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## Listening to Sexual Minorities: A Study on Faith and Sexual Identity on Christian College Campuses

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*Listening to Sexual Minorities: A Study on Faith and Sexual Identity on Christian College Campuses*

Mark A. Yarhouse, Janet B. Dean, Stephen P. Stratton, and Michael Lastoria

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press

Reviewed by Brad A. Lau

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Well-researched and incisively written, *Listening to Sexual Minorities* is a “must read” and provides a helpful resource for student affairs professionals seeking to further their understanding of and care for students. As the title suggests, the authors operate from a posture of humility and respect in faithfully relating stories told by sexual-minorities in their own words. The longitudinal research behind this book consisted of gathering information on two occasions, one year apart, from 160 student participants on fourteen different Christian college campuses. Comparisons were also made with earlier 2009 and 2013 studies. The underlying premise of the authors behind the study is that Christian college campuses should be intentional in engaging our students who are navigating their faith and sexuality.

The authors begin by reminding readers about the three “lenses” that people often bring to this conversation (pp. 8-9). The integrity lens is connected to the historic view of the church that human sexuality and expression is grounded in the creation order and God’s design for marriage between one man and one woman. The disability lens emphasizes the fallenness of creation and an understanding of sex and gender that is not as it was originally intended, but calls for compassion and empathy. Finally,

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the diversity lens sees gay identity as worthy of being celebrated and affirmed. All of these perspectives point to the very real tension that both institutions and sexual-minorities feel in seeking to navigate student faith formation alongside their sexuality on Christian college campuses.

The authors describe the participants in the study as “relatively young, quite religious, very spiritual, sexual minorities, fairly moderate, doing better than expected, and looking a lot like their fellow students” (pp. 29-48). Their research and findings recognize the complexity of the conversation and the diversity of the student participants. There is not a single student story, but many different backgrounds, experiences, and stories related to faith and sexuality. As the authors state, “The complexities should lead us away from easy answers . . . and toward more nuanced reflection on sexuality, human development, and flourishing” (p. 37). The ultimate goal is always to see our students flourish and develop as whole persons.

Key findings of this longitudinal study are summarized well toward the end of the book (pp. 272-274). The first finding, as has already been mentioned, has to do with the diversity of the student participants. The second key finding is that Christian colleges can be challenging environments for sexual minorities to navigate. Third, “intrinsic religiosity” and faith are important elements for students seeking to fit into our campus environments. Fourth, about 50% were in “low distress” and the other 50% were in moderate to high stress with intrinsic religiosity having a protective effect on the level of psychological distress. Fifth, most of the sexual minorities in the study wanted to hold on to both their Christian faith and their sexuality. Sixth, most of the participants liked being on their Christian campus. And finally, social support and relational connections are critical for sexual minorities on our campuses.

Before concluding with some of the most poignant takeaways and considerations for student development practitioners (and there are many), it is important to point out a few concerns or limitations that are noteworthy. While the research and methodology throughout were excellent, on rare occasions some of the comparisons with older studies seemed a little overstated. Attitudes and perceptions about this topic have changed so dramatically and rapidly in recent years and, while the authors briefly noted this on a couple occasions, this reality probably deserved more emphasis. Another observation is that the authors didn't fully acknowledge or appreciate the complexities of working within systems with diverse stakeholders including Boards of Trustees and alumni

who have a level of responsibility for institutional faithfulness and integrity over time. While this particular consideration might be beyond the scope of the study, it does seem relevant and noteworthy (and, perhaps, some recommendations in this area might have been helpful). Finally, it was still somewhat unclear how the "integrity lens" enters into the equation or, put another way, we are left with the same conundrum of extending understanding, compassion, empathy, care, and support while holding to an "orthodox theological position" that matters to many of our institutions and those who faithfully serve students on Christian college campuses.

With that said, there are a number of observations and insights throughout the book that are extremely helpful to student development practitioners in our work with students. First, faith was extremely important to the student participants in this study. Generally, this was reflected in faithfulness in church attendance as well as attention to private faith practices (prayer, reading Scripture, etc.). In fact, "Participants indicated it was more important to identify themselves as a Christian than any of these additional labels. This was truly the most important identity for this group of students" (p. 93). The researchers also found that faith commitment was generally very beneficial to overall mental health (p. 162). It is incumbent upon us to take the faith of sexual minorities on our campuses seriously and to facilitate ways for them to deepen their walk with Jesus. This is part of the human flourishing that we seek for all our students.

A second interesting observation had to do with participant's attitudes toward celibacy. A significant number of students saw celibacy as an option, but also noted that the church and the college campus are very unprepared about how to talk to students about singleness and/or celibacy as anything other than a loss. Indeed, "What kind of vision does a faith community provide to its members who do not see themselves in the standard path toward heterosexual marriage and family?" (p. 226). If we are concerned about educating and speaking to the "whole person", it is critical that we allow for alternative "scripts" for living a meaningful and purposeful life.

Yet a third observation that is absolutely critical is the importance of supportive and empathetic relationships and relational connections on campus. A few close friends or "micro-affirmations" from faculty or staff members can go a long way in mitigating the "otherness" that is

felt by students. Participants in the study noted that counseling centers were often the most helpful resource along with empathetic faculty and staff members. In addition, campus ministries offices and residence life were sometimes perceived as helpful. It was somewhat troubling, though perhaps not surprising, that student development was seen as the least preferred resource for sexual minorities on our campuses. While there was not always “evidence” conveyed by students to support these perceptions, they were perceptions nonetheless. As the authors noted, this may have to do with the fact that student development is charged with addressing conduct issues and carrying out institutional policies. Interestingly, the authors observed several times that very few student participants suggested policy change as an end goal. What is clear is that student development offices can and should seek ways to listen carefully to sexual minorities and create environments conducive to flourishing and spiritual growth. Our goal is always to point all of our students to deeper walks with Jesus!

A fourth observation, as noted previously, is that we must seek to address the needs of the whole person. This requires intentional and proactive engagement and that we “show up” for the conversation. As the authors note, “In the eyes of students, the developmental process for sexual identity seemed to be more informally engaged at best, often lacking any formative plan that students could identify” (p. 126). What would it look like for student development offices to both embody institutional values and convictions while courageously stepping into this “awkward” space with our students? As the researchers noted, “The most common classification of the ‘general campus attitude’ among the interview sample was ‘disengaged and resistant,’ meaning that other students [and faculty/staff] were perceived as being avoidant of engaging sexual minority issues (disengaged) and possibly averse to discussing the topic if confronted (resistant)” (p. 110).

In the minds of sexual minorities on campus, not talking about same sex attraction or sexual minority students is not seen as neutral, but as indicative of a lack of support or even resistance. Or, as the authors summarized “Basically, interviewed students seemed to be asking for a quality of institutional attention that did not magnify their own shame and fear” (p. 289). This requires a great deal of cultural humility as we enter into meaningful and nuanced conversations about sexuality and faith recognizing that “Christians who seek to follow Christ and un-

derstand the meaning of their same-sex attractions will need support, compassion, and space from the church community as they navigate this journey" (p. 155).

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