get it past the faculty, but it was a fabulous experience. Every week we would talk about various queer theories, what it is like for me at that institution, gay identity, all that kind of stuff. He saved my life, I think. If not for him, I would have gone nuts, because it was so nice to know that there's at least one adult there who is a Christian and not absolutely bat-shit insane when it comes to the fact that gay people exist in the world. (Elizabeth, Transcription)

Counseling Services. Four individuals attended the counseling center at their respective universities. Despite any fears or pre-conceptions the students had, each experience was positive. None of them felt any pressure to change or ignore their sexuality, and for two female students, the experience of going to counseling was actually formative in helping each of them establish a healthy sexual identity as a lesbian. Katie spoke directly about this experience,

My counselor, this year, joked that you could see my progression on my counseling forms. You have to fill out forms with our various issues before you go in. My first year I ranked three, on a scale of one to five, on questions of sexuality. Last year I put a 5. This year, I scratched out “questions of” and put five next to sexuality. I'm at the point where I have issues sometimes, but I'm not questioning anything, and I think those people have actually helped me along the way. (Katie, Transcription)

Mike also relayed a positive experience,

He has, my therapist, has been really there for me. He doesn't think that homosexuality is a sin and that the way to deal with it is to try to remove it from an individual, and he thinks that a healthy identity as a homosexual is to embrace that part of yourself, which is all the things I believe. (Mike, Transcription)

The only negative association with counseling services was expressed when students felt worried that they would be sent to mandatory counseling sessions if their sexual orientation was reported to school administrators. When asked about this, Zach responded, "Yeah, it wouldn't have been my choice. They would have, well not forced, because they can't, but strongly suggested to do it . . . it would have been mandatory, basically, the counseling" (Zach, Transcription). Katie also expressed her feelings in regards to this issue,

I think that's demoralizing to someone, to be like, "You're clearly disturbed and not fit. We need you to go and talk to somebody and make sure that you really know what you're talking about." I have no problem with counseling, but I do have a problem with you telling me I need it because I'm clearly something unnatural. (Katie, Transcription)

School Handbook and Policies. An overwhelmingly negative aspect of each student's college experience was the tension caused by the school handbook and policies. Each student attended an institution where homosexual behavior was specifically mentioned and prohibited in the university's lifestyle guidelines. One specific source of tension was the distinction these policies made between acknowledging a homosexual identity and actually participating homosexual behavior, such as same-sex hand-holding,

kissing, and dating. As a college student attempting to define his own sexuality, Aaron indicated, "It's really frustrating because, for one, I can be gay as long as I'm not practicing, which doesn't make any sense to me" (Aaron, Transcription). According to Katie, "You're allowed to be gay, as long as you don't do anything gay" (Katie, Transcription).

Elizabeth spoke about having a conversation with her admissions counselor before attending college, in which he stated, "I noticed on one of your recommendations, your teacher mentioned that you were a member of the GSA [Gay-Straight Alliance] . . . I just wanted to make sure you knew that you can't be gay at Christian University, right?" (Elizabeth, Transcription). Upon reflecting on this conversation, Elizabeth said,

That was really the start, and it was, yeah, of course the policy says officially you can't engage in same-sex behavior, and it's not that gay students can't attend, you just can't engage in this or that. But it was interesting to hear the way it really comes across, which is you cannot be gay and come here. (Elizabeth, Transcription)

A second significant source of tension was a perceived over-emphasis that was placed upon the policies regarding homosexuality. Behaviors that other students engaged in, such as drinking and heterosexual behavior, were not dealt with as harshly. As a result, a double standard was perceived, and gay and lesbian students felt singled-out, frustrated, and bitter. Six of the students spoke about how their respective institutions specifically included same-sex hand-holding within the definition of homosexual behavior which was not permitted, Aaron was one of the students who specifically mentioned this.

I can't be in a relationship, like, I can't hold hands with another guy, yet I see straight couples making out everywhere, and it's just kind of like, I don't get why that's there at all. It's just really frustrating . . . It just feels really unfair. (Aaron, Transcription)

Katie also spoke about this aspect of the policy,

That is a huge misunderstanding, where most of the heterosexuals believe that we just can't have sex like they just can't have sex, and it's absolutely fair, but that's not the case at all. If I'm holding hands with someone I'm in sexual misconduct violation, and that's kind of ridiculous. (Katie, Transcription)

Elizabeth spoke about her experience in the residence hall as a further example of this double standard,

It was funny because a lot of stuff got overlooked in a way that gay stuff never does. Girls had their boyfriends sneak up to their rooms all the time. There was a lot of drinking going on, you know, folks did what they wanted, and a lot of that flew under-the-radar. (Elizabeth, Transcription)

In addition, Zach recalled a time in which a group of students were caught drinking on-campus, a behavior which was also in violation of the living guidelines. Furthermore, several members of this group were under-age.

And all the school ever did was slap them on the wrist . . . nothing ever happened, nothing ever came of it. And I'm like, "That's illegal. That's against the law," but me being gay isn't, and I was more severely punished. (Zach, Transcription)

In regards to forming student organizations, David spoke about the Gay-Straight Alliance chapter on his campus. Every student who was seen attending this group was

threatened with punishment from administration if participation continued. As a result, the group decided to meet in secret, without even telling the faculty who wished to be supportive.

I feel like we're an underground railroad. It's ridiculous. So, a group like the Political Activists, on-campus, can be an official club, can have sponsorship, can receive money from the school, but GSA cannot . . . if, you know, we just want to have a place where we can meet and be supported and have a place where we can talk . . . the university got rid of it, and so that forces people to find other places to find acceptance and love. (David, Transcription)

These rules and policies were seen as encouragement of the negative perceptions of homosexuality displayed on-campus. Mike explained,

You have to acknowledge that when you create a handbook that's all about loving your neighbor, and all this stuff that Christian universities stand for, and then you have an entire section of the handbook devoted to, basically, putting down homosexuality and encouraging homophobia, of course the student body is going to, in many ways, perpetuate the cycle of homophobia and hatred, because the handbook does. How can we hold the students accountable if the handbook is openly doing it? (Mike, Transcription)

Male Residence Hall Culture. Of the five male students who were interviewed, four of them lived in all-male residence hall environments. The culture of the all-male residence halls was both foreign and intimidating to male students who experienced same-sex attraction. The behaviors which other males found humorous and entertaining were seen as offensive and immature by the gay individuals. Furthermore, these students

did not feel as if they were in a position to challenge the prevailing attitudes. Only one of these individuals indicated that his residential experience was not extremely negative.

David spoke about his own experience,

I hated every second of it. I, in fact, moved out after the first semester into the on-campus apartments, and I have since lived in an apartment. So, I hated it. I can't even describe how much I can't stand the whole dorm lifestyle and attitude . . . it was just the whole assumption, like, "Yeah, we're all guys, let's wrestle naked, let's all take showers together" . . . I hated the immature attitude. (David, Transcription)

In response to the question about his residence hall experience, Josh explained,

I didn't understand a lot of the culture, I guess . . . and I joke about this with a lot of my friends now, but on our campus it seems like straight guys had way more gay tendencies than gay guys on our campus. And it's weird to say, but the sexual repression on our campus is ridiculous . . . and I never understood it. (Josh, Transcription)

Even Aaron, who was the only male that did not live in the residence halls, expressed disdain for the culture.

I'm actually kind of fortunate that I didn't have to live in the halls, because I probably would have killed myself. You know, all the stories that I hear from my friends who have lived in the halls, you know, it sounds terrible . . . It's just ridiculous that two straight guys can be all touchy and jump around, but if you like guys, then you're going to hell. It's ridiculous. (Aaron, Transcription)

For Mike, the experience in the residence hall was partially negative because he did not feel safe coming-out to the RA on his floor, or even to his full-time hall director. He also concluded that the male residence hall culture contributed significantly towards the negative attitudes displayed towards homosexuality on-campus.

And the actual people who are in the residence halls themselves, the students, literally have no inkling that there might be a gay person around them, so they just spout off every horrible thing you can say about gay people, and it's sort of constant. I mean, Christians are the biggest perpetrators in this issue, and that's the saddest fact . . . they're perpetuating hate. They're teaching people that this is an issue that God is against, and that therefore, we should be against these people. And so, of course, when you're in a group of Christians, especially all men, the resulting homophobia that occurs is literally jarring. (Mike, Transcription)

Perceptions of Administrators. Unlike the relationships and positive interactions students experienced with faculty and staff members, interactions with and perceptions of administrators were exceedingly negative. Administrators were perceived as people who were largely ignorant and out of touch with current issues regarding homosexuality. As a result, students felt that administrators simply did not want gay or lesbian people on their campuses. Katie identified administrators' control as a weakness of her campus.

So with this peak of homosexual awareness, or whatever they're calling it, they've already gotten in trouble with the Dean of Students interfering when he found out certain things were going on, and is now making them counter every pro-gay thing with an anti-gay thing. It's going to be terrible. (Katie, Transcription)

Two students specifically spoke about negative interactions they had with administrators as a result of their sexual orientation. For Josh, the individual who was going to be his supervisor at one point in his college career was informed by administration that Josh recently entered a same-sex relationship. As a result, Josh was called into his office for a meeting.

So I went in and talked with him, and he asked me point-blank if I was in a relationship, and I was honest with him and said “yes,” and so we talked about that, and he pretty much gave me the ultimatum of continuing my schooling until graduation and ending my relationship, or continuing my relationship and ending my time in school. (Josh, Transcription)

As a theater major who was involved in many shows and productions, Zach reported a similar experience which occurred immediately after another student told university administrators that Zach was gay.

So in turn, the school pulled me from summer tour. That's why I didn't go. That Fall I wasn't in the show because of it. It was bad. There were meetings. There was a meeting where they wanted to put me in counseling, and they said, “The only way you can stay is if you're in counseling.” So by the end of it all I told them it wasn't true. They're so stupid, they'll believe what they want so they don't have to deal with anything. I was like, “Well, I'll just say what you want me to say, and we'll pretend that this never happened.” And so, you know, they believed it, and we went our separate ways. (Zach, Transcription)

Also regarding this specific situation, Zach spoke about a meeting he had with a residence life administrator.

I was in a meeting for two hours with Eric, from residence life, and we were just talking about everything, and all this stuff that the school has decided and the school has talked about, and I'm like, "Can you really just decide that for me?" . . . But they didn't want me to represent the school in any way, and they didn't want me to, like at all. I was like, "Do you just want me to disappear?" I'm like, "I got a year left, can I finish?" (Zach, Transcription)

In general, students felt administrators were completely unapproachable regarding sexuality. David explained this mindset on his campus.

They push students away and make them make decisions that they are not yet ready to make. I'm being kind of vague because I have to, like, their attitude and their stances make students find acceptance in other places, whereas if they provided the services here, the students wouldn't be forced to make irresponsible choices, to find temporary situations to find love . . . they're just making students worse off than they were before. (David, Transcription)

Elizabeth was the only student who spoke in defense of campus administrators.

I know the president, the vice president, so it's not quite as easy as just, "They're a bunch of old, white homophobes who don't know what they're doing" . . . but at the same time, they're really products of their culture, and they were growing up in Evangelical culture in the 50s and 60s and early-70s, which really conflated Biblical prohibitions against homosexuality, pop-psychology that suggested it's a series of disorders, as well as an overwhelming cultural bias in favor of a heterosexual norm. (Elizabeth, Transcription)

Summary

The students interviewed for this study discussed specific aspects of their collegiate experiences, as well as the role the university played within this experience. Aspects of their experiences included identity denial, perceptions of homosexuality on campus, exposure to peers outside the campus culture, concealing sexual identity, and establishing an on-campus peer support network. Aspects within the role of the university which were discussed included support from faculty and staff members, counseling services, school handbook and policies, male residence hall culture, and interactions with administrators.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter five presents a summary of the project, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Project

This study examined the collegiate experiences of gay and lesbian students enrolled in faith-based institutions of higher education. The theoretical framework for this study was rooted in literature regarding the collegiate experiences of college students and various models of identity formation, specifically addressing homosexual identity formation. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with eight undergraduates who self-identified as gay or lesbian while enrolled in a faith-based college or university. Common themes were extracted from the responses, and these themes were organized and analyzed in response to the research questions. Interviews were conducted during the spring semester of 2010.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from the study that examined the collegiate experiences of gay and lesbian students enrolled in faith-based institutions of higher education: students making informed enrollment decisions, sexual identity formation during the collegiate experience, reconciling faith and sexual identity, encouraging supportive networks for gay and lesbian students, and policy development

regarding sexual behaviors on campus. Each conclusion is supplemented by discussion and suggestions.

Students Making Informed Enrollment Decisions

Young adults who experience feelings of same-sex attraction, although they may not identify as gay/lesbian, should carefully approach enrollment decisions when considering attending faith-based colleges or universities, as feelings of same-sex attraction will likely have a negative impact on the collegiate experience at these institutions. Colleges and universities must be candid with prospective students and families regarding institutional policies concerning homosexual behaviors. Additionally, staff members who engage with students in enrollment decisions, particularly those who work in admissions offices, cannot assume these students fully understand their own sexuality upon entering college.

Prospective college students, whether or not they eventually identify as gay or lesbian, should be aware of the pressure they may feel to conceal same-sex attractions or behaviors while enrolled at faith-based institutions. This pressure is a result of institutional values and the negative perceptions of homosexuality within the faith-based campus culture, and it creates obstacles regarding the ability of gay/lesbian students to openly develop and establish their sexual identities. Chickering (1969, 1993) identified growth in competency, emotional management, interdependence, and mature interpersonal relationships as necessary to achieve identity development. Similarly, the final stages of many sequential models of homosexual identity development were consistently characterized by an individual's ability to synthesize his/her sexuality into a larger, holistic identity (Cass, 1984; Fassinger, 1998; Troiden, 1989,). However, the

pressure these students feel to conceal their sexuality while enrolled in these institutions may place undue focus on the sexual aspect of each one's identity, resulting in a hindered ability to holistically develop.

Young adults who experience feelings of same-sex attraction while progressing through adolescence, as well as their families, should not ignore such feelings as they make decisions regarding which college to attend. These attractions may not simply disappear while progressing through higher education. Rather, the possibility exists that one's same-sex attractions will intensify while enrolled in college, and policies restricting homosexual behavior on faith-based campuses may actually become a significant source of tension and frustration. Such factors must be carefully considered as students choose to attend an institution that will best facilitate their identity development.

It is equally important for professionals in admissions offices at faith-based universities to recognize that many incoming students possess a limited understanding of their own sexuality. Behavioral expectations regarding sexuality should be clearly communicated to prospective students and families, but this communication cannot be based on an assumption that young adults have fully processed their own sexual attractions and behaviors. In fact, incoming students may be fixed in a position of dualistic thinking (Perry, 1981). Students may hold a belief that some sexual identities are clearly right or wrong, which may change as they move toward relativistic thinking. Such candid discussion would provide prospective students who experience same-sex attraction with a necessary insight into how the campus culture may impact their overall experience. Ideally, counselors, faculty, or other staff members will maintain such communication with students while they begin to process their own sexual attractions and

tendencies throughout their first two years of higher education. Staff members should also be aware of the potentially negative effects a gay or lesbian identity can have on the collegiate experience of incoming students. If prospective students admit that acknowledging a gay/lesbian identity is even a remote possibility, this consideration should weigh heavily in discussions regarding whether or not a faith-based university is the best fit for them.

Sexual Identity Formation During the Collegiate Experience

Students who experience same-sex attraction often make formative decisions regarding sexual orientation and overall identity during their collegiate experience. It is important for these students to be able to safely discuss these decisions with other individuals within the context of the campus subculture.

Although each individual in this study identified as gay or lesbian at the time of his/her interview, none of them thought this was a possibility prior to entering college. This pattern suggests that many gay and lesbian students may enroll in a faith-based university without originally intending to sexually identify this way. For these students, adopting a non-heterosexual identity is an unforeseen, and possibly unwelcome, change that occurs during the college experience. This finding is supported by Cass (1984) and Troiden (1989) who each had a stage of identity confusion in their respective models of homosexual identity formation. This stage was marked by an individual's ability to notice his/her own sexual attractions as different from the societal norm, and Cass specifically noted that an individual may completely reject the possibility of ever establishing a homosexual identity while rooted in this stage. This is important to note, both for young adults who experience feelings of same-sex attraction, and for college

administrators who wish to positively facilitate the developmental progression of all students enrolled at faith-based institutions.

Gay and lesbian students identified exposure to off-campus cultures as an occurrence which helped them progress through the stage of identity denial, as well as a significant piece of their overall identity development. This included exposure to various international cultures, diverse regional cultures within the United States, and current gay and lesbian cultures. This exposure provided an avenue for students to incorporate multiple perspectives into their own viewpoints, thereby moving from dualistic into relativistic thinking (Perry, 1981). Additionally, it provided students with a larger perspective regarding how their sexual identity could fit into the broader society outside of the culture of the faith-based institution they attended. This pattern is supported by sequential and non-sequential models of homosexual identity formation. Troiden (1989) identified the identity assumption stage where a gay/lesbian individual determines how to process the social stigma associated with a gay/lesbian identity. Cass (1984) identified one's ability to evaluate how he/she will adapt into society as a sexual minority as a precursor to the stage of identity acceptance. D'Augelli (1994) identified interactive intimacies as a significant variable which impacts one's sexual identity development, referring to the messages an individual receives regarding sexuality from his/her surrounding community. These messages were significantly impacted by exposure to other cultures. Without these off-campus experiences, gay and lesbian students are at a significant disadvantage when seeking to develop their sexual identity.

Students who experience feelings of same-sex attraction should search for exposure to cultures outside their institution within the first few years of their

undergraduate experience. This may be found through opportunities such as urban immersion experiences, study abroad programs, service-learning trips, and intentional interaction with local gay and lesbian communities. Such experiences will provide students with a more complete perspective regarding their own sexuality, which will be invaluable as important decisions are made regarding identity formation. Faculty and staff members at faith-based colleges and universities should be aware that students who experience same-sex attraction make formative decisions regarding their identity development during the time they are enrolled at these schools. Students should also be encouraged to process and discuss these decisions within the campus culture, rather than feel pressured to maintain secrecy regarding issues surrounding their sexuality.

Reconciling Faith and Sexual Identity

Many students who identify as gay or lesbian while enrolled at faith-based institutions progress through a period in which they seek to reconcile their sexuality with the Christian faith. This process may result in a continued engagement of Christian faith, abandonment of faith, or adoption of a new faith.

Spirituality is a primary concern for many gay and lesbian college students (Love et al., 2005). Every individual interviewed for this study came from a predominantly Christian background and family, and as a result, questions of faith became impossible to ignore as he/she began to acknowledge a gay or lesbian identity. However, these students did not feel safe openly engaging these questions within their institutional setting. Negative perceptions of homosexuality were observed in residence hall settings, classrooms, and chapel services, and therefore, students felt insecure in regards to their willingness to openly address these questions.

Though these negative perceptions were tangibly experienced within specific aspects of the collegiate experience, such as the behaviors of heterosexual students in male residence hall settings and institutional policies forbidding same-sex behavior, the disparity exists at a much deeper level. These negative attitudes permeated the campuses, indicating the existence of a broader, systemic cultural conflict between the Christian organizations that sponsor these institutions and modern gay/lesbian culture. The CCCU Task Force on Human Sexuality publicly acknowledged that the Christian Church has repeatedly confirmed the inherent sinfulness of homosexual actions throughout its history (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2001). Gay and lesbian students find themselves in conflict with this cultural background when they choose to attend faith-based colleges and universities.

It is not the purpose of this study to address the core, cultural conflicts between evangelical Christianity and the gay/lesbian culture. However, students who have questions regarding their own sexuality will continue to attend faith-based institutions, and programmatic efforts on the part of the university would be extremely helpful to these students as they navigate these questions. These efforts should be approached as intentional learning opportunities that engage all students in discussions regarding how sexuality impacts faith and spirituality, especially as it relates to Christianity. In an effort to avoid harming students who are forming sexual identity, it is essential that safe spaces be created within these programs where multiple viewpoints may be acknowledged. It may not be possible to condone, or affirm, these viewpoints, but they should be acknowledged and tolerated. Chapel services provide an ideal environment to openly engage the topic of human sexuality, especially as it relates to Biblical text and the

Christian faith. Scholars and ministers who represent multiple perspectives regarding sexuality should be brought to campuses to discuss these viewpoints with students, either through panel discussions or a series of lectures. Gender-specific programming could be implemented in residence halls to give both male and female students insight into how young adults of their same gender process the experience of growing up as a Christian with feelings of same-sex attraction. Educational initiatives could be embedded in course content. Courses, or specific sessions within courses, could be designed to engage the multiple perspectives that exist regarding Biblical translation as it relates to sexual behavior. Any of these programmatic efforts would benefit gay and lesbian students as they seek to reconcile their faith and sexuality. Heterosexual students would also benefit from these efforts by being exposed to the reality of the struggles these students face as they progress through their collegiate experiences.

Encouraging Supportive Networks for Gay and Lesbian Students

Gay and lesbian students can find considerable support from individual faculty, staff, counselors, and other students in regards to making healthy sexual identity decisions. Administrators should be aware of this dialogue and support these interactions and relationships, as they provide channels for students to progress through healthy sexual identity formation within the context of the Christian university culture.

College students progressively move through autonomy towards interdependence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This is often experienced as students become separated from their parents and develop an increased emotional reliance on peers. Every student who participated in this study came from a religious background, and many of these backgrounds held negative perceptions of homosexuality. The possibility of harming

relationships with family members by identifying as gay or lesbian heightened the importance these students placed on supportive relationships with peers. Coleman and Remafedi (1989) argued that individuals who establish a gay/lesbian identity during adolescence develop an increased desire for intimacy in peer relationships. As a result, the positive relationships gay and lesbian students formed with fellow students became vital in helping them navigate the college experience.

Similarly, positive relationships with faculty, staff, and counselors became significant factors in sustaining the collegiate experience for many of the individuals interviewed. Especially for first-year students, frequent contact with faculty members lessened feelings of anonymity (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). For gay and lesbian students, the need for accessible faculty members was heightened as they progressed through sexual identity formation (Mooney, 1992). Supportive professors and staff provided much-needed validation to gay and lesbian students who felt rejection from the mainstream culture of the university. Students were also relieved to find that counselors did not expect them to simply ignore or repress their sexual attractions. This is interesting to note, as students repeatedly indicated a fear of being sent to mandatory counseling sessions because of identifying as gay or lesbian. These supportive professionals helped gay and lesbian individuals feel valued in a cultural setting that often condemned homosexual behavior.

Peers also played an important role in creating a supportive network for gay and lesbian students. Students in this study repeatedly indicated that the individuals who maintained their relationships during their coming-out experience became extremely important to them. Gay and lesbian students were relieved to find peers who did not

reject them because of their sexual identity. Students were able to build mature interpersonal relationships as they were able to recognize and tolerate their personal differences (Chickering, 1969; 1993). Fassinger (1998) specifically identified the importance of establishing group membership identity while also establishing identity as an individual. It is important for students to recognize the positive impact their acceptance may have regarding the developmental progress of their peers who experience same-sex attraction. Conversely, rejecting peers as a result of sexual tendencies may have significant negative impacts on their overall development. Particularly in residence hall and classroom environments, students at faith-based universities should understand the impact of their attitudes and behaviors on the students around them. Students should not assume every one of their peers are heterosexual, and they should recognize that to maintain this mindset is to perpetuate the existence of a negative environment for students who experience same-sex attraction.

A primary responsibility of faculty members at faith-based universities is to support the development of their students. Some of these students may happen to identify as gay or lesbian, but this support is no less important for them as it is for heterosexual individuals. In fact, inaccessibility of faculty members contributes significantly to students' feelings of isolation and anonymity, regardless of sexual identity (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). Despite finding individual faculty members who were supportive of their sexuality, gay and lesbian students also identified other professors who made derogatory comments or encouraged homophobic discussions in classroom settings. All faculty members at faith-based universities should acknowledge the possibility that there may be students in their classes who are still in the process of

figuring out their own sexual attractions. In the interest of preventing developmental harm to such students, it is important that professors seek to prevent derogatory comments and discussions from taking place in the classroom.

Administrators and staff members at faith-based institutions are in a difficult position in relation to gay and lesbian issues. These administrators, particularly high-level officers such as Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Deans, embody the values of their institutions. Compromising these values has the potential for putting their jobs at risk. Frequently in CCCU-affiliated universities, active support of gay and lesbian students is in direct conflict with institutional values, and therefore the ability of administrators to support gay and lesbian students is limited. However, the possibility will continue to exist that students with questions regarding their own sexuality will attend faith-based universities, and administrators have a responsibility to serve these students, who pay the same tuition and fees as heterosexual individuals. Supporting the development of all students remains their responsibility, while maintaining and upholding institutional values is their charge. Administrators should seek to facilitate supportive networks for gay and lesbian students in whatever capacity they are able.

Considering the difficult position of administrators concerning this topic, three specific suggestions are offered regarding how these individuals could support gay and lesbian students. First, administrators should actively seek to learn about the individual experiences of gay and lesbian students on their campuses. The prevailing sentiment of the students interviewed for this study was that administrators simply did not want gay or lesbian students to attend their institutions. Whether or not this is an accurate assessment, it is the perceived attitude. By seeking to learn more about the struggles of these

students, administrators could communicate a more personal message to these individuals. These efforts should be carefully considered within the prevailing values of the institution. Second, counseling should be encouraged to support students as they mature and develop. Mandating counseling as a punitive measure against gay and lesbian students deepens the rift between gay/lesbian students and administrators. Among the individuals in this study, counselors were all perceived as supportive of students with gay or lesbian identities, despite the perception that administrators sent them to counseling in an effort to remove their homosexual tendencies. Students with questions regarding their own sexuality should be encouraged to take advantage of the counseling services provided by their university, but requiring these counseling sessions as a perceived form of punishment sends a negative message to young adults who are likely in an already sensitive developmental phase. Additionally, if administrators continue to mandate counseling sessions for gay and lesbian students, these students will continue to maintain the perception that administrators simply do not want to engage with students and learn about their experiences. Third, administrators should be honest and transparent with students regarding the difficulties they face on this topic. Most current gay and lesbian students are simply unaware of the true difficulties administrators face in regards to dealing with issues of sexuality. As a result, gay and lesbian students assume that administrators have no desire to help or support them. However, these same administrators may actually have a strong desire to help, but they simply feel restricted in their ability to do so because of their responsibility to uphold the values of their sponsoring institution. Overall, increased communication between both administrators and gay and lesbian students may yield positive results.

Policy Development Regarding Sexual Behaviors On Campus

University policy regarding homosexual behavior on faith-based campuses contributes significantly to the negative experiences of gay and lesbian students who are enrolled in these institutions. Such policies cultivate feelings of fear, anger, and bitterness in students who experience same-sex attraction, as well as aggravating the confusion these students feel while they process their sexual tendencies and identity.

To protect the confidentiality of the institutions represented in this study, specific examples of institutional policies regarding homosexual behavior were not included. However, for a comprehensive explanation of the stance of the CCCU regarding human sexuality, readers are encouraged to view the report released in 2001 by the CCCU task force on human sexuality, the link to which is found in the reference list (CCCU, 2001). This document clearly articulates the position of this organization, and therefore its affiliates, on sexuality and sexual behavior.

Policies regarding homosexual behavior on faith-based campuses created two specific sources of tension for the gay and lesbian students in this study. First, policies were structured in a way that created a distinction between adopting a gay/lesbian orientation and actually acting upon that orientation by outwardly displaying homosexual behaviors. This distinction, between orientation and behaviors, was confusing for students who experienced same-sex attraction. Second, gay and lesbian students perceived an imbalance concerning how policies were enforced regarding their sexuality compared to the inappropriate sexual behaviors, as defined by university policy, of heterosexual students. Administrators at faith-based institutions must directly address each of these policy concerns.

Students who experience same-sex attraction are experiencing a sensitive developmental phase when they agree to adhere to college and university living guidelines that expressly forbid homosexual behavior. The distinction these guidelines create between sexual orientation and sexual behavior adds unnecessary confusion to students who are likely already confused about their own sexuality. It is simply too difficult for students, particularly as freshmen and sophomores in college, to conceptualize homosexual orientation versus homosexual behaviors while they are also processing their own feelings of same-sex attraction, attempting to reconcile their faith and sexuality, and navigating their first experiences as independent college students. Furthermore, students who experience same-sex attraction initially feel unable to process these feelings with many of their peers because of the negative attitudes that permeate the culture of the campus, increasing the confusion they feel. These factors put students who feel same-sex attraction at significant risk when compared to heterosexual students. In addition to the increased confusion, these policies also cultivate feelings of bitterness in gay and lesbian students, as they are able to observe heterosexual students expressing their sexuality without fear of repercussions.

Conflicts concerning policies and living guidelines on faith-based campuses may be further evidence of a deeper cultural rift. Specifically, a significant disparity exists regarding how administrators demonstrate tolerance compared to how gay and lesbian students view tolerance. Under the current paradigm, policies are structured in a way that draws sharp contrasts between homosexual orientation and homosexual behaviors, tolerating homosexual orientation while punishing homosexual behaviors. Evidently for administrators, who embody the values of the institution, this is an appropriate position

that is supportive of student development. However, according to gay and lesbian students in this study, this stance is intolerant and confusing. As administrators at faith-based universities seek to develop and update policies in regards to sexual behavior, this conflict must be carefully considered and articulated.

Students should not be found in violation of policies, and therefore punished, as a result of feeling homosexual attraction. Although gay and lesbian students are aware of campus policies regarding same-sex behavior before entering college, these same students also begin college with a limited understanding of their own sexual attractions and identity. Administrators should directly address any imbalances regarding how sexual policy violations are handled on their campuses. Inappropriate sexual activity, including heterosexual behaviors, should be clearly defined by institutional policies and handled equitably. To do otherwise perpetuates a campus environment that is unethical and unfavorable for students who experience same-sex attraction.

Regarding students who feel same-sex attraction, or who identify as gay or lesbian, and wish to attend faith-based universities, it is important to not underestimate the impact institutional policies will have on the undergraduate experience. Students should make themselves fully aware of the cultural context of faith-based universities, and that there is little tolerance for inappropriate homosexual behaviors on these campuses.

In a broader sense, the sponsoring institutions of faith-based universities, including the CCCU and various denominational churches, should recognize the importance of continually revising and updating policies regarding sexual behaviors. The complexity of this topic, as well as the awareness of deep cultural conflicts that exist

within it, demands continued learning and dialogue. The CCCU should encourage this dialogue through sponsored forums, presentations, and professional conferences. These sponsored events could incorporate research regarding student development theory, theological discussions on homosexuality, and best practices for addressing gay and lesbian behaviors on faith-based campuses. Sponsoring institutions should also recognize the possibility that two major cultures are merging on faith-based campuses, Christianity and gay/lesbian culture. Sadly, these cultures often cannot coexist within this specific context of higher education. Individuals within each culture may find ways to reconcile them, but this reconciliation may be impossible at an institutional level. In either case, healthy, holistic development of all students must be the primary concern, and continued discussion should be a top priority.

Limitations

This study was limited to the experiences and developmental issues faced by eight students who identified as gay or lesbian while enrolled in private, CCCU-affiliated colleges and universities. Each student was Caucasian and came from a religious, Christian background. The experiences of other sexual minorities, such as bisexual or transgendered individuals, were not included. The setting of the findings was also limited to four faith-based institutions, representing geographically diverse locations in the United States, including institutions in Eastern, Western, and Midwestern states. The experiences and sexual identities of these students were self-reported.

Recommendations

Future studies should request that each student provide demographics information in addition to the information shared during the interview. Ethnicity, field of study,

grade-point average, family background, distance from home, or other relevant information would provide the study with additional context, enabling a deeper analysis of individual responses.

Future studies should expand the number of students and institutions they attend. A comparative analysis would allow the experiences of gay and lesbian students to be compared with the experiences of straight students, all within the context of faith-based higher education. The expanded institution base could also include faith-based universities not affiliated with the CCCU. The inclusion of bisexual and transgendered students would provide another important perspective.

Future researchers should also conduct a longitudinal study to better understand how the experiences of gay and lesbian students in faith-based institutions change over time, comparing the experiences of freshmen with those of seniors. Additionally, the informant base could be expanded to include family members, professors, university administrators, heterosexual peers, and others who interact with gay and lesbian students on a regular basis. This information would provide additional observations regarding the collegiate experiences of these students.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

A. Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me today.

This study is being conducted to better understand the experiences of gay and lesbian college students as they progress through faith-based colleges and universities. The objective of this study is to ultimately help college faculty, staff, and administrators at faith-based institutions better understand the positive and negative experiences of these students. You are encouraged to provide personal experiences and stories throughout this interview, as this information will be used to better understand any developmental issues you faced during college. I encourage you to be open and honest throughout this interview. Your experiences are very important.

Before beginning, I would like to inform you of your rights as a research participant, as well as the assumptions that Human Subjects Research is founded upon. First, there are no direct benefits from participating in the study. You may choose to refrain from answering any of the following questions, and you reserve the right to withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason. I assure you that your identity will remain completely confidential and will not be divulged in any published material. Your identity will also not be shared with any university administrators or faculty members. However, your answers will be utilized in drawing conclusions for this study, and they may be presented in published material under a pseudonym.

To ensure that I record your answers accurately, I would like to ask your permission to record this interview. To protect your confidentiality, you will be labeled with a pseudonym and not identified personally in any way. Any other names and locations mentioned during the course of the interview will also be labeled with

pseudonyms. The recording will remain solely in my possession, and no other person will know that you participated in this study.

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Have you been able to review the Informed Consent Form I provided to you earlier? Do you have any questions about this document?

I have prepared a list of questions to help guide our conversation, but please do not hesitate to share any stories or experiences you feel may be relevant. We will talk about your experiences as a lesbian/gay student thus far in your college career, as well as the role of the university in helping you progress developmentally.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

B. Background Information

I would like to begin by discussing your decision to attend a faith-based college or university, as well as briefly reflecting upon your experience of identifying as lesbian/gay while attending this school.

- 1) Did you begin to experience same-sex attraction, or identify as lesbian/gay, before attending this college?
 - a. Did this play any role in your decision process about attending this college?
- 2) As a student who identifies as lesbian/gay, I am very interested in why you chose to attend a faith-based institution.
 - a. Why did you want to attend a faith-based institution?
 - b. What drew you to this specific college?
 - c. Why have you chosen to stay enrolled here?

- 3) Were you aware of this college's position regarding homosexuality on-campus before you made your decision to attend?

C. Collegiate Experience

Now, I would like to talk a little more in-depth about the factors which impacted your collegiate experience.

- 1) Have you disclosed this aspect of your identity to your family?
 - a. If so, what was that experience like? What was their response?
- 2) Have you disclosed this aspect of your identity to any of your friends who are also enrolled at this college?
 - a. If so, what was that experience like? What was their response?
 - b. Has identifying as lesbian/gay impacted your friendships and relationships during college? If so, how?
 - c. Have you had particularly positive or negative experiences with any other students at your university because of this aspect of your identity?
- 3) Have you disclosed this aspect of your identity to any faculty or staff members at your institution?
 - a. If so, what was that experience like? What was their response?
 - b. Has identifying as lesbian/gay impacted your relationships with faculty members or staff at your college or university? If so, how?
 - c. Have you had particularly positive or negative experiences with any faculty or staff members at your college or university?
- 4) How are you involved on campus?
 - a. What, if any, leadership opportunities have you had on campus?

- b. In your opinion, has your sexual identity impacted your ability to be a campus leader?

D. Role of the University

Let's specifically discuss the role of your institution in relation to sexual orientation.

- 1) How do you feel about the campus guidelines regarding homosexual behavior?
 - a. How have these rules impacted your undergraduate experience?
- 2) As someone who has experienced same-sex attraction, what was it like to live in a residence hall at this college?
- 3) Have you spoken with a member of the counseling staff at your college or university?
 - a. If so, what was this experience like?
 - b. Was this voluntary or were you directed to speak with them?
- 4) Would you recommend this college to other students who identify as lesbian/gay?
 - a. Why/Why not?
- 5) What are the strengths and weaknesses of this particular institution in regards to the identity development of students who identify as lesbian/gay?
- 6) Have you ever considered leaving this college as a result of identifying as lesbian/gay? Have you considered transferring to another college or university?
- 7) What kind of advice would you give campus administrators regarding students who identify as lesbian/gay at this college?
 - a. Is there anything the administrators at this college could do which would help you?

E. Conclusion

1) Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Thank you very much for taking time to discuss your experiences with me. This conversation will help me greatly in understanding how lesbian/gay students experience faith-based higher education.

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Study Title An Analysis of the Collegiate Experience of Gay and Lesbian Students Enrolled in Faith-Based Higher Education

Study Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to better understand the collegiate experience of LGBT students enrolled in private, faith-based institutions of higher education. Findings from this research may help faculty and staff members at faith-based institutions in meeting the developmental needs of these students.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be at least 18 years of age, be enrolled in a faith-based college or university, and identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Participation Procedures and Duration

For this project, you will be asked to participate in an interview in which you will be asked a series of questions about your experience in college thus far. The duration of the interview will be approximately 90 minutes.

Audio or Video Tapes

For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interviews will be audio taped. Pseudonyms will be assigned before the recording process, so identifying names will not be recorded. The tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office, located in the DeHority Complex at Ball State University, for one year and will then be erased.

Data Confidentiality or Anonymity

All data will be maintained as confidential and no identifying information regarding names or locations will appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

Storage of Data

Paper data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office for one year and will then be shredded. The data will also be entered into a software program and stored on the researcher's password-protected computer for one year and then deleted. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

Risks or Discomforts

The only anticipated risk from participating in this study is that you may not feel comfortable answering some of the questions. You may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Who to Contact Should You Experience Any Negative Effects from Participating in this Study

Before contacting you, the researcher personally verified that there are counseling services available to any student of your university through the institution you are enrolled in. These services are available if you experience any feelings of anxiety during the interview process. Utilizing these counseling services, if you choose to, will not pose any risk to your enrollment status.

Benefits

You may not gain any direct benefits from participating in this study. However, by sharing your experiences, you will be helping college administrators better understand the collegiate experience of LGBT students at faith-based universities. By doing this, you will be contributing to a larger, societal benefit.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at anytime for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

IRB Contact Information

For one's rights as a research subject, you may contact the following: Research Compliance, Sponsored Programs Office, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070, irb@bsu.edu.

Study Title An Analysis of the Collegiate Experience of Gay and Lesbian Students Enrolled in Faith-Based Higher Education

Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project entitled, "The Effect of Early Childhood Experiences on Interest in Exercise." I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher Contact Information

Principal Investigator:

Faculty Supervisor:

Joel M. Wentz, Graduate Student
Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education
Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306
Telephone: (765) 285-1320
Email: jmwentz@bsu.edu

Dr. Roger Wessel
Dept. of Educational Studies
Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306
Telephone: (765) 285-5486
Email: rwessel@bsu.edu

APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Institutional Review Board

DATE: November 24, 2009

TO: Joel Wentz, MA

FROM: Ball State University IRB

RE: IRB protocol # 141434-2

TITLE: An Analysis of the Collegiate Experience of LGBT Students Enrolled in Faith-Based Universities

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

DECISION DATE: November 24, 2009

EXPIRATION DATE: November 23, 2010

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

The Institutional Review Board has approved your Revision for the above protocol, effective November 24, 2009 through November 23, 2010. All research under this protocol must be conducted in accordance with the approved submission.

As a reminder, it is the responsibility of the P.I. and/or faculty sponsor to inform the IRB in a timely manner:

- when the project is completed,
- if the project is to be continued beyond the approved end date,
- if the project is to be modified,
- if the project encounters problems, or
- if the project is discontinued.

Any of the above notifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRB (<http://www.bsu.edu/irb>). Please reference the IRB protocol number given above in any communication to the IRB regarding this project. Be sure to allow sufficient time for review and approval of requests for modification or continuation. If you have questions, please contact Amy Boos at (765) 285-5034 or akboos@bsu.edu.

APPENDIX D

EMAIL REQUESTING STUDENT PARTICIPATION

From: Joel M. Wentz

To: Prospective Study Subjects

Subject: Thesis Research

Dear [Student],

Hello. My name is Joel Wentz, and I am a graduate student at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. For my Master's thesis project I am conducting a study entitled: "An Analysis of the Collegiate Experience of LGBT Students Enrolled in Faith-Based Higher Education". Since I attended a faith-based university, I am very interested in learning about how students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender experience college in a faith-based setting. I am also conducting this study because I believe that understanding the experiences of students such as you will help university administrators better meet the needs of LGBT students.

I got your name from [Personal Contact], and I would like to interview you regarding your personal experiences and thoughts regarding this topic. [Personal Contact] is aware that I am getting in touch with you, and your name and contact information has not been shared with anyone other than me.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and would require one interview in a location which we would both agree upon. The interview would be approximately 90 minutes long. Please consider participating, as your experiences are extremely valuable. If you are interested, please let me know within the next week so we can arrange a time and location for the interview. Please respond to this message through your personal e-mail address.

Once again, I hope you will consider taking part in this study. If I have not heard from you within one week, I will follow up with a phone call. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Joel Wentz