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Seeking Community: Creating Effective Lifestyle Agreements

by Steven P. Bird, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Christian colleges wrestle with the creation and maintenance of regulations for correct behavior of campus members (lifestyle agreements). Using theoretical considerations as well as specific application examples, a way is presented to create a lifestyle agreement that is internally consistent and fits the needs of the campus. Specifically, the effect of external constituencies, organizational efficiency, and, most importantly, efforts to develop community, are used to guide the construction of lifestyle agreements. While very specific examples are given, no effort is made to create a one-size-fits-all set of codes. Instead, a framework is constructed to allow a campus to develop a lifestyle agreement suited to its own circumstances. This framework provides colleagues with an approach to answering three specific questions. What should be included in the lifestyle agreement? Who should sign it? When does the lifestyle agreement apply?

INTRODUCTION

Creating and maintaining a set of regulations concerning correct behavior of campus members – what I will call a lifestyle agreement – is a never-ending difficulty for Christian colleges. Different views on whether an existing lifestyle agreement should be expanded, constrained or eliminated continually persist. Concerns erupt over the agreement’s language, content, and implementation. Periodically, sides are chosen, lines are drawn in the dirt, and battle begins, all of which interferes with the organization’s ability to accomplish the goals everyone agrees need to be accomplished.

Clearly lifestyle agreements are important to Christian college campuses or we would not be willing to expend so much energy on their creation, maintenance, and application. But how can we create effective lifestyle agreements that are more internally consistent and useful rather than fragmented and divisive?

This article presents a sociological consideration of the role lifestyle agreements play in Christian colleges in order to provide an approach to their creation and application.

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that will be comprehensive and realistic. Using broader theoretical considerations of the social realities of lifestyle agreements and specific thorny application examples, I will present a way to create a lifestyle agreement with an implicit understanding of why it is made the way it is and how it would be applied. It is not my intention to create a specific lifestyle statement that any or all colleges should adopt, but, rather, to present a meaningful way to create such a statement that is appropriate to use at any Christian college wishing to create or modify a lifestyle agreement. Although specific examples will be provided, I am more concerned with providing an approach with broad utility rather than a specific lifestyle agreement. In fact, colleagues could even use this approach and arrive at different conclusions about specifics than I do – but we would understand exactly why and where we disagreed and, perhaps most importantly, we would be able to speak effectively to each other about our disagreements rather than speak past each other in frustration.

Everyone begins with a set of assumptions. There are two that I need to state at the outset. Several others will be introduced later as needed.

Assumption 1: Christian colleges are based on voluntary membership.

It is important to remember that a Christian college is not a coercive organization. Clients and workers alike come to the organization voluntarily – no one is forced into the organization. This accuracy of this statement may seem obvious, but it bears mentioning because we need to remember that individuals have chosen to enter the organization and in doing so have agreed to be part of its mission. After working for a few years at the college, individuals tend to exhibit the same natural tendencies that members of any social organization do. One of those tendencies is to take the organization for granted and begin to think, often unwittingly, of what the organization owes us more than what the organization is there to accomplish. It is very important, of course, to note that the organization has obligations to its members, but in the battles that surround lifestyle agreements the factions sometimes are based on their own interests rather than those of the organization. To combat this tendency it is important to remember that lifestyle agreements were submitted voluntarily. Decisions about changes to or applications of it should focus on what accomplishes organizational goals rather than what makes individuals happier or our their jobs easier. The implications of this voluntary membership will reappear periodically throughout this discussion.

Assumption 2: A Christian college is not a church. It is an educational institution.

Thus we may adopt, but do not develop, doctrinal statements. By this I mean that, as an institution, we are not granted the Biblical authority to produce the creeds that regulate Christians. This is a duty of the Church.

This assumption is a little more complicated for denominational schools where the theologians might be expected to help develop doctrinal creeds. It might even be more complicated for theologians or Biblical scholars at non-affiliated Christian colleges who are expected to deal with doctrinal issues. But the lifestyle agreement of a campus, it is important to note, serves the institution as a whole and the institution is oriented
on an educational mission that is para-church related. Whatever external constituencies we need to satisfy tend to be focused on our organizations as educational institutions that are distinctively Christian rather than churches that happen to also educate. Whatever organizational efficiency we seek to accomplish is primarily aimed at specific educational goals. Whatever community we seek to create is aimed at a whole person education that extends beyond classroom content, certainly, but is still an educational community at heart. This assumption will play an important role in the discussion section regarding the elements to be included in a lifestyle agreement.

The need for lifestyle agreements

The need for lifestyle agreements that establish acceptable behavioral boundaries is a fact of life for Christian colleges. At least three sociological realities drive this need. First, the college has outside constituencies, e.g. parents of current students, alumni, churches, and prospective students, who both expect and want the college to have a lifestyle agreement. Every college has outside constituencies, whether they are state legislatures or parents of current students, but the outside constituencies for the Christian college tend to retain a concern for a certain campus environment with specific controls on moral behaviors. Public and private colleges with no religious affiliation have experienced less of this pressure since the 1960s but still wrestle with it as well. As the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s (1990) work on campus life states:

The 1960s brought historic changes. During that decade in loco parentis all but disappeared. Undergraduates enjoyed almost unlimited freedom in personal and social matters, and responsibility for residence hall living was delegated far down the administrative ladder, with resident assistants on the front line of supervision. Top administrators were often out of touch with day-to-day conditions on the campus.

The problem was, however, that while colleges were no longer parents, no new theory of campus guidance emerged to replace the old assumptions. Regulations could not be arbitrarily imposed – on that everyone agreed – but what was left in doubt was whether codes of conduct should be established and, if so, who should take the lead. Unclear about what standards to maintain, many administrators sought to sidestep rather than confront the issue.

To complicate matters further, while college and university officials understood that their authority had forever changed, this shift toward a freer climate was not understood or accepted by parents or the public. The assumption persists today that when an undergraduate “goes off to college” he or she will, in some general manner, be “cared for” by the institution....

Even state legislatures and the courts are not willing to take colleges off the hook... (pp. 5-6).

A second social force that shapes the need for lifestyle agreements at Christian colleges is one faced by all formal social organizations – the need for organizational efficiency. In essence, the organization cannot function if the members do not know what is or is not expected of them. Anyone who has ever had responsibility for some portion of a bureaucratic organization can attest to the fact that organizing people into shared routines and behaviors requires documented procedures and policies that
guide interactions. Without these guiding bureaucratic forms, organizations spend most of their time dealing with every person and circumstance in a case-by-case way and organizational inefficiency will quickly consume all available resources. This bureaucratic necessity becomes more and more important as the size of the organization increases. As Scott (1998, pp. 260-261) explains it, “Studies of a wide variety of organizations show reasonably consistent and positive associations between size of organization and measures of structural differentiation, including number of occupational categories, number of hierarchical levels, and spatial dispersion of the organization.” In fact, it is in modern mass-population societies where bureaucratic forms of organization have become the normal social organizational technique.

When there are more people involved in social settings than we can reasonably know well, we are forced into formalized arrangements of tasks and people that allow us to proceed efficiently through required tasks and allow us to be confident others will do their tasks as well. When everyone in this complicated division of labor does their part correctly, the overall tasks of the organization are accomplished. If there are only ten of us, the problem is minimal and we need less bureaucracy. But when there are two thousand of us, we have to have carefully specified rules and regulations that make all our duties clear so we can be sure everything is done in a way that fits the overall goals of the organization. Too much bureaucracy is as much a problem as too little. But, it is the need for organizational systems that get the job done, which means an appropriate amount of bureaucratic form, that forces us to adopt formalized rules, policies and procedures like those in a lifestyle agreement.

Finally, it is an intrinsic part of the values of Christian colleges to seek something more than educational factories where students are processed like so much raw material. Or, to use a metaphor more appropriate to the post-industrial society we find ourselves in, we wish to avoid the dehumanizing aspects of a McDonaldized society (Ritzer, 1993) where everything and everyone is processed like “fast-food” people. Those who work in Christian colleges expect to create something more than a nameless, faceless processing of human beings where anonymity replaces a common identity and concern for each other. True, we are only partially successful in our attempts to create these communities where terms like in loco parentis still have importance, but we try nevertheless. It is clear that an explicitly identified value in the Christian college subculture is “community”.

Community can be difficult to define since it has several different meanings. For social scientists, the term is commonly used to refer to studies of towns and cities. Ammerman (1997), for example, studied the effects of social location (types of towns and cities) on different congregations. In doing so she followed a rather common practice and referred to towns and cities as communities rather than referring to the congregations as communities—even though many of us might refer to a community of believers. This approach can be used when developing discipline codes on a campus. Paterson and Kibler (1998, part four) provide a very pragmatic approach to constructing a disciplinary code for a campus. Their reference to community, though, is implicitly about a collection of people in a geographically bounded area (the campus) who live within the same social-judicial system. This approach uses the term community in the same way it would be used to refer to a town. Alternatively, the term community is used to refer to people who share some important trait. An example of
this use of the term is Hoekema’s (1994) look at efforts to create a shared set of ethics among individuals on college campuses. And, contemporarily, the word community is even used to refer to something as amorphous as people who interact through the Internet (Rehm, 2000).

Many Christian colleges talk of community but they clearly do not mean that they are a collection of people in a geographically bounded area (the campus) who live within the same social-judicial system. And, they are not referring to all campus members being Christian or having some cyber-connection. What colleges mean by community is a set of meaningful and close relationships between the campus members. In essence, colleges are looking for community to be akin to a “primary group.” Primary groups are collections of people who have consistent and regular interaction that is intimate and face-to-face such that the members of the group come to have a shared identity – they see a clear distinction of who they are as compared to outsiders. The people in our primary groups are the ones we hold near and dear. This is what we normally mean by community on Christian college campuses: close webs of close relationships that build us all up and hold us all accountable. We seek a collection of people who share a common heart and soul. This idea of community seems similar to the observations of Tönnies (1963) who contrasted pre-modern community and modern society. He argued that modern societies are impersonal and task oriented where the small farming communities of earlier societal forms were based on closer networks of relationships like the ones we seek on our campuses.

The link between a desire for community and the need for a lifestyle agreement is relatively straightforward. To create a sense of shared identity and strong interpersonal relationships, social groups use socially created boundaries. By stating some specific differences that members must voluntarily adhere to, organizations screen out individuals who will not contribute to a stronger primary group type of community. In fact, for churches, the use of a certain amount of social stigma can lead to a much more dedicated and dynamic church body (Iannacconne, 1992). The lifestyle agreements we have establish community boundaries and allow us to know who we are. Without these boundaries, we cannot have as strong an internal community.

**The difficult questions of a lifestyle agreement: What? Who? When?**

Lifestyle agreements introduce some thorny problems for the campuses that use them. Three questions must be answered and revisited on a regular basis when working with lifestyle agreements. What rules will be included? To whom do the rules apply? When will the rules apply?

Ideally, all of the social forces that make a lifestyle agreement useful or necessary would converge into an undisputed set of rules that accomplished all three needs: satisfying external constituencies, facilitating organizational efficiency, and creating community. But reality rarely provides ideal outcomes. Not only do different external constituencies disagree over what should be allowed on campus and when, but what is often desired by any organization’s clients or other constituencies is not the same organizational form that would most effectively allow an efficient organizational process or interpersonal community. Moreover, organizational efficiency and community often can be nearly antithetical to each other.
In one sense, the most efficient way to enforce rules is to have a no nonsense zero-tolerance policy that is applied to everyone in exactly the same way regardless of context or circumstances. This is bureaucracy at its best and worst. Simply determine if there is any shred of dependable evidence that indicates even the most minimal amount of guilt and then apply the consequences written in the policy. Student development personnel would be able to make quick summary decisions in an expedited way that uses the minimal amount of time or other organizational resource: a textbook example of organizational efficiency. But, creating community is the goal then this type of approach will fail utterly.

A student reacting to the news of his mother’s death might be guilty of the same transgression as a student whose motivation is to cause as much disruption as possible, but few would want both students to experience the same consequences. We desire for more than organizational efficiency. We also want a social setting where everyone attempts to care for each other with compassion as well as accountability.

To help us see how an efficient set of rules and their applications can be in tension with attempts to create a social organization that fosters community, I will compare a couple of familiar ancient rule systems. To begin, imagine being responsible for enforcing the rules listed in the Biblical text of Leviticus. A bulky set of rules, no doubt, but the bulk was in part due to efforts to get every situation and circumstance specified so clearly that the application was very efficient and clear. Enforcing these rules would be tedious but relatively straightforward. Only when a new context arises would there be a need to wrestle with the application of the rules and, even then, only to the extent necessary to extrapolate existing rules to write a specific rule for this new context.

Now, imagine that you are responsible for enforcing the rule system woven into the Sermon on the Mount or the beatitudes as they are sometimes called. These are clearly principles that are meant to create relationship—community—between God and humans as well as between fellow humans. Willard (1998, p.116) summarizes the beatitudes this way: “The religious system of his day left the multitudes out, but Jesus welcomed them all into his kingdom. Anyone could come as well as any other. They still can. That is the gospel of the beatitudes.” The principles of the Sermon on the Mount are meant to guide us into community. How to make these principles bureaucratically useful, however, is not quite as apparent. The reality is that we do have to create a system with bureaucratic utility as well as one that fosters community and satisfies external constituencies that matter to the organization. So, we fall back on the rule listing approach of Leviticus because we can’t figure out how to bureaucratically realize the Sermon on the Mount. But, if community is an overarching goal and bureaucratic efficiency is just a means of promoting organizational goals, then we need to find a way to build the system to serve the goal.

This is our problem, then: we want to create appropriate lifestyle agreements for our campuses that satisfy external constituencies, create organizational efficiency, and create community, while avoiding the tensions created by diverse external audiences and the push-pull relationship of organizational efficiency and compassionate community. Specifically we must wade through all of this and find answers to the three questions posed: what should be included in the lifestyle agreement, who must live within its expectations, and when does it apply.
What should be included in a lifestyle agreement?

Christian colleges, as has been indicated earlier, are para-church organizations. Lifestyle agreements exist to satisfy external constituencies that expect these colleges to teach and mentor and model. They exist to facilitate organizational efficiency that leads to broadly defined educational goals. And, they exist to create a particular kind of educational Christian community. So what doctrinal tenets and behavioral proscriptions need to be included in lifestyle agreements? Where do we get those doctrinal tenets?

The latter question is the easier one to answer. Adopt the doctrinal statements of the Church. But which church is the Church? A denominationally affiliated college secures its doctrinal statements from the tenets and creeds of the church with which the college is affiliated. Inter-denominational schools may have a somewhat harder time, however, as they try to identify the Christian tradition from which to adopt their doctrinal orientation. Nevertheless, each college must look to its own heritage and orientation when deciding from where to secure the doctrinal tenets and creeds that will guide its lifestyle agreement.

Even so, having decided from where to draw our doctrine does not necessarily make clear the items necessary for the guiding statements of a Christian college. To illustrate, I will consider how a college that identifies itself as "evangelical" and "non-denominational," would approach the question of what should be included. In using this example, I will demonstrate an approach that also will illustrate how other types of colleges would approach the issue.

Theoretically, a non-denominational evangelical college would have many possible theological traditions available to use in designing lifestyle agreements that regulate behavior and establish shared beliefs. But, how do we select from among the competing traditions of denominational evangelicalism? We can be sure that the answer is not an ecumenical one. Ecumenism usually adopts a "lowest common denominator" approach. That approach, eventually, leaves us with nothing. For churches and denominations that have tried to do this, the result has usually been organizational inefficiency and community boundaries that are so weak that they are sociologically inconsequential (Finke and Stark, 1992, chap. 6). In essence, the organization fails when it seeks to be only what is acceptable to everyone in a general tradition. At the other extreme we could try to include everything that every church has ever advocated. This, however, will surely lead to endless battles over the integration of these different statements with each other. Therefore, we cannot settle for what absolutely everyone could agree with and we cannot try to include every theological claim ever asserted.

The answer lies, instead, in a type of evangelical pluralism. The kind of pluralistic system referenced here is one where an over-arching umbrella of key values, beliefs, and norms covers a diversity of lifestyles that all fit within the larger umbrella but differ in many other ways. In general social systems this can be illustrated by a town that has laws that set clear boundaries for all inhabitants, i.e. no murder allowed, but does not dictate how every person must dress or eat. In the more specific example of a non-denominational evangelical college, the lifestyle agreement sets the boundaries that are critical for establishing community and organizational efficiency, within the...
span of acceptable views that the external constituencies will accept. It does not, however, seek to specify a stance on every behavior or belief known to Christendom.

We decide, then, which doctrinal statements are central to who we are, establish the over-arching set of expectations, and leave the rest of the issues to individuals in response to their church. If we have become confused and think that the goal of the institution is to define a systematic theology, a theological statement that speaks to every theological issue and question, then we are building the wrong umbrella to cover our diversity. If we remember, however, that our goal is to build a Christian community for the sake of an educational goal, we can succeed.

The first conclusion, then, concerning the criteria for determining what should be included in a lifestyle agreement is:

**Conclusion 1:** A Christian college includes in its lifestyle agreement only the doctrine that is necessary for the definition of the Christian community needed to accomplish its educational goal.

So what would a non-denominational evangelical college include in it's lifestyle agreement if the guiding principle of this conclusion is followed? Would it be critical to the nature of such an organization and its community that everyone agree that Christ was, in fact, God? Yes. Any evangelical community must possess such a belief. Is it critical to an evangelical community that everyone be Calvinist or Arminian? No. If a college was more tightly tied to a denominational tradition, that might be a critical boundary, but for a truly non-denominational college being Calvinist or Arminian is a matter of accountability of the members to their own churches. The non-denominational, evangelical college would not need to comment on every doctrinal issue in its lifestyle agreement; it would only need to address the ones necessary for an over-arching umbrella that establishes an evangelical community wherein the organization can accomplish its educational goal. All other issues can be wrestled with in the Church. Eventually, however, doctrine must affect how we actually live. This raises a new set of thorny issues – issues of application.

It is necessary to note here that as a college seeks to define its community it faces the danger of fads or trends in the church. Historically, we have witnessed church doctrine being held hostage by contemporary events. This need not be related to heresy; sometimes it reflects the key issues of the time. But, then again, doctrinal debates can also be detoured into fads that are not particularly consequential. In the recent past many evangelical denominations were focused with great intensity on the issue of divorce. Now the focus tends to be on abortion or, perhaps, homosexuality.

Recognizing this tendency, Christian colleges need to construct a lifestyle agreement that is focused on the key doctrines of the umbrella that we dwell under rather than jumping on the latest bandwagon of popular attention. The doctrinal statements that are woven into the campuses' lifestyle agreement should set the important principles as boundaries; and then, specific applications should be addressed by the people living under that umbrella, rather than placed in the umbrella itself. If the umbrella consists of many specific application issues that are receiving considerable attention at that moment, colleges will need to revisit the lifestyle agreement periodically and revise it to fit the latest hot issues. This is not a particularly efficient organizational approach.
Lifestyle agreements need to be community-defining documents for the long term. Otherwise little continuity will exist in the community and its identity will suffer. On the other hand, lifestyle agreements must be applied to daily life on campus in concrete ways. How do we determine correct behavior for the community and avoid fads of application? We probably can’t, totally. We can, however, use the same approach stated above for the complication introduced by making sure our doctrinal positions are derived from a tradition — evangelicalism — instead of a particular church structure. First, we avoid a behavioral ecumenism that devolves into a focus on the individual’s rights where anybody can do whatever they deem acceptable instead of focusing on the common good. We also must avoid an approach that tries to include everything that might be remotely relevant, suffocating our interaction and finally crushing the community. Instead, it is best to be concern only with those applications of doctrine necessary for the defining and maintaining of our Christian community for its educational goal.

Conclusion 2: Lifestyle agreements should include only the applications of doctrine that are necessary for the definition of the Christian community needed to accomplish our educational goal.

At this point, an additional sociological reality needs to be recognized. American society has made a societal shift to an industrial or post-industrial economic system with wage labor that is based on the individual instead of systems where a larger social unit enters the economic system, i.e. the family. This shift has led to a cultural focus in the United States on the rights of individuals. As previously stated, individuals in organizations tend to lose sight of organizational goals and focus instead on their own interests. This tendency has become exacerbated in the United States by this strong cultural focus on individual rights, sometimes to the exclusion of the greater common good. Such a focus has implications for college lifestyle agreements. Debates about what should be included in the agreement have the potential of collapsing into shouting matches about “my rights” and “your rights.” As a result, all sight is lost of the larger purposes of the lifestyle agreement — satisfying external constituencies, organizational efficiency; community. It is worth noting the personal rights focus at this time because specific application issues (restrictions on behavior in particular) are likely to be sidetracked into a discussion of individual rights. To approach a lifestyle agreement in a way that fulfills the three sociological goals that have been identified, a third assumption needs to be stated.

Assumption 3: Community is accomplished through the giving up of some individual rights for the sake of a common good or common goal.

The ramifications of this statement are immense. If we wish to foster community, build organizational efficiency, and satisfy external audiences, we must be cautious about claims of individual rights that trump the organization’s mission. Such claims might be valid and may need to be considered, but only within the context of the greater good—the organizational mission—that is being served and an awareness of the voluntary nature of our involvement in the organization. Any individual’s rights, in this context, would refer to his or her needs as related to the organizational goals and the
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fostering of community—not just a client's right to have whatever he or she wants. If our colleges are reduced to buyers (students) and sellers (the college) negotiating terms of exchange (what they will pay or be required to do), then there will be no chance for community of the sort we seek to exist. Instead of having meaningful primary group relationships we will have impersonal personal-profit type relationships that resemble what is usually defined as a secondary group. This is not the goal most Christian colleges claim to seek.

When considering what to include in a lifestyle agreement, then, little is gained by arguing about "my rights" and "your rights." Efforts to define content of the lifestyle agreement according to personal rights will undermine the community we seek to establish. On the other hand, the community will not be fostered by efforts to create a comprehensive list of dos and don'ts. An attempt to build the necessary minimal umbrella for community would not seek to claim that the group has the right to define all aspects of individual behavior—just the critical ones for community boundaries. To avoid the extremes we need to maintain an awareness of the goals: 1) create an umbrella that fosters and does not stifle community; 2) keep as organizationally efficient a form as we can; 3) attempt to stay within the expectations of as many external constituencies as possible.

Let's take this a step further in application. It is plausible that a non-denominational evangelical college would determine that the maintenance of community necessitates the inclusion of a doctrinal statement in the lifestyle agreement that declares that members of the community seek to be Christ-like, pure of spirit and heart. Such a statement would form a boundary for how the campus members define themselves as compared to people not in their community. The next step would be to determine what specific applications of this doctrinal statement must be included to protect the boundaries of the community. For example, it might be stated that campus members must avoid activities that could reasonably interfere with purity in spirit and heart. They could forbid pornography and agree to give up any rights they have to dance, drink, or use drugs because they can reasonably be expected to undermine the community's members' ability to be Christ-like. These behaviors simply pose too much potential risk to the community's members' fulfillment of the boundary-defining doctrine that defines the community.

Social dancing, as an example, can be harmless, but it also can draw members of the community into avenues of thought and action that are destructive. It has been argued, however, that the umbrella that the community members' live under needs to include what is necessary to establish community boundaries and no more than that, so the organization does not let bureaucracy suffocate the development or maintenance of community.

How do the campus members decide what is necessary and not too much? The answer lies in asking how great the risk is of the activity undermining the doctrinal goal. Pornography, for example, clearly undermines attempts to be Christ-like. Does social dancing? Each campus would have to make a determination of its own. But the question is not whether anyone has the right to participate in the activity and it is not whether it fits into a particular systematic theology that is comprehensive and total. The first question is strictly market economics and not focused on the development of community while also promoting organizational efficiency to accomplish the college's
goals (education). The second is wandering out into the work of the church. The real question is whether we must have this lifestyle limitation to support a specific doctrinal boundary that creates and fosters the community where we can best accomplish our organizational goals of education. These determinations, then, are not based on personal tastes (what students or administrators prefer) but, instead, on organizational awareness. Rather than deciding if I like to see male students wearing earrings (or female students for that matter) I need to decide how much risk this behavior poses to the doctrinal boundary that establishes the very identity of the community the campus has or hopes to have.

As a final example of this process, consider the issue of abortion. Is there a Christian doctrine that indicates a sanctity of life? Yes, there clearly is. Is that doctrine central to the establishment of a useful community on a non-denominational evangelical campus? Surprisingly, the answer could be no. Such a doctrine is central to our identity as Christians, certainly, but not necessarily critical to the definition of a campus community. Remember that we are trying to establish the doctrine that defines an “evangelical Christian community” so that the whole person education being sought can be accomplished. If the campus were a church it would need to be determining doctrine and doctrinal application for its members’ lives in all areas. In fact, that is one reason why all of us maintain a membership in a church. But even though each person needs that doctrional guidance, and even though evangelicalism clearly asserts sanctity of life, it is not necessarily needed to establish the Christian community needed for a campus’ educational goals.

Sanctity of life discussions on campuses are usually driven by a very specific application of doctrine: abortion. If we are being motivated by a general doctrine for the sanctity of life, we will begin crusades to get people to use seat belts, since many traffic fatalities could be avoided by using a seat belt. We would start crusades against poor eating habits since they lead to heart disease and other pathologies that end life early. Typically, however, we are not thinking about a larger view of the sanctity of life. We are, specifically, thinking about abortion. If the criteria for a lifestyle agreement is to only include the applications of doctrine that are necessary— even critical— to the definition of an “evangelical Christian community” that exists for educating men and women in a Christian identity, then only those applications that halt behaviors that are a risk to the community and that can undermine the common good should be included. A statement on abortion might not be relevant to this purpose. I suspect that two objections will be raised. First, some will say “But then we would be saying our community members can have abortions.” Others will say, “We also exist to make a statement to the world outside of our community. We don’t exist in a vacuum.” Let me address these responses in turn.

Not including a specific prohibition against abortion in a campuses’ lifestyle agreement does not indicate that a campuses’ community members can have abortions. We do not specify every possible behavior in existence as right or wrong for our community members. Instead, we seek to provide specific applications of doctrine to those behaviors that are threats to the kind of community we need for our educational goal. If we allowed them to do so, some students and other members of the community would entertain the opportunity and/or temptation to engage in several behaviors many campuses proscribe. Drinking, dancing, etc. can be engaged in as a matter of
personal conscience yet we prohibit them. We do this because those actions have a high possibility of undermining our community through the behavior or misbehavior of some members of the community. We give up those behaviors for the sake of the community whether we agree that they are sin or not. The goal is to create a Christian community for our educational goal—not to establish a comprehensive doctrinal statement. Thus we all make some sacrifices and, as a community, we only address some doctrinal issues and their applications.

To make the point more clear, consider this—we do not have a statement about assisted suicide even though it has been allowed in some circumstances by the courts. Why not? Because we do not believe assisted suicide is a potential undermining influence on our community. The risk of this behavior occurring and having a destructive influence on the campus community is very low. Each campus would have to consider a prohibition on abortion in the same way. The common conclusion in the evangelical arm of Protestantism is that abortion is immoral but the question for a campus lifestyle agreement is not what is wrong, but what poses a risk to our campus community and its goals. On some campuses, the community could conclude that there is a noticeable risk and the behavior must be specifically prohibited in the lifestyle agreement of the campus. On other campuses it might not be mentioned since it poses minimal risk to the campuses' community and ability to create the educational experience desired. If a community supports an ethos that discourages abortion and the potential for such an act is about as high as the potential for an assisted suicide there is little need to include it in the lifestyle agreement. Our goal is to identify the issues of application of doctrine that are critical to the definition and maintenance of our community and its educational goal.

How do we deal with the other possible objection: that we also exist to make a statement to the world outside of our community? To what extent are we here to make a statement to the world around us? I would argue that we should seek to do that in a peripheral way. We are not the Church. Thus, we cannot presume to take on the role of the Church. As a community we will make a statement to the world around us, of course. All communities do. But such a statement should be a natural outgrowth of our efforts to fulfill our goal as a community: educating students as intelligent Christians. We need a Christian community to do this.

Do we need to make pronouncements to the world to establish our Christian community? Does doing so help us accomplish our goal of education? To both of these questions I would answer no. There are specific external constituencies that have been referenced throughout this discussion and Christian colleges do react to them in their efforts to create an efficient organization that develops a community appropriate for the campuses' educational purpose. But making pronouncements to the society at large is qualitatively different than dealing with a college's constituencies who are needed for the fulfillment of its mission. If Christian colleges decide to make systematic theological statements and/or attempt to preach to the society around them through bold statements on what should or should not be done, it will diffuse the resources of the organization to the detriment of the organization's mission.

It is a great temptation of many para-church organizations to expand into new missions. We would be wise to take note that organizations that accomplish this effectively in industrial or post-industrial mass-population societies are those that
build autonomous internal systems to accomplish the different goals. Using a single organizational structure to accomplish two very different purposes – make a statement to society and create Christian education – can only create confusion and ineffectiveness.

If we decide that our goal as an institution, or that our creation and maintenance of a Christian community, necessitates making public pronouncements on all issues of moral consequence we had best start writing a lot of news releases. The only circumstance I can envision that would necessitate our doing this is an external threat to our continued community or educational goal. Public pronouncements should be made from individuals or other communities that exist for this purpose – like the church body.

**Who must sign the lifestyle agreement?**

On many campuses discussions abound regarding who should sign a lifestyle agreement. Should the members of the governing board? The students? The faculty? What about hired staff? This is another area of debate that can be mediated by recognizing that a lifestyle agreement is a device we use to establish a community aimed at an educational goal. In deciding to whom a lifestyle agreement should apply we should seek to determine when and where it must be applied to maintain community. This can be done, to a large extent, by establishing at the outset, which individuals qualify as members of the community. To identify who is a member of a community, we need to return to the definition of community. A community is as a collection of people who have consistent and regular interaction that is intimate and face-to-face such that the members of the group come to have a shared identity.

Community is determined by relationships maintained across time within a shared context—but not just any relationships. Communities are based on groups of people whose relationships affect the identities of one another. If the interaction is not affecting the members’ ideas of who they are, then it is too shallow to foster community. If an individual consistently interacts with a group of people who have some sense of common identity and if he or she affects the group members’ ideas of who they are and what kind of people they should be, then that individual is a member of that community. Who is a part of a campus community, then? Anyone who has consistent interaction with the community members and affects the self-definitions of the other members. Hence, a fourth underlying assumption.

**Assumption 4:** Those people who have a regular relationship with the other members of the community and have a notable impact on the self-definitions of the other community members are themselves members of the community.

Do the faculty do these two things? Yes. Do traditional students do them? Yes. Administration? Yes. People in these three groups obviously are members of the campus community. Other individuals, however, may be harder to classify.

Do Trustees or Regents have regular interaction with the other community members and have notable impact on their self-definitions? What about part-time students? In large measure our response depends on how much interaction these individuals have.
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with other community members and the amount of effect they have on the identities adopted by others on the campus.

In the case of part-time students, we may question how many credits they are taking and how much out of class time they spend with others from the community. For predominantly residential colleges, part-time students will have a difficult time getting into the student sub-culture because they are missing the important social linkages gained through eating and living together. At other colleges, part-time students form a notable portion of the campus student body and thus the very nature of the social networks will have become more inclusive of them. On campuses where it is determined that part-time students have regular interaction of great enough impact that they affect others in the community then they would need to sign a lifestyle agreement.

Part-time faculty, on the other hand, probably has more interaction with the students in their class than the part-time students do. They also have a position from which they can have a much greater impact on some other members' identities. It is hard to imagine a Christian college where part-time faculty would have little effect or interaction with others in the community. This suggests that they should sign the lifestyle agreement. Conclusion three becomes evident then:

Conclusion 3: Anyone who has regular interaction with other campus community members and has a notable effect on the type of person others choose to be should sign the lifestyle agreement.

When does the lifestyle agreement apply?

The approach presented for answering the "what" and "who" questions can also serve as a guide us in determining when the lifestyle agreement should apply. It is sometimes argued that when students are gone from campus for a break or to visit parents they are not under the authority of any lifestyle agreement at the campus. At some campuses it has been argued that students need not adhere to the agreement as soon as they are off campus. Similar kinds of arguments are made for workers at the campus. To settle these kinds of issues we need a rationale for when the lifestyle agreement applies that is based on its reason for existence. In this case, I will begin by stating the conclusion and then offer an explanation.

Conclusion 4: A lifestyle agreement applies whenever a person's behavior can impact the continuance of community or its goals. It applies to the extent necessary to maintain us as contributing members of the community and its educational goals.

Communities exist above and beyond the members in them, but certainly the members in them affect the communities of which they are a part. In fact, this is a central assumption to this discussion.

Assumption 5: Each individual member of a community affects the nature of that community through what he or she does and through who he or she is.

When individuals are gathered together on the college campus few have doubts that
the lifestyle agreement applies because it is implicitly recognized that violations of the covenant would violate our community. Individuals recognize that to be part of a group, personal choices must become subservient to the best interests of the larger group if we wish to be part of the group. This is true for any collection of people - family, workplace, church - that wants to maintain some common identity for some length of time. Each requires certain voluntary sacrifices on the part of its members for it to exist.

Now, however, is there some reason that we would make these same sacrifices, or any sacrifices, while not in the group? To arrive at an answer to this question, let's begin by comparing certain behaviors when they happen on and off campus. If a member of a residence hall openly brought people into the residence hall to take drugs and be sexually active, we would rightly see that the behavior as detrimental to our community. This behavior would violate the shared trust and reaffirmation of Christian principles that our community is based on as defined by the doctrinal statements and applications put forth in the lifestyle agreement. But what if this person did these things while off campus during spring break? Would they still violate our community? They would if the behavior changed them in a way that made them a negative influence when they returned to campus.

Assumption 6: What we do as individuals, while away from any given community, affects who we are.

Let's consider the implications of assumptions 5 and 6. Who we are affects the community. What we do, affects who we are. If a person consorts with prostitutes and violates moral standards it changes that person. When that person returns to the community he or she will very probably undermine the community. Not necessarily by continuing the problematic behavior, but by undermining the degree to which he or she contributes to the community. Communities survive through the contributions of their members. If members are not truly committed they not only quit contributing the support necessary to maintain community, but will also bleed away the contributions of others through their infusion of such detrimental influences as apathy, cynicism, or malice.

How much does a lifestyle agreement apply, then, while we are away from our campus community? It applies to the degree necessary to maintain us as contributing members of the community. This approach moves us away from dichotomous ideas about application. It is not an all or nothing application. It is, instead, a question of intensity of application. Some behavior is always restricted. When involved in sexual immorality, for example, a person changes. When he or she returns to the community after such involvement, he or she becomes a negative influence. Other behaviors are less consequential. For example, Episcopalians are served wine when partaking in Communion. As an Episcopalian, is it permissible to partake of the wine in Communion if all alcohol is forbidden in one's campus lifestyle agreement? The answer depends on how much effect consumption will have on your ability to be a contributing member of the community when you return. In the Episcopalian's case, it won't have any effect at all.

With regard to organizational efficiency, it is unfortunate that this criterion does not make living out a lifestyle agreement clear cut. But the organizational efficiency
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gained by having total acceptance or denial of off-campus behaviors that would not be allowed on campus does not provide the fertile ground where discernment can grow. Discernment is not only a great trait in community members, but also is part of what we hope to develop in our students anyway. But it does leave us with a more ambiguous standard to apply to off-campus behavior. How do we decide when a behavior is or is not acceptable? And how do we help students and others know how to effectively discern what they can and cannot do? Instead of being able to look at a check list and say “good” or “bad” we must use an approach like this: you entered into an agreement with the community voluntarily, so always try to err by being too careful in your liberties for the sake of the community. If I find myself thinking, “Can I drink in this situation? Does the lifestyle agreement apply now?” I have to assume it does and place the burden of proof on claims that it does not. With this approach I need a compelling reason to move outside the lifestyle agreement because I am putting the common good before my individual gratification.

So, does a lifestyle agreement apply during spring break? Yes. It applies to whatever extent is necessary to maintain a person as a contributing member of the community. Can faculty do things in their homes that students cannot do in the residence halls? Yes, if the behaviors do not change who they are such that the faculty members impact negatively on the community. The lifestyle agreement applies to whatever extent is necessary to maintain them as contributing members of the community. And they would be very wise to err on the side of care for the community.

If a campus has decided that social dancing poses too great a risk to the moral identities of some of the campus members and so has prohibited it, each member of the community must consider this before engaging in social dancing while away from the campus. But even if dances in the residence hall focus the attention of some students on ideas or drives that will negatively affect their involvement in the community, dancing with my wife in the privacy of our living room is not likely to change me in such a way that I would have a negative effect on the community. The real question is whether doing some behavior will make me a less constructive member of the community I have voluntarily chosen to be involved in.

For the few short years they are in the residence halls, the students will probably need to sacrifice a few more individual liberties for the community than faculty and staff do at home. It is worth noting, however, that most employees will be making their sacrifice of individual choice for the sake of the community long after any given student has graduated. Each member of the community makes a noticeable sacrifice of individual rights for the common good.

Two responses I would expect to hear are, “This means I decide how much I’ll be affected, so I can do whatever I want” and “This isn’t fair. It means faculty and others can do things that I can’t just because they are outside of the physical proximity of the community more often.” These responses both focus on individual rights instead of the common good of the community. The first response misses the point entirely. Consideration of the effect on the community is not something to be whimsically tossed aside. To boil down what has just been presented to individual license implies that the lifestyle agreement and the community it establishes are trivial. If a person views them as trivial he or she should not join the community in the first place. Concern for the community does free you to live by the liberty of your own conscience,
but your conscience is bounded by a voluntarily given pledge to the community. The second response also misses the point. If we are arguing about who gets what, we have already lost sight of the community we claim to be voluntarily joining and supporting.

So how does this affect certain internal constituencies like non-traditional students? Does the lifestyle agreement apply to students who live off-campus? If non-traditional students who are consistently enrolled are members of the community, then they would sign the lifestyle agreement and must ask themselves how strongly it applies at any given time. While they are at home or at work they must decide whether any given behavior will detract from their ability to be a contributing member of the community. If they choose to view this as license to do as they please, they have violated both the agreement and their pledge to the community. They should, instead, seek to do what they believe is honestly acceptable without making themselves a detriment to the community and its educational goal. If there arises a disagreement between the student's view and the student development faculty's view of what is acceptable behavior under this philosophy, the good of the community outweighs other considerations. Further, the organizational realities for having a lifestyle agreement necessitate that the campus staff has to bear the burden of making a correct decision and the student is bound to live within it. This assumes that the student development faculty member is seeking to carefully apply limits only as necessary and not just in the way most convenient for him or her and it assumes that the student understands that voluntary submission to the community bears this kind of a price.

Since our focus is on the good of the community, and the lifestyle agreement is a statement of doctrine and its application that is necessary for the establishment of community, we can also note that a person of integrity cannot cheat the system by saying "I'll do this proscribed behavior now and then reconcile to the community later." With that insincere approach reconciliation is not truly possible. He (or she) has made choice of who to be that makes him a negative influence on the community when he returns to it. If a person violates a lifestyle agreement and then sincerely seeks to reconcile to the community it is a different matter. A person also cannot in good faith say "I will sign the lifestyle agreement and then behave out of accord with the community's expectations because the community is wrong and needs to change its stance anyway." This response is, put baldly, a betrayal of the community. If a person feels that the community is wrong in some doctrinal stance or application then he or she has two choices. Stay out of the community and share his or her concerns from without, or join the community and live within the expectations of the lifestyle agreement while sharing those concerns from within.
CONCLUSION

A lifestyle agreement is a means to establish a Christian community for the fulfillment of a university’s mission statement. I have tried to demonstrate how certain thorny questions can be answered through a focus on the sociological forces that drive the need for a lifestyle agreement: community, organizational efficiency, and external constituencies. Specifically, it has been suggested that decisions about what to include in a lifestyle agreement can be made by remembering that the agreement is a means to establish an educational community. Consequently, only those doctrinal statements and their applications that are necessary for the community need to be included. I have also suggested that a focus on community can assist us in determining who should sign the lifestyle agreement. And, I have suggested that it can be determined when a lifestyle agreement applies to any given community member by remembering that as long as we intend to return to the community we should avoid any behavior outside the allowances of the lifestyle agreement that could denigrate our ability to be a contributing member of the community. Finally, I suggested that to minimize the risk to the community by the exercise of individual liberty, the good of the community be weighed ahead of individual rights.

Throughout this discussion, I have sought to address the real issues of application that it raises. Even so, my primary goal has been to provide an approach to lifestyle agreements that can guide our efforts to build effective ones. There is room for debate about the conclusions drawn from the approach presented. Others using the same sociological approach might disagree with the conclusions presented as to what should be included in a lifestyle agreement, who signs it, and when and to what extent the agreement applies. The gain of using this approach is not that everyone agrees on specifics, but, rather, that all will understand the basis of those disagreements and still be able to construct an internally consistent lifestyle agreement.

For each of our campuses, community is the foundation from which we seek to accomplish our educational goal. A lifestyle agreement is no more, and certainly no less, than the means by which we establish the boundaries and nature of that community.
REFERENCES