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At a Crossroads:

Student affairs professionals' developmental journey to support LGBTQ Students at
Christian Colleges and Universities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Education

by

Dominica J. Scibetta

2023

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

At a Crossroads:

Student affairs professionals' developmental journey to support LGBTQ Students at
Christian Colleges and Universities

by

Dominica J. Scibetta

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Mark Kevin Eagan Jr., Co-Chair

Professor Kristen Lee Rohanna, Co-Chair

Student affairs professionals (SA-pros) play a critical role throughout campus life (Gaston-Gayles, Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle, Twombly, & Ward, 2005; Hirt, 2006; 2009). Although these staff are trained and responsible for LGBTQ student well-being (Kezar, 2010; Kezar, Gallant, & Lester, 2011), those serving at Christ-centered institutions are underprepared to balance professional training, campus expectations, and LGBTQ student care, leading to professional tensions (Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2016; 2019). The following qualitative study explored the experiences of 10 student affairs staff at Christian campuses negotiating professional, institutional, and personal tensions in efforts to support LGBTQ students. Findings interpreted through Schein's (2010) levels of organizational culture and Baxter Magolda's

(2001) theory of self-authorship revealed that although campuses espoused familial, close-knit, and like-minded Christian values, when confronted with LGBQ issues daily practice was complex, confusing, silent, fearful, and political. Navigating these misalignments led to tensions of loyalty, action, trust, and faith. Participants' negotiation of these tensions varied. Some continued to rely on external authority for direction while others encountered a crossroads that prompted a renegotiation of their relationships, practice, and Christianity. Within these campuses, affirming students' sexual orientation identity required participants to grow in multiple ways - accepting of ambiguity, considering multiple perspectives, developing underground webs of support, and at times repositioning their faith. Self-authoring participants refused to comply with campus expectations and found new ways to support LGBQ students. Recommendations for future research and practice related to self-authorship in a Christian college context, student-staff relationships, graduate level training, and the Christian college approach to LGBQ issues are provided.

The dissertation of Dominica J. Scibetta is approved.

Ozan Jaquette

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2023

DEDICATION

The following project tried to capture the experiences of professionals as they negotiated institutional expectations, professional standards, and personal values when supporting LGBTQ students within Christ-centered colleges and universities. Rather than portray these professionals as unaware or ill-equipped, I hope the study demonstrated how culture and context shaped their personal and professional developmental journey when grappling with what it meant to love Jesus and their students. I dedicate this dissertation to all the staff members who came forward to share their experiences. Thank you for entrusting me with your stories.

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- Scibetta, D. J. (2019). Christian campus culture and student affairs professionals serving LGBTQ students. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 56(3), 254-266
- Scibetta, D. J. (2016). But the greatest of these is love: How staff members negotiate their relationships with LGBTQ students at Christian colleges and universities (unpublished masters thesis). California State University, Long Beach
- Scibetta, D. J. (2016). *How staff members negotiate their relationships with LGBTQ students at Christian colleges and universities*. (unpublished peer review, ACPA; ASHE).
- Scibetta, D. J. (2015). *Revisiting the GI Bill*. NASPA Region VI Newsletter: Public Policy and Research

Introduction

Student affairs professionals (SA-pros) play a critical role throughout college life and are typically responsible for student discipline, residential life, equity and cross-cultural programming, career advising, community building, mental health counseling services, and other areas of campus (Gaston-Gayles, Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle, Twombly, & Ward, 2005; Hirt, 2006; 2009). Starting with *Student Personnel Point of View* in 1937, social justice advocacy and a commitment to honoring the “whole” student has been a hallmark of student affairs work (American Council on Education, 1937). These practitioners are educated, trained, and socialized to provide holistic care for all student populations, including LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer/questioning) students (Linley, Nguyen, Brazelton, Becker, Renn, & Woodford, 2016; Nicolazzo, 2016; Woodford, Chonody, Kulick, Brennan, & Renn, 2015). SA-pros strive to provide LGBTQ students a welcoming and affirming campus by offering programmatic, counseling, and health services specifically designed to promote identity development and overall wellness (CAS, 2019).

Although many institutions attempt to create an inclusive learning environment for all students (Garvey, Rankin, Beemyn, Windmeyer, 2017; Rankin, Weber, Bloomenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Will, 2015), LGBTQ-identified students attending Christian colleges encounter more hostile campus climates. These institutions uphold Biblical doctrine that preserves the belief that sexual intimacy is reserved for one man and one woman in the context of marriage (Love, 1997; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse & Lastoria, 2013; Strunk, Bailey, Takewell 2014; Wentz & Wessel, 2011). SA-pros working for these campuses are often underprepared to negotiate tensions among religious tradition, professional responsibilities, and personal values when caring for LGBTQ students (McEntarfer, 2011; Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2016; 2019; Slater, 2019). This

lack of preparation to manage such tensions may be especially true for professionals who must reconcile graduate school training related to LGBQ support alongside daily practice (Lorden, 1998; Perez, 2014).

This study utilized a qualitative research design to explore how student affairs staff members working at Christ-centered colleges and universities negotiate institutional and professional tensions when building supportive relationships with LGBQ students. More specifically, the study uncovered the nuanced ways staff develop strategies to affirm LGBQ student identities in a context that challenged their capacity to do so.

Improvements in LGBQ Student Support in Higher Education

Over the last 15 years, higher education institutions have improved LGBQ inclusion efforts, with only specific institutions becoming outliers. Nationally, the need for increased LGBQ expertise led to the formation of groups such as the Consortium of Higher Education Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Professionals, introducing an entirely new functional area solely dedicated to directing LGBQ campus resources (Sanlo, 2000; LGBT Campus, 2021). These groups educate people on the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities and advocate for more inclusive policies and practices. At an institutional level, colleges have resource centers, created student support groups, and provide “safe zone ally training” - all to create an affirmative environment for LGBQ populations (The Safe Zone Project, 2021). Beyond research and programming, many colleges have endowed emergency scholarships for LGBQ students who have been financially “cut-off” from their parents after coming-out (Will, 2015). Even among some religiously affiliated institutions, campus communities have introduced ways to integrate their views of faith and sexuality to become more welcoming (Rankin, Weber, Bloomenfeld, & Frazer, 2010).

Within the field of student affairs, graduate programs and professional organizations include training and standards to guide higher education leaders in their work with LGBQ students. Student affairs master's level instruction provides extensive learning on LGBQ identity development and the unique experiences of this population (Abes & Jones, 2004; Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn-Fassinger, 1996; Lev, 2004). Course design includes topics related to gender, religion, LGBQ identities, and intersectionality (Gayles & Kelly, 2007). The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) provides frameworks to assess the effectiveness of 48+ functional areas, one of which is LGBQ programs and services (CAS, 2019). To date, over 115,000 student affairs staff have been trained by CAS throughout their career. Additionally, in 2015 the Campus Pride Index offers a national standard of LGBQ - inclusive benchmarks to improve the retention of LGBQ students (Garvey, Rankin, Beemyn, Windmeyer, 2017). Both CAS and the Campus Pride Index cite student affairs staff as paramount to helping LGBQ students feel safe disclosing their identity and included in campus life (Martin, Broadhurst, Hoffshire, & Takewell, 2018). Overall, higher education institutions demonstrate a strong commitment to LGBQ populations on college campuses, with SA-pros central to creating healthy environments for LGBQ students.

Christian Colleges and LGBQ Issues

While many colleges and universities have LGBQ support services, Christian institutions, particularly Evangelical campuses, have been much slower to change due to their connections to Biblical doctrine (Haverluck, 2014; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse & Lastoria, 2013; Strunk, Bailey, Takewell 2014; Wentz & Wessel, 2011). The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) is a global organization of over 180 Evangelical institutions (15 located in California), enrolling over 520,000 students (2021). The CCCU aims to “advance the cause of Christ-

centered higher education and to help institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to Biblical truth” (2014; 2021). CCCU institutions do not formally support best practices related to LGBQ inclusion (e.g., resource centers, gay alumni networks, and faculty or staff ally groups) (Slater, 2019). Without adequate campus resources, LGBQ students attending these institutions students face heightened prejudice, harassment, and negative perceptions of queer identities (Dias, 2015; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wentz & Wessel, 2011; Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean, & Brooke, 2009). They are more likely to engage in high-risk behavior, are less involved in co-curricular experiences, have reduced motivation to persist, and experience psychological distress (Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Reed, Prado, Matsumoto, & Amaro, 2010; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Vespone, 2016; Wright & Perry, 2006). While the CCCU articulates a mission to develop students’ “mind, spirit, body, and emotions,” these campuses largely ignore specialized supports for LGBQ students.

Student Affairs Professionals and LGBQ Student Care

Supportive relationships, like those between SA-pros and LGBQ students, positively shape the decision for these students to “come out” and leads to increased self-esteem and academic achievement (Evans & Broido, 1999; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). However, SA-pros serving at CCCU campuses are often restricted to openly supporting this population (Johnson, 2009; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Yarhouse, et al. 2009). The CCCU’s belief that that marriage and sexual intimacy are intended between a man and woman is woven throughout codes of conduct, campus policies, public statements, and student life practices (Biola University, 2012; 2014; California Baptist University, 2015; Vanguard University, 2016). A 2010 review of 20 randomly selected CCCU institutions found that 50% of campuses included

policies directly referring to “homosexual behavior,” 45% categorized the behavior as a form of immorality, misconduct, or promiscuity, and 75% responded to such behavior with discipline, expulsion, or dismissal (Wolff & Himes, 2010, p. 445). Student handbooks often differentiated orientation from behavior, implying that disciplinary action may occur if the student engaged in same-sex behavior regardless of their identity. Mixed messaging of both support and discipline created confusion for students and staff (Love, 1997; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse & Lastoria, 2013; Strunk, Bailey, & Takewell, 2014; Wentz & Wessel, 2011). SA-pros working for CCCU institutions are placed in situations whereby professional commitment to support LGBTQ students must be carefully negotiated alongside institutional values and policy.

Problem Statement

College students are becoming much more diverse along all social identities - race, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, religiosity, etc. The number of college-aged students who identify along the LGBTQ spectrum is rising, with one in six adults in Generation Z identifying as members of this community (Jones, 2021). This trend is also found among Christian college student populations. In a survey of 3,000 students attending Christian colleges, 22% of students identified as non-heterosexual (College Pulse, 2021; Redden, 2021). Student affairs professionals must be prepared to serve students from all backgrounds in all types of institutional contexts. Thus, SA-pro graduate programs (as well as professional organizations) need to ensure SA-pros gain expertise in both student development and campus culture, especially when meeting the needs of LGBTQ students attending Christian institutions.

Although SA-pros are trained and responsible for LGBTQ student well-being (Kezar, 2010; Kezar, Gallant, & Lester, 2011), those at CCCU institutions may be underprepared to negotiate policy alongside student care, experience feelings of professional tension and

“professional paralysis,” and in some cases question their faith when balancing institutional policies and LGBQ student care (Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2016; 2019). Professionals without adequate support and preparation to manage such tensions cite high rates of burnout, empathetic distress, and attrition (Bestler, 2012; Lorden, 1998; Perez, 2014). These SA-pros often have less visibility in their advocacy for LGBQ students due to department resistance, institutional barriers, and lack of preparation to navigate complex campus demands (Croteau & Talbot, 2000; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; McEntarfer, 2011; Schreiner & Nelson, 2013; Scibetta, 2019). Balancing professional training, institutional context, and LGBQ student care may be especially difficult for new professionals (Amey, Jessup-Anger, & Tingson-Gatuz, 2002; Janosik, Creamer, Hirt, Winston, Saunders, & Cooper, 2004).

While there is expanding literature on the LGBQ student experience at faith-based institutions, little is known about how student affairs staff negotiate professional, institutional, and personal tensions when forming supportive relationships with LGBQ students within a Christian context. The limited research examining staff interactions with LGBQ students attending Christian colleges suggests that student affairs staff are uniquely positioned to provide increased levels of support, acceptance, and protection, and mitigate campus homophobia (Hughes, 2015; Love, 1997; Wentz & Wessel, 2011; Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean & Brooke, 2009; 2018); yet how staff develop the capacity to reconcile tensions and advocate for LGBQ students in Christian campus settings remains mostly unexplored. Understanding how staff build affirmative LGBQ student relationships within Christ-centered institutional context highlights new ways to better prepare SA-pros as they negotiate complex professional tensions in service to the LGBQ students attending Christian colleges and universities.

Purpose of the Study

This study utilized a qualitative research design to explore how student affairs staff working at Christ-centered colleges and universities negotiate institutional and professional tensions when building relationships with LGBTQ students. More specifically, the study uncovered the ways staff develop the professional capacity to address LGBTQ issues in a historically LGBTQ-hostile campus context. Findings illuminated what is needed to improve staff support of LGBTQ students in these settings. The following central research question directed the study:

1. How do student affairs professionals working for Christ-centered colleges and universities negotiate professional, institutional, and personal tensions to support LGBTQ students?

Using Schein's (2010) *levels of organizational culture* and Baxter Magolda's (2001) *theory of self-authorship*, the following sub-questions helped guide this inquiry along cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions:

- a. How do participants make-meaning of campus policies and standards regarding LGBTQ issues?
- b. How are participants' relationships with campus colleagues (i.e., faculty, administration, and colleagues) shaped by their interactions with LGBTQ students, if at all?
- c. How are participants' professional and personal identities shaped by their interactions with LGBTQ students, if at all?

Significance of the Study

This study built on existing literature related to LGBTQ student care in Christian campus settings, paying specific attention to the critical nature of relationships between SA-pros and

LGBQ students and ways these staff negotiate their response when meeting the needs of this student population. The study also extended knowledge about the development of self-authorship within specific contexts, such as Christian college settings.

Studying the ways in which staff members build supportive relationships with LGBQ students while balancing Christ-centered institutional context and professional standards is important for several reasons. First, the study promotes a broader understanding of LGBQ support within a Christian college context, and new ways to support LGBQ students within these settings may emerge. Second, findings provide new strategies to help staff reconcile tensions between their professional training and institutional standards and practices related to LGBQ support. Third, the study offers new insights for graduate programs to better prepare future student affairs professionals to meet the complex demands facing LGBQ college students, with specific attention to the variety of institutional contexts. These professionals may develop more sensitivity to campus culture when caring for LGBQ students. Finally, the study's implications provide clarity for Christian college leaders when supporting the staff responsible for LGBQ care. Adopting new strategies that are more supportive of both LGBQ students and SA-pros can lead to improved staff retention and development.

Operational Definitions

Specific language was chosen for uniformity and clarification, and not meant to further marginalize or ignore the experiences of those involved. For the purposes of this study, I have intentionally selected the use of certain terms for the following reasons:

- *Christian-affiliated or Christ-centered:* Refers to colleges or universities who explicitly and publicly state their affiliation with and support of Christ-centered higher education and integrate Biblical truth and Christian doctrine into their campus

community (i.e., regular chapel attendance, hiring practices, statements of faith, academic curricula, etc.).

- *LGBQ*: The study explores issues related to sexual orientation and human sexuality vs. gender identity, thus T (transgender) was removed from the acronym. LGBQ refers to individuals who experience same-sex attraction, and/or explore/identify with a lesbian, gay, or bisexual orientation. When referring to specific research studies, I use the terminology used by the author. Note that some studies focused on the experiences of sexual minorities within Christian college environments use terms such as “non-heterosexual” or “same-sex attracted” to describe their sample (Wolff & Himes, 2010; Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean & Brooke, 2009).
- *LGBQ-Hostile*: Christ-centered campuses vary in their approach to LGBQ issues. These campuses may allow a degree of LGBQ expression (i.e. student dating, informal support groups/clubs), but their policy language specifically instructs students to live “in congruence with God’s design” for sex between one man and one woman in the context of marriage. Campus policies attempt to regulate or restrict LGBQ identity and behavior. Deviation from Biblical interpretation is treated as an opportunity for repentance and/or redemption.
- *Student affairs professionals (SA-Pros)*: Higher education practitioners often associated with student affairs, student support, and/or student services departments and/or divisions who are primarily responsible for holistic success, growth, and development vs. teaching and academic curricula development.

The next chapter includes a literature review exploring the training and socialization of student affairs to LGBQ student support, the Christian college campus approach LGBQ issues,

and the ways SA-pros serving at Christ-centered institutions might resolve complex tensions when serving LGBQ students. I include a discussion of Schein's (2010) levels of organizational culture and Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, which was used as a conceptual framework to understand how SA-pros working for Christ-centered institutions develop the capacity to navigate institutional expectations, interpersonal relationships, and personal values when supporting LGBQ students.

Findings revealed that although campuses espoused familial, close-knit, and like-minded Christian values, when confronted with LGBQ issues daily practice was complex, confusing, silent, fearful, and political. Navigating these misalignments led to tensions of loyalty, action, trust, and faith. Within these campuses, affirming students' sexual orientation identity required participants negotiate these tensions in multiple ways. Self-authoring participants refused to comply with campus expectations and found new strategies to support LGBQ students. Recommendations for future research and practice related to self-authorship in a Christian college context, student-staff relationships, graduate level training, and the Christian college approach to LGBQ issues are provided.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Student affairs professionals (SA-pros) are educated, trained, and socialized to provide holistic care for all student populations, including LGBQ students (Linley, Nguyen, Brazelton, Becker, Renn, & Woodford, 2016; Nicolazzo, 2016; Woodford, Chonody, Kulick, Brennan, & Renn, 2015). Over the last few decades, higher education institutions have deepened their commitment to LGBQ campus equality and inclusion (Beemyn, 2002; Woodford, Kolb, Durocher-Radeka, Javier, 2014; Taylor, 2015; Zemsky & Sanlo, 2005). Despite increased LGBQ support, both in the field of student affairs and throughout the higher education landscape, LGBQ students continue to experience discrimination, bias, bullying and harassment (Rankin, et al., 2010; Renn, 2010; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012), especially when attending Christian-affiliated institutions (Wolff & Himes, 2010; Yarhouse, et al., 2009). SA-pros working for these campuses are often underprepared to negotiate tensions among religious campus tradition, professional ethic of care, and personal values when caring for LGBQ students (McEntarfer, 2011; Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2016; 2019; Slater, 2019). This lack of preparation to manage such tensions is especially felt among professionals who are trained and educated to support all students, yet find themselves working for LGBQ-hostile campuses (Lorden, 1998; Perez, 2014).

To explore how SA-pros build relationships with and offer support to LGBQ students in a Christ-centered institutional context, attention must be paid to how these professionals are trained to negotiate holistic care for all students and adherence to LGBQ-hostile policies and practices at Christian-affiliated campuses. The following literature review begins with an analysis of the various ways student affairs staff are trained and socialized to support LGBQ

students. The second section explores how Christian campus values and ideologies related to LGBQ issues shape student affairs daily practice. The final section reviews the limited research addressing SA-pros serving at Christ-centered institutions and ways they might resolve complex tensions among Christian faith and LGBQ issues. I conclude with a discussion of Schein's (2010) levels of organizational culture and Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship as a framework to understanding how SA-pros working for Christ-centered institutions develop the capacity to navigate institutional context when supporting LGBQ students.

Becoming a Student Affairs Professional

In the early 20th century, as the higher education landscape diversified and expanded, the demand for student-centered personnel responsible for discipline and co-curricular activities grew. The field has extended to “functionally-based” areas (e.g. expertise in specific areas - financial aid, career counseling, academic advising, etc.) and “population-based” areas (e.g. expertise in specific student groups - first-generation, LGBQ, undocumented, differently abled, international, etc.) (Hirt, 2006). Presently, SA-pros are responsible for residential life, leadership organizations, career preparation, advising and counseling services, cross-cultural programs, character and community building, and other complex issues related to mental health and campus safety (Gaston-Gayles, Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle, Twombly, & Ward, 2005; Hirt, 2006; 2009). Research exploring student affairs socialization provides insight into how SA-pros learn “the rules of the road,” especially as it relates to supporting marginalized student groups, such as LGBQ populations (Kuh, 2000; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Tull, Hirt, & Saunders, 2011).

Learning the “Rules of the Road”

Graduate School and Commitment to LGBQ Support. For aspiring student affairs professionals, graduate school is often their formal introduction to the competencies and skills

required to manage a wide range of campus duties. Student Affairs master's programs orient SA-pros to the core values of the profession, which include social justice, equity, community, holistic student development, and service to the university. Although specific graduate program components vary slightly across institutions, the field shares an overarching commitment to providing a safe campus environment for LGBQ populations. Graduate program curricula cover identity development models, allyship strategies, and other LGBQ -specialized training (Ryan, Broad, Walsh, & Nutter, 2012). Knowledge of student identity development might help SA-pros better support the "coming out" process (Abes & Jones, 2004; Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn-Fassinger, 1996; Stevens, 2004). Further, these programs offer emerging professionals shared language and practices that reinforce the field's mission to support LGBQ students.

Graduate School and Formation of Values. Scholars explored how graduate programs contribute to the formation of professional values, such as holistic care, LGBQ equity, and service. Lidell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, and Boyle's (2014), *Survey of Early Career Socialization in Student Affairs* (SECS) discovered that programs with high ethical standards, clear values, collaborative work norms, and enriching activities led to a greater sense of commitment and value congruence to the field. In a follow-up SECS study, findings showed graduate education, alongside experiential opportunities and peer interaction were just as important for new professionals as were skills (Hirschy, Wilson, Liddell, Boyle, and Pasquesi, 2015). Recent graduates of these programs reported having stronger personal and professional values. For emerging SA-pros, securing inclusive values early-on helped establish an enduring commitment to LGBQ support in the future. These studies demonstrate the critical role graduate programs play in the development of inclusive values. However, how these values manifest in everyday practice remains unknown.

Graduate School and “Real Life” Preparation. Although graduate-level education provides SA-pros with basic skills/competencies and values to address issues of diversity, scholars debate the degree to which programs prepare staff to manage complex campus challenges long-term (Freeman & Taylor, 2009; Kuk & Banning, 2009). Weidman, Twale, and Stein’s (2001) synthesis of existing studies concluded that although professional competencies and knowledge gained from graduate-level coursework were important, interpersonal relationships were most valuable to the learning process. Informal interactions with peers outside the classroom had greater influence on students’ professional expertise. Findings implied that formal education is critical, but comprehensive preparation for “real life,” is multifaceted and ongoing.

Additional research supported a mismatch between graduate preparation and career readiness. Waple’s (2006) 28-item survey completed by 430 early-career SA-pros confirmed misalignment between what graduate students learned versus what supervisors believed necessary for effective practice. Most supervisors (81%) indicated early-career professionals were prepared in basic competencies (e.g. multicultural awareness), but were not prepared in critical skills, such as supervision, planning, and decision making (p. 12). Like Weidman, Twale, and Stein’s (2001) findings, this study demonstrated the limitations of graduate school education when preparing for everyday practice. Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, and Molina’s (2009) study also noted that while recent graduates felt prepared to support diverse populations, supervisors rated new staff as ill-prepared to manage “real-life” issues. These studies demonstrated that although unrealistic to prepare emerging professionals with all needed skills, recent graduates need substantial “on the job” training and supervision once employed. Findings bring into question how SA-pros’ developed the capacity to navigate challenging workplace

situations, such as balancing Christian campus culture alongside LGBTQ student care, especially without receiving significant support.

Graduate School and “The Developmental Paradox.” Although graduate school acts as a critical entry point to the field of student affairs, new professionals encounter a “developmental paradox” once on campus. Kegan and Lahey (2009) report that only half of staff in two major studies involving several hundred participants (middle-class, college-educated professionals) were not securing the capacities needed to navigate complex workplace situations. Multiple longitudinal studies of college students support their findings - few traditional-age graduating students developed self-authorship during college (King & Baxter Magolda, 2011). Thus, young adults enter the workforce “stuck” or unsure how to appropriately respond to situations that might feel uncomfortable (e.g., conflict with a colleague) or demand a nuance response. This was especially true when individuals encountered folks with backgrounds different from theirs. These emerging staff did not have the maturity to manage their anxiety or internalize their values and beliefs.

Recent graduates entering universities as professionals face a “developmental paradox.” Shetty, Chunoo, and Cox (2016) explored this paradox and explained that while SA-pros were responsible for the holistic student development, they themselves did not gain a sense of self-authorship before entering the workforce. Researchers administered a modified version of the *Career Decision Making Survey* (Creamer, Baxter Magolda, & Yue, 2010) to assess self-authorship of 109 participants, 76% of which earned master’s degrees (p. 135). Recent graduates reported securing “self-authorship” (e.g. internally defined beliefs, values, relationships, and identities). Interestingly, after a year in the field, they reported lower levels of self-authorship. Researchers explained that this is likely because early-career staff had not encountered complex

workplace situations that challenged their values. SA-pros required added support to resolve tensions between what they learned in graduate school and everyday practice. Master's programs produced staff who espoused support for LGBQ students, but research did not fully explain how staff gained the capacity to align these values with everyday practice later in their career, especially among LGBQ-hostile campuses.

Learning through Professional Organizations

When becoming a student affairs practitioner, SA-pros received formal education and training via graduate school and participated in professional associations for ongoing support throughout their career. ACPA (American College Personnel Association) and NASPA (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) were the leading organizations that offered access to conferences, employer list-serves, webinars, certificate courses, mentor programs, research opportunities, task-force membership, and elected offices. Combined, they supported a network of over 21,500 members and provided more than 40,000 participants the specialized skills and proficiencies necessary to support LGBQ students (ACPA, 2021; Hirschy, Wilson, Liddell, Boyle, & Pasquesi, 2015; NASPA, 2021). These professional organizations increased LGBQ visibility, representation, and scholarship for SA-pros.

ACPA and NASPA reiterated formal training related to LGBQ student support. Pryor, Garvey, and Johnson (2017) examined ACPA and NASPAs' LGBTQ, gender, and sexual minority professional development topics over the last 30 years. Content analyses of 543 conferences revealed that one-third of training addressed LGBTQ campus inclusion and LGBTQ student mental health (p. 126, 131). Although findings did not detail who attended such presentations, the analysis showed a widespread commitment to LGBTQ scholarship, practice, and inclusivity – a core focus introduced in graduate school. Engaging with ACPA and NASPA

were especially important for newer professionals. Chernow, Cooper, and Winston (2003) explored the level of involvement at different stages throughout student affairs staff careers. Participation was particularly critical for those with less than five years of work experience. While the study did not focus solely on LGBTQ competencies, findings implied that early-career SA-pros relied more heavily on these organizations for training, while mid- and senior-level staff developed alternative ways for professional growth. Janosik (2015) also found that professional organizations were a valuable way for newer professionals to build competencies, find mentorship, and enhance skills, especially during the transition from graduate school to the “real world.” Professional organizations provided an additional layer of support for SA-pros, aimed to strengthen their student interactions, including interacting with LGBTQ populations.

Although ACPA and NASPA reinforce the field’s ongoing commitment to LGBTQ advocacy, training was often generalized for all institutional settings and does not offer context specific nuance. Thus, SA-pros may not apply LGBTQ related training in the same way. While professional organizations help staff internalize important values to the field (e.g., LGBTQ student support), organizations can function as an echo chamber, whereby new professionals gravitated towards information they already know (Duran & Allen, 2020). New professionals need added support and exposure to diverse perspectives when navigating everyday workplace situations. Further research to uncover how SA-pros learn to support LGBTQ students at LGBTQ-hostile campuses is needed.

Learning through Colleague Relationships

Graduate school and professional organizations offer formal and ongoing support for SA-pros as they develop a long-term commitment to LGBTQ student care. When exploring additional ways SA-pros socialize, prepare, and train for their profession, informal peer interaction was the

most critical factor when learning how to do their job (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007). Strayhorn (2009) explored the frequency, nature, and quality of new professionals' interactions with their peers and non-peers (e.g., supervisors, senior administration), and found that student affairs values and practices are mostly learned among peers. Survey data revealed that over 90% of new staff interacted with peers at least four times per week and much less time with upper-management (p. 43). Supportive peer relationships helped new professionals understand the functions of their job and lead to increased job satisfaction, motivation, and community. Lombardi and Mather (2016) supported Strayhorn's (2009) findings that peer colleagues helped "newcomers" feel less confused about their professional role. In this way, peer connection was a central way recent graduates decided to work for a particular institution and learned to integrate values, such as LGBTQ advocacy, into everyday practice.

Building supportive relationships with peers also helped professionals gain clarity about their values, dispositions, and professional identity. Baker's (2013) exploration of the socialization of Black women in student affairs demonstrated the importance of peer relationships when navigating racism and genderism in highly political campus environments. Building rapport with peers helped participants gain more visibility, build alliances, and, in some cases advance within the organization. Pittman and Foubert's (2016) survey of 542 current/recent graduates confirmed that colleague relationships, not graduate school experiences, secured SA-pros professional values long-term. However, in all these cases, researchers assumed peers share common values aligned to overarching student affairs principals (e.g., LGBTQ inclusion). Findings do not reveal what occurs when emerging professionals' approach to LGBTQ student support differs from their peer-colleagues, or how these critical relationships might change when navigating such tensions.

Learning within Context

Higher education institutional contexts reinforce the learning about LGBTQ student care that occurs throughout graduate school, professional associations, and interactions with staff colleagues. Campus environment was the primary force that influences how professionals apply their training, interact with colleagues, care for students, make-sense of their learning, and address complex issues (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007). These settings, not formal graduate training, determined “pace of work, how work gets done, and work environment,” (Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006, p. 661). In fact, Roberts (2007) found the influence of one’s graduate training diminished as SA-pros gain on-the-job experience. Although 69% of emerging professionals graduated from preparation programs at research and comprehensive universities, less than 25% ended up working for the same institutional type. Even if graduate training remained somewhat consistent among the field, everyday practice looked significantly different depending on campus type (Hirt, 2006).

Institutional Context and Student Affairs Typology. Hirt’s (2005; 2006; 2009) comprehensive typology of student affairs practice described how campus setting determine professional expectations and everyday behavior. Based on survey data collected from more than 1,100 practitioners across the U.S., her studies challenged the assumption that student affairs practice transcends organizational context. For example, staff working for religious institutions encountered highly political climates whereby religious doctrine and denominational influence acted as an authority. Professionals acted as “interpreters” when balancing personal faith, institutional responsibilities, and student care alongside sociopolitical change (Hirt, 2006, p. 39). Staff practicing within these environments spent half as much time (12% vs. 23% at large liberal arts institutions) on administrative tasks, and much more time on teaching, community

building, and re-interpreting their faith alongside professional responsibilities (p. 48). As interpreters, SA-pros mentored students on ways the church mission applied to present society. Alternatively, staff at large comprehensive universities were responsible for specific functions (e.g., financial aid, student life) and not necessarily tasked with holistic faith development. The typology indicated that SA-pros serving at religious institutions span various functional areas, whereas SA-pros working for larger comprehensive institutions are more specialized and did not have a role in students' faith or spirituality. This suggested that when compared to graduate school, campus context plays a much larger role in shaping professional practice.

Although most SA-pros sampled were formally trained by graduate programs and participated in professional organizations that commit to holistic and inclusive LGBQ practices, campus context ultimately dictated how espoused values translated into everyday practice. In this way, LGBQ-hostile settings may present potential misalignment between formal student affairs training and campus policy and practice. Empirical studies related to the ways SA-pros are educated, trained, and socialized to the values of the field are robust; however, little is known about how Christ-centered campuses influence professional practice as it relates to LGBQ issues. Even less is known about how SA-pros might manage the tensions among professional standards, institutional environment, and student care.

About Christian Colleges and Universities

Although the field of student affairs and most higher education institutions share a commitment to serving LGBQ students (Garvey, Rankin, Beemyn, & Windmeyer, 2017; Rankin, Weber, Bloomenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Will, 2015), Christ-centered colleges remain connected to Biblical doctrine that challenges LGBQ student support (Love, 1997; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse & Lastoria, 2013; Strunk, Bailey, & Takewell 2014; Wentz & Wessel, 2011). To better

understand how Christian ideology informs LGBTQ practice, special attention must be paid to the history, tradition, and context in which these approaches are formed. For the purposes of this study, the following literature focuses on the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), which are unique in that they have specific denominational expectations that influence how campus members (e.g., students, staff, faculty) approach LGBTQ issues.

CCCU Campus Mission

CCCU institutions distinguish themselves from other colleges when addressing LGBTQ issues in several ways – mission, member selection and socialization, and policy articulation. CCCUs require all member campuses to have a public and board approved institutional mission statements that are rooted in historic Christian faith and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to integrating Biblical faith in all educational programs (CCCU, 2014). CCCU affiliates demonstrate their belief in a perfect, loving, and just God, who eternally exists as the Holy Trinity, on university websites and in student/staff handbooks. For example, a mission statement taken from one CCCU campus website read, “[our mission is to] pursue knowledge, cultivate character, deepen faith, and equip each student for a Spirit-empowered life of Christ-centered leadership and service” (Vanguard University, 2021). Their campus values include the pursuit of Christ who is Truth, the commitment to modeling Jesus Christ, and the discernment of God’s purpose for their lives.

CCCU Member Selection and Socialization

In addition to mission, the CCCU further differentiate their campuses from other institutions by intentionally selecting and socializing individuals towards Christ. All members within a CCCU campus community are educated and developed based on the Christian faith. For example, CCCUs require full-time faculty, administrators, and staff to adhere to a Christ-

centered framework that include language about “chastity in singleness,” “sexual intimacy reserved for marriage between one man and one woman,” and “living in congruence with one’s birth sex and one’s gender identity,” (John Brown University, 2021). Onboarding practices for new employees include questions about church membership, require a written statement of faith, and/or a commitment to codes of conduct pledging a life modeled by Jesus Christ (Frost, 2013). The intentional selection of students, staff, and faculty illustrate how sustaining organizational history, tradition, and culture depend on a process of socialization, whereby Christian ideology is taught and reinforced by its members. The integration of faith is core to CCCUs and provides a unique context by which LGBQ student policies and programs manifest. How SA-pros navigate the CCCU campus context in service to LGBQ students remains largely unknown.

Christian College Approach to LGBQ Issues

The CCCU culture exists within a much larger community of alumni, local churches, congregations, community leaders, board members, denominational chapters, and other stakeholders whose values and actions center on the traditional interpretation of Biblical scripture. In contrast to student affairs explicit professional commitment to LGBQ student well-being, CCCU institutions have codes of conduct, public statements, and corrective policies speak against students who identify as LGBQ and/or who are caught engaging in same-sex behaviors (Biola University, 2012; 2014; California Baptist University, 2015; Vanguard University, 2013). Both at a national organizational and individual campus level, the CCCU promotes a consistent message that LGBQ identity and behavior deviated from the desired Biblical image of intimacy. All individual campus affiliates have a formal statement that to some extent reinforced this philosophy.

CCCU Campus Policies Related to LGBQ Issues

Individual CCCU campus level codes of conduct or lifestyle agreements that include a traditional view of sexuality (e.g. sex between a man and woman in the context of marriage) create further uncertainty for SA-pros. Wolff and Himes' (2010) examination of policy language among 20 randomly selected CCCU member institutions found that 50% of the sample include policies directly referring to "homosexual behavior," 45% categorized the behavior as immoral or promiscuous, and 75% responded to such behavior with discipline, expulsion, or dismissal, while only 20% mentioned counseling as an alternative response (p. 445). In a national sample of 231 LGBTQ students, those attending evangelical colleges experienced dissonance in their sexual identity development when compared to their heterosexual peers (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Kwon, 2016, p. 204). In another study of the intersections of spiritual and sexual identity, students discussed "major disconnections" between these two identities, contributing to feelings of social oppression (Gold & Stewart, 2011, p. 249). LGBQ-hostile campus climates also impacted student persistence, with nearly a third of respondents wanting to leave the institution, a rate much higher than heterosexual peers (Rankin, et al. 2010; Schreiner & Nelson, 2013). These studies suggest LGBQ-hostile campuses have intentionally designed policies that that create unhealthy environments for LGBQ students.

A brief review of CCCU member campus policies showed a similar policy approach to human sexuality. In 2012, Biola University issued an official statement on human sexuality stating their expectation to follow a traditional interpretation of the Scriptures - any act of intimacy between two persons of the same-sex was seen as an "illegitimate moral option for the confessing Christian." An updated statement on "Sexuality and Relationships" (2022) provided slightly softened language - any sexual activity outside of marriage was "contrary to God's

intentional design.” Students experiencing “same-sex attraction or identify[ing] as LGBTQ” were invited to engage in conversation with faith leaders and counseling centers. Similarly, California Baptist University (2015) endorsed “...Christians should oppose...all forms of sexual immorality...Individuals associated with University-sponsored activities [must refrain] from sexual conduct outside of marriage ...” Additionally, Vanguard University (2011) situated homosexuality among other prohibited behaviors, such as drunkenness, stealing, slanderous or profane language, all forms of dishonesty, occult practices, and sexual sins. In 2016, Vanguard University’s Board of Trustees issued reaffirmed their Pentecostal position that the “sexual ideal in the Bible is chastity for those outside a monogamous heterosexual marriage...” (p. 1). The document explained that students who fall outside this description will encounter “progressive discipline sanctions.”

CCCU Policy Contradictions. CCCU campus policy nuances create additional confusion for professionals trying to support LGBQ students. For example, CCCUs regularly separated LGBQ identity and behavior, whereby students are encouraged to abstain from same-sex behavior despite identifying as LGBQ (Love, 1997; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse & Lastoria, 2013; Wentz & Wessel, 2011). Love (1997) highlighted the tendency of religious institutions to separate orientation and action and discovered a disconnect between the institutions’ stated commitment to care, and gay/bisexual students’ experiences with judgment and isolation. This finding was confirmed by Wentz (2010) and Wentz and Wessel (2011), suggesting that the CCCUs’ apparent “acceptance” of orientation (identity), while prohibiting same-sex sexual intimacy or dating, heightened confusion for students trying to adhere to the prescriptive policy. The prohibition of same-sex behavior, while overlooking orientation, made the development of authentic sexual identities difficult for gay and lesbian students attending these colleges.

Additional studies confirm that the CCCU's differentiation between same-sex identity and behavior, particularly when student handbooks alluded action only if the student engaged in same-sex behavior (Love, 1997; Wentz, 2010; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Strunk, Bailey, and Takewell (2014) noted that, although "homosexuality" was not always sufficient for expulsion, gay male students reported feeling pressured to remain silent about their orientation. The CCCU campus approach created unclear expectations for the entire campus community. Students felt they had a "choice" to avoid same-sex orientation, and staff had trouble supporting students while maintaining traditional institutional policy. At the very least, the CCCU campus climate related to human sexuality is complex. Although these studies do not capture staff members' experiences, the policy nuances surrounding LGBTQ identity and behavior likely create confusion for SA-pros when deciding how to implement campus expectations.

CCCU Everyday Practice Related to LGBTQ issues

Collectively, CCCU institutions espouse specific philosophies about LGBTQ issues, yet little is found about how these values operationalize daily. Unlike most higher education institutions that consistently rely on CAS, ACPA and NASPA to guide their LGBTQ related practice in a uniform way, CCCU members have no central framework or cohesive language to address LGBTQ issues on their campuses (Glanzer, 2020). A recent review of CCCUs 2022 International Forum offers insight into their current approach. A track on "human sexuality," included topics related to emerging gender identities. Two sessions in particular, "Caring for LGBT+ students while stewarding the larger conversation," and "The Stewardship and redemption of our sexual selves: The strengths and limits of how Christian student affairs leaders approach sexuality and LGBTQ+ Issues," offers "encouragement" to SA-pros navigating faith, human sexuality, and denominational responsibilities (CCCU, 2022).

Although promising to find LGBTQ matters addressed at a national conference level, prior literature does not explain how SA-pros members navigated CCCU nuances when developing relationships with LGBTQ students. CCCU affiliated campuses uniformly prohibit same-sex behavior, and promote the philosophy that homosexuality is a "struggle" or "conflict," yet ways to respond to students who violate community expectations of heterosexuality and abstinence appear confusing. For example, an excerpt from Biola University's student handbook reads:

when a student...communicates that he or she is struggling with same-sex behavior/attraction and/or sexual orientation issues we aim to offer safety that promotes openness...we pledge to extend compassion...while providing accountability and assistance ...with this said, sexual behavior contrary to [our] community standards will be addressed through a disciplinary process. (para. 6, 2015).

Biola University seems to promote goodwill and compassion, while also advocating for punishment if the student acts on their same-sex attraction. Even with added CCCU professional development topics, confusing policies require staff to carefully navigate their role as mentor and authority. How staff balance unclear campus expectations alongside LGBTQ student care remains unknown. Even less is understood about how SA-pros might develop the professional capacity to support LGBTQ students in a non-affirming context.

Student Affairs Professionals Serving at Christian Colleges

Many institutions enable supportive relationships among SA-pros and LGBTQ students. In contrast, the CCCU Christ-centered culture offers confusing and unclear strategies to care for LGBTQ students (Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Love, 1997; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse & Lastoria, 2013; Strunk, Bailey, Takewell 2014; Wentz & Wessel, 2011). These institutions create professional gaps between formal student affairs training and everyday practice. Although many SA-pros strive to support LGBTQ students attending Christian colleges,

LGBQ restrictive policies constrain their ability to do so (Johnson, 2009; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Schreiner & Nelson, 2013).

For CCCU institutions, recommended practices to create LGBQ affirming environments do not formally exist. Thus, SA-pros at CCCU settings must develop alternative ways to negotiate nuanced tensions among religions campus tradition, and professional values when developing supportive relationships with LGBQ students (McEntarfer, 2011; Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2016; 2019; Slater, 2019). Literature exploring student affairs practice at Christ-centered colleges is very limited. The following section reviews the Christian values that guide practice, SA-pros role when supporting LGBQ students in these settings, and nuanced strategies employed to affirm LGBQ populations. The ways in which SA-pros develop these professional capacities remain unknown.

Shared Student Affairs Values at Christ-centered Colleges

Like-mindedness and God’s will. Student affairs staff serving at Christ-centered universities shared values of community, purpose, and meaning. Gott and Craft’s (2020) comprehensive review of evangelical Christian campus ministries identified espoused organizational leadership ideals – with spirituality and service at the core. Rather than emphasize academic degrees and social background, these organizations stressed wholeness, connection, calling, and humility as paramount to leadership. SA-pros within these contexts perceived leadership as fulfilling their service to “God’s will” (p. 65). Scibetta (2019) found that CCCU SA-pros described a “familial” campus environment with a uniform commitment to God, Christian tradition, and faith-based mission. Both studies noted that “like-mindedness” was strongly emphasized among campus members. Thus, staff who challenged the status-quo,

attempted to hold others accountable, or disagreed with campus doctrine related to LGBTQ issues experience high levels of isolation and fear.

Like-mindedness and LGBTQ issues. The CCCUs emphasis on like-mindedness and agreement encourages the entire campus to adhere to heterosexuality and abstinence. Glanzer (2020) reaffirmed the collective approach found on these campuses. Findings offered a high-level understanding of the current landscape of Christ-centered student affairs practice – unlike large state universities where individual self-authorship might be the end goal for students and staff, Christ-centered colleges advocated for “co-authorship,” whereby individuals *join* with God and each other in their spiritual disciplines. Put another way, SA-pros working for these institutions are not encouraged to deviate from the CCCU approach to LGBTQ related topics.

Literature exploring how SA-pros operationalize CCCU Christ-centered values when interacting with LGBTQ students was limited. Glanzer, Graber, and Cockle (2021) interviewed 70 staff representing 44 CCCU institutions, all of whom identified as Christians themselves. Participants cited broad values, such as love, to guide their approach to LGBTQ students. However confusing campus policies, like those differentiating same-sex attraction and behavior, combined with the lack of formal training and peer support led to more than one-third feeling underprepared to address these issues. As a result of institutional barriers and peer isolation, SA-pros who attempted to show LGBTQ support experienced confusion, report high rates of burnout, “professional paralysis,” or left the profession altogether (Buchanan 2012; Lorden, 1998; Perez, 2014; Scibetta, 2019). Additional research is needed to better understand the strategies employed to balance professional tensions in service to LGBTQ students on these campuses.

The Role of Student Affairs Staff at CCCUs

Despite feelings of confusion or isolation, SA-pros working for CCCU institutions play an active role when creating an LGBQ supportive environment. Even within Christ-centered environments, they positively influence students' attitudes toward LGBQ people, mitigate LGBQ students' feelings of discomfort when disclosing their identity, encourage the use of campus resources, and call into question heterosexist campus norms (Love, 1997; Rankin, 2003; Wright & Perry, 2006; Yarhouse et al., 2009). In fact, most sexual minority students report finding support from faculty and staff (Love, 1997; Yarhouse et al., 2009; Wentz, 2010).

Those with increased direct one-on-one contact with LGBQ students (like student affairs staff) are more likely to reconcile ways to affirm these students alongside their Christian faith. They offer acceptance and protection for GLB students regardless of the campus approach. Getz and Kirkley (2006) also found positive ways staff extended support for the LGB (transgender population not included) community. These studies offer some insight into the unique role of student affairs leaders when addressing LGBQ issues within a religious campus setting, yet both took place at Catholic institutions. Neither environment explicitly spoke against LGBQ identity and behavior. Moreover, findings do not explain how SA-pros developed the capacity to push against overarching campus values and expectations to form supportive relationships with LGBQ students.

LGBQ Affirming Strategies at CCCUs

SA-pros serving at CCCUs are uniquely positioned to develop positive relationships with LGBQ students, yet research exploring the specific strategies employed remains limited. Hughes (2015) explored the ways staff introduced institutional changes when addressing LGBQ issues at a single Catholic (Jesuit) institution. Like Love (1997), he found that campus leaders with close

contact with LGBTQ students were able to maintain approachability and inclusivity by sharing personal stories with students.

Although not specific to only CCCU institutions, Hughes and Hurtado (2018) explored factors that support sexual orientation identity salience and development for LGBTQ students. Using Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) data collected from the *Diverse Learning Environments Survey* administered to 20,549 students across 34 institutions, 18 of which were private (religious affiliation not specified) and 2 CCCU members, authors found that SA-pros created formal learning opportunities to support LGBTQ students facing hostile campus incidents (p. 315). Findings indicated that both informal relationship building and formal student affairs interventions positively influenced LGBTQ student development. Although difficult to determine which of these strategies took place on the two CCCU institutions sampled, SA-pros were critical to educating the campus about tolerance, inclusion, diversity, and bias. That said, structural challenges (i.e., reporting protocol, new job responsibilities, etc.) often challenged the implementation of such services. These barriers might be more apparent at LGBTQ-hostile campuses, making support of LGBTQ students increasingly difficult.

Informal Strategies of Support. Overwhelmingly, strategies to support LGBTQ students in CCCU settings were informal - not officially sanctioned by the institution. Glanzer, Graber, and Cockle (2021) examined the experiences of 371 student affairs leaders in their attempt to balance the needs of LGBTQ students and Christian institutional policies. All participants shared a theological basis for treating everyone as a “child of God,” and cited values of love, care, and respect when interacting with LGBTQ students. As such, individual counseling and mentoring were the primary strategies used to support LGBTQ students. No evidence pointed to formal institutionalized strategies to affirm LGBTQ students. Scibetta’s (2019) in-depth

interviews with 10 SA-pros serving at CCCUs also found that most interactions among staff and LGBQ students were one-on-one and private. Participants cited the use of “underground webs of support” across CCCUs for staff to share LGBQ resources, but few campuses supported such networks. In fact, the “most controversial” strategy included weekly student groups for scripture study related to LGBQ issues. SA-pros in these settings consistently reported needing context-specific training, education, and practical strategies to effectively balance Christian ideology and LGBQ student care.

Holistic student care is the hallmark of student affairs practice, yet LGBQ students continue to experience negative outcomes when attending Christian-affiliated institutions. CCCU institutions espouse values of love, respect, and dignity, yet how staff negotiate these ideals amid LGBQ policy complexities remains unknown. SA-pros working for these campuses are underprepared to negotiate tensions among religious campus tradition, student affair practice, and personal values when caring for LGBQ students. Existing research suggests a patchwork of services that range from discouragement of same-sex sexual behavior to neutral (not regulating behavior, but also not actively seeking to improve inclusion). The literature examining student affairs practice and LGBQ issues at Christ-centered colleges is largely unexplored. None of the studies reviewed discuss the developmental requirements needed to reconcile the disconnect between student affairs commitment to LGBQ student care when serving at a non-affirming campus context. Exploring how SA-pros negotiate these tensions provides insight into what is needed developmentally and pragmatically to ensure staff are prepared to support LGBQ students in a CCCU campus environment.

Conceptual Framework

Student affairs professionals are responsible for holistic college student development, yet they often begin their career ill-prepared to meet complex workplace demands (Amey, Jessup-Anger, & Tingson-Gatuz, 2015; Kegan and Lahey, 2009; King & Baxter Magolda, 2011). In contrast to student affairs explicit professional commitment to LGBQ student well-being, Christian institutions have codes of conduct, public statements, and corrective policies that speak against students who identify as LGBQ and/or who are caught engaging in same-sex behaviors (Biola University, 2012; 2014; California Baptist University, 2015; Vanguard University, 2013). While most SA-pros are formally trained and educated to improve the campus climate for LGBQ students; little is known about how staff working for Christ-centered institutions develop the capacity to provide LGBQ student care. Even less is understood about how these professionals negotiate complicated workplace dilemmas if their personal and professional values conflict with intuitional expectations. The study utilized Schein's (2010) *levels of organizational culture* and Baxter Magolda's (2001) *theory of self-authorship* as conceptual frameworks to examine the interplay between Christian college environment, institutional expectations, and member experiences when navigating tensions to support LGBQ students.

Schein's Levels of Organizational Culture

Schein's (2010) model provides three levels to describe the degree to which the cultural elements are visible and observable, or abstract and unconscious. These elements are important to consider when understanding member behavior and action. The first level - *observable behaviors and artifacts* – are easily viewed, heard, and felt by individuals. Outward manifestations include dress code, technology use, language, events, or familiar images. For

CCCUs, artifacts might refer to informal conversations about LGBTQ issues or the presence (or absence) of LGBTQ-ally student clubs and organizations.

Level one offers a partial picture of a culture's underlying foundation, thus Schein (2010) introduces the second level of culture - *espoused beliefs and values* – the principles, philosophies, or policies that guide everyday behavior. These elements socialize members to the “unwritten rules of the road,” and reinforce “taken for granted” organizational values. This process of “social validation” is critical to sustaining an already formed culture; however, does not guarantee all individuals will abide by overarching ideologies. Meaning, although Christ-centered colleges promote specific positions on human sexuality, select individuals may not support them.

The final level of culture - *fundamental values and underlying assumptions* – include the cultural philosophies that are so integrated into the environment that individuals are largely unaware of their existence. For CCCUs, a commitment to Christ is assumed and Biblical doctrine is woven throughout hiring practices, academic curricula, and student life (i.e., chapel attendance). Challenging level three creates organizational confusion and instability. While adjustments may take place among observable artifacts (level one), changing fundamental assumptions about LGBTQ issues would require complete transformation.

Schein's (2010) framework reveals how culture is manifested along several levels and offers a clear way to uncover an organization's character, basic assumptions, and observable behaviors. His model also suggests that daily behaviors may not align with an espoused ideology, further emphasizing the importance of taking a deeper look at how individuals manage their behaviors, perceptions, and feelings when navigating organizational context.

Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship

Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship reveals how SA-pros navigate the layers of Christian institutional context when interacting with LGBTQ students. Originally self-authorship was examined among college students. More recently, scholars have applied this framework to explore SA-pros self-authorship journey from graduate school into professional institutional settings, specifically their capacity to negotiate professional tensions and meet complex workplace demands (Perez, 2017; Shetty, Chunoo, & Cox, 2016).

Self-authorship is grounded in two primary assumptions: one, that people make-sense of the world around them through personal experiences; and two, as people mature and have new experiences, self-authorship continues to develop and change. The four-phase developmental model describes how individuals move from "following formulas" (allowing others to define their beliefs, relationships, and sense-of-self) to becoming an "author of their own life" and establishing an "internal foundation" (a secured self-concept). After experiencing dissonance with external perspectives, people arrive at a "crossroads," when they realize abiding by others' expectations does not work in all contexts. Over time, they develop a central core of beliefs and values that fosters their engagement with the world around them.

Self-authoring becomes evident as people move away from absolute way of thinking and gain the capacity to integrate complex beliefs and philosophies into an authentic sense of self. In the context of this study, SA-pros exist along any of these phases – strictly adhere to campus LGBTQ-related policies and expectations (follow formulas), report levels of dissatisfaction or discomfort with the "way things are done," (crossroads), and/or develop a more multifaceted and interdependent approach to balancing faith and LGBTQ inclusion (self-author).

Self-authorship involves development along three dimensions - *cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal*. Cognitive processes involve meaning-making strategies, focusing on the idea that people are responsible for their thoughts, beliefs, and values rather than influenced by external sources (e.g., those in authority, written policy). For SA-pros, the cognitive dimension includes how staff come to know or believe something to be true. Select staff may rely primarily on supervisors in their approach towards LGBQ students, while others may describe a combination of factors that guide their approach to these issues. Interpersonal processes relate to how people maintain healthy relationships. Interpersonal development would include building interdependent and reciprocal relationships with diverse individuals when constructing an approach to LGBQ student support. Finally, intrapersonal processes center on the formation of values, identities, and beliefs. For example, SA-pros might share personal reflections about how they construct their sense-of-self as it relates to faith, LGBQ inclusion, and campus loyalty. Self-authorship encourages development along all three dimensions through personal choice, agency, and experience versus imitating those around them.

Following the original 17-year longitudinal study, Baxter Magolda (2004) introduced the *Learning Partnerships Model* (LPM) to explore the conditions required to promote self-authorship beyond the undergraduate student experience. To challenge individuals' current way of thinking, organizations must assume that knowledge is complex, socially constructed, and largely shaped by one's identity. To support the transition from a structured and protective collegiate campus to a complex workplace environment, organizations must: 1) validate of learners as knowers; 2) view new experiences as opportunities for growth; and 3) define learning as mutually constructed. In this way, the organization must discourage simplistic solutions and

encourage individuals to develop personal agency when solving complex problems. The LMP is a valuable lens to examine the contextual conditions needed to cultivate self-authorship.

Integrating Schein and Baxter Magolda

Much remains to be learned about the intersection of Christian campus culture and staff behavior when addressing LGBQ student care. Taken together, Schein (2010) and Baxter Magolda (2001) provide a way to uncover how individuals negotiate their relationships, perceptions, and feelings when navigating institutional context. Schein's framework provides a lens to unpack the multifaceted elements of Christian campus culture as it relates to LGBQ issues. Baxter Magolda helps examine how SA-pros navigate the layers of their Christian institution, specifically their negotiation of tensions among external sources (i.e., established campus policy, board leadership expectations) when developing more nuanced and internally secured ways to affirm LGBQ students in these settings.

Investigating the three dimensions of self-authorship addresses the central research question by offering insight into how staff members make-sense of campus policies and standards regarding LGBQ issues (cognitive); how their relationships develop as result of working with LGBQ students (interpersonal), and how their sense-of-self (e.g. professional identity and values) when working with LGBQ students. The theory of self-authorship also uncovers the potential patterns of learning, growth, and development resulting from navigating tensions related to building relationships with LGBQ students in a Christian context. The Learning Partnership Model adds nuance by examining how key institutional conditions either support or inhibit the development of self-authorship among staff.

Christian doctrine shapes the values, policies, and practices among Christ-centered institutions, like the CCCU. These campuses consistently promote a message that LGBQ

identity and behavior deviates from Biblical ideal. As a result, SA-pros working for these institutions may be placed in situations whereby they have to carefully negotiate religion, personal belief, campus policy, and institutional context when interacting with LGBQ students. There is a significant gap in terms of what we know about LGBQ issues at CCCUs, and even less about the everyday behavior of professionals who are responsible for fostering healthy student development. To help fill this gap, this study utilized a qualitative research design to explore how SA-pros members working at Christ-centered colleges and universities negotiate institutional and professional tensions when building supportive relationships with LGBQ students. More specifically, the study aimed to uncover the ways staff develop strategies to affirm LGBQ student identities in a context that challenges their capacity to do so.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

Although student affairs professionals (SA-pros) are trained and responsible for supporting all college students' holistic well-being (Kezar, 2010; Kezar, Gallant, & Lester, 2011), staff serving at select Christ-centered colleges face unique challenges that make supporting LGBQ student populations difficult. SA-pros working for LGBQ-hostile institutions are underprepared to negotiate tensions among professional values, ecumenical institutional context, and LGBQ student care (Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2019). Little is known about how SA-pros negotiate professional, institutional, and personal tensions in service to the LGBQ students attending Christian colleges and universities. As such the following research question guided my study: how do student affairs professionals working for Christ-centered colleges and universities negotiate professional, institutional, and personal tensions to support LGBQ students? Using Schein's (2010) *levels of organizational culture* and Baxter Magolda's (2001) *theory of self-authorship*, the following sub-questions helped explore this inquiry along cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions:

1. How do participants make-meaning of campus policies and standards regarding LGBQ issues?
2. How are participants' relationships with campus colleagues (i.e., faculty, administration, and colleagues) shaped by their interactions with LGBQ students, if at all?
3. How are participants' professional and personal identities shaped by their interactions with LGBQ students, if at all?

Research Design

The study used a qualitative research design to explore how student affairs staff members negotiate professional tensions when building relationships with LGBQ students attending Christ-centered colleges and universities. A qualitative design was suitable to uncover the rich data needed to discover the ways in which participants navigate institutional policy and context, professional relationships, and personal values within a specific environment, as well as how they make meaning of LGBQ issues at Christian college campuses. Qualitative research design enabled me to discover how meaning was constructed and how people made-sense of their lives (Merriam, 2009). Considering, the study focused on student affairs practice across campuses, versus focusing on a specific campus (e.g., case study), or specific institutional policies (document analysis), I administered in-depth interviews to better understand individual perspectives, experiences, learning, tension reconciliation, and feelings. The study did not seek to test or measure the outcome of student-staff relationships, nor examine specific interventions, thus a quantitative design was not selected.

Site and Sample Selection

The study utilized a purposeful, criterion-based sample. Purposeful sampling allowed for the identification of individuals from the population directly tied to the research objective to gather the rich information needed to learn about a specific issue (Patton, 1990). I originally intended to recruit at least 12 student affairs professionals with no more than 10 years of professional work experience and who currently work at Christ-centered colleges or universities within the U.S., that have specific policies/statements addressing LGBQ issues. The criterion ensured each participant had direct contact with students, as opposed to upper administration positions where they might have limited student contact, as well as currently working within a

Christ-centered campus context. For the purposes of this study Christ-centered institutions referred to those that explicitly state their affiliation with and support of Christ-centered higher education, and/or integrate Biblical truth and Christian doctrine into their campus community (i.e., regular chapel attendance, hiring practices, academic curricula, etc.). For example, institutions belonging to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) are required to clearly state their commitment to Jesus Christ throughout policy and practice.

Participants self-selected into the study. After obtaining IRB approval, I posted a recruitment flyer on my personal and professional social media accounts/networks. Additionally, I used publicly available Christian university contact information to connect with individuals who may fit the criteria. For example, I used the professional work email listed for CCCU-type institutional student affairs staff and sent an initial recruitment/invitation letter asking if they either wanted to participate themselves and/or forward to folks who might be interested. I also emailed potential participants that I connected with from previous work experience and research activities. The email asked the recipient to consider participating themselves and/or forward the email to colleagues and friends who fit the criteria and might be interested in participating. At the end of each interview, I employed snowball sampling by asking participants if they would pass my contact information to others who might be interested in participating.

The initial recruitment phase, which launched in July 2022, was extremely slow, and only yielded two participants over a two-month period, despite sending over 100 solicitations for participation. The individuals interviewed identified colleagues who might qualify, but they did not directly reach out to participate. After consulting with my co-chairs, I decided to relaunch recruitment emails and social media posts after the fall semester began. Resending and reposting

the recruitment flyer mid-September produced additional participants, all of whom self-identified as currently working for a Christian-affiliated institution and having contact with LGBTQ students. Additionally, I was invited to speak at a Christ-centered college during a student affairs staff gathering focused on supporting LGBTQ students on campus. During the session, I shared about my research and left flyers to elicit more participants. Relaunching recruitment and speaking at a local CCCU helped identify an additional eight participants. The study included data gathered from 10 participants.

Study Participants

To protect participants' identity, I used their pseudonym throughout the entire research process. Participants in the final sample ranged in age from 25 to 35 years old, averaged 4.9 years in the field of student affairs and based on self-reports, and spent at least 20 hours per week directly interacting with students. As a measure of confidentiality, I removed specific professional titles from all mentions of each individual; however, participants indicated working in areas of diversity, equity and inclusion, residential life, student life/activities/programming, academic success, outreach and admissions, spiritual formation or pastoral care, and community engagement. Despite varied titles, participants described similar daily responsibilities including student leadership development, activities programming, and general mentorship. All of the participants earned their undergraduate college degree from a religiously-affiliated institution and personally identified as Christian. I attempted to recruit a demographically diverse sample reflective of the composition of most small Christian colleges. The final sample included more females than males, and mostly white/Caucasian and Latino/Hispanic identifying individuals. All but one participant worked within the southwest region.

TABLE 3.1*Name, Location, and Demographics of Participants*

Pseudonym	Campus Geographic Region	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Campus Denomination
Abby	Southwest	F	Non-Hispanic/White	Assemblies of God
Amber	Southwest	F	Non-Hispanic/white	Assemblies of God
Bella	Southwest	F	Non-Hispanic/white	Protestant
Cody	Southwest	M	Latino/Hispanic American	Nondenominational
Emma	Southwest	F	Latino/Hispanic American	Nondenominational
Holly	Northwest	F	Non-Hispanic/White	Presbyterian
Jamie	Southwest	F	Non-Hispanic/White	Assembly of God
Kim	Southwest	F	African American/black	Church of Christ
Roman	Southwest	M	Latino/Hispanic American	Nondenominational
Tanya	Southwest	F	Latino/Hispanic American	Nondenominational

Data Collection

When individuals contacted me offering to participate in the interview, I conducted a brief “screening” via email to ensure they fit the criteria. I then scheduled a one-on-one interview. When scheduling the interview, participants had the option of in-person or zoom appointments, however; all participants selected zoom sessions. Each participant received an electronic copy of the informed consent form (Appendix A) to review at least seven days prior to the scheduled interview date. Prior to engaging in the interview, I reviewed the consent form with the participant and answered any questions they had regarding the consent form and/or interview process. All participants indicated that they felt comfortable proceeding with the interview.

Once consent was obtained, I asked participants to complete a brief background close-ended questionnaire to obtain demographic, professional, and religious affiliation information (Appendix B). I then used a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) to elicit data about

participants' experiences interacting with LGBTQ students at a Christian affiliated institution in their own words. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed word-for-word, saved to a secure cloud storage system, and uploaded to Dedoose software for analysis.

The interview protocol was driven by the central research question and focused on the dimensions of self-authorship to examine how participants navigated any tension between their professional/personal values and institutional policy/expectations when interacting with LGBTQ students at Christian affiliated institutions. The interview protocol underwent multiple iterations. Revisions were made to ensure the questions selected were streamlined, organized, clear, and directly connected to the central research question and the literature guiding the study. The final interview included rapport building questions about student affairs training, general campus context and culture, and daily roles and responsibilities. The remainder of the interview explored more deeply their approach to LGBTQ student-staff interactions and how these interactions influenced their commitment to the university, professional relationships, and professional identity and values. Probes and follow-up questions were used to obtain more detail about specific experiences and to further engage participants throughout the interview process. The inclusion of "how" questions encouraged participants to reflect about the ways they came to understand and make meaning of their experiences.

Interviews were held between July and October 2022. Considering the sensitivity of the topic, I was impressed with the rich data elicited from the interviews. Regardless of limited in-person student contact that may have resulted from COVID-19 lockdowns, data collected during the interview process made clear that each participant had thought in-depth about the influence of their institutional culture when caring for their students, including LGBTQ populations. They

openly shared about campus politics and other risks involved when attempting to support LGBTQ students on their campus.

To ensure confidentiality and to protect participants' identity, pseudonyms were selected at the beginning of interview and listed on the initial background questionnaire, and then used throughout the research process. All participants were instructed to use their pseudonyms throughout the interview, and to avoid stating their place of employment. If participants mentioned their institution, the names were not mentioned in the findings. Participants were also given the opportunity to review their transcript and flag any items that might put their identity at risk. None of the participants requested changes.

Data Analysis

The study utilized thematic analysis to analyze the data collected from one-on-one interviews. Since qualitative analysis is an iterative process, analysis began immediately upon data collection and continued throughout the entire research process. I interacted with the data multiples times: during collection, transcription, and formal analysis. After each interview, I created brief memos documenting initial thoughts, feelings, and themes collected throughout the session. After transcripts are completed and cleaned, I applied thematic analysis to better understand how participants constructed meaning of their experiences.

The coding process underwent two cycles (Saldaña, 2013). I began the first coding cycle by uploading all my transcripts and finalized list of preliminary codes into the research software Dedoose. I used Dedoose to code all transcripts, manage my data, codes, code definitions, and analytic memos. To develop a comprehensive code book, I began noting any general patterns or themes. Initial codes included components of my conceptual framework (e.g. organizational values, policy, everyday language, relationships with colleagues), concepts reflected in the

literature (e.g. student affairs socialization, Christian campus culture, LGBTQ student care), and *in vivo* codes capturing participants' own words related to their experiences, ideologies, and values (e.g. feels like family). After the initial coding cycle, I sought to consolidate and expand coded themes from my running list described above for further detail and nuance. I met with my co-chairs to further develop themes. Additionally, I kept a record of my coding decisions and initial reflection in my research journal as a measure of trustworthiness. During this second stage of the coding cycle, some codes were collapsed into larger themes. For example, common phrases, "we don't talk about it," or "pretend it's not real," were collapsed into "institutional silence." Conversely, other codes were extended. For example, staff experiences with tension branched out to include types of tension related to service, action, loyalty, and identity. This process resulted in approximately 30 codes related to participants perception of campus culture, the campus approach to LGBTQ issues, SA-pros experiences with tension, and their management of such tension (Appendix D) (Saldaña, 2013).

Positionality

I am a female, transracial Asian-American adoptee, and self-identify as Christian and a member of the LGBTQ community. My experiences navigating sexual orientation, faith, and professional practice was particularly salient when I attended, and later worked for, a small private Christ-centered university. The overall campus context promoted specific ideologies that fundamentally differed from my personal and professional values. I experienced significant tension about whom to serve (institution or student) and what to do, as well as how to negotiate my own identities in an LGBTQ-hostile environment. As a result of these experiences, I learned about the complex challenges facing the entire Christ-centered campus community when providing healthy ways to address LGBTQ issues. Similarly, I realized the gaps in student

affairs practice when training and equipping emerging professionals to manage complex campus issues.

My level of familiarity and close connection to the research focus is a strength in many ways, but might also present bias during data collection and analysis. Considering how closely my experiences potentially aligned with that of the participants, I paid careful attention to my thoughts and feelings throughout the research process and took several steps to address bias. For example, during participant recruitment and screening, and at the start of each interview, I clearly communicated how my own experiences and identities lead me to research this topic. Providing such transparency established trust with participants. Further, I shared my transcripts and findings with participants and my committee members to verify my interpretations and analysis. Taken together, these steps along with the strategies listed in the subsequent credibility and trustworthiness section, helped identify any gaps in my understanding, check for alternative explanations, and account for any “blind-spots.”

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations that may arise from this study. The interview might lead participants to experience some level of emotional discomfort due to recalling frustrating or confusing memories about complex challenges associated with LGBTQ issues on a Christian college campus. Further, the potential possibility of linking stories and/or comments to the participant could lead to stress within their workplace or compromise their professional position within the institution.

I addressed such considerations in a variety of ways. If participants experienced any discomfort from recalling their experiences, they could stop the interview at any time. I also provided participants with a list of local counseling and LGBTQ-support resources if they sought

additional support to process their experiences. To address participants' fear of workplace retaliation, I took clear measures to ensure confidentiality. I also encouraged participants to use their personal email, rather than school/work email account when communicating with me. After all interviews were transcribed, each participant had the opportunity to review the transcripts for factual errors and flag any items they felt put them at risk. Finally, all data were stored in a secure password-protected computer at my private residence.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

I applied several strategies to mitigate personal bias and establish credibility and trustworthiness throughout the research process. First, to ensure the research instrument (semi-structured interview protocol) accurately obtained data needed to answer the research questions, I piloted the instrument with two individuals prior to data collection. The practice enhanced my interviewing techniques, listening skills, and rapport building.

Second, to strengthen the confidence in the truth and accuracy of the findings, I established member-checks. Prior to data collection, I thoroughly explained to all participants the research focus, requirements, process, and the measures taken to maintain confidentiality. I also informed them how the transcript would appear (i.e., word-for-word, verbatim, including "umm's, uhh huh's, etc.), and how the data were used. After the interview was complete, participants were invited to review their transcript to check for inconsistencies, to flag items that might put them at risk, and to ensure findings resonated with their personal experiences (Carlson, 2010). Additionally, I asked two participants to read a draft of chapter 4 (the findings) to review my broader findings and share their perceptions of the accuracy of my research and analysis. I gave them two weeks to offer feedback via email. One participant responded and indicated that

the findings resonated with them, and they felt hopeful knowing other people might benefit from their experiences. No changes were requested.

Third, I utilized peer debriefing to increase the dependability and credibility of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I invited my co-chairs to review some transcript excerpts, preliminary codes, the coding results, and a draft of chapter 4 (the findings) to guide, refine, and validate my research process and interpretation of the data. Through collaboration and feedback, the peer debriefing process challenged me to check my assumptions, ensure identified themes resonated with others, and pushed me to evaluate my conceptualization of the findings. Peer debriefing served as a critical strategy when interacting with the data and offered transparency about my analytic process.

Finally, to increase credibility and confirmability, I established an audit trail by maintaining a record of the entire research process, including my experiences during recruitment, and data collection and analysis. The research log included brief reflections, observations, insights, analytic memos, key ideas, initial thoughts, and biases. Documenting my process made my decisions transparent and clear. Combined, these strategies helped maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of my sources, collection of data, coding protocol, and feedback process, and ensure my interpretation of the data were consistent with participants' experiences.

Limitations and Delimitations

Like all studies, this study presented limitations. Although the findings are valuable for select student affairs staff balancing service to their Christian institutions and LGBQ students, the data are not generalizable to reflect all the experiences of all staff members at all Christian or Christ-centered institutions. Also, the use of snowball sampling might have made it more likely that the individuals interviewed supported LGBQ students on their campus. For example,

reporting higher levels of competency when supporting LGBTQ students in LGBTQ-hostile contexts. Additionally, the institutions represented were mostly connected to the CCCU community with an explicit commitment to Biblical doctrine, and do not fully represent the entire Christian college community. To ensure the manageability of the study, I focused on the experiences of “frontline” practitioners, including individuals who spend much of their workday directly interacting with students. Since I targeted a specific staff population within the Christian campus context, the study did not provide perspectives from students, faculty, or senior-level administrators. These delimitations were necessary to answer the central research question and to accomplish the objectives of the study.

Conclusion

Studying the ways in which student affairs professionals navigated institutional context, professional standards, and personal values within Christ-centered environments promoted a broader understanding of LGBTQ student support within a Christian college context. Exploring the negotiation of professional tensions was important to understand what might be required developmentally of staff to effectively care for LGBTQ students. The qualitative research design uncovered what staff members within these contexts may be able to do when supporting LGBTQ students, and illuminated ways to prepare, develop, educate, and train future student affairs professionals to meet the complex demands facing higher education, with special consideration paid to the institutional type they may find themselves working for.

CHAPTER 4

The Findings

Student affairs professionals (SA-pros) are trained and responsible for supporting all college students' holistic well-being (Kezar, 2010; Kezar, Gallant, & Lester, 2011), yet staff serving at Christ-centered colleges with deeply held Biblical ideologies regarding human sexuality face unique challenges when supporting LGBQ students. Little is known about how SA-pros working for LGBQ-hostile institutions manage tensions among professional values, ecumenical institutional context, and LGBQ student care (Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2019). This qualitative explored how student affairs professionals working for Christ-centered colleges and universities negotiated professional, institutional, and personal tensions to support LGBQ students. A brief background survey and a semi-structured interview protocol was used to elicit data from 10 participants. Each interview was transcribed word-for-word and underwent multiple coding cycles. Data excerpts were synthesized and organized into the themes and subthemes.

Findings interpreted through Schein's (2010) *levels of organizational culture* and Baxter Magolda's (2001) *theory of self-authorship* revealed that participants perceived their campus as espousing a close-knit, caring, familial, and Christian community, yet, when confronted with LGBQ issues, daily practice became complex, confusing, silent, fearful, and political. Navigating organizational misalignment between espoused values and everyday life while interacting with LGBQ students led to intense periods of tension. Ongoing relationships with LGBQ students forced staff to confront issues of loyalty, action, trust, and identity. Participants' negotiation of these tensions varied. While select staff largely maintained institutional

expectations, others who interacted with LGBQ students on a frequent and regular basis demonstrated an expanded capacity to resist the campus norms in service to LGBQ students. Advocating for LGBQ equality in a Christ-centered environment required staff to abandon old beliefs about human sexuality, find new social supports, and learn to accept ambiguity and complexity. Data are shared thematically, using individual participant vignettes throughout for further nuance.

A Family in Christ

Organizational culture manifests along three distinct levels – deeply ingrained fundamental worldviews, espoused values, and everyday observable behaviors (Shein, 2010). To better understand how participants built relationships with LGBQ students in a Christian college context, they were first asked to describe their institutional culture – specifically the overarching ideologies that shaped daily practice. Although the study sampled staff from various campuses, each participant portrayed their university similarly – predominantly Caucasian/white, small, residential, and, of course, Christian. Analyses revealed that participants perceived their campus as espousing a close-knit community of like-minded “Believers,” yet when addressing LGBQ issues daily practice became complex, confusing, isolating, silent, and fearful. The following section explores distinct cultural features of these Christian campuses.

Christian Beliefs Woven throughout Personal and Professional Lives

At a fundamental level, all participants described their campuses as grounded in the belief of a perfect and loving God. Not surprisingly, for Christ-centered campuses, Biblical doctrine was the central foundation woven throughout campus mission, values, policies, programs, leadership, and expectations. Participants discussed ways “Christian traditions were held as right

and true...as a way to set [their campuses] apart.” They were required to formally profess their Christianity by signing statements of faith, noting their belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They also signed community agreements and adhered to specific lifestyle expectations – regularly attending chapel/church, avoiding social gatherings that involved alcohol or drugs, etc.

Campus daily life often included prayer before class, faith-based mission and service trips, and small group Bible study. Students enrolled in Bible classes (e.g., New/Old Testament, Christian Worldview, Theological Debate, etc.), and staff retreats typically included prayer, worship, and preaching. Christian practice was deeply ingrained through campus policies and everyday expectations.

A deep commitment to serving Christ informed participants’ identity, purpose, professional priorities, and relationships. Although participants had some denominational differences (e.g. Church of Christ, Assembly of God, Presbyterian), all of them identified as Christian. Staff participants felt called to a life of service and viewed their student affairs role as integral to their religious identity. Holly, who served in the Community Engagement department at a Northwestern campus, said:

I really do think of [my job] as a calling and very deeply connected to who I am, like my identity. Working everyday with other folks who understand that is really fulfilling...it creates a sense of belonging...I’m seen and understood. It’s definitely more than a job.

Holly’s notion - “it’s more than a job” - resonated with all participants. Their work was deeply personal. Beyond sharing an evangelical worldview, staff working for these campuses centered much of their professional identity in Christianity. They were living out their faith in service to each other and their students.

Navigating a Familial and Like-minded Campus Culture

A shared commitment to Christianity and demonstrating “Christlike compassion and cordiality,” created a familial campus environment. Regardless of role, years of service, or race/ethnicity, all participants described a close-knit community that felt like an extended family. In fact, the word “family” was the most used descriptor when expressing the overall “vibe” of their campus. Both entry- and mid-level professionals of various backgrounds talked about the “deep connections” they had with colleagues and students. Abby, a white/Caucasian student success specialist with only one year of full-time work experience already formed “super close connections across campus.” Despite COVID-19 lockdowns, which disrupted in-person interactions, she added, “We really are what we claim to be, a really good community who do genuinely care and want to support each other as a team.” When asked what she meant by, “claim to be,” she explained that, for her (and many others on the campus), the family-like environment was, at least in part, driven by a desire to express God’s love. Being kind was the Christian thing to do.

Those with more professional experience, like Kim, an African-American female serving as student affairs coordinator for seven years also perceived their campus as a, “small type of family...we all know each other...we have a lot of close bonds.” In fact, the familial nature was a primary motivator for her to join the campus as a professional. Roman, a Latino male, working in student life for nearly three years resonated with Kim and Abby; “People are very amicable...very honoring of one another...we all value each other...” Although Abby, Kim, and Roman differed in some ways, they shared a deep affinity for their campus family in Christ. For Christian institutions, Biblical tradition was the ultimate source for campus values and everyday practice.

The deeply connected campus family, where “work and social life boundaries were often blurred,” was grounded in like-mindedness, a shared system of beliefs used to maintain a distinctly Christian ethos. While all organizations encounter sub-groups who differ from the status quo, sustaining organizational identity requires the integration of these different perspectives into the overarching culture (Schein, 2010). For the Christian campuses employing participants in this study, however, rather than foster diversity of thought, background, or opinion, they worked hard to maintain homogeneity among their members. Themes related to like-mindedness and uniformity cannot be overstated. Apart from “family,” like-mindedness was the chief descriptor for Christian campus culture. As one staff stated, “Faith-based institutions aren’t just missionally driven, [there’s] also a huge emphasis on like-mindedness...not just as a positive thing, it’s literally part of our identity.” Another described like-mindedness as *the* “ethos of the institution.” Associating like-mindedness with campus “identity,” “ethos,” and “mission” underscored two fundamental assumptions of Christ-centered campus culture: first, we are all Christians; second, we all agree.

The Christian campuses represented in this study upheld a like-minded community by hiring staff already deeply connected to their culture. When asked what brought participants to their campuses professionally, they each shared a nearly identical story. All were raised in a conservative religious home. Except for one participant, who attended a large state university for graduate school, all others reported being college educated (undergrad and graduate) at Christian institutions. Participants were extremely involved as undergraduate students. They served as student leaders, coordinated campus activities, and/or played collegiate sports. For example, Tanya was raised and educated exclusively in an evangelical Christian environment. In college, she served as ASB Vice President and played volleyball. While none of the participants

explicitly used the term “legacy family,” Tanya, like many others, explained that several immediate and extended family members attended the same Christian institution as undergraduates. Additionally, more than half of the participants reported currently working for their alma mater. In many ways, staff serving at Christian colleges arrived with decades of Biblical tradition and a longstanding connection to their campus.

To reinforce a like-minded culture, participants described their institutions as intentionally having sought out candidates who already “bought into” their mission, values, and way of life. Several participants explained how their campuses frequently hired from within. Tanya explained that folks with already established connections to the campus were motivated to apply. In turn, they were hired because of their shared beliefs. Now seated on the other side of the interview table, Tanya described an overall sentiment among hiring committees - “Well, if they came here [as students] they know and understand our brand.” Shorthand – *they’re one of us*. Nearly all staff reported receiving a personal call/email from a former mentor, supervisor, or faculty member offering them a full-time position upon graduation. They described the transition from student to professional as a “natural fit,” “familiar,” and “a return home.” These campuses strengthened like-mindedness and uniformity by selecting staff with a lifetime of Christ-centered socialization.

The insular like-minded nature of the Christian campuses provided a degree of familiarity and belonging, but also produced frustration and isolation. For Tanya, “hiring from within fostered a deep sense of community among other Believers,” and made her feel “at home.” However, she quickly added, “but, it really prevents [the university] from taking a good look at other candidates, what outsiders can contribute...so things tend to stay the same.” In her opinion, the familial like-minded environment formed a “bubble,” that she characterized as

“single-minded or one-note.” Thus, she felt like her campus was “closed off to different ideas.” She paused to reflect about the consequences of such an insular environment, “well, there is an assumption that you’re in a safe community. When you step outside the like-minded nature of things...it’s [hesitates to try to find the right word] uncomfortable.” Tanya’s statement about *assumed* safety implied like-mindedness was taken for granted – she did not believe everyone aligned with the dominant culture. She also pointed to the negative outcome of “stepping outside” the status quo – discomfort. When probed, Tanya provided more nuance:

No one really asks “what do you think about x, y, z?” I wonder if it’s because they think if she works here, she can’t believe this or that...[but] sometimes I don’t always agree with the brand of Christianity that’s pushed here. [pause] I am a Christian and I hold my faith seriously, but I also don’t agree with specific aspects of the culture...It can be pretty lonely sometimes, especially as a Latina...

Her mention of loneliness contrasted sharply with previous descriptions of kinship and family. For her, cultural like-mindedness made exploring alternative beliefs or actions challenging. All participants overwhelmingly described their campus as a like-minded Christ-centered extended family; however, those like Tanya (at times) disagreed with some institutional traditions and beliefs, leaving them feeling isolated from the community.

Experiences of disconnection from the family appeared more frequent among staff of color. Participants who identified with a minoritized group already felt they did not represent the majority (white/Caucasian), so feelings of isolation were not necessarily new. Kim, who identified as a Black/African-American female felt like she “didn’t always have the insider track.” She described herself as an “outlier” – a member of “those smaller populations.” She added, “If you don’t agree with people around you, you’re going to feel like you’re on the outside looking in, that’s isolating.” Considering the pressure to blend in, she felt even more invested to advocate for herself and for her students who felt on the outside. She underscored

this point when she stated, “Look, as a Black woman, I have to double and triple extra advocate...this definitely carries over to the work I do with my students.” For example, she tried her best to support the Black Student Union, campus diversity club, and other student-led initiatives focusing on equity. Kim understood that she would never fully reflect the campus majority, but she believed that connecting minoritized students to these identity-based communities would foster some sense of belonging. Similarly, Roman, a Latino gay male, who remained closeted at work, shared about the negative consequences of a like-minded community:

Most of the time people are good to one another, we genuinely care...but then there are these systems of silence, like ‘hey it’s not OK to think or act differently,’...there is a silencing of the fringe.

For Roman, the “fringe” involved anything that “didn’t completely fit with the institutional identity,” as a predominantly white, evangelical, conservative, suburban campus. He described this persistent feeling of “always having to look over your shoulder,” to ensure he was acting in accordance with campus values and expectations.

Emma, a 27-year old Latina, also expressed this tension between belonging and isolation. She reflected the dominant culture in terms of faith and sexual orientation, which made her feel part of the “in group.” However, recent workplace discussions about race and politics (e.g., former President Trump, the Black Lives Matter [BLM] movement, George Floyd and related police brutality, immigration, etc.) left her feeling lonely and frustrated. Although her institution felt “like home,” she continued, “...I can’t ignore the fact that it’s probably because of my own identity as a Christian and a heterosexual female, having a boyfriend...that’s what’s accepted as right.” For Tanya, Kim, Roman, and Emma, intersections of race, ethnicity, and sexuality did not align with longstanding campus ideologies and traditions, resulting in perceived separation

from “the family.” Christian campuses made every effort to cultivate like-mindedness among members. Shared faith and common experiences provided belonging - but only to a point.

A Christian Campus Approach to LGBQ Issues

Christian campus culture was defined by a commitment to upholding Biblical doctrine and to maintaining a like-minded community. For many participants, they spoke positively about a familial environment that provided belonging and purpose. However, when asked to discuss institutional expectations regarding LGBQ students, campus uniformity broke. Participants often shifted their demeanor, took long pauses, and described a complex culture characterized by contradiction, silence, and fear. Daily practice related to LGBQ issues did not reflect harmony, agreeability, or consistency. All participants articulated the campus theological foundations related to sexual intimacy as between one man and one woman in the context of marriage. They also recited Biblical references used to inform campus policy prohibiting non-heterosexual romantic partnerships. Despite such conceptual clarity, participants were extremely confused about how to apply these beliefs when interacting with LGBQ students. The following section explores organizational nuances that complicated participants’ capacity to support LGBQ students.

In terms of human sexuality, participants’ Christian campuses consistently, publicly, and formally promoted the message that homosexuality deviated from Biblical tradition. One participant shared, “...we have a huge document addressing our institution's position on [sexuality], so the campus stance is clear.” Biblical references to sexual purity, marriage, and sexual expression (prohibiting pornography, nudity, cohabitation, etc.) were reiterated throughout staff/student handbooks, in large gatherings (e.g., chapel), and during both staff and one-on-one meetings. Most staff reported signing a “contract,” affirming their commitment to

upholding such community standards. Participants offered examples of what might happen when students were caught “breaking contract” (violating campus rules) and appeared before conduct/care committees. Consequences could include regular meetings with the campus pastor, counseling referrals, suspension/dismissal from student leadership positions, or in extreme situations – expulsion. All participants were acutely aware that their institutions’ evangelical worldview framed homosexuality as sinful. These cultural cues, values, and beliefs about human sexuality were embedded overtime and shaped participant experiences when interacting with LGBQ students.

Confusion and Uncertainty When Demonstrating “Christ-like” Compassion

Considering how directly the university communicated their philosophies on human sexuality and the desire to maintain like-mindedness, one might expect participants to be uniform and clear about how to enforce such standards when interacting with LGBQ students, but this was not the case. They expressed significant confusion when attempting to navigate organizational complexities related to LGBQ issues. For many, ways to demonstrate “Christ’s love” for LGBQ students in an LGBQ-hostile environment was unclear.

To protect participants’ confidentiality, participants were asked not to directly identify their campus. However, the following excerpt is a composite of several CCCU statements on sexuality to illustrate why staff might feel confused or unsure how to address LGBQ students:

Sexual relationships are designed by God to be expressed within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman...any sexual activity outside of marriage is contrary with God’s intentional design of intimacy...Living out God’s intent for sexual expression may require sacrifice at times, but is ultimately a source of freedom and love.

Our campus community acknowledges that too often Christian communities have felt unkind for those who experience same-sex attraction or identify as LGBTQ. Our campus never endorses bullying or harassment of any kind. All members of our community are expected to treat one another with respect and Christ-like compassion.

According to participants, campus positions on sexuality clearly outlined expectations related to sexual purity. However, when explicitly addressing LGBQ student matters, rather than explore potential disciplinary measures, campus members were encouraged by supervisors to extend compassion and care. For some participants, offering such vague, value-based suggestions seemed counter to campus norms. Put another way, students caught living outside community standards typically faced some type of sanction. Thus, homosexuality (considered sinful in many statements of campuses employing participants in this study) might warrant an intervention, yet staff were told to offer “Christ-like compassion.” Cody, a 31-year-old Latino male, has served as a campus pastor for about two years. He described significant confusion when trying to uphold “competing expectations.” He understood general guidelines outlined in campus contracts, yet value-based statements regarding “same-sex” issues were broad, and unclear. He explained:

[our student contract] tries to provide ‘safe guards’ or ‘accountability measures’ to make sure that the atmosphere supports a Christian lifestyle and ethic. Our policies try to hold us to those standards...but to be honest, the [position on sexuality] is less of a policy and more of like a theological paper...I don’t know if we have explicitly defined expectations per se.

Policies define campus norms and outline acceptable characteristics, processes, and protocols for institutional members. Generally, Cody felt his campus was quite clear about “lifestyle” expectations (e.g., do not have same-sex romantic relationships, do not have sex outside of a monogamous heterosexual marriage, do not host or promote gatherings that involve alcohol or drugs, etc.). The student handbook on his campus noted that violating such expectations were subject to a “conduct process.” However, the rigid nature (*break the rules, face consequences*) of these policies seemed ill-defined when LGBQ students were concerned. Cody perceived his campus as making “fuzzy” pronouncements about human sexuality versus outlining specific

protocols or consequences. Even when probed, he experienced extreme difficulty explaining what was expected of him when interacting with LGBQ students:

our campus doesn't clearly state what happens to students who are actively out, exploring what it means to be gay, or even those wanting to be allies...No one really knows...obviously we are to never turn a student away or reject them, but other than that, we're not really sure.

Being instructed to demonstrate support for LGBQ students seemed counter to the campus' prescriptive approach typically applied to student violations. Offering value statements (*treat one another with respect*) rather than prescribed consequences created further confusion and tension for staff. Cody's uncertainty was shared by many participants. They were unsure what compassion and care looked like for LGBQ students on an LGBQ-hostile campus and wrestled with ways to interpret policy nuances. While all participants were surprised by the lack of campus direction, those with fewer than three years ($n=6$) of work experience expressed even more confusion. They seemed almost defeated when they said...“it's very unclear;” “I don't know if there is any clear expectation;” “nobody really knows;” “it's very mixed;” “it's super confusing;” and “I really have no idea.” For example, if a student was caught “breaking contract” (e.g., drinking), they would be reported and face consequences. However, was a student experiencing “same-sex attraction” “breaking contract?” Was the outcome different if they were “acting out” a same-sex romantic partnership versus simply exploring a non-heterosexual identity? Staff were not sure. Despite conceptual clarity related to sexual purity, participants were uncertain how to demonstrate “Christ-like compassion” for LGBQ students attending these campuses.

Distinguishing Between LGBQ Identity and Behavior

Participants' inability to determine how best to approach their relationships with LGBQ students was largely shaped by a campus distinction between sexual identity and behavior.

According to statements on human sexuality and noted throughout participant interviews, students who identified as LGBQ should commit to a lifetime of celibacy – the standard “everyone should aspire to.” For these campuses, homosexuality was considered sinful *only* if acted upon. Thus, staff were often faced with determining whether a student was exploring or acting out their LGBQ identity.

Participants (who served at different campuses throughout the U.S.) shared a common language when talking about LGBQ students. Overwhelmingly, when referring to non-heterosexual students, they used terms “same-sex attracted” or “practicing” rather than sexual orientation, LGBQ, LGBTQIA+, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. Using specific terminology called attention to key features of these campuses. One, behavior and identity were “separate issues.” Two, focusing on sexual behaviors enabled institutions to codify LGBQ students. These campuses may not have control over how students identify, but classifying dating/courtship or sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage as sinful or a violation allowed these actions to be subject to a conduct hearing. Framing sexuality in such absolute and binary terms highlighted the institution’s rigid *following formulas* approach to sexuality. Campuses in this study perpetuated the belief that God, acting as the final authority, commanded individuals to live by a specific code of right and wrong.

The duality between identity and behavior deepened the complexities surrounding LGBQ student support. Regardless of professional role, age, years of experience, or faith denomination, all staff confirmed an explicit differentiation between same-sex attraction/action and LGBQ identity/orientation. When sharing stories of LGBQ students, staff would talk about the students who were “acting on,” “wrestling,” or “exploring.” One participant explained, “Students might have gay leanings, but if they’re going to remain celibate, that’s more of a same-sex attraction

thing...and that is treated differently.” Abby, with only one year of work experience already understood the importance making these distinctions:

It’s clear that student conduct is only addressing behavior... [our campus] wants students who are wrestling and journeying through their sexuality to engage with caring and loving staff, but ongoing habitual behaviors is when you run into a conduct issue...they’re just two totally different situations.

Amber, a 27-year-old Residential Life staff, who worked for her campus for three years, put Abby’s sentiment more plainly, “questioning [your sexuality] is fine, but don’t act on anything.” Amber and Abby’s explanations were shared by other staff who were taught to view sexuality through a binary lens action or identity and right or wrong.

The identity versus behavior phenomenon presented participants with a near impossible task to, “make sure students weren’t practicing [homosexuality].” Although participants were unsure how exactly to care for LGBTQ students “without condoning,” they were clear that their first step was to determine if a student was “acting on” anything. Tanya described the types of behavior that would indicate if a student was breaking contract: “if you see two guys holding hands or maybe making-out in a public place, that required a conversation.” She also explained that “public” extended beyond campus bounds. Meaning, students could report seeing a classmate at a gay bar or kissing someone of the same sex at the mall. After hearing about such instances, staff would hold one-on-one conversations with the student, whereby they would reiterate community standards and attempt to support the student’s “exploration.” Cody, a campus pastor, frequently met individually with students about a range of issues. He provided a glimpse into what these conversations looked like:

Really, we are determining what are the identities here? Are we talking attraction? Living a complete full lifestyle associated with those identities? I worked with a student who was open about his orientation and in a relationship that was visible, which is not common. I was fairly close with the student so just reminded him, “Hey, you’re an adult and going to make your own decisions, but don’t complain or be upset if there’s

disciplinary action based on some of things that you're doing out in the open for everyone to see. You understand what the school expects of you. So, you're putting yourself in jeopardy by doing it.

Cody clarified that his role as campus Pastor (all his student sessions were confidential) and his ongoing relationship with the student allowed him to be more candid and direct than other colleagues might. Nevertheless, he indicated that one-on-one conversations with LGBQ students typically started with determining the nature of their sexuality, then reiterating campus expectations about sexual purity and offering some level of support through their "journey." Considering that he perceived his campus as unclear about how to specifically approach LGBQ students, he was less concerned with changing "policy" and more concerned with ensuring his students were clear on potential consequences of violating campus expectations. For Cody, clarifying the campus position was meant to offer the student some transparency so they could make an informed decision about how to live out their LGBQ identity.

The pressure for staff to determine if an LGBQ student was living outside campus community standards did not mean they wanted to investigate or report. In fact, many indicated the entire process was very stressful. A select few shared about instances with LGBQ students earlier in their career that produced a lot of discomfort and even levels of shame. Jamie, a 30-year-old white female, serving at an Assembly of God university for five years, described the detective work that occurred when she met an openly gay student for the first time:

You try to see if the student is actually in an active relationship with someone who is the same-sex. When you find out a student is queer or questioning, it might not be explicitly said, 'report the student,' but that's how it feels. And I didn't want to do that. You almost don't want them to say anything, because then we're expected to report that information...So the first time a student came-out to me, she wasn't in an active relationship with anyone that I could tell, so I didn't feel like I had to necessarily report her...and I wasn't going to ask any more details.

On one hand, Jamie felt pressured to investigate whether a student was “acting” on same-sex attraction. On the other hand, Jamie did not want the student to explicitly disclose any behaviors (dating) because that would warrant a reporting process. She found these complex interactions deeply troubling and had since moved to a different institution that offered more flexibility when supporting LGBQ students.

Considering campuses addressed LGBQ identity and behavior differently, to avoid having to report “acting” students, participants used vague language and kept conversations with LGBQ students “private” and “underground.” One participant described these conversations as a “dance” where students and staff subtly pick-up on cues, without using explicit words. Roman, a student activities coordinator, described this nuanced approach:

Staff and students talk about [sexuality] without using the real words, but we’re all going to know what’s happening, we’re just not going to label it because the school said we can’t or shouldn’t.

Roman’s example illustrated a common experience, whereby staff and LGBQ students formed an “unspoken agreement to talk about [these issues] in the abstract.” For example, if an LGBQ student was dating, the relationship was not labeled as “romantic.” Rather, they might use words like “my friend,” (*my boyfriend*) or “I have feelings” (*I’m attracted to or in-love*). In some situations, they would speak in hypotheticals (*so if my friend*). Carefully selected language and “unspoken agreements” offered some degree of safety for both parties. Students had an opportunity to explore their identities without fear of being reported. In turn, staff could engage with and support LGBQ students without institutional pressure to correct or intervene.

Institutional Silence and Fear Regarding LGBQ Issues

The underground nature of staff-LGBQ student interactions contributed to a larger theme of institutional silence and fear regarding LGBQ issues. One participant said plainly, “We just

don't talk about it (openly).” Participants believed that their campuses intentionally avoided openly mentioning, naming, or discussing approaches that countered traditionally held beliefs about human sexuality. For example, none of the campuses represented officially sanctioned (funded, publicly endorsed/recognized) LGBTQ specific groups, clubs, or organizations. While select campuses had support groups addressing sexuality purity – topics might also include pornography and sex addiction. Participants perceived the groups’ purpose to reiterate community standards versus support holistic identity development. One staff described these groups to identify and address LGBTQ students’ “suffering.” Session facilitators/counselors often connected LGBTQ experiences with other types of suffering, such as depression, social isolation, tension, etc. Additionally, participants noted that LGBTQIA+ equality symbols (rainbow flag, equal sign sticker) were not allowed on campus, social media, or other print publications. These strategies silenced the LGBTQ student experience and made their presence less visible.

Institutional silence was also evidenced in the lack of LGBTQ specific resources available for staff. Professional development regarding these issues were limited, if existent at all. Only two participants reported participation in any training sessions explicitly addressing LGBTQ student care. In fact, Jamie did not realize other Christian campuses formally addressed this issue until she attended a national Christian college conference during her second year serving as a DEI coordinator. She described her discovery:

I was at this conference, which included other denominations. Some of the (other campuses) were much more upfront with their support of LGBT students, while others like mine didn't even have a space for students to process or to question or anything.

So after the conference, several of us went to our Vice President and said that we would love to have a ‘safe space’ because [LGBTQ] students are here. We would be remiss[ed] if we didn't acknowledge and support them at this university. That was met with a lot of pushback from administration, and specifically the spiritual formation department. They were mostly confused, like “Why would we have that? We have a clear, hard, and fast

stance on human sexuality. Why would we need to have this conversation?” Ultimately, [the] administration said, “No, we can't have something like that here.”

Jamie’s conference experience demonstrated several ways her campus reinforced silence around LGBQ issues. One, the institution did not provide exposure to formal trainings, seminars, or conferences that might encourage LGBQ student support on Christian colleges. Second, campus leadership maintained their strong position on Biblical tradition and refused to integrate an alternative perspective of human sexuality. Finally, and most explicitly, the administration denied staff’s request to launch a “safe space” for LGBQ-identified or exploring students to process, ask questions, or find support. For Jamie, these practices kept staff uninformed and ill-prepared to provide LGBQ student support.

Other participants confirmed the systematic neglect to provide staff with training and education on LGBQ issues and student care. Aside from Jamie, only one other participant mentioned attending a “staff gathering” that addressed “caring for our community.” The afternoon retreat was intended to bring folks together to learn about the “modern issues” facing students, specifically related to human sexuality. In her opinion, campus leaders dodged specific questions by reiterating vague campus values of support and love. For her, “watered-down” answers implied that her campus wanted to remain silent or (at the very least) was unwilling to critically engage staff in these discussions.

Institutional silence was also felt during meetings. Bella, who served her institution for over eight years, was reaching a breaking point with her campus. She spent nearly 30-hours a week working directly with student leaders. Throughout her career, she had several LGBQ students share “heartbreaking” stories about shame, isolation, and at times, suicidal ideation because of their sexuality. Although she implored campus leaders “to do *something*,” her plea was often met with an “out of sight, out of mind” philosophy. Over the years, she introduced

different ways the campus might show support for LGBQ students (e.g., host an open forum, start a support group, improve staff/counselor training), but top leaders continually denied these requests and made every effort to ensure any LGBQ program/event would “fly under the radar.” She expressed deep frustration when trying to openly address LGBQ issues during leadership meetings, “When it comes to this stuff...you can’t say anything! [deep sigh]. So, we’re just all quiet...if conversations do arise, they are brushed off...[leadership] tries to pretend that it’s not real.” The administration’s disregard of the urgency in her pleas sent the message that the institution-at-large would remain silent on issues of human sexuality. The lack of support and overall avoidance of these topics left Bella feeling dismissed and neglected.

The avoidance of discussing and supporting LGBQ students was experienced by other participants. Emma, a student life/activities coordinator, shared Bella’s defeat when trying to introduce new practices. She added: “When it comes down to practice, leaders don’t want [LGBQ issues] to become an issue or a controversy...we all rely on a Don’t ask, Don’t tell policy.” An institutional commitment to like-mindedness on LGBQ issues resulted in the systematic “silencing of the fringe.” Leaders prohibited formal recognition of LGBQ student/ally groups, limited LGBQ support training, avoided conversations that might counter traditional beliefs, diluted answers to direct questions about LGBQ issues, and ignored requests for new programs/services. Combined, these actions reinforced institutional science on LGBQ issues.

Systematically silencing beliefs or practices that countered Biblical tradition was largely shaped by fear. Participants perceived the entire campus community - leadership, staff, and students - as anxious and fearful of any action that challenged campus norms related to human sexuality. For them, openly supporting LGBQ students might lead to threat, danger, or exposure,

which forced LGBQ student support to remain “underground,” and “concealed.” Some staff were afraid of being fired or doing the wrong thing, while others experienced fear more subtly. These participants were less concerned with job security and more concerned with maintaining a level of secrecy when offering support to LGBQ students. In these cases, staff and LGBQ students worked hard to keep their conversations about sexuality confidential.

Fears about speaking against or challenging campus norms weighed on the minds of select participants, some of whom believed stepping out of line could compromise their jobs. For example, despite having served in student affairs for nearly eight years, Bella worried about getting fired for supporting students who confide in her. She reflected about her fear as she worked with a student exploring their non-heterosexual identity:

I just really don't want to get fired. I hate that that fear drives me...there's definitely a desire to engage more with the student, but there's just fear everywhere. No one here tells you that you have choices, and I haven't really experienced anything any other way than what I've heard my whole life in church...I just sort of know that if I speak truth to the student I might get fired and if I don't speak the full truth, I keep my job.

Bella, a white/Caucasian heterosexual Christian female, had always reflected the campus majority. However, her interactions with LGBQ students initiated a period of exploration. She started forming alternative beliefs about LGBQ issues that did not fully align institution. Counter to campus teachings, she no longer believed God called all gay Christians to remain celibate. Now, “speaking truth” from her perspective meant telling LGBQ students “they are OK no matter what.” Despite her newly formed approach to LGBQ issues she remained afraid to speak-up. She continued, “I want to desperately show them that they're safe, loved, and cared for, but I feel like I can't say that here.” Bella's experience underscored how institutional silence and fear reinforced each other. While she did not fully agree with the campus position, her underlying fear prompted her to remain largely silent on the issue.

The fear of being fired, although prominent for Bella, was not necessarily substantial in the data. More commonly, participants experienced fear related to exposure. Staff were intent on keeping any level of advocacy or support for LGBTQ students “under the radar.” They described their relationships with LGBTQ students as “beneath the surface,” “grassroots,” and “behind closed doors.” These strategies were meant to lessen the fear for staff and students who might “get caught” challenging campus norms. Emma shared Bella’s fear of being fired earlier in her career - “In the beginning I was looking all around for what is right and who to follow...I wanted to do well and be seen as capable.” Three years later, she felt secure in her belief that homosexuality was not sinful but knew that disclosing this counter-perspective to the “wrong person” might introduce consequences. She continued:

You can’t go around promoting [a different belief system]. We have key donors and a conservative board, so the last thing I want is my name to be thrown out there publicly as the person that’s going against the written policy. If you’re targeted, your power is removed...so you have to find nuanced ways to create change.

Emma no longer feared being fired, but remained very cautious and kept her “true beliefs under wrap.” She continued, “If I get targeted, I risk not being able to have any interaction with LGBTQ students, I won’t be protected, and then what?” When probed, Emma could not recall staff facing formal consequences for defending LGBTQ students. Rather, she spoke of a subtle isolation that might occur when staff stepped outside campus norms. To avoid feeling siloed on a small familial campus she attempted to keep a low profile in her support for LGBTQ students. For example, rather than draw attention during a leadership meeting, she decided to hang a small equality flag in her office. When interacting directly with students, she would constantly reassure them that their conversations would remain confidential.

Tanya, who served as an outreach coordinator for almost four years, also felt she had to approach LGBTQ issues with “care and sensitivity.” When a student disclosed their LGBTQ

identity during an admissions interview, she was careful to talk about the situation with one “safe” colleague. Tanya avoided specific names and details because there was “a lot of fear for everyone involved.” The prospective student was afraid they would not be admitted, and she was afraid she might be penalized for admitting a student that “might not be a fit for the community.” Although Emma’s and Tanya’s fears were more subtle, their experiences demonstrate a persistent anxiety and apprehension about the possibility of being discovered as an outlier.

Participants’ Christian campuses worked hard to maintain a distinctly evangelical identity, both institutional and among individual members. Part of this identity included a traditional view of human sexuality. Systematic silence coupled with persistent fear perpetuated a culture of like-mindedness and reinforced the message that they should agree with the campus position on LGBQ issues. In some ways, the like-minded familial campus provided a sense of belonging and community; however, like most “families,” some things remained complicated. Despite theological clarity, participants lacked clear direction about how to apply Biblical beliefs and values to everyday LGBQ issues. Participants believed that their institutions were confusing and contradictory about what to do when interacting with LGBQ students. Silence and fear heightened complexities that made LGBQ student support on these campuses “compounded,” “complicated,” and “political.”

Student Affairs Professionals Experiences with and Negotiation of Tension

Christian campuses espoused a familial and like-minded culture grounded in a Biblical doctrine. However, daily practice related to LGBQ issues did not always reflect a harmonious Christ-like community. Rather, participants described a culture of confusion, contradiction, silence, and fear. Although each participant respected university values of family, faith, and

collegiality, and identified as Christians themselves, they also cited instances in which campus ideologies of sexuality challenged their capacity to serve LGBQ students authentically.

Navigating a highly complex environment led participants to experience significant tension and conflict.

While all participants described periods of tension when confronting LGBQ issues, data analysis through the lens of *self-authorship* illuminated specific patterns related to the nature of tension, as well as the ways staff negotiated such tension. Further nuance was uncovered when examining these patterns alongside participant years of service and frequency of interaction with LGBQ students. Select participants relied heavily on authority figures and Biblical tradition for direction when confronting LGBQ issues. In contrast, others started to abandon old beliefs, form new social supports, and accept ambiguity. The following section uses three key stages of self-authorship – *following formulas*, *crossroads*, and *becoming the author of one's life* – to explore how participants experienced and resolved tension when building relationships with LGBQ students in a Christian campus environment.

Rule-followers: Seeking Direction from Authority in the Face of Uncertainty

All participants believed their campus provided unclear or contradictory expectations related to LGBQ students; however, select participants reported significant uncertainty and confusion. Viewed through the lens of *self-authorship*, the nature of their tension and the strategies employed to mitigate such tension reflected a “following formula” stage of development. Tensions related to lack of clarity were experienced most acutely among early-career staff (less than three years of FT work experience) who reported minimal interaction with LGBQ students. While other participants indicated having less than three years of FT work experience, folks like Abby and Tanya (averaged 1.5 years in the field), also noted only a few

interactions with LGBQ (attracted or identified) students, none of the relationships were described as close. This was especially true for Tanya, an outreach coordinator who mostly encountered LGBQ student issues abstractly through admissions essays versus close one-on-one exchanges. Despite graduate school training and almost two years in student affairs, Abby and Tanya remained unsure how to interact with LGBQ students in accordance with campus expectations. In fact, they both perceived grad school as creating “real deficits” in their preparation for “the real [professional] world.” Staff in this phase of self-authorship spent a great deal of time wondering how to please students, peers, and leaders. Moreover, their rigid “right and wrong,” belief system related to LGBQ issues remained relatively unexplored.

As self-proclaimed, “rule follower(s),” Abby and Tanya constantly questioned what they were supposed to do and often sought approval from those in authority for direction. Abby, a 25-year-old female working in student success reported having only one year of full-time professional work experience. She shared what caused her greatest tension:

I like to be a real follower, so there is a big part of me wants to do what I'm supposed to do and follow what the institution says about [LGBQ issues], but I'm not always sure what to do in an official capacity, and that's hard for me.

She talked about a time she “freaked out,” when she heard a colleague say something demeaning about an LGBQ student. Although she was bothered by situation, she remained unsure what to do:

It would be easier if somebody from the top gave explicit directions. Like, when I heard a colleague use the opposite pronoun of what the student wanted. That's where I felt the pressure of, *do I call them out? What do I say? Do I correct them?* So as staff, we just want to know what we're supposed to do. Like in other situations too, *do we report or not report?*

She paused to reflect about her tension and added:

We want to help our students, but we also want to keep our job. We're looking for direction from administration, but then all administration does is refer back to policy and procedures. So do I treat [campus rules] like a law? I don't know.

Abby's primary tension developed from a desire to stand-up for the LGBQ student, but also a desire to follow campus rules. She desperately wanted someone in authority to offer clear instruction.

This conflict of loyalty was also felt by Tanya. At times she disagreed with campus policies about LGBQ issues, but also felt compelled to abide by them. Like Abby, she wrestled with maintaining allegiance to the student or institution.

I'm trying to reconcile how not [to] feel disloyal. Although I have conflict with many of our campus policies at-large, at the same time I feel a responsibility to uphold them to some extent. I feel loyal to the brand...but then I don't want to make empty promises to [LGBQ] students. Like what if their experience is different from what they expected...I feel like maybe I've lied to them.

Tanya expanded on what she meant by "lied to them." As someone who was responsible for identifying, recruiting, and admitting students who would "be a great fit" for the campus, she was looking for students who would align with community expectations. Occasionally, prospective students (and their parents) would ask what happened if a student was gay. She was instructed to offer broad value-based responses – *we treat everyone with care and compassion*. In these instances, Tanya felt she lied to the student knowing her campus did not support LGBQ students well. On the other hand, she felt she lied to the institution by admitting students who did not align with their community agreements. When addressing LGBQ issues, Abby and Tanya's lack of overall work experience coupled with the institutional desire for like-mindedness led to tensions of clarity and loyalty.

Ignorance is Bliss

To lessen feelings of tension or anxiety, Abby and Tanya placed LGBTQ matters “on the back burner,” until they felt more secure to explore alternative ways of understanding. Rather than critically examine traditional Biblical beliefs, they intentionally refused to acknowledge the complexities of faith, sexual purity, and LGBTQ issues. When faced with multifaceted questions, they maintained a relatively binary lens and relied heavily on campus leaders for clarity, direction, and when deciding “the right thing to do.” In some cases, they attempted to avoid tension altogether. Tanya described an “ignorance is bliss” approach to navigating LGBTQ issues on her campus:

This is going to sound horrible, I really try to not think about [the campus approach]...it’s definitely an intentional ignorance on my part. I know [our campus] has a statement on human sexuality and gender, but am I going to study the nuances? No. To be honest, knowing too much scares me, like if I read it, then I’ll know it, and knowing too much might influence my ability to support students.

Considering Tanya’s desire to follow the rules - reading official campus statements and clarifying expectations might force her to abide by traditions she did not necessarily agree with. Generally, she did not *fully* support institutional statements on human sexuality, but also felt underprepared to challenge university rules and structures. She admitted that avoiding LGBTQ issues “created a lot of hiding and difficulty in creating community,” but she did not know how to “navigate the gap” between what she felt inclined to do and what her campus instructed her to do. In fact, she had not “formed any strong opinions about what should be done differently.” Broadly, Tanya understood the “right” thing to do from a moral, ethical, or professional position, but aligning her beliefs with the institutional approach gave her pause. Thus, she relied on an “out of sight out of mind” approach and sought direction from supervisors.

Abby also felt unprepared to further engage with the complexities surrounding LGBTQ issues on her campus and continued to rely on leaders for ultimate guidance. In truth, the interview was the very first time she openly articulated her own thoughts and feelings about LGBTQ issues. After a long pause, she realized, “hmm, this is probably the most I’ve ever really put words to what I’ve been thinking and feeling.” Despite being raised in a conservative Christian environment with strict Biblical views about sexuality, she no longer believed being gay was sinful. Nevertheless, she was unsure how reconcile her views while working with LGBTQ students on campus. She reflected, “I see such an opportunity to create positive change...but there are all these layers. So, I’m trying to find coworkers who are older than me that remind me that [being LGBTQ] is normal and okay.” Abby was developing her own opinions about sexuality, but still regarded “older” colleagues and supervisors as the ultimate authority to validate her new belief system. Despite a desire for change, she remained deferential to leaders.

Rule followers like Abby and Tanya experienced significant tension about doing the “right” thing. They were unsure how to balance loyalty to LGBTQ students and their institution. To negotiate these tensions, they either willfully ignored campus complexities on LGBTQ issues or continually sought direction from external agents. Their actions reflect the “following formulas,” stage of development, whereby individuals feel underprepared to closely examine beliefs that might counter the status quo, which prompts them to look to authority for clear right and wrong answers (Baxter Magolda, 2001). These strategies helped resolve their anxieties and internal conflict.

At a Crossroads: Developing New Beliefs and Renegotiating Relationships with Authority

In contrast to Abby and Tanya, who exemplified a “follow formulas” approach to LGBTQ campus issues, several other participants represented the “crossroads phase” of self-authorship, a

transitional period whereby individuals begin to abandon longstanding traditions, question authority, and start redefining a new sense-of-self (Baxter Magolda, 2001). These staff ranged in age from 27 to 35-years old, averaged five years in the field, worked one-on-one with students at least 26 hours per week, and described their relationships with LGBTQ students as “closely connected” and “personal.” When parceling out age, years of service, professional role, and student interaction, sustained relationships with LGBTQ students was the most critical factor that initiated the “crossroads” phase of self-authorship. For example, Amber only reported three years of work experience, but her role as residential life coordinator forged close relationships with LGBTQ students quickly. Through her work with these students, she started to question if the administration was doing the right thing and critiqued Biblical scriptures that spoke against non-heterosexuality. Although she still relied on others for guidance, she was forming a new understanding of sexuality based on new experiences. Similarly, Jamie’s administrative role in DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion), did not directly relate to student development, but her personal connections with several LGBTQ student leaders “rocked her world.” She realized how campus policies were “actually harmful.” Building authentic ongoing relationships with LGBTQ students led participants to wrestle with Christian teachings they had learned throughout their life. They became increasingly frustrated with the way campus leaders handled LGBTQ issues and started to break-away from the “family.”

Forming New Beliefs, Still Processing

All participants were raised, educated, and professionally socialized in a “Christian bubble.” They perceived their campus as working hard to ensure that Biblical ideology was preserved among like-minded people. One of these agreed upon values included the traditional Christian view of human sexuality. Most participants could not recall meeting openly gay/queer

people prior to beginning their professional roles and their subsequent interactions with LGBTQ students. Within this context, professional interactions with LGBTQ students (either exploring or identifying) was often the first-time staff “started to see LGBTQ people as individuals with real-life experiences.” Consistent relationships with LGBTQ students made it “more difficult” for select staff to continue supporting the campus approach to these issues. Unlike “rule followers,” who avoided acknowledging theological complexities, staff at the crossroads phase actively engaged their dissonance and committed to learning. Amber, who worked in residential life, described herself as “still processing”:

The church at-large thinks of this issue as an absolute right or wrong...but that doesn't work. Because I do so much [LGBTQ student] mentoring I'm really in this place of learning right now. I've grown in compassion. So, now I'm figuring out my values...I'm still processing.

Although she was immersed in an environment that maintained a binary (right/wrong) way of thinking, her relationships with LGBTQ students pushed her to explore a more compassionate worldview. She was becoming more open-minded.

Jamie, a white-identified, 30-year-old DEI staff also explained how her “rigid,” stance on human sexuality diminished the more she worked with LGBTQ students, “My hard and fast, and black and white stance that I grew up believing is definitely changing because of these students. I'm broadening my perspective.” She paused to reflect how an increasingly nuanced approach to LGBTQ issues contrasted with the like-minded and insular campus culture:

If you wanted, you could stay safe in a little bubble – it would be easy to do here, I mean, you're surrounded by everyone who acts like you, thinks like you, looks like you...but these students really personalize the issues...it makes it more difficult to view students through only a disciplinary action lens.

Her statement, “if you *wanted* to, you *could* stay safe,” emphasized two important aspects of Christian campus culture as it relates to LGBTQ issues and the formation of new beliefs. One,

within these institutional environments uncritically abiding by the status-quo was easy – everyone looks, thinks, talks, lives like you. Two, critically analyzing campus norms required intentionality. Staff who wanted to support LGBTQ students had to purposefully commit to evaluating existing claims, ideologies, and values. Similarly, Bella, a student life and activities staff member, was also sorting out her beliefs about LGBTQ issues. After serving at her campus for nearly eight years, she realized the campus desire for like-mindedness not only hurt LGBTQ students, but also created a harmful environment for everyone:

All of this has brought on a crisis in my own beliefs about these institutions in general...if you can't talk about alternative ideas and issues with people who are supposedly Christian, how are we going to teach students how to think critically?

Amber, Jamie, and Bella remained a bit unsure exactly how to articulate their new thoughts about sexuality, but their “heart” for LGBTQ students was expanding. They were working through institutional silence and fear to develop a more holistic approach to caring for LGBTQ students. When asked how she was making-sense of campus policy and Biblical tradition in a different way, Jamie added:

It's less about asking if homosexuality is right or wrong, and more about asking the *right* questions – like, what is love in action?...it's going to demand much more than what I thought...I'm still thinking about what that might look like [here]...

Jamie's notion of “still thinking” and asking different questions highlighted an important cognitive transition for staff at a crossroads. Unlike “rule followers,” who wanted explicit direction about what was right and wrong or avoided LGBTQ issues altogether, these participants were committed to exploring alternatives. While staff at a crossroads had not fully articulated their specific beliefs or strategies for how they would challenge campus status-quo, they no longer supported the campus approach.

Frustration with Authority

After interacting with LGBQ students more frequently, staff at a crossroads became extremely dissatisfied with the way campus leaders addressed LGBQ issues. The close-knit familial feel started to dissolve and weaken. Relationships once characterized by empathy and care were now described as “political” and “complicated.” Amber spoke about how her regard of authority was shifting. As a fairly new professional, she often sought guidance and direction from her supervisor. For example, how to manage roommate conflicts, underage drinking, sexual assault, etc. Overall, she spoke highly of her supervisor, noting, “she’s really a force to be reckoned with...she carries so much wisdom.” Lately, however, she was frustrated with her director’s lack of action related to LGBQ student policy. She described her administration as “blind” and “ignorant to what was actually happening.” Amber continued:

Everyone...colleagues, campuses, churches, the CCCU, everyone talks about these topics, but they just offer some catchy or watered-down answer, no one is *actually* addressing it...they just have theoretical conversations. Before I thought, oh we can just talk about it, but now I’m like no we need something more concrete and tangible.

Amber described a familiar pattern for staff at a crossroads - staff consulted leaders for concrete ways to support LGBQ students, leaders offered vague theological recommendations (e.g., *show kindness and grace*), staff became increasingly aggravated. This ongoing cycle led Amber to question whether campus leaders, like her supervisor, were even prepared or equipped to appropriately address LGBQ issues. “Watered-down” value statements were not sufficient to manage the complexities she faced when trying to support her students. She started to seek guidance elsewhere: “I go to therapy or I’ll meet up with friends outside of campus, I’ll talk about all this there. I’m over holding onto this frustration and now I just need figure out how to help.”

As staff developed new belief systems, they created distance from colleagues and leaders once regarded as experts. Jamie was reexamining who was “safe” to talk to about LGBQ student issues:

I feel like I can’t show my true colors of what I believe anymore...I have to conceal what I believe in, that I do want to support LGBTQ students...We all desire and work towards building authentic relationships, and these separations [of opinion and belief] become a barrier to that...you can’t be entirely vulnerable and open, that’s hard on a campus that’s like this small family.

Jamie not only avoided certain “unsafe” people on campus, she started to speak more openly about the hypocrisy between espoused campus values of family and connection and feelings of isolation and mistrust:

A lot of these institutions breed pharisees, they do not breed or graduate students who actually really love *all* people...[the campus] has a strict and rigid set of beliefs that hinder everyone from seeing the humanity of those who might be different.

Her frustration grew into resentment, which led to the blunt characterization of campus leaders as pharisees. She added, “I want to continue to connect [with others on campus], but I feel like I can’t anymore...it feels like a lie.” The inability to foster close connections contrasted starkly with her former notions of campus family, support, and shared faith. Bella reflected Jamie’s cynicism of campus leadership. Her feelings intensified to a point that she has started to “lose faith in the institution itself.” Bella shared:

I feel like I can’t deeply reconcile who I am and what I believe with what I’ve been told to do...it’s so stifling. I feel like I’m betraying myself by being here by not being able to tell [LGBQ student] there’s another way to think about this.

For staff at a crossroads, sustained interactions with LGBQ students forced staff to wrestle with their perception of campus leaders as “all-knowing” authorities. In some cases, like Bella, they experienced personal despair and hopelessness – questioning if they should stay at their campus much longer. As their dissatisfaction grew, they started to detach from the campus family.

Professional Paralysis

As staff at a crossroads abandoned former beliefs and renegotiated their relationships with the campus community, they shifted their focus from theology (*Is being gay sinful?*) towards concrete ways of supporting LGBQ students (*What can we do to support LGBQ students?*). While all participants expressed some level of frustration with institutional silence and fear related to LGBQ support, these participants wrestled more intensely with “professional paralysis,” feeling stuck when trying to support LGBQ students (Scibetta, 2019). For example, Jamie understood that the institutional position on LGBQ issues would remain unchanged, but was not sure what to do next:

Yes, we have these doctrines, but we need to do something, like maybe support groups or places we can connect students to... I’m trying to figure out how to care for our students when we have to keep these doctrines. I don’t feel restrained by our campus position or policy per se, that’s established, it’s like – Ok, what do we do about that? That’s the line I’m working through – the line between support, acknowledgement, care, and affirmation.

Her description of a “line” implied that while she acknowledged specific campus boundaries existed, she was willing to test the limits. Jamie was no longer fearful (like rule-followers) to “cross the line,” but was still determining what new path to take. Holly, a Director of Community Engagement at a northwestern Presbyterian campus, also shared how any level of support for LGBQ students required navigating nuanced boundaries and limits:

I’m walking this very tight and narrow line...As a Christian community, we want desperately to let people know how much we love them, *but* without condoning. So I’m pushing to engage [with LGBQ students], but also remembering we have these beliefs...we have our institutional identity.

Holly was figuring out ways to balance the “tension between doing the very best for the student, while knowing the institutional limitations to caring for them.” In this way, her professional

paralysis was more about finding nuanced ways to provide concrete support versus parceling out campus policy or Biblical doctrine.

Participants, Amber, Bella, Jamie, and Holly were letting go of their reliance on external agents (leadership, scripture, and campus rules) and were developing a new way to think about and approach LGBQ issues. Their close connections with LGBQ students challenged them to critically examine campus culture, policies, and Biblical expectations. They were becoming more comfortable wrestling with their personal understanding of LGBQ issues alongside their Christian faith. Unlike, “rule followers,” who regarded leaders as the final authority, these participants realized campus administration did not always know what was best and described intense frustration with “the way things have always been done.” As LGBQ issues became less abstract and more “real life and intimate,” these staff committed to pushing through feelings of paralysis in their attempt to support LGBQ students.

On the Path to Self-Authorship: Accepting Complexity and Resisting Campus Norms

Participants described their overall campus culture as caring, familial, and like-minded; however, once confronted with LGBQ issues, they described an environment of silence and fear. Navigating organizational complexities between espoused values and everyday practice created tension. While some relied on external authority for direction, those with meaningful relationships with LGBQ students encountered a crossroads that prompted a reorganization of beliefs and relationships. Participants who reported moving through the crossroads phase were much more confident and secure when challenging the campus approach to human sexuality. They managed their tensions differently compared to rule-followers or those at a crossroads. These staff abandoned old beliefs about human sexuality, formed new social supports, accepted ambiguity and complexity, and at times the repositioned their Christian identity. Combined,

these actions demonstrated key aspects of self-authorship, the capacity to secure an internalized sense-of-self and stand apart from the mainstream (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Within a Christian campus culture, the choice to validate LGBTQ students required participants to reconcile tension and grow in multiple ways.

Self-authoring was largely illustrated among staff of color who had sustained relationships with LGBTQ students throughout their career. Self-authorship – securing new beliefs, forming interdependent colleague relationships, and resisting campus norms – were specifically connected to four participants who identified as either African American/Black or Latino/Hispanic and averaged five years in the field. Moreover, their professional roles explicitly required direct one-on-one student mentorship (e.g., student athletic advisor, student development, spiritual formation), versus a heavily administrative role (e.g., outreach/admissions). When examining sources of tension and strategies to manage such tensions, self-authoring staff differed from other participants in their capacity to construct nuanced thinking, form interdependent relationships, and secure a multifaceted identity. These self-authoring staff were explicit in their commitment to openly advocate for LGBTQ students, which (at times) put them in direct conflict with institutional values and policies.

Securing New Beliefs

A key feature of self-authoring individuals was their acceptance of alternative perspectives and their recognition that knowledge was contextual. This contrasted starkly with folks who sought absolute truth (right and wrong) or avoided cognitive tensions. Participants, like Cody, Kim, Emma, and Roman, confirmed the presence of rigid thinking and denial earlier in their career, but were much more comfortable wrestling with complexity. For example, Cody, a Latino male in his early 30s, had served in the spiritual formation office for about six years.

After completing his graduate degree in theology about two years ago, he assumed the role of Campus Pastor for a non-denominational university. Although most of his time was spent mentoring and counseling students facing a variety of issues, connections with LGBTQ students were especially impactful. Through these relationships he formed a “layered” posture toward LGBTQ issues:

Time spent with [LGBTQ] students takes you from the abstract and puts a human being in a few feet of you. They’re sharing some of the most intimate experiences that they’ve had. There is an undeniably powerful connection that happens when someone places their hope in you...and then you start to realize that there really isn’t some cookie cutter approach to managing these things.

Cody abandoned the “cookie cutter” approach his like-minded campus vehemently protected and perpetuated. Unlike rule-followers’ anxiety when confronting LGBTQ issues, or crossroads staff members’ professional paralysis, Cody felt comfortable, almost fulfilled, when “wrestling in the messiness.” He described a new “freedom” to solidify alternative beliefs:

I lean much more on my experiences [with students as] opposed to theology...there isn’t the pressure of having to believe one thing or another. I’m not sure anyone has the exact right answer...I really like having those complex conversations about theology in contemporary culture, the Bible, the Scriptures, that’s where the work really happens.

Cody highlighted an important feature of self-authorship – accepting ambiguity. This realization was especially powerful considering the campus community highly regarded his role (Pastor) as the final authority. However, Cody himself reconciled that no one, not even ministers, have the “right” answers. For him, real learning involved grappling with complexity rather than defining an absolute. In contrast to Tanya, who deliberately and fearfully avoided engaging with LGBTQ issues, participants like Cody felt liberated to confront the intricacies of Biblical tradition and denominational pressure.

Kim, a 30-something African American female who worked closely with student athletes, also found relief after she realized, “no one has the exact right answer.” Throughout the

interview she expressed while she felt deeply connected to the university she currently worked and supported the value of Christian higher education (earned both her undergrad/grad degree from a religious institution), she always felt a bit “outside.” As a student and a professional, Kim was keenly that her racial/ethnic background and political positions did not reflect the majority. Understanding the insular nature of her campus, she intentionally spent her free time with folks outside the “Christian bubble.” Her social interactions and relationships with LGBQ students introduced a shift in her thinking about LGBQ issues:

Before I was much more one-dimensional or simple...[LGBQ issues] seemed neutral, an out-of-sight-out-of-mind thing...but seeing all the things these students face, you embrace a new freedom to say, ‘hey I may not know everything, but I’m here and together we’re going to figure out what’s next.’

Staff who demonstrated features of self-authorship were more confident separating from the like-minded campus culture. Both Cody and Kim constructed knowledge and beliefs about LGBQ issues contextually, admitting no one has the right answer. They felt liberated to construct alternative beliefs about LGBQ issues based on personal experiences versus reliance on dogmatic theology or denominational leaders for direction.

Participants working through this phase found new ways to integrate Christian values alongside LGBQ student support. They made it a clear throughout the interview that they were *still* Christians. Their intentionality to make such a point emphasized their motivation to “reinterpret” elements of their faith and explore different ideas versus abandon their faith altogether. Roman, a 26-year-old Latino male, remained steadfast in his Christian identity, but shared how his faith was evolving and expanding. He began working for his alma mater immediately after graduation and felt very connected to his campus. He was upbeat and jovial when he described his overall work environment and spoke fondly of his colleagues and student leaders. While he always felt some unease when balancing LGBQ student support alongside

institutional pressures, lately his desire to integrate personal, professional, and spiritual identities had intensified:

Look, I'm a product of [Christianity], so naturally I don't think it's all bad, but recently a lot of my reflection has been navigating my own beliefs and process... there are many things [about my faith] I hold on to, but I also know there are lots of limitations...

As he started to think more critically about Biblical teachings, he began letting go of lessons he learned throughout his life (e.g., *homosexuality is sinful; remain celibate*). Roman was disillusioned with “the bubble,” and was “losing faith,” in the beliefs he once placed so much confidence. Reconciling his beliefs about LGBTQ issues was compounded by his own sexual orientation. Half-way through the interview, he paused, lowered his voice, and said:

My experiences with all of this would be vastly different if I were just an ally, but [pause] I myself am gay, but am closeted at work. So, I'm learning how to help students through their own coming out process, through their own identity process, as I'm engaged in mine as well.

I'm being pushed to believe there isn't a specific way...I'm just so much more open. So now, I'm asking myself a very real internal question of - how do I reconcile my own self, my integrity, my faith, my role here.

Over time, he realized living as an openly gay Christian was possible. This shift required him to form a multidimensional understanding of his faith, which included a holistic approach to LGBTQ identity. Now, he noted that his beliefs were informed by “what the Church says,” but also from graduate school, his friends, students, and “all sorts of other things.” Largely shaped by LGBTQ student relationships, self-authoring staff abandoned their rigid position on LGBTQ issues and intentionally constructed a more contextual belief system about human sexuality.

Forming Interdependent Connections

Direct, sustained, and close relationships with LGBTQ students prompted staff to confront longstanding beliefs and professional relationships. Identifying institutional allies played a vital role for participants who continued their journey towards self-authorship. Unlike staff who

relied on leadership for clarity and direction, interdependent connections with select colleagues were marked by mutuality, bidirectional learning, and shared responsibility. When addressing LGBQ issues, these staff reached out to other professionals, not for direct answers, but rather to “process,” to “talk things out,” and to learn.

Self-authoring participants were acutely aware that their commitment to openly support LGBQ students challenged institutional norms. They reported feeling isolated from the “family.” To mitigate feelings of loneliness, they sought other “safe colleagues” who shared similar perspectives on LGBQ student care. Creating webs of support on campuses that were openly hostile, silent, and fearful about LGBQ issues was not easy. Staff used subtle and casual forms of “on and off the clock” communication (e.g., indirect questions, vague language, and every-day conversation) to identify supporters. Emma, a Latina in her mid-20s serving in Student Life, described how she “picked-up on clues” to identify fellow allies:

You operate under great caution because you can't just talk about [LGBQ issues] in the open...so you pick-up on signals, you drop comments about politics, or you talk about places you visited over the weekend or where you hang out... You listen to how people talk about certain things and then slowly you figure it out...You just sorta know, like yeah, that one over there is safe.

Despite working for a familial campus, participants like Emma employed clandestine behaviors to build connection with others who did not fully align with the institutional approach to LGBQ students.

Silence and fear compounded feelings of isolation for these participants, leading to underground efforts for identifying safe allies for support. Unlike rule-followers who relied on leaders for guidance or staff at a crossroads who resented administrators for their lack of action, self-authoring staff formed interdependent (and often covert) “webs of support” focused on learning. Although sampled from a variety of campuses, several participants reported being part

of “underground listservs,” social media groups, or informal meetups that connected student affairs practitioners across campuses to collect and share resources related to LGBQ student care.

Emma described what motivated her to join such a group:

Most of us realized that our campuses weren't going to provide much, so it's up to us to get the training and professional development we need. We give each other space to reflect, we get to lean on each other as we grapple with what is morally right.

Emma, and other self-authoring staff, realized that neither graduate school training nor campus professional development/training adequately prepared them to negotiate Christian campus culture alongside LGBQ student care. While all participants reported having advanced degrees in education, counseling, spiritual formation/theology, or leadership, the programs did not address ways to integrate spiritual/faith and LGBQ identity development. Emma described feeling under-resourced when trying to help a student through their coming out process:

Nothing really prepares you for these situations, so you just listen and try to help them feel safe and supported....I feel like I can't give advice on the matter specifically, so I will help [the student] look up resources...I wish I was better equipped to explore this with them.

Consequently, they formed their own networks of close friends, safe colleagues (at their campus or neighboring CCCUs), partners, therapists, and community organizations. For Kim, these groups helped her locate “gender-affirming and sexually affirming [off-campus] spaces for students.” Similarly, Cody relied on these folks for “articles, books, and resources to educate [himself] and build a framework to better approach these issues on [his] campus.” Roman described his network as “little enclaves of people that support, value, and affirm [my] beliefs...they offer a place where it's okay to be accepting.” Although their campuses compromised their ability to form open relationships with other LGBQ allies, they found ways to form the interdependent connections needed to feel more equipped to support for LGBQ students.

Self-authoring individuals started to ground their relationships in mutuality, whereby all parties are allowed to be their authentic selves. Cody, Kim, Emma, and Roman, were becoming agents of their own growth and development. The interdependent nature of their connections contrasted sharply with staff who relied on other professionals for straightforward answers. Together, they were “figuring things out” versus asking authority for direction. Covert webs of support enabled these staff to mitigate feelings of isolation and to form a new approach to LGBTQ student support in a Christian campus environment.

Resisting Campus Norms

Self-authoring staff reconciled that not everyone on campus would agree with their approach to LGBTQ issues and took risks to openly provide concrete forms and love for LGBTQ students. Rather than describe their approach as fearful or paralyzed, they were “upfront and honest,” “transparent,” “elevated,” and “in the fight” when confronting the complexities of sexuality and faith. These staff were demonstrating key tenets of self-authorship – trusting their internal voice when carving out new action plans.

Within a Christian campus culture, publicly affirming LGBTQ students involved skirting student conduct policies, helping students find queer communities of support, attending underground LGBTQ student meetings, posting pride symbols in their office, sharing supportive messages on social media, and openly disagreeing with campus leadership in meetings. Amber, a residential coordinator, mentioned “looking the other way,” when students formed an underground LGBTQ support group on her floor. When talking about the covert ways Emma identified institutional allies through informal conversations, she also shared how she intentionally decorated her office, “I have this little rainbow flag in my office...” Over the years, she received a few comments about the flag being “too explicit,” so she got creative:

Yeah, so [the flag] comes out sometimes, but oh, I have this little picture (points behind her), it just says LOVE in fun colors [laughs]. Honestly, I bet older people don't even get it, but for those that do, I think of it as a signal to students, and I guess others too, that I'm a safe space...

Displaying symbols of LGBQ equality might seem subtle, but in a Christian campus context, Emma's approach was intentional and bold. She found a way to openly celebrate and affirm LGBQ students in a silent, fearful, and highly political environment. Her decision to hang the flag pushed a counter-narrative without completely isolating her from leadership roles. Kim, who already felt she had to "triple extra advocate" for herself as a Black-identified female and for her LGBQ students, her campus resistance related more to student referrals and community resources. She sought out off-campus community organizations, resources, therapists, and support groups. At times, she would attend their events or share their resources on her personal social media accounts. These networks became invaluable for her LGBQ students.

Self-authoring staff were much more confident openly confronting campus leaders on LGBQ issues. Roman shared a specific Board meeting held after a highly anticipated and well attended evening chapel service related to human sexuality. The campus facilitated a conversation between two openly gay Christians – one who committed to celibacy and the other who did not. Roman thought the event was a step in the right direction – at the very least, showing LGBQ students that campus leaders were ready to address the topic. Typically, the campus recorded and posted video of all special chapel services on social media and the website. At times, a brief article highlighting the event with testimonials, pictures, and key takeaways was also published. In this case however, high-level administrators had a long debate about whether to share the event publicly. Roman recalled several leaders as extremely apprehensive to draw attention to such a controversial topic/event. As a meeting attendee, Roman shared how he "threw caution to the wind" and openly went against what he probably should've said:

They probably wanted me to say something like, “you’re right, it’s best we don’t make this a huge deal,” but...instead I was like, “well maybe you should care less about pleasing external audiences and start thinking of ways to educate and inform our students about these issues.”

Although the Board never published anything about the event, confronting administration was a turning point for Roman. He noted, “I’m just much less afraid of judgment now.” His fear of judgment, isolation, or being fired for pushing back so forcefully and directly had lessened. Kim also shared that earlier in her career she was “looking all around for what was right and who to follow,” but now when meeting with leadership, she “takes risks and leaps to make a difference.” Roman and Kim were developing more confidence when advocating for LGBQ students in a hostile environment. Securing such an internalized foundation was also shared by Emma, who poignantly shared:

Look, I’d rather the [LGBQ] student I’m talking to be alive, so I’ll resolve whatever I have to...God has called me to be here, so for now I’m comfortable with the decisions that I make.

As Christians we are commanded to love, it’s our moral compass, but love demands action, so we have to ask ourselves, what is love actually going to look like on this campus.

Despite working for Christian colleges that was perceived as silent, fearful, rigid, and confusing on LGBQ issues, these participants gradually developed a bigger picture about what God had called them to do in service to LGBQ students. They renegotiated their relationships with colleagues and LGBQ students, openly confronted long standing Biblical teachings, and redefined key aspects of their faith. As participants were becoming the author of their own life, they resolved tension with increasing complexity, interdependence, exploration, and authenticity. In this way, they reconciled their fear or hesitation, and employed multiple perspectives and experiences as a framework for action.

Conclusion

The study explored the experiences of 10 student affairs professionals as they negotiated professional, institutional, and personal tensions in efforts to support LGBQ students. Findings interpreted through Schein's (2010) *levels of organizational culture* and Baxter Magolda's (2001) *theory of self-authorship*, revealed that although campuses espoused familial, close-knit, and like-minded Christian values, when confronted with LGBQ issues daily practice was complex, confusing, silent, fearful, and political. Navigating these misalignments led to tensions of loyalty, action, trust, and faith. Participants negotiated these tensions in multiple ways. Some continued to rely on external authority for direction, while others encountered a crossroads that prompted a renegotiation of their relationships, beliefs, and Christianity. Within these campuses, affirming students' sexual orientation identity/process required participants to grow in multiple ways - accepting of ambiguity, considering multiple perspectives, developing underground webs of support, and at times repositioning their faith. Participants themselves did not necessarily classify their acts of support as cultural resistance, but examining these behaviors within the Christian college context demonstrated that notwithstanding potential consequences, self-authoring participants refused to comply with campus expectations and found new ways to support LGBQ students.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion & Implications

Overview of Study

Student affairs professionals (SA-pros) play a critical role throughout college life – residential housing, leadership organizations, career preparation, counseling services, cross-cultural programs, mental health, and campus safety (Gaston-Gayles, Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle, Twombly, & Ward, 2005; Hirt, 2006; 2009). Starting with *Student Personnel Point of View* in 1937, social justice advocacy and a commitment to honoring the “whole” student has been a hallmark of student affairs work (American Council on Education, 1937; Amey, Jessup-Anger, & Tingson-Gatuz, 2015; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; King & Baxter Magolda, 2011). Although many institutions attempt to create an inclusive learning environment for all students (Garvey, Rankin, Beemyn, & Windmeyer, 2017; Rankin, Weber, Bloomenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Will, 2015), LGBTQ-identified students attending Christian colleges encounter more hostile campus climates. These institutions uphold Biblical doctrine that preserve the belief that sexual intimacy is reserved for one man and one woman in the context of marriage (Love, 1997; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse & Lastoria, 2013; Strunk, Bailey, & Takewell 2014; Wentz & Wessel, 2011). SA-pros serving at these Christ-centered colleges face unique challenges when supporting LGBTQ students.

Although staff are trained and responsible for LGBTQ student well-being (Kezar, 2010; Kezar, Gallant, & Lester, 2011), those at Christ-centered institutions are underprepared to negotiate policy alongside student care, experience feelings of professional tension and “professional paralysis,” and in some cases question their faith when balancing institutional policies and LGBTQ student care (Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2016; 2019). Professionals without

adequate support and preparation to manage such tensions cite high rates of burnout, empathetic distress, and attrition (Bestler, 2012; Lorden, 1998; Perez, 2014). These SA-pros often have less visibility in their advocacy for LGBTQ students due to department resistance, institutional barriers, and lack of preparation to navigate complex campus demands (Croteau & Talbot, 2000; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; McEntarfer, 2011; Schreiner & Nelson, 2013; Scibetta, 2019). Balancing professional training, institutional contexts, and LGBTQ student care may be especially difficult for new professionals (Amey, Jessup-Anger, & Tingson-Gatuz, 2002; Janosik, Creamer, Hirt, Winston, Saunders, & Cooper, 2004).

While there is expanding literature on the LGBTQ student experience at faith-based institutions, little is known about how SA-pros working for LGBTQ-hostile institutions negotiate tensions among professional values, ecumenical context, and LGBTQ student care (Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2019). This study used a qualitative research design to explore how student affairs professionals working for Christ-centered colleges and universities negotiated professional, institutional, and personal tensions in efforts to support LGBTQ students. Schein's (2010) *levels of organizational culture* and Baxter Magolda's (2001) *theory of self-authorship* provided further nuance by examining how participants sense-making, colleague relationships, and professional and personal identities were shaped by their interactions with LGBTQ students.

The final sample included 10 participants, eight females, two males, and mostly white/Caucasian and Latino/Hispanic identifying individuals. They ranged in age from 25-35 years old, averaged 4.9 years in the field of student affairs, identified as Christians, and based on self-reports spent at least 20 hours per week directly interacting with students. Participants indicated working in areas of diversity, equity and inclusion, residential life, student life/activities/programming, academic success, outreach and admissions, spiritual formation or

pastoral care, and community engagement. All of the participants earned their undergraduate college degree from religiously-affiliated institutions, and all completed graduate level training in education, student affairs, theology, or leadership and community development.

Data collection included a brief background close-ended questionnaire to obtain demographic, professional, and religious affiliation information. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to elicit data about participants' experiences interacting with LGBQ students at a Christian affiliated institution. After interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and cleaned, thematic analysis was applied to better understand how participants constructed meaning of their experiences. Each interview transcript underwent multiple coding cycles (Saldaña, 2013). After the initial coding cycle, coded themes were consolidated and expanded. This process resulted in approximately 30 codes based on selected frameworks and *in vivo* codes capturing participants' own words. Data excerpts were synthesized and organized into the themes and subthemes related to participants perception of campus culture, the campus approach to LGBQ issues, SA-pros experiences with tension, and their management of such tension.

Summary of Findings

Findings interpreted through Baxter Magolda's (2001) *theory of self-authorship* and subsequent *Learning Partnership Model* answered the central research question, specifically how staff members made-sense of campus policies and standards regarding LGBQ issues (cognitive); how their relationships developed as result of working with LGBQ students (interpersonal); and how their sense-of-self (e.g. professional identity and values) were shaped by their interactions with LGBQ students. Schein's (2010) *levels of organizational culture* contextualized participants' learning, growth, and development within a Christian institutional environment.

At a fundamental level, all participants described their campuses as grounded in the belief of a perfect and loving God. Not surprisingly, for Christ-centered campuses, Biblical doctrine was the central foundation woven throughout campus mission, values, policies, programs, leadership, and everyday expectations. A deep commitment to serving Christ informed staff identity, purpose, professional priorities, and relationships. Participants perceived their campus as espousing a close-knit, like-minded, caring, familial, and Christian community. Their shared faith and common experiences provided a deep sense of belonging - but only to a point. When confronted with LGBTQ issues, daily practice did not reflect harmony, agreeability, or consistency, rather participants believed their institutions were confusing and contradictory about what to do when interacting with LGBTQ students. Despite conceptual clarity related to sexual purity, participants were uncertain how to demonstrate “Christ-like compassion” for LGBTQ students attending these campuses. Participants’ inability to determine how best to approach their relationships with LGBTQ students was heightened by campus silence and fear, and a unique distinction between sexual identity and behavior.

All participants felt underprepared to navigate religious campus tradition, student affairs practice, and personal values when caring for LGBTQ students. They reported periods of significant tension when confronting these issues. Data analysis through the lens of *self-authorship* illuminated specific patterns related to the nature of tension, as well as the ways participants negotiated such tension. Further nuance was uncovered when examining these patterns alongside participant years of service and frequency of interaction with LGBTQ students. A select few, especially early-career staff (i.e., those with fewer than three years of full-time work experience) who reported minimal interaction with LGBTQ students, continued to rely on external authority for direction. They were mostly concerned with upholding institutional

tradition and often ignored the complexities of supporting LGBQ students alongside Christian faith. As participants interacted with LGBQ students on a more frequent and regular basis they questioned their college's existing approach and critiqued Biblical scriptures that spoke against non-heterosexuality. Sustained relationships with LGBQ students were the most critical factor that led participants to wrestle with Christian teachings learned throughout their life, thus prompting their desire to better support LGBQ students. Participants who worked through this exploratory "crossroads" phase became much more confident and secure when challenging the campus approach to human sexuality. These individuals abandoned old beliefs about human sexuality, formed new social supports, accepted ambiguity and complexity, and critically explored their Christian identity.

Within these campuses, affirming students' sexual orientation identity/process required participants to grow in multiple ways. They developed nuanced ways of knowing, considered diverse perspectives, cultivated underground webs of support, and at times repositioned their faith. Despite working for Christian colleges that were perceived as silent, fearful, rigid, and confusing on LGBQ issues, these participants gradually developed a bigger picture about what God had called them to do in service to LGBQ students. As participants were becoming the author of their own life, they resolved tension with increasing complexity, interdependence, exploration, and authenticity. In this way, they reconciled their fear or hesitation, and employed multiple perspectives and experiences as a framework for action. Examining these behaviors within the Christian college context demonstrated that, regardless of possible consequences, self-authoring staff challenged campus expectations in support of LGBQ students.

Self-Authorship Development in a Christian College Context

Christian faith and Biblical tradition were the bedrock of the campuses represented in this study. These Christ-centered institutions provided a unique context by which staff interacted with LGBQ students and made-sense of LGBQ related policies and issues. Prior literature did not explain how SA-pros navigated organizational tensions when directly interacting with LGBQ students, nor explored how staff might support LGBQ students in a Christian college environment. Findings from this study, analyzed through the lens of self-authorship, highlight participants' developmental journey, specifically how select staff move through their tension and cultivate the supports and skills required to care for LGBQ students in an LGBT-hostile climate.

Professional Isolation Leads to Under-Preparation

Participants were raised, educated, and professionally socialized in an insular Christian environment that upheld specific views of human sexuality. The belief that homosexuality is sinful was woven throughout participants' personal and professional life. These staff grew-up in a conservative religious home and intentionally sought out Christian institutions to complete their postsecondary degrees. While none of the participants explicitly used the term "legacy family," each had several family members and close friends who also attended the same Christian institutions as undergraduates. Their transition from student to professional was a "natural fit." Prior literature found that Christian institutions stress uniformity rather than foster diversity (Gott & Craft, 2020; Glanzer, 2020). Similarly, participants described their campus as a "bubble," that maintained a mostly homogenous community by hiring staff who support longstanding Biblical principles. More than half of the participants chose to work for their alma mater because a former mentor, supervisor, or faculty member offered them a full-time position upon graduation. The intentional selection of staff with similar backgrounds meant that those

working for these institutions mostly interacted with other like-minded “Believers.”

Collectively, these professionals lacked exposure to different perspectives about LGBQ issues.

Unlike the widespread commitment to LGBQ scholarship, practice, and inclusivity typically found throughout the field of student affairs (Pryor, Garvey, & Johnson, 2017), participants in this study reported relative isolation from LGBQ individuals and LGBQ-affirming training. Although prior literature acknowledges that recent graduates need substantial “on the job” guidance once employed, scholars assume emerging staff have extended learning opportunities and/or mentorship to negotiate complex workplace issues (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Waple, 2006; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). This study challenges that premise – in fact, participants cited no central framework, cohesive language, colleague support, or training/development to help them address LGBQ issues on their campuses. This finding supports Glanzer, Graber, and Cockle (2021) who also found no evidence of institutionalized LGBTQ-affirming strategies among Christ-centered colleges. Institutional like-mindedness coupled with lack of exposure to LGBQ issues/people left staff significantly underprepared to address LGBQ campus issues.

Encountering the “Developmental Paradox”

Professional isolation from LGBQ issues meant staff did not have the competencies (e.g., LGBQ-allyship, understanding of gender/sexuality theory) needed to support LGBQ students, as well as the opportunities to form independent beliefs about these issues. Findings indicate that the insular nature of Christian college culture made uncritically abiding by the status-quo easy. Prior research found that gravitating towards familiar campuses was common among new professionals, which developed an organizational echo-chamber, whereby members reinforce organizational beliefs and expectations (Duran & Allen, 2020). Similarly in this study, deeply

embedded Biblical values and beliefs about human sexuality were so consistent over time that staff were never challenged to think, believe, or act differently. One participant never knew campuses formally addressed LGBQ issues until they attended a national conference nearly two years into their career. In fact, several participants noted that they had never met an openly gay/queer individual until interacting with an LGBQ student.

Considering participants' relative isolation from LGBQ issues and individuals throughout their lives, interacting with an LGBQ student was often the first time they were forced to confront the complexities of institutional policy, LGBQ student care, and faith. These relationships introduced what previous scholars termed the "developmental paradox," – while staff are responsible for holistic student development, they themselves are still securing their beliefs, values, and identities (Creamer, Baxter Magolda, & Yue, 2010; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; King & Baxter Magolda, 2011; Shetty, Chunoo, & Cox, 2016). Prior research did not fully explain how staff might resolve this paradox, especially in an insular campus context. Findings from this study point to consistent and meaningful interactions with LGBQ students as a critical motivator for participants to negotiate through the paradox and continue their developmental journey. The more often participants met with LGBQ students, the more likely they questioned what they had been taught about human sexuality. LGBQ student relationships prompted select participants to work through their dissonance, internally define their sense-of-self, construct meaning in a more complex way, and secure their values long-term.

Consistent and Meaningful LGBQ Student Interaction: Critical to Resolving the Developmental Paradox

Socialization literature cite graduate school, professional organizations (e.g. ACPA, NASPA), informal peer-colleague interactions, and higher education contexts as ways SA-pros

learn the rules of the road and solidify their values long-term (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Janosik, 2015; Hirt, 2005; 2006; 2009; Lombardi & Mather, 2016; Strayhorn, 2009). Previous studies did not mention the role of students themselves as an active agent to help emerging staff manage their professional anxieties, internalize values and beliefs, or create mature professional relationships. In contrast, this study illuminates the significant role of LGBQ student interactions when shaping participants development from “following formulas” (allowing others to define their beliefs, relationships, and sense-of-self), through a “crossroads,” (becoming dissatisfied with “way things are done”), and finally towards “self-authorship” (internally defined sense-of-self). When parceling out age, years of service, professional role, and hours of student interaction, sustained relationships with LGBQ students was the most important factor that initiated the self-authorship journey.

Within a Christian campus culture, direct, meaningful, and consistent interactions with LGBQ students introduced the dissonance needed for staff to reexamine actions and beliefs that were embedded throughout their lives. At the most basic level of any organization exists a dominant worldview that is reinforced by establishing clear expectations of how members should behave and act (Schein, 2010). Participants in this study uniformly described their Christian campuses as consistently promoting the Biblical image of intimacy as being between one man and one woman in the context of marriage. Despite how directly the university communicated these philosophies, most participants were unsure how to address these issues in practice. Confusion was largely shaped by their campus’ distinction between sexual identity and behavior. Students might be able to identify as gay or experience same-sex attraction, but staff were told to instruct these students to avoid those “feelings” and remain celibate. Prior literature found that the tendency to separate identity from behavior creates unhealthy environments for LGBQ

students (Gold & Stewart, 2011; Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007; Love, 1997; Stratton, Dean, Yarhouse & Lastoria, 2013; Strunk, Bailey, & Takewell, 2014; Wentz & Wessel, 2011; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Kwon, 2016). This study extends existing research, noting that these organizational nuances also create tension and confusion for staff themselves. Participants expressed significant tension when trying to police LGBQ student actions, while simultaneously told to offer care and compassion.

Generally, early-career staff participants reported minimal contact with LGBQ students remained unsure how to interact with these students in accordance with campus expectations. The nature of their relationships with LGBQ students were abstract and “on paper.” For example, one staff participant noted that they rarely interacted with LGBQ students outside of reading about their sexuality in admissions essays. These staff – characterized as “rule followers” – remained loyal to institutional expectations and leaders. They avoided confronting campus complexities, placed LGBQ matters “on the back burner,” and sought clear direction from supervisors. While they understood the importance of providing care for LGBQ students, they felt unprepared to confront these issues on their own and relied heavily on existing rules established by the institution to guide their practice and beliefs.

Unlike “rule followers,” who largely maintained campus norms, other staff described intense frustration with the way their institution managed LGBQ issues. Staff participants characterized as “at a crossroads” confirmed absolute thinking (*being gay is sinful*) and denial (*ignorance is bliss*) earlier in their career, but had since released their rigid stance on human sexuality. As they more frequently interacted with LGBQ students, they described their “heart” for LGBQ issues as expanding. How they made-sense of Biblical tradition also became more complex. Through their relationships with LGBQ students, these interviewees realized campus

policies and protocols harmed LGBTQ students and created a hostile environment for staff trying to form alternative beliefs about these issues. For them, the Christian adage “love the sinner, hate the sin” no longer worked. Increasingly frustrated with the status-quo, several SA-pros in this study started to develop their own understanding of sexuality based on new experiences and personal research.

Considering how participants were raised and socialized, it was not surprising that interactions with LGBTQ students introduced tension about what to do or believe about these issues. What was surprising was the degree to which some participants felt these conflicts. For some, tensions were so significant that it brought into question their own personal identities, especially their faith identity. Participants who spent a great deal of time mentoring and counseling LGBTQ students formed a “layered” posture toward their Christianity. All participants felt spiritually called to serve at their institution. In many ways, their professional identities as student affairs practitioners were deeply connected to their Christian identities. Therefore, disagreeing with the overarching institutional approach challenged some participants to reposition their faith.

Select staff abandoned the “cookie cutter” approach of their like-minded campus and found a new “freedom” to form alternative beliefs. Self-authoring was mostly illustrated among staff of color whose intersections of race, ethnicity, and sexuality already did not align with longstanding campus traditions. Reconciling religion alongside LGBTQ student care was particularly salient for Roman, a closeted gay Latino male. His ongoing relationships with LGBTQ students prompted him to reexamine Biblical lessons he learned throughout his life (e.g., *homosexuality is sinful; remain celibate*). Overtime, he began to shift away from a perceived binary approach to sexuality. This required him to form a multidimensional understanding of his

faith, which included a holistic acceptance of his own queer identity. He realized that living as an openly gay Christian was possible. Other participants described a liberation from dogmatic theology and uncritical deference to denominational church leaders for direction. Largely shaped by LGBQ student interactions, self-authoring staff abandoned their rigid position on LGBQ issues, resolved that not everyone would agree with their new position, and, in doing so, intentionally constructed a more contextual version of what it meant to be a Christian.

Meaningful relationships with LGBQ students enabled select participants to form nuanced ways of thinking about LGBQ issues and Christianity and increased their capacity to actively resist campus norms in support of LGBQ students. Self-authoring participants who saw the “humanity” of LGBQ students were explicit in their commitment to advocate for these students. Regardless of their professional isolation, under-preparation, and (at-times) uncertain beliefs about LGBQ issues, they were no longer afraid to confront leaders or “cross a line” that directly conflicted with institutional tradition. Rather than describe their interactions with LGBQ as anxious, underprepared, or paralyzed – they were more “upfront and honest,” “transparent,” “elevated,” and “in the fight.” In a Christian context advocating for LGBQ students included: “looking the other way,” when students formed an underground LGBQ support group, posting rainbow and love stickers discreetly in their office, using inclusive language (e.g., LGBQ vs. same-sex attracted or homosexual), and openly disagreeing with campus leaders during Board meetings. Participants found ways to openly celebrate and support LGBQ students despite the silent, fearful, and highly political institutional environment.

Exploring points of growth for staff extend our understanding of the student-staff relationship. Staff were not just learning about practical supports for LGBQ students, they themselves were maturing personally and professionally. Prior research confirmed that informal

and supportive relationships between staff and students positively influences LGBTQ student college experiences (Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Hughes 2015; Hughes & Hurtado, 2018), but these studies did not explore how these interactions influence *staff members'* learning and growth, especially in an insular Christian environment. This study illuminates that, in these settings, interactions with students who represent a background unfamiliar to the staff member acts as the dissonance needed to initiate growth. This finding implies a bidirectional nature of development between students and staff. Participants made-meaning of their institutional context, campus policies, and Christian faith identity in various ways throughout their career. Their developmental journey from absolute to complex, dependent to interdependent, and rigid to multifaceted was significantly shaped by their sustained engagement with LGBTQ students.

Locating Safe Colleagues: Critical to Caring for LGBTQ Students in an LGBTQ-hostile Environment

By design, Christian college cultures represented in this study appeared to inhibit staff members' capacity to develop self-authorship – the very skills needed to negotiate the complexities of caring for LGBTQ students in LGBTQ-hostile environments. The *Learning Partnership Model* suggests that organizations support this developmental process by: 1) validating learners as knowers; 2) viewing new experiences as opportunities for growth; and 3) defining learning as mutually constructed (Baxter Magolda, 2004). Generally, institutions of higher learning reflect these practices by cultivating critical thinking, diversity of thought, and supportive relationships among those of different backgrounds. By contrast, campuses in this study emphasized a simplistic and binary view of sexuality, promoted authoritative knowledge construction (leaders know best), and discouraged personal agency when solving complex problems. Consequently, participants were not encouraged to deviate from the campus view that

sex should only take place between a married man and woman. These organizational features, combined with an institutional culture of like-mindedness, silence, and fear surrounding LGBTQ issues isolated participants trying to care for LGBTQ students. Findings indicate that connections with safe colleagues served as a critical source of support, education, and freedom for participants who felt professionally isolated. This study also identified key clandestine strategies participants used to form community in an isolating and fearful context. Webs of support among “safe” colleagues were instrumental to participants’ developmental journey, specifically as they pushed through interpersonal tensions in service to LGBTQ students.

Demonstrating “Christ-like compassion” for LGBTQ students in an LGBTQ-hostile environment was unclear at best. Despite working for a campus that promoted values of family and connection, most participants felt unsafe when voicing different opinions or sharing alternative perspectives with others. These individuals did not know whom to trust, whom to rely on for support, or if they agreed with their campus leaders’ dogmatic approach to LGBTQ issues. Silence and fear around LGBTQ issues compounded tension for participants who did not fully align with the institutional approach to LGBTQ students. Experiences of disconnection from the family appeared more frequent among participants of color who already did not represent the campus majority (white/Caucasian), resulting in their heightened perception of separation from “the family.” Feeling limited or constrained when trying to support LGBTQ students in a Christian context was consistent with previous research (Johnson, 2009; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Schreiner & Nelson, 2013). This study extends knowledge about the degree to which these tensions manifested among colleague relationships. Participants who chose to support LGBTQ students experienced isolation that compromised their capacity to form authentic professional connections.

Although the study sampled staff from various campuses, participants were uniform in their overall perception of campus culture as espousing a close-knit community of “Believers,” however, when addressing LGBQ issues, this bond was severed. Findings reveal that in the college settings represented, offering tangible supports for LGBQ students required staff to break away from the Christian campus “family.” Participants who developed alternative beliefs about LGBQ issues became dissatisfied with campus leaders they once respected. The rigid campus culture led to a climate of seclusion and mistrust, whereby LGBQ-supporters were “always looking over their shoulder.” Several participants described the dissolution of their professional relationships after seeing how they treated LGBQ students. This included disagreeing with pastors, typically regarded as the final authority, when determining what was best for LGBQ students. Leaders were depicted as hypocritical “pharisees.” Close-knit professional relationships once characterized by like-mindedness, empathy, and care, were weakened.

Consistent with prior literature exploring Christ-centered campus culture, institutions represented in this study also systematically silenced LGBQ advocacy, restricted professional training on LGBQ issues, and minimized symbols of LGBQ equality (e.g., rainbow flag) (McEntarfer, 2011; Pickering, 2017; Scibetta, 2016; 2019; Slater, 2019). Thus, SA-pros working for colleges in this study were forced to develop underground efforts to locate “safe” colleagues for support and education. While some participants continued to rely on leaders for explicit direction, self-authoring participants formed interdependent (and often covert) “webs of support” focused on learning.

Casual everyday conversations were key to identify other supporters. For example, talking about race and politics signaled a specific position on LGBQ issues. More subtle was the language that select staff intentionally used when discussing LGBQ students. Participants

confirmed previous findings that their Christian college campuses also relied on clinical (less inclusive) terms like “same-sex attracted” versus inclusive terms like LGBTQ and partner (Love, 1997; Wentz, 2010; Wolff & Himes, 2010). Therefore, select participants differentiated themselves from the campus-at-large by purposely avoiding words like “practicing,” “lifestyle choice,” “same-sex attracted,” or “behavior.” Within LGBTQ-hostile environments, using terms such as LGBTQ, orientation, and partner during informal conversations was a powerful way to resist campus norms, identify allies, and communicate a degree of safety. Locating safe colleagues also included organized underground/confidential email listservs to share resources, trainings, articles, and other learning tools with other LGBTQ-allied staff. Although individual campuses created a sense of isolation, participants found others who shared similar perspectives. When addressing LGBTQ issues, these staff reached out to other professionals, not for direct answers, but rather to “process” and to “talk things out.” These interdependent connections - marked by mutuality, bidirectional learning, and shared responsibility - enabled staff to be their authentic selves and to feel more equipped to care for LGBTQ students.

Implications for Research

This study explored how student affairs staff working at Christ-centered colleges and universities negotiated institutional and professional tensions when building relationships with LGBTQ students. More specifically, it considered how select staff developed the professional capacity to address LGBTQ issues in LGBTQ-hostile campuses. Although the study may not be generalizable to all staff working for Christ-centered type institutions, findings extend our understanding of self-authorship in Christian college contexts, the supports required to aid SA-pros developmental journey, and the nature of learning and development within student-staff relationships.

Self-Authorship in a Christian College Context

The *theory of self-authorship* assumes specific organizational principles will be present for growth and learning development to take place, yet the campuses represented in this study did not validate learners' capacity to know, encourage new experiences, or define learning as mutually constructed. Rather, participants described these campuses as maintaining an insular, binary, and authoritative climate rooted in Biblical tradition. Regardless of the organizational and cultural challenges, select staff leaned into their dissonance, identified valuable supports (e.g., safe colleagues), and ultimately demonstrated key aspects of self-authorship. They pushed against campus norms in service to LGBTQ students. This implies alternative ways for emerging staff to self-author, regardless of the organizational environment they find themselves interacting with.

Future research might explore the nature of self-authorship among evangelical Christian settings, specifically the "crossroads" phase. This transition period is typically marked by dissonance or tension with the status quo. While participants demonstrating features of self-authorship noted increasing dissatisfaction with Biblical teachings and certain leadership decisions, not everyone necessarily questioned their Christian faith. They maintained a consistent belief in absolute truths (e.g., Jesus is God). Does self-authorship require a crisis of faith to internally secure Christian values long-term? Moreover, while the utmost goal of self-authorship is to become more attune with "self," Christian tradition might continue to maintain a God-first position. How might the prioritization of building a relationship with God shape self-authorship? The study found a strong emphasis on like-mindedness that reinforced an insular environment, whereby staff were surrounded by others of similar backgrounds. Even more significant, they shared a deep spiritual faith that shaped their view of the afterlife, their

relationships, and their sense-of-self. How might individuals gain exposure to divergent ideas and ways of living to “test” their current understanding of the world?

Applying different frameworks, such as queer theory, might also illuminate current power structures that make developing self-authorship more challenging within these contexts. Using this lens, scholars could explore the process by which CCCU campuses create, reinforce, and reproduce taken-for-granted assumptions of what is good and ideal (McDonald, 2015). Addressing concepts of normativity and intersectionality would be especially beneficial when examining the language and communication practices related to human sexuality at these institutions. Queer theory would identify what organizations have deemed taboo or secret and demand a more nuanced conversation about what is needed to initiate transformation.

Finally, to offer more generalizability, scholars might consider implications for quantitative measures of self-authorship, specifically among staff. Self-authorship studies are largely qualitative and applied to the experiences of college students attending liberal arts institutions. While some researchers offer quasi-statistical continuum models to map data patterns overtime (King, Perez, & Barber, 2022), future examination might identify specific organizational features across institutional types that either support or inhibit self-authorship (e.g., reliance on authority, dissatisfaction with status quo, authentic connection with colleagues to different ideas) among staff. Measuring these qualities alongside staff climate studies (e.g., perceptions, experiences, interactions) might illuminate more broadly what institutions can do to support self-authorship among emerging student affairs professionals.

Bidirectional Learning and Development Among Staff-Student Relationships

Findings raise questions about the bidirectional nature of influence on learning and development in staff-student relationships. King and Baxter Magolda (2011) discuss the critical

role of supportive professionals when helping students form a secured sense-of-self and a complex way of engaging with the world around them. The *Learning Partnership Model* also identifies key principles to promote authentic connection between staff and student. Prior literature overwhelmingly addresses the opportunity frontline SA-pros possess when promoting healthy student development. For example, meaningful one-on-one relationships help staff tailor supports for students to safely explore and gain confidence in their LGBQ identities.

This study extends knowledge about the importance of building meaningful relationships with students by specifically identifying how consistent and authentic interactions with LGBQ students shape *staff* cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development. For select participants, relationships with LGBQ students evoked a period of exploration of beliefs, actions, and identities that at times forced a renegotiation of their Christianity. This implies that staff in these contexts learn from and are transformed by student connection, illustrating the bidirectionality of learning and development of staff-student relationships. Future research should closely examine the ways in which staff members themselves learn from and are shaped by the interactions with their students. Additionally, researchers might consider the influence of institutional culture, particularly forces of silence and fear, as factors that compromise staff-student relationships.

Developmental Supports for Emerging Staff

This study challenges the assumption that emerging staff arrive to the workplace already well-developed and capable of supporting LGBQ students regardless of institutional context. Specifically, experiences with professional paralysis and isolation left staff significantly underprepared to care for this population. Identifying safe colleagues was a critical strategy to support staff members' developmental journey. Regardless of silence, fear, and confusion, select

staff found clandestine ways to find other staff who also wanted to support LGBTQ students. These relationships provided participants the support, connection, and exposure to safely explore different ideas. Much more could be explored about the role of peer-colleagues to support practitioners' developmental capacity to care for students, especially if advocating for a population that is not traditionally affirmed by that campus.

Recommendations for Practice

Generally, student affairs staff are trained and responsible for LGBTQ student well-being. While not surprising to discover that conservative Christian campuses represented in this study challenged holistic care for LGBTQ students, what was surprising, and of concern, was the extent to which staff members were isolated and underprepared to negotiate various tensions when supporting these students. Several important actions among the field of student affairs and Christian institutions should be taken because of the findings.

Graduate Education and Professional Training

Graduate-level programs and professional organizations are important to training, educating, and developing emerging student affairs professionals; however, resources and materials are often generalized to all institutional environments. All participants earned graduate-level degrees and reported multiple years in the field, yet they remained significantly isolated and underprepared to offer LGBTQ student support at Christian colleges. This study calls for context-specific training to ensure staff trying to support LGBTQ students in Christian college settings no longer feel isolated, unsupported, and ill-equipped. Graduate programs and professional organizations, like ACPA and NASPA, should improve and expand training and education related to the nuances of campus culture, as well as how to reconcile institutional, professional, and faith-based values. Similarly, CAS, the predominate force for promoting

standards throughout the field of student affairs, might expand their learning outcomes, requirements and procedures related to diversity/inclusion efforts in specific contexts. These agencies and organizations should account for the intersections of religion and sexuality when helping professionals navigate tension and support all students, especially vulnerable populations.

Christian College Leaders Support for Frontline Staff

While unrealistic to think longstanding Christian mission, values, traditions will suddenly dissolve among these institutions, Christian college leaders can take several actions to support the staff serving LGBTQ students on their campuses. First, they can begin intentionally hiring individuals from outside the organization. Inviting external folks with similar faith traditions to join their campus community may provide current staff the exposure to new approaches, ideas, and programs needed to better support their work with LGBTQ students. Second, these campuses have an opportunity to critically examine the language (formal written and informal everyday) used when discussing LGBTQ issues and students. Participants' journey through campus silence, fear, and confusion required elevating the conversation from identity versus behavior and discipline vs. support to a conversation that was much more accepting of complexity and ambiguity. Using words like LGBTQ rather than same-sex attracted would signal safety among staff, and also offer a degree of support to students. Third, employing a developmental lens when supporting staff might offer more insight into what they practically need to care for students. For example, early-career staff require much more clarity and direction vs. vague value-based statements. Clearly articulating expectations keeps leaders accountable, offers transparency to students, and helps staff understand what to do next. Finally, the point that certain staff members in this study intentionally countered cultural norms in support of LGBTQ

students brings into question the sustainability of Christian colleges' existing approach to LGBTQ issues. Leaders should consider expanding the opportunities for staff trainings, conferences, or other educational sessions, especially knowing that emerging staff are likely arriving to campus much more accepting of LGBTQ individuals.

The Field of Student Affairs

Student affairs professionals serving in Christian college settings consistently report needing context-specific training, education, and practical strategies to effectively balance Christian ideology and LGBTQ student care. The field of student affairs at-large is responsible for better preparing future student affairs professionals to meet the complex demands facing LGBTQ college students, which includes specific attention to various institutional environments. Put plainly, values of justice, holistic development, and student care do not transcend context. Rather student affairs practice is very much influenced by the campus one works for. The assumption that LGBTQ-ally training and competencies will be offered to all emerging SA-pros has left many staff working for more than 180 CCCU type institutions underprepared and isolated. These campuses make up nearly 10% of the four-year higher education landscape. New strategies to help staff reconcile tensions between their professional training and institutional standards and practices related to LGBTQ support is required not only to support staff retention, but to ensure all students remain safe and cared for.

Conclusion

Offering love, compassion, support, and care is hallmark for student affairs professionals, yet how these principles extend to LGBTQ students vary greatly depending on the institutional setting one serves. The values that undergird the field do not transcend institutional context. An expectation that all higher educational settings will foster diversity of thought, scaffold staff

development, and keep LGBTQ students safe is simply not the case. This study examined experiences of ten student affairs staff at Christian campuses navigating institutional context, professional relationships, and personal values when interacting with LGBTQ students. Although Christian college culture inhibited their capacity to form complex beliefs, build authentic relationships, and mature professionally, many assumed personal risk, confronted Biblical teachings, resisted cultural norms, and genuinely provided LGBTQ students support and love.

Rather than portray these staff as ignorant or ill-equipped, I hope the findings demonstrate how culture and context significantly influenced their personal, spiritual, and professional journey as they wrestled with what it meant to love Jesus and love their students. We have much to learn from those who navigate the Christian college terrain in service to LGBTQ students. This study should encourage the professionals currently working for Christ-centered institutions, specifically those who feel conflicted, confused, disillusioned, and isolated in their support of LGBTQ students. There are ways, specific to their campus, to challenge existing norms in the creation of an inclusive and safe environment for LGBTQ students. In return, I urge professionals outside these settings take seriously these participants' stories and carefully consider how to better support their negotiation of institutional expectations, faith, and LGBTQ support.

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

University of California, Los Angeles

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS AND LGBQ STUDENT CARE AT CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dominica J. Scibetta, from the School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. The results of the study will be used for my Doctoral dissertation.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you currently work as a Student Affairs professional for a Christian affiliated college or university, and have identified as having a regular interactions with LGBQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer/questioning) student(s) attending your campus.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT A RESEARCH STUDY?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?

This study will explore how student affairs staff working at Christ-centered colleges and universities negotiate institutional and professional tensions when building relationships with LGBQ students. More specifically, the study may uncover the ways staff develop the professional capacity to support LGBQ students in Christian college contexts.

HOW LONG WILL THE RESEARCH LAST AND WHAT WILL I NEED TO DO?

Participation will take a total of about 60-90 minutes. If you volunteer to participate in this study, I, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Participate in one (1) in-depth one-on-one interview (lasting approximately 60-90 minutes in length). The objective of the interview will be to explore your experiences interacting with LGBQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer/questioning) student(s) when working for a Christian affiliated institution. The interview will be held in a private location of your choosing or virtually via secured zoom, at a mutually agreed upon date and time.

- The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed word-for-word only with your permission. I will take handwritten notes throughout the interview. You are free to skip questions and may stop the interview at any time and I will immediately stop recording and taking notes.
- At no point will I ask for any identifying questions on the intuition name and you will be requested not to disclose your place of employment at any time. As such, identification of institutions will not be mentioned in the dissertation or any publication. As a result, you will be invited via email to review your transcript and will be free to correct factual errors as well as flag any items that might put you at risk. You will have 2 weeks to do so, after which I will assume it is accurate and does not pose any risk of linking you to the institution you are affiliated with. If you choose to offer feedback via email, the process should take no longer than 30 minutes to respond.
- You may also be asked to read the draft of chapter 4 (the findings) to review broader findings and verify the accuracy of the research and analysis. If you agree to do so (you may decline), the process may take about 1 hour.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS IF I PARTICIPATE?

While no research is entirely risk-free, this study poses minimal risk to you. The interview may lead to you experiencing some level of emotional discomfort due to recalling frustrating or confusing memories about complex challenges associated with LGBQ issues on a Christian college campus. Additionally, if the stories and/or comments were linked to you, it may lead to stress within your workplace.

I will address these concerns in several ways. All interviews will be held one-on-one, in a private location of your choice. I encourage you to use your personal email, rather than school/work email account when communicating with me. You will have an opportunity to select your own pseudonym, which will be used throughout the research process. At no point will I ask for any identifying questions on the intuition name and you are requested not to disclose your place of employment. As such, identification of institutions will not be mentioned in the dissertation or any publication. All interviews will be transcribed word-for-word and you will have the opportunity to review the transcripts for factual errors and flag those of which you feel may put you at risk. Your interview data will not be labeled with any identifying information, nor with a code to link to you personally.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and there are no consequences if you choose to stop the interview or withdraw from the study. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IF I PARTICIPATE?

You will benefit from the opportunity to explore and reflect on your experiences as a student affairs professional interacting with and supporting LGBQ students on your Christian-affiliated college campus. This process may provide you with a safe space to share your challenges, obstacles, and successes. As findings are analyzed, presented, and published, I anticipate this will further validate your experiences. Additionally, if you felt isolated in your experience, you may gain a sense of community when learning of others who share your story.

If your campus leaders become more sensitive to these issues and choose to take action as a result of the findings, it is possible that you may benefit from an improved campus climate, and additional professional development, training, and support to improve your work with LGBTQ students.

Finally, the findings will contribute to the literature regarding the ways in which student affairs staff members negotiate their values, relationships, and institutional policies when supporting LGBTQ students in LGBTQ-hostile environment. Professionals may learn what they can do within the constraints of their campus when attempting to better support students who are exploring or questioning their sexuality. Findings may also influence how Christian institutions consider their student life policies, staff development and support practices, human sexuality curricula, and diversity programming.

HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME AND MY PARTICIPATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

I, the researcher will do my best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible, but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.

Use of personal information that can identify you:

You will select your own pseudonym, which will be used throughout the research process. At no point will I ask for any identifying questions on the intuition name and you are requested not to disclose your place of employment.

How information about you will be stored:

All data and related materials will use your pseudonym and will be kept completely confidential and secured file cabinet and/or on my personal password protected computer located in my private residence.

People and agencies that will have access to your information:

I alone will have access to both digital and hard copy data. I will share some of the transcript data (with pseudonym) and records with my dissertation co-chairs to monitor the study. Research records provided to authorized, non-UCLA personnel will not contain identifiable information about you. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not identify you by name.

How long information from the study will be kept:

All consent forms, raw data, and all related materials will be retained for a period of one (1) year following completion of the research. After one (1) year, I will destroy all data.

USE OF DATA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

No data will be kept for use in future research.

WHO CAN I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

The research team:

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the research, you may talk to the one of the researchers:

- Principal Investigator
Dominica J. Scibetta
631.398.4133 (cell)
dscibetta@gmail.com
- Dissertation co-Chair
Dr. Kristen Rohanna
310.880.6812 (work)
krohanna@ucla.edu

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix B

Brief Background Close-Ended Questionnaire

PSEUDONYM: _____

You may decline to answer any of the following questions. If you do not feel comfortable disclosing the requested information, please leave blank.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age:	
Gender:	
Highest degree earned:	<input type="checkbox"/> Some college <input type="checkbox"/> College degree <input type="checkbox"/> Some graduate school <input type="checkbox"/> Graduate degree completion <input type="checkbox"/> Decline to answer
Race/ethnic background: (Mark all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American <input type="checkbox"/> African American, Black, or Afro-Caribbean <input type="checkbox"/> Asian American or Pacific Islander <input type="checkbox"/> Latino or Hispanic American <input type="checkbox"/> Native American or Alaskan Native <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Decline to answer

EMPLOYMENT

Campus denomination affiliation:	
Campus geographic region:	<input type="checkbox"/> Midwest <input type="checkbox"/> Northeast <input type="checkbox"/> Northwest <input type="checkbox"/> Southeast <input type="checkbox"/> Southwest
Years in the field of student affairs:	
Current Position:	<input type="checkbox"/> Full-time <input type="checkbox"/> Part-time
Years in your current position:	

On average how much time per week do you spend directly interacting with students?

1-5 hours 6-10 hours 11-15 hours 16-20 hours 21-25 hours 26+

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Intended participant: Student affairs professional, employed at a Christ-centered institution.

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this research study. The interview will focus on your professional work experiences at a Christ-centered college when interacting with undergraduate students who identify as LGBQ or are questioning their sexuality to better understand how you negotiate any institutional and professional tensions when building supportive relationships with these students. More specifically, I hope to uncover the ways staff can affirm LGBQ student identities in a context that may challenge their capacity to do so. For the purposes of the interview, I will use acronym LGBQ as an “umbrella term” to include students who are either exploring or identifying as LGBQ. I plan to ask about your overall campus climate, critical incidents with students, and dive more deeply into those exchanges. I may use probes to gather some more information or fill in the gaps. At no point will I ask for any identifying questions on the institution name and you are requested not to disclose your place of employment or the name of your campus at any time throughout the interview. The interview will be about 1 hour; however you may stop me at any point.

Background & Rapport Building

1. Tell me about how you came to work in the field of student affairs.
 - a. (Possible probe: *What and/or who motivated you to pursue this career path?*)
2. Tell me about your level of training and engagement in the field of student affairs.
 - a. (Possible probe: *Where did you attend school? What professional organizations do you participate in, if any?*)
3. Tell me about the types of training you’ve received as it relates to LGBQ issues, if at all.
4. Tell me about how you came to work for your current campus. What brought you there?
 - a. (Possible probe: *What are some of the expectations or responsibilities that you have?*)

Transition: *As you know, this study is about the experiences of staff members who interact with LGBQ students. So I want to talk a bit about the campus climate related to LGBQ issues.*

Campus Climate re: LGBQ issues

1. How would you describe the campus climate or approach to LGBQ students?
 - a. (Possible probe: *Could you give me a recent example that illustrates, in general, how the campus talks about or addresses LGBQ issues?*)
 - b. (Possible probe: *Does your university formally endorse LGBQ events, student clubs, programs, etc.?*)
2. What do you believe are the expectations the campus has of you when interacting with LGBQ students?
 - a. (Possible probe: *How did you come to know these were the expectations/policies?*)

Transition: *Now I am going to talk more about your experiences when addressing LGBQ issues on your campus.*

Critical Incident/Tensions

3. Can you tell me of a time when your interactions with an LGBQ student resulted in you feeling a tension between what the institution expected of you and your own inclinations or values?

Exploring the Critical Incident

4. How have you worked to balance LGBQ student support and institutional policies and/or professional ethics?
 - a. (Possible probe: *What was it that made you feel like there was a tension or a choice you had to make?*)
5. What resources or supports do you have access to that help you navigate during these processes?
 - a. (Possible probe: *Who or what helped you make-sense of what the campus expected of you when interacting with LGBQ students?*)
6. How have you evolved and adapted while working with LGBQ students?
 - a. (Possible probe: *How has working with LGBQ students affected your professional relationships (e.g. with colleagues, supervisor(s), or other students), if at all?*)
 - b. (Possible Probe: *How has your professional approach to LGBQ issues changed, if at all?*)
 - c. (Possible Probe: *Have your values changed, evolved, or solidified?*)
 - d. (Possible Probe: *What have you learned as a result of these experiences?*)

Closing

1. Is there anything else I haven't asked you or you think I should know?

Debrief/Conclusion

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your experiences with me. I wanted to remind you that you are free to contact me if you want to refine or clarify any points made during our interview. Additionally, I will email you in the next couple weeks to review your transcript, to correct factual errors or flag any items that might put you at risk.

Once again, thank you very much.

Appendix D

Code Tree

PERCEPTION OF CAMPUS CULTURE

- **Socialization:** *Process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to the organization.*
- **Christian/Faith:** *Describing Christian ideology and tradition*
- **Small:** *Describing the size of the campus.*
- **Familial:** *Group of people closely connected those foster feelings of belongingness, community, care, and support.*
- **Like-Minded:** *Having similar outlook, perspective, belief, or disposition*
- **Out-Group:** *Feelings of isolation, loneliness, or disconnection resulting from feeling like an outlier.*

CAMPUS APPROACH TO LGBTQ ISSUES

Complex

- **Policy:** *Guiding document addressing campus approach to issues of human sexuality.*
- **Confusing/Unclear:** *Lack of understanding or feelings of uncertainty when addressing LGBTQ issues/students.*
- **Identity vs. Behavior:** *Distinguishing between same-sex attraction and same-sex identity or orientation.*
- **Complex/Complicated:** *Consisting of many interconnected and nuanced factors.*

Silent and fearful

- **Silence:** *Avoidance when naming, addressing, or discussing LGBTQ issues.*
- **Underground/Private:** *Actions that remain concealed or below the surface to maintain secrecy.*
- **Fear:** *perception that any variety of actions and/or words will likely lead to threat, danger, or exposure.*

Political

- **“Denominational Effect”:** *The role of religious denominations or organizations when addressing LGBTQ issues.*
- **Professional role:** *Describing how the campus role influences approach to LGBTQ students.*

SA-PROS EXPERIENCES WITH TENSION

- **Tension:** *Condition of strain, stress, dissonance, or uneasiness when addressing LGBTQ issues/students within the campus context.*

Who do I serve?

- **Institution vs. Student:** *Loyalty to institution policies and beliefs vs. student care/support/affirmation.*
- **Interpersonal:** *Exploring how to construct relationships with others.*
- **Politics:** *Describing issues of power, control, and/or influence.*

What do I believe?

- **Cognitive:** *Exploring ways of knowing (e.g. how do I know what I know).*
- **Intrapersonal:** *Exploring values, faith and/or identity (e.g. who am I).*

What can I do?

- **Language:** *System of communication, often using “coded” or abstract language when addressing LGBTQ issues.*
- **Restraint:** *Limitations or restrictions placed upon actions, behaviors, or practices when supporting LGBTQ students or addressing LGBTQ campus issues.*
- **Looking for answers:** *Desire for clarity when addressing LGBTQ issues/students.*

MANAGING TENSION

Following formulas

- **Rely on authority:** *Seeking approval or direction from external sources (leadership, campus policies, etc.).*
- **Willful ignorance:** *intentional suspension of belief in a particular reality; refusal to recognize or acknowledge the validity of a certain belief or claim.*

At a crossroads

- **Student interaction:** *Describing key interactions with LGBTQ students.*
- **Crossroads:** *Realizing the need to establish a new direction when approaching LGBTQ issues/students.*

Becoming the author of one's life

- **Self-authoring:** *A period of exploration, discovery, and learning when solidifying one's values, beliefs, and/or actions against external perspectives.*
- **Connecting with colleagues:** *Building meaningful connection with others for support.*

Finding a new way

- **Internal foundation:** *Securing a more complex way to approach LGBTQ issues/students that challenge the existing campus approach.*

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theory of Self-Authorship

- **Cognitive dimension**
- **Interpersonal dimension**
- **Intrapersonal dimension**

Schein's levels of organizational culture

- **Observable artifacts**
- **Espoused beliefs**
- **Underlying assumptions**

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