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Joel M. Wentz  
*University of New England*

Roger D. Wessel  
*Ball State University*

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# Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Students Attending Faith-Based Colleges: Considerations for Improving Practice

By Joel M. Wentz and Roger D. Wessel

## Abstract

The intent of this 2010 qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of undergraduates who identified as gay/lesbian in faith-based colleges. Some of the issues students encountered were identity denial, perceptions of homosexuality on campus, exposure to off-campus cultures, concealing sexual identity, establishing a peer support network, and reconciling faith and sexual identity. Participants discussed support from faculty/staff, counseling services, school policies, male residence hall culture, and perceptions of administrators. Considerations for improving practice include making informed enrollment decisions, supporting sexual identity formation during college, reconciling faith and sexual identity, encouraging supportive networks, and developing policies regarding campus sexual behavior.

## Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Students Attending Faith-Based Colleges: Considerations for Improving Practice

The collegiate experience takes place during a formative period of identity development for many young adults. In addition to developing a career, college students also mature academically, emotionally, spiritually, and sexually (American Council on Education, 1937). The intent of this study was to discover how an explicitly Christian, undergraduate college environment influenced the collegiate experiences of gay and lesbian students.

In many faith-based colleges and universities, homosexual behaviors are prohibited (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2001), creating unique concerns regarding the experiences of gay and lesbian students in these universities. To better serve these students, faculty and staff at faith-based institutions would benefit from a more-informed understanding of the collegiate experiences of their gay and lesbian students and how these experiences influence overall identity development.

## Literature Review

The theoretical framework for this study rests in the literature of two separate fields of study: (1) literature regarding college student development and (2) gay and lesbian identity formation. Arthur Chickering's (1969) foundational work on education and identity addressed how identity development takes place in relation to the college experience. He theorized a seven-stage psychosocial model which Chickering and Reisser (1993) later revisited. After a student moves through the first vector, developing competence, he/she must then learn to manage emotions, as emotions that are not properly managed can delay the developmental process. In the third vector, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, students experience an emotional separation from parents, which typically results in reliance on peers. In the fourth vector, developing mature interpersonal relationships, students build on established interdependence and develop a capacity for intimacy. The quality of relationships deepens while students begin to recognize and tolerate

differences. In the fifth vector, establishing identity, growth in many various aspects of holistic identity takes place. This sense of identity draws upon the foundation of the previous vectors. After establishing a sense of identity, students decide who they want to become and how to get there, thus developing purpose. This vector addresses personal interests and the priorities that students place on family, friends, and accomplishments. Finally, students address core beliefs and values in the seventh vector, developing integrity, affirming values while recognizing the existence of alternative viewpoints.

Concerning gay and lesbian identity formation, the theoretical models which contributed to the foundation of this study were organized into stage and non-sequential models. One foundational stage model of homosexual identity formation was developed by Cass (1979) in which gay and lesbian adults progress through six stages before achieving a fully realized sexual identity. When an individual first perceives that his/her behavior may be identified as homosexual, he/she enters the first stage: identity confusion. Depending on personal beliefs, he/she will consider the possibility of a homosexual identity and either accept or reject this possibility. If the individual accepts the potentiality of a homosexual identity, he/she moves into stage two: identity comparison. This stage is primarily defined by feelings of alienation, as the individual compares him/herself to others of heterosexual orientation. If the individual considers making contact with other homosexuals to lessen the feelings of alienation, he/she enters the third stage: identity tolerance. This stage is defined by tolerance because the individual sees his/her contacts with homosexuals as necessary rather than desirable. It might be common for an individual in this stage to maintain both a heterosexual and homosexual identity, depending on the environment.

Increased contact with the homosexual culture leads to the fourth stage: identity acceptance (Cass, 1979). As a network of gay and lesbian friendships is created, the individual begins to define how he/she may fit into society as a homosexual. Extremely selective disclosure may be made at this point to community members outside of this network. As the individual accepts that homosexuals are a generally negatively valued group in society, he/she progresses into the fifth stage: identity pride, during which frequent attempts are made to validate homosexual status. If these attempts result in positive dialogues and contacts, the sixth and final stage is entered: identity synthesis. During this stage, the individual realizes not all heterosexuals have contributed to marginalizing the homosexual group and that there are other aspects of one's identity other than sexuality. Homosexuality is no longer hidden, and every aspect of identity is synthesized into a seamless whole. As peace and stability are found in this stage, identity formation is considered complete. Cass (1984) later revisited this developmental model in an effort to determine its validity. Based on this assessment, it was found that research participants tended to blur the original distinctions between stages one and two, as well as those between stages five and six, which suggested that individuals who develop a homosexual identity may actually progress through four stages, rather than six. This finding also supported the validity of four-stage models developed by other researchers, such as Troiden (1989) and Fassinger (1998). However, Cass (1984) ultimately concluded that six identity formation stages could still be clearly distinguished from one another. She also asserted that, in comparison to other models of homosexual identity formation, her original model was the only one which included every one of these individual stages, stating that "these alternative models may offer a too narrow conception of the developmental process" (p. 164).

D'Augelli (1994) developed a nonsequential model of homosexual identity development, in which he presented three variables and six interactive processes which play important roles in identity development throughout a gay or lesbian individual's entire lifetime. The first variable, personal subjectivities and actions, is defined by specific meanings an individual attaches to perceptions and actions related to his/her sexual orientation. The second variable, interactive intimacies, refers to the effects of messages received through interactions with friends, family, peers, and other intimate members of one's community concerning sexual orientation. The third variable, sociohistorical connections, refers to the setting in which the individual lives (e.g., cultures, laws, policies, or organizations which impact sexual orientation). D'Augelli also identified six processes that homosexuals may interact with at any point during the identity formation process: exiting heterosexual identity, developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status, developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity, becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring, developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status, and entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community. A homosexual may enter or exit any process depending on his/her current context and environment.

## Method

The purpose of this study was to better understand the collegiate experiences of undergraduates who identified as gay or lesbian while enrolled in private, faith-based colleges and universities and to identify what factors are present which may have positive or negative influences on the collegiate experiences of gay and lesbian students at these institutions. A secondary purpose was to better understand how these institutions could improve their practice in meeting the developmental needs of these students. This information was studied to better equip faculty and staff members in faith-based institutions for working with students who identify as gay or lesbian. This study addressed the following research questions. What are the experiences of gay and lesbian students in faith-based institutions of higher education? How can faculty and staff at faith-based institutions improve the collegiate experiences of these students?

### Design of the Study

Students who participated in this study self-identified as gay or lesbian and were enrolled in one of four private, faith-based institutions of higher education. Each participant attended an institution that was affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), an international association of intentionally faith-based institutions of higher education whose mission is to "advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education" (CCCU, 2009, para. 2). The CCCU had 110 members in North America in 2010, as well as affiliates in 24 countries.

Qualitative, phenomenological methodology was followed in this study since the focus concerned the experiences of a group of people, rather than a single individual (Creswell, 1998) and the experiences of this group revolved around a similar concept, or phenomenon. Flowers and Moore (2003) argued that "a qualitative research design is suitable when . . . [educators] are interested in collecting in-depth data reflective of . . . students' college experiences" (para. 1). Data were collected through single, personal interviews with students who attended private, highly residential, faith-based institutions.

### Data Collection

Purposive sampling was used to identify potential informants (Patton, 1990). One of the researchers had personal contacts on faith-based campuses around the

country, and some of these contacts identified as gay or lesbian. An email was sent to each of these individuals, requesting their participation as a research subject. In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was utilized so that the researcher could “find an insider, a member of the group studied, who is willing to be an informant and act as a guide” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 77). In this way, many of these initial personal contacts quickly resulted in personal contacts with other gay and lesbian students. The first eight students who agreed to participate in this study were selected for interviews. Experiences were gathered from students at four different faith-based institutions, representing geographically diverse locations in the United States, including institutions in eastern, western, and midwestern states.

Personal interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed-upon environment. A semi-structured interview protocol was created to facilitate flexible interviews that adjusted to the flow of conversation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The structure for this protocol was organized into two major areas so that information would answer the research questions. Students were encouraged to share stories and personal experiences through the interview process. Before any interviews were conducted, a panel of experts (i.e., educators and faculty members skilled in both the topic and qualitative research methodology) reviewed the proposed interview guide. A revised draft of the interview guide was prepared based on the suggestions of this panel. Then, a pilot test was conducted with three members of the target population who were not involved in the study. Final revisions were made based on the suggestions of those involved in the pilot test. Interviews were conducted during the spring semester of 2010; they were recorded and transcribed. All information provided by the participants was kept confidential through pseudonyms.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative research technique of “memoing,” as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was used to draw emerging connections and themes during the data collection process. Analysis was conducted based on steps identified by Moustakas (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). During the first step, horizontalization, statements from the interviews that addressed how individuals experienced the topic were identified (Moustakas, 1994). Second, statements identified from multiple interviews during the first step were organized into clusters. This step required the researcher to revisit the data and identify themes, or common experiences, among the participants. In a process known as *axial coding*, the researcher then examined these clusters to identify major categories which explained the experienced phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This step required the researchers to visit the data multiple times. Finally, a narrative was constructed, in relation to the original research questions, around these categories.

## **Findings**

### **Demographics**

All eight participants were traditional-age, Caucasian college students enrolled in faith-based colleges and universities associated with the CCCU. Of these eight students, five were male and three were female with participants ranging from sophomores to seniors. Each participant came from a predominantly Christian background, and none identified as gay or lesbian before attending college. The circumstances surrounding each participant’s sexual identity and the college he/she chose to attend were unique to each individual.

- Aaron grew up in the Catholic Church and became a Christian in junior high school. He came out (i.e., publicly announced his sexual orientation) to his immediate family members and, at the time of this study, no longer identified as Christian.
- David came from a conservative, Christian family and had not come out to any immediate family members at the time of this study. David identified as a Christian. Both of David's brothers also attended faith-based universities.
- Both of Elizabeth's parents were pastors. She identified her family background as moderate and open-minded. She chose to attend a faith-based institution in an effort to maintain her Christian faith. At the time of this study, she came out to her immediate family, and she identified herself as an atheist.
- Jessica was raised in a conservative, fundamental Christian background and came out to both her parents during college. Jessica was in a same-sex relationship before attending college, but she never expected to actually identify as a lesbian. She did not identify as a Christian.
- Josh was raised to believe homosexuality was sinful and attended a faith-based institution in an attempt to avoid identifying as gay. Josh came out to his entire immediate family during college, and he identified as a Christian.
- Katie attended a faith-based university as a "naïve attempt to not become a lesbian." She had one sister and came out to all of her immediate family members. She identified herself as a Christian.
- A prominent factor in Mike's decision to attend a faith-based university was because of his initial belief that homosexuality was a sin. His father was a pastor and his mother ran a Christian pregnancy crisis shelter. Mike came out to each of his immediate family members while he was in college.
- Zach decided to attend a faith-based university because he did not want to be gay. He was very involved in church and youth group throughout high school but did not identify as a Christian at the time of this study. He came out to his mother but not many extended family members.

### **Collegiate Experience of Gay and Lesbians on Faith-Based Campuses**

Five main findings emerged: identity denial, perceptions of homosexuals on campus, exposure to off-campus cultures, concealing sexual identity, establishing an on-campus peer support network, and reconciling faith and sexual identity.

**Identity denial.** Every student indicated a period of time during which he/she denied the possibility of accepting a gay or lesbian identity. Although each one admitted to experiencing varying levels of same-sex attraction prior to attending college, none actually acknowledged a gay or lesbian identity before attending

college. The impact of this period of denial was different for each person. Two of the eight students indicated that this denial played an active role in their decision process regarding which college to attend. Josh felt that attending a Christian university would help him avoid establishing a gay identity.

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

While deliberating over which school to attend, Katie felt that attending a faith-based institution would cut her off from any opportunities to explore her sexuality, which would ultimately help her maintain a straight identity. "I had a list of bad things that could happen at college . . . what if they figure out I like girls? . . . I wanted to avoid that if at all possible."

During their pre-college years, the other six students were not as actively worried that same-sex attraction, much less adopting a gay or lesbian identity, would ever become a major concern as a college student. The assumption among these individuals was that either their feelings of same-sex attraction would simply go away or that they could progress through their undergraduate experience without ever engaging in homosexual behavior. In regards to choosing a faith-based university which took an open stance against homosexual behavior, Jessica also did not expect her sexuality to cause any problems. "At the time I was very religious . . . I didn't really ever expect to be 'out' or be comfortable with being a lesbian." Ultimately, for these individuals this period of denial eventually resulted in accepting a gay or lesbian identity. Aaron acknowledged,

I came to this school with the knowledge . . . that it's wrong and it's a sin, and I just didn't accept it. Through the course of being at this school, I learned a lot of things . . . I realized that all this is who I am, and I ended up accepting myself.

**Perceptions of homosexuality on campus.** Each student expressed that extremely negative perceptions of homosexuality were perpetuated within the general campus culture. These perceptions seemed to be largely unchallenged by the student body, and in some settings, they were actually affirmed. Three of the students specifically mentioned homophobia as a significant attitude within their university culture. Aaron said, "You hear people say 'faggot' or making fun of gays . . . homophobia on this campus is pretty ridiculous. It's all subtle, under-the-carpet, not directly in your face." Further negative perceptions were evident in chapel services. Jessica expressed frustration that chapel services were not utilized as a time to engage in healthy dialogue about sexuality. Zach referenced a specific chapel service in which the prevailing message was, "You can be gay, as long as you're trying to be straight." Elizabeth spoke about a meeting she held with her college's chapel directors. "We talked about how, when it came to the content of chapels, gay issues were very rarely mentioned. If they ever were, it was in a negative sense."

Four of the students reported the attitudes of people in class settings as further evidence of these negative perceptions. Three students specifically identified professors as a source of anti-gay sentiment in the classroom. According to Josh,

"I've heard stories of faculty members outright saying . . . 'It would be better if our government just killed all the homosexuals,' and nothing's been done about that." When Elizabeth chose to turn in a writing assignment about gay slang in the early 20th century, her instructor strongly objected to the topic. She also indicated that during a conference after the assignment was finished, he commented on the "questionable morality of me studying gay people." Jessica identified one specific classroom occurrence that exemplified the attitude of her peers toward homosexuality.

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

**Exposure to off-campus cultures.** In regards to sexual identity, many students indicated a period of exposure to others outside their campus culture as a significant event within their collegiate experience. In some cases this was a period of exposure to a LGBTQ community or a realization that significantly different cultures existed outside of the university. In either case, students indicated that this exposure resulted in feeling accepted by a community of peers, which was extremely valuable. Overall, five of the eight students spoke of this as a turning point in their college experience.

For David, studying abroad for one semester provided him with a valuable perspective. "So that time away, away from the Christian University . . . provided me the opportunity to really become who I was inside and gave me the time to discover that." Similarly, both Mike and Aaron spent one semester in urban environments, which was formative for each of them. Mike expressed a newfound level of confidence in his own sexuality after this experience, stating, "I sort of came back to Christian University with the mindset of 'I'm not going to take this anymore.'"

**Concealing sexual identity.** After accepting a gay or lesbian identity, each student experienced significant pressure to conceal his/her sexuality. One student indicated a fear of losing her on-campus job if any of her supervisors found out she identified as a lesbian. Other concerns expressed by students included being fined, sent to mandatory counseling sessions, or being suspended from the institution. For Zach, this constant pressure resulted in him leading a double life: "There is the Zach that everyone at Christian College sees, and then there is the gay Zach, and I won't let anything intersect." Josh spoke about the experience of having his boyfriend visit him in this environment.

When he would come on-campus, it was understood between the two of us . . . to stay separated from him, to walk by my side and not have much physical contact, no hand-holding or anything like that, and to not really show affection.

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

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

The tension experienced during the pre-college stage of identity denial seemed insignificant compared to the tension created by the pressure to conceal their sexuality after accepting a gay or lesbian identity. Students actively worked to ensure they never accidentally said or did something which would reveal their homosexual identity. This required keeping silent when derogatory comments were made about homosexuality and emotionally distancing oneself from professors and students who perpetuated those attitudes. The result was a pervasive feeling of anxiety, constantly wondering if someone would find out. According to Elizabeth, "It's a challenge here if you wish to live a life that's open and honest and full of integrity in keeping with your sexual orientation."

**Establishing an on-campus peer support network.** After accepting a gay or lesbian identity, building a peer support network became extremely important for students. Seven of the participants spoke directly about the positive results of having a social network of friends that accepted and encouraged him/her. Elizabeth admitted, "I found all the reasonable kids at the Christian college and quickly befriended them." One student even cited this network as the main reason he did not transfer to another school. Students also spoke about how the coming-out process actually strengthened many of the friendships they had already established with other students. Jessica explained, "I think that most of my friends went from being a friend to a very good, close friend through that. Just through their support . . . those people really know me and know what I went through."

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

**Reconciling faith and sexual identity.** Each student specifically spoke about attempting to reconcile their Christian faith with their gay or lesbian identity. The outcome of this process ranged from active rejection to continued acceptance. Several students also indicated that these issues influenced their relationships with peers and family members. Three students spoke about how they were in the process of attempting to maintain their faith. David described how appreciative he was of his supportive friends and family members, "especially in regards to my faith because I'm still trying to hold on to my Christian faith and not sacrifice that for this." Josh also indicated that he was appreciative of his supportive family members, although

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

For both Mike and Zach, the Christian faith was something they explored in an attempt to ignore their feelings of same-sex attraction. Mike explained, "I was that guy that just prayed every day since junior high for God to heal me, and just assumed that it would happen." Similarly, Zach described his previous experience with the Christian faith. "I was all about faith then. It's what I threw myself into to ignore the stuff I didn't want to deal with, and I was like, 'Oh, it'll go away, and God will make it go away.'" At the time of this study, neither Mike nor Zach identified as Christian. Elizabeth came to identify as an atheist during her collegiate experience.

### **Positive and Negative Influences on the Collegiate Experience**

Five main findings emerged: individual support from faculty and staff, counseling services, school handbook and policies, male residence hall cultures, and perceptions of administrators.

**Individual support from faculty and staff.** All of the participants indicated support from faculty and staff members as an extremely positive aspect of his/her university. Zach even explained that the main reason he had not left his institution was because his instructors did not treat him any differently after they found out he was gay. Students further appreciated the fact that faculty and staff members would support them, despite the possibility of being reprimanded by the university. In some cases, students indicated that professors actually risked their own job security by being supportive of their sexual identity. Mike explained,

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

Six of the eight students spoke about individual relationships they formed with faculty or staff members. These individual relationships were exceedingly positive, and in some cases, were integral in the student's identity development process. Aaron spoke of how one teacher "helped give me the courage to begin to accept myself and come out." One professor helped Jessica come out to her Christian family: "That Bible professor I told . . . he got me resources on biblical translation stuff that I could show to my mom, and he was really helpful." Elizabeth had the opportunity to take an independent study with a faculty member who was supportive. The purpose of the study was to examine gender roles and sexuality in literature.

He had to title it "Readings in English" so we could get it past the faculty, but it was a fabulous experience. Every week we would talk about various queer theories, what it is like for me at that institution, gay identity, all that kind of stuff. He saved my life, I think. If not for him, I would have gone nuts.

**Counseling services.** Four individuals attended the counseling center at their respective universities. Despite any fears or preconceptions the students had, each experience was positive. None of them felt any pressure to change or ignore their sexuality, and for two female students, the experience of going to counseling was

actually formative in helping them establish a healthy sexual identity as a lesbian. Mike indicated, "my therapist has been really there for me. He doesn't think that homosexuality is a sin and . . . that a healthy identity as a homosexual is to embrace that part of yourself."

The only negative association with counseling services was expressed when students felt worried that they would be sent to mandatory counseling sessions if their sexual orientation was reported to school administrators. When asked about this, Katie responded, "I think that's demoralizing to someone, to be like, 'You're clearly disturbed and not fit. We need you to go and talk to somebody and make sure that you really know what you're talking about.'"

**School handbook and policies.** An overwhelmingly negative aspect of each student's college experience was the tension caused by the school handbook and policies. Each student attended an institution where homosexual behavior was specifically mentioned and prohibited in the university's lifestyle guidelines. One specific source of tension was the distinction these policies made between acknowledging a homosexual identity and actually participating in homosexual behavior, such as same-sex hand-holding, kissing, and dating. As a college student attempting to define his own sexuality, Aaron indicated, "It's really frustrating because, for one, I can be gay as long as I'm not practicing, which doesn't make any sense to me." According to Katie, "You're allowed to be gay, as long as you don't do anything gay."

A second significant source of tension was a perceived extra-emphasis that was placed upon the institutional policies regarding homosexuality. Behaviors that other students engaged in, such as drinking and heterosexual behavior, were not dealt with as harshly. As a result, a double standard was perceived, and gay and lesbian students felt singled out, frustrated, and bitter. Six of the students spoke about how their respective institutions specifically included same-sex hand-holding within the definition of prohibited sexual behavior. Aaron said, "I can't hold hands with another guy, yet I see straight couples making out everywhere . . . it's just really frustrating . . . unfair." Elizabeth spoke about her experience in the residence hall as a further example of this double standard:

A lot of stuff got overlooked in a way that gay stuff never does. Girls had their boyfriends sneak up to their rooms all the time. There was a lot of drinking going on . . . folks did what they wanted, and a lot of that flew under the radar.

Zach recalled a time in which a group of under age students were caught drinking on-campus, a behavior that was in violation of the living guidelines. "All the school ever did was slap them on the wrist . . . nothing ever came of it. And I'm like, 'That's illegal. That's against the law,' but me being gay isn't, and I was more severely punished."

In regards to forming student organizations, David spoke about the Gay-Straight Alliance chapter on his campus. Every student who was seen attending this group was threatened with punishment if participation continued. As a result, the group decided to meet in secret.

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

When you create a handbook that's all about loving your neighbor, and all this stuff that Christian universities stand for, and then you have an entire section of the handbook devoted to, basically, putting down homosexuality and encouraging homophobia, of course the student body is going to, in many ways, perpetuate the cycle of homophobia and hatred, because the handbook does.

**Male residence hall culture.** Of the five male students who were interviewed, four lived in all-male residence hall environments. The culture of the all-male residence halls was both foreign and intimidating to male students experiencing same-sex attraction. The behaviors which other males found humorous and entertaining were seen as offensive and immature by the gay individuals. David spoke about his own experience.

I can't even describe how much I can't stand the whole dorm lifestyle and attitude . . . it was just the whole assumption, like, "Yeah, we're all guys, let's wrestle naked, let's all take showers together" . . . I hated the immature attitude.

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

The actual people who are in the residence halls themselves, the students, literally have no inkling that there might be a gay person around them, so they just spout off every horrible thing you can say about gay people . . . the resulting homophobia that occurs is literally jarring.

**Perceptions of administrators.** Unlike the relationships and positive interactions students experienced with faculty and staff members, interactions with and perceptions of administrators were exceedingly negative. Administrators were perceived as people who were largely ignorant and out of touch with current issues regarding homosexuality. For Josh, his supervisor was informed by administration that Josh recently entered a same-sex relationship. As a result, Josh was called into his office for a meeting.

He asked me point-blank if I was in a relationship, and I . . . said "yes." . . . He pretty much gave me the ultimatum of continuing my schooling until graduation and ending my relationship or continuing my relationship and ending my time in school.

Zach reported a similar experience that occurred after another student told university administrators that Zach was gay.

The school pulled me from summer tour . . . There was a meeting where they wanted to put me in counseling, and they said, "The only way you can stay is if you're in counseling." So by the end of it all I told them it wasn't true . . . "I'll just say what you want me to say, and we'll pretend that this never happened."

In general, students felt administrators were completely unapproachable regarding sexuality. Elizabeth was the only student who spoke in defense of campus administrators.

I know the president, the vice president, so it's not quite as easy as just, "They're a bunch of old, white homophobes who don't know what they're doing" . . . but at the same time, they're really products of their culture . . . which really conflated biblical prohibitions against homosexuality, [and] pop-psychology that suggested it's a series of disorders.

## Discussion

Five considerations for improving practice emerged from the findings: students making informed enrollment decisions, sexual identity formation during the collegiate experience, reconciling faith and sexual identity, encouraging supportive networks for gay and lesbian students, and policy development regarding sexual behaviors on-campus.

### Students Making Informed Enrollment Decisions

Young adults who experience feelings of same-sex attraction, although they may not identify as gay/lesbian, should carefully approach enrollment decisions when considering attending faith-based colleges or universities as feelings of same-sex attraction will likely have a negative impact on their collegiate experience at these institutions. Sexual attractions to individuals of the same sex may not simply disappear while progressing through higher education. Rather, the possibility exists that one's same-sex attractions will intensify while enrolled in college, and policies restricting homosexual behavior on faith-based campuses may become a significant source of tension and frustration. Likewise, colleges and universities must be candid with prospective students and families regarding institutional policies concerning homosexual behaviors. Additionally, staff members who interact with students in enrollment decisions cannot assume these students fully understand their own sexuality upon entering college.

Prospective college students, whether or not they eventually identify as gay or lesbian, should be aware of the pressure they might feel to conceal same-sex attractions or behaviors while enrolled at faith-based institutions. This pressure is often the result of institutional values, and it creates obstacles regarding the ability of gay/lesbian students to openly develop and establish their sexual identities. Chickering (1969, 1993) identified growth in competency, emotional management, interdependence, and mature interpersonal relationships as necessary to achieve identity development. Similarly, the final stages of many sequential models of homosexual identity development were consistently characterized by an individual's ability to synthesize his/her sexuality into a larger, holistic identity (Cass, 1979; Fassinger, 1998; Troiden, 1989). However, the pressure these students feel to conceal their sexuality while enrolled in faith-based institutions may place undue focus on the sexual aspect of each one's identity, resulting in a hindered ability to holistically develop.

It is equally important for enrollment professionals at faith-based universities to recognize that many incoming students possess a limited understanding of their own sexuality. If prospective students acknowledge that a gay/lesbian identity is even a remote possibility, this consideration should weigh heavily in discussions regarding whether or not a faith-based university is the best fit for them.

## **Sexual Identity Formation during the Collegiate Experience**

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

Although each individual in this study identified as gay or lesbian at the time of his/her interview, none of them thought this was a possibility prior to entering college. This pattern suggests that many students may enroll in a faith-based university without originally intending to sexually identify as gay or lesbian. For these students, adopting a non-heterosexual identity is an unforeseen, and possibly unwelcome, change that occurs during the college experience. This finding is supported by Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989) who both posited a stage of identity confusion in their respective models of homosexual identity formation. This stage was marked by an individual's ability to notice his/her own sexual attractions as different from the societal norm, and Cass specifically noted that an individual may completely reject the possibility of ever establishing a homosexual identity while rooted in this stage.

Gay and lesbian students identified exposure to off-campus cultures as an occurrence which helped their overall identity development. This included exposure to various international cultures, diverse regional cultures within the United States, and gay and lesbian cultures. This exposure provided an avenue for students to incorporate multiple perspectives into their own viewpoints, thereby moving from dualistic into relativistic thinking (Perry, 1981). Additionally, exposure to off-campus cultures provided students with a larger perspective regarding how their sexual identity could fit into the broader society outside of the culture of the faith-based institution they attended. This pattern is supported by sequential and non-sequential models of homosexual identity formation. Troiden (1989) identified the identity assumption stage where a gay/lesbian individual determines how to process the social stigma associated with a gay/lesbian identity. Cass (1979) identified one's ability to evaluate how he/she will adapt into society as a sexual minority as a precursor to the stage of identity acceptance. These messages were significantly impacted by exposure to other cultures. Without these off-campus experiences, gay and lesbian students are at a significant disadvantage when seeking to develop their sexual identity.

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

### **Reconciling Faith and Sexual Identity**

Many students who identify as gay or lesbian while enrolled at faith-based institutions progress through a period where they seek to reconcile their sexuality

with the Christian faith. This process may result in a continued engagement of Christian faith, abandonment of faith, or adoption of a new faith. Overall, spirituality is a primary concern for many gay and lesbian college students (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005). Every individual interviewed for this study came from a predominantly Christian background, and, as a result, questions of faith became impossible to ignore as he/she began to acknowledge a gay or lesbian identity. However, these students did not feel safe openly engaging these questions within their institutional setting. Negative perceptions of homosexuality were observed in residence halls, classrooms, and chapel services, and, therefore, students felt insecure openly addressing these questions.

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

It is not the purpose of this study to address the core cultural conflicts between Evangelical Christianity and the gay/lesbian culture. However, students who have questions regarding their own sexuality will continue to attend faith-based institutions, and programmatic efforts on the part of the university would be helpful to these students as they navigate these questions. These efforts should be approached as intentional learning opportunities that engage all students in discussions regarding how sexuality impacts faith and spirituality. In an effort to avoid harming students who are forming their sexual identity, it is essential that safe spaces be created within these institutions where multiple viewpoints may be acknowledged. It may not be possible to condone or affirm these viewpoints, but they should be acknowledged and tolerated. Chapel services may provide an ideal environment to openly engage the topic of human sexuality, especially as it relates to biblical text and the Christian faith. Scholars and ministers who represent multiple perspectives regarding sexuality should be brought to campuses to discuss these viewpoints with students, either through panel discussions or a series of lectures. Gender-specific programming could be implemented in residence halls to give both male and female students insight into how young adults of their same gender process the experience of growing up as a Christian with feelings of same-sex attraction. Educational initiatives could be embedded in course content. Any of these programmatic efforts would benefit gay and lesbian students as they seek to reconcile their faith and sexuality. Heterosexual students would also benefit from these efforts by being exposed to the reality of the struggles these students face as they progress through their collegiate experiences.

#### **Encouraging Supportive Networks for Gay and Lesbian Students**

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

College students progressively move through autonomy toward interdependence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This is often experienced as students become separated from their parents and develop an increased emotional reliance on others. Every student who participated in this study came from a religious background, and many of these backgrounds held negative perceptions of homosexuality. The possibility of harming relationships with family members by identifying as gay or lesbian heightened the importance these students placed on supportive relationships with peers. Coleman and Remafedi (1989) argued that individuals who establish a gay/lesbian identity during adolescence develop an increased desire for intimacy in peer relationships. As a result, the positive relationships gay and lesbian students formed with fellow students became vital in helping them navigate the college experience.

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

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

Administrators and staff members at faith-based institutions are in a difficult position regarding gay and lesbian issues. These administrators, particularly high-level administrators such as presidents, vice presidents, and deans, embody the values of their institutions and it would not be wise to compromise these values. Frequently in CCCU-affiliated universities, active support of gay and lesbian students is in direct conflict with institutional values, and, therefore, the ability of administrators to support gay and lesbian students is understandably limited. However, students with questions regarding their own sexuality will continue to attend faith-based universities, and administrators have a responsibility to serve these students who pay the same tuition and fees as heterosexual individuals. Supporting the development of all students remains their responsibility, while maintaining and upholding institutional values is their charge. Administrators should seek to facilitate supportive networks for gay and lesbian students in whatever capacity they are able.

Considering the difficult position of administrators concerning this topic, three specific suggestions are offered regarding how these individuals could support gay and lesbian students. First, administrators should actively seek to learn about the

individual experiences of gay and lesbian students on their campuses. By seeking to learn more about the struggles of these students, administrators could have context for understanding their experiences and communicate a more personal message to these individuals. These efforts should be carefully considered within the prevailing values of the institution. Second, counseling should be encouraged to support students as they mature and develop. Students with questions regarding their own sexuality should be encouraged to take advantage of the counseling services provided by their university but requiring these counseling sessions as a perceived form of punishment sends the wrong message to young adults who are likely in an already sensitive developmental phase. Third, administrators should be honest and transparent with students regarding the difficulties they (i.e., administrators) face on this topic. Most current gay and lesbian students are simply unaware of the true challenges administrators face when dealing with issues of sexuality. As a result, gay and lesbian students assume that administrators have no desire to help or support them. However, these same administrators may actually have a strong desire to help, but they simply are restricted in their ability to do so because of their responsibility to uphold the values of the sponsoring institutions. Overall, increased communication between both administrators and gay and lesbian students may yield positive results.

#### **Policy Development Regarding Sexual Behaviors on Campus**

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

To protect the confidentiality of the institutions represented in this study, specific examples of institutional policies regarding homosexual behavior were not included. However, for a comprehensive explanation of the stance of the CCCU regarding human sexuality, readers should review the report released by the CCCU task force on human sexuality (2001) as well as other CCCU documents on this topic. They clearly articulate the position of this organization, and, therefore, its affiliates on sexuality and sexual behavior.

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

Students who experience same-sex attraction experience a hypersensitive dilemma when they agree to adhere to college and university living guidelines that expressly forbid homosexual behavior. The distinction these guidelines create between sexual orientation and sexual behavior adds unnecessary confusion to students who are likely already confused about their own sexuality. It is simply too difficult for students, particularly as freshmen and sophomores in college, to conceptualize having homosexual orientation versus prohibiting homosexual behaviors while they are also processing their own feelings of same-sex attraction,

attempting to reconcile their faith and sexuality, and navigating their first experiences as independent college students. Furthermore, students who experience same-sex attraction initially feel unable to process these feelings with many of their peers because of the negative attitudes that permeate the culture of the campus. These factors put students who feel same-sex attraction at significant risk when compared to heterosexual students. In addition to the increased confusion, these policies also cultivate feelings of bitterness in gay and lesbian students as they are able to observe heterosexual students expressing their sexuality without fear of repercussions.

Conflicts concerning policies and living guidelines on faith-based campuses may be further evidence of a deeper cultural rift. Specifically, a significant disparity exists regarding how administrators demonstrate tolerance compared to how gay and lesbian students view tolerance. Under the current paradigm, policies are structured in a way which draws sharp contrasts between homosexual orientation and homosexual behaviors, tolerating homosexual orientation while punishing homosexual behaviors. Evidently for administrators, who embody the values of the institution, this is an appropriate position that is supportive of student development. However, according to gay and lesbian students in this study, this stance is intolerant and confusing. As administrators at faith-based universities seek to develop and update policies regarding sexual behavior, this conflict must be carefully considered and articulated.

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

In a broader sense, the sponsoring institutions of faith-based universities, including the CCCU and various denominational churches, should recognize the importance of continually revising and updating policies regarding sexual behaviors. The complexity of this topic as well as the awareness of deep cultural conflicts that exist within it demands continued learning and dialogue. The CCCU should encourage this dialogue through sponsored forums, presentations, and professional conferences. These sponsored events could incorporate research regarding college student developmental theory, theological discussions on homosexuality, and best practices for addressing gay and lesbian behaviors on faith-based campuses. Sponsoring institutions should also recognize the possibility that two major cultures are merging on faith-based campuses, Christian and gay/lesbian culture. Sadly, these cultures often cannot coexist within this specific context of higher education. Individuals within each culture may find ways to reconcile them, but this reconciliation may be impossible at an institutional level. In either case, healthy, holistic development of all students must be the primary concern and continued discussion should be a top priority.

## Contributors

Joel M. Wentz is an Area Coordinator in the Office of Residential Education and Housing at the University of New England. He has a Master of Arts from Ball State University and a baccalaureate degree from Huntington University.

Roger D. Wessel is an Associate Professor of Higher Education in the Department of Educational Studies at Ball State University. He has a Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Arts from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and a baccalaureate degree from Lee University.

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