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# Experiences of Students and Alumni Navigating Sexual Identity in Faith-Based Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

Students and alumni affiliated with faith-based institutions of higher education who experience same-sex attraction regardless of identity label or behavior (“sexual minorities”) shared some of their experiences in these unique settings. The results of this study are consistent with existing research in this area suggesting that sexual minorities may be a distinct group in several important ways. We reported on their experiences of milestone events, meaning-making associated with identity, and concerns about campus climate in light of a range of perspectives on religious doctrine and institutional policies.

Studies on faith-based campuses are beginning to offer a look at the experiences of students navigating sexual identity concerns in these unique settings. The experiences are diverse and far-reaching, and they include navigating sexual identity development in light of religious identity as well as experiences of campus climate in light of their own status as sexual minorities.

### Sexual Identity Development

Sexual identity refers to the labels people use to think about themselves and convey to others information about their sexuality. Common sexual identity labels include gay, lesbian, straight, bi, and queer. Most of the research and theoretical models have reflected the experiences of sexual minorities (or those who experience same-sex attraction regardless of identity label or behavior).

Recent scholarship has focused on the milestone events in sexual identity formation. That is, many sexual minority adults have identified key milestones in the formation of their identity as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). Common milestones include but are not limited to: first experience of same-sex attraction, first experience of sexual behavior to orgasm, first labeling of self as LGB, first disclosure to others, and first ongoing same-sex relationship.

In a previous study of sexual minorities at faith-based institutions (Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean, & Brooke, 2009), it was noted that many Christians did not report experiencing some of the common milestone events. In this study, only 30% of Christian sexual minorities reported engaging in same-sex behavior to orgasm; 14% reported labeling themselves as gay; 20% reported an ongoing same-sex relationship. These findings could be interpreted in many ways. For example, it could be that the strain of conflict between religious and sexual identity causes many sexual minorities to simply delay milestone events that will eventually become a part of their experience. Alternatively, they may be charting a different course, following a unique trajectory in which their religious identity informs decisions about specific milestone events.

### Campus Climate

Campus climate also factors into these discussions. Research on campus climate suggests that many campuses in the U.S. “are neither positive nor inclusive, with many students experiencing hostility because of the anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) attitudes of others” (Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013, p. 949). A decade ago, many sexual minorities felt they had to hide their sexual identity and/or were concerned for their safety (Rankin, 2003). More recent research on campus climate suggests improvements while concerns remain about disproportionate harassment and discrimination (Rankin, 2010).

When we turn our attention to faith-based institutions of higher education, we note far fewer studies in this area. From the studies conducted thus far, we do see concerns regarding campus climate. For example, Yarhouse et al. (2009) reported that while it was

unusual for students to hear faculty or staff express negative comments or jokes that “put down” people who experience same-sex attraction, it was much more common to hear these things from other students (73.1% of respondents reported hearing such things four or more times during the past year, and male students [87%] reported this more so than female students [59%]). This sets a climate that students described as largely negative with some distinction between “homosexuality” in general and homosexual behavior (84% of respondents viewed the community perception of homosexuality as “generally negative” or “negative,” while 96% viewed the perception of homosexual behavior as “generally negative or “negative” (Yarhouse et al., 2009, p. 104).

What little research has been conducted suggests that while many students are themselves religious and may be navigating sexual identity differently than those at other institutions, they are doing so in a campus climate that is largely negative toward homosexuality and especially homosexual behavior. They may share the views of the institution—particularly about behavior—but nonetheless they are navigating sexual identity in that context. The present investigation provided a more in-depth look at current sexual minority students and alumni of faith-based institutions.

### Method

In the tradition of exploratory research and due to the relative under-representation of studies about this population, primarily descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis were employed. Qualitative methodology allowed respondents to share details about their faith, sexual identity, and campus experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and three research members trained in qualitative analysis reviewed the transcripts and identified themes and subthemes from the transcribed interviews. When differences arose regarding themes or subthemes, these were re-reviewed until the reviewers were able to reach consensus on all themes.

### Participant Description

Eighteen participants completed the semi-structured interview and are included in data analysis. There was an equal distribution of current students ( $N = 9$ ) and alumni ( $N = 9$ ) from a number of colleges/universities. All participants identified as a sexual minority, Christian, and attending a religiously affiliated college or university, as these comprised the selection criteria. The sample was predominantly male (83.3%;  $N = 15$ ), Caucasian/White (83.3%;  $N = 15$ ), single (83.3%;  $N = 15$ ), and in their late twenties ( $M = 26.11$ ;  $SD = 9.80$ ). With regard to student classification, current students were mostly seniors (66.7%) with several juniors (11.1%) and sophomores (22.2%). Time since alumni left or graduated college varied widely within a range of 0.25 – 28.75 years ( $M = 8.04$ ;  $SD = 11.57$ ). All but one participant identified as Protestant, considering themselves to be both spiritual and religious ( $M = 7.44$  and 8.33 on a 10-point Likert-type scale, respectively).

## Results

The results are organized around two major areas: (1) experiences of attraction, orientation, identity, and associated milestone events, and (2) campus climate.

**Sexual Attraction, Orientation, Identity, and Associated Milestone Events.** Participants were asked to reflect upon their experiences of sexual attraction during the time period they attended college. For example, individuals were asked to describe both their homosexual and heterosexual attraction on a 10-point Likert-type scale with 1 indicating no attraction and 10 indicating strong attraction. On average, participants reported low opposite-sex attraction ( $M = 2.94$ ) and strong same-sex attraction ( $M = 8.78$ ).

Participants were asked how they identify themselves to others and how they resolved the tension that often arises between one's sexual identity and one's Christian identity (alumni responded retrospectively about their time at college). Approximately 66.6% indicated that they eschewed a sexual identification label and primarily identified with their Christian faith. Three participants endorsed a Gay/Bisexual Christian identity (16.7%), two claimed a Heterosexual/Straight identity (11.1%), and one identified as LGB with nominal or covert Christian affiliation (5.6%). Alumni also shared how they currently identify themselves to others, which changed somewhat since their time in college/university. Over half of alumni ( $N = 5$ ; 55.6%) now identify as a Gay/Bisexual Christian; two maintain their primary identification in their faith, having never identified as LGB (22.2%); one no longer identifies as LGB and now identifies as a Straight Christian with a heterosexual orientation (11.1%); one participant did not respond.

**Milestone events.** Participants responded to a number of questions regarding what are often understood to be "milestone events" in the development of a gay sexual identity (see Table 1). All participants reported experiencing same-sex attraction at an average age of about 11. Nearly all participants (94.4%) reported confusion about their same-sex feelings occurring at an average age of about 12. A current student shared that, "Even though I had experienced same-sex feelings for years prior, I never paid it much attention until I began to go through puberty (because I had not had any feelings to compare them against up to that point). These feelings were only solidified." A male alumnus similarly reported, "I experienced confusion as I felt sexual feelings toward my male friends in junior high, but because there was so much shame attached to the idea of being gay, I pretended to want a girlfriend."

Regarding sexual activities with same-sex partners, 61.1% reported being intimately/romantically kissed, being fondled, and fondling someone of the same sex. Same-sex sexual behavior to orgasm was reported by 77% of the sample at a mean of 17.5 years old. One participant reported that, "In 7th grade, I experienced my first orgasm while masturbating during a homoerotic fantasy." Others similarly indicated that homosexual pornography played a role in their first same-sex sexual behavior to orgasm. Participants initially attributed their same-sex feelings to a gay identity at an average age of about 18, with nearly half of these later "taking on a gay identity" at an average age of about 21.

Participants also shared about their first same-sex relationship (differing from any same-sex sexual behavior outside of a relationship), with half endorsing a relationship at an average age of approximately 21.

Table 1

*Number and Mean Age of Participants Indicating They Had Various Sexual Experiences*

Experience	Mean Age (SD)	N	Percent of Sample
Awareness of same-sex feelings	11.22 (4.31)	18	100%
Confusion about same-sex feelings	12.24 (3.42)	17	94.4%
Intimately/romantically kissed by someone of the same sex	20.45 (4.18)	11	61.1%
Been fondled (breasts or genitals) by someone of the same sex (without orgasm)	16.00 (5.80)	11	61.1%
Fondled (breasts or genitals) someone of the same sex (without orgasm)	15.55 (5.84)	11	61.1%
Same-sex sexual behavior (to orgasm)	17.50 (2.96)	14	77.8%
Initial attribution that I am gay/lesbian/bisexual	18.79 (4.00)	14	77.8%
Took on the label of gay	21.38 (5.18)	8	44.4%
First same-sex relationship	21.11 (3.06)	9	50%
Intimately/romantically kissed by someone of the opposite sex	18.33 (4.42)	9	50%
Been fondled (breasts or genitals) by someone of the opposite sex (without orgasm)	20.17 (4.36)	6	33.3%
Fondled (breasts or genitals) someone of the opposite sex (without orgasm)	20.00 (3.83)	7	38.9%
Opposite-sex sexual behavior (to orgasm)	24.33 (1.16)	3	16.7%
First opposite-sex relationship	16.77 (5.12)	13	72.2%
First disclosure of same-sex attraction	17.94 (2.96)	18	100%

Participants were also asked about sexual experiences with opposite-sex partners. Half reported a sexual history that included being intimately/romantically kissed by someone of the opposite sex. One-third indicated that they had been fondled by someone of the opposite sex, while 38.9% reported fondling an opposite-sex partner. Relatively few individuals reported opposite-sex sexual behavior to orgasm (16.7%). Nearly three-quarters (72.2%) endorsed a first opposite-sex relationship at a mean age of about 16.

In terms of the meaning/significance of milestone events, participants were asked, “Thinking back on your first experience of same-sex attraction, what did those experiences mean to you?” Five themes arose from the data: *unaware of meaning/confused* (N=8), *gay is wrong* (N=6), *fear* (of consequences, family, God’s disapprove, self-condemnation) (N=4), *temporary phase* (N=3), and *different/outsider* (N=3). For example, in terms of *fear*, a current sexual minority student shared:

...it scared me. Because I grew up in a Christian home and I was like, “How is that going to play out, work...” and I had just become a Christian

when I started really experiencing these in a direct way. The first time I was attracted I had just become a Christian, and I was just like, “Can I continue to be a Christian?”

Participants were also asked about when they first disclosed their same-sex sexuality to another person. The specific prompt was, “Tell me about when you first disclosed your same-sex attraction or identity” with multiple additional prompts related to circumstances, effect on relationship, and attribution/meaning-making. Nearly half ( $N=8$ ) shared that their first disclosure occurred when they were between ages 11 and 18, while seven participants shared that first disclosure was later, between ages 19 and 24 (three did not respond). Disclosure to family (siblings, parent) and Resident Director were the most common, followed by friend, mentor, and youth pastor. In terms of circumstances, we identified several themes, including *supportive circumstances* ( $N=4$ ), *unplanned disclosure* ( $N=4$ ), *disclosure within close relationship* ( $N=3$ ), *internal pressure to disclose* ( $N=3$ ), *conflict between same-sex sexuality and Christianity* ( $N=3$ ), *external pressure to disclose* ( $N=2$ ), and *disclosure within therapy* ( $N=2$ ).

In terms of effects on the relationship in which disclosure had occurred, we distinguished three themes: *supportive/accepting/compassionate* ( $N=5$ ), *grew closer* ( $N=5$ ), and *no significant change* ( $N=5$ ). Regarding the theme *grew closer*, a student shared, “I feel like overall it had an effect of deepening our relationship. As we ended up I would ask for her advice and stuff like that, I think it deepened our relationship.”

When participants elaborated on attributions and meaning-making, we identified three themes: *broken relationship with father* ( $N=3$ ), *no strong attribution* ( $N=3$ ), and *broader identity* ( $N=2$ ). For the theme *broader identity*, one student shared: “I don’t want to be somebody that is like the defining part of who I am. I think a lot of people can get so wrapped up in it that that’s what drives their personalities, their reality, and everything. And while it may be a part of who I am, that’s not the total sum of who [participant] is....”

We asked if people were currently in a same-sex relationship. Most participants ( $N=13$ ) said they were not currently in a relationship. Only two indicated that they were currently in a same-sex relationship (both current students). Four offered that they had previously been in a same-sex relationship. Of the two currently in a relationship, both reported these as positive relationships. Of those who shared having previously been in a same-sex relationship, two indicated they were comfortable in that relationship, while two indicated they had not felt comfortable. Four participants shared that any sort of physical sexual activities occurred off-campus or in private on-campus.

We asked if participants were currently in an opposite-sex relationship. Most ( $N=14$ ) said they were not, and only one participant indicated that he was currently in an opposite-sex relationship (and that the partner was aware of his same-sex attractions).

### Campus Identity and Relationship to Campus Policies

A significant focus of this research was campus climate. Most participants ( $N=12$ ; 66.7%) endorsed being known as a sexual minority to only a few close friends while they were students. Four individuals reported that they were known to be a sexual minority by many others on campus. Few ( $N = 2$ ; 11.1%) described themselves as trying to “pass” as heterosexual and were not known by anyone as a sexual minority. With regard to their attitudes toward campus policies regarding sexuality and sexual behavior, participants were split. About half (55.5%) shared that they came to a Christian university but quietly disagreed with their policies, while 44.4% chose to attend a Christian university because they agreed with the existing policies. Notably, no participants vocally or publicly disagreed with the policies.

Participants were asked, “How would you describe your college/university’s atmosphere regarding same-sex attraction?” The most frequently cited themes here were *Hesitance to discuss/avoidance of topic* ( $N=8$ ), *Open to discussion/progress* ( $N=8$ ), *Understanding/compassion if it is a struggle* ( $N=7$ ), *Unsafe climate* ( $N=6$ ), and *Policy/prohibition against same-sex behavior* ( $N=6$ ).

Concerning *Hesitance to discuss/avoidance of topic*, a current student stated that while faculty and staff are fairly open to discussion, there is an overall climate of avoidance among students:

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...the students in general, I think it just makes them uncomfortable because of the classic Evangelicalism that pretty much everybody has been brought up in. And they never really thought about the issue, because there’s not a lot of gays in church. They’ve never really interacted with and gotten to know them as people.

A second theme had to do with the campus being *Open to discussion/progress*. A current student shared this about the openness to discussion about sexual identity on campus:

When I was a freshman it wasn’t a very big issue on the minds of anybody. However in the past two years I think because of the efforts of some of the organizations on campus we’ve had some people come in to speak at chapels and I think there’s been a much more open discussion about it.

With regard to the theme, *Understanding/compassion if it is a struggle*, a current student shared:

Our university really tries to push the issue to make it more known. Not from a specifically acceptable standpoint, but to say it’s a legitimate struggle just the same as everybody else in the sins that they have. They try to have

a biblical view on it and just to encourage people to come alongside people with the struggle. I think it's been something that's been getting in motion.

Six participants shared the theme of their campus being an *Unsafe climate*. For example, a current student stated,

I'm not comfortable telling other people that I'm gay. I'm not comfortable saying that. Or being open about it on campus. I don't know if that gives you a feel for the atmosphere. I think people are kind of closed-minded.

Interviewers probed further around the question of policies, particularly as they pertained to public displays of affection as an expression of same-sex sexuality. We identified two themes: *Equal treatment/all sexual behavior is prohibited* (N=5) and *Policy specifically against same-sex behavior* (N=4).

Concerning *Equal treatment/all sexual behavior is prohibited*, a current student described the campus atmosphere in regard to sexual behavior:

I mean even straight couples are limited to the amount of PDA – public affection that they can show. I mean, you'll see couples walking around, holding hands – and then hug for a very long time looking into each others' eyes like they want to kiss, but you rarely ever see a couple kiss on campus.

The second theme identified in this probe was *Policy specifically against same-sex behavior*. An alumnus recalled:

Well there was absolutely no toleration for that at all. I believed – I never in my time there saw two people of the same gender display any sort of physical romance for each other, and my understanding as a student was that if one was caught, that there would be discipline.

In the interview portion that dealt with campus climate, we also asked each participant about his or her personal experience on campus. We identified two main themes: *Pockets of safety* (N=8) and *Conceal/hide* (N=3). With respect to the theme, *Pockets of safety*, an alumnus shared his personal experience:

Mine was a little different from my friends, I've realized. The group of friends I hung out with I chose very carefully and very intentionally because I realized that they were just a little bit more accepting in general. So most of them were all theater majors, so that kind of explains it, but two of them I can think of didn't agree that homosexuality was okay, but they still treated me like a human being, still had fun with me, still invited me to things, and my sexuality never defined me.

The other theme was *Conceal/hide*. As an example, an alumnus recalled the pressure to hide his same-sex attractions:

So there was an upper classman that lived on the hall who was kind of overseeing this mandatory Bible study freshmen had to participate in. And he assigned us accountability partners. And we actually were sent to our room and we were told to open up about things you were struggling with. And I remember as I walked to the dorm room with my partner, I told myself, “Do not open up about your sexuality. They’re going to try to get that out of you and it’s not safe. You cannot talk about it.”

**Advice to other sexual minorities.** Participants were asked the question, “What advice would you give to other Christian students on your campus who experience same-sex attraction?” We identified several themes, including *Find trustworthy people* (N=14), *Be aware of potential consequences* (N=6), *Broaden identity* (N=4), *Transfer* (N=4), *Do not repress your sexuality* (N=4), and *Explore your identity* (N=4).

Concerning the theme, *Find trustworthy people*, one current student shared: “I encourage you to find a group of friends who can be open and honest and listen and even if they’re not 100% in support of it they will be willing to listen.” An alumni offered this:

Find at least one person you can be open with. Don’t believe at all whenever somebody says you must do something in order to be a good Christian. If somebody’s putting preconditions on your Christianity, then I would treat that with extreme skepticism.

Another theme was *Be aware of potential consequences* (of telling others/hostile environment). In advising students to be aware of potential consequences, one alumnus offered this:

To go somewhere they feel safe. To try to be safe. It’s really hard for Christian kids if you come from a really dogmatic environment because a lot of times your home life isn’t safe and your church might not be safe and if you are really wrapped up in your youth group like I was, that doesn’t really offer you a safe place to land either.... But I would still say if you are a freshman or a sophomore kid and you’ve got same-sex attraction, you still probably find it a pretty hostile place.

An additional theme was *Broadening identity* (not defined solely by sexuality).

**Advice to your college/university about improving services.** Participants in this study were asked the question, “What advice would you give to your college/university about how they can better serve students on your campus who experience same-sex attraction?” The most

frequent themes by numeric count were *Dialogue* ( $N = 10$ ), *Sanction underground LGBT group or provide safe place to meet* ( $N = 8$ ), *Increase awareness/education about same-sex attraction issues* ( $N = 6$ ), *Clarify policies to alleviate fear/ambiguity* ( $N = 4$ ), *Change policies about same-sex behavior* ( $N = 4$ ), *Equal treatment of homosexuality and other sins* ( $N = 4$ ), and *Current resources are helpful* ( $N = 4$ ).

The most frequently identified theme was that of *Dialogue* ( $N = 10$ ). An alumnus shared:

I feel like talking about homosexuality once a year is not enough. I really think that we now in our day in age, we have to incorporate into our curriculum. I guess when I'm talking about curriculum maybe broader than just classrooms, but maybe incorporated into this is what we're gonna do every year, like, we're gonna do a series, and just open up to those students.

The next most frequently cited theme was to *Sanction underground LGBT group or provide safe place to meet* ( $N = 8$ ). For example, a current student stated:

Just have spaces where people can talk without feeling like they will face any evidence of repercussions whether officially through the administration in terms of ... or more subtle discrimination on campus. Just provide safe spaces where students and faculty can discuss these things in a nonjudgmental non-punitive manner. Like the only way understanding will be reached is through spaces like that where people from different backgrounds come together and hear stories. So I'd say find a way to have those conversations on an official level.

Another theme was the recommendation to *Increase awareness/education about same-sex attraction issues* ( $N = 6$ ). A current student expressed a need for acknowledgment of sexual minorities on campus:

I think actually having some resources would be really great to have. And, just being a little more open to it and not condemning people who are gay and saying you can't be Christian if you're gay, which is kind of the climate. I guess just realizing that they are really important and that people can be gay and still love Jesus and want to serve God. Acknowledging that it does exist and it exists on this campus.

## Discussion

This study provides a more in-depth look at the experiences of sexual minority students and alumni from faith-based institutions of higher education. Their experiences are remarkably diverse, yet we see common themes throughout the discussion of milestone events and campus climate.

It is not uncommon to study milestone events in the development of an LGB identity. However, it is important to consider the unique experiences of people of faith who are navigating sexual identity in light of their religious identity. In some cases, they may be

asking a different set of questions about what their same-sex attractions and behavior mean to them. Some of our participants may have either delayed or refrained from specific milestone events that may or may not be a point of conflict with their religious beliefs and values. In some cases, decisions to refrain from specific milestone events (e.g., adopting a public gay identity) may have to do with campus climate and openness or extent of being “out” as a sexual minority in a more public way.

In terms of campus climate, we see more of a consensus view that Christian campuses have been and continue to remain difficult settings for Christian sexual minorities. Although not the focus of this study, there is reason to believe that there may be some improvements noted by alumni who reflected back on their experiences when they were undergraduates, but there appears to be much that could be done to improve climate. Even in cases in which students or alumni support more conservative doctrinal positions that are reflected in some campus policies, there seemed to be near consensus that campus climate is an important area for ongoing improvement.

The question of how to best improve climate for sexual minorities at faith-based institutions of higher education is a uniquely challenging situation for constructive dialogue among multiple stakeholders. We can envision some within the mainstream LGBT community wishing us to challenge the policies and doctrinal positions at these institutions; at the same time, other professionals, students, and alumni may wish to retain doctrinal positions but revisit policies and campus climate to improve the lived reality of Christian sexual minorities.

When participants were asked about what a campus could do to improve, they wanted to see more dialogue/discussion and also more in terms of support groups. There were also requests to clarify policies that may seem unclear about how a person can engage this topic and be supportive of one another without putting oneself at risk of discipline. There were also those who wished to change campus policies and the theological and doctrinal positions presumably associated with those policies. This is a remarkably complex issue in terms of balancing respect for sexual orientation and respect for religion in the context of higher education. (The issue of professional training in religiously-affiliated graduate training programs is another related matter but is beyond the scope of this paper; the interested reader should review articles in the recent volume of *Psychology of Sexual Orientation & Gender Diversity*; e.g., Bieschke, 2014; Gonsiorek, 2014; Hancock, 2014; Hathaway, 2014).

It is important that we at least identify as a superordinate goal the improvement of campus climate for students navigating sexual identity concerns. Some of the recommendations often made in the mainstream LGBT literature in response to campus climate concerns at state universities may need to be adapted to the unique educational settings under discussion. For example, creating an atmosphere in which sexual minority faculty and staff who abide by community standards of behavior could openly mentor and be a resource to sexual minority students would seem to be an improvement, as would approved support and education groups that facilitate exchange of ideas and perspectives

(while not undermining campus policies). Each of these kinds of changes may be an improvement and source of encouragement for those who identify as sexual minorities. Of course, addressing language and microaggressions that set a negative climate would also be important. Such steps are likely to be viewed as insufficient by some stakeholders and may be viewed as exceptionally challenging to implement by other stakeholders.

## Conclusion

Sexual minority students and alumni affiliated with faith-based institutions of higher education shared some of their experiences in these unique settings. Findings from the limited number of studies conducted thus far suggest that sexual minorities in these contexts may be a distinct group in several important ways. We reported on their experiences of milestone events, meaning-making associated with identity (in light of navigating both religious identity and sexual identity), and concerns about campus climate in light of a range of opinions regarding doctrine and policies, as well as suggestions for improvement.

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