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UNDERGRADUATE ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL MINORITIES  
BASED ON RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Brady Schaar

May 2014

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Brady Schaar

entitled

Undergraduate Attitudes Toward Sexual Minorities Based on Religious Beliefs

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

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### Abstract

Sexual identity development has become an increasingly important issue in higher education over the last 40 years. This has prompted an increased level of discussion concerning sexuality on university campuses. Many factors can have an impact on undergraduate students' attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons, and multiple studies have shown that religious beliefs are one of the most important factors in shaping student attitudes toward sexual minorities. In order to examine how undergraduate students' attitudes toward LGB persons are affected by their personal religious beliefs, a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted at a small, liberal arts, faith-based university in the Midwestern United States. This study consisted of a dozen one-on-one interviews with residence life student leaders. The results of the study examined a potential cognitive distinction between sexual activity and sexual identity, specific attributes of faith that can have an impact on attitudes toward LGB persons, and the impact of personal relationships with LGB persons on attitudes toward sexual minorities.

## Acknowledgements

So many people to thank and so little time. First (and most importantly), I thank God for giving me the opportunity to go on this journey and giving me the courage to actually say yes. There is no reason I am in this position except the grace of God, and I am so thankful to him for that.

To my thesis supervisor, Tim Herrmann. Thank you so much for pushing me to excellence throughout this process. Your guidance, wisdom, and support over the last two years have been so appreciated, and I have valued greatly being able to learn from you. And to the other MAHE faculty members, learning from you has been an honor and a privilege. Your guidance has had a huge impact on me over the last two years, and I am incredibly grateful.

To my friends in Cohort Six. You have helped me learn so much about what it means to be a true member of a learning community. Your support for me has encouraged me in learning how to be authentic, and I cannot thank you enough for that. From classes to coffee nights to conferences, we have had so many fantastic experiences, and I wouldn't trade it for anything.

To my fellow staff members, professional and assistant, in Taylor World Outreach: Mary, Kelsie, Jenny, Katie, Jon, Julie, and Eric. Working with all of you has been an incredible blessing and privilege. You have helped me realize so many different

passions in myself and helped to confirm some things that aren't passions. Like reflective painting.

Finally, I want to thank my parents, Steve and Jola Schaar. Mom and Dad, your support through this entire process has meant the world to me. You have helped me through the good times and the bad, and I would not be the person I am today without your care, guidance, and love.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

John is a freshman at a small faith-based institution. John has had an excellent experience thus far in higher education, but John is also apprehensive about discussing his sexual identity. John is exclusively attracted to the same sex and is unsure how to broach the subject in the context of his faith-based university where the campus climate does not seem to foster healthy discussion regarding sexuality. John has heard a large amount of religious posturing from other students in the residence hall concerning gay marriage and homosexuality, and this potentially insensitive conversation has left John very discouraged about having a genuine discussion surrounding his issues of sexual identity.

Despite this, John decides to talk with one of his residential assistants, Steve. Steve responds positively in their initial conversation, and he is very open to continuing this conversation with John. However, Steve is very unsure how to continue this conversation. He has been raised in a conservative Christian household where sexual minorities are not viewed favorably. Indeed, Steve's home church community holds a very conservative stance regarding issues of sexual orientation, and his church has been vocal in their opinions on the subject. Steve has also never known anyone who dealt with same-sex attraction or anyone who identified as gay or bisexual. Therefore, while Steve

wants to continue the conversation with John in order to help him deal with his issues of sexual identity, Steve does not feel prepared to have this conversation.

The situation described above raises a plethora of issues including sexual identity development, religious beliefs, campus-wide discussions concerning sexuality, and residence life on a college campus, to name a few. In particular, the connection between religious beliefs and attitudes toward sexual identity is an essential component of the situation. The issue of sexual identity is one that many college students face today, and it is an issue that student affairs professionals must be prepared to discuss and understand. In order to address the topic, the current study was conducted to examine the connection between religious beliefs and attitudes toward sexual minorities.

### **Sexual Identity in Higher Education**

Sexuality is an issue that institutions of higher education have faced since their creation. However, the topic of sexual identity development has increased in prominence and prevalence over the last four decades. Researchers such as Cass (1979) and D'Augelli (1994) developed theories of sexual identity development that deal with homosexuality and bisexuality. Cass' (1979) theory of sexual identity formation stated that non-heterosexual persons move away from a low awareness and acceptance of a gay or lesbian identity toward a final stage of a gay or lesbian identity that is integrated with all other aspects of the self. Meanwhile, D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model of LGB identity development detailed six different processes that LGB persons undergo in order to establish a non-heterosexual identity. These theories have been developed and refined over the past forty years, and the fight for gay rights has concurrently increased in social and societal prominence (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). With these

theories of sexual identity development and with the increased prominence of the gay rights movement, society has developed a greater awareness of homosexual and bisexual persons. Such awareness extends to research concerning attitudes toward homosexuality and the factors that influence those attitudes.

Numerous studies have been conducted in order to examine the effects of certain factors on attitudes toward homosexuality. These factors range from gender (Chonody, Siebert, & Rutledge, 2009) to previous interaction or relationships with lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) persons (Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002). One of the main factors in determining personal attitudes toward homosexuality and LGB persons is religion. Multiple studies have been conducted to examine the effect of personal religious beliefs on attitudes toward homosexuality in college students (Batson, Floyd, Meyer, & Winner, 1999; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1992; McFarland, 1989). Religion is one of the key factors influencing student attitudes toward homosexuality, and its effects should be examined and researched in order to better understand student attitudes toward LGB persons.

### **Connecting Religious Beliefs to Sexual Identity**

Many studies have been conducted concerning religious beliefs and their effect on attitudes toward LGB persons. McFarland (1989) linked fundamental religious beliefs to greater discrimination against homosexual persons, while Batson et al. (1999) connected intrinsic religious beliefs with increased negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Additionally, research has shown that Protestants are more accepting of negative attitudes toward homosexuality than other religious groups (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1992). All three of these studies and many more have been conducted with college students. However, only a small number of the studies were conducted at religiously-affiliated or faith-based

institutions. These findings have great meaning and relevance in the context of a Christian university. The connection between religion and attitudes toward LGB persons is of utmost importance to Christian institutions of higher education because it can imply an institutional position on homosexuality through association. Additionally, the vast majority of students who attend religiously-affiliated institutions are religious themselves. Therefore, research conducted on the connection between religious beliefs and attitudes toward homosexuality would likely be connected to many students who attend faith-based institutions.

The issue is important for college students in numerous aspects of their lives. College is more than a time for just education; it is a time for personal development. Multiple theories examining the personal development of students have been created, developed, and discussed. Attitudes toward homosexuality and LGB persons can be affected by many aspects of these theories. Kohlberg's (1958) theory of moral development examined the development of moral reasoning in college students, specifically centering on the principle of justice. Perry's (1968) theory of ethical development portrayed college students as moving from a dualistic mindset of right and wrong to a position of commitment while understanding and accepting other beliefs. And Chickering's (1993) theory of identity development touched on the effect of environmental factors in the identity of college students, including institutional objective and size, student relationships with faculty, and teaching curriculum. All of the above theories of student development can have an effect on student attitudes toward homosexuality.

Indeed, college is the primary place and time when students are able to develop their own beliefs and value systems that are influenced by, yet independent of, the belief systems in which they were raised. As such, many students spend time in college developing their own beliefs regarding different issues like homosexuality. These beliefs can be influenced by a great number of things, including personal religious beliefs. Therefore, understanding the influence of these beliefs on the development of college students is quite meaningful for student affairs professionals. In 2001, Bowen and Bourgeois discovered widespread evidence of pluralistic ignorance among college students regarding homosexuality. That is, the surveyed college students rated themselves as significantly less anti-gay than either their friends or the typical college student. This study indicated a lack of discussion among college students regarding the issue of homosexuality. If students are not discussing the issue with each other, then it is likely that the university is not discussing the issue with students.

The topic is relevant in multiple aspects of student development, particularly with regard to residence life. There are students living at faith-based universities who identify as gay or bisexual, and it is important to understand how the religious beliefs of other students might affect attitudes toward or perceptions of those students who identify as gay or bisexual. Furthermore, there are students at faith-based universities who experience same-sex attraction but do not necessarily identify as gay or bisexual. For those students, it is helpful to understand other students' attitudes toward or perceptions of homosexuality because those attitudes and perceptions will affect how those students address and understand their own same-sex attraction. Because of the stigma attached to issues of sexual identity in a Christian environment, these students can suffer from a great

deal of shame, from a feeling of being unworthy of love (Struthers, 2009). If these students do not feel safe discussing this issue with anyone else on their Christian campus, then they are more likely to feel isolated in their struggles. Indeed, many students dealing with same-sex attraction on Christian college campuses often struggle with thoughts of suicide (Slagg, 2009), and studies have shown that the rates of suicidal ideation and attempt are comparatively higher for LGB persons (SPRC, 2008).

**Research Question**

Therefore, the present study attempted to answer the following question regarding college students and homosexuality: How do college students' personal religious beliefs affect their attitudes toward and perceptions of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of the current study was to gain a greater understanding of how undergraduate students' perceptions of and attitudes toward sexual minorities are affected by their personal religious beliefs. In order to understand the connection, one must have a solid framework regarding different types of religious orientation and factors that can inform religious orientation. Additionally, general attitudes toward sexual minorities must be examined. A great deal of research has been conducted to expand upon the connection between religious orientation and attitudes toward sexual minorities, and this research must be examined. Some Christians make a cognitive distinction between sexual activity and sexual identity, and this is important to understand their motivations regarding their interactions with sexual minorities. Finally, some students must navigate sexual identity development amidst a pre-existing religion, and student affairs professionals should work to acknowledge and understand this process.

#### **Types of Religious Orientation**

In order to examine the effect that religious beliefs can have on perceptions of sexual minorities, religious beliefs must first be examined and discussed. Multiple types of religious orientations exist, and research has shown that these differing orientations can be predictors of different attitudes toward sexual minorities (McFarland, 1989; Whitley, 2009). These different types of religious orientations should be examined and



studied in order to better understand the impact they can have on attitudes toward and perceptions of sexual minorities.

In their foundational model, Allport and Ross (1967) developed an orientation describing extrinsic religion in which religion is used for ulterior motives such as “security, comfort, status, or social support” (p. 441) and intrinsic religion in which a person’s whole life and motivation is oriented on and centered around religion. Batson (1971) later developed a model of religious orientation that included a quest orientation. In a quest orientation, religion is used as an open-minded search for truth; some individuals use religious beliefs to seek for truth rather than using those beliefs to inform truth. Religious fundamentalism is also an important orientation to examine and understand. Religious fundamentalism reflects “the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contain the...essential inerrant truth about humanity and the deity” (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992, p. 118). These orientations shape how a person thinks about and interacts with the rest of the world, and this impact must be understood when considering how religious beliefs can affect attitudes toward and perceptions of sexual minorities.

### **Attitudes Toward Sexual Minorities**

The general attitudes of the population of the United States have become increasingly liberal in the last 25 years concerning the morality of homosexuality. The shift in attitude has also extended to civil liberties for lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons; Americans are becoming less willing to restrict civil liberties for LGB persons. This shift appears to be due, at least in part, to increasing levels of education throughout the population (Loftus, 2001). However, multiple factors have an effect on attitudes toward

sexual minorities, and although the general trend in the population has shifted toward increasing levels of acceptance, that is not the case for every demographic in the United States' population. Differing levels of acceptance exist within different populations and demographics.

In 2002, Herek conducted a study using data from a 1999 survey to examine attitudes toward bisexual men and women. Herek examined a multitude of factors to assess their impact on attitudes toward bisexual men and women, including gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation. A distinct difference was observed when considering gender; heterosexual women rated homosexual persons significantly more favorably than bisexual persons, while heterosexual men rated other males less favorably than females. Concerning the attitudes of heterosexual men, the orientation of the target was insignificant. In a later study, Castillo, Muscarella, and Szuchman (2011) examined how gender differences affected college students' perceptions of same-sex sexual harassment. They discovered that unattractive professors were generally perceived to be more harassing, particularly by male participants. Furthermore, students who self-reported higher negative attitudes toward homosexuality perceived greater harassment than those students who held positive attitudes toward homosexuality. This appears to indicate that those with negative attitudes toward homosexuality were more likely to hold negative stereotypes and believed that homosexual persons engaged in socially inappropriate behavior such as sexual harassment.

Comfort levels with sexual minorities (and perception of other students' comfort levels) are also a significant component to examine when discussing sexual minorities and college students. Bowen and Bourgeois (2001) examined college students' personal

comfort with LGB students and their perceptions of other students' comfort with LGB students. They found that previous contact or a prior personal relationship with an LGB student indicated increased acceptance of sexual minorities, and the presence of LGB students in the same residence hall was also found to be an indicator of increased acceptance. However, they also discovered a sense of pluralistic ignorance surrounding student attitudes toward homosexuality. That is, the respondents indicated that their friends and fellow students had a lower acceptance rate than what was actually reported. This indicated that while students had increased in their comfort with LGB students, they still did not discuss the issue with their peers as they consistently believed that their peers are less comfortable with LGB students than they actually were.

In 2011, Wolff, Himes, Miller Kwon, and Bollinger conducted a study with approximately 320 college students at a faith-based institution in California. They were examining Evangelical Christian students' attitudes toward different issues involving sexual minorities (e.g., job discrimination based on orientation, gay marriage). The findings indicated that Evangelical students made a distinction between general issues (e.g., job equality) and issues with a higher level of morality (e.g., gay marriage or adoption): "In nonmoral spheres, Evangelicals do not hold more negative attitudes than [those] of the general population" (Wolff et al., 2011, p. 214). These moral intuitions often become a key component that shapes the college student's response to issues of higher morality, and disgust can be particularly impactful in shaping these intuitions (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009). Additionally, the researchers found that those students who knew a gay or lesbian friend or relative held significantly less negative attitudes toward sexual minorities:

Knowing a gay or lesbian person is also likely to soften their affective response and activate highly prized Christian relational values of love, charity, grace, and humility while alleviating fear and anxiety about what a gay person might be like. (Wolff et al., 2011, p. 215)

Previous relationships with LGB persons have been shown in the past to be a predictor of positive attitudes toward sexual minorities (Bassett et al., 2005; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002). However, one must recognize the religious aspect of this positive predictor, particularly when considering a “conservative Christian theology wherein all persons are created and valued by God” (Rosik, Griffith, & Cruz, 2007, p. 16).

### **Differences Based on Religious Orientation**

A great deal of research has been conducted examining the connection between religious orientation and attitudes toward sexual minorities. In 1989, McFarland examined how differing religious orientations affected discriminatory attitudes. A quest orientation correlated negatively with all discriminatory attitudes, while intrinsic, extrinsic, and fundamentalist orientations correlated positively with discriminatory attitudes toward homosexuality (McFarland, 1989). Rowatt et al. (2006) also found religious fundamentalism to be a strong predictor of negative implicit attitudes toward gay men relative to heterosexuals. There was not enough information discovered in the study to imply causation, but there was a clear correlation between religious fundamentalism and negative attitudes toward sexual minorities (Rowatt et al., 2006).

In 1999, Batson et al. examined the effect that intrinsic religion had on attitudes toward sexual minorities. Students who reported high levels of intrinsic religion were less likely to aid students who were gay or students who were interested in supporting gay

civil rights. The researchers were trying to determine if intrinsic religion was associated with universal compassion, meaning that participants would be more likely to render aid to anyone regardless of sexual orientation or beliefs. However, they found intrinsic religion to be more associated with tribal compassion, meaning that participants were more likely to alter or limit their aid based on sexual orientation or their beliefs about sexual orientation. Students with high intrinsic religion justified their greater discrimination as a stand for moral equality rather than a stand against sexual minorities (Batson et al., 1999). Additionally, Whitley (2009) looked at the connection between different forms of religiosity and attitudes toward sexual minorities. The research showed that most forms of religiosity, including fundamentalism, religious service attendance, orthodoxy, self-rated religiosity, and intrinsic orientation were related to negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Extrinsic orientation was unrelated to attitudes toward sexual minorities, while quest orientation was related to positive attitudes (Whitley, 2009).

Other researchers have also examined different religious factors such as service attendance or religious doctrine. Finlay and Walther (2003) analyzed homophobia based on religious affiliation and attendance of religious services. They found that conservative Protestant denominations had the highest homophobia scores, followed by moderate Protestants, Catholics, and liberal Protestants. There was considerable variation within each group, but a higher frequency of service attendance was strongly related to homophobic attitudes. Lottes and Kuriloff (1992) examined which religious affiliations were more tolerant of negative attitudes toward homosexuality, and they found that Protestants were more accepting of negative attitudes toward sexual minorities than

Catholics or Jews. Finally, Chamberlain (2009) discussed the growing age gap regarding attitudes toward sexual minorities and Christian Evangelicals. Younger evangelicals were over twice as likely as older evangelicals to support gay marriage (24% to 10%).

Younger evangelicals were also more likely to know someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and the personal contact could lead to more positive attitudes toward sexual minorities (Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Lance, 2002).

### **Distinction Between Identity and Activity**

A significant amount of research has also been conducted regarding whether a distinction can be made between sexual identity and sexual activity, a distinction which recently became the subject of multiple authors and studies (Paris, 2011; Yarhouse, 2010). Bassett et al. (2000) conducted a study to examine whether Christians made a cognitive distinction between sexual orientation and sexual behavior. The researchers found that there was a different evaluation between homosexual persons who were sexually active and homosexual persons who were celibate. These students were able to cognitively separate identity from behavior, thus placing value on the person instead of the action. Furthermore, this different evaluation also had specific behavioral implications; students who were “selectively rejecting”—who accepted celibate homosexual persons but rejected sexually active homosexual persons—were more likely to give money to a church that was also “selectively rejecting.” On the other hand, “universally rejecting” students—those who had equally negative attitudes toward celibate and sexually active homosexual individuals—gave significantly less money to churches that were “selectively rejecting” (Bassett et al., 2000). Therefore, some students made an actual cognitive distinction between sexual identity and sexual behavior, and the

distinction had clear behavioral implications for these students in terms of their monetary donations.

Additional studies have shown that some Christians make a meaningful cognitive distinction between sexual identity and sexual activity. Rosik et al. (2007) surveyed 155 students at a Christian university to assess their attitudes toward celibate and sexually active homosexual men and women. They found that those who maintained a person-behavior distinction held more positive attitudes toward gay men than those who were comparatively more rejecting or did not emphasize a person-behavior distinction. The distinction helped Christians to separate the value of homosexual persons from the value of homosexual behavior, thus orienting the value system around the person rather than the behavior.

### **Interventions**

Interventions to improve college student attitudes toward sexual minorities have also been the subject of several research studies. In particular, courses on human sexuality have been shown to have a positive impact on student attitudes toward sexual minorities (Lance, 2002; Lance, 2008). Chonody et al. (2009) conducted a study to examine the effect of an elective human sexuality course on attitudes toward homosexuality. The results of the research showed that the course was effective in improving attitudes toward LGB persons across all demographics, although males had a greater positive shift in their attitudes than females. In the study, religious affiliation was not shown to be a major factor in the improvement of attitudes toward LGB persons (Chonody et al., 2009).

Other studies have also tried to determine the effectiveness of an “intervention” with the goal of improving student attitudes toward sexual minorities (Bassett et al., 2005). The research found that “universally rejecting” and “universally accepting” (prior to the intervention) students both experienced increased acceptance of homosexual persons. One item of note with the research of Bassett et al. (2005) was that improvement in the acceptance of sexually active homosexual individuals was greater than improvement in the acceptance of celibate homosexual individuals. This may indicate that the intervention had a greater effect on attitudes toward homosexual behavior rather than homosexual persons.

### **Crossover of Gay and Religious Identities**

Finally, an important aspect to consider in research concerning religion and sexual minorities is the experience of those who would identify as religious and lesbian, gay, or bisexual simultaneously. This aspect is particularly relevant when considering the issue in the context of a faith-based institution of higher education (Hill, 2009). Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, and Hecker (2001) highlighted the relevance of a narrative approach for this type of research. While commonalities are often shared among those who are simultaneously religious and lesbian, gay, or bisexual, each person’s story is different and unique. This is of utmost pertinence to acknowledge and understand if student affairs professionals (Christian professionals, in particular) wish to aid students in integrating their sexual identity with their religious or spiritual identity (Buchanan et al., 2001).

The role of family is also a significant component in the process of sexual identity development and formation. One of the key stages in D’Augelli’s (1994) model of sexual identity development is disclosing the differing sexual orientation to parents and family.



Research has been conducted to examine the role that religion plays for family members of LGB persons. Lease and Shulman (2003) developed a survey designed to connect the role of religion in family members' acceptance of LGB persons. The most common positive theme that emerged from the research was believing in the unconditional love of God that extended to family members who are sexual minorities. This theme was most common and prevalent, but some themes also emerged which showed how religion could be a hindrance to the acceptance of LGB family members. Some family members reported difficulty with intolerant or unaccepting church members, others reported encouragement from religious groups for a change in sexual orientation, and others reported issues with the doctrine of some faith groups that viewed homosexuality as sinful (Lease & Shulman, 2003). The themes all show the importance of religion for family members of LGB persons.

### **Identity Integration**

The intersection of gay and Christian identities can be particularly challenging for students on a Christian college campus. Students must determine how they wish to integrate the identities of sexuality and spirituality or if they want one identity to take supremacy over the other. Some students may feel forced to choose between two worlds, to choose between sexuality and spirituality. Other students may seek to integrate the worlds of sexuality and spirituality in a manner that makes sense of or makes meaning from a student's entire experience (Buchanan et al., 2001). Some students may seek to fulfill both of these outcomes simultaneously. This underscores the helpfulness of a descriptive approach for working with LGB students on a Christian college campus. A descriptive approach "seeks to describe a viewpoint rather than making a prescription

concerning what ought to be” (McCarty, 2009, p. 39). Utilizing a descriptive approach emphasizes understanding instead of endorsement, and students would be able to hear multiple viewpoints on the subject of sexual minorities without feeling forced to defend their own personal ideals. This also would likely help students understand why certain religions teach what they do regarding human sexuality and sexual minorities (McCarty, 2009).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Design**

In order to collect information on the research question presented, a qualitative study was conducted to examine better and define the connection between personal religious beliefs and attitudes toward sexual minorities. The study utilized a phenomenological design. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to examine a specific experience and “to determine what [that] experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The phenomenological design of the current study allowed the researcher to examine the experience of personal religious beliefs and their impact on attitudes toward sexual minorities. Additionally, the design was helpful in examining the wide breadth of experiences that accompany the issue. Research has highlighted the importance of a narrative or descriptive approach when examining the topic of religiosity and sexuality (Buchanan et al., 2001; McCarty, 2009), and a phenomenological design allowed the researcher to account better for the differences in personal experiences.

#### **Participants**

The study was conducted at a faith-based, residential, liberal arts university located in the Midwest. The university’s student body consisted of approximately 1900 students. Interviews were conducted with residential life student leaders. Residence life

student leaders provide an acceptable convenience sample for the larger population of the university. These students were on the front lines of residence life with other college students, and they likely had residents who dealt with issues of sexual identity and orientation. Contact theory indicates that those persons who have had more interaction with sexual minorities have spent more time thinking about and processing the issue of sexual identity (Lance, 2002). Therefore, these students were more likely to have spent time processing and thinking about issues of sexual identity. Additionally, these students were all at least sophomores, meaning that they were more likely to have a more developed spiritual or religious identity as opposed to their freshman peers.

## **Procedures**

Qualitative interviews were conducted with students in order to assess the connection between religious beliefs and attitudes toward sexual minorities. These semi-structured interviews consisted of protocol questions (see Appendix A) designed to examine the connection between religious beliefs and attitudes toward sexual minorities. In particular, these questions sought to determine whether students were able to make a cognitive distinction between sexual identity and sexual activity and what that distinction might look like. Literature has shown this to be an important area to consider in future research; therefore, the current research attempted to examine that distinction (Bassett et al., 2000). The interviews were one-on-one between the student and the researcher, and the questions were primarily open-ended in order to allow students a greater deal of latitude in their responses. Furthermore, a pilot interview was conducted in order to examine the effectiveness of the protocol questions. This interview took place before the remaining interviews were conducted and helped to refine the protocol questions while

providing the researcher with a certain level of comfort in conducting the remaining interviews. The pilot interview was utilized in the final study.

The researcher interviewed twelve students in order to gain an effective convenience sample from the university (Creswell, 2007). In order to recruit student participants, the researcher visited residence life staff meetings in all of the residence halls on campus to inform student leaders of the study. Students were then able to sign up if interested, and they were selected at random by the researcher for participation in the study. The researcher also contacted the residence life professional staff before attending these meetings to seek their input and guidance and how to best inform the student staff of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were recorded via audio by the researcher and were transcribed at a later date. Finally, the researcher coded the interviews in order to make sense out of the data. The objective of the coding process is to allow the researcher to identify the main points from each interview and to subsequently combine and collapse those points into the key themes of the research (Creswell, 2007). By coding each interview, the researcher was able to compare the interviews with each other and come to an informed conclusion regarding the overarching themes of all the participants and their responses. The process also allowed the researcher to compare the key themes from the interviews with the key themes from the research literature, thereby providing an opportunity and platform for discussing the results of the study in the context of the established literature.

**Benefits**

The research provided a more informed understanding of how religious beliefs and religious orientation could affect attitudes toward and perceptions of sexual minorities. Student affairs professionals will interact with students who are dealing with issues of sexual identity, they will interact with students who are dealing with faith development, and they will interact with students who are dealing with both simultaneously. In order to be effective practitioners, one must have a solid framework and understanding of how these two important developmental aspects interact with each other. Furthermore, the current research could help colleges or universities in understanding how to help students who are dealing with issues of sexual identity. It could also help student affairs professionals to encourage other students to interact with sexual minority students in a meaningful way that creates space for necessary conversations. It is hoped that this research will provide all of these benefits in order to improve student affairs practice at institutions of higher education.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

For the purposes of the current study, 12 student leaders were interviewed. Six of the participants were men, while six were women. Two of the participants were sophomores, seven were juniors, and five were seniors. Some students are referred to by name, but these names are pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of each participant. In each interview, a series of semi-structured protocol questions were asked for the purpose of developing an understanding of how students' religious beliefs affect their attitude toward sexual minorities. Students were asked questions about their own personal faith; their educational background; their attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons and the gay community; their beliefs on same-sex sexual activity; attributes of their faith that have affected their attitudes toward sexual minorities; the process of their own attitudinal changes toward sexual minorities; and their thoughts on the current campus climate toward sexual minorities.

#### **Faith Orientation**

All 12 participants self-identified as Christian, yet there were unique characterizations that came within that identity. Half of the participants described themselves as a follower of Jesus Christ, while seven participants discussed how they felt they had a personal relationship with God. Melissa, a senior participant, stated:

[I] would consider myself to be a Christ follower and not necessarily legalistic or someone who claims to know everything about the Bible because that's absolutely not true, but someone who seeks to live more like Christ does every day.

Indeed, her response characterized many of the sentiments expressed by students regarding their own personal faith. Another student participant, Kim, described her belief in God by saying, "I believe that Jesus Christ is exactly who He says He is...[and] I get my doctrine from the Bible." Religious fundamentalism came up with a few different participants; one viewed fundamentalism positively and aligned herself with religious fundamentalism, while two other participants stated that they did not have a particular fondness for fundamentalism. Matt explained, "I'd consider myself to be maybe a little bit more liberal as far as I don't really want to associate myself with fundamentalism." Several participants also explained that they felt little to no affiliation or attachment with a specific denomination of Christianity, despite growing up in a family and church that held a denominational affiliation. One participant, Jacob, described his viewpoint on denominations by saying, "I wouldn't necessarily associate myself with any one specific denomination within the Christian faith."

## **Education**

In terms of prior education, six participants had some kind of faith-based education before coming to a faith-based institution of higher education, whether that education was at a private Christian school or homeschool. Four participants had been in a public education system for their entire lives before coming to a faith-based institution. When asked about the reasons why they came to an institution of faith-based higher



education, several different responses emerged. The majority of participants discussed a desire to grow in their own personal faith and their understanding of their faith. Ashley said, “I wanted to become properly informed and equipped on what exactly I believed both theologically and philosophically,” while Kim said, “I felt like I could grow more at a Christian school.” Several other students also expressed a desire to deepen their faith by learning from other Christians with slightly different perspectives. Sharon described this by saying, “It would be really nice to prepare myself to go into life after college with a really strong foundation intellectually about why I believe what I believe.” Other students also discussed their hopes for learning about their field of study or major from a faith-based perspective. Stephanie explained, “I wanted to learn my career within the context of my faith.”

### **Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Persons**

When asked about their attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons as individual people, a few themes emerged. The majority of participants discussed their desire to treat an LGB person no differently from anyone else, or to not let that factor of their identity have a substantial impact on their relationship with them. Alexander said, “Sexual orientation should not at all influence any different personal relationship,” while Kim explained that a person’s sexual orientation “doesn’t change how much I love them. It doesn’t change the fact that I think they’re valuable as people.” Jacob expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “I would be as loving towards them as I would towards any person.” Indeed, several student participants described a desire to see the inherent value in LGB persons as human beings, to look beyond just a person’s sexuality and see their entire personhood. Stephanie explained that “my faith let me see [my gay friend] as a

whole person instead of maybe that one facet [his sexuality].” When describing his desires for interacting with LGB persons, Jacob said, “I hope that I would be very compassionate and would strive to be very compassionate as I come alongside somebody in that place.”

Several participants also had prior relationships with LGB persons. Eight participants discussed relationships with friends or acquaintances from high school, while six participants talked about relationships they had with LGB persons in college. Three participants discussed members of their extended family who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. When discussing his openly gay uncle, Daniel said, “I’ve experienced or have seen people react to my uncle negatively and judge him and [with] me knowing who he was, [those reactions] really hurt me.” Out of all of these participants, six specifically stated that their personal relationship with someone who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual was a positive experience for them that fostered understanding and growth. Eric said that knowing someone who was gay “made homosexuality more of a person instead of just this idea that I’ve never encountered and so it made it more real to me.” Here, Daniel described his first reaction when a close friend of his from college came out to him:

The first thing I did was just hug those people and I was just so happy and excited that they trusted me with that and just being able to reinforce that this doesn’t change what I think about you. You are still my friend and you are still my brother. I’m sorry that you’ve experienced so much brokenness and I’m sorry that this is something you’ve had to hide or something you’ve had to deal with on your own for so long.

Indeed, several students expressed a desire to create an open space for conversation surrounding sexuality and faith. Matt described this desire by saying, “I want to give everybody the room to struggle with God and to work these things out for themselves.” Melissa also explained, “There’s nothing wrong with processing it and struggling with it and dealing with it and talking about it and resonating with it and relating with it.”

### **Gay Community**

The participants were also asked separate questions regarding their view of the gay community and their thoughts on the relationship between the institutional church and the gay community. Over half of the participants discussed their frustration with some of the more “extreme sections” of the gay community, while several said that for them, the gay community was a difficult one to examine and understand. Stephanie said, “I see them as a very closed community, [and] I almost feel pressured by the ideas of their community,” while Rob expressed frustration at “the ways some of the more extreme or intolerant groups of the gay community have reacted against the church.” For these participants, it was easier to think of individuals in the community than it was for them to think of the entire community. Sharon explained that for her, “it’s harder to find and give respect to the human aspect [of people] when you’re dealing with a huge clump [of people].” Jacob described the gay community as “a super diverse community,” but it was difficult for him to describe the entire gay community “because it’s like saying what are your thoughts about the heterosexual community.”

Several participants talked about their view of the gay community as being a community that was very open and expressive, and several others expressed a desire to learn more about the gay community. Ashley explained, “They feel the need to be so

outwardly expressive with how they feel and their sexual orientation because of the way that we, the church, have reacted.” Rob also followed up by saying that despite his frustrations with some of the gay community, “I don’t know where they’ve come from and I don’t wanna be too quick to vilify them.”

With regard to the relationship between the gay community and the church, half of the participants said that they felt the church and the gay community had a difficult relationship. Stephanie described this relationship as “very strained.” Several participants expressed a desire for the church to improve communication with the gay community and to decrease the emphasis on homosexuality. Ashley expressed, “Homosexuality has been a glorified issue that we have focused on way more than other sexual problems that exist in the church,” while Rob said that “you get this really nasty, selective, hate-driven overemphasis on homosexuality [from the church].” Alexander continued by saying, “Sin in heterosexuality is not viewed with the same harshness as homosexuality.” Several others said that they felt there was also a divide in the church between sections that were more affirming and sections that were more conservative. Sharon explained that “[Christians] don’t know what to do with it in general...some churches have really thought a lot about it and other ones are avoiding it.”

### **Same-Sex Sexual Activity**

The participants were asked separate questions regarding their stances toward same-sex sexual activity. Ten participants discussed their beliefs that same-sex sexual activity was wrong, while two participants were unsure of their stance. Sharon explained, “[The Bible] speaks against the action of homosexuality, sexual activity.” However, she followed up by saying, “The Bible doesn’t say that you’re not going to have these

feelings, you're not gonna have these attractions, you're not gonna have this struggle.”

Similarly, Ashley said, “I believe that homosexual behavior is wrong...[but] I do not believe that same-sex attraction is wrong at all.”

Several participants explained their thought processes on making a distinction between sexual attraction and sexual behavior, while a smaller number of participants discussed a distinction between sexual orientation and sexual behavior. Alexander said, “There’s a separation between homosexual identity and sexual orientation,” while Kim explained, “There’s a big difference between being homosexual and acting on your homosexual tendencies.” For these participants, they saw the attraction or orientation as something not inherently sinful, but they believed that the activity itself was sinful. Rob stated, “I would disagree with the people who say that homosexuality or homosexual attraction in and of itself is forbidden in Scripture.” When pushed more regarding how they reconciled this distinction with their faith, half of the participants explained that they saw same-sex attraction or a homosexual orientation as a result of original sin, brokenness, and the fallen nature of humanity. Ashley explained: “We are broken because of our sin nature...and there have been repercussions because of our sin nature...so I think that sexuality has fallen.”

### **Faith Attributes**

The participants were also asked to discuss what specific attributes of their faith or religion impacted their attitudes toward LGB persons. Nine participants discussed their desire to show love to LGB persons, while seven participants discussed compassion as a relevant attribute of their faith. In interactions with LGB persons, Alexander explained, “You love them just as much as you would love anyone,” while Melissa said, “My faith

holds me to a standard of communication that is above reproach...[I] hope to communicate love but also consistency and steadiness.” Grace also came up as an important attribute to consider, discuss, and understand in the context of relationships with LGB persons. Daniel touched on this by saying, “Sexual activity outside of a marriage is something that I don’t think is righteous in the eyes of the Lord [but] I don’t think that He’s gonna not love someone because they engage in sexual activity.”

On a smaller level, humility and honesty were also discussed. Humility was described as an understanding that no one has the absolutely correct answer regarding religion and sexual identity. Melissa suggested that, “[Christianity] is about truth, it’s about saying hard things, but it’s about humility and recognizing that you don’t have the answers.” Meanwhile, honesty was discussed as a desire to be open and honest with LGB persons about any personal convictions they might hold regarding sexual identity, even if those convictions ran contrary to the other’s. Eric expressed a desire to combine the components of honesty and grace in the conversation surrounding sexual minorities. He explained:

High truth [and] high grace...are really necessary in order to fully show the picture of God. A church without high truth is the kind of cotton candy religion of just like oh, we love everybody, there’s nothing wrong with you...and then the high truth without the grace is like the homosexuals are gonna die and burn in hell.

Matt expanded upon this: “You have to have the condemnation for the grace to be worth anything.” Some kind of brokenness or fallenness must exist in order for grace to have an actual impact and effect on people.

### **Process of Attitudinal Changes**

When asked about the process of changes in their attitudes toward LGB persons, over half of the participants discussed the fact that their opinions had been more isolated and closed off in the past. Daniel said, “I had an attitude of confusion and ignorance and I didn’t know much about it besides what my peers were saying or the gay jokes and I didn’t want anything [to do] with that.” They were less open to discussion and less open to understanding the perspective of sexual minorities. Stereotypes were a big issue for Matt, and he explained:

If you can reduce someone to a stereotype...you don’t have to think of them as [people]. When I was younger, I kinda viewed homosexuality as the stereotype...Now I make the distinction between people who are gay and people who are acting out in an explicit way.

For several participants, the issue was personalized by specific relationships that they had with people who self-identified as a sexual minority. Melissa described going on “a whole journey of interacting with people of different races, different religions, [and] different sexualities,” while Eric said, “My interaction [with a gay friend] caused me to fully develop my ideas and thoughts about homosexuality.” For other participants, the catalyst for opening their attitudes to the discussion was the amount of personal interaction they had with other people regarding the topic of religion and sexuality. For Sharon, the process looked like “hearing a bunch of opinions and believing they’re right, then being confronted with the topic in more real ways or more intellectual ways and then having to reevaluate what I thought about it.”

### **Current Campus Climate**

Finally, participants were asked about their own perceptions of the current campus climate toward sexual minorities. Several participants described the campus climate as being ignorant to the issue of sexual identity, while others perceived a lack of discussion on campus surrounding the topic. Eric said that a “lack of experience and lack of time to develop these thoughts [about homosexuality] have caused there to be a lot of ignorance” on campus, while Jacob expressed his feelings that “there is a lot of shame [on campus] when it comes to sexuality...and we don’t know what to do with it.” Yet other participants stated their beliefs that the campus climate was open to conversations regarding sexual identity, and several others expressed their beliefs that the campus climate would be loving and compassionate to individuals who came out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Matt explained that in his personal interactions, “the vast majority of the people I’ve talked to have been very loving and gracious toward the gay community and willing to step out of the box of their tradition and their upbringing to have an honest conversation.” Stephanie described some of her own personal experience by saying, “I meet more people who are still trying to figure out how they feel about it and what they think.” Jacob also followed up his earlier statements, saying, “I think most people would be loving and compassionate if uncomfortable with the whole situation.” Out of all the questions, the response to this question was the most varied among the participants.

The student participants were asked to discuss their own ideas for improving the campus climate toward sexual minorities. Two thirds of the participants expressed their belief that more personal conversations on the topic of sexual identity would help in improving the campus climate toward sexual minorities. Eric explained: “There would



need to be an atmosphere of high grace [and] high truth where people can be open and vulnerable and people won't judge them for it," while Rob stated, "I would like to see fear eliminated from the conversation." Half of the participants also discussed their desire to see more speakers come to campus who had a personal perspective on sexual identity and religion (e.g., Wesley Hill). Melissa said, "We need people who don't profess to have the right answer to come on campus, but [who] confront the mindset of our campus that so desires a right answer." Finally, a couple of participants discussed the possibility of emphasizing the topic on a regular basis with student leaders. They felt that the university staff could work to empower student leaders with the tools and knowledge to help other students process through their own sexuality and to see sexual identity as a personal issue.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The final chapter unpacks the essence of the main themes from the study by connecting those themes to previously conducted research examined in the literature review. The themes discussed in this chapter are the distinction between sexual identity and activity, specific faith attributes associated with attitudes toward sexual minorities, and contact theory. The implications of these themes are explored, particularly regarding how they connect to practices for student development and future research. The chapter concludes by discussing the potential limitations of the study along with an overall conclusion of the research.

#### **Identity/Activity Distinction**

Over the course of the study, several key themes emerged from the data. The existence of a distinction between sexual identity and sexual activity was one of the key areas cited with potential for future research in the established research literature (Bassett et al., 2000; Rosik et al., 2007). Therefore, the examination of the distinction was a key hope for the research over the course of the study. As in the study by Bassett et al. (2000) where some Christian college students were “selectively rejecting” of homosexual persons, several participants in the current study also made the cognitive distinction between sexually active and celibate homosexual persons. One student participant, Kim, stated, “There’s a big difference between being homosexual and acting on your

homosexual tendencies.” Her statement was a clear example of a cognitive distinction between sexual activity and sexual identity.

Ten out of the 12 student participants stated their views of same-sex sexual activity as something wrong or sinful, but those viewpoints did not prevent the students from seeing LGB persons as valuable and important. Sharon summed up the sentiment well when she said, “The Bible doesn’t say you’re not going to have these feelings, you’re not gonna have these attractions, you’re not gonna have this struggle. It speaks against the action of homosexuality, sexual activity.” Students were still able to acknowledge the importance of recognizing sexual identity as a real issue that is dealt with on a personal level. When students understand the personal nature of this issue, they are better equipped to have a meaningful dialogue and conversation surrounding sexual identity. The distinction also helps students to see a person’s sexuality as one part of their overarching personal identity, similar to Cass’ (1979) final stage of sexual identity development: identity synthesis.

### **Faith Attributes**

Another key theme that emerged from the present study was the importance of specific faith attributes that impact how college students view LGB persons. In their 2011 study, Wolff et al. examined the attitudes of Christian college students toward LGB persons. They found that “highly prized Christian relational values [like] love, charity, grace and humility” had a positive impact on student attitudes toward sexual minorities (p. 215). Several students from the present study expressed similar values and attitudes when discussing their attitudes toward LGB persons. Ashley described demonstrating “an attitude of love above all else,” and Alexander said, “You love them [LGB persons] as

much as you would love anyone else.” For Melissa, “[Christianity] is about truth, it’s about saying hard things, but it’s about humility and recognizing that you don’t have the answers,” while Jacob said, “We should approach questions with a lot of humility.” Jacob also stated, “I hope that I would be very compassionate and would strive to be very compassionate as I come alongside somebody in that place [of sexual identity].” Empathy also came forward in the conversations; Kelsie said, “The fact that I realize how much I need God is making me see these people as people who also need God every day...[and] I see them as a brother or sister struggling in sin...just in need of the Lord to work in their life.”

These attributes all aligned with the positive relational values of the Christian faith examined in the study by Wolff et al. (2011). Therefore, depending on the attributes espoused, faith may actually have a positive impact on student attitudes toward sexual minorities. As with the identity/activity distinction, when students express these kinds of attributes toward LGB persons, they are better suited to have a meaningful conversation concerning faith and sexuality and how these two topics intersect. These attributes also help to focus the value placed on a LGB person around the person instead of the activity. Without a demonstration of these attributes, the value of a LGB person could still be dependent on whether they are acting on their sexual desires. Students could potentially say, “I will love and value you as a person as long as you do not act on these desires.” When these attributes are demonstrated, students are more likely to orient the value of a LGB person around their personhood instead of their sexual activity. This type of orientation could turn faith into a positive predictor of student attitudes toward LGB persons.

### **Quest Orientation**

Over the course of the study, two student participants, Melissa and Jacob, espoused ideas or values that could align with a quest orientation of faith in which religion is utilized as an open-minded search for truth and answers (Batson, 1971). Jacob explained his perspective by saying, “We should approach questions [about sexuality] with a lot of humility,” and continued, “I’m still trying to figure out what I think about what God’s plan for sexuality is.” Melissa said that for her, faith is sometimes “about humility and recognizing that you don’t have the answers.” When prompted to discuss their views of same-sex sexual activity, neither student committed to saying that he or she viewed same-sex sexual activity as sinful. The university at which the study was conducted requires all students to sign a lifestyle contract, which contained a rationale for living in a Christian community for four years. One paragraph included some behavioral stipulations in which several things are prohibited, including “homosexual behavior.” Melissa said that, in this context, “going against your authority [the university] is wrong...[but] there’s nothing wrong with processing it and struggling with it and dealing with it and talking about it and resonating with it and relating with it.” Jacob expressed similar thoughts when he said, “I’m still trying to think through a lot of what God’s view is on sexuality in terms of does God create people to be in loving same-sex relationships and is that a part of his plan for sexuality.” The responses of these two students aligned with previous studies (McFarland, 1989; Whitley, 2009), indicating that a quest orientation can correlate to more positive attitudes toward sexual minorities. Although only two students seemed to align with quest orientation, the distinction was still relevant to understanding how faith can affect student attitudes toward LGB persons.

## Contact Theory

A final key theme that emerged in the present study was the positive impact of personal relationships with LGB persons. Numerous studies have found that personal interactions with LGB persons can have a positive impact on attitudes toward and perceptions of LGB persons (Bassett et al., 2005; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Lance, 2002; Lance, 2008). In their 2001 study, Bowen and Bourgeois discovered that previous contact or a prior personal relationship with a LGB person was a positive predictor of acceptance of LGB persons.

The idea of contact theory came up for many student participants as they discussed their personal relationships with LGB persons. Several students expressed gratitude regarding a friend or family member who had come out to them. Rob said, “I almost felt honored and I was glad that [my friend] told me,” while Daniel stated, “I was just so happy and excited that they trusted me with [their sexuality].” Some students also discussed how getting to know someone who was lesbian, gay, or bisexual helped them to move past their foreclosed state of mind regarding sexual minorities. Eric said that getting to know someone who was gay “made homosexuality more of a person instead of just this idea that I’ve never encountered and so it made it more real to me,” while Matt said, “When I was younger, I kinda viewed homosexuality as the stereotype...you don’t have to think of them as [people].”

For these students, the positive impact of knowing a LGB person is clear. By getting to know LGB persons, the students were able to move beyond their stereotypes of sexual minorities, creating a more holistic picture of what it means to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Stephanie described this by saying, “My faith let me see [my gay friend] as a

whole person instead of maybe that one facet.” Through getting to know LGB persons, students were able to create a whole picture of that person’s identity, not just one that was solely defined by sexuality. The relationships could also contribute to the activation of those highly relational faith attributes such as love, empathy, and compassion (Wolff et al., 2011) that can improve conversations regarding faith and sexuality.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings and analysis from the current study have several implications for student affairs practice. First, the positive impact of personal relationships with LGB persons indicates that campuses should develop more programming regarding the personal nature of sexual identity and the implications it can have for individual persons. By developing programming designed to examine the personal nature of sexual identity, colleges can improve the dialogue on campus regarding faith and sexuality by moving beyond the political and religious rhetoric that tends to surround the issue. Melissa explained her desire for this when she said, “We need people to come on campus that don’t profess to have the right answer but confront the mindset of our campus that so desires a right answer.” This could involve bringing speakers on campus to discuss their own personal stories of how they reconciled their faith and their sexuality, or it could involve encouraging students dealing with their own sexuality to come forward and discuss some of their stories. Such programming could also encourage students to see sexuality less as the sole defining characteristic of a person’s identity and more as one aspect of a person’s holistic identity. Promoting this kind of understanding in students could help them in orienting the value of a person around the entire person as opposed to just one aspect of that person (in this case, sexual identity).

For something like this to occur, colleges should also take steps to ensure that there are safe places that exist on campus for students to come and discuss their personal struggles with sexual identity. If safe places do not exist, then students will not come forward, and dialogue will stagnate and die. There are several dangers inherent in the potential lack of conversation concerning sexual identity. Students struggling to understand their sexual identity often deal with chronic feelings of isolation and loneliness, which could be heightened if a proper conversation regarding sexual identity does not exist on campus. Research has also shown that LGB youth experience suicidal behavior more than any other youth group (SPRC, 2008), and this kind of behavior can increase in an environment where students feel unsafe discussing their sexuality. Student affairs professionals have a responsibility to create a space for healthy conversation concerning sexuality where students will not feel marginalized, dehumanized, or judged for openly and honestly discussing their struggles with sexual identity.

By creating a venue for students to tell their own stories regarding sexual identity, colleges can demonstrate a willingness to discuss sexual identity as a personal issue and they can establish a precedent for other students to treat this as a personal issue. One student, Ashley, discussed “having that ongoing dialogue [about sexual identity] in RA meetings and in-service...because if the leaders don’t know what they think about it, then sure as hell, no one else is going to know what they think about it.” Colleges and universities can create safe spaces for dialogue surrounding sexual identity, and they can make it a recurring part of conversation and training with residence life staff. Student leaders can be better prepared in confronting the issue in their own residence hall or floor, and they can be better equipped to help other students deal with this issue themselves.



Student affairs professionals can research and discuss sexual identity for as long as they want, but student leaders are on the front lines in helping other students understand their own sexual identity. Steps must be taken to educate student leaders on how to have an open and non-threatening conversation with someone concerning sexuality and sexual identity. Professionals at faith-based institutions can help prepare students to respond with welcoming faith attributes that promote a positive dialogue and conversation such as love, grace, and humility.

### **Implications for Research**

While the current study presented some interesting findings, there are certainly areas upon which future studies could expand. The study sought to examine and understand the connection between undergraduate students' personal religious beliefs and their attitudes toward sexual minorities, yet the participants in the study all identified as Protestant. Future studies could examine the differences between other faiths or sets of religious beliefs such as Catholicism, Judaism, or Islam, among others. By expanding the religious orientations represented in the study, the results and findings would be more applicable to diverse communities with different faiths.

Future studies should also continue to examine and unpack the distinction between sexual identity and sexual activity. Some studies have shown that the distinction can have behavioral implications (Bassett et al., 2000), but future studies could examine the process that creates such a distinction. What causes a person to make a distinction between sexual identity and sexual activity? This could aid student affairs professionals in fostering such a distinction in their students and helping those students to process that distinction in the context of their faith and their religion. Experimental studies could be

utilized to examine and assess the effectiveness of certain programs surrounding faith and sexuality. If universities create programs or classes designed to address faith and sexuality, students could take pre- and post-test measures to determine their effectiveness in order to find the best possible program or solution.

### **Limitations**

As with any research study, there are several limitations that exist within the current study. The first is the inherent nature of qualitative and phenomenological research. Phenomenological research seeks to understand the essence of a shared or common experience, and experiences are always colored by personal beliefs, biases, and backgrounds. There is no way to account for all of the differences that might exist within a student participant group, and with phenomenological research, there is an inherent challenge of trying to account for and understand those differences and nuances. There are also researcher limitations inherent in the study. The researcher attended an institution similar to the one studied and therefore has a great deal of personal connection to faith-based liberal arts higher education. Furthermore, the researcher has several important personal relationships with lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons, and this has had an influence on the beliefs and passions of the researcher in studying this topics. Finally, the lack of diversity in the student participants is a relevant limitation to note. All students self-identified as Protestant Christian, and this could be expanded upon in future research or a future study.

### **Conclusion**

The intersection of faith and sexual identity in higher education is challenging to navigate. The amount of detail, nuance, and difference that exists within the topic can be

paralyzing and overwhelming. Yet it is imperative to equip students and student affairs professionals to help direct this often difficult conversation. By seeking to understand how religious beliefs affect attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons, higher education professionals will be better equipped to facilitate and foster a meaningful, significant, and relevant conversation concerning faith and sexuality. This could work to reduce the shame and stigma associated with sexual identity on faith-based campuses, and it could assist in developing a safe place where students are free to struggle with their own sexuality and where professionals can guide students through that struggle.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **1. Introduction**

- a. Welcome/Greeting
- b. Informed Consent
  - i. Nature and purpose of the study
  - ii. Interview procedure (45-60 minutes)
  - iii. Potential risks and anticipated results
  - iv. Confidentiality (digital recording of the interview)
  - v. Freedom to withdraw from the interview or decline to answer
  - vi. Questions regarding the study/researcher (signed consent form)

#### **2. Interview**

- a. Warm up questions
  - i. How would you describe your personal religious beliefs?
  - ii. What drew you to a faith-based institution?
- b. Specific open-ended questions
  - i. Describe your attitudes toward lesbian, gay, or bisexual persons.
  - ii. Describe your attitudes toward same-sex sexual activity.
  - iii. How do you feel these attitudes have been formed or shaped by your religious beliefs?
    - 1. What specific attributes of your faith have affected your attitudes toward sexual minorities?
  - iv. Could you describe any personal interactions you have had with sexual minorities?
    - 1. How has your faith affected those interactions?

- v. Could you describe your perception of the current campus climate toward sexual minorities?

3. Closing

- a. Gratitude
- b. Open request—"Do you have any questions for me?"
- c. Respondent feedback
- d. Reiteration of gratitude

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent Form**

#### **TAYLOR UNIVERSITY**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT**

##### **Undergraduate Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities Based on Religious Beliefs**

You are invited to participate in a research study of religious beliefs and their effect on attitudes toward sexual minorities. You were selected as a possible subject because you are a student leader in Residence Life. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. The study is being conducted by Brady Schaar with the Department of Higher Education.

##### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to examine undergraduate attitudes toward sexual minorities in order to better understand the college environment for sexual minority students and be mindful of how to aid those students.

##### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of eight to twelve subjects who will be participating in this research.

##### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

You will attend a one-on-one interview with the researcher that will be conducted at a time and place of the researcher and the participant's choosing. There will only be one interview for each participant, and it will only last for one hour. The full course of interviews should be completed in approximately two weeks.

##### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

While on the study, the risks are:

The risks of completing the interview include being uncomfortable while answering the questions and the possible loss of confidentiality. There are minimal emotional or psychological risks to participating in this study, and there are no physical risks to participating in this study.

If you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you may tell the researcher that you may not wish to answer. If you continue to feel uncomfortable as a result of your answers, you may seek out the services of the Counseling Center at Taylor University by calling 765-998-5222.

#### **BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

There are no direct benefits of taking part in this study. However, participants may experience an indirect benefit by having time to discuss how their religious beliefs affect their attitudes toward sexual minorities.

#### **ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

Instead of being in the study, you have these options: not participating is the only other alternative.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published. Audio recordings will be made of each interview, but these recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and will only be accessible to the researcher through locked computer files. These recordings will be destroyed after the research has been completed and the thesis has been successfully defended.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Tim Herrmann, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### **PAYMENT**

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

#### **COMPENSATION FOR INJURY**

In the event of physical injury resulting from your participation in this research, necessary medical treatment will be provided to you and billed as part of your medical expenses. Costs not covered by your health care insurer will be your responsibility. Also, it is your responsibility to determine the extent of your health care coverage. There is no program in place for other monetary compensation for such injuries. If you are participating in research which is not conducted at a medical facility, you will be responsible for seeking medical care and for the expenses associated with any care received.

### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher Brady Schaar at 614-507-7236. If you cannot reach the researcher during regular business hours e.g. 8:00AM-5:00PM), please call 614-507-7236.

If you have any questions regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject, you can contact Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at IRB@taylor.edu or the Chair of the IRB, R. Edwin Welch at 756-998-4315 or edwelch@taylor.edu

### VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the Department of Higher Education or Brady Schaar, the researcher. There is no risk associated with withdrawal prior to completion of the study.

### SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

*If the study involves children who will be providing their assent on this consent document, rather than on an assent document, use the following signatures:*

**Printed Name of Parent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Parent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

