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LGBTQ Student Experiences and Perceptions in Christian Higher Education: An Exploration of Institutional Climate and LGBTQ Persistence

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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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Dedication

To all those who believe they can't make it.

Abstract

The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students at faith-based institutions that influence perceptions and persistence are not well known. Although institutions are committed to student growth and development, LGBTQ students are often treated with religious stigmatization and discrimination. This qualitative phenomenological research gave LGBTQ students a voice to share experiences that impact perceptions of campus climate, strategies that lead to persistence, and recommendations to strengthen institutional inclusiveness. The interview results from six LGBTQ students at various Christian institutions associated with the Council for Christian College and Universities provided in-depth considerations for faith-based institutions, specifically Christian, to increase enrollment, build more inclusive spaces, and improve student retention as it relates to this population. Through this research, institutions will be able to balance their religious ideals with LGBTQ student needs to promote an affirming campus climate without compromising missions. Study participants were recruited through a vast network of higher education professionals who have preestablished, trusted relationships with participants. Professionals were contacted through Facebook posts and outreach to network connections to share the research opportunity. As LGBTQ students communicated interest in the research, they were scheduled for one-on-one interviews to share their stories. The interviews showed that LGBTQ students often lack institutional support, no policies can positively or negatively embolden campus personnel, there is no one path from enrollment to graduation for LGBTQ students, and that vital support systems are essential to navigating campuses. Despite many of the participants sharing that an organization existed on their campus, these students continue to contend with conservative views on LGBTQ identities, feel they are used to

understand issues but without resolution, and that institutional personnel seem unequipped to address campus or personal LGBTQ struggles.

Keywords: LGBTQ, Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, campus climate, higher education, religious stigmatization

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There is a conflict between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identities and many faith-based traditions in the United States. It is the belief of various churches that these LGBTQ identities are problematic and immoral due to violating God's will (Bailey & Strunk, 2018; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). To support and reinforce these beliefs, the leaders of some Christian colleges and universities have created behavioral policies and implemented practices that reflect traditional religious views of romantic or marital relationships only being between a man and a woman (Yarhouse et al., 2009).

This divide has significant consequences for LGBTQ students who experience this culture as a hostile environment. For example, the constant distress and lack of support from an LGBTQ student's institution can cause a severe decline in academic performance and overall well-being (Hong et al., 2016). In these environments, LGBTQ students become isolated, experience discrimination and harassment, and internalize heterosexism, resulting in increased academic difficulties, mental health issues, and suicidal behavior (Hirsch et al., 2017; Vespone, 2016; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2018). As a result, compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBTQ students report more mental health problems and psychological distress in response to the campus climate (Woodford, Weber, et al., 2018). For example, in a national study of LGBTQ college students, 25% reported being harassed due to their identities, 30% felt discomfort with their campus climate, and 30% considered dropping out at some point during their studies (Woodford & Kulick, 2015). As these statistics do not specifically reflect faith-based LGBTQ college students, more needs to be known about their inclusion, participation, and treatment at Christian institutions where comparable experiences have been shared.

According to Rockenbach et al. (2017), these faith-based engagements have a negative influence on the campus climates for LGBTQ students. As a result, LGBTQ students continue to report marginalization, discrimination, and harassment, which can be attributed to religious mistreatment (Hughes & Hurtado, 2018; Seelman et al., 2017; Vespone, 2016). At many of the colleges and universities that are associated with more conservative Christian denominations, there is a presumption that welcoming LGBTQ students equates to compromising religious ideals (Vespone, 2016). As a result, a spiritual norm forms and creates an institutional culture that divides campuses between those who experience religious privilege and LGBTQ students who are oppressed by it (Riswold, 2015). It is important to investigate these experiences to validate LGBTQ student perceptions as well as to build a bridge with Christian institutions to address misconceptions.

Statement of the Problem

The specific challenges often experienced by LGBTQ students who attend U.S. Christian colleges and universities go beyond the normal stressors of college life or situational issues (Vespone, 2016) and present a significant problem for these students and the higher education professionals who work with them (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). For example, in higher education in general, LGBTQ students continue to face environments that are homophobic and reinforce heterosexism (Garvey & Drezner, 2016). In Christian institutions, these attitudes are sometimes combined with church doctrines that are nonaffirming to LGBTQ students and view their LGBTQ identities as immoral, creating even more hostile environments on campus that LGBTQ students are forced to navigate, often without assistance (Vespone, 2016). Furthermore, these stressors are exacerbated when these Christian institutions are granted waivers from nondiscrimination laws that otherwise provide LGBTQ student protections to prohibit acts

deemed homosexual and prohibit LGBTQ-inclusive organizations (Coley, 2017). When LGBTQ students experience and contend with unwelcoming environments, they are more likely to experience increased mental health issues (e.g., depression or anxiety) and decreased academic performance (Borgogna et al., 2018; Wolff et al., 2016).

The problem of practice that this study addressed was the lack of LGBTQ student support and protection by institutional leaders at Christian institutions (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Vespone, 2016). With minimal support and inclusion of the LGBTQ population, it is difficult to make accurate predictions about LGBTQ student issues that impact institutional priorities such as retention rates, enrollment revenue, and ongoing student development (Pitcher et al., 2016). This can lead to a disconnect between the administration's view of LGBTQ issues, which does not often include support measures, and the experiences of LGBTQ students (Wheeler, 2016). Members of the LGBTQ population enroll at Christian institutions; however, it is not clear how well campus administrators know how to support these students. This is evident when LGBTQ students visit counseling services or report incidents of discrimination but are often confronted with biased or no responses (Pitcher et al., 2016; Vespone, 2016). Without a proper understanding to establish support, there is a potential to further abuse this population through spiritual harassment and neglect (Wood & Conley, 2014). With Christian institutions potentially impeding or even disrupting LGBTQ student success (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016), more needed to be understood about LGBTQ students, including their perceptions of the campus climate, the climate's impact on their persistence, and the strategies used to persevere when their identities conflict with their institution's culture and religious stance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to document and understand LGBTQ student experiences at Christian institutions, some of which might negatively impact their ability to persevere and persist when their identities conflict with their institutions' campus culture. In order to improve the educational environment for LGBTQ students at Christian institutions and provide guidance in navigating unwelcoming campuses, it is important to understand how LGBTQ students perceive the campus climate and sense of self in it, as suggested by Vaccaro et al. (2015). For Christian institutions to fulfill their commitment to student success, which includes the success of their LGBTQ students, it is crucial to provide institutions with the resources to understand the struggles this population faces and to educate leaders about effective ways to support LGBTQ students.

This study was designed to give LGBTQ students the opportunity to share their experiences, including their difficulties on campus, and how these experiences impact them as students (e.g., mental health issues, academic performance, and college persistence). As increased awareness of LGBTQ issues tends to lead to positive outcomes, such as developing more tolerant attitudes and an expanded understanding of LGBTQ students (Sumner et al., 2017), the results of this research were intended to contribute to an understudied area of higher education and to show how current Christian campus policies and cultures influence LGBTQ students' experiences, connectedness, persistence, and overall well-being and success.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do LGBTQ students describe their campus experience at their Christian institution?

RQ2: How do institutional policies and practices impact LGBTQ students' sense of

belonging?

RQ3: What factors do LGBTQ students say were important in choosing to attend and persist at their Christian institution?

Research Significance

This research was designed to inform institutional decision-makers about LGBTQ student experiences on their campuses so they might make better-informed decisions in implementing policies, guiding professional practices, and attending to campus culture. Since there is minimal research on this topic, this study advanced the knowledge base on LGBTQ student experiences and issues as well as helped determine future directions for Christian higher education (Wolff et al., 2016). With the results from this research, there is potential to reduce the discrimination LGBTQ students experience at U.S. Christian higher education institutions and improve inclusiveness of these students on these campuses.

Theoretical Framework

Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2013) was the theoretical framework for this study. Minority stress theory states that health disparities in minority populations can be attributed to stressors such as external events and internal beliefs that are harmful to identities (Lefevor et al., 2019). These stressors are strongly influenced by discrimination, negative internalized perceptions, harassment, and heterosexism (Shadick et al., 2015; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). A key precept of this theory is that the stressors experienced by a marginalized population can lead to disruptive psychological distress and challenges outside common developmental issues (Vespone, 2016; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Minority stress theory is a useful framework for this type of research because the present study was designed as an exploration of the various experiences of LGBTQ students that impact their perceptions of campus climates at faith-based

institutions, where identities are often in conflict with religious ideals. In using this theoretical framework, external stressors such as policies or institutional treatment as well as internal factors such as perceptions that influence the overall success of LGBTQ students were identified.

In addition to using minority stress theory to help understand participant experiences, this theory was also helpful in guiding the data collection process, as it acknowledged the LGBTQ experience while conducting the participant interviews and with other ethical considerations in devising the research. To understand LGBTQ student strategies for persistence, it is essential to use a critical lens that acknowledges their experiences and does not add to their possible stressors. This framework gave me the understanding to navigate the stressors LGBTQ students experience, build a research process that encouraged vulnerability, and craft questions that minimized minority stress. As faith-based institutions can often create difficult environments, using this theory to inform the data collection process was expected to build trust and reduce bias for the data analysis and interpretation.

Definition of Key Terms

Campus climate. The attitudes on campus that impact perceptions about feeling welcomed and valued in the community (Dessel et al., 2017). The term climate was used as shorthand throughout this study.

Faith-based institution. This designation is given to institutions that place faith at the center of the learning experience (Bailey & Strunk, 2018). The present study's focus was on a specific type of faith-based institution: Christian colleges and universities.

Heterosexism. This is the systemic privilege given to those who are heterosexual, which is believed to be the normative sexual orientation (Foster et al., 2017).

Microaggression. Subtle forms of intentional or unintentional discrimination such as jokes or insults toward minority groups that convey negative messages (Hong et al., 2016).

Out/outness. LGBTQ persons' public openness about their identities, which, based on the environment, can range from no disclosure to full disclosure (Dentato et al., 2014).

Summary

The lives of LGBTQ college students at Christian institutions are not well understood in the context of higher education. As shown in this chapter, there are numerous voices that need to be heard to contribute to this underresearched topic and to provide guidance to Christian institutions in supporting these members of their campus communities. According to Yarhouse et al. (2009), the voices of LGBTQ students are often unrecognized and seldom heard on Christian campuses. With the adverse experiences of LGBTQ college students having the potential to lead to depression, disrupted academic performance, and various forms of mistreatment, the purpose of this study was to document these difficulties and understand their continued pressure on persistence. While future institutional responses are uncertain, this study focused on understanding LGBTQ students and their campus experiences to educate leaders on prominent issues that create perceptions of estrangement and add to minority stress. Grounded in the theoretical framework of minority stress theory, the literature in Chapter 2 comprises topics that contribute to understanding the experiences that reinforce minority stress and validate the importance of researching LGBTQ students enrolled at Christian institutions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The experiences that influence LGBTQ student persistence at Christian institutions are examined in this review of the literature. As research on the lived experiences of LGBTQ students at Christian institutions is limited, the campus experience from the participant's decision to apply through their continued enrollment is explored. With Christian institutions often being unsupportive of LGBTQ students, an exploration of student perceptions might highlight current institutional strengths and the areas in which institutional leadership can alleviate the depression, academic decline, or suicide ideation common to this population (Wolff & Himes, 2010). To build a comprehensive understanding, there are five sections on important areas of the LGBTQ student experience: (a) Christian institutions, (b) LGBTQ treatment, (c) support systems, (d) mental health, and (e) identity management.

To locate relevant research literature, I used the following search terms in various combinations in the Abilene Christian University library databases: *LGBTQ college students*, *faith-based institutions, religious institutions, LGBTQ experiences, Christian, LGBTQ inclusion, identity development,* and *LGBTQ student persistence*. In search parameters, combinations of the terms provided the diverse perspectives necessary to create a comprehensive interpretation of literature on LGBTQ students at Christian institutions. As LGBTQ college student populations and campus climates are everchanging, the timeframe for the search was within 5 years, with older research articles used as support when applicable. The search was restricted to U.S. institutions due to my educational background and minimal knowledge in foreign higher education contexts. In using peer-reviewed articles, the information collected provided a significant foundation to synthesize literature connecting LGBTQ student persistence to Christian institution leadership practices and groundwork to support the data collection process.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was used throughout the research to provide structure and important reference points for participant experiences. The first section is a discussion of minority stress theory, which emphasizes the unique stress placed on individuals in minority populations due to hostile or unwelcoming climates (Bissonette & Szymanski, 2019). In the second, information is provided to outline LGBTQ development, which focuses on identity construction and expression (D'Augelli, 1994). As students in this study were college age, it is likely that these frameworks were salient and could be a significant part of their experiences.

Minority Stress Theory

According to minority stress theory, attention is directed at environmental and situational variables that increase the stress of minorities (Lefevor et al., 2019). Stress can be in response to external events such as discrimination or harassment, expectations of external events and the caution they require, and internalization of negative attitudes that are harmful to identities (Borgogna et al., 2018; Meyer, 2013). It is suggested that stressors due to LGBTQ minority status could account for psychosocial disparities that exceed more generalized stressors (Toomey et al., 2018).

Minority stress theory evolved from discussions on social stress and lasting issues stemming from societal experiences (Meyer, 2013). Based on societal interactions and stigmatization, it was believed that LGBTQ individuals would experience chronic stress as a response (Meyer, 1995). The concept of stress, however, is problematic as the development of stress often focuses on subjective or personal accounts rather than on objective or social accounts. In previous studies that compared minority groups and nonminority groups (i.e., men and women, heterosexual and homosexual), the findings did not suggest a significant difference,

leading to researchers distrusting the minority stress framework (Meyer, 1995). However, in more recent years, it has been determined that gender and sexual minorities struggle with mental health issues and distress at a higher rate than heterosexual peers (Woodford, Weber, et al., 2018). This is in part due to the conditions that reinforce prejudice in minority groups working toward acceptance (Meyer, 2013) and specifically for the LGBTQ population's experiences with homophobia (Toomey et al., 2018).

When applied to LGBTQ students, these challenges could increase campus hardships that prevent them from reaching their academic potential (Linley et al., 2016). The challenges that most impact these students and their success are heterosexism (external and internalized), discrimination, and harassment (Borgogna et al., 2018; Vespone, 2016; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2018). As a result of these pervasive stressors, sexual minorities will often report increases in psychological distress (Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2018). Shadick et al. (2015) found that this distress will increase when LGBTQ students possess other salient identities that are also in a minority status (e.g., disability, race). As LGBTQ students work to navigate these identities, the number of personal stressors increases in addition to negative mental health outcomes (Shadick et al., 2015).

According to Murchison et al. (2017), in-group social connections can act as a safeguard to minority students to decrease adverse outcomes. In addition to a common connection through stress, individuals with a minority status are also associated with cohesiveness and camaraderie (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). As a result, an increased sense of belonging and support can reduce overall stress (Carastathis et al., 2017). With respect to minority stress at Christian institutions, considerations such as antidiscrimination policies to prevent exclusionary messages, for-credit LGBTQ courses to improve awareness, and LGBTQ student organizations can further

deepen belonging to minimize psychological distress (Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2018). Through LGBTQ organizations, LGBTQ students can work in collective effort to decrease heterosexism experienced on campus and build upon belonging to affirmation in their identities (Bissonette & Szymanski, 2019). As LGBTQ students receive sexuality related social support, Toomey et al. (2018) found that this mitigates the connection between stress related to their identities and adjustment. This is important as adjustment is critical to both academic success and general satisfaction but is inhibited due to the social risks associated with LGBTQ identification (McKinley et al., 2015).

LGBTQ Identity Development

Homosexual identity formation is most prominent model in LGBTQ identity development exploration (Cass, 1979). According to Cass (1979), identity formation happens in six stages: confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and identity synthesis. In the confusion stage, individuals come to a place where previous perceptions of being heterosexual are mixed with current behaviors that are believed to be homosexual. As confusion continues, it leads to personal isolation, and as D'Augelli (1994) found, development in private with more negative than positive social cues. While LGBTQ individuals process through self- and social perceptions, there is a constant focus on differentness and an effort to maintain a heterosexual appearance to minimize those differences and negative cues (Cass, 1979). However, as LGBTQ individuals maintain this image, it becomes difficult to find in-group members to assist in identity development (Scroggs & Vennum, 2020). As LGBTQ identities are invisible, this creates additional obstacles in building the relationships important for identity formation (D'Augelli, 1994; Fuist, 2016).

In Cass's (1979) third stage, tolerance is marked by the individual's movement toward relationship building. In the tolerance stage, individuals work to remove themselves from alienation and acknowledge important needs (i.e., social, emotional). This is consistent with Linley et al. (2016), who stated LGBTQ students need mentorship from people like them or who understand them. As contact with people who share identities increases, confidence is built, and individuals start to see a more normalized identity (Cass, 1979). This acceptance then transitions the individual into pride. In this stage, the individual takes an active role in devaluing heterosexual perceptions and accepts the potential rejections in society. In this new understanding of one's identity, D'Augelli (1994) stated in their model that it often involves confrontation with current barriers to development. As individuals process through confusion, acceptance, and into a number of interactions outside confrontations, an awareness develops that the negative views of heterosexuals are based on experiential assumptions (Cass, 1979). This causes the private identity to become more permeable with the public image to create a final "version" that is unique and supported. While the formation is complete, coming out is a never-ending process and one of the most difficult decisions an LGBTQ individual needs to make each time a connection is made (Cole & Harris, 2017; Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015).

LGBTQ Population and Christianity

With 83% of the population being religiously affiliated (Foster et al., 2017) and affiliation being influential on beliefs (Barringer & Gay, 2017), sexual development remains a complicated process for LGBTQ students who are surrounded by those with majority identities (i.e., heterosexual) reacting to a deviation from the perceived norm (Stratton et al., 2013). This norm is often created by holy books or leaders who outline the consequences for deviation and as a result, reinforce antigay attitudes (Foster et al., 2017). Unfortunately, current Christians are less

informed of the roles that a number of religious communities and leaders have had in reinforcing various disparities in the LGBTQ population (Wolff & Himes, 2010). Although religion can provide hope (Wolff et al., 2016), many LGBTQ individuals feel hopelessness or uncertainty in their situations getting better (Hirsch et al., 2017).

In the Christian religion, it is believed that God created all things, and of these things, He created humankind to be good (Bryson, 2020). It is from these beliefs that teachings such as "love your neighbor as yourself" were created, reflecting the image of God and one of the many processes of transformation to become more in His image (McMartin et al., 2020). Through His love, God provided humankind with the opportunities to love one another and create a social self that uses moral habits to shape one's soul into that image (Bryson, 2020). According to Craig (2003), morality is based on the thoughts of God, which makes the Bible most important in determining what is right or wrong rather than being a cultural construction.

The Bible continues to be the ultimate instruction on how Christians should live (Grisanti, 2017). A common Christian interpretation of scripture in the Bible is that homosexuality should be viewed as detestable conduct as it undermines God's intention for humankind to procreate (Grisanti, 2017). However, as God's reach is infinite, it is also believed that all actions, including sin, are allowed by God (McMartin et al., 2020). According to Grisanti (2017), "The Bible clearly teaches that believers must honor God in how we interact with all sinners, including those who struggle with or practice homosexuality" (p. 117). As a response, many churches describe their stances on homosexuality to be "Love the sinner, but hate the sin" (Fahs & Swank, 2020, p.6). Yet, the LGBTQ population continues to contend with rejection and social isolation due to their identities (Hirsch et al., 2017; Wolff & Himes, 2010). Jesus did not

say much on homosexuality but welcomed the marginalized, and through His actions tried to teach love toward people deemed as outcasts (Riccardi, 2017).

In Christian churches across the United States, there are denominations that embrace and support LGBTQ identities despite scripture. According to Fahs and Swank (2020), various churches work to emulate the Kingdom of God, which does not exclude people. Some denominations are even more inclusive, such as the United Churches of Christ, which officially endorses same-sex marriage as they see LGBTQ rights as essential to Christianity. This can also be seen in the mainline Protestant traditions, whose religious ideologies have more accepting attitudes toward sexual minorities (Barringer & Gay, 2017). As Fahs and Swank (2020) found in their study on church shopping as an LGBTQ individual, most of the gay-affirming churches reflect Protestant traditions. However, this trend toward LGBTQ support highly depends on biblical interpretations, which either reflect communal teachings that work toward social justice or individualist perspectives that teach personal morality (Coley, 2017). Additionally, as more scientific understanding on sexual development has become available, it has led people to reinvest time in reviewing related scripture (Keen, 2020). Because of differences between denominations and teachings, there is a separation between the more liberal traditions that advocate for reform and the more conservative traditions that tend to work on personal salvation and morality (Todd et al., 2017).

On the other side of the religious spectrum, conservative Christianity is characterized by its specific interpretation of scripture (Cole & Harris, 2017), which is not as open to sexuality outside of traditional and conservative norms. This can be seen in Baptist, evangelical, and nondenominational churches that make an effort to shape people's convictions about gender and sexuality (Fahs & Swank, 2020). Of the 70% of Americans who belong to some denomination of

Christianity, 25% are in evangelical denominations that are committed to biblical teachings grounded in heteronormativity (Gabriele-Black & Goldberg, 2019) and that oppose LGBTQ identities more so than many other denominations (Keen, 2020). As Bailey and Strunk (2018) explained, in evangelical churches, gendered expectations such as male dominance and female submission are more common. This is similar to Baptists, who typically believe that marriage should only be between a man and a woman, a biblical standard for procreation, which is a common view in Christian tradition (Keen, 2020; Southern Baptist Convention [SBC], 2020). However, Baptists also contend that congregational practices can be informed through diverse contexts and views (Thompson et al., 2019). In a study conducted on Baptists and social justice, the Bible was significant in helping participants build their views, often referencing the compassion for justice demonstrated by Jesus Christ (Miller & Polson, 2019). Although Baptist congregations and those within them can self-govern, it is still expected that all forms of sexual immorality, which includes homosexuality, are opposed (SBC, 2020). As Fahs and Swank (2020) stated in reference to one nondenominational church respondent, "Biblical teachings supersede the social decisions of the church" (p. 5).

LGBTQ Students in Higher Education

As LGBTQ retention rates are often not tracked (Windmeyer, 2016), there is no true estimate of the LGBTQ student population enrolled in higher education. However, it is estimated that in regard to higher education, students in the LGBTQ population report higher rates of intent to attend college than their heterosexual peers (Wimberly et al., 2015). As LGBTQ student experiences are not always positive, the environment will be unequally conducive to their academic and personal success, which impact overall retention (Linley et al., 2016).

According to Preston and Hoffman (2015), discourse on college campuses can be heterogendered and reinforce LGBTQ students as different. In these climates, LGBTQ students will often report issues with heterosexism and discrimination (Hong et al., 2016). As these experiences persist, they create hierarchical differences in gender and sexuality and hegemonic norms that are difficult to challenge (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). A number of colleges and universities continue to put forth effort to improve campus climates, but negative experiences are still common for many LGBTQ students (Tetreault et al., 2013). In a national survey of 1,669 self-identified LGBTQ students, 41% stated that their respective institution did not fully address issues related to gender or sexuality (Rankin, 2005). Although it is subtle, this degrades experiences and creates challenges on campus for LGBTQ students (Snow, 2018).

LGBTQ communities are often seen as separate from the normative campus culture (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). Heteronormative culture is an underlying standard that dictates approved gender roles and reinforces behaviors that are gender specific (Sevecke et al., 2015). Because of this heteronormativity, it becomes difficult for the LGBTQ student population to process through and understand their identities (Bailey & Strunk, 2018). When LGBTQ students are unable to understand their identities and feel discomfort in disclosing them, it leads to the mental health issues common to this campus population (Borgogna et al., 2018). For campuses with LGBTQ resource centers, they are places LGBTQ students can use to cope with stressors and work on forming their identities (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2018). However, as only 150 institutions have LGBTQ resource centers (Best Colleges, 2020) and LGBTQ identities remain hidden (Woodford & Kulick, 2015), the satisfaction with campus climate necessary for persistence will not be the same for LGBTQ students across institutions of higher education (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016).

Precollege Experiences

To understand LGBTQ college students, it is important to examine the variables that impact their development prior to enrollment at a faith-based institution. One of the most significant is family, who are critical for self-acceptance in sexual identity development (Carastathis et al., 2017). According to Maslowe and Yarhouse (2015), parental responses to a child coming out are unpredictable and unique to the parent. These responses can range from shock and anger to love and concern. It has been estimated that anywhere between 15%–51% of those who disclosed to families had a negative experience and encountered rejection leading to more fragile LGBTQ identities (Carastathis et al., 2017). Because of a potential lack of knowledge, it is often the parent's religious communities that influence the understanding of LGBTQ identities, which is then attributed to their children (Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015). When these communities are nonaffirming, research suggests that LGBTQ individuals conceal identities from those in the family perceived to be unsupportive (Foster et al., 2017). With family support linked to all measures of young adult adjustment, this area is a decisive component for LGBTQ students having a positive transition into higher education (Snapp et al., 2015).

Religious Views

Based on research, there are no spiritual or nonbeliever commonalities that LGBTQ students share. Some LGBTQ individuals come into contact with organized Christian religion and share antireligious sentiments due to perceived homophobia or heterosexism (Smallwood, 2015). Although these religious communities can provide support, LGBTQ individuals will often take the time to invest in other beliefs or lose their faith as a result of negative experiences with religion, such as marginalization (Cole & Harris, 2017; Foster et al., 2017). For those who choose to remain committed to a faith, there is an ongoing process to determine a place that

represents support as well as sexual identity development (Bayne, 2016). According to Barringer and Gay (2017), LGBTQ individuals who participate in denominations that affirm LGBTQ identities share less internalized homophobia and improved well-being. This can be seen on Christian campuses, where LGBTQ students often share a reliance on God's affirmation, comfort, and acceptance (Vespone, 2016). As a result, these LGBTQ students have become more expressive through reconstructing messages about religious identities (Smallwood, 2015) and building a relational connection to God for strength and support (Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Mental Health

In the college environment, faculty members can help improve the climate to contribute to LGBTQ student success in the classroom, but not all practices that privilege heterosexism can be eliminated on campus (Barnhardt et al., 2017; Hong et al., 2016; Kulick et al., 2017). According to Kulick et al. (2017), oppressive environments are sometimes embedded in institutional practices and can have negative effects on the well-being of marginalized communities, leading to psychological distress in LGBTQ students. Based on reports from LGBTQ students, constant religious stigmatization and discrimination lead to humiliation and depression (Wood & Conley, 2014). As Pascoe and Smart Richman (2009) found, even perceived discrimination can result in lower mental health and well-being. Additionally, the LGBTQ population is more prone to anxiety, suicide ideation, and alienation (Zubernis et al., 2011). As these issues remain unresolved, LGBTQ students can start to distrust those around them and face fear in disclosing their identities (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). When LGBTQ students decide to hide their identities, they assume that this concealment will be a protection for stressors, but it instead creates further declines in mental health (Wolff et al., 2016).

As LGBTQ students conceal their identities, it prevents personal exploration, opportunities for support, and overall development. According to Garvey and Rankin (2015), closeted LGBTQ students report fewer support networks to help in navigating harmful campus environments and locating supportive faculty members. As a result, this closeting or concealing leads to isolation, academic decline, and negative self-esteem (Wolff et al., 2016). Although LGBTQ students conceal identities to minimize victimization risks, microaggressions, such as minimizing the need for policy changes and views expressed in class discussions, will continue to impact this population (Carastathis et al., 2017; Woodford, Weber, et al., 2018). Because of those on campus being unaware of the hidden yet salient LGBTQ identities, constant microaggressions will cause LGBTQ students to experience psychological distress (Hong et al., 2016). Consequently, LGBTQ students will endure chronic stress as well as be more at risk for depression and suicide (Woodford, Weber, et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, LGBTQ students at Christian institutions can have inadequate services and at times, have mental health professionals attempt to convert them into being heterosexual (Vespone, 2016; Wolff et al., 2016). This often leads LGBTQ students to be hesitant to reach out for care (Cole & Harris, 2017). With these struggles, LGBTQ students will continue to be at a heightened risk of mental health issues and forced to weigh the costs of coming out (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Wolff et al., 2019). According to Wedow et al. (2017), campuses need to be places where LGBTQ students can explore their identities and avoid losing the confidence needed to succeed in college. However, for LGBTQ students, awareness of resources is minimal, and support services remain inconsistent (McKinley et al., 2015).

Identity Management

When attending a college or university, students are given multiple opportunities to define their identities and learn about the world. However, some institutions are home to heterosexism and discrimination (Kulick et al., 2017). As Garvey and Rankin (2015) stated, LGBTQ individuals need to weigh the costs and benefits when choosing to come out to people in different environments. This decision becomes more confusing for LGBTQ college students as institutions provide them opportunities to define identities and create a sense of independence, but with minimal guidance (Hong et al., 2016). To improve well-being and explore these identities, LGBTQ students often participate in a variety of LGBTQ organizations (Hughes & Hurtado, 2018). In these organizations, LGBTQ students are able to interact with other marginalized students, contribute to systematic change efforts, and form relationships that lead to empowerment and control over identity formation (Kulick et al., 2017). These environments create spaces where identities can be out in the open, explored, and developed without consequence (Pitcher et al., 2016). As LGBTQ student persistence can sometimes be attributed to these LGBTQ organizations, it is important for institutions to provide these spaces for LGBTQ students (Hughes & Hurtado, 2018; Pitcher et al., 2016).

To build support and reinforce success for LGBTQ students on a college campus, faculty or staff members often step into the role of mentors or advisors (Broadhurst et al., 2018). These relationships can challenge LGBTQ students while also providing supportive environments to explore the academic and social challenges in which this population is more at risk than heterosexual peers (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). As Linley et al. (2016) stated, these interactions with faculty can improve academic success, but these same faculty are just as important outside the classroom as role models to guide LGBTQ students in life experiences.

Therefore, it is important that faculty members are involved with LGBTQ student organizations to help LGBTQ students navigate environments and support them in creating a sense of belonging (Linley et al., 2016). Without these partnerships, LGBTQ students, who need sources of support to persist, could be at risk of navigating campus alone or withdrawing from the institution (Pitcher et al., 2016).

Enrollment, Persistence, and Retention

In college student enrollment, there are common necessities that impact retention in higher education. According to Tinto (2010), expectations, support, feedback, and involvement are four institutional necessities that promote and influence student retention. With LGBTQ students, Rockenbach and Crandall (2016) found that satisfaction with campus climate is critical to persistence. However, due to their identities, LGBTQ students can build expectations that focus on concerns such as discrimination or rejection (Bissonette & Szymanski, 2019). Tinto (1990) discussed incongruency, a concept based on perception and marked by an individual's evaluation of his or her interaction with an institution and the degree to which specific needs, such as social or intellectual, are met. These evaluations are important as persistence in these institutions remains a significant component in student development and posteducational success (Woodford & Kulick, 2015). The inconsistencies of safe interactions are problematic for LGBTQ students, as they often perceive and experience unwelcoming or hostile environments (Garvey & Drezner, 2016). As support for LGBTQ students can influence perceptions about the campus climate (Kortegast, 2017), it is critical that institutions provide resources to LGBTQ students to support well-being (McKinley et al., 2015).

College is a time of personal exploration and transitional experiences (Bayne, 2016; Vespone, 2016). However, as LGBTQ students disclose their identities, many Christian college

and university systems often inhibit these opportunities for growth by restricting enrollment and resources (Wolff et al., 2017). For example, one institution published a student handbook with rules that could deny or terminate student enrollment when student influence on campus is seen as contrary to the university and the Lord (Rockenbach et al., 2016). In these restrictive Christian environments, LGBTQ students often hide identities that prohibit them from participating in educational or socialization processes that can improve well-being or increase belonging (Vespone, 2016). According to LGBTQ students, the option to withdrawal from their institutions would not be considered if campus environments were more supportive of them (Pitcher et al., 2016).

Christian Institutions

The missions of faith-based higher education institutions are central to their identity and educational foundations. For this reason, institutional missions often communicate and support religious practices that reinforce traditional views toward sexual identities (Bailey & Strunk, 2018). According to O'Brien (2017), churches encourage students to enroll at these institutions and send financial resources, assuming that biblical teachings will be reinforced on campus. In more extreme cases, support from churches can create a standard at Christian institutions that ensures they adhere to literal interpretations of scripture and God's word as inarguable truth (Vespone, 2016). Institutions that choose to uphold traditional views of sexual identities can request and can be given the exemption to discriminate against LGBTQ students based on religious freedom laws (Wedow et al., 2017). With this exemption, these institutions might create policies that prohibit admission, require counseling with conversion undertones, and forbid LGBTQ-affirming organizations (Snow, 2018; Wolff et al., 2019). As a result, such

institutions create tension, spiritual neglect, and religious abuse toward the LGBTQ population (Wood & Conley, 2014).

Religious denominations differ on their approaches to faith and their views of LGBTQ students. According to Barringer and Gay (2017), some denominations have worked to influence positive attitudes toward LGBTQ persons and affirm this population. This affirmation can be seen at multiple faith-based institutions where heterosexual students have petitioned administrators to recognize LGBTQ students and adopt nondiscrimination statements (Coley, 2017). As Gardner (2017) found, a growing number of students at Christian institutions accept and place a high value on biblical scripture but disagree with conservative interpretations. This can often place pressure on institutions that need to balance student perceptions and personal beliefs with campus scriptural beliefs related to gender and sexuality (Bailey & Strunk, 2018). As institutional standards are enacted through mission statements, institutional policies may potentially be made to prevent this questioning of theological assumptions about LGBTQ identities (Wolff et al., 2017).

Views on Sexuality and Sexual Identity

As the literature suggests, it is possible that positions on LGBTQ issues are influenced by the conservative or liberal teachings of Christian colleges and universities or from religious traditions (Coley, 2017). According to Bailey and Strunk (2018), Christian institutions might be more inclined to silence LGBTQ students due to a struggle with the inconsistent messages of church leaders, conflicting feelings, and concerns over enrollment. In other circumstances, institutions remain silent and do not help LGBTQ students as they believe doing so condones the immoral behavior associated with LGBTQ identities (Wolff & Himes, 2010). Specifically, it is believed that behaviors and expressions outside heteronormative roles and relationships are

sinful (Wolff et al., 2016). Religious organizations, like educational institutions, with high levels of social cohesion are found to reinforce these attitudes (Barringer & Gay, 2017). These beliefs can be seen throughout Christian higher education as well as in other faith-based colleges and universities where there is often a consensus that those who experience same-sex attraction are viewed with a negative lens (Stratton et al., 2013). In a study on sexual identity development and campus climate on a Christian campus, it was found that 84% of LGBTQ students believed that their campuses had negative views of homosexuality, with 96% relating negative attitudes toward homosexual behavior (Yarhouse et al., 2009).

While some institutional policies are found to conflict with LGBTQ identities, it is important to not make assumptions about the attitudes Christians (i.e., leaders, students) have toward LGBTQ people (Wolff & Himes, 2010). As Riswold (2015) stated, an individual's religious identity is a constant balance between salient identities such as race, class, and gender, to name a few. Where issues of inclusion were found on campuses, there were also tensions in different racial, cultural, and sexual identity communities (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). In college, students are still in the process of developing their own attitudes on LGBTQ issues and navigating their own identity exploration (Bayne, 2016; Wolff et al., 2012). Currently, heterosexist and homophobic attitudes are becoming less common among heterosexual students at Christian institutions (Bailey & Strunk, 2018). As heterosexual students interact with and connect to LGBTQ students, perceptions are shown to be increasingly more positive (Worthen, 2012). This positive shift is accomplished through intentional dialogues that give LGBTQ students opportunities to expose heterosexual students to their privileges and work on more tolerant attitudes (Hughes & Hurtado, 2018). Although conflicts between LGBTQ students and

Christian institutions persist, positive improvements are being made through increased campus awareness and national trends toward LGBTQ affirmation (Snow, 2018).

Institutional Policies and Practices

In most Christian denominations and nonaffirming Christian institutions, same-sex relationships continue to be condemned (Coley, 2017; Wolff et al., 2019). Throughout Christian communities such as those in the church or on college campuses, LGBTQ individuals are marginalized based on important convictions (i.e., biblical, cultural, historical; Cole & Harris, 2017; Hughes & Hurtado, 2018). At more conservative Christian colleges, this marginalization is seen in the experiences of LGBTQ students, which are often invalidated, and the students themselves are ignored or have their presence denied (Snow, 2018). Moreover, when students are found to be LGBTQ, denial can be replaced with multiple forms of discipline such as academic probation, on-campus restrictions, and mandated counseling (Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wolff et al., 2016). These views and actions do not exist on all Christian campuses, but characteristics such as affiliation and policies are what drive institutional missions and often influence attitudes toward LGBTQ students (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). Although institutional missions vary by denomination, many institutional leaders invest resources to protect these ideals as well as traditional gendered or sexual beliefs (Bailey & Strunk, 2018).

In light of these missions, processes such as enrollment, employee or student recruitment, and attitudes toward LGBTQ students are truly at the institution's discretion (O'Brien, 2017). Whether explicitly stated or unwritten, many conservative Christian colleges establish policies that make it difficult for LGBTQ students to enroll in and graduate from the institution (Bailey & Strunk, 2018). As Wolff et al. (2019) stated, nonaffirming institutions will prohibit LGBTQ identities through policies that forbid same-sex romance, oppose gender-affirming medical

procedures, and are unsupportive of LGBTQ-affirming student organizations. While these policies coincide with established institutional missions, policies that discriminate against LGBTQ students can create stress and unwelcoming messages (Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2018).

Furthermore, it is common for private faith-based institutions to not provide resources or essential services for LGBTQ students (Vespone, 2016; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2018). According to Yarhouse et al. (2009), "Christian college and universities, in particular, are known for community life policies influenced by a traditional religious sexual ethic" (p. 97). However, this campus climate can communicate intolerance and be a form of oppression that hinders LGBTQ students from obtaining the academic and social support needed to succeed on campus (Vespone, 2016).

A second source of oppression is the permission that faith-based institutions are given to discriminate against LGBTQ identities, despite the fact that Title IX was designed to prohibit discrimination (Kimmel, 2016; Wedow et al., 2017). However, in accordance with religious freedom laws, the U.S. Education Department often grants Title IX exemptions to faith-based colleges and universities, even though it is harmful to LGBTQ students (Rockenbach et al., 2016; Wedow et al., 2017). This lack of LGBTQ protections at faith-based institutions continues to perpetuate religious oppression and places many students in educational environments where prejudice is more influential on their development than their interactions with churches or ministries (Gardner, 2017). It is important that institutional leaders in Christian higher education understand the ramifications of campus climate on LGBTQ student development and their overall burden on students who identity as LGBTQ (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). Administrators could be nonhostile toward LGBTQ students but also make decisions not knowing their impact on this population (Broadhurst et al., 2018).

LGBTQ Student Treatment on Campus

In the context of higher education, it is common for LGBTQ students at Christian institutions to navigate unsupportive environments (Wolff et al., 2016, 2017, 2019). According to Broadhurst et al. (2018), because of minimal understanding from heterosexual peers, LGBTQ students continue to face challenges that impact their success. When this lack of understanding is combined with institutional policies that perpetuate negative attitudes and classroom climates that do not include LGBTQ curricula, it can create a sphere of heterosexism that contributes to academic distress and withdrawal (Barnhardt et al., 2017; Wolff et al., 2012). As these environments of heterosexism continue, especially in Christian institutions, they perpetuate the experiences of LGBTQ students, who report constant discrimination, verbal and physical harassment, and religious stigmatization (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Vespone, 2016; Wolff et al., 2016). These negative experiences are often due to heterosexual norms, absence of antidiscrimination policies, and various forms of homophobia reinforced by religious affiliation (Katz et al., 2016; Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2018). When LGBTQ students experience these unwelcoming environments and perceive the campus climate as negative, it can lead to altered growth and development (Garvey & Drezner, 2016). In Vespone's (2016) study, when LGBTQ students made an effort to address mental health concerns and report discrimination, campus resources were found to be inadequate or unavailable to these students.

It is important to note, however, that even when these issues are addressed, LGBTQ students face a more common form of discrimination called microaggressions, which thrive on being subtle and discreet (Woodford, Weber, et al., 2018). The term microaggression is defined as a subtle form of discrimination that marginalized populations experience based on their identities (Hong et al., 2016; Kulick et al., 2017; Seelman et al., 2017). According to Hong et al.

(2016), these microaggressions are present in four areas: perceived social supports, such as friends or faculty members; overhearing negative remarks; influential factors, such as hometown or upbringing, that create anti-LGBTQ mindsets; and societal culture with a focus on beliefs and policies. As Wolff et al. (2016) noted, LGBTQ college students may also have to contend with institutional policies that communicate unwelcoming messages. With perceptions having the power to impact expectations, Kortegast (2017) suggested that institutional personnel start to confront homophobia and discrimination to promote inclusion and show support for LGBTQ students.

LGBTQ Student Support Systems

Some studies suggest that campus climates at Christian institutions range from isolating to oppressive and homophobic to psychologically damaging to LGBTQ students (Barnhardt et al., 2017). According to Kulick et al. (2017), engaging in activist groups and identity-based associations gives LGBTQ students a chance to heal from oppressive environments and take control of their identities. Through these ongoing interactions, LGBTQ students are able to build relationships, which, as Fuist (2016) stated, are vital to identity formation. With a shift in national college completion agendas to focus on holding colleges accountable and engaging more diverse students, there is potential to build the supportive environments needed for LGBTQ student persistence (Barnhardt et al., 2017; Bayne, 2016; Pitcher et al., 2016). As Pitcher et al. (2016) stated, one important source of support is the policies that often reflect institutional values, norms, and beliefs. Whether positive or negative, these norms and beliefs will influence LGBTQ student perceptions about the campus climate and impact their willingness to come out or persist (Kortegast, 2017).

According to Linley et al. (2016), the presence of faculty in LGBTQ students' lives can have a positive impact on academic achievement and social connections on campus. In developing these relationships, faculty are able to promote social connectedness on campus and be role models for supportive relationships (Kulick et al., 2017). For example, when faculty members use inclusive practices, it demonstrates an affirming and accepting climate for LGBTQ students to thrive (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). As Linley et al. (2016) found, "Students reported feeling supported by faculty who confronted homophobic language, challenged normative heterosexist/cisgender discourses within the curriculum, and utilized inclusive language within the classroom" (p. 57). With 54% of LGBTQ students disclosing their identities to a faculty member at least once, it is crucial for supportive faculty to have the tools to aid students in this developmental process (Wolff et al., 2016). To further promote this development, institutions often implement required safe zone training programs to bring awareness to personnel about LGBTQ issues and equip them to confront discrimination or harassment (Barnhardt et al., 2017; Linley et al., 2016). As personnel continue to equip themselves to address discrimination and LGBTQ issues, LGBTQ students experience the affirmation and support shown to improve mental health (Rockenbach et al., 2016).

Summary

The persistence of LGBTQ students at Christian higher education institutions is a debated but important topic. As the literature shows, LGBTQ college students often face unwelcoming and oppressive environments, but there are positive environments being built across the United States in more affirming institutions. With persistence linked to student satisfaction of the campus climate, LGBTQ students who perceive institutions as negative could become disengaged (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). For LGBTQ students and these faith-based

institutions to be successful, the present study expanded on available literature to provide more comprehensive knowledge and lesser-known experiences to institutional leaders. In Chapter 3, methods are shared on the research process and the procedures used to create the dialogues and document experiences known to be critical in achieving LGBTQ inclusion on Christian college and university campuses.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology & Design

The present study's purpose was to document the experiences of LGBTQ students and understand the various strategies that contribute to their success at Christian higher education institutions in the United States. This study was designed to use participant interview responses to inform institutional leaders at Christian institutions about LGBTQ student experiences on campus. Using interview questions that asked about perceptions, policies, and practices provided multiple opportunities for LGBTQ students to share the positive and negative experiences influencing their well-being and persistence. Coupled with an interpretive paradigm, a more holistic understanding of participant viewpoints, beliefs, and attitudes was developed. With an interpretative practice, human experience is not seen as measurable reality but is instead heard, interpreted, and analyzed based on individual context (i.e., cultural, societal; Tracy, 2019). This chapter comprises a description of the research design and methodology, including the participant population and sample, materials/instruments used, data collection process, data analysis procedures, efforts to ensure trustworthiness, my role as the researcher in the research process, ethical considerations, the study assumptions, and its limitations and delimitations.

Research Design and Methodology

Interviews were used in this qualitative study to document and understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ students at U.S. Christian colleges and universities. With a narrative research approach that holds stories as essential to human experience (Willig, 2012), the interviews established more meaningful connections between LGBTQ perceptions and the events that created them. As such, these interviews were specifically designed to collect students' stories about what was or is important to their persisting at their institutions and the perceptions of campus climate that influence their persistence and to identify key themes in their experiences

in faith-based institutions. This interview structure fits into the aim of the narrative analysis that works to construct events to advance the plot and lead the researcher to identify data that should be included in the final story, or in this case, the dissertation (Polkinghorne, 1995). According to Tracy (2019), qualitative interviews are organic, adaptive, and help in decoding participant stories, leading to mutual understanding with the researcher. Using these approaches makes it possible to learn about the personal challenges participants encounter and the settings in which they were experienced as well as perceptions and how situations affect interpretation of those perceptions (Weiss, 1994). Therefore, a narrative analysis of data generated from semi-structured interviews was appropriate for the present study because it allowed participants to share stories, the progression of their lives through experiences, and provide information on LGBTQ issues that are less observable due to personal comfort or identity disclosure.

In using a qualitative approach that focuses on lived experiences, interactions during the interview process can give researchers access to information such as past events and buried emotions (Tracy, 2019). In light of the common experiences of the population in the present study, access to more personal information was important. As Mishler (1986) recommended, research interviews need to be a source of empowerment and provide a space for participants to disclose their own stories. According to Jamshed (2014), semi-structured interviews center on open-ended questions and often lead to a more comprehensive exploration of participants. In the present study, as responses led to further questions, additional investigation was conducted as long as the participant continued to be comfortable with the process and new information was being added. Fortunately, with interviews being conducted online, it is possible that participants who were anxious or cautious in face-to-face situations could have been more confident in conversation as various characteristics (i.e., personal, social) can be hidden in online

environments (Rheingold, 1994). With these methods, LGBTQ students were given a platform to disclose their experiences and contribute to an area of higher education that will inform leaders on the impact of institutional doctrines on student persistence.

Population

The study population consisted of LGBTQ college students enrolled in Christian higher education institutions located in the United States; specifically at institutions that are members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). The CCCU is a higher education association that promotes the integration of the Christian Bible into educational experiences at more than 150 U.S. institutions that enroll close to 520,000 students globally from all types of backgrounds (CCCU, n.d.-b). Member institutions come from denominations including Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, Baptist, and nondenominational as the most common, with Methodist, Presbyterian, and various evangelical denominations representing fewer member institutions (CCCU, n.d.-a). For institutions to be members, there are three basic commitments that need to be upheld. These commitments are the integration of scripture into academic disciplines, virtues incorporated into curricular and cocurricular activities, and the graduation of students to live the gospel through purposeful action (CCCU, n.d.-b). Limiting the study's population to CCCU institutions helped to ensure that study participants were only from colleges or universities that view themselves as Christian institutions and that promote learning and social environments according to their interpretations of scripture. Doing so helped to exclude institutions with historical or even current connections to Christian denominations but whose religious or denominational ties no longer influence their institutional commitments, practices, or campus cultures. As LGBTQ students might have been able to accurately categorize some of

these institutions as Christian, selecting CCCU institutions helped to develop a population with more reliable and consistent social guidelines.

Study Sample

The participants in this research consisted of current college students who identified as LGBTQ, were classified as a sophomore or above to have time to experience campus culture and climate, and were enrolled at CCCU-member Christian institutions in the United States. It was advantageous to work with these LGBTQ students as it was believed that the freshmen year provides the first potential experiences of hostile climates, such as discrimination or harassment, as well as possible positive environments such as supportive peers or policies to build perceptions about the institution. For a more in-depth understanding of the institutions, the participants needed to be enrolled at the institution for at least 1 year to be able to share experiences and more long-term perceptions of the environment. Because of various personal circumstances and unknown campus environments, LGBTQ participants did not need to be enrolled throughout the research process as valuable data could still be collected on perceptions and persistence.

As these students were not recruited through specific institutions, I needed to confirm that their college or university was affiliated with the CCCU to follow participation requirements. In light of various institutional stances on LGBTQ issues, it was communicated that the research process would not request institutional identifiers from participants in order to protect them but that campuses had to be verified through the list of institutions on the CCCU website by the student in order to participate.

To recruit these participants, a request for participants was made via a post to various higher education-related groups on Facebook, which included the Student Affairs Professionals

page with 35,000 members, the LGBTQ Research and Researchers in Higher Education and Student Affairs group with approximately 3,000 members, the LGBTQIA+ Affinity Higher Education Professionals group with 3,000 members, and the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Network with close to 5,000 members. This post, open to the entire membership, included the study's purpose and design, contact information, and a request to share the recruitment message with LGBTQ students who fit the requirements as to not receive personal information unless students expressed interest (see Appendix A). As LGBTQ students often see faculty and staff as sources of support, using professionals or trusted connections could have made these students more willing to participate. Interested students were instructed to contact me directly in order to express interest in participating in the study. Once they contacted me via email, respondents were sent an email with an informed consent form that provided information about the purpose of the study (see Appendix B). As students agreed to continue as participants by signing the informed consent form, they were contacted through email to provide demographic information and schedule a one-on-one audio or video interview.

In using a direct line to students through professionals, purposive sampling of this population had the most potential to elicit the most useful responses to document LGBTQ student experiences (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). With purposive selection of participants, the chosen participants could best be able to answer the study's research questions; however, due to unknown disclosure and difficulties locating additional participants, snowball sampling was used to increase participants through trusted LGBTQ networks or organizations (Tracy, 2019). As all communication of this research was initially through higher education professionals, an established message for them to forward to potential LGBTQ participants was provided that included a link to the CCCU institution website as well as various

options to determine class status such as credit attainment or number of years in college to assist in determining eligibility for the study without sharing identifiers.

It was estimated that with a sample size of 10–12 participants, thematic saturation would be achieved, as this range is seen in other published research on similar topics. For example, in a qualitative study on transgender and gender nonconforming students, Wolff et al. (2017) included seven participants to better understand their experiences in Christian higher education The plan was to interview 10–12 participants; however, the final sample size was six. Lowe et al. (2018) stated that saturation helps to provide justification for claims and conclusions developed through interviews or observations. Saturation is reached once additional interviews do not contribute valuable information or deeper insight into these claims (Tracy, 2019). As such, the selected number of participants was viable and consistent with the research literature.

Materials/Instruments

The materials and instruments used to collect, analyze, and organize data included a videoconferencing platform, reflective journal, and laptop computer. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom and were audio or video calls based on participant comfort. Once completed, MP4 audio recordings created by the Zoom software were exported to send to the transcription service Rev to convert interviews to text. All transcripts were kept on a password-protected laptop. Once the interviews were transcribed by Rev, which guarantees 99% accuracy in transcriptions, I manually coded the data by reading through the transcripts and using the comment review tool in Microsoft Word. I used a journal to track and document personal reactions and to check for potential biases throughout the research process.

Data Collection

Data were collected through one-on-one interviews with LGBTQ college students. With participants being located in different states, one-on-one interviews were conducted on Zoom. For students who wanted to video conference, internal software in the Zoom platform was used to record the conversations and store them with password protection. The same software was used with participants who chose audio conferencing. However, the participants had time to change their display names or photos if additional accommodations were requested. As comfort can impact the data collection process, all steps were taken to ensure participant anonymity and a safe space.

The interviews were in a semi-structured format, consisting of open-ended questions to ensure individual interpretation and follow-up questions based on the students' responses (Edwards & Holland, 2013). With this interview structure, students were given ample time to share their experiences, but I did not hesitate to redirect the conversation to follow up on a response or make an adjustment due to a perception of a participant's nonverbal discomfort (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Interviews were scheduled for approximately 1 hr to no longer than 2 hr to allow for question clarification and adequate time for rich responses to the interview questions.

Data Analysis Procedures

To determine whether thematic saturation was achieved when analyzing the data, I began reviewing my interview notes after three or four interviews had been conducted to start identifying common themes and did so with future interviews until they no longer provided new information. Therefore, once the participants had been interviewed and thematic saturation was

achieved, data collection concluded. I then sent audio recordings to Rev for transcription to prepare for the coding and analysis process.

A Priori Codes

It is important to acknowledge that prior to the analysis process, various codes were carried into the research. Whether it was a guideline to data collection or checkpoints for interpreting the data, these pre-established or a priori codes originated from minority stress theory. As minority stress theory states, people with minority identities often need to contend with additional stressors outside common societal or, in this case, educational stressors (Lefevor et al., 2019). The a priori codes included experiences such as discrimination, heterosexism, and harassment (Shadick et al., 2015; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). In understanding the LGBTQ student experience through literature and respecting the experience through the minority stress theory, the a priori codes were invaluable in organizing the data.

A Posteriori Codes

After the interviews were transcribed, participant responses were coded to determine themes and create a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTQ participants. To identify these themes, I coded the interviews with both in vivo and emotion coding. While in vivo coding focuses on participant words, emotion coding acknowledges the participants' emotional experiences (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The in vivo coding pass, which was first, was the main analysis foundation and involved documenting specific words or phrases that corresponded to each question and that were used to build themes. As research has shown, institutions appropriate LGBTQ student voices in ways that reduce the students' power in the space. Since LGBTQ students could also be ignored or isolated on Christian campuses, I chose to use this pass to amplify participant voices. In the emotional coding pass, careful attention was

placed on words or implicit messages that expressed feelings such as anxiousness, sadness, or excitement in relation to perceptions and interactions on campus (Saldaña, 2009). As these emotional weights are expressed or freed, participants can be more understood in the context of their experiences and readers more empathetic to needs for continued research.

In conjunction with the in vivo and emotion coding passes, I employed the constant comparative method to reflect on, consolidate, and finalize the overall themes. The constant comparative method is an approach for comparing data identified in each code and continually reviewing them to notice emerging themes and modify existing ones (Tracy, 2019). I perceived that using these coding techniques and practices was effective in acknowledging and organizing the LGBTQ student participant voices into overarching themes that were supported by their descriptive accounts.

Methods for Establishing Trustworthiness

Several actions were taken to establish study trustworthiness. The first was to minimize potential bias from subjective observations during the interviews and transcription process. Ortlipp (2008) recommended examining one's personal assumptions and belief systems to minimize bias throughout the research process. Therefore, to maintain control over subjective observations in this process, a reflection journal was kept that described personal lenses, reactions to LGBTQ student responses, and judgments that had the potential to bias and cloud the study results. As researcher subjectivity can impact data interpretation, it was important to create a place to express thoughts throughout the research process to minimize interference with interviews or data analysis (Tracy, 2019). The research journal was used as a constant reminder to control personal reactions, remove subjective interference, and improve credibility of the results (Amankwaa, 2016).

Credibility

To further improve credibility of the results, I sent transcripts of the interviews via email to participants for member checking to improve accuracy and understanding of their experiences for data analysis (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Thomas, 2006). Member checking is especially useful for verification such as determining points of view (Madill & Sullivan, 2018) as well as providing participants the opportunity to add or remove responses in the transcript to create new meaning in the data (Birt et al., 2016). This was a vital practice to ensure that all experiences were not only accurate for interpretation but for readers to more authentically understand the scope of this topic through the participants' perspectives.

The second practice to establish credibility is debriefing. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), peer debriefing consists of a disinterested individual providing an analytical review of the research to examine content that could be biased or specific to the researcher. As a researcher as well as a professional, I have a long-standing connection to topics on LGBTQ identities. Using peer debriefing allowed me to reassess thoughts in the reflection journal and additional sections that could impact credibility. Using peer debriefing toward the end of research can accomplish a few things. According to Cooper et al. (1998), this process can ensure the researcher is kept to an honest standard as well as to confront frustrations that could come from the findings. As this topic can impact institutions with Christian affiliations and unintentional bias, peer debriefing addressed unfounded perspectives and unchecked biases to limit their overall impact on the data.

Using negative case analysis further strengthened study trustworthiness. Negative case refers to comparing data when not all sources or testimonials support the conclusions of the research (Gliner, 1994). This analysis provided me the opportunity to view the data from a

perspective similar as those in the peer review. This self-review forced me to shift the lens in understanding the participants and to inspect the transcripts more in depth to understand the reasons for outliers in the data. This consideration built on the previous practices to help me determine inconsistencies in the data. As these inconsistencies could have impacted the results, this practice challenged me to look beyond the findings that supported the literature to reinforce and strengthen the conclusions.

Transferability

As LGBTQ student backgrounds are as diverse as their identities, it was important to be more restrictive with the participant population to produce a focal point to the data. According to Shenton (2004), practices such as data restriction and time in the data collection process are options to improve transferability. Therefore, the data were restricted to CCCU colleges and universities confirmed as Christian institutions based on specific standards rather than those that are Christian in name or perceived practice. With this parameter, recruiting LGBTQ students at these institutions started in mid-spring 2021, and interviews were conducted from May through August to avoid conflicts with academics and to collect responses in a similar state of higher education. As these restrictions were limited, it was also important to be detailed in various aspects of the research, including both processes and participants. For the study findings to be transferable, the context and processes had to be described accurately and robustly to aid readers in understanding the participants as well as the topic (Gliner, 1994; Shenton, 2004). With intentional and in-depth information, this research can be replicated with minimal gaps inhibiting transferability.

Dependability

Dependability is another method for improving credibility and promoting future research. With dependability, records and reports need to be thorough so future researchers can replicate the work (Shenton, 2004). To ensure that research continues on the topic of LGBTQ students at Christian institutions, constant consideration was paid to detailing explanations, methods, and recommendations. Although it was difficult to collect data due to the nature of this research, the research process was developed through diverse sources related to various aspects of the LGBTQ identity and Christian higher education. With participants' detailed accounts and equally detailed descriptions of research processes, future researchers will have multiple sources of information to be able to repeat the study and understand the links between results. These efforts are made to increase dependability in the research, but it is also important to note that the lens of the research is dependable (Self, 2019). As a doctoral student, I attended several trainings and had many professionals advise the process. To strengthen the work, I took numerous steps to create comprehensive descriptions from proposal to defense.

Confirmability

The final step was to address confirmability in the data. The most appropriate practice to ensure confirmability was an audit trail. According to Shenton (2004), an audit trail establishes step-by-step details of the research process and the various workflows created by the data. To this end, all dissertation-related processes were explained in detail, transcripts were coded with notes, and documents related to theme development were created. With confirmability being concerned with objectivity, a more transparent research path allowed for readers to understand my role, beliefs, and reasoning throughout the research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Shenton, 2004). As the study topic is important to me, there could be no proven neutrality

throughout the research. The interpretations were developed through word associations and as a collection, the closest theme was created. Although simple, the strength of this research was participant vulnerability. Again, as neutrality is difficult to navigate, a confirmability audit by the chair of the dissertation committee was completed to support or reject that data interpretation was not unique to the researcher.

Researcher Role

As a higher education professional at a Catholic institution, support and advocacy for LGBTQ students is an important part of my role, and I often see overlap in the LGBTQ student experiences found in the research literature. Throughout the planning for this research, I made sustained efforts to recognize bias resulting from my personal and professional LGBTQ initiatives. To help with this, I kept a personal journal to write notes, observations, and overall thoughts that could impact analysis of the data. Being a student researcher, my role was to build a comprehensive study, provide a safe space for the study's LGBTQ student participants to share their experiences, and contribute to this topical area in the research literature. I believe this was accomplished through well-designed interview questions, supportive dialogue, and a commitment to participant protection and the standards set forth in Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines.

Ethical Considerations

In recognition of the study methodology, this research was classified as exempt in accordance with the IRB at Abilene Christian University and submitted as requiring minimal risk to participants (see Appendix C. The main consideration for LGBTQ participants was to ensure all information was de-identified to provide a safe space to share experiences and not to out a student. As the email to recruit participants requested LGBTQ students to reach out in self-

interest, it made these students independent entities and required no formal approval process beyond personal acknowledgment.

To further improve comfort and security, all participants chose a personal pseudonym before proceeding past informed consent. Marginalized groups whose identities are rooted in oppression are often able to create a sense of power by naming themselves (Gardner, 2017). Therefore, because feelings of powerlessness are common to the LGBTQ population, I wanted to give the participants the opportunity to choose names that provided them comfort and empowerment throughout the research process. Additionally, all information and interview materials were stored and maintained on a password-protected computer with no other identifiers linking the participants to the data. No participants were contacted or data collected prior to IRB approval of the study plans.

Assumptions

Two key assumptions based on the research literature and my professional knowledge of the LGBTQ population guided this research. The first assumption was based on student experiences at faith-based institutions. Because Christian institutions often vary in their stances toward sexual orientation and the church, there are no universal standards for LGBTQ treatment. As no standards exist, it was assumed that LGBTQ students would have unique experiences to contribute to this research. These experiences might include discrimination, identity shaming, efforts to convert sexuality, or positive interactions such as policy change, peer acceptance and support, and institutional advocacy. To be sensitive to this, the study's theoretical framework, minority stress theory, was used to craft the interview protocol (see Appendix D) and provide a safe space for LGBTQ students to openly share their experiences.

The second assumption was based on student participation. As the LGBTQ students in this study did not have an established relationship with me, it was assumed that some might be hesitant to share some of their personal experiences. For some LGBTQ students, environments on campus have been unwelcoming and unsupportive, so it is likely that some participants had to conceal their identities on campus. This might have made participating in a research study on this topic uncomfortable and feel somewhat risky to them. I anticipated that it would take some time for me to establish trust with some participants, enabling them to provide open and honest responses to the interview questions. In response to this assumption, the informed consent form included an option to cease participation at any time during data collection. It was also made clear that their information could be viewed by those involved in the research process, when necessary, but that no identifiers would be in the final written product.

Limitations

A significant limitation was the possibility that the study participants may possess certain attributes that differentiate them from other members of the LGBTQ spectrum attending Christian institutions. For example, the participants may have had a greater propensity to voice their concerns than those who did not elect to participate. As LGBTQ students often delay coming out to their college peers (Jackson, 2017), it is possible that these participants could be more "out" on campus and have processed through various parts of their identities to be comfortable enough to interview for this research (Hong et al., 2016). With outness often being linked to stage in identity formation (Dentato et al., 2014), LGBTQ students involved in this study could be further in their development as well as perceive a level of safety and security in their participation to be able to share their experiences (Snapp et al., 2015).

Delimitations

This study was designed to document and understand LGBTQ student experiences at Christian institutions that potentially impact their abilities to persevere and persist when their identities conflict with their institution's religious commitments, social policies, and/or campus cultures. Therefore, this research focused solely on LGBTQ student perceptions of their campus climates, how they are treated, and their persistence strategies. This research was not designed to collect institutional perspectives on LGBTQ students. As LGBTQ participants are often minimized on campus, it was important to make student experiences a focal point and not the beliefs of those in leadership. Because of the absence of institutional input, there were no opportunities to understand their campuses more in depth, verify the participants' perceptions or accounts, or identify possible actions from upper-level leadership, such as deans or vice presidents, to improve campus climates for LGBTQ students. Additionally, as no institutional identifiers were collected, participants were trusted to confirm their institution's CCCU membership, which had the potential to skew the data if not accurate.

The second delimitation relates to the LGBTQ students who participated in this research. As participation was a snapshot of the LGBTQ population from various Christian colleges and universities, the results are not a true representation of LGBTQ students enrolled in Christian higher education. The LGBTQ spectrum includes a wide range of terms and definitions people use to classify their sexual identity. As a result, it was likely that not all sexual identities would be represented and that responses would not be generalizable or applicable to all LGBTQ student identities. Although the participants were from different colleges and universities, Christian institutions vary in their responses to LGBTQ issues, making it difficult to illustrate all campus cultures and climates for LGBTQ students. Therefore, the results do not represent the

perspectives of the entire LGBTQ population or reflect the treatment of LGBTQ students at all Christian institutions. With the focus on Christian higher education, LGBTQ students attending faith-based institutions, such as those associated with Catholicism, Judaism, and other religious affiliations, were not included in this study.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the research design and methods that were employed to ensure that the research process served to answer the established research questions. The purpose of this study was to understand and document the lived experiences of LGBTQ college students at Christian higher education institutions. With purposive sampling used to recruit these participants, LGBTQ students who could contribute to the exploration of LGBTQ experiences in CCCU-affiliated Christian higher education were examined. In using a qualitative interview methodological approach, in-depth conversations provided information on LGBTQ students' personal experiences, perceptions of campus climate, and impact factors for their well-being and educational persistence. Chapter 4 describes the findings of the research discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to document and understand the experiences of LGBTQ college students at Christian institutions. As no demographic information was collected, the participants and responses were analyzed as a collective LGBTQ identity, but the results were individualized to ensure unique narratives were shared. To present the results, emerging themes were separated into sections, and specific quotes from participants were used to explore these themes. The themes were developed through the lens of in vivo and emotion coding techniques. These techniques were important in analyzing participant responses as LGBTQ experiences are not often heard in Christian higher education (Yarhouse et al., 2009). With the chosen words and expressed emotions of LGBTQ students, the results provided Christian institutions with the experiences that shape campus climate for this student population. To organize this exploration, the results include specific quotes to connect LGBTQ students to the research as well as to one another, and there are brief summaries of the overall takeaways from the results.

Data Saturation

In the development of this research, it was estimated that data saturation would be achieved with 10–12 participants. When data saturation is achieved, data collection and analysis, though important for adding more voices, will not add new data insights or themes (Green & Thorogood, 2004; Guest et al., 2006). According to Guest et al. (2006), saturation can be achieved with as few as six participants. As the a priori, in vivo, and emotion codes were reviewed and built into themes, it was determined that the six participants contributed significant information resulting in data saturation. To further assist in this determination, Tracy (2019) stated to focus on the contributions to the research questions or goals and the predictability of participant responses. While the responses from each participant were unique, the experiences

became common enough to predict and, more importantly, the results from the data analysis provided clear conclusions to the research questions. It is important to note that while saturation was achieved, not all relationships between the themes could be discovered. According to Lowe et al. (2018), saturation can be achieved without examining the in-depth relationships between themes. As study designs are not universal and there is no universal method to achieve saturation, the information provided was the path to saturation for this research (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

A Posteriori Coding

The themes were discovered by in vivo and emotion coding and directed by the research questions. Throughout the data analysis process, multiple themes provided a glimpse into LGBTQ student experiences at Christian institutions. As the research questions pertained to various aspects of the student experience, the themes were separated to fit within these parameters. Because of COVID-19 and campus restrictions, it is important to note that it is possible that not all themes were current for the academic year. As institutions across the United States were at different stages of functioning, LGBTQ students could have had additional limitations on campus outside of restrictive practices due to specific guidelines or remote education, and, as a result, have lapsed or altered experiences.

This section includes the in vivo, emotion, and a priori codes that inspired themes unique to the research that I consolidated. Axial codes developed by literature consistencies and participant responses provided a strong foundation to continue research on this topic. As various codes overlapped, the codes that are detailed are based on standalone data to reinforce themes and provide additional context to the research.

In Vivo Codes

The in vivo pass created several common codes that highlighted the LGBTQ experience. As the various passes were instrumental in creating an overall theme to the research, it is important to share parts of the data that led to consolidation. With in vivo coding, I used words or phrases to bring attention to specific experiences or thoughts shared by a participant. The responses were unique yet overlapped with the literature, allowing the responses to stand alone as well as support previous studies. Based on the interviews with participants, the codes in this section focus on their religious identity, use of the counseling center, and the ways in which participants navigated their campuses.

Christianity. Of the most frequent responses from participants, an affiliation with a Christian ideology was a significant part of their experiences. The influences can be seen in enrollment decisions, hopes on campus, and overall personal faith life. As LGBTQ and Christian identities are sometimes in conflict, it was meaningful to explore this theme. As Carolina stated, "I am a Christian, that's my spiritual background. And it impacted me in the way I want to have a community that will have the same values like I did."

In a similar sentiment, Caleb wanted to remain true to their Christian beliefs but was uncertain whether an opposing and just as salient identity would conflict with those on campus. Caleb shared, "I wasn't sure how I would be accepted if I would be accepted. And I do still identify as a Christian. So, I was hoping that it wouldn't cause a whole lot of problems.

When choosing to attend a Christian institution, balancing LGBTQ and Christian identities is a common experience for LGBTQ students. While not all LGBTQ students who attend Christian institutions are Christian, those who are struggle to maintain a harmonious relationship between identities. LGBTQ students who could be accepted for one identity could

also be shunned for another. In Eileen's case, their pre-enrollment identity was still in progress. Much like those at the institution, a conservative Christian stance provided a "weird" foundation to start a deeper identity formation. Eileen said,

> I was also looking for somewhere that . . . I thought I was bi at the time. So I was looking for somewhere that I could be out but still be this conservative Christian and still find a husband and kind of walk that weird line that I was finding myself in.

In Faith's background, there was also a transition but not related to their LGBTQ identity and started much earlier in life. Faith shared, "I consider myself Christian. I don't really ascribe to a specific tradition, per se, though I grew up with a Church of Christ background."

In many instances, LGBTQ students who attend Christian institutions also grew up with religion as a defining part of their lives. Whether positive or negative, religion played a role in their personal and identity development. Jude said,

> I'm actually born and raised in the South, and so religion is a big deal where I'm from. Everybody, and their mother, and their brother, and their cousin is a Christian, so I grew up very strong in my belief.

Although not all LGBTQ students are religious or are affiliated with a Christian denomination, these LGBTQ students found comfort and guidance in their faith. In the literature, LGBTQ student religious affiliation was not always known. In this study, LGBTQ students provided information about their Christian faith and the influence it had on them or their LGBTQ identities.

Counseling. Counseling centers on many campuses are often free and offer an opportunity for all students to sort through personal struggles and process numerous life decisions. In the literature, services related to counseling were inconsistent as far as offerings and

LGBTQ student comfort (Cole & Harris, 2017). Similar to Christian faith among LGBTQ students, counseling services on church-affiliated campuses can bring about thoughts of distrust and uncertainty. As the responses showed, personal use was not always immediate and required deliberate reflection that resulted in both positive and negative experiences.

In most cases, the study participants have found comfort in their counseling centers and trust the professionals. As these counselors work within a Christian context, there was no certainty about their response. Eileen explained this process and said,

> I was really nervous going into it because this was therapy provided by my Christian institution. I didn't know exactly what their response would be. I don't know what the therapists' personal convictions are, but they have been so supportive and so loving and validating my experience and validating my pain.

In a similar fashion, Faith's counseling center had a trusted individual who went beyond her role to not only validate but also affirm LGBTQ students in their identities. Faith shared,

> There was one counselor in the counseling center that kind of colloquially was known as kind of like the queer student mom. Basically, everyone I knew that had an LGBTQIA+ identity would ask for this specific counselor because she was the one that we all knew that could talk about these things and was good about them and the sort of unique problems that we were facing at the institution.

In addition to being a place to explore mental health, counseling centers, when staff are trained properly, can also be places to explore identities. An affirming counseling center is not present on all campuses, but as many attitudes toward LGBTQ identities are based on individual stance, some centers have staff willing to walk the journey with students. Jude said,

> Our counseling services have been extremely helpful. I've had a really good experience with that service, and I have recommended that service to many other students in my position or in similar positions. They are very affirming. They are very understanding. It just has been, for me, a great way of exploring and affirming my own identity and my own sexuality.

Unfortunately, not all LGBTQ students experience these supportive environments. The counseling center is available for LGBTQ students to process through personal struggles, but due to perceived competence or inclusion, the students do not consider the services offered as reliable. In the next two scenarios, counseling was used; however, the experiences were triggering. Carolina said,

> And I have also used the counseling center. My counselor there knows I am gay, she doesn't care, and she hasn't reported me. However, I don't think they have enough training given that I reported many times that I wanted to commit suicide and that I was involved in self-harm behavior and they didn't act very well. Neither did Residence Life.

Talique also used the counseling center but did not continue. Similar to Carolina, Talique struggled with suicide ideation. They said,

> As far as resources, specifically for the challenges that I face, I used the counseling center once, when my mental health was really, really bad, and I should probably put a trigger warning here, I struggled really intensely with suicidal ideation this past February. So I did use the counseling center.

Services at counseling centers can assist LGBTQ students in their personal development or cause more harm. Although the LGBTQ students in the present study had more positive experiences, there were still uncertainties and barriers that limited the center's impact.

Counseling center services could be more beneficial to LGBTQ students, but too many unknowns exist in such personal and intimate settings.

Emotion Codes

Emotion coding was used to provide emphasis and vulnerability to the experiences discussed in the in vivo pass. As the experiences cannot be truly understood through reading the transcripts, there is added awareness that comes from sharing the emotions participants felt or what the participants knew others felt. Using the codes found in the emotion coding pass to demonstrate reactions or feelings in a common experience provided a chance to understand the participants more in depth. When consolidating the codes into unique research themes, having the emotions available to me gave insights into the meaning behind the results. The most common emotions present in the transcripts were anxiety, fear, and surprise.

Anxiety. The feeling of anxiety is present throughout the literature (Vespone, 2016; Wolff et al., 2016) and was one of the prominent emotions across participant interviews. General anxiety existing prior to enrollment is not known, except for one participant. However, regardless of diagnosis, the focus of these interviews was on the experiences as well as the emotions felt within them. These emotions were present in different scenarios and helped to provide more context for triggering areas or experiences. For example, Caleb felt safe on campus to an extent but shared a tension on campus that created a certain level of discomfort. Caleb said,

> I think physically, I feel decently safe. I don't think anyone would physically do anything to hurt those of the LGBTQ community or myself. I do think there's a lot of emotional tension, and it's, for me personally has led to worsening my depression and anxiety. And a lot of that has come from the dorms.

In Caleb's case, the discomfort came from their identity and being in a hall with an all-male population. Because of peer discomfort and Caleb's own presence, there was a continued sense of tension that made it difficult to determine the actions of others.

According to Faith, their anxiety started prior to their enrollment. As many students in college experience living with a roommate who is often a stranger, this anxiety becomes compounded when the institution's affiliation could influence stance on specific issues. Faith said,

> Because I've had those experiences I described where people have not had those sorts of positive experiences. So, that certainly was not great and caused me a considerable bit of anxiety going into [name of institution redacted] that was fortunately offset by my true saint of a roommate. But, that was significant.

Talique has general anxiety but realized that the application process increased this emotion. Talique's expectation when searching for an institution was to be embraced by the community and to see demonstrated diversity. Talique said, "I do have general anxiety disorder. The college application process was not immune to my anxiety, so I certainly had a lot of hesitations, and one of them was the lack of diversity."

The feeling of anxiety can happen at any moment. From the college search process to being present on campus, LGBTQ students are aware of the systems and environments that symbolize Christian campuses. This is not to state that all Christian institutions are the same, but when there are multiple situations and relationships LGBTQ students need to navigate, there is not always information available to know how their identities will be seen.

Fear. The LGBTQ community on college campuses is a significant support system and can provide a safe place for LGBTQ students to relax and process situations or identities.

However, fear can sometimes impact their experiences or those important to them. Those important to them can include institutional employees, peers, or themselves. According to Caleb, their campus is relatively safe, and they understand the ways to navigate it, but there is always a "what if" factor: "But I would say overall, I feel decently safe. But I do always have that, the fear of something happening." In various instances, spoken or not, this fear can cause individuals to hide or dilute their identities. Jude said, "I think one of the biggest things that both I and other people that I know have experienced is just a fear of authenticity and expression."

As self-expression can impact mental health, the fear to be authentic to peers and the overall campus community could be detrimental to LGBTQ students. Heterosexual students can be present in the community and their identity expression does not often create questions or criticism. However, this fear is also reflected in concerns related to campus services as well, where the process is meant to be engaging. Talique said,

> I know many students who would not use the counseling center. There is a fear that those who work there might parrot the lines of the administration, but I have found that to be very rarely the case, if at all.

At times, when LGBTQ students cannot talk to counselors or peers, many will reach out to professors or administrators. Eileen said,

> Universities [are] recognizing that faculty and staff are also queer and that so many of them are afraid to speak up because fear of losing their jobs, or losing promotional opportunities, and creating a more safe space for faculty and staff to talk about their experiences, beyond just students.

When LGBTQ students fear their environment, it has the potential to impact all actions and decisions. These students can avoid accessing tutoring services, requesting help from

professors, scheduling counseling appointments, and interacting with peers. As LGBTQ students become less connected to their institutions, their personal development and academic progress are at risk. The fear could be a perception, but perception is reality, and the reality LGBTQ students face is often different than their heterosexual peers.

Surprised. When a surprise occurs, it is often a response to an unexpected event or stimuli. As the literature shows, LGBTQ students have many expectations when entering a college or a university (Carastathis et al., 2017). When the institution is Christian, these expectations are not always positive and can sometimes reflect negative perceptions. However, in some cases, these negative expectations are not met, creating a pleasant surprise for LGBTQ students. Caleb said,

> I was surprised that it wasn't as big of a deal as I thought it would be, if that makes sense. Especially since in between my freshman and sophomore years, where the Black Lives Matter protests, and a lot of racial reconciliation needing to take place. So, I think that took the focus a little bit away from LGBTQ community in the church.

In Talique's experience, their racial identity was just as salient as their LGBTQ identity. Where Caleb saw a distraction, Talique saw an experience. Talique said, "I was pleasantly surprised by the warm embrace that a lot of the Black students gave me upon my entrance, and they have been very welcoming, and very appreciative of me."

In Talique's situation, there was an expectation centered on their Black identity. Where Talique expected to be excluded from one area of their identity that intersected with their LGBTQ identity, they found a welcoming reception. Faith, although not of the same racial background, assumed that some campus professors would be unwelcoming to LGBTQ identities.

When Faith needed to process through issues on campus or discuss their views on specific topics, they found acceptance and guidance. Faith said,

> I think that what was surprising about those experiences is that I have had them primarily with professors in my university's religion and philosophy division. And at my Christian institution, in order to work in that division, you must ascribe to the theological tradition of the university in terms of denomination, and it is a traditionally more conservative denomination.

Throughout college, students should be surprised about tests and athletic wins, not experiences that many other students see as commonplace. Based on these experiences, it seems that views are changing, and campuses are becoming more welcoming, but work needs to be done on a systematic level. As campuses shift and LGBTQ inclusion improves, LGBTQ students may feel less surprised when respected or affirmed.

A Priori Codes

With a priori coding, the experiences that define the minority stress theory were used to establish a baseline and codes to be aware of throughout the research process. As the codes from the minority stress theory involved experiences such as harassment and discrimination, it was important to explore these possibilities related to LGBTQ student experiences due to their impact on various factors involved in the research. However, as the a priori codes were preestablished, there was constant effort to ensure that the in vivo and emotion codes were explored in detail and not distracted by specific experiences involved in the a priori codes.

Covenant. Aside from one participant, all LGBTQ students involved in this study discussed an acknowledgement or covenant that needed to be signed. These documents were used to communicate acceptable behaviors and limited LGBTQ student expression. As one of the

a priori codes found in the minority stress theory was discrimination, the covenant that forces a disconnect with LGBTQ identities, this theme was important in understanding campus navigation and hardships, which can be controlled by the institution. Carolina said, “So to begin with, we have a Life Together Covenant that we have to sign at the beginning of each semester that says what we are not supposed to do.

At many colleges and universities, there is a residency requirement controlled by the institution. These colleges can require campus residency up to a certain age or minimize residency to specific years that are most impactful on retention (e.g., freshmen students). However, this puts LGBTQ students in difficult situations where values and housing are put into conflict. Faith demonstrated this conflict by stating,

> Because my university has a housing contract that you must sign at the beginning of every year. It used to include a statement that you had to sign and agree to, which was that marriage is biblically defined as between man and woman and those are the only sorts of relationships that are biblically approved and blah, blah, blah. You had to sign that you agreed in order to live on campus, which is required in your first 2 years at my university

In a similar manner, Eileen shared,

> We have to sign this statement to live in the dorms, about sexual purity or something, I guess. But in it, we have to sign that we believe that sex is reserved for marriage between a man and a woman.

The residence halls are a place for all students to relax, study, and connect to other students in the building. When places on campus, residential or academic, become selective, it limits interaction and sense of belonging. Caleb said, “First of all, I identify as a gay male, and

the university I attend is a Christian university. And their covenant that we have to sign as students isn't very supportive. It's kind of exclusive in that sense." At Talique's institution, there are more details about prohibited behaviors that extend beyond heterosexual expectations. Talique said,

> It's a document all students are required to sign every year that includes no drinking, no gambling, no smoking, no sex in general. So no sex outside of marriage, straight or gay, but it also specifically references homosexual behavior as a prohibited behavior.

Although some of the expectations in these documents are healthy limitations to ensure personal growth and development, the LGBTQ identity is not a choice. When LGBTQ students are forced to acknowledge a restrictive document, it puts them in a position to choose their identities and values or commit to their education without compromise.

Hate, Harassment, and Homophobia. In the context of LGBTQ students, the experiences of hate, harassment, and homophobia often intertwine. Although these experiences are navigated separately, these experiences can lead to one another or blend. Whether it was individual or institutional, the responses were important to pair as a significant contributor to negative LGBTQ experiences. As the minority stress theory states, LGBTQ students, as well as other minority identities, experience stressors outside normal stressors (Lefevor et al., 2019). Because of Christian affiliation and doctrines, LGBTQ students are surrounded by multiple sources of potential stressors. Unfortunately, there are instances where there are little to no options to address the words or actions of the campus community. Caleb said, "I feel as if it's a lot about silencing voices, especially with Title IX sexual harassment, or sexual abuse, any of those things that happen on campus."

In the interviews, there was a sense of powerlessness in a few participants. LGBTQ students who experience hate or harassment will also see it happen to friends. Although Faith experienced hate in their organization, it escalated as future leadership came into their roles. Faith said, “I mean, when I was in leadership of that student club, I received hate mail in my email inbox. And that was even not as bad as some of the hate mail that leadership since has received.”

These actions could be individual but can also reflect institutional influence. According to Gardner (2017), Christian institutions are more influential on students than churches or religious denominations. Carolina shared this view consistent with this statement: “I think many of the issues of people being hateful and saying homophobic things it’s because institution starts with the you should not be gay.”

With institutional influence, it is difficult to address hate, harassment, and discrimination. These situations are often unwarranted and unpredictable as stances can be individual. As the severity of these actions can depend on an LGBTQ student’s outness, expression, and multiple other factors, so much of it falls on the institution’s willingness to be supportive. Because of this influence, there is the potential for identities to be challenged or lost. Eileen said, “Do I even want to be a Christian anymore? Because I kept noticing all these really almost insidious heteronormative and homophobic things that I had just let slide for my entire life. For a while, I was really angry.”

When campuses are unsupportive and excuse hateful speech or actions, it can make LGBTQ students question the identity most harmful to them. As many of the LGBTQ students in the present study are Christian, these behaviors stifle the development of one identity while

affirming the growth of another. While the intention of these actions is unknown, the impact on LGBTQ students reaches their core and has no place on a college campus.

Axial Codes

The consolidation process to develop overall themes from the data came from all the information available throughout the process. This included the literature, communication from the participants prior to their interviews, their voice fluctuations during the interviews, and the responses themselves. When the data collection process was complete, there was significant time spent reviewing the data and working to understand the participants. As the participants came from various backgrounds and institutions, the most important step was to allow the participants to assemble. Doing so gave me the opportunity to see the connection between them.

While the participants could not meet in person, their responses could be grouped and moved to find the most conclusive themes. As such, all the responses were handwritten into a topical area or thematic group when found during the transcript review. Once the codes from all interviews were placed, multiple ideas and phrases were developed within a specific group to determine the most appropriate theme based on the additional information provided (i.e., voice fluctuations, data, etc.). The current themes are unique, consistent with the literature, and developed through numerous contemplative sessions to best display participant experiences.

LGBTQ Student Experiences

The experiences of LGBTQ students at Christian institutions are not well known and are often a hodgepodge of articles used to create a narrative. Through multiple interviews, it became apparent that these students have an imbalance of experiences that provide hope and disconnection. As Woodford and Kulick (2015) stated, a sense of belonging is necessary for persistence, and persistence is critical for student development. The students involved in the

current research were fortunate to persist and develop themselves despite their environments. Of the experiences discussed throughout the interviews, a few stood out in terms of coding and were most notable. The most important themes related to LGBTQ student experiences were lack in campus support, positive affirmation, selective change, and campus navigation.

Campus Support. In the literature, much has been noted about the environments at Christian institutions. LGBTQ students often do not experience the same open and welcoming environment as heterosexual students (Rockenbach et al., 2017). However, one or two participants in my study discussed less negative experiences; the reasoning one provided was unique and stood out. According to Faith's account, they pass as straight. Although a part of the LGBTQ community, Faith's appearance creates a perceived straightness, which leads to a more positive experience in relation to their LGBTQ peers. This point is to provide a unique perspective in terms of the straight or heterosexual identity. At Christian institutions, many of those not of the LGBTQ community are privileged with resources and affirming environments to thrive. As the present study's participant experiences showed, LGBTQ students are subject to various responses or reactions due to their identities. The theme for this population is no one size fits all. LGBTQ students often have different negative experiences, but in all experiences, it is an institutional failure to not support this population. Jude explained in one concise statement what many participants expressed throughout their responses as a foundation to all negative experiences. "I think . . . since my university is Christian, it's religiously affiliated; There is a very strong ideological powerhouse, for lack of a better word, on campus of very traditional, conservative, religious mindsets."

This foundation fluctuated in the various experiences, but in extreme cases, individuals on campus are more aggressive or vocal about their refusal to support the LGBTQ community.

Rather than outspoken anti-LGBTQ students, there is often a quiet culture that creates an unsupportive environment. As Caleb said,

> And then, obviously, we have the students on campus who aren't supportive, and are very traditional. A certain amount of students, not a majority, but there is a group that . . . I don't know how to put it. Yeah, they're very vocal about the disagreement. And it's led [to] some hate crimes and some sexual harassment on campus. And those issues haven't really been dealt with by the faculty or administration.

Unfortunately, in some cases, support is almost completely absent. This is not the case for all institutions and is not unique to Christian campuses, but it is important to note in this study's context. Carolina's comment reflects this lack of support: "I've had very difficult situations concerning mental health. The university was not helpful and they tried to just sugarcoat it. I almost committed suicide and they didn't do much."

As the literature showed, mental health is one area in which LGBTQ students can often struggle. LGBTQ students who need support cannot rely only on support systems to process issues or situations. Additionally, campus resources are not always a welcoming place. Caleb shared an experience as an out student that reflected Carolina's experience, but not to the same extent.

> I would just say that a lot of it's swept under the rug, and they try to ignore a lot of issues. Myself, and a couple of my friends, have gone to the dean of students and relay some of our concerns to him. And it's been like, "I'll do what I can." But there's not a whole lot that I can do in this situation. So, that's been kind of frustrating.

For LGBTQ students to persist, there needs to be a sense of belonging as referenced throughout the present study. In the situations previously detailed, experiences were disregarded.

When experiences are left unaddressed despite the information, LGBTQ students can become frustrated and feel voiceless. As LGBTQ students push back, there is resistance to change and, depending on the institution, a negative consequence. Faith explained a scenario of friends who worked to change the campus.

> We have had situations where in some of the introductory religion classes that are much bigger and have more adjunct professors and the like students be . . . They teach Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. The professors reach those bits in Leviticus and make a very big deal about the homosexuality is a sin thing. And when people I know have sort of pushed back against that, they've been treated very poorly.

Talique shared their perception on the lack of support from their administration that goes beyond the classroom yet follows closely with Faith's. In this situation, the consequence went beyond a more interactive treatment and threatened the likelihood of persistence. As Talique stated,

> That is the general posture taken by the administration. Their own personal views vary. Many of them would be traditional, have non-affirming theologies. A rare few are not but overall, the response is almost nonexistent. I know some peers who have contemplated coming out publicly had been told by at least one administrator not to do that, that that would endanger their graduation chances.

Students, regardless of their identities, need to be supported in and outside of the classroom. In many instances, due to disagreements or personal beliefs, LGBTQ students at Christian institutions do not receive adequate support. When LGBTQ students choose to address these issues, it is met with the administration's powerlessness to make changes or active resistance through unchristian-like treatment. These situations are not unique to Christian

institutions, but the underlying factors that dictate their reasoning are different, and in most cases, can be reported. At Christian institutions, LGBTQ students do not always feel safe to report. With these various situations combined, LGBTQ students are put in a place with minimal direction and inadequate support.

Positive Affirmation. Throughout the interviews, the participants shared multiple instances that were negative and harmful to them. Current research shows that LGBTQ students can have positive experiences, but these experiences are often less common. Of the responses on positive experiences, all participants shared the impact of connection and support. With these relationships, a sense of belonging could be established, and a safe space could be mobile. The relationships were organic and came into existence due to their natural paths on campus. For example, Jude shared that involvement led to the start of their campus relationships.

> I think that the organizations that I've been a part of have really shaped my outlook. I am someone who tries everything, so I've tried everything basically. I wound up going into the speech team at my school, and that has been an incredible outlet for self-expression but also a really good opportunity to make really strong relationships to work together with my peers and . . . I don't know. I think that involvement has been an instrumental part of making me feel welcome at the school.

In previous literature, the importance and benefits of an LGBTQ organization are much discussed (Hughes & Hurtado, 2018; Pitcher et al., 2016). These organizations allow students to connect to others like them and develop their identities. Jude was able to see opportunities outside the LGBTQ organization on campus to express themselves in a way comfortable to them and possibly contributed to growth in future aspirations. As Christian institutions are not always a source of comfort for LGBTQ students, opportunities like these are essential. Talique had a

similar experience with their student organization on campus and also found comfort in campus personnel.

> I was pleasantly surprised by the warm embrace that a lot of the Black students gave me upon my entrance, and they have been very welcoming, and very appreciative of me. I joined the Black Student Union last year and was a cabinet member there. Yeah, I really appreciated that, and that was a huge positive experience. Another positive experience was I think I've been very warmly received by our faculty. The professors and the various administrators who have gotten to know me either a little . . . either directly or by word of mouth.

Caleb, who discussed some painful experiences in their interview and created their campuses alliance, found security in relationships as well and said,

> So, I would say a huge, positive experience, other students who are just so accepting. I would say pretty much everyone on campus who knows that I'm gay is supportive of that. And there are some faculty who are allies and are willing to provide safe spaces for students who need them.

Carolina, who had some of the worst experiences compared to other participants, had a difficult time identifying positive experiences at their institution. However, much like the other participants, relationships gave Carolina the opportunity to feel like they belonged when all things at their institution seemed to contradict it. Carolina said, "What has been helpful has been to find people with the same values, that we're a very close and small group that has made me have a sense of belonging."

To students, values can be an important distinction between those who are affirming and those who could be harmful to identities. When students have a sense of belonging, whether they

are LGBTQ or heterosexual, it makes the institution more than an educational space. In some instances, friends can be a simple support system, as the responses from the present study's participants showed. In other instances, the support system goes above and beyond. Eileen, who shared a strong relationship with their support system, said,

> I have an incredible group of friends at school. They have become like a second family to me. They have just loved and supported me. They're all straight. I'm the only queer person in the group, but they all just absolutely support and affirm and welcome me, are some of the best allies that I have ever met, are always open to learning and growing, and want to know how to best support me. That has been such an incredible experience, one that I didn't realize that I needed until I had it.

Eileen's experience demonstrates the power of connection. In articles on higher education, connection is often a common factor in retention. However, as Eileen put it, they did not know they needed connection until they experienced it. LGBTQ students do not expect much out of the college experience but to learn and strive toward the future. The opportunities to be affirmed, connect to other students on campus, and get involved are opportunities of circumstance compared to the anticipated opportunities for heterosexual students. This makes creating a more inclusive environment that much more vital to LGBTQ student success.

As college students leave their families, institutions become not only a home away from home for some but also a safe haven and the only shelter for those with a more traumatic home environment. For LGBTQ students, parental reactions to coming out can be unpredictable and at times, damaging to mental health (Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015). Although higher education personnel are not meant to be parental figures, they should be a safe place. Faith had this experience and shared significant gratitude. In Faith's experience,

> I have been truly amazed at the openness and compassion of individual professors. I have had multiple professors serve as mentors, as confidants, as, honestly, the parental figures that I wish I had had growing up. So, a lot of individual people, especially professors and some staff members at my institution have been very, very supportive of me, maybe even especially because they know I don't get that sort of . . . I know I am an adult, but you know there's a difference between adult support when you're a college student. So, they know I don't get that. And I can't authentically receive that support from home, so they have sort of stepped into those roles for me.

To support LGBTQ students, as the responses showed, is to be allies, be sounding boards, accept authenticity, and to see them as they want to be seen. As the research is limited in scope, it is not known whether positive experiences can outweigh the impact of negative experiences.

Selective Change. As Garvey and Rankin (2015) stated, it is less common for LGBTQ students to come out when in a hostile climate. However, the participants in the present study, who were in hostile climates ranging from low to high, were out. Statistically, this could be insignificant, yet it is important to note. The Christian institutions associated with the participants seemed to be interested in their experiences but were devoid in action. According to some participants, when institutional leadership wanted to understand a specific issue or respond to issues on campus, they would often request meetings with LGBTQ students or LGBTQ organization leadership to provide more in-depth information. Faith said,

> Probably my most difficult experiences came when I served in leadership of the only LGBTQ+ student association on our undergrad campus. Because serving in that position, you really sort of opt in to the burden of education. I was constantly asked to be the queer representative on so many panels and town halls and asking to speak to classes and all

> these different things like you're some sort of rarity like, "Oh, this is the queer that is at the Christian school. This is the person that we need to talk to."

This tokenization happens at many Christian institutions. Jude had a similar experience at their institution, which happened to coincide with a personal struggle in their own identities, and said,

> I think another thing that has been a bad experience for me is I've struggled with my own identity and solidifying that and feeling secure in that. It doesn't help that for many people at the university, whether they're students or they're staff or faculty, as soon as you see someone who is queer, or you see someone who is Hispanic or, in a different case scenario, someone who's Black, [an] identified person of color, we're very quick to be tokenized and used as a spokesperson for our identity group.

Because of the institution classification, it is possible that LGBTQ student enrollment is minimal. As institutional administration could believe the LGBTQ enrollment to be low compared to other populations, using LGBTQ students to understand issues could be educational. However, as a result of low enrollment, there could be a less substantial need to develop plans to improve the environment. It is also possible that due to relationships with a specific church or denomination, change is unacceptable or difficult to promote. Without a common baseline to compare or understand institutional intentions, there are institutions that believe themselves to be a little further ahead than what the LGBTQ students perceive. According to Eileen,

> So then their reaction is always like, "Oh my gosh, yes. Of course. We want you to feel safe. We want you to feel comfortable. Let's fix it. Let's address this." Then we'll say, "Okay, well, here are some things we can do to help. This is what we would like to see

> changed." Then the administration goes, "Oh, well, no. We can't do that." They're just so resistant to any of our suggestions, even though they're saying . . . I think genuinely they are upset that we don't feel safe and welcome in the university, but then when we try to offer suggestions on how to make it better, they don't listen to our suggestions. I don't think that they recognize the inconsistency. That's been frustrating.

As a few of the participants shared other salient identities, it is important to acknowledge that their identification as an LGBTQ person is only a part of their true selves. According to Talique, there is limited progress in one identity but none in the other.

> I think that's an important thing to notice, that Christian institutions are willing to engage in the race conversation, and even their engagement is incredibly limited, but they are almost never willing to talk about sexuality. I think that's significant.

The selective change created by Christian institutions could be an honest effort to identify options for improving LGBTQ inclusiveness on campus and the issues within their scope of control but due to relationships with the church or specific organizations are unable to move forward. It is also possible that religion has shaped their view of homosexuality and the LGBTQ community. As the institutions were not involved in the present study, these thoughts are speculation. However, the hope that LGBTQ students feel from these experiences is more harmful than helpful and provides additional stressors related to their identities. According to Hirsch et al. (2017), LGBTQ status has no impact on hopefulness but can impact feelings of hopelessness. Whether a minimal or significant change, LGBTQ students just want to be heard.

Navigating the Campus. To be fully present and feel safe in various environments (i.e., classrooms, residence halls, the campus, etc.), careful navigation is important. For many of the participants in the present study, navigation was vital to understanding which resources were

accepting and which could be harmful to them. This careful movement takes time, effort, and relying on supportive connections. Unfortunately, this process requires significant attention on top of normal college stressors. For each person and resource, there is a constant uncertainty, and without campus support, there is a constant risk as well. Talique said,

> Some days are really good, and some days are not. My queer identity has sort of been the biggest difficulty to navigate on campus. This is an institution where many people have been raised in a variety of different conservative faith traditions, and a number of conservative faith traditions that preach very strongly that homosexuality and anything that's not heterosexual is evil, is wrong, is an abomination, is a sin, et cetera, et cetera. That has impacted my experience as a queer person who's also relatively out, but not all the way out.

In Eileen's situation, however, professors on campus had an in-depth knowledge of the environment as well as the various campus resources available to students to help in campus navigation. Thanks to "insider" knowledge, the relationships Eileen was able to create on campus provided a unique protection on campus. They said,

> As a religion major, I was worried that I would have more negative experiences. I did have one professor who, actually some faculty that I was close with told me, when I told them that I was taking his class, they mentioned, "Okay, well, just don't let him know that you're gay because he probably won't like that. Just probably better for you if you don't mention it." Nothing came up, because I knew that going into it. I was kind of careful about what I said in class.

Without an information network, LGBTQ students could go into environments that are difficult to manage. The responses themselves are unknown, but as it has been shown, stressors

and less welcoming environments could impact academic performance. These networks allow for campus inconsistencies to be known and for safer paths to graduation. Not having this knowledge could be disastrous for LGBTQ students. Faith noticed these inconsistencies and shared,

> So, it's kind of all over the place how different things like that are handled based on who you manage to interact with and then in classrooms which professors you have. There's sort of a . . . not any sort of official list but you can word-of-mouth learn like, "You should try to live under this resident director," or, "You should try to take this religion class because that professor is chill," or, "If you're having an issue, you should talk to this person in the counseling center, not this other person." We've worked out a little word-of-mouth network of how to try to navigate how inconsistent these sort of systems are.

These networks not only provide the multiple paths to avoid negative experiences on campus, they also provide the means to deal with and process them. As Jude said,

> I think that one of the biggest things that has helped is forming a very solid network of support. I know which professors I can go to to talk about something or which friends I can go to to vent about something. I know who will listen to me, who will take me seriously, who will support me, and I think that creating that network has been one of the most influential and beneficial ways of processing and dealing with negative experiences.

Developing these networks creates a number of spaces on campus that aid in LGBTQ student retention and growth. These networks provide more inclusive classrooms, safer campuses, approachable resources, and possible allies in making systemic change. When LGBTQ students do not feel welcomed in most spaces, these networks create migrating safe

spaces. Carolina shared their view of this process in a unique way: “This community has slowly [been] getting bigger because let’s say I get invited, I also bring the people I know are LGBTQ and are isolated and same with them. So we’ve slowly been networking and getting bigger.”

When LGBTQ individuals feel comfortable enough to come out, it gives others the courage to be authentic themselves. This process takes significant time depending on the environment, but as the network expands, so do the opportunities. As the participants shared, the networks can make them feel less alone and can provide a more normal educational path, although not an equal one.

Institutional Policies and Practices

One integral part of retention is a sense of belonging. In the interviews conducted, a sense of belonging and institutional influence over this feeling came in multiple forms. The most common practice or policy centered on limitations of behavior. Of the six participants, five shared that some type of contract was required on campus. One participant shared that through advocacy, the requirement became more of an acknowledgment, but the acknowledgment still communicated the institution’s heterosexual stance on relationships. When asked about the common LGBTQ issues on campus, Caleb stated,

> First of all, I identify as a gay male, and the university I attend is a Christian university. And their covenant that we have to sign as students isn’t very supportive. It’s kind of exclusive in that sense. So, they don’t allow what they say, homosexual activity, is how they phrase it.

Similar to Caleb, Talique was also required to sign a document that is known as part of the institution’s foundational documents. Talique said,

> It's a document all students are required to sign every year that includes no drinking, no gambling, no smoking, no sex in general. So no sex outside of marriage, straight or gay, but it also specifically references homosexual behavior as a prohibited behavior.

These covenants, though unique to the institution, each carry an expectation that limits the actions of LGBTQ students as well as forces values on them that might not be their own. In some cases, they also force LGBTQ students to decide between safety and security and the ability to live authentically. Faith said,

> It's very much been a "We don't have any policy on the books," so it's a very case-by-case basis, at least in what I've heard. Because my university has a housing contract that you must sign at the beginning of every year. It used to include a statement that you had to sign and agree to, which was that marriage is biblically defined as between man and woman and those are the only sorts of relationships that are biblically approved and blah, blah, blah. You had to sign that you agreed in order to live on campus, which is required in your first 2 years at my university.

At most institutions, housing requirements are a standard. This standard provides immediate access to resources and peer connections, which are key factors in academic success. According to Vespone (2016), the development of self-acceptance comes through interactions with others of similar lifestyles, which help to find strength, build support, and address internal or external conflicts. However, in using these contracts anywhere on campus, there is potential to limit or completely prohibit LGBTQ student identity development. Carolina, who also needed to sign a contract, said,

> So the Life Together Covenant has not supported my sexuality and my identity. It is also hard because it used to be optional for professors to sign it but now it isn't. That's the

reason a lot of professors decided to retire earlier last year because they didn't agree with it. Yeah. I think that has limited a lot of what we can do and say, and how we feel about ourselves.

Aside from the restriction on actions, these covenants can also impact the way in which LGBTQ students view themselves, as Carolina stated. This might not be the intention of the institution when covenants or contracts are created, but as LGBTQ students become unable to explore their identities, there are missed opportunities for personal or identity development. When this environment continues over time, academic performance and the connections needed to remain at the institution can decline (Jackson, 2017). Based on responses from the participants, there is little knowledge as to the specific policies or practices outside of the covenants or acknowledgements that are established by the institution. As Faith said, "And the policies are just very . . . There really isn't anything on the books other than the man and wife thing, so how they handle more nuanced situations is truly individual."

The responses to this question about policies and practices did not provide much information. Most of the responses, aside from Faith's, which provided a little more context to individual control, focused more on acknowledgment documents. This does not mean that the institutions do not have more substantial policies or practices, but the participants could have been unaware of them from a student code perspective. The next section focuses more on reasons for persistence, which is connected to Faith's previous response. Although not necessarily a practice, individual control on response to LGBTQ students, allowed or forbidden, was a norm that led to support or lack of support for these participants.

LGBTQ Student Enrollment and Persistence

LGBTQ student identities often conflict with Christian institutions. There is little information on their intentions to enroll in these institutions or their determination to persist. From the application process to graduation, multiple paths were available to the study participants, each dictated by the experiences unique to them and their campuses. When reviewing the responses between the checklist of wants in a college or university with reasons for enrollment, there was little overlap. The checklist included a religious connection, financial support, and academically related opportunities. Of the mentioned reasons for enrollment, items on the checklist were present but more focused on community and external influences. This does not mean that the other factors were not important, but in communicating what led them to apply to their current institution, there could have been factors, such as scholarships, that were unexpected or discovered throughout the enrollment process. In terms of persistence, the important factors for LGBTQ students in the present study were the positive experiences previously discussed and integral support systems to push them forward.

Enrollment. The enrollment process is difficult for all students. Students need to weigh the costs, academic programs, involvement opportunities, and the campus itself with income, aspirations, and other personal factors. These reasons are well known in higher education as students can extend these factors to understand the institution's academic prestige, research opportunities, financial aid, and postgraduation success in making a final decision. However, when asked directly about the reason for enrollment at their current institutions, the answers focused less on these reasons. All participants shared that an institution needed to help build upon their faith just as much as their education, ensure financial stability, and help them excel in their future professions. In their decision to enroll in their current institution, factors such as

community and outside pressure were added into the process along with their original search criteria. Jude said,

> The college that I chose was actually my only choice, so I was very happy that I was accepted. But yeah, I decided on the school that I wanted to go to basically because it was small, it was a growing college, they had a strong religious program for studying in. And . . . I don't know. When I had visited the university a couple of times, it just felt right. I really like the people, and the campus felt like home, so I knew from the start that I wanted to go [to] that school.

Jude's original intention was to focus on their religion. Through their involvement in speech, Jude shifted into law. For many students, majors can change and redirect movements on campus. However, according their response, Jude kept the communal aspects to make the campus feel more like the home they saw from the start. In additional to affordability, Caleb saw the community potential at their institution and said,

> So, for me, it was when I was making the decision, I was between two universities. And I had a lot of time to process this. So, I chose this one, because I felt like it was a smaller community, and also with my visits to campus, I really saw some aspects of the community that I liked, there was a lot of intentionality and openness. And those were the impressions that I got when I visited. And then, just being more affordable. So that's really what ultimately drew me here.

Talique shared a hope to be embraced when selecting an institution. In their response, there was emphasis on a significant scholarship and the handling of the application process. Talique said,

> So yeah, the scholarship was a huge part of that, and I have known other people apply and receive it also. They said that it was a huge blessing to them. So affordability, and then there was the fact that my institution is a Christian one. That was a big part, and I also liked the way in which my application was handled. It was very personal. Particularly my scholarship application. It was very personal and very interactive, which I appreciated, and it was an opportunity that I would not have received at another institution.

Although they also identified cost as a factor in college choice, Carolina's response focused on the academic program in partnership with the community: "They have a very good social work program and they talked a lot about their intentional community and their integration of faith and learning."

These participants all found comfort in community and reinforced their decisions with some of the main factors that influence college attendance. For other participants, those main factors were still present, but in these cases, they were directed to their institutions through an external influence. The original intent for this "pressure" was to apply; additional factors and contemplation led to a final decision. According to Eileen,

> It was actually interesting for me because my school was my denomination, and I grew up in the same area. I think it was always assumed that I would apply. I think every single person in my youth group growing up applied to [institution name redacted]. It wasn't necessarily assumed that I would go, but it was always assumed that I would apply. I don't think I thought really deeply about it during the application process. It wasn't until I was looking to actually choose a university and where I wanted to commit, that I started

> thinking deeply about it. In the admissions process, I think it was just kind of an underlying assumption my entire life.

Faith's experience was similar in that their parents wanted them to apply to at least one Christian institution. As many of the institutions Faith applied had faith-based backgrounds, it is uncertain if it was the institution's designation that was important or more of the foundation that led to interest. Faith's parents did not have expectations for this specific institution as in Eileen's case, but as Faith made the decision for that institution, their parents were influential in the direction. Faith said,

> My parents made me. I applied to 13 different colleges and universities, and the 13th one was because my parents said I had to apply to at least one Christian religious university because the rest that I applied to were not religiously affiliated. At least in the sense of being considered Christian institutions, a lot of universities have faith-based backgrounds, but none of them were considered Christian institutions. So, my parents said, "You have to apply to this one." It was really kind of random. They were like "We've heard good things about this one, so you got to apply to at least one, so you're applying here."

The decisions that were made were made by the participants. Although factors that led to completing an application could have exerted various pressures, and hesitations made the decision more difficult, each participant made the experience their own. Despite original intentions or important college-bound factors, at least at the time of this study, all participants have persisted.

Persistence. The interview questions did not include a question specifically on persistence. In the positive affirmation section, participants shared the positive experiences of

campus support that are known to improve connections to an institution and aid in retention. What seemed to empower the participants were the personal strategies used to confront negative interactions or situations related to their identities. The positive experiences included the support they found in other people on campus. Jude had these positive experiences as well but when asked about their strategies when dealing with negativity, said,

> I think that another way that has been helpful is doing things for myself and not for others because when I was worried about what people thought of me, negative experiences hurt way more. Now that I am working on living the mindset of I want to express myself this way because I want to and not because I want people to see me or validate me or support me or any of that, I think that is really helpful in eliminating that vulnerability to negative criticism because it's not for them, it's for me. I think that has been very freeing. Luckily for counseling, I've been able to really implement that into my life and into my personal philosophy.

Similar to Jude, Caleb worked to improve on standing up for themselves. However, it was less about others and more about self-preservation. In some instances, it was important to take a stand in being authentic but in others, removing themselves from the space was safer and prevented additional stress. Caleb said,

> I don't necessarily think this is a healthy one. But my primary one is escape. If something happens on campus, or I'm in a situation where I'm starting to get very heated, or I don't feel safe, I usually just try to either go to a place where I know it's safe, or to get off campus for a bit. And yeah, I think personally, my response has been to stand up for myself more. When I first came here, I really didn't let a whole lot bother me, I tried to

> let it slide off my back and try to dismiss a lot. But within the first year, I realized that I had to take a stand for myself in something. And being gay was one of those issues.

With Talique, there was a mixture of strategies. However, to Talique, the day-to-day often felt overwhelming and there was a perceived absence of options leading to a strong need to decompress, like Caleb. Talique said,

> I'm working on incorporating more self-care, such as social time with my friends. I'm also medicated for both depression and anxiety. I do therapy once a week. I try to make it to church on Sundays, me being a part of an affirming faith tradition or well, I should say, affirming denomination, currently, is also one of the strategies I use, but overall, there aren't a whole lot, I should be honest about that. There aren't a whole lot on the day to day that I use. I can too often find myself overwhelmed by some of it to the point where I just kind of, just be by myself for a moment, to collect myself and then kind of move on through the day.

In some cases, LGBTQ students do not have the support to deal with situations alone. Faith, who was not out of their home and could have felt alone, found strength from professors who watched over and embraced their identities. Through personal growth and uncomfortable situations, professors became parental figures to help provide guidance to Faith and provide the energy to continue when burnt out. They said,

> I am very lucky that there are a number of professors that I've been able to go to who not only have been willing to talk to me and be the wall at which I rant and things like that but also willing to actually lay hands on me and pray for me and be there for me in those emotionally vulnerable moments. I'm very lucky that I've had those adult mentors that

> we've been able to find that have been able to be there for me. That's how I've managed to get through it.

As many participants shared, campus support systems were vital to their experiences. Whether it was to get them through a situation or possibly the whole 4 years, Faith found solace in the educators who decided to go above and beyond for their students. Unfortunately, not all educators will choose to lower their boundaries to accept the vulnerability of students. Eileen noticed that others needed to educate them to move forward. With understanding that their own perceptions needed to grow, there was more understanding that the campus could also be in the same situation. Eileen said,

> It led to me, I think, [to] becoming a little bit more understanding. Yes, these things are bad and they need to change, but I think having more grace for people and realizing, "Well, I used to be in their shoes, too." It took someone teaching me that I was wrong for me to change my mind. I think I've kind of balanced back out to the middle now, recognizing that things need to change. People are getting hurt, and the way things are is not okay, but these people that I'm working with, they're still people. They're still good people. They're trying to do the right thing. They just need to be educated. So that's kind of how I guess my views on it have evolved over the last several years.

According to Rockenbach et al. (2017), LGBTQ students perceive campuses to be more divisive and insensitive comparted to heterosexual peers. The LGBTQ students in the present study have experienced these environments and have done their best to navigate them. Although there were times of frustration and pain, the participants are fairly positive, focus on their own success, rely on support systems, and are hopeful but doubtful that change will occur on their campuses.

Summary

These results provide significant context to understanding LGBTQ college students in Christian institutions, however, they not sufficient for explaining the reach of experiences on a broader scale. Through this research, it was determined that LGBTQ students lack support, need to build information networks to navigate campuses safely, and do not always feel welcomed at their institutions. As Faith shared,

> It's hard for me to feel invested in the challenges, like in sort of fighting back against them in a lot of ways because I've just had to deal with a lot so I just . . . sort of . . . am numb to it in a lot of ways. And that's kind of how I get through it.

In the initial research questions, the intention was to understand LGBTQ students at Christian institutions from start to finish with all experiences in between. This topic is an area with minimal information creating more barriers to LGBTQ student success. With participant vulnerability, much information has been contributed to this research. These students have become exhausted with their experiences, and though some are positive, there is not adequate support and resources to create lasting inclusiveness. As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a need to document the experiences of LGBTQ students to provide assistance to future LGBTQ students and educate Christian institutions. The responses from the study participants showed there are mental health issues and mechanisms to cope with stressors such as escape or suicide that need to be addressed and prevented. With the present research, LGBTQ student were seen and heard. These results do not guarantee that campus improvements will take place at Christian institutions, but the questions important for building educational materials and making recommendations were answered.

In using these findings as a foundation, I will provide the next steps for the results as well as the implications these results have on higher education institutions in Chapter 5. Interview questions that allowed for participant recommendations provided a glimpse into their perceptions of their campuses and the opportunity to build recommendations reflecting this research. As much of the findings in this research were consistent with existing literature, the responses from participants can fill the gaps in knowledge and provide footholds for more in-depth studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

The limited information about LGBTQ students at Christian institutions makes it difficult for institutional leadership to learn or understand how to support these students on campus. With interviews that framed experiences from preenrollment to graduation, narratives were documented, and the purpose to understand LGBTQ experiences was achieved. In the present study, there was significant effort to make the process simple and protected. As the LGBTQ students in this study could be navigating their campuses, it was important to have trusted professionals reach out to them, for participation to be as anonymous as possible, and for the interview questions to guide them through their stories, start to finish. However, as this process allowed for self-confirmation of meeting the requirements to participate, the exact institutions represented are unknown, and many students who could have participated were missed.

The findings discussed in this chapter reflect interviews with six courageous students who were willing to share their experiences and provide a glimpse into these little-known environments. Their responses showed that many LGBTQ students continue to experience higher education environments that are not inclusive and institutions that remain unwavering in their commitment to biblical education. The most notable findings from the research include lack of supportive environments, building support systems, a personal connection to faith, and the desire for safe spaces. To further contribute to this topical knowledge, this chapter includes a discussion of the findings, implications of the research, recommendations for current institutions and future researchers, and limitations of the research.

Discussion

The interviews showed that LGBTQ student experiences fluctuate. Similar to previous literature, LGBTQ students have positive experiences that reinforce their places at their current

institutions and negative experiences that make it difficult to remain enrolled. As most LGBTQ scholars have found, LGBTQ students are an oddity on various Christian campuses and often struggle as a result. The responses from the LGBTQ students in the present study were expected and were consistent with similar topics of research. The students involved in this study were fortunate enough to persist but did so through careful navigation and building networks. As there is minimal research on LGBTQ students in U.S. Christian higher education, the collected data and findings are a significant contribution to the literature.

The theoretical framework used throughout this research was in respect to LGBTQ students and their experiences outside common educational stressors. Using the minority stress theory as a guideline allowed me to create interview questions that were appropriate and gave LGBTQ students a chance to unpack some of their stressors in a structured space. Additionally, as many LGBTQ students often feel anxious on campus, the research design used the minority stress framework to provide participants the space to maintain a sense of control over their identities throughout the process. Through a signature waiver for informed consent, indirect contact to recruit, and constant understanding during the interviews, the participants seemed to be comfortable in their identities and unfazed by their current stressors. The interview responses were natural, and the conversations seemed to be an opportunity to advocate for change like many have done on their respective campuses.

As many of the participants were out and were upperclassmen, it is possible that they have been able to process through institutional stressors such as heterosexism (Hong et al., 2016) to be comfortable on campus and parts of their identities to achieve tolerance or acceptance (Cass, 1979). As such, the participants were able to provide multiple examples and understand their campuses from a multidimensional lens (i.e., concealment, being out, and LGBTQ peer

observation). In comparison to the theory and previous assumptions, LGBTQ students in the present research are extremely resilient and powerful despite the oppression against them.

LGBTQ Student Experiences

To build a baseline to understand the research, the first research question asked LGBTQ students to describe their experiences at Christian institutions. The most notable findings and implications were found in the areas of campus support, positive affirmation, selective change, and navigating the campus. Based on previous literature, most of these results were expected. However, the participant responses provided information that was limited or unknown in various studies with comparable topics.

Campus Support. The findings showed that LGBTQ students often receive minimal or unequal support on campus. The LGBTQ participants in this study dealt with conservativeness that created barriers, LGBTQ issues being overlooked, and an overall feeling of not being welcomed. These findings are consistent with the literature that explains these environments as a norm. According to Foster et al. (2017), these norms are developed through religious texts and leaders that outline consequences for deviation outside the norm (i.e., hetero identities). Once LGBTQ students start to search for the support, whether they are out or not, the resources are inadequate or not available to them. This could be seen in the failure to report issues, as discussed by many participants, due to perceived repercussions or assumed response. According to Rankin (2005), 41% of LGBTQ students from a national survey of nearly 2,000 reported that issues were not fully addressed on their campus. Additionally, many LGBTQ students do not report in fear of outing themselves or worsening the situation (Wolff et al., 2019). This could lead LGBTQ students, like the participants in the present study, to be more certain of being outed or reprimanded than assisted.

Although Christian higher education works to teach the lessons and messages referenced in scripture, there continues to be unwillingness for those at Christian institutions to reach out to their neighbors. Whether due to a conservative denomination or lack of interaction with LGBTQ students, it is common for peers and personnel to show minimal support for the LGBTQ community. For example, Caleb shared that one professor refused to use a transitioning student's chosen name and stated that a person is what they were assigned at birth and instead used their dead name. This transition process, though unique to various individuals in the LGBTQ community, still signifies a change to be more authentic and the vital need for support.

When people are unwilling to be supportive, it further places identities into isolation and services out of reach. For some LGBTQ students, allies are available but as Sumner et al. (2017) found, it is often that heterosexual students will be supportive in private and unsupportive in public to avoid being perceived as LGBTQ. According to Dentato et al. (2014), "A lack of close and supportive contacts can influence the decision-making process related to coming out or remaining closeted, perceptions of comfort with self and others, and ultimately influence identity developmental processes" (p. 497). It is fortunate that LGBTQ students will have a person to turn to in these times, but unfortunately, this has led LGBTQ students to feel more accepted by God than by those on campus (Wolff et al., 2017).

Positive Affirmation. The most significant overlap between participant responses and the literature was in the area of positive affirmation. Throughout the literature, much of the data showed dependable relationships with faculty, organizations, and peers. These relationships were vital in LGBTQ student persistence in the present study as it gave them allies and a place on campus that many were unwilling to share. As Kulick et al. (2017) stated, faculty can promote social connectedness on campus and role model-supportive relationships. With classroom or

campus guidance, faculty can address issues in the classroom and be present on campus in support this student population when safe to do so. This inclusion does not mean all peers will accept LGBTQ students but does create at least one place that anti-LGBTQ actions will not be tolerated. In addition to peers and organizations, LGBTQ students can be a little more protected and given the environment to thrive.

Hughes and Hurtado (2018) found that LGBTQ students will often participate in organizations to improve well-being and explore identities. These organizations, which create safe spaces, are where allies and LGBTQ students meet. Whether organizations are registered or underground, there are few LGBTQ students who act as revered lights to guide those searching for support. As Carolina stated in their interview, one friend leads to a connection that turns into a supportive person, and it becomes an ever-growing group to rely on. These groups become places where LGBTQ students can process their stressors, talk about faculty who are inclusive or not, and express themselves with little to no concern (Pitcher et al., 2016). Over time, these relationships and constant empowerment can lead to a more confident control over identity formation (Kulick et al., 2017). This places the power of self that could have been lost back into the hands of LGBTQ students, and although the campus could remain unwelcoming, LGBTQ students will have the various support systems they need to move forward.

Selective Change. One unfortunate trend found throughout the interviews was the use of LGBTQ identities. Whether through tokenization or inactive listening sessions, LGBTQ students were often put into situations where change seemed imminent but only lead to false hope by administrative leaders. As Eileen stated,

> Then we'll say, "Okay, well, here are some things we can do to help. This is what we would like to see changed." Then the administration goes, "Oh, well, no. We can't do

> that." They're just so resistant to any of our suggestions, even though they're saying . . . I think genuinely they are upset that we don't feel safe and welcome in the university, but then when we try to offer suggestions on how to make it better, they don't listen to our suggestions. I don't think that they recognize the inconsistency. That's been frustrating.

Upon reviewing the literature, this experience was uncommon as most campus actions toward LGBTQ identities were punitive to separate students from the institution, not to use LGBTQ students for potential good. As research with close topical areas as well as findings in the research all seem consistent, it was surprising to see a common shift in experience across multiple participants. Rather than use LGBTQ standouts (i.e., leaders) on campus or acknowledge LGBTQ organizations, the literature suggests that most campuses alienate or marginalize LGBTQ students (Cole & Harris, 2017). These actions are still present in other forms such as covenants or educational seminars but this interest in LGBTQ identities, though small, could symbolize a future shift in campus practices.

In the present study, many participants shared that administrators and other decision-makers held meetings to understand the environment for LGBTQ students, with some being open to recommendations. However, once the meetings concluded, no steps were taken. It is possible that campuses are open to learning about LGBTQ issues but, due to connections with various churches, are unable to fulfill recommendations or make promises. It is also possible that these meetings could be surveillance to identify LGBTQ students and ensure that religious values are upheld (Bailey & Strunk, 2018). This is only speculative as institutional intentions are unknown. As institutions are often connected to organizations or churches, the administration could be open to learning about LGBTQ issues but are unable to address them due to guidelines,

doctrines, or Title IX exemptions. However, as O'Brien (2017) stated, in the teachings of Jesus, there are no exception clauses when someone has the power to help someone else in need.

Navigating the Campus. The campus navigation process is difficult for all college students. However, for LGBTQ students at Christian institutions, their identities become an unmistakable weight. As this weight increases from moments such as convocations, classroom discussions, or religious seminars, it becomes physically and mentally more exhausting to walk around the campus. Those who identify as LGBTQ need to not only navigate the sometimes-insurmountable walls of conservative and traditional campus climates but also need to navigate their identities as well. This sentiment was communicated by Talique, and it revealed that the campus is not the same for each student in attendance. To LGBTQ students, buildings become more confining, campus is emptier, and all connections bring about hesitation to some extent. As Garvey and Rankin (2015) stated, LGBTQ students in all interactions need to weigh the benefits of coming out with the possible costs. In some instances, LGBTQ students are able to build a relationship that will assist them in navigating campus, but this allyship is never promised.

To improve success in navigation, many participants had supportive peers and notification systems from trusted networks. As Eileen shared, one faculty member warned them to not let one instructor find out that they were LGBTQ as it could lead to a negative response. This notification was helpful to Eileen but is not an option for all LGBTQ students. As such, LGBTQ students have built underground networks and organizational "safe lists" to communicate to other LGBTQ students where the safe spaces are and the people to aid them in their education. The literature showed the importance of finding support systems and allies but had little to no mention of these vast networks of information and communication. These intentional actions demonstrate a desire to remain on campus as many LGBTQ students who see

no support can easily withdraw and often do so (Pitcher et al., 2016). As support networks are essential for LGBTQ student development (Wedow et al., 2017), this is one area in which university leaders can start to make it easier for LGBTQ students to navigate Christian institutions.

Unique Findings

As not all LGBTQ issues can be addressed, many LGBTQ students rely on supportive systems such as campus personnel or peers to improve their lives through college. When reviewing the literature, the reliance on accepting peers and faculty was consistent; however, the use of counseling was less common. Not only do religiously affiliated institutions provide inadequate information about services to LGBTQ students (McKinley et al., 2015), but counseling at these institutions can be synonymous with punishment rather than development (Wolff et al., 2016). For the present study's participants, counseling was an original source of hesitation due to perceived reporting of identity or personal beliefs but their views shifted as individuals were added to an unwritten network about who is safe and who is not. As a result, a few of the participants in this study shared affirmation by their counselors, and one went as far to confess a mother-like perception of theirs. However, as these connections are not common, there could be a lack of training on how to handle mental health concerns that intersect with identities, as Carolina stated in reference to their experience. As Cole and Harris (2017) found, Christian counselors could lack experience working with LGBTQ individuals. Therefore, it is possible that counselors can affirm identities and be accepting but do not have the knowledge to help LGBTQ students process them within their experiences. Although the findings showed an overall positive relationship with counseling services, if the literature is also accurate, there could be Christian

institutions still working to address homosexuality and meeting with LGBTQ students without the knowledge to do so.

According to Kortegast (2017), “Colleges and universities need to create more equitable practices for all students to live, learn, and thrive” (p. 68). In referencing the literature and the interviews, there are people and places willing to create more inclusive campuses but the connection to scripture and beliefs or lack of knowledge will also work to maintain the religious status quo. As such, many LGBTQ students create reliable network lists that can be shared by word of mouth or passed through documents as educational maps to safe spaces on campus. Wedow et al. (2017) stated that support networks such as these and reinterpretation of doctrine were essential to identity development. However, this process is unique as much of the literature focused on individual LGBTQ student perceptions of safety, which often created support systems, not a collective effort that has created a support network. This process was one of the most significant findings as it presented LGBTQ students as less lonely than what the literature shows. The participants did not always have guidance on campus, but many of them put themselves out there compared to students in previous studies.

Policies and Practices

The second research question was designed to build on personal experiences by targeting the institutional factors that impact LGBTQ student belonging. As no institutions were verified, participants had to share the policies and practices that were most impactful on their persistence. Many participants stated that their institutions’ policies were unwritten. In most cases, institutions acted in accordance with doctrines that were reflective of the institutions’ beliefs on sexual orientation if and when it was deemed necessary. This is not consistent with the literature showing Title IX exemptions or codes of conduct as the institutions in the present study, based

on participant responses, were Title IX compliant. Upon review of the worst campuses for LGBTQ students, the literature was confirmed to be true as countless institutions with religious affiliation, many in the CCCU, were granted Title IX exemptions (Campus Pride, 2021). These exemptions are in addition to various codes or standards set forth by institutions. For example, Arizona Christian University (2021), a CCCU member institution, states,

> We believe the term "marriage" has only one meaning: the uniting of one man and one woman in a single, exclusive union, as delineated in Scripture. We believe God intends sexual intimacy to occur only between a man and a woman who are married to each other. We believe God has commanded that no intimate sexual activity be engaged in outside of a marriage between a man and a woman. We believe any form of sexual immorality (including adultery, fornication, homosexual conduct, bestiality, incest, or use of pornography) is sinful and offensive to God. Gen. 2:18-25; 1 Cor. 6:18; 7:2-5; Heb. 13:4; Matt. 15:18-20; 1 Cor. 6:9-10. (para. 14)

Based on participant responses, these anti-LGBTQ sentiments were also prevalent in covenants and acknowledgments at their institutions. Although the policies and practices were not explicit to the participants, the LGBTQ students identified these documents as containing significant requirements that needed to be followed. It is uncertain as to the institutions included in the present study, but the statement of faith from Arizona Christian University could reflect a participant's campus climate or those of other CCCU institutions enrolling LGBTQ students.

With no written policies to their knowledge, the participants shared that the actions were often part of the campus's culture or were choices made by an individual with no institutional pressure. However, practices such as the covenant were an important requirement that was often not a choice but had to be adhered to. Although in line with institutional affiliations, the issue has

contributed negatively to campus climate and LGBTQ student identity development complicated when placed into various challenges such as those discussed (Bayne, 2016). Unfortunately, there were not enough data to understand policies or procedures in depth, and due to research methods, the inability to review them. Additionally, as none of the examples shared such as covenant or on-campus housing acknowledgements were collected for this study, it was difficult to compare the minimal practices or policies found in the literature that limit LGBTQ behaviors or actions to those found in the present study.

Enrollment and Persistence

The study participants had the opportunity to share the reasons for enrollment and the factors that kept them enrolled. There is little information on LGBTQ decision-making at Christian institutions in the existing literature. All students in this study chose to attend a college or university based on numerous factors such as location, cost, academic programs, and growth opportunities. In interviews with the participants, there were no consistent reasons for initial enrollment. The main theme was religion, but the reasons were unique to the participants such as receiving a full ride, good academic program, or parental influence. Interestingly, one of the participants shared an initial religious conservativeness prior to their enrollment that matched the institution and whereas others were guided from youth in conservative households such as Faith and Carolina. As they continued through their education and had opportunities to become more out or express it, many kept to their religion but questioned the conservative interpretations of it.

As a part of their campus communities, these LGBTQ students attended classes, did homework, got involved, and built important relationships. However, these same students also had to contend with professors who were nonaffirming, stress from issues related to their identities, and navigating the coming out process. These factors can cause LGBTQ student

depression, identity concealment, and institutional withdrawal (Pitcher et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2019). According to the present study's participants, aside from degree completion, the main source for persistence was the support they received from various individuals on campus. The participants were comfortable being out and when far enough into their education, were more comfortable speaking out on LGBTQ issues. This process took significant time, but the participants were consistent in sharing that some professors became close allies or mentors, and peers who became friends were incomparable sources of support. When LGBTQ students perceive a more supportive environment, there is an increased sense of belonging, leading to increased chances of persistence (Barnhardt et al., 2017). All of the students in the present study had a group available, whether registered or unofficial. This is consistent with the literature and many LGBTQ student recommendations to ensure that safe spaces are available to make LGBTQ students feel more welcomed and provide opportunities for belonging.

According to Snow (2018), there are slow but consistent changes occurring in colleges through the increased number of support groups, efforts for identity awareness, and improved attitudes toward acceptance. The present study's participants shared that so much of the attitudes were individual and that little factions will continue to exist but it is still possible to thrive in these environments. Although there was identity fatigue and exhaustion from this constant campus navigation, the participants knew who to confide in and the safe places to unpack their stressors. These positive experiences, which were a surprise at times, gave LGBTQ students a distant glimpse of the "normal" college experience. As LGBTQ students experience more discrimination, harassment, and resulting mental health issues than heterosexual peers, these participants were able to demonstrate that there are buffering effects consistent with the literature (Borgogna et al., 2018; Hong et al., 2016; Rockenbach et al., 2017). The timeline for institutional

shifts in acceptance is uncertain as they require policy formation, curriculum development, and reinterpretation of scripture from governing bodies, but it is certain that faculty, staff, and peers will continue to be vital for LGBTQ student persistence.

Implications

Based on previous literature and the current study's results, there are several notable implications to discuss. The present study's findings seem to be consistent with the experiences of LGBTQ students in Christian higher education shown in other research but also add significant information. Therefore, it is important that the participants' responses not be taken lightly as this study's findings show the need to improve campus environments and work with institutional leaders to increase cultural competences as they relate to LGBTQ identities.

Throughout the interview process, it became apparent that LGBTQ students are heard but not listened to and are seen but not acknowledged. The first implication is that Christian institutions hold meetings to demonstrate investment in the experiences of the LGBTQ population but choose not to or are unable to act in response. In various instances, LGBTQ students in this study were called upon when the institution wanted to understand a specific issue, but when the students gave the information and recommendations, the institutions failed to collaborate or act. From the student perspective, multiple ineffective attempts to make change eventually led to burnout. When the institution made a change such as policy or opportunity, those who shared the news with LGBTQ students were often exaggerated or magnified the accomplishment. From a leadership standpoint, this practice is manipulative and gives false hope to students who are already navigating the multiple unknowns of campus environments. In various instances, there was forward progress, but the behaviors resembled a savior mentality and were too inconsistent to improve LGBTQ student well-being. To move forward, there needs

to be more collaborative committees to build constant transparency, realistic expectations, and a genuine commitment to not provide false promises for campus LGBTQ progress.

Second, the support networks that LGBTQ students build demonstrate a more systemic issue on campus. The most common reasons for building support and information networks according to the study participants reflected experiences of peers with faculty and staff or the unknowns with newly hired campus personnel. To feel a sense of control and security, the participants built a collective knowledge to identify supportive faculty, affirming counselors, and other inclusive personnel who could be helpful in their education. LGBTQ students used these strategic plans to persist, which creates the perception that not all campus personnel are equipped with the information to manage their biases in interactions or ensure student success. As implicit bias can negatively impact other student populations such as students of color or international students, it would be beneficial to design a comprehensive training as part of employee onboarding. This practice would aid in overall employee development, LGBTQ student success, and with the addition of multiple identities, would be less invasive on personal beliefs. Although there are further systemic issues and anti-LGBTQ attitudes, some of which were revealed in this research, it is a simple practice to start building more inclusive campuses.

Recommendations

This study's results provided important details for understanding LGBTQ student experiences at Christian institutions. These experiences are both helpful in working to create policies and procedures for institutions to implement but are also limited. Based on the participant responses, recommendations are provided for building a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ students, and due to limited experiences, recommendations for future research are also provided. As the implications and previous literature suggest, LGBTQ student experiences

range from negative or hostile to positive and supportive. Therefore, practical applications of this research as well as the future of this topical area need to engage not just the LGBTQ students who experience these campuses but also the Christian institutions that influence them. With a delicate balance in perspective, the recommendations build upon the good, create options for negative environments, and provide opportunities for both sides to be involved.

Recommendations for Practical Application

Using the findings in this study could have immediate and long-term practical application for institutional leaders at Christian college and universities. As shared in multiple interviews, LGBTQ students are often asked how to improve the environment for the campus population. Subsequently, this also places a substantial pressure on Christian institutions to respond but that in the past have been shown to put this student population into distress (Wolff et al., 2016). With the responses from LGBTQ students assumed to be shared across multiple institutions, there is attention that needs to be given to areas for improvement.

Based on the number of students enrolling at their institutions coming from a faith background, it is recommended that policies be reinterpreted to include different, more inclusive views of Christ and balance the lessons in scripture. As Wedow et al. (2017) stated, LGBTQ students who integrated their identities with religion often interpreted scripture to be more affirming, which led to increased self-acceptance. In most interviews, LGBTQ students shared in their institution's commitment to faith. As Eileen, a religion major, stated, "I would like to see the university come out as a Christian university [and] support the oppressed and marginalized, which is a Christian ideal." In using this as a starting point, the participant responses could provide mutual learning opportunities for students, campus leadership, and the church. With LGBTQ student input and the constant change in student needs, this practice can make

institutions more flexible in their management of campus climates and the ways in which scripture can be used.

LGBTQ students often shared that there were feelings of isolation before coming out to a friend or locating others of similar identities. In various instances, LGBTQ students were able to participate in organizations. An important recommendation for institutions to consider is to provide a space for LGBTQ students to gather. In providing a space to gather, LGBTQ students will be able to build supportive relationships, process through their identities, and create networks by which to know safe spaces on campus. As the organization falls within institutional standards, expectations related to sexual behavior can still be implemented and still provide developmental opportunities for the students. This recommendation does not call for institutions to affirm LGBTQ identities but instead provides an option with potential for LGBTQ student retention and overall success.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following are recommendations for expanding on the present study and understanding more about this topical area. These recommendations are to improve upon the study limitations but to also provide a substantial foundation for future researchers who want to understand LGBTQ students at Christian institutions. The first recommendation is to include all identities in the LGBTQ spectrum in research. In the present study, six participants were interviewed, but their qualifications to participate were self-identified without verification, so no specific identities or backgrounds were known. Saturation was achieved based on LGBTQ as a collective population; however, more could be understood by recruiting students representing specific identities. The second recommendation is to expand on identities into demographics such as family's connection to religion, location raised, and level of outness in various

environments (i.e., home, high school, etc.). With this additional context, there can be a more in-depth understanding of LGBTQ students in college and the differences in Christian institution navigation based on previous influential experiences. The third recommendation is to extend the research into a longitudinal study. According to Vaccaro et al. (2015), LGBTQ student often reframe stressors as an opportunity to learn and cope with exclusion. As LGBTQ students, like all college students, develop over time, it would be helpful to see the evolution of these practices over time and through multiple experiences.

The fourth recommendation is to improve the qualitative process for LGBTQ students to share experiences. In the research, LGBTQ students were limited to audio interviews for protection, and the coding techniques were narrow to make their statements more powerful. However, the absence of nonverbal cues and additional coding techniques weakened the responses, and more could have been understood about these students as well as their institutions. The final recommendation is to increase the number of Christian institutions in which the participants are enrolled or make a firm effort to partner with the CCCU. Fortunately, it is assumed that LGBTQ students enrolled at CCCU institutions participated in the present study, but the overall sample was stunted as higher education professionals were used to recruit. Because of campus climates or personal connection to LGBTQ students, it is plausible that countless participants were missed. With support from the CCCU, that is more potential to increase recruitment numbers (i.e., institutions and LGBTQ students) and build a process that is acceptable to stakeholders to inform institutional decisions. As there is no information on institutional stances of LGBTQ identified in the present study, data can be intentionally collected from supportive campuses as well as those nonaffirming to sexual minorities on which little to no data exists on the experiences of LGBTQ students (Wolff et al., 2016).

Limitations

Based on the research process and various protocols to collect responses, there are multiple limitations that could have impacted the trustworthiness and interpretation of the results. With the research intended to provide a deeper understanding of LGBTQ student experiences at Christian institutions, it was important to explore the students as well as their relationship with their institutions. However, due to the number of Christian institutions and spectrum of LGBTQ identities, a few of the important limitations are based on the limited range included in this study. Although the responses are helpful in starting to understand the experiences of LGBTQ students, there are most likely LGBTQ student identities that were not found during the recruitment process. Additionally, as there are more than 150 CCCU institutions (CCCU, n.d.-b), it is difficult to estimate the number of institutions involved in this study, stances on LGBTQ students, and to include all denominations in the Christian faith. While these institutions continue to evolve, and some becoming more LGBTQ-affirming, there are numerous perspectives that could not be explored. The recruitment process was intentional in working to address this limitation by communicating to approximately 40,000 or more professionals in higher education, but not all potential participants could be reached by this recruitment method.

The second set of limitations relates to personal understanding, relationship building, and disclosure from participants. As participants were recruited on the premise that minimal intrusion would take place to protect identities, participants self-reported if they met the personal background requirements such as an LGBTQ identity or class standing and attending an institution with membership in the CCCU. Additionally, to further protect identities, face-to-face interaction was determined to be a threat to LGBTQ student outness as well as disclosure. Because of the lack of face-to-face interaction, it was difficult to connect the important emotions

and words involved in coding with nonverbal cues that could influence interpretation of the participant's responses. From the start of this process through analysis, it was possible that false identification or responses could have impacted the legitimacy of their experiences, overall understanding of Christian institutions, and data for future research. Because of the nature of the topic and the influence of previous experiences on disclosure, the concept of trust needed to be present in my role as a researcher to build rapport and understand the study participants. However, as a stranger to whom the student must disclose, the trust would take more time than email communication and the interview to develop. With this understanding, higher education professionals in which the students trusted were used as a recruitment strategy to increase chances of more vulnerable responses and further strengthened with a transparent informed consent form to mitigate these limitations.

Summary

The experiences of LGBTQ college students at Christian higher education institutions are complicated and multidimensional. It is a constant balance between the inflexibility of education and the evolution of identity. This delicate relationship has taken a toll on LGBTQ students but has also been a process that strengthens learning in personal and professional endeavors. As the problem in the present study centered on the lack of information and resulting lack of understanding to support LGBTQ students, the findings from the participant interviews can aid students as well as institutions. Throughout the interviews, LGBTQ students gave perspectives that honed in on the difficulties created by Christian institutions and the personal strategies that allowed them to be steadfast in their movement forward. As these participants were difficult to recruit due to the research methods, but also the gatekeepers that prevent a descent into these environments, there is still a limitation to the depth of this research. It is through these

participants' sharing that a significant contribution can be made toward LGBTQ student success as well as the institutions that are built to support them.

The significance of this research is far reaching and timely. Throughout the interviews, the participants often shared a sense of loneliness, anxiety, and uncertainty when it came to their campus environments. This is consistent with the minority stress theory that discusses the impact of personal experiences such as tokenization that represents external events and heterosexism that demonstrates internal beliefs on overall well-being. The common anchor to persist through similar experiences or various situations and stressors was the support from peers and campus personnel. Based on previous literature, most of the participants' experiences were foreshadowed. The literature review helped to inform appropriate questions that gave the participants the opportunity to interview in a process that considered their safety and most importantly, their identities. As the responses showed, LGBTQ students chose to disclose to the individuals they can trust. Despite a quick and impersonal relationship, participants provided responses that were honest, difficult to grasp, and have the potential to educate or advocate depending on need.

Threats toward LGBTQ student retention at Christian institutions are not universal but prevail at a number of campuses. In multiple interviews, the participants shared intimate trust with peers and campus personnel. Through these relationships, campus felt more welcoming, and learning, not their identities, was the center of attention. From campuses that were less inclusive, there was a struggle to be heard and efforts to hold the institution accountable. In 2021, LGBTQ students from a number of religious colleges and universities sued the U.S. Department of Education due to Title IX exemptions allowed at their institutions. As stated earlier in the present study, these exemptions place LGBTQ students in uncomfortable positions and unwelcoming

environments. It is unknown whether these environments will change, but as the interviews showed, LGBTQ students have their own reasons in filling out their college applications, and as such, many more will continue to enroll at Christian institutions.

To aid in progress and development for all those involved, the participants ended their interviews with answers to questions that focused on their recommendations for the institution and advice for future LGBTQ students. Despite their experiences, LGBTQ students want to be proud graduates. As leaders in higher education, we should love this student population as we love ourselves.

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Appendix A: Participant Solicitation

My name is Anthony Ungaro, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Ed. D. Program in Organizational Leadership at Abilene Christian University with my dissertation topic: *LGBTQ Student Experiences and Perceptions in Christian Higher Education: An Exploration of Institutional Climate and LGBTQ Persistence*. I am currently seeking 10-12 participants for a qualitative research study to document and understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ college students enrolled at Christian institutions. Participants for the study must meet the criteria of being currently enrolled as a student (for at least one year) at a Christian college or university associated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities in the United States, identify as LGBTQ, and are classified from sophomore to senior. Participant identities and their institutions will be kept confidential.

CCCU Institution List: https://www.cccu.org/members_and_affiliates/

Participants will complete an informed consent form to participate in the study and be interviewed to document experiences. Participants will be allowed to stop participation in the study at any time. The study will be recorded using Zoom meeting software and the interviews will be conducted via audioconference. The interview will be approximately 60 minutes and include 15-20 questions about policies, perceptions, and campus climate. Transcription of the interview will be sent later for the participant to check for accuracy. Themes that emerge from the data collection will be reported within a dissertation manuscript and submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

If you have a student who would be open to sharing their experiences and meets requirements, please have them contact me at **xxxxxxxxxx**.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Anthony M. Ungaro
Abilene Christian University
Organizational Leadership Program

LGBTQ Student Experiences and Perceptions in Christian Higher Education:

An Exploration of Institutional Climate and LGBTQ Persistence

Introduction
I am Anthony M. Ungaro, a current doctoral student at Abilene Christian University. I am doing research on the lived experiences of LGBTQ college students at Christian institutions. I am going to give you information and invite you to be part of this research. You do not have to decide today whether or not you will participate. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research to see if it is right for you.

Purpose of the research
The purpose of this research is to document and understand LGBTQ student experiences at Christian institutions. As campus environments will be different, it will also be important for me to understand the impact of self-perceptions on these climates and student success. I believe you can help by telling me about your experiences and personal practices you use to be successful.

Participant Selection
You are being invited to take part in this research because I feel that your experience as a LGBTQ college student can contribute much to the understanding and knowledge of LGBTQ persistence at Christian institutions.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not.

Duration
The research will take place over one pre-scheduled days. During this meeting, you will be interviewed for approximately 1 hour.

Procedures
A. I am asking you to help me learn more about the lived-experiences of LGBTQ students at Christian institutions. I am inviting you to take part in this research project. If you accept, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will be detailed below.
B. During the interview, I will sit down with you on an audioconference Zoom call. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and I will move on to the next question. No one else but me will be present unless you would like someone else to be there. All responses to my questions will remain confidential. The entire interview will be recorded, but no-one will be identified by name during the interview process. The recording will be kept on a password protected computer. The information recorded is confidential and only REV.com, an interview

transcription service, the dissertation advisor, and myself will have access to the audio recordings. The recordings will be erased once all participants have reviewed their interview transcripts and confirmed their responses.

Risks
I believe the personal risks will be minimal; however, there could be certain topics that are less comfortable to discuss. If the discussion is on sensitive and personal topics, you will not be coerced into discussing anything that makes you uncomfortable and you retain the right to avoid certain topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the interview if you don't wish to do so, and that is also fine. You do not have to give me any reason for not responding to any question or for refusing to take part. Additionally, all studies have the risk of breached confidentiality; however, the steps shared below will be taken to minimize this risk.

Benefits
There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation will contribute to better understanding the LGBTQ student experience at Christian colleges and universities.

Reimbursements
You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research. However, you will be provided with a final version of the dissertation.

Confidentiality
The information collected from this research will be kept private, confidential, and protected by password. Any information about you will have a pseudonym except for this form which requires your legal name and the name provided via your email. Only the researcher will know your true name.

Sharing the Results
Nothing that you tell me prior to or after the recorded interview, which will be transcribed by an external service, will be shared with anyone else, and nothing will be attributed to you by name. Following the research, the dissertation is planned to be published so that others may learn from these experiences.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so, and you may stop participating in the interview at any time that you wish.

Who to Contact
If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact:

Anthony M. Ungaro - xxxxxxxxxxxx
Dr. Brian Cole - xxxxxxxxxxxx

If you have concerns about this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research:

Dr. Megan Roth - xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Consent Section

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study

Print Name of Participant_____

Date _____
MM/DD/YYYY

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this form has been provided to the participant.
Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent_____

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____
MM/DD/YYYY

Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

March 24, 2021

Anthony Ungaro
Department of Graduate and Professional Studies
Abilene Christian University

Dear Anthony,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "LGBTQ Student Experiences and Perceptions in Christian Higher Education: An Exploration of Institutional Climate and LGBTQ Persistence",

(IRB# 21-035)is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

1. What were you looking for in a college or university (i.e., programs, location, opportunities, etc.)?
2. What led you to apply for admission to your current institution?
3. Before committing to your institution, did you have any hesitations? If so, what was most pressing for you? If not, what made it easy for you to accept?
4. What is your spiritual background?
    a. What impact did it have on your enrollment at your current institution?
5. Since your enrollment, what have been the most positive experiences that have solidified your sense of belonging at your institution?
    a. Have any surprised you? If so, why?
6. On the flip side, what have been some of the most difficult situations you have experienced?
    a. How did you get through it?
7. What are some common LGBTQ issues you or others have experienced on campus?
8. How has spirituality played a role in your college experience (i.e., academics, personal growth, and identity development)?
9. How have those at the institutions (i.e., staff, faculty) handled these issues?
    a. How would you address LGBTQ issues on campus? In the classroom?
10. How safe do you feel on campus (i.e., intellectually, physically, and emotionally)?
    a. Who or what makes it that way?
11. What campus resources have you used to meet challenges you experienced?
    a. If you do not use resources, why not?
12. How have your responses to challenges evolved over time?
13. Do you know the institution's diversity statement?
    a. How does it compare to your understanding/perception of the campus climate?
14. How do your beliefs compare to that of your campus?
    a. How has this shaped the way you navigate it?
15. What institutional policies or practices do you feel have either limited or supported your identity development?
16. What personal strategies have you used to deal with negativity due to your identity?
17. Have you disclosed to anyone at your institution? If so, who (i.e., classmate, professor, staff member) and what factors led you to disclosing to this person(s)? If not, why?
18. What recommendations do you have for your institution to provide more opportunities for LGBTQ students to feel more welcomed?
19. What would you recommend to first year LGBTQ students coming into your institution?