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Alone Together: The Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Undergraduates at Faith-based Colleges

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Alone Together: The Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Undergraduates at Faith-based Colleges

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix who attended faith-based colleges. The study was guided by Strayhorn's (2019) College Students' Sense of Belonging Theory and Abes' et al. (2007) Reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity. The scope of experiences explored was narrowed to three of the five categories in Schreiner's (2010a) Thriving Quotient. These categories were: positive perspective (outlook on life), social connectedness, and diverse citizenship.

The study included 11 participants from 7 faith-based colleges and represented various intersections of sexual and gender identity. The study employed constructivist grounded theory methodology, an inductive research approach which seeks to embrace the pre-existing realities and experiences that both the research and the participants bring to the research process. This method also recognizes the unique reality that is also constructed during the research process itself. The data in the study were collected through semi-structured interviews and were analyzed using open, focused, and theoretical coding.

The result of the study was an emergent theory on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix at faith-based colleges. This theory described how these experiences were both the "same" as majority population experiences and "different." Similarities included a prioritization of academics and a desire for success, the importance of connections with faculty and peers, and a broadening of perspective when open to experiencing difference. Differences included the presence of fear and anxiety due to institutional behavioral codes, finding belonging outside the bounds of institutional policies, and feelings of betrayal by the institution in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices.

Acknowledgements

I am generally skeptical of students who begin papers with definitions from a dictionary. Nevertheless, the word acknowledgment can mean “the act of showing that you accept something is true” or “the act of thanking someone” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). These frameworks are helpful as this work simultaneously comes to a close and enters a beginning. I accept the truth that this work, this entire journey, was supported, held up, and refined by many. And so, here is my act of thanksgiving.

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Dedication

To all those who live just outside the well-water crop circles of higher education, the church, and society – May this work serve as a small offering of nourishment and hope.

To my sons who hold such breadth and beauty in their humanity – May this work remind you to be brave and to boldly live your one wild and precious life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

A. Context of the problem

During a student's traditional undergraduate years, an emerging adult questions, explores and solidifies many aspects of identity (Morgan, 2012). This process includes a journey toward independence in terms of decision making, value construction and belief systems. This process is very fluid and dynamic and often causes a heightened need for a sense of belonging in college students (Strayhorn, 2019). Majority populations (white, heterosexual, cis-gender students) often follow paths of identity development that are culturally normative, resulting in a found sense of belonging in the similar experiences and identities of those around them. This is especially true at predominantly white institutions (Strayhorn, 2019). In contrast, minoritized students often struggle through identity development and sense of belonging with tension and uncertainty, specifically as they explore the intersectionality of multiple identities simultaneously combined with competing perspectives from outside influences (Abes et al., 2007, Strayhorn, 2019). Realizing they are "different" from most of their peers, and perhaps from their family, can often make it difficult to attribute validity and meaning to self-authored experiences, conclusions, and opinions. (Abes et al., 2007; Morgan, 2012; Nicolazzo, 2016). These processes and realizations can also affect minoritized students' ability to thrive during the undergraduate years. This concept of thriving includes students' academic, social, psychological and emotional well-being and is tied to overall student success (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Schreiner, 2010a). Sense of belonging, as described by Strayhorn (2019) overlaps with Schreiner's (2010a) thriving model, specifically in the subsections of social connectedness and diverse citizenship.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, (questioning), intersex, asexual, (agender) (LGBTQIA+) students are one of these minoritized subpopulations of students. And although

understanding and respect for this group of students has increased significantly over the past decade, these students still face unique and consistent challenges on university campuses (Hill et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2020; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). Moreover, considerable challenges remain for LGBTQIA+ students attending faith-based colleges with conservative policies on sexuality and gender (Coley 2018a; Reed et al., 2020; Wolff et al., 2016). Many questions remain concerning why these students choose to study in educational environments that historically prove to be difficult for them (Coley, 2018a; Reed et al., 2020; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Stratton et al., 2013; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wolff et al., 2016). However, data support the consistent presence of LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges (Coley, 2018a).

Additionally, more understanding is needed concerning the LGBTQIA+ student experience once enrolled and moving about the everyday life of an undergraduate student at a faith-based college. These students, specifically, field microaggressions, awkward class discussions regarding sexual ethics, and institutional policies that leave them feeling unsure and unsafe (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Wolff & Himes, 2010). Therefore, even more questions arise as to what helps these students thrive during the undergraduate years, including solidifying a sense of belonging, working through the process of multiple dimensions of identity development, and persisting to graduation.

Although studies focused on LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges do exist, few of them target recent alumnix and few of them seek to develop theories regarding student experiences during the undergraduate years through the Thriving Quotient lens with identity development and sense of belonging frameworks in mind. This specific focus is needed in order to help institutions better understand and help this minoritized subpopulation thrive throughout

the undergraduate experience. This focus is also needed in order to help current students develop strategies for resilience and belonging in faith-based social and academic contexts.

B. Statement of the purpose

The purpose for conducting the study was to explore the undergraduate experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix who attended faith-based colleges. This exploration aimed to develop a constructivist grounded theory pertaining to student experiences within the intrapersonal and interpersonal categories of Schreiner's (2010) Thriving Quotient. These categories were: positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010a). The study was conducted using a constructivist grounded theory approach, an inductive approach to qualitative research involving theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, coding, theoretical memo writing, and sorting. For the current study, the sample consisted of 11 recent alumnix (1-3 years removed) from faith-based institutions throughout the United States. Most of these institutions were from member institutions of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), and all of the institutions align with conservative evangelical doctrine. The study aimed to maintain a breadth of representation in terms of gender and sexual identity and geographic location.

C. Statement of research questions

1. How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered outlook on life at faith-based colleges?
2. How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered social connectedness at faith-based colleges?
3. How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered interactions with diversity at faith-based colleges?

4. How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe the general concept of thriving during college?

D. Definitions

1. Campus climate

Campus climate is a term used in the literature with increased frequency in the past decade. This term refers to the environment of the campus as perceived by various smaller groups of individuals, often minoritized populations. This environment is determined and affected by the attitudes of faculty, staff, and students, as well as by the presence of harassment, fear, or discrimination (Brown et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2017; Rankin, 2003; Rankin, 2005; Rockenbach and Crandall, 2016; Tetreault et al., 2013). Symbolism and the history of the institution can similarly add to a campus' climate, as can selectivity of the institution, and majority demographics (i.e., race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, GPA, standardized test scores, etc.) (Byron et al., 2017; Platt & Lenzen, 2018; Tetreault et al., 2013). Therefore, campus climate can be friendly, warm, and inclusive or chilly and hostile. Many of the articles reviewed sought to report on the campus climate of various faith-based institutions as perceived and experienced by sexual minorities (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Stratton et al., 2013; Vespone, 2016; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wolff et al., 2012; Wolff et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2017).

2. Microaggressions, homonegativity, homophobia/transphobia

Microaggressions, homonegativity, and homophobia/transphobia are all negative and harmful acts or attitudes experienced by sexual minority students. Lomash (2018) defined microaggressions as subtle acts of discrimination aimed at a particular minority. These acts show up in behaviors, words, or situations in which the minority feels ignored or affronted. Platt and Lenzen (2013) described microaggressions as brief and commonplace indignities. The presence of microaggressions play a large role in campus climate and are often a result of homonegativity

and homophobia. Sometimes used interchangeably, homonegativity and homophobia are used in the literature to describe both internal and external realities. External phobia and negativity stem from societal assumptions or people in the immediate environment of the LGBTQIA+ student. Internal phobia and negativity stem from self-reflection, fear, doubt, and hatred from within the student's own personhood. In general, these terms describe a hostile attitude toward LGBTQIA+ persons, and, in some cases, a belief that homosexuality and transgenderism is an immoral abnormality that is contagious and should be feared/avoided (Lomash, 2018; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wolff et al., 2016).

3. Faith-based institution

For the purpose of the study, faith-based institutions included colleges with mission statements and curricular design heavily influenced by a denomination or general religious values/commitments. Most of these colleges are members and affiliates of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). This association of colleges consists of 180 institutions around the world. All institutions are accredited and most have curricula rooted in the arts and sciences. All institutions are private institutions with higher tuition than public universities but often have large endowments to help with financial aid to students (Schreiner, 2018). Most CCCU institutions have conservative policies regarding sexuality and gender and exclusive hiring policies limited to individuals affirming these same conservative positions (CCCU webpage; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Wolff & Himes, 2010).

4. Conservative sexual ethic

All of the institutions in this study hold policies that align with a conservative sexual ethic. This ethic includes the belief that the covenant of marriage should be reserved for a commitment between one man and one woman. It also reserves the act of sexual intercourse to

the marriage relationship. Derivatives of this ethic often include a prohibition of same-sex dating, believing the intent of dating is to progress toward greater levels of intimacy and, eventually marriage. This ethic also states every person should live in congruence with one's birth sex and does not give credibility to gender identities outside the binary of male and female. This ethic would also disagree with any gender transitional therapy methods (hormones, reassignment surgery, etc.).

5. Thriving

The interview protocol for the study relied on the concept of thriving as defined by Schreiner (2010a, 2010b, 2010c). This concept is derived from theoretical frameworks founded in positive psychology and student success/retention. It is closely tied to the idea of human flourishing; however, thriving includes a robust academic component as opposed to a sole focus on relationships with others and individual outlook. Schreiner (2010a) uses the term thriving to describe “college students who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Thriving college students not only are academically successful, they also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college” (p.4).

E. Assumptions

1. Truthful reporting

The study assumed all participants to have reported experiences truthfully, to the best of his/her/their ability. The study also recognized that individual perceptions and views of experiences were recalled with various levels of comfort and clarity. Individual trauma may have also affected the ability to recall experiences with accuracy.

2. Institutional interest

The study assumed faith-based colleges wished to improve experiences of all students on their campuses, including enrolled LGBTQIA+ students.

3. Conservative positioning

The study assumed all participants came from conservative religious backgrounds. It also assumed all institutions represented in the study had policies that communicated and upheld a conservative sexual ethic, specifically around sexual identity/expression and gender identity/expression (Reed et al., 2020; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Stratton et al., 2013; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Yarhouse et al., 2009).

4. Participant interest

The study assumed the participants had a sincere interest in the study and did not have any alternative motives such as institutional defamation, political reform, or personal vengeance.

5. Experiential nuance

The study recognized that student experiences stemmed from multiply realities. While students in the study may have reported all experiences directly related to sexual and gender identity, it is possible that some experiences may have occurred due to causes outside the cognizance of the students interviewed (faculty disposition toward all students, institutional policies applied to all students, etc.). Experience descriptions may have also varied due to individual self-awareness and self-knowledge.

6. Unbiased coding/analysis

The study assumed the researcher could analyze and code for themes with limited bias outside of that built into the constructivist grounded theory research model.

F. Delimitations and limitations

1. Institutions considered

The study is limited to experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix at faith-based colleges and gave focus to colleges within the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). This delimitation excluded public or non-faith-based private colleges.

2. Age of participants

The study was limited to alumnix who attended a faith-based college within the last 1-3 years. This delimitation excluded significant experiences of older alumnix or of current students. It also, by default, focused on one cohort of students, who studied in the same cultural and political context.

3. Generalization

The study was limited to the experiences of 11 recent alumnix of faith-based institutions. The results of the study were not generalizable to the larger populations of LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students or all higher education institutions.

4. Potential bias

The nature of the study was personal and sensitive. Potential shame or exposure could have biased the responses of participants in the study. This bias could have resulted in veiled or omitted responses, skewed the data that was collected and, in turn, could have affected the codes and themes that emerged from the data.

5. Positionality and trustworthiness

The primary researcher is employed at a faith-based college (a CCCU institution) and has worked with LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students for more than a decade. The researcher brought empathy and experiential knowledge of some of the specific challenges faced by LGBTQIA+

students in faith-based settings. The researcher also brought a lived tension between loyalty to institutionally stated positions/values and evolving personal positions/values into the study. These realities undoubtedly colored how the researcher was able to see and hear the data. These realities coupled with the unique experiences and realities of each participant most likely formed yet another unique reality; this reality was the setting for this study. Several steps were taken to mitigate bias. Data was member-checked and the research design was reviewed by several professional colleagues. Coding and resulting theories were reviewed by two additional researchers. All participants were invited to review transcripts for accuracy.

G. Importance of the study

The Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU) is an association within higher education comprised of 180 accredited institutions from all over the world. These institutions educate over 520,000 students and employ over 90,000 faculty and staff. There are over 3.6 million alumnix stemming from CCCCU schools (CCCCU, 2017, Our work and mission.). All of these institutions assume one of four membership levels within the association. These membership levels are uniform in the categories of Christian mission, cooperation and participation, and institutional integrity. The membership levels differ in the categories of institutional type and accreditation, employment policies, and Christian distinctives and advocacy. These differing areas specifically include hiring practices that are exclusive of individuals outside of institutional stated beliefs and values and policies, statements, and strategic initiatives regarding sexuality, gender, creation care, and diversity and inclusion (CCCCU, 2017, The leading national voice.).

The mission of the CCCCU is “to advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and to help our institutions transform lives by faithfully relating scholarship and service to

biblical truth” (CCCU, 2017, Our work and mission, par. 1.). To achieve this mission, the CCCU is focused on three strategic initiatives: public advocacy, professional development and scholarship, and experiential education. These initiatives provide resources to member institutions by way of unified messaging in the public sector for the common good, national and international conferences, networking and hiring assistance, and study abroad opportunities around the world (CCCU, 2017, Our work and mission.).

The students enrolled at CCCU member institutions are commonly white, high-achieving, and evangelical (Schreiner, 2018). These students often achieve higher college grades and less decline from high school GPA but also report fewer learning gains during college compared to students enrolled at other non-religious private institutions (Schreiner, 2018; Schreiner & Kim, 2011). Students enrolled at CCCU institutions are “significantly less likely to engage with racial, social class, religious, or political difference than their counterparts at other private institutions, although they perceive their institutions as encouraging engagement with difference in general” (Schreiner, 2018, p. 42). They also report gains in understanding of people who are different despite a largely homogeneous campus climate with few opportunities to experience diversity. These gains could reflect a lower “starting point” in terms of diversity exposure compared to students at other private institutions (Schreiner, 2018; Schreiner & Kim, 2011).

Research that profiles CCCU campuses as largely homogenous with little access to or curricular inclusion of diverse racial, political, or social realities is directly related to research studies of campus climate. Campus climate refers to the environment of the campus as perceived by various smaller groups of individuals, often minority populations. This environment is determined and affected by the attitudes of faculty, staff and students, as well as by the presence of harassment, fear or discrimination (Brown et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2017; Rankin, 2003;

Rankin, 2005; Rockenbach and Crandall, 2016; Tetreault et al., 2013). One of these minority populations is LGBTQIA+ students. Many studies have looked at the campus climate experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at public institutions (Platt & Lenzen, 2013; Rankin, 2003; Rankin, 2005; Tetreault et al., 2013). These studies reported consistent experiences of isolation, fear, microaggressions, and mental health struggles (Brown et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2017; Rankin, 2003; Rankin, 2005; Rockenbach and Crandall, 2016; Tetreault et al., 2013). Other studies specifically looked at campus climate experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges, even some specifically at CCCU institutions (Reed et al., 2020; Stratton et al., 2013; Wolff et al., 2012; Wolff et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2009). These studies mirrored much of the findings of public universities but also added additional considerations and complications connected to spiritual identity development and conservative institutional policies regarding sexual ethics.

The primary importance of this study was in the potential understanding and help offered to current LGBTQIA+ students enrolled at CCCU institutions through the perspectives and narratives of recent CCCU alumnix who identify within the LGBTQIA+ community. The identity development process often solidifies during the undergraduate years (Morgan, 2012). However, the process is often filled with exploratory steps in different directions – deciding and retracting and deciding anew or again (Abes et al., 2007; Morgan, 2012). These explorations of identity are affected by lived experiences. Students at CCCU institutions report significant struggles with mental health, isolation, and harassment (Byron et al., 2017; Love et al., 2005; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Tetreault et al., 2013; Vespone, 2016). They also report consistent embattlement between sexual identity and spiritual identity which often results in a complicated coming out process ridden with family, peer, church and institutional conflict

(Lomash, 2018; Reed et al., 2020; Yarhouse et al., 2009; Wolff et al., 2016). The current study sought to construct a theory surrounding LGBTQIA+ experiences at faith-based colleges through the reflections of alumnix. Such a theory could provide needed encouragement, helpful suggestions, and a general sense of feeling known and less alone for current LGBTQIA+ students. This knowledge could help current LGBTQIA+ students know where to begin in finding a sense of belonging or in navigating the development of multiple dimensions of identity.

In addition to helping current LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges, a secondary importance of this study was the perspective and resources offered to the institutions themselves. Other studies suggested more visible counseling resources, formation of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), recognizable “safe space” symbols in faculty and staff offices, and policy revisions (Vespone, 2016; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wolff et al., 2012; Wolff et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2017). While these suggestions are all valid and helpful, the current study sought to construct theories from current narratives to affirm, correct or add to suggestions offered in previous research. Institutions in the CCCU and the broader association state a specific desire to work for the common good of all people and society, at-large (CCCU, 2017, par. 1 - about). However, recent studies question whether or not this objective is being met (Schreiner, 2018; Schreiner & Kim, 2011). Graduates of CCCU institutions are actively involved in giving and volunteering at churches, but not necessarily any better at recognizing community needs or civic engagement than alumnix from any other private institution (Schreiner, 2018). Moreover, CCCU institutions express commitment to diversity initiatives and global education; however, many struggle to bring a diverse student body to campus and many fail to consider campus systems through the perspectives of minoritized populations (Schreiner, 2018). On the ground level, faculty and staff at these institutions often struggle to balance loyalty to the institution and loyalty to student care.

This tension leaves both employee and student in impossible situations with little assurance as to the best way forward. (Scibetta, 2019).

The current study sought to offer help and insight to faith-based colleges on how to better foster and engage conversations about LGBTQIA+ student thriving through lived experience. It also sought to offer help to students, faculty, and staff on how to find practical ways forward that honor both student experiences and institutional moral commitments. This insight could help these institutions achieve broader institutional outcomes related to student retention, campus climate, and diversity and inclusion. This insight could help in the continued work of profitable and safe education for all, thriving for all, particularly at institutions seeking to emulate the love of God for all people.

H. Theoretical framework of the study

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) seeks to develop theories from data gathered rather than rely on any one previously established framework to explain data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This approach protects the integrity of the inductive data analysis process instead of filtering data through already established frameworks. However, CGT does embrace bringing the knowledge of existing literature into the study and allowing that literature to guide research and interview questions. With this allowance in mind, the current study brought substantial knowledge of two existing theoretical frameworks into the research process: College Students' Sense of Belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) and Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Abes et al., 2007).

1. College students' sense of belonging

Strayhorn's (2019) model of College Students' Sense of Belonging was developed over decades of qualitative and quantitative research with college students. This model adds specific

applications of higher education to Maslow's (1954) basic human needs hierarchy. This model hinges on an understanding of the seven core elements of sense of belonging developed by Strayhorn (2012) and published in the first edition of his book. These core elements represent Strayhorn's synthesis of content consistently found in the existing literature related to sense of belonging.

The first core element of belonging is belonging is a basic human need (Strayhorn, 2019). This need can be latent or expressed, meaning hidden or not recognizable or understood and clearly expressed (Strayhorn, 2019). This basic need sits above physiological and security needs and underneath esteem and self-actualization in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy. This means if the lower needs are met, the individual is freed up to realize and step into needs of belonging. Similarly, if the basic need of belonging is deprived, the individual is unable to move into needs of esteem and self-actualization. These higher levels of basic needs are typically where college and university mission statements and objectives are met, making the fulfillment of belonging essential to the achievement of those objectives (Strayhorn, 2019).

The second core element of belonging is belonging is a fundamental motive and is strong enough to change behaviors (Strayhorn, 2019). The need for belonging is so essential that opportunities to acquire it can cause people to change preferences or affinities, worship in a different way, or dress differently. In the context of higher education, the level to which students feel a sense of belonging can directly affect academic choices both positively and negatively, depending on what messaging is being received from different sources of potential belonging (i.e., faculty, peer groups, social organizations) (Strayhorn, 2019).

The third core element of belonging is the need for belonging becomes heightened in certain circumstances, at certain times, and among certain populations (Strayhorn, 2019). This

core element is very pertinent to college students. The need for belonging is heightened when someone enters a new environment, such as a college freshman leaving home for the first time, or a first-generation college student with little intel on what awaits them. The need for belonging is also heightened during key moments of development, such as the pivotal identity development that occurs during the undergraduate years (Abes et al., 2007; Morgan, 2012; Nicolazzo, 2016; Strayhorn, 2019). Finally, the need for belonging increases among certain subpopulations, particularly populations that are marginalized or feel marginalized because of the given context. LGBTQIA+ students in faith-based environments would be one of those marginalized subpopulations with a heightened need for belonging (Strayhorn, 2019).

The fourth core element of belonging is belonging is related to and a product of mattering (Strayhorn, 2019). One of the definitions of community referenced by Strayhorn (2019) is “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 16). Belonging is a precursor to this idea of community and both happen when a student feels that he/she/they matters to the university, that the university needs the student and is committed to meeting the needs of the student and vice versa.

The fifth core element of belonging is the intersection of multiple dimensions of reality affect belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). More will be noted on this core element through the exploration of the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI); however, this element highlights the existence of multiple aspects of identity in every college student (race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc.) and stresses the reality that a student can feel belonging in terms of one part of identity (ex. Black men in a

multicultural center) but alienation due to the intersectionality of more than one aspect of identity (ex. Gay Black men in a multicultural center) (Abes et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2019).

The sixth core element of belonging is belonging begets other positive outcomes (Strayhorn, 2019). When college students experience belonging, it positively affects persistence, academic achievement, civic leadership, and cocurricular involvement (Strayhorn, 2019).

Finally, the seventh core element of belonging is belonging must be continually satisfied and changes and morphs over time (Strayhorn, 2019). Changes in roommates, major, instructor, family situations, or others can disrupt a sense of belonging (or lack thereof) previously experienced by a student. The undergraduate experience is full of change personally and academically. These changes can trigger any of the core elements previously discussed (Strayhorn, 2019).

2. Reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity

Another change that can affect a sense of belonging is that of identity. As noted, the traditional undergraduate years are often categorized as the years of “emerging adulthood” in terms of developmental stage (Morgan, 2012). During these years, students often engage crucial work related to individual identity development. Although foundational frameworks of identity development specific to the LGBTQIA+ community do exist and are helpful, they are often very linear (i.e., Cass, 1979). The process of identity development is more likely happening with a high level of intersectionality between multiple dimensions of identity and influenced by social, political and relational contexts, as well (Abes et al., 2007; Morgan, 2012; Nicolazzo, 2016).

Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity provides a conceptual framework for the interactions among different identity dimensions in college students. This framework highlights the weight of intersectionality and asserts that no one

identity dimension functions or exists in isolation. The model describes a center essence of self or an identity core that holds personal values and beliefs. This core is surrounded by contextual factors (family, social context, experiences) that impact the salience of each core identity dimensions at various levels (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Abes et al., 2007).

Abes et al. (2007) reconceptualized this original model of multiple identity dimensions by overlaying the results of a study on lesbian college students conducted by Abes and Jones (2004) which uses the meaning making model developed by Keagan (1994). This reconceptualized model adopts the foundational notion of intersectionality among multiple dimensions of identity development. However, in addition to considering how different contexts and experiences influence the salience of multiple identities, the new model also considers the level of self-authorship present in the formation and solidification of these identities (Abes et al., 2007). Essentially, the model is attempting to measure the level at which the individual is authoring or choosing the identity and the level at which something or someone else is authoring or choosing the identity.

Derived from the Baxter Magolda (2001) study that explored Keagan's (1994) meaning making model in the context of college students, the reconceptualized model identifies three levels of authorship or meaning making within the formation of identity development in college students. These levels come from Keagan's (1994) third order of meaning making – meaning that comes through “concrete relationships to which one's own interests are subordinated” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 4). The levels represent the amount of influence allowed to pass through a proverbial meaning making filter and, therefore, the amount of weight those influences are given in corresponding or situationally pertinent identity development decisions (Abes et al., 2007). The first level is formulaic meaning making. At this level, there is almost no filtering of outside

influences. Thus, outside perceptions and opinions are closely connected to the that of the individual (Abes et al, 2007). This can be seen in maintaining values, identities, and perceptions that were taught and held by family members, cultures, etc. The second level of meaning making is transitional meaning making. This level allows some outside influence to pass through the filter but also filters some out, allowing for the individual to start to consider perceptions and decisions surrounding identity that may differ from external messages heard or taught. The third and final level of meaning making is the foundational level of meaning making. At this level, no matter the external influences or narratives present, the individual is able to filter out the opinions and perspectives of others and construct a self-authored identity containing values and beliefs that are congruent and copacetic to the individual (Abes et al., 2007).

College Students' Sense of Belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) and Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) informed the current study as it looked at the experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix at faith-based colleges. Specifically, as the study attempted to develop theories surrounding how LGBTQIA+ alumnix reported moving through the social process of undergraduate education at faith-based colleges, these frameworks helped guide initial and follow up interview questions surrounding the areas of outlook on life, social connectedness, diversity, and thriving. Careful attention was given as to whether the participants described a sense of belonging (or lack thereof) that is akin to the core elements described by Strayhorn (2019). Moreover, the current study listened for levels of meaning making shifting throughout the college experience for LGBTQIA+ alumnix. In addition to levels of meaning making, the intersectionality of multiple identity dimensions (sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class) informed the study, as well, noting themes in narratives that emerged regarding the relationships and influences of various identities.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

A. Introduction

The landscape of higher education is becoming more diverse and more competitive. Discussions and studies concerning shifting demographics, budget cuts, and the perceived returns on the investment of a 4-year degree are at an all-time high in the United States (Grawe, 2018; McGee, 2015). Every institution is working hard to remain flexible, embrace alternative delivery methods, think more globally, and do more with less, in general. Administrators and stakeholders must simultaneously work to keep the business of higher education afloat while also working to understand and improve the student experience.

The student experience informs every wing of the institutional house – who enrolls, what they study, if they graduate, where they live, where they spend their time, and if they learn. Once a student is enrolled at any given institution, a myriad of reasons exists to care about the experience of that student over the next 4-6 years. While it is often easy to remain focused on the student experiences of the majority population (greater mass, greater impact, greater revenue), understanding the experiences of minoritized students is invaluable to every institution. Listening to and valuing the experiences of minoritized populations models the commitment to diversity, dignity, curiosity, and possibility for which all institutions hope their students embody. It is this posture that produces good citizens who use their knowledge and creativity to make the world a better place (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Schreiner, 2017).

Students who belong to the LGBTQIA+ community are one of these minoritized populations with valuable voices. There are members of this community on every campus, even if they are not or choose not to be known (Craig et al., 2017; Gabriele-Black & Goldberg, 2019; Love et al., 2005; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Their sexual identity is often more salient than that of

their heterosexual peers, and this salience affects how they experience campus climate, relationships, and academic endeavors (Hughes & Hurtado, 2018; Lomash et al., 2018; Squire & Mobley, 2015). LGBTQIA+ students enrolled at faith-based colleges and universities have unique experiences due to the added integration of religion into all aspects of campus life. Many of these faith-based institutions hold to conservative and non-affirming positions on human sexuality and gender. These positions are manifested in university policies concerning sexuality and gender that affect student housing, behavioral expectations, and curricular content (Coley, 2018a; Lau, 2005; Wolff & Himes, 2010).

While the college choice process for LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based institutions is nearly completely void of scholarly research, the few studies available list proximity to home, academic programs and prestige, financial aid offers, and parental influence among the top reasons LGBTQIA+ students enroll in faith-based colleges and universities (Coley, 2018b; Burleson, 2010; Squire & Mobley, 2015). Institutional fit is another factor in college choice. Many LGBTQ students look to enroll in colleges that are “gay-friendly” or emphasize diversity (Burleson, 2010; Squire & Mobley, 2015). However, due to the nuanced and individual nature of sexual identity development, many LGBTQIA+ students are not “out” or aware of their sexual identity at the time of college choice (Squire & Mobley, 2015; Wentz & Wessel, 2011). Others consistently choose to ignore their sexual identity or count it as unimportant when considering future college cultures (Burleson, 2010; Squire & Mobley, 2015).

B. Statement of the problem/purpose of the review

Regardless of the reasons and in spite of potential tensions with conservative policies, LGBTQIA+ students are recruited by, admitted to, and enroll in faith-based institutions (Coley, 2018b). While these students have been present on these campuses for decades, administrators,

faculty and staff still struggle to listen, understand, and come to unified conclusions on how to better serve the LGBTQIA+ community in their midst (Stratton et al., 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Recent overt commitments to celebrating and integrating different aspects of diversity on these campuses have initiated important conversations even at some of the most conservative institutions (Hulme et al., 2016; Schreiner, 2018). Unfortunately, these initiatives are focused primarily, if not exclusively, on racial and ethnic diversity (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Schreiner, 2018). Sexuality and gender continue to be a point of tension on these campuses, resulting in fractured opinions in the campus community and unclear policies and procedures (Scibetta, 2019).

It is in the middle of this tension that LGBTQIA+ students live and learn. If faith-based institutions are to be successful in meeting institutional outcomes connected to academic, psychological, social and societal thriving, they must commit to understanding LGBTQIA+ student experiences as an avenue to better support this minoritized population. The current impasse between institutional promises of unique places of belonging where students can learn alongside others and consistent narratives of fear, isolation and shame is the problem that guides this review. With this in mind, it is the purpose of this literature review to consider and think critically about academic research pertinent to the specific institutional context, the previously expressed experiences of LGBTQIA+ students regarding campus climate and identity development, and the recent assessments and conversations surrounding diverse student thriving at faith-based institutions. The research questions that guide this literature review are:

1. What are the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges?
2. What helps LGBTQIA+ student thriving at faith-based colleges?

C. Coverage

A search was conducted using various databases including EBSCOhost, ERIC, Google Scholar, and reference lists from key studies related to the topic. Approximately 250 documents were found with approximately 60 being used in the final literature review. The original search was limited to articles that were primarily peer-reviewed between 2004-present with the majority of the articles being published in the last decade. The expansion beyond the last decade was added in order to include original landmark studies often referenced when discussing the topic. The following key words were searched: religio*, spiritual, faith, Christian, Mormon, lgbt, gay, homosexual, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, sexual minority, sexual minorities, LGBTQIA+, trans, higher education, college, university, post-secondary. Several articles exploring the relationship between spirituality/religion and sexuality along with articles that reported on LGBTQIA+ student experiences outside of faith-based institutions were included in order to provide broader historical context and to illuminate key themes that affect the topic of this review.

D. Definitions

1. Faith-based college

For the purpose of this review, faith-based institutions include institutions with any faith affiliation in terms of mission, ethos, policies, and curriculum. This includes all institutions within the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU), Catholic, Mormon, and Seventh Day Adventist institutions. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) lists 682 faith-based institutions in the United States.

2. LGBTQIA+

For the purpose of this review, the acronym “LGBTQIA+” is used to describe all students who are minoritized in sexual or gender identity. Departures from this acronym only occur if specific studies chose to use different terminology.

E. Review of the literature

1. Context of faith-based institutions

a. “Moral communities”

Faith-based institutions share a common commitment to educate students in an environment that integrates tenets of faith with both curricular and cocurricular aspects of university life. Many of the mission statements at these institutions include words like “education,” “Christian,” “service,” and “world” (Firmin & Gilson, 2010), and much focus is placed on the spiritual development of students and the benefits of like-minded values held by faculty, staff and students (Hill, 2009; Hill, 2011; Scibetta, 2019).

Hill (2009, 2011) included this like-mindedness as part of what he calls “moral communities” in his studies regarding institutional influences on religious participation and religious belief. These longitudinal, quantitative studies found that the religious beliefs and participation habits did not change much across time in students who attended more conservative Evangelical institutions; Catholic and protestant institutions showed declines over time; public institutions showed an increase in belief and participation. While these results may be arguably dated now, Hill’s description of moral communities is quite pertinent. He asserted that moral communities are formed when institutions are small enough to maintain religious homogeneity. This homogeneity, in turn, allows for the institutions to maintain expectations of belief and

behavior. Hill also says students at these institutions may also have a certain level of spiritual apathy and a lack of ability to interact with those different from themselves (2009).

Davignon and Thomson (2015) applied this concept of moral communities in their more recent study with a similar focus. These authors narrowed their study to explicitly to CCCU institutions and asked if religious homogeneity, availability of spiritual mentors, and integration of faith and knowledge were successful in fostering the spiritual beliefs and practices of students. Again, the idea of homogeneity was linked to the institutions ability to exercise “social control of its members” (p.533); however, this study determined that homogeneity is more significant and impactful when it is measured by shared beliefs (born-again, Bible believing) rather than denominational labels (i.e., evangelical) (Davignon & Thomson,2015). This push against denominational thinking when reviewing the cultures and policies of faith-based institutions is also supported in studies from Coley (2017, 2018) and Rosik et al. (2013), but it is also challenged by Hulme et al. (2016). These studies will be considered at later points in the literature review.

b. Conservative policies

The social control noted by Hill (2009, 2011) and Davignon and Thomson (2015) is enforced largely by campus policies regarding behaviors. In a qualitative study conducted at two Christian liberal arts universities, Lau (2005) found ten perceived reasons for behavioral codes. These reasons were: promoting Christian distinctives, reflecting campus ethos/historical commitments, projecting a certain image to the community, providing safety, *in loco parentis*, to enhance the educational environment and promote integration of faith and learning, promoting Christian community, prepare students for life after college, provide protection from the world, and act as legal safeguards. While this study is limited in scope (only two institutions) and is

focused on perceptions and not official institutionally stated reasoning, the conclusions are in concert with other research that articulates some of the benefits of studying at a faith-based institution (Wells, 2016).

While these policies arguably have benefits connected to student safety and encouraging an environment conducive to academic focus and achievement, these policies can also be seen as harmful and discriminatory, specifically by sexual minorities on campus (Coley, 2018a; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Wolff & Himes, 2010). Only two studies to date examined policies that include behavioral bans on sexual behavior at faith-based institutions. In their descriptive paper, Wolff and Himes (2010) randomly selected and analyzed 20 CCCU institutional behavioral policies. All but six of the policies explicitly mentioned homosexual behavior and all prohibit sexual behavior outside of marriage. In light of these policies, the main focus of the paper was to explain the consequences of discrimination among sexual minority youth. Threats and harassment were noted, as well as significant mental health struggles resulting from anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Social isolation and internalized homophobia leading to substance abuse and risky behavior were also specified (Wolff & Himes, 2010). These findings were consistent with other studies focused on experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges (Reed et al., 2020; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Vespone, 2016; Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Coley (2018a) conducted the second study on prohibitive behavior policies at faith-based institutions. The study differed significantly from Wolff and Himes (2010) in that it aimed not only to document discriminatory policies but also to predict the type of institution most likely to adopt those policies. Additionally, Coley's study was significantly larger in scope, looking at the 211 universities that have bans on homosexuality out of the nation-wide 682 religiously affiliated

institutions listed by the IPEDS survey. Coley pushed against traditional denominational delineations and presented a new categorization based on theological orientation. Institutions aligned with an individualist theological orientation focused more on piety whereas institutions aligned with a communal orientation focused more on social justice. This dichotomy was meant to add more nuance to the common conservative and liberal camps. The study found that institutions that adhere to conservative teachings and align with an individualist theological orientation were significantly more likely to have policies that ban homosexuality. Schools with communal theological orientations were less likely due to a priority to serve and protect all students on campus. The study also noted that institutions within the CCCU would be harder to change or challenge due to the prioritized belief that conservative ethics on sexuality are part of what makes the institution distinctly Christian.

c. Majority doctrine and homonegativity

These conservative sexual ethics and discriminatory policies stem from institutional majority doctrine and often foster (even if unintentionally) homonegativity on faith-based campuses. The majority doctrine of faith-based institutions reserves sexual intimacy for the marriage relationship which is to be between one man and one woman and, when possible, for the purpose of procreation (Hughes, 2019; Lomash et al., 2018; Wedow et al., 2017). Same-sex relationships as well as homosexual acts are considered sinful and wrong, and, in extreme cases, a product of deviance or mental illness. In 2001, the CCCU released an official task force report on sexuality. While this report called for acknowledgement of sexual minorities on campus and called on institutions to provide support for students struggling with sexuality, it also asked institutions to clarify policies and positions on sexuality (Wolff & Himes, 2010). Many of the policies in the studies already reviewed were a result of this charge.

Conservative policies and explicit non-affirming language can contribute to and reinforce a general culture of homonegativity on faith-based campuses. Much like the categories presented by Coley (2018a), Rosik et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study at a private Christian school in California on the relationship between different aspects of the Moral Foundations Theory and homonegativity. The Moral Foundations Theory explores the “standards by which people formulate their moral standpoints and values” (p.315) and includes individual foundations (harm/care and fairness/reciprocity) and binding foundations (ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity). Developed largely by Graham, Haidt & Nosek (2009), the authors posited that more liberal individuals tend to make decisions based on the individual foundations prioritizing the fair and dignified treatment of all individuals. On the contrary, more conservative individuals make decisions on the binding foundations, prioritizing wholeness, tradition, and preserving established societal values. The study used both the Attitudes Toward Lesbian and Gay Men (ATLG) scale and the Modern Homonegativity Scale (HMS-G), using the concepts of “old school homonegativity” (disgusting, wrong) and “new school homonegativity” (gay people should be happy with the right that they have and stop making a big deal of things) (Rosik et al., 2013). The study found higher concern for the care/harm of another person to be associated with lower homonegativity and higher concern for purity/sanctity to be associated with higher homonegativity. Although this study is arguably limited due to the narrow nature of the sample, many of these categories and theories closely aligned with and supported the work done by Coley (2018a) concerning campus policies.

Also using the ATLG and adding the Religious Fundamentalism Scale, LaFave et al. (2014), studied the relationship between gender and heterosexual attitudes toward homosexuality. This study was also quantitative and was also limited to one conservative

Christian university. The data gathered showed heterosexual men to have more negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian people than heterosexual women. It also showed a positive relationship between religious fundamentalism and negative attitudes. The authors also noted a strong allegiance to traditional gender roles in this sample and negative attitude in religious contexts to be more pronounced than non-religious fundamentalism (LaFave et al., 2014).

d. Resources

Providing resources to LGBTQIA+ students on faith-based campuses is one way to address a culture of homonegativity. Nearly every study in this review suggested education and training as a pathway to improvement regarding minority experiences at faith-based institutions (Gabriele-Black & Goldberg, 2019; Meanley et al., 2016; Platt & Lenzen, 2013; Rankin, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010; Scibetta, 2019; Tetreault et al., 2013; Wolff et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Unfortunately, garnering support for these types of resources and successfully launching them proves to be difficult at faith-based colleges. Understanding the landscape of resources available on these campuses as well as the complexities that exist therein is crucial to the faith-based institutional context.

Resource centers are a common solution to providing education and safety to minority students (Fine, 2012). Applying the theories of resource mobilization and political opportunity, Fine (2012) studied 1751 post-secondary institutions to assess the likelihood of LGBTQIA+ centers on campuses. This study found that public institutions were more likely to have resource centers, most likely due to greater access to financial resources. Geographic location was also significant. Even though the study statistically controlled for the South being more politically conservative, the New England and mid-Atlantic regions still showed significantly more likely to have LGBTQIA+ resource centers on campus. Political climate was another strong predictive

factor; more progressive campuses proved more likely to have resource centers. The author was specific to mention that not one religiously affiliated school had a LGBTQIA+ resource center on campus and that these were perhaps the campuses that needed one the most. Other studies noted the presence of activist groups or support groups (Coley, 2018b; Gabriele-Black & Goldberg, 2019; Coley, 2020) on faith-based campuses but also pointed out how campus climate contributed to a lack of participation in these groups (Gabriele-Black & Goldberg, 2019; Rockenbach and Crandall, 2016; Vespone, 2016; Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Staff members in student affairs and residence life are often frequently engaged in conversations with students surrounding identity development and campus experiences. These employees are crucial to the success of the cocurricular aspects of higher education, perhaps even more so at smaller institutions that emphasize community and mentoring. Scibetta (2019) conducted a qualitative study with 10 student affairs professionals at CCCU institutions using a narrative inquiry approach. This study used Schein's (2010) model of organizational culture and asked how specific campus culture at Christian colleges shape the experiences of student affairs professionals as they serve LGBTQIA+ students. Participants in the study reported significant tension between loyalty to students and loyalty to institutional policies and doctrinal statements. They feared losing their jobs or being labeled an outsider and felt campus doctrines contributed to a culture of silence concerning LGBTQIA+ students and the topic of sexuality. The authors questioned the sustainability of this approach to sexuality found at many Christian colleges and urged for more professional development, training, and the evaluation of institutional culture so that all faculty and staff might feel equipped and encouraged to serve all students without confusion or fear (Scibetta, 2019).

F. LGBTQIA+ student experiences

The literature pertaining to LGBTQIA+ student experiences at faith-based institutions is positioned within a larger body of literature focused on assessments and frameworks related to campus climate, identity development, and multiple dimensions of identity as experienced by minority students, in general, on all campuses. This broader literature is worth mentioning, albeit briefly, so as to provide theoretical context and broader corroboration for the more specific literature regarding faith-based institutions.

Early studies by Hurtado & Carter (1997) and Hurtado et al. (1998) are considered landmark reports regarding campus climate. Campus climate refers to the environment of the campus as perceived by various smaller groups of individuals, often minority populations. This environment is determined and affected by the attitudes of faculty, staff and students, as well as by the perceived or actual presence of harassment, fear or discrimination (Brown et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2017; Greathouse et al., 2018; Rankin, 2003; Rankin, 2005; Rockenbach and Crandall, 2016; Tetreault et al., 2013). Campus climate is generally spoken of in terms of negative or positive climate.

The Hurtado & Carter (1997) quantitative study focused on Latinx students. It aimed to further develop/correct Tinto's (1993) earlier model of student engagement by adding the concept of membership to the discussion of integration. The study found that perceived negative campus climate negatively impacts student sense of belonging, but, perhaps more importantly, the study highlighted the difficulty of applying general models of student engagement, climate, or belonging to minority students without care and caution. This study is referenced and used by many subsequent studies attempting to assess climate of minority subpopulations.

The Hurtado et al. (1998) paper discussed key issues for institutional self-study. This report described common campus climate perspectives and struggles for women, ethnic and racial minorities, LGBTQIA+, and disabled students while advocating for the importance of campus-specific climate assessments. The authors also stated the value of diversity on campus for majority students. This value was also noted in the Hurtado et al. (2008) study that delineated the structural, psychological, behavioral, and historical aspects of campus climate. This study also highlighted the gravity of pre-existing attitudes that students bring with them in the shaping of campus climate and emphasized the imperative nature of students interacting with people different from themselves to successfully function in and contribute to a diverse society (Hurtado et al, 2008).

These foundational theoretical works on campus climate are confirmed in the pioneering quantitative studies of Sue Rankin (2003, 2004, 2005, 2010) focused on exploring experiences and perceptions of campus climate in the LGBTQIA+ higher education community. The initial study (2003) conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute considered the experiences of over 1600 students at 14 institutions. This was a larger sample size than any previous study and, admittedly, surveyed students at the more queer-friendly campuses in the country. This attempt at mitigating potentially skewed data, made the results even more potent. The study found prevalent harassment, microaggressions, and fearful attitudes in LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff. The study also noted the complexity that comes when considering multiple identities, a complexity that is explained within important identity development theoretical frameworks (Abes et al. 2007; Morgan 2013).

The concepts of intersectionality and multiple identities inform the Rankin and Reason (2005) study that looked specifically at how Students of Color and White students perceive

campus climate for underrepresented groups. The study confirmed that students of color experience campus climate differently than white students and experience more harassment. The Rankin et al. (2010) study expands the Rankin (2003) study and surveyed over 5,000 faculty, staff and students. The study also included specific data on transgender, gender non-conforming, and Persons of Color. The results reported consistent experiences of harassment and negative campus climate perceptions for all participants. Additionally, they emphasized the gravity of intersectionality in conversations about campus climate (i.e., a student of color who is also gender non-conforming). These foundational studies were pivotal in subsequent studies that confirmed negative campus climate perceptions and experiences for LGBTQIA+ students at non-faith-based campuses including reports of discrimination, isolation, avoidance, and significant mental health struggles (Brown et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2017; Tetreault et al., 2013).

Following the death of Tyler Clementi at Rutgers University in 2010, a group of scholars (including Rankin) embarked on a landmark study that analyzed results from several national surveys including the National Survey of Student Engagement (2017), the Undergraduate Student Experience in the Research University Survey (2016), the American college Health Association-National College Health Assessment (2016), and the four surveys conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, including The Freshman Survey (2016), the Your First College Year Survey (2016), the Diverse Learning Environments Survey (2016), and the College Senior Survey (2017). The Greathouse et al. (2018) white paper used these survey results to explore over 60,000 queer-spectrum and over 6,000 trans-spectrum experiences at 918 unique institutions. These experiences were measured against the experiences of cis-hetero students. This more recent study supported the findings of earlier studies on campus climate; perceptions of climate were more negative for queer-spectrum students and trans-spectrum students. These

students experience higher levels of harassment, lower levels of emotional and mental health, and lower levels of campus engagement (Greathouse et al., 2018). The study also revealed an imbalance in academic disciplines represented in the queer and trans-spectrum students. These students were found primarily in the arts and humanities and severely absent from business, STEM, and health professional fields (Greathouse et al., 2018). All of the markers in this study were graver for trans-spectrum students compared to queer-spectrum students (Greathouse et al., 2018).

1. Microaggressions

Perceptions of campus climate at faith-based colleges echo the findings of these larger and broader studies. However, negative experiences at faith-based colleges are also often “uniquely experienced when they are coming from a within-community context” (Lomash et al., 2018, p.12). Microaggressions are one of the most frequent categories of negative experiences found in the literature (Byron et al., 2017; Hughes, 2019; Lomash et al., 2018). Hughes (2019) defines microaggressions as “subtle, often surprising, offenses perpetrated by those in the majority, who hold privilege and power toward those in the minority, who are marginalized and oppressed in frequently subconscious, automatic ways” (p.16); Platt and Lenzen (2013) define them as “brief, commonplace, and daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities directed toward specific groups of people” (p.1012). Both of these studies were qualitative in nature and worked with smaller sample sizes at a single institution. While the Platt and Lenzen (2013) study was not conducted at a faith-based institution, it aids in the interpretation of faith-based studies in that it framed the research using Sue’s (2010) typology of sexual orientation microaggressions. This typology includes six categories of microaggressions: oversexualization, homophobia, heterosexist language/terminology, sinfulness, assumption of

abnormality, and endorsement of heteronormative culture and behaviors. These categories are consistent with the results of Byron et al. (2017), Lomash et al. (2018), and Hughes (2019) and are described as manifestations of implicit biases steeped in the heteronormative culture of faith-based colleges described in the first section of this literature review. The presence of microaggressions affected academic participation, mental health, residence life, and contributed to feelings of loneliness, isolation and fear (Byron et al., 2017; Hughes, 2019; Lomash et al., 2018; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Byron et al. (2017) broadens the focus beyond microaggressions into other byproducts of negative campus climate. The authors of this study used a mix methods approach (survey and follow-up interviews) with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual students at a religious liberal art university in the South. Although the study directly mentioned the extreme conservative nature of the South, it also noted this campus was considered fairly liberal among Christians in the region. This was evidenced in the employment of queer faculty, the presence of LGB organizations and established safe zones. Despite these positive factors, the study reported a negative perception of campus climate most significantly in gay and lesbian students and then also in bisexual students. Heterosexual students had a much more positive view of campus climate (Byron et al., 2017).

This study used two elements of queer theory – performativity and liminality – to frame the ways different participants chose to move in and out of different presentations of sexual identity. Some of this fluidity was a natural part of the identity development process; in other instances, participants chose to hide sexual identity in order to feel safer or to avoid harassment (Byron et al, 2017). This particular study was unique in that it studied experiences of climate not only on campus but also off campus, specifically at fraternity parties. Gay men had the most

negative experiences at these parties, and frequently experienced what the authors called the “tyranny of sexualized spaces – an exercise of power whereby hegemonic groups seek to reclaim space and secure their sexual privilege within in” (Byron et al., 2017, p.674). This looked like being kicked out of parties or enduring verbal harassment in front of many peers. Lesbian and bisexual women reported negative experiences in these parties, as well, and were often asked to perform sexual acts for the entertainment of heterosexual men.

2. Outness and internalized transphobia/homophobia

The Byron et al. (2017) study is one of many studies to address the invisible nature of sexual orientation and the levels of “outness” that are part of the sexual minority identity development journey. Sexual minority students who are fully out are more likely to be engaged on campus socially and academically (Rankin, 2010, Wedow et al., 2017). However, the coming out process is often full of anxiety, confusion, conflict and fear, especially for those in spiritual communities and conservative families (Burlison, 2010; Squire & Mobley, 2015; Stratton et al., 2013; Wolff et al., 2016; Wedow et al., 2017; Wolff et al, 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2009). For this reason, many sexual minorities choose to stay hidden and experience loneliness, isolation, and suicidal ideation (Craig et al., 2017; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Vespone, 2016; Wolff et al., 2016).

Using similar research questions tied to campus climate, Craig et al. (2017) and Snow (2018) used different qualitative approaches to gain insight into LGBTQIA+ experiences. Both studies analyzed data from static sources as opposed to more dynamic, semi-structure interviews. Craig et al. (2017) analyzed 271 Religious Educational Experiences Narratives (submitted written accounts) over a 5-year period from individuals who completed at least one year at a religious institution and identified within the LGBTQIA+ community. Snow (2018) analyzed

personal blogs from LGBTQIA+ students enrolled at evangelical Christian colleges. Both studies found negative campus climate experiences described by the majority of participants. These experiences include isolation, peer rejection (Snow, 2018), institutionalized homo/transphobia, discipline procedures and conversion therapy (Craig et al., 2017). Both studies also found internalized homophobia and fear of exposure. The Craig et al. (2017) study reported a theme of engaging in heterosexual relationship in an attempt to cover sexual identity. These relationships all showed negative mental health ramifications. Participants named strategies for resilience and coping, but the primary theme throughout was a struggle to reconcile sexual identities with spiritual identities and the mental health battles that followed them in that struggle (Craig et al., 2017).

Part of this tension between sexual, gender and spiritual identities is influenced by parents, other family members, even cultures (Abes et al., 2007; Wolff, 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Reed et al. (2020) used a consensual qualitative research process to explore the process of coming out to parents for students enrolled in a faith-based college. The study conducted interviews with the 39 students from 15 schools. Themes that surfaced as important in the coming out process were prediscovery influencing factors (parental opposition to same-sex attraction, prior positive parent-child relationship, closer connection to one parent over the other, previous parental experiences with same-sex attracted individuals), the actual disclosure event (more positive if parents do not try to dissuade or enter into theological arguments), and the postdisclosure impact (a commitment to continued conversation, relationship and openness).

3. Identity development

The traditional undergraduate experience commonly occurs during the height of the identity development process in young adults (Love et al., 2005; Morgan, 2012; Reed et al.,

2020; Stratton et al., 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009; Wedow et al., 2017). Yarhouse was one of the first scholars to begin asking questions about the experiences of sexual minorities on conservative faith-based campuses. His (2009) study served as the impetus for several subsequent books on the topics of sexual identity, same-sex attraction, and the intersections of faith, gender and sexuality. This landmark study investigated the major milestones of sexual identity development and perceptions of campus climate as described by 104 undergraduate students at three conservative faith-based colleges. The data concerning major milestones revealed primary emotions of shame, guilt and fear experienced throughout the sexual identity development process. These responses stemmed from a deep tension between experienced same-sex attraction and religious beliefs that label homosexuality as sinful (Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Nicolazzo's (2016) ethnographic study addressed the identity development process for transgender students. This study included 9 transgender students and was conducted over an 18-month time period. The study used a Critical Trans Politics (CTP) framework, a branch of Critical Race Theory (CRT), specifically focused on trans resilience. Nicolazzo (2016) organized findings according to the tenets of CTP and categorized them into arrivals (convergences in the data) and departures (divergences in the data). Arrivals included gender binary discourse, compulsive heterogenderism, resilience as a verb, the tiring labor of practicing trans genders, a constellation of kinship networks (Nicolazzo, 2016). Departures included the impact of other social salient identities on all of the noted arrivals, as well as various forms of exhaustion and various locations of kinship networks. Nicolazzo (2016) did not include students at faith-based colleges. While some of the tenets of gender identity development noted in this study certainly apply to students at faith-based colleges, research on the gender identity development process for students at faith-based colleges is generally lacking.

Continuing the Yarhouse (2009) focus, Stratton et al. (2013) sought to measure levels of same-sex-attraction and other-sex-attraction as they related to identity milestones, intrinsic religiosity, and campus attitudes toward same-sex-attraction. Both this study and the Yarhouse et al. (2009) study attempted to establish sexuality, attraction and milestones as spectrums instead of dichotomies; however, much of the language used in these studies is very linear with clear categories of attraction, gender, and milestones. Nevertheless, Stratton et al. (2013) reported correlations between low levels of same-sex-attraction with higher levels of intrinsic religiosity (IR). This is the same IR discussed by Coley (2018a;2018b) in his research as a characteristic of more individualist theological orientation as opposed to communal orientation.

Yarhouse et al. (2018) continued these previous studies concerning student experiences and sexual identity development. This book also introduced a tangential longitudinal study with 160 students completing a survey at both time 1, and a year later, time 2. Out of this 160, 39 students were also interviewed at time 1 and time 2. The results of this study confirm the impact of intrinsic religiosity (IR) previously mentioned. It also noted mental health markers that were concerning but half of the responses scored in the low distress range, matching up with other college students outside this subpopulation. The study also found great diversity in terms of sexual experiences, identities, beliefs, and doctrinal positions. Also, most of the sample worked hard to hold both sexuality and spirituality together and expressed a desire to be in these educational settings (Yarhouse et al., 2018).

While both of these studies focused on the sexual identity development process and how that process is uniquely influenced by religion and spiritual climate, other studies focused on the process of reconciling spiritual and sexual identities – two salient identities often experienced in tension (Love et al., 2005; Wedow et al., 2017; Wentz & Wessel, 2011; Woodford et al., 2013).

Love et al. (2005) and Wedow et al. (2017) were both studies with large qualitative sample sizes and both focused on the relationship between spiritual and sexual identities. Love et al. (2005) conducted interviews over the course of two years at two public institutions and Wedow et al. (2017) conducted interviews at one Catholic university. It is noteworthy that both studies ended with similar frameworks to describe the categories of their data despite the rather large cultural differences in institutional type. No matter the context, “identity theory tells us that people will experience stress and difficulties developing a positive sense of self when holding two conflicting identities that are both central to their sense of self” (Wedow et al., 2017, p.310).

The conflict between spiritual identity and sexual identity left the students in these studies in one of four positions. Wedow et al. (2017) found students to be integrated, liberated, embattled, or disillusioned in their process of reconciling spiritual and sexual identities. These categories simplified and clarified near identical findings in the Love et al. (2005) study. Integrated students were able to maintain both salient identities primarily by revising traditional Catholic teachings. The primary factor in helping these students reach an integrated state was finding strong connections with other students in the first year or two of the college experience. Liberated students let go of Catholic identity and embraced sexuality. These students experienced family tensions and a lack of connectedness on campus. Embattled students embraced their Catholic identity and let go of sexual identity. These students were primarily concerned about family reactions to sexual identity and were the most informed about Catholic beliefs. They were also the most uncomfortable in the interview process. Finally, the disillusioned students described overall uncertainty, apathy or avoidance. In general, their opinions and experiences were deemed unimportant. They were just in college to get the degree and get out (Wedow et al., 2017).

Wolff et al. (2017) explored the experiences of transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) at Christian colleges wrestling with many of the same tensions described in previously noted studies on sexual minoritized students. This phenomenological study included 7 TGNC students and found major themes of invisibility of TGNC, rejection of TGNC expression and identities, ambivalence and psychological conflict, and resilience and campus support systems. Overall, this study noted consistent negative campus climate perceptions by TGNC students including harassment, microaggressions, discrimination, and fear. These students also consistently noted a preference and attraction to spiritual practices over organized religion. The study also noted support groups and counseling services as helpful resources to encourage resilience in the midst of negative campus climate factors (Wolff et al., 2017). These findings are limited in that they only represent 7 students and all were assigned female at birth.

When considering broader research that affirms a greater salience of sexual identity in LGB students (Hughes & Hurtado, 2018), these studies focused on the sexuality and gender identity development process in religious contexts and the tension felt in attempting to reconcile two conflicting identities. Understanding this unique tension is undoubtedly crucial as higher education professionals consider how to improve experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges.

4. Activism

The literature also explores activist groups as impactful experiences and a potential connective space for LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges. Coley (2018a, 2018b, 2020) suggested activism as a primary avenue to affect policy change, specifically by pushing for a more communal theological orientation. His most recent work categorized the types of students involved in activist groups at four faith-based colleges and tracked their likelihood to remain

involved in activism after college using a mixed methods approach. The categories developed were: Activist Identity (stayed active after college, most successful in challenging/changing policy), Value-based Identity (focused more on education of the population, entered humanistic careers post-graduation), solidarity identity (focused on support of LGBTQIA+ friends on campus, continued to consider different concepts of future family cultures post-graduation). These categories could be helpful to institutions as they consider the types of activism possible on specific campuses (Coley, 2020).

Gabriele-Black and Goldberg (2019) shared similar conclusions regarding activism. However, this study also focused on why many LGBTQIA+ students at evangelical colleges and universities choose not to be involved in activism or support groups (nearly half of the 23 students in the qualitative sample). These students reported fear of exposure on campus, a lack of readiness to be “out,” and a fear of lost financial support from parents. These fears confirm the previous noted concerns regarding culture and climate at faith-based colleges, particularly those affiliated with conservative teachings on sexuality (Gabriele-Black & Goldberg 2019).

G. Thriving and diversity at faith-based institutions

Faith-based colleges are engaging diversity conversations with increasing intentionality (Schreiner, 2018). Many schools are working to increase diversity representation in faculty and staff and to create specific full-time positions focused exclusively on diversity and inclusion (Dahlvig & Beers, 2018; Schreiner, 2018). The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) formed an official Commission on Diversity and Inclusion and began holding an annual national conference on diversity, providing opportunities for professional development and support for its member institutions. These initiatives have also produced academic scholarship working to help faith-based colleges reimagine the future given new cultural landscapes.

Hulme et al. (2016) authored a position paper urging readers to reimagine the future of Christian higher education. This paper highlighted the potentially competing loyalties of the church (often the denomination with which a school is affiliated) and various academic disciplines, even the discipline of higher education itself. These competing loyalties can make conversations about change difficult, even hostile. Nevertheless, the authors pushed leaders in Christian higher education to be courageous and avoid a scarcity mindset. The paper also provided a helpful distinction between adaptive and technical organizational challenges. Technical challenges require creative problem solving and high levels of competence in leadership, but adaptive challenges are problems “tackled by confronting existing beliefs, ways of knowing, and deeply held assumptions. This type of change questions what people hold dear and requires a reassessment of existing priorities and patterns of behaviors” (p.97). Hulme et al. (2016) named instruction delivery, academic space, and student experiences as areas that warrant an adaptive approach.

Unintentionally testing the adaptive problem solving of CCCU schools, Schreiner (2018) conducted a quantitative study with 128 students and alumnix at 33 institutions. The goal of the study was to determine if alumnix from CCCU schools differ at all from alumnix of other private and public institutions. Measurements of difference were developed in three main categories: common good (contributions to society), individual good (return on investment, mainly in job placement), and kingdom good (pursuit of justice, good of man, care for the poor). The study found CCCU alumnix to be significantly less likely to engage with racial, social class, religious or political difference. This could be a result of CCCU students beginning at such a lower level than students at other universities when they enter college. The alumnix reported making gains in this area, but the data show them not catching up to their counterparts. CCCU alumnix are also

less likely to volunteer or donate to places other than their local church, and they are more disconnected from politics. This study is supported by other studies and papers in the literature that explain the benefits of students learning to interact with positions of difference (Dahlvig & Beers, 2018; Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013; Wells, 2016); however, the Schreiner (2018) study is the most pertinent to the context of this review and provides the clearest framework in data reporting.

Prior to the study noted above, Schreiner (2010) developed an assessment tool called the Thriving Quotient to measure thriving in college students as a measure of student success outside of academics and persistence to graduation. Schreiner defines thriving as “students who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally” (p.4). This tool is designed to measure engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010).

Ash and Schreiner (2016) used the Thriving Quotient in a quantitative study focused on the role of institutional integrity and sense of community for students of color at Christian colleges. This study included over 1,500 students of color at 12 CCCU institutions and asked to what degree students of color are thriving intellectually, socially, and psychologically at their corresponding institutions. The study found institutional fit, a sense of purpose in student roles, and student perceptions of institutional commitment to student welfare to be the biggest factors of thriving. Commitment to student welfare was defined as an institution’s “abiding concern for the growth and development of its students” (Braxton et al., 2004). Psychological sense of community contributed to perceptions of institutional fit and commitment to student welfare particularly for students of color at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Overall, this study

confirmed the importance of belonging and institutional trust as crucial factors to thriving in students of color at PWIs (Ash & Schreiner, 2016).

The Thriving Quotient was also used to measure predictors of tuition worth at CCCU institutions by Conn (2017). This study specifically asked to what extent psychological sense of community, institutional integrity, and student thriving contributed to students deciding the higher cost of these institutions was worth the investment. This study included a large sample of over 6,000 students at 11 institutions and determined institutional integrity and commitment to student welfare were both positively related to tuition worth. Institutional integrity was particularly important to students of color and represents “the level to which the institution fulfills its mission and goals” (p.145). However, the biggest factor in determining tuition worth was psychological sense of community, “a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other and a shared faith that their needs will be met by their commitment to be together” (p.145). McMillan and Chavis (1986) were some of the first scholars to develop the sense of community theory, and it has been used in several student success studies, even some in faith-based contexts (Bohus et al., 2005).

While not conducted with students enrolled at faith-based colleges, Hill et al. (2020) used the Thriving Quotient to measure queer thriving of 60 LGBTQ+ students attending a conference for queer undergraduate students. The main research question of this study focused on how queer thriving complicated or contradicts current scholarship on LGBTQ+ experiences. The study found experienced support for identities, connections with other LGBTQ+ students, representation in the curriculum and opportunities to make an impact on campus or in the community to all positively influenced thriving (Hill et al., 2020). This study supported Nicolazzo’s (2016) discussions of positive effects of kinship on student success and reliance. Hill

et al. (2020) also advocated for LGTBQ+ support centers and education exercises like the identity wheel to encourage thriving for LGBTQ+ students.

H. Emerging conclusions/implications for policy/practice

This review of the literature related to the context of faith-based campuses and the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at those campuses reveals negative campus climate perceptions, consistent presence of microaggressions, heteronormative environments that often breed homonegativity, and significant tension between the simultaneous development of sexual identity and spiritual identity. Furthermore, consideration of literature on diversity efforts in the most conservative group of faith-based institutions reveals concerted effort to help students of color thrive during the undergraduate years; however, no mention is given in the literature to including LGBTQIA+ students in these diversity efforts. In the midst of these conclusions, the literature does point to some emerging conclusions that, in turn, provide implications for policy and practice for the future.

Education for faculty and staff was the most frequently suggested “first step forward” on the path to better experiences overall for LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges. Studies called for robust professional development opportunities for faculty and staff, particularly at more conservative institutions. These opportunities should include training and education on sexual and gender identity development, proper terminology regarding sexual orientation and gender, and general mental health training to equip faculty and staff to speak with and care for LGBTQIA+ students in an informed way (Gabriele-Black & Goldberg, 2019; Platt & Lenzen, 2013; Meanley et al., 2016; Rankin, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010; Scibetta, 2019; Tetreault et al., 2013; Wolff et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2009). Other literature suggested theological discussions stressing a “person-behavior distinctive” at institutions that hold the most

conservative stances on LGBTQIA+ populations and expressions. This distinctive argues for the sexual orientation of a person to be biological and unchangeable while still allowing for homosexual acts to be considered contrary to Christian teachings (Rosik et al., 2007; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016). On the other end of the educational spectrum, other studies stressed the need for ally training for faculty, staff, and students so that heterosexual members of campus would know how to better support members of LGBTQIA+ community (Byron et al., 2017; Crandall et al., 2020).

In addition to training for faculty and staff, the literature spoke of benefits for education for students, as well. In concert with current diversity discussions, reviewed studies emphasized the importance of including diverse material in syllabi and in institutional educational outcomes (Hurtado et al., 1998; Hurtado et al., 2008; Rankin et al., 2010). Education for students in cocurricular environments such as Resident Assistant trainings (Hughes, 2019) and campus sponsored open-dialogues can also be important in equipping students to build relationships and have conversations with people who hold different perspectives. Campuses that provide opportunities for majority students to interact with minority subpopulations on campus help all students become better citizens more able to contribute to society in profitable ways (Craig et al., 2017; Hughes & Hurtado, 2018; Hurtado et al., 1998; Hurtado et al., 2008; Rankin et al., 2010; Wolff et al., 2012).

Beyond training, the literature stressed of the value of policy review at faith-based colleges. Some of this policy review would result in major ideological changes for these colleges. However, research findings pertaining to campus climate are consistent and stark enough to warrant assessments of university policies. Administrators should ensure policies protect and provide an environment conducive to learning for all students. Procedures connected

to these policies should be clear and firm so that LGBTQIA+ students on campus know what to do and expect should they experience harassment or need care (Coley, 2018a; Gabriele-Black & Goldberg, 2019; Rankin, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Rosik et al, 2013; Scibetta, 2019; Wheeler, 2016; Wolff et al., 2016; Yarhouse et al., 2018). At a more practical level, behavioral codes should be examined to ensure they are clear, intentional and fit the mission of the institution (Coley, 2018a; Lau, 2005;).

Regardless of policy changes and educational offerings, LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges must have access to comprehensive mental health care and safe spaces for dialogue. As previously mentioned, religiously affiliated colleges and universities generally do not have centers designated to serve sexual minorities (Fine, 2012). However, support groups, group therapy opportunities, activist groups and gay-straight alliances help to provide peer connections and places to process experiences and on-going identity development (Coley, 2018a; Evans et al., 2017; Rankin et al., 2010; Stratton et al., 2013; Vespone, 2016).

I. Scholarly importance and future research

The national demographic and cultural shifts evident in the last five years have not bypassed the landscape of higher education. Books from John McGee (2015), Nathan Grawe (2018, 2021), Carson Byrd (2019) and others are challenging higher professionals everywhere to pay attention, mark the shifts, and remain agile. Additionally, the political climate in the United States is increasingly divided with strong tensions surrounding topics of racism, sexuality, gun control, religious liberty and a global pandemic. These realities undoubtedly bring challenges to the personal and professional lives of many people, including higher educational professionals

and academic researchers. These realities also bring important opportunities for scholarly importance.

While research does exist on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in higher education, fewer studies focus on experiences at faith-based colleges. Even fewer studies focus on the specific context of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, one of the most conservative body of faith-based colleges. More research is needed at these institutions given the documented tensions between spiritual and sexual identity. Specifically, assessment tools like the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, 2010) could be used to measure what contributes to or inhibits thriving for LGBTQIA+ students at CCCU institutions. However, identifying students to participate in these studies may prove to be difficult, because the majority of CCCU institutions do not track sexual identity in demographic data.

Ash & Schreiner (2016) and Conn (2017) conducted studies that included effects of perceived institutional integrity. These studies also suggested further research on enrollment messaging at CCCU schools. Research evaluating projections of diversity and campus climate on websites, social media, and conversations with admissions counselors compared to student experiences on campus would be helpful to these institutions and to minorities in the areas of mission alignment and student retention.

Finally, the majority of the studies reviewed in this work were conducted with little attention to the intersectionality of multiple identities (Abes et al., 2007). More research is needed on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who are also students of color, low socio-economic status, or live with a disability. More education to reduce current stigmas surrounding intersectionality in faith communities would be necessary prior to this research, but recognizing

the unique experiences that come when students carry multiple identities is crucial if faith-based institutions wish to gain accurate understanding of all student experiences.

I. Conclusion

The presence of LGBTQIA+ students on faith-based campuses should be celebrated regardless of institutional positions on sexual and gender ethics. These students have basic needs of belonging that must be met in order for them to thrive academically, psychologically, and socially. Faith-based colleges would do well to listen better, learn more, and find creative and effective solutions to help LGBTQIA+ students succeed and thrive on their campuses.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

The undergraduate years are experienced differently by various subpopulations of students. Academic and interpersonal student thriving are affected by differences in social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ableness, and many other factors (Ash & Schreiner, 2016). Theoretical frameworks related to belonging and the intersectionality of identity development can help explain some of these differences (Abes et al., 2007; Morgan, 2012; Strayhorn, 2019). However, listening to the narratives of students who lived these experiences can also help gain understanding.

LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges face unique challenges during the undergraduate experience (Nicolazzo, 2016; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Stratton et al., 2013; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wolff et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2009; 2018). These campus climates are heteronormative with conservative policies regarding sexuality and gender identity and expression (Coley, 2018a; Stratton et al., 2013; Wolff & Himes, 2010). LGBTQIA+ students enrolled at these institutions report higher levels of anxiety, isolation, and mental health struggles (Tetreault et al., 2013; Vespone, 2016; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Yarhouse et al., 2009; 2018). More research is needed to explore how LGBTQIA+ students might thrive amidst conservative campus climates. The purpose for conducting the study was to explore the remembered undergraduate experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix who attended faith-based colleges. This exploration aimed to develop a constructivist grounded theory pertaining to these experiences; the experiences considered in the emergent theory were framed by the intrapersonal and interpersonal categories of Schreiner's (2010a) Thriving Quotient. These categories were: positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010a).

The chapter describes the major tenets of qualitative research, as well as explains constructivist grounded theory (CGT), a derivative of the broader grounded theory approach to qualitative research. That general knowledge will then be tailored to explain a constructivist grounded theory study focused specifically on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix who attended a faith-based college. Within the CGT framework, the chapter discusses approaches to sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

A. Research design

While the goal of quantitative research is often to generalize statistical significance to a broader population, the goal of qualitative research is often to contextualize and explain more specific human experiences (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) or provide rich descriptions (Charmaz, 2014). Qualitative research acknowledges the existence of multiple constructed realities and often features a more collaborative relationship between researcher and participants toward the end goal of understanding the “why” of any given phenomena, experience, culture, person, etc. (Patton, 2001; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

The current study embraced this collaborative relationship and aimed to develop substantive theories from greater understanding of experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix who attended faith-based colleges. The research design of the study adhered to a constructivist philosophical position. This perspective asserts that knowledge, truth and reality are actively and constantly constructed by individuals through lived experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Constructivism challenges individuals to see all of the preexisting biases, values, moral positions, assertions on truth/reality, etc. that are carried into each new situation, affecting what is able to be seen and known. Karl Marx once said, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstance existing already, given,

and transmitted from the past” (Charmaz, 2014, p.13). When this philosophical position is applied to the original forms of grounded theory – a research approach that aligns more with a positivist philosophical position – the research approach moves to constructivist grounded theory (CGT).

1. Grounded theory

First introduced in the 1960’s and developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Grounded Theory is an approach to qualitative research that explicitly aims to generate theory from cases studied, a theory grounded in the data. The flagship publication, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, outlines the basic process of the approach. The method is largely focused on actions, interactions, and processes ((Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) and uses an inductive approach to data analysis. This inductive approach seeks to let themes emerge from the data as it is collected. Other distinct features are theoretical sampling, constant comparative method, coding for themes, and memo writing during the data collection and analysis processes (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory has “an implicit aim of developing probabilities, not through statistical methods, but rather through an examination of relationship between concepts” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p.183).

There are several sub-categories of grounded theory method. The first is classic grounded theory. As noted, this type of grounded theory is the original process developed in the 1960’s by Glaser and Strauss and originates the phrase “all is data” and insists on coded themes emerging strictly from the data (Patton, 2001). These data also include previous literature; therefore, a researcher using classic grounded theory does not have knowledge of the literature prior to the study. The literature is also considered data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Modified grounded theory was developed in the late-1980's by Strauss and Corbin. A minor diversion from classic grounded theory, modified grounded theory allows for the use of existing coding paradigms in data analysis as opposed to a design that strictly adheres to inductive conclusions. Modified grounded theory shares a pragmatist philosophical approach to research with Classic grounded theory (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Shifting from the pragmatist approach, constructivist grounded theory aligns more with the constructivist epistemological approach. This category of grounded theory moves the participant data to a centralized position in the study and recognizes that each individual constructs his/her/their own reality (Charmaz, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), bringing in unique experiences, conclusions, and moral judgements to every situation. This approach also takes the "researcher's position, privileges, perspective, and interactions in to account as an inherent part of the research reality" (Charmaz, 2014, p.13). Additionally, the research, in and of itself, is also a construction. It occurs under specific conditions some of which may prevent some data from being seen or known (Charmaz, 2014). The category also allows for a previous knowledge of literature prior to the data collection phase (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

A shift from constructivist to post-modern or post-structural epistemologies result in the final two sub-categories of grounded theory. Post-modern grounded theory places an emphasis on situational mapping while generating theory. Discursive grounded theory resides within post-structuralism and focuses on mapping and deconstructing theory through focus on language interaction and discourse (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

The research design of the current study used processes aligned with constructivist grounded theory (CGT). This category was chosen to encourage and allow for reflexivity in data collection and decision-making and also to specifically acknowledge the previous experiences

and perspectives held by both the researcher and the participants. This method was also chosen because it embraces a knowledge of pertinent literature prior to the data collection and analysis stages of the study but also adheres to an “all is data” approach in its reliance on field notes, primary source documents, etc.

2. Sample

The current study employed initial purposeful sampling and transitioned to snowball and theoretical sampling as the study continued. The researcher sent an email (Appendix A) to a mental health professional who agreed to distribute a self-select intake form (Appendix B) to an information-rich group of approximately 50 potential participants who specifically fit the purpose of the study (i.e. LGBTQIA+ alumnix who attended faith-based colleges). This mental health professional specializes in sexual orientation and gender identity development and is also a nationally recognized researcher, podcast host, author, and speaker on topics relating to spirituality, sexuality, and gender. He is also an alumnix of a faith-based college and identifies as a gay, cisgender man. An initial sample of 19 participants was collected through the intake form (Appendix B). This form included an introduction to the research and to the study. It also included contact information in case potential participants had questions regarding the study. Of the 19 participants who filled out the inquiry form, only 9 met the specific parameters of the study, specifically the number of years removed from attendance at a faith-based college.

Participants who completed the intake form and met the specific parameters of the study received a follow-up email (Appendix C) with greater details about the study (format, time commitment, confidentiality) and a link to an online informed consent form (Appendix D). All participants signed the informed consent form electronically via Google form prior to scheduling an interview. Interviews began following this initial recruitment process.

All forms of grounded theory are unique in that data analysis begins immediately following collection and continues simultaneously throughout the research process. Following data collection and data analysis of this initial group of 9 participants, snowball sampling occurred as the researcher considered suggestions of additional participants offered by current participants in the study during the data collection process. Theoretical sampling occurred as initial themes emerged from the coded data. The researcher pursued additional participants who had specific experiences with the emerging themes. This sampling process continued until data saturation occurred and no new themes emerged from the data. Both snowball and theoretical sampling added 2 participants to the sample, resulting in a final 11 participants.

This data saturation point largely determined the number of participants in the study. Qualitative research has varying benchmarks of sampling needed to justify and validate the study (Patton, 2001; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). However, the primary question in a constructivist grounded theory study relates to the point at which the data reach the level of legitimate theory (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The current study aimed to include 10-12 participants total and remained flexible throughout the data collection process. The researcher continued to pursue participants until the point of data saturation and a well-supported emergent theory pertaining to LGBTQIA+ experiences were reached.

B. Instrumentation – positionality/reflexivity

The primary instrument of a qualitative study is the researcher. Because of this, the positionality of the researcher – bias, motivation, background – are all pertinent and influential to the process of the study and its outcomes (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2001). The primary researcher is employed at a faith-based college (a CCCU institution) and has worked with LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students for more than a decade. The researcher brought empathy and experiential

knowledge of some of the specific challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students in faith-based settings. The researcher also brought a lived tension between loyalty to institutionally stated positions/values and evolving personal positions/values into the study. The researcher has a son who identifies within the LGBTQIA+ community and is beginning the traditional undergraduate experience. These realities undoubtedly colored how the researcher was able to see and hear the data. These realities coupled with the unique experiences and realities of each participant formed yet another unique reality; this reality was the setting for this study.

Several steps were taken to mitigate bias. Data were member-checked and the research design reviewed by several professional colleagues. Coding structures and the resulting emergent theory were reviewed by two additional researchers. Transcriptions and member checking were employed in this study to ensure as much confirmation as possible in the final resulting theory. An interview guide was used (Appendix E) for all interviews. The questions in this interview guide were focused on three of the five main components contained in the Thriving Quotient developed by Schreiner (2010a). The three components of focus were: positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness. Additionally, the interview questions were guided by the main concepts of the College Students' Sense of Belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) and the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Abes et al., 2007) theoretical frameworks. All of the questions aimed to explore LGBTQIA+ alumnix experiences during the undergraduate years, specifically as they seek belonging and move through the dynamic process of identity development.

C. Collection of data

The study used formal, semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data collection. These interviews were 45-60 minutes in length and invited participants to tell their

story of experiences and to explore their specific reality within the undergraduate experience. These interviews were scheduled and conducted via Zoom online conferencing platform; both audio and visual data were recorded. A transcript of each interview was sent to the interviewee (Appendix F) to check for accuracy and permission to use all data there within. Participants were asked to respond with correction, questions, and comments on the transcription within one week of receiving it. Each participant selected a pseudonym as part of the interview protocol. If participants did not wish to choose a pseudonym, one was assigned to them. Pseudonyms were used from the point of transcription and beyond in data collection and analysis. Once the transcripts were verified for accuracy by the participants, the original recordings containing actual identities were destroyed. General questions associated with the research questions were asked; however, probing and follow-up questions happened at the discretion of the researcher during the interview.

To comply with grounded theory processes (and qualitative processes, in general), data beyond individual interviews played a role in the research, as well. The researcher made field notes during and journaled upon completion of each interview. Both field notes and journal entries were considered in the data analysis. The journaling included notes of repeated phrases, possible emerging themes or connections with other interviews, reflections on non-verbal responses (emotions, emphases, actions) and contextual details (time, place, room, clothing, background). Journaling also included questions, emotions, or reactions experienced by the researcher in response to data collected in the interview.

D. Data analysis

Data analysis began immediately following the first instance of data collection and employed the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method is an inductive

process where the researcher compares one piece of data with another piece of data (across interviews, field notes, etc.) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This constant comparison leads to fluid categories that then contribute to themes in the coding process. Over time, this process results in the formation of theories (Charmaz, 2014, Patton, 2001; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

All data were analyzed through the constructivist grounded theory processes of coding, memo writing, and sorting. Coding is the process of noticing key words or information rich phrases as they emerge in the data and it happened in two stages in the current study. A code is “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). The initial, open coding phase named words, phrases, or actions that consistently showed up in and helped make sense of the data. This phase can use the exact words said by participants or summary phrases assigned by the researcher. The second phase was focused coding and included collapsing several similar codes from open coding into fewer focused codes specifically using gerunds as the first word of the focused codes. Gerunds are words ending in “ing” that cause a verb to function as a noun. These focused codes were also confirmed through memo writing.

Memo writing is the data analysis stage that sets grounded theory apart from other qualitative research approaches (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Memo writing involves making short notes about the categories that emerge and how they might relate to each other as they happen. In essence, it is a real-time reflection of the researcher on the data and what they might mean as they are emerging (Charmaz, 2014). These reflections were noted as part of the journaling process but were also noted throughout the focused coding phase, as well. Beyond memo writing was sorting, whereby the researcher read and reread the journal entries and memos

in order to establish continual categories, alignments and relationships therein. In these later stages of analysis, theoretical coding was used. Theoretical coding used the constant comparative methods and attempted to explain how the categories interact with and make sense together (Charmaz, 2014). Constant data collection and analysis continued until the point of theoretical saturation where no more new patterns or themes emerged. At this point, the final theoretical coding phase resulted in the formation of an emergent theory concerning the remembered experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix who attended faith-based colleges.

In order to improve trustworthiness of the study and of the final theories generated, a second master's level researcher and a third doctoral level researcher reviewed the major findings of the study to check for bias or blind spots. These researchers had access to data used at major junctures in the analysis process and asked questions pertaining to collection, analysis, and results. Data reporting included use of existing literature, strengths and limitations of theories formed. These processes were conducted with the aim of developing theories pertaining to LGBTQIA+ alumnix experiences during the undergraduate years, specifically as they seek belonging and move through the dynamic process of identity development at faith-based colleges. The data were analyzed and an emergent theory was developed guided by the following research and interview questions:

1. How do LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered outlook on life at faith-based colleges?
 - a. Describe your overall approach to life during the undergraduate years.
 - b. Describe what success meant to you during the undergraduate years.
 - c. Did your college employ any strengths-based curriculum? If so, what were your top strengths?

- d. Describe your experience with the strengths-based training (if applicable).
 - e. How did your sexual and/or gender identity influence your perspectives on success or overall approach to life during your undergraduate years?
2. How do LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered social connectedness at faith-based colleges?
- a. What were the main points of connection and belonging during your undergraduate years?
 - b. What were the settings or experiences that brought the most struggle or conflict for you?
 - c. What was most helpful/encouraging to you as you continued on in education at your alma mater (university sponsored programs, faculty, staff, ad hoc encouragement, peer groups)?
 - d. What were the main factors that contributed to your decision to leave the school at which you were enrolled? (if applicable)
 - e. How would you describe your sense of community during your undergraduate years?
 - f. What do you feel you contributed to campus culture? Academically? Socially?
 - g. What gifts did you bring to the campus?
 - h. How do you think your sexual or gender identity influenced your social connectedness or community?
3. How do LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered interactions with diversity at faith-based colleges?
- a. How would you describe your college's relationship with diversity and inclusion?

- b. Describe your interactions with students different than yourself during the undergraduate years.
 - c. Describe a time when you were challenged by a peer to think differently about something during your undergraduate years.
 - d. Describe a time when the curriculum challenged you to think differently about something.
 - e. How would you compare your interactions now with those of your undergraduate years with those different from yourself?
 - f. How did your sexual and/or gender identity affect your perspective or experiences on diversity and inclusion?
4. How do LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe the general concept of thriving during college?
- a. How would you describe what it means to thrive during college?
 - b. Using your definitions, did you thrive during your undergraduate years?
 - c. What factors helped you to thrive?
 - d. What factors hindered your ability to thrive?

E. Chapter summary

Undergraduate experiences are different for various subpopulations of students. LGBTQIA+ students are one of these subpopulations. This chapter provided a detailed overview of a qualitative research study that used a constructivist grounded theory model toward developing theories regarding LGBTQIA+ alumnix experiences at faith-based colleges. This research approach included purposeful sampling, snowball sampling and theoretical sampling. Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data collection. An invitation to member check transcripts was offered to participants. Data analysis happened throughout the project,

following the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Memo writing, coding, and sorting accompanied the constant comparative method until theoretical saturation was reached and the formation of a theory was complete.

Chapter 4: Results

A. Introduction

Student experiences can give insight into levels of student thriving during the undergraduate years. Overall approach to life, experiences with diverse people and perspectives, as well as understanding how and where students experience connection and belonging are key indicators as to the quality of the undergraduate experience (Schreiner, 2010). Exploring and understanding these indicators can be helpful to students in providing validation and to institutions seeking to improve retention and effectiveness of student outcomes (Ash & Schreiner, 2016). The current study explored LGBTQIA+ remembered experiences of the undergraduate years at faith-based colleges with these thriving indicators as guides for the exploration. The chapter provides a summary of the overall study, an introduction to the participants, and an analysis of the data as it relates to the research questions

B. Summary of the study

1. Purpose of the study

The purpose for conducting the study was to explore the undergraduate experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix who attended faith-based colleges. This exploration aimed to develop a constructivist grounded theory pertaining to these remembered experiences within the intrapersonal and interpersonal categories of Schreiner's (2010a) Thriving Quotient. These categories were: positive perspective (outlook on life), diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010a). The study gathered data from 11 LGBTQIA+ alumnix 1-3 years removed from graduation and employed a qualitative, constructivist grounded theory research approach. Positive perspective questions explored student experiences related to definitions of success, overall attitude toward college, and areas of greater focus. Diverse

citizenship questioned how LGBTQIA+ students interacted with and experienced institutional diversity as well as different perspectives in the classroom and in relationships. The study also looked at what students believed they contributed to the campus with their unique strengths. Social connectedness included main points of connection and belonging during the undergraduate years. The study also explored how LGBTQIA+ students think about and self-evaluate the concept of thriving during their undergraduate years.

2. Importance of the study

There are over 600 faith-based colleges in the United States. These colleges hold varying positions on same-sex relationships, sexual expression, and gender identity/expression (Coley, 2018a). Over 150 of these schools are part of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). These schools are predominantly White institutions (PWI) with the majority of students also coming from an affluent social class and quality access to education (Schreiner, 2018). All schools in the CCCU are required to hold and enforce a conservative sexual ethic. This ethic states that not only marriage, but all forms of sexual expression are reserved for one man and one woman in a committed covenant relationship. It also states that all students must live in congruence with their birth sex. Students who live outside of this ethic face disciplinary action, and because of these restrictions, sexual and gender minoritized students face unique challenges at these faith-based institutions (Wolff et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2017; Woodford et al., 2013).

Despite these challenges, LGBTQIA+ students are enrolled and even recruited to these institutions (Coley, 2018a). Because sexual and gender identities are often invisible, the experiences of these students often go unnoticed or unheard. LGBTQIA+ students often feel isolated and fearful on these campuses (Vespone, 2016; Wolff et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2017; Woodford et al., 2013). The importance of the study is the potential belonging and affirmation

offered to current LGBTQIA+ students in the shared experiences of recent alumni. This validation could provide needed encouragement and useful insight into how to thrive at faith-based colleges. Further, the study is also important to faculty, staff and administrators at faith-based colleges, offering specific examples of what might be helpful and harmful to LGBTQIA+ students during their undergraduate years.

3. Design of the study

The study used a qualitative constructivist grounded theory approach to research. In general, qualitative research aims to explore and explain rather than measure and predict (Patton, 2001; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Specifically, grounded theory is an inductive approach to qualitative research that commits to letting the conclusions emerge from the data without preconceived hypothesis or hunches (Charmaz, 2014). Classic grounded theory studies are often remiss of literature reviews, believing that the study is best conducted with zero knowledge of previous discussions of the subject matter so as to remove any potential bias in the researcher (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). However, constructivist grounded theory pushes against that more positivist philosophy and is intentional to own the perspectives and realities that both the researcher and the participants bring into the interviews and, therefore, into the study (Charmaz, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This approach includes a literature review as well as an extensive statement regarding the positionality (or reality) of the researcher as related to the research subject (Charmaz, 2014). This method also begins with purposeful sampling, employs the constant comparative method of analysis as well as memo writing. The study also ends with a theory that has been developed from the data which often explains a specific social process (Charmaz, 2014). In this project, the study aims to develop a theory focused on the remembered undergraduate experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix at faith-based colleges.

4. Data collection

The primary source of data in this study were semi-structure interviews lasting 45-60 minutes in length. A self-select Google intake form was distributed via social media by a mental health therapist with significant ties to both the LGBTQIA+ community nation-wide and to communities of faith. This purposeful sampling yielded 19 potential participants. Of those 19, 9 fit the parameters of the study in terms of distance from graduation (1-3 years). An email was sent to those 9 with a follow up link to a thorough informed consent form. All 9 individuals signed the informed consent form electronically and Zoom interviews were scheduled.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom online conference software and both audio and video data were recorded. The researcher took field notes during the interviews and journaled extensively after each interview. All of these were submitted as data in the NVivo 12 software platform. As initial Memo-writing and coding began to reveal major categories and themes, snowball sampling and theoretical sampling resulted in 2 more participants for a total sample of 11 participants. More specific follow-up questions related to the emerging themes were asked in the interview protocol of the last 2 participants. The data reached the point of thematic saturation following the 11 interviews.

C. Results of data collection

1. Summary of interview procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 11 participants. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and was conducted via Zoom online conferencing platform. Both audio and video were recorded for all interviews. Following each interview, the researcher compiled field notes taken during the interview protocol and began journaling about the interview. Journal entries included notes on non-verbal cues, postures, and patterns. Questions pertaining to data

gathered and potential emergent themes were also noted. These journal entries were critical to the implementation of the constant comparative method employed in grounded theory studies (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2001). The researcher revisited and added to these memos throughout the entirety of the study as more and more data were collected and considered. This process continued in the midst of on-going interviews and only concluded once thematic saturation was accomplished.

2. Method of analysis

All audio recordings were imported into OtterAi transcription software; transcripts were edited for accuracy by the researcher using a line-by-line strategy. Each participant reviewed final transcripts for accuracy and changed/redacted content as desired. Final transcripts were imported into NVivo12 qualitative research software for analysis as were all journal entries and memos. All imported data were coded in three stages. The first stage was initial open coding and resulted in 429 unique codes. Some of these codes were in vivo codes (in the language of the participant) and some were codes constructed by the researcher. Memos were written throughout the open coding process and included questions, connections, and words or phrases to keep in mind as the study continued. The focused coding stage followed and resulted in 107 codes that were constructed specifically using gerunds. This method of coding assigns derived verbs ending in “ing” that function as nouns and merges codes from the open coding phase that speak of the same subject or phenomena (Charmaz, 2014; Saldana, 2016). The memo writing process continued after this phase and new questions and connections entered as data. The gerund codes were grouped into 12 categories and then 6 themes with more memo writing in between and following.

The 6 emergent themes were used to answer the research questions that guided the study. These questions were developed using language from Schreiner's Thriving Quotient and targeted the intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumna at faith-based colleges as well as explored participants' own concepts of thriving.

3. Confirmation of work

Lists of all three coding phases as well as resulting categories and themes were sent to two researchers for accuracy checks and confirmation of work. One of the researchers was a master's level researcher in the field of higher education. The other researcher was a doctoral level researcher in the field of psychology, higher education, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Both researchers offered constructive feedback to the primary researcher and categories were adjusted slightly to reflect these conversations. The final categories and themes reported reflect those confirmed by both external researchers.

4. Introduction to participants

Simple biographical data were gathered from each participant focused on gender identity, sexual identity, spiritual identity, family background, college choice process and faith-based college attended. Brief descriptions of each participant are listed below. Each participant either chose a pseudonym for the study or assumed a pseudonym assigned to them by the researcher. These descriptions attempt to communicate the unique perspective each participant brought to the study while still maintaining confidentiality. A summary of participants' classifications can be found in Table 1 below the biographies.

a. Cameron (she/her/hers)

Cameron is White and identifies as a gay or lesbian, cisgender, non-conforming female. She grew up in the Nazarene church and is the daughter of a pastor. She attended a faith-based

college in the upper-Midwest (CCCU). She chose to attend this faith-based college because of close personal connections and strong school representation in her youth group culture. She also was excited about the potential for a strong, Christian community. She was very active in her youth group and continued in spiritual peer leadership during her undergraduate years, leading small groups and musical worship. Cameron came out as gay during her undergraduate years, and while she entered the undergraduate years identifying as an Evangelical Christian, she now identifies more broadly as a Christian.

b. Casey (she/he/they)

Casey is White and identifies as a queer, transgender male. She grew up in a non-denominational Christian church; however, the tenets of Christianity did not resonate with her from a young age. She attended a faith-based college (CCCU) in the upper-Midwest and was very active in undergraduate research and in promoting a sex-positive culture on campus. She chose to attend this faith-based college because of personal connections with current students and proximity to home. Casey came out publicly as queer her freshman year of high school. She knew she was transgender later in high school, but that identity continues to be known to very few people in her life. She still does not identify as a Christian.

c. Charlie (he/him/his)

Charlie is White and identifies as a bisexual, cisgender male. He grew up in the Southern Baptist church, but identified as agnostic when he entered college. He attended a faith-based college in the South (CCCU). He was very involved in the work study program and found a lot of purpose in his job. He chose to attend this faith-based college because of awarded financial aid and proximity to family. Charlie came out as bisexual during his undergraduate years, and he now identifies broadly as a Christian.

d. David (they/them/theirs)

David is Chinese-American and identifies as pansexual and non-binary. They grew up in the Reformed Evangelical tradition, but was starting to question many aspects of faith and sexuality when they entered college. They attended a faith-based college in the Pacific Northwest (CCCU). They were very involved in student leadership within the Chinese-American community. They chose to attend this faith-based college because of its academic programs and faith-based culture. Although they were questioning when they entered college, they came out later in their undergraduate years. They continue to question their faith and identify broadly as Christian.

e. Dorothy (she/her/hers)

Dorothy is White and identifies as a lesbian, cisgender female. She grew up in the Evangelical Church, and faith was very important to her when she entered college. She attended a faith-based college in the South and was very involved in volunteer programs in the local community. Her faith-based college is not a member of the CCCU (more conservative). She chose to attend this faith-based college because of financial aid awarded, proximity to home, and its faith-based culture. She came out during her undergraduate years and identifies as Christian.

f. Grace (she/her/hers)

Grace is White and identifies as queer and gender ambivalent. She grew up in a Christian home influenced by the Mennonite Church; her parents worked with a mission organization. She attended a faith-based college in the upper-Midwest (CCCU) and was very involved with the college newspaper and activist groups on campus. She chose to attend this faith-based college because of its academic reputation and its faith-based culture. She came out during her undergraduate years and identifies as agnostic.

g. Jill (she/her/hers)

Jill is White and identifies as asexual, homoromantic, and cisgender female. She grew up in the Evangelical Church and her father is a minister. She attended a faith-based college in the South and was involved in undergraduate research and student leadership. Her faith-based college is not a member of the CCCU (more conservative). She chose to attend this faith-based college because of its academic rigor and faith-based culture. She came out as asexual late in her undergraduate years and identifies broadly as Christian.

h. Karis (she/they)

Karis is White and identifies as pansexual and non-binary. They grew up in a very socially conservative, Pentecostal home (women only wear skirts and do not cut their hair). They attended a faith-based college in the South and was involved in the natural sciences. Their faith-based college is not a member of the CCCU (more conservative). They chose to attend this faith-based college because of proximity to home and personal connections with other students attending. They came out during her undergraduate years and identify as agnostic.

i. Mary (she/her/hers)

Mary is White and identifies as asexual, aromantic, and cisgender female. She grew up in a non-denominational, Evangelical Christian home and was very involved in her youth group. She attended a faith-based college in the South (CCCU) and was very involved in writing for the college newspaper. She chose to attend this faith-based college because of a positive college visit experience, proximity to home and the Honors Program. She came out during the undergraduate years and identifies broadly as Christian.

j. Sam (he/they)

Sam is White and identifies as gay and non-binary. They grew up in a fundamentalist Baptist Church and their parents started a new church in their hometown. They attended a faith-based college in the South (CCCU) and were very involved in Greek life. They chose to attend this faith-based college because of personal connections with current students, a positive campus visit, and the faith-based culture. Sam knew they were gay in early adolescent years, but remained closeted until later in his undergraduate years. They identify broadly as Christian.

k. Skye (she/her/hers)

Skye is White and identifies as graysexual/asexual/queer, cisgender female. She grew up in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and her parents are pastors. She attended a faith-based college in the Pacific Northwest (CCCU) and was involved in music and the Honors Program. She chose to attend this faith-based college because of financial aid awarded and a personal connection to current students at the college. Skye came out after her undergraduate years but stopped identifying as Christian during the undergraduate years. She currently identifies as agnostic.

Table 1.
Participants' Classifications

Participants	Gender Assigned at Birth	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Spiritual Identity	Geographic Location
Cameron	Female	Gender Non-Conforming Female	Lesbian	Agnostic	Midwest
Casey	Female	Transgender Male	Queer	Non-Christian	Midwest
Charlie	Male	Cisgender Male	Bisexual	Christian	South
David	Male	Non-Binary	Pansexual	Agnostic	Northwest
Dorothy	Female	Cisgender Female	Lesbian	Christian	South
Grace	Female	Gender Ambivalent	Queer	Agnostic	Midwest
Jill	Female	Cisgender Female	Asexual/Homoromantic	Christian	South
Karis	Female	Non-Binary	Pansexual	Agnostic	South
Mary	Female	Cisgender Female	Asexual/Aromantic	Christian	South
Sam	Male	Non-Binary	Gay	Christian	South
Skye	Female	Cisgender Female	Queer	Non-Christian	Northwest

D. Data analysis

1. Positive perspective (outlook on life)

Research Question 1: How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered outlook on life at faith-based colleges?

The interview protocol related to one's outlook on life included questions centered around how the participants remembered approaching life during their undergraduate years. Questions explored definitions of success and areas that received the most mental and emotional time and energy. The data showed consistent emphasis in three categories: academics,

community, and identity development. The data also showed specific ways being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community affected the participants' remembered outlook on life. Illustrative data supporting these categories are explained below as well as outliers in the data.

a. Academics

Academic endeavors and accomplishments were a major theme that dominated remembered time and energy spent for most participants. When asked about overall approach to life, participants offered different versions of doing what needed to be done to perform well, graduate, get a good job, and reach a financially independent life status. All of the participants presented as high achievers for whom quitting was not an option. In fact, for many, the overall remembered outlook on life was a determination to exceed expectations, not just meet them.

Dorothy explained

Really, my approach to life in general, at that point, was wanting to be the best at whatever it was that I was doing. So, like with, with school, I had, I wanted to have the best grades I could possibly have, you know, I wanted to with my extracurricular volunteer activities that was to, you know, go out and have the experiences that I needed for my career. And really, that's kind of how I looked at faith too, like I wasn't going half-ass that I was going to do be is a ... I don't know how to phrase it, but I was gonna be the best that I could be. I was never satisfied with half doing anything.

Grace tied her academic endeavors to “not letting anyone down,” and Cameron used the term “academic pressure.” Karis described herself as a “very much study first, play later kind of girl,” and Jill stated, “a lot of my ideas about success came through academics.” Nearly all the participants described themselves as “academically focused.”

Other participants added more pragmatism to this academic focus when asked about approach to life. Charlie explained

I was really just looking to establish a life. {Success} was largely dependent on which jobs I held and more or less if I was making enough money to live entirely independent.

David, Mary and Sam all shared similar perspectives and focused on the end goal of graduating, securing employment, and making money. These goals shaped outlook on life throughout the undergraduate years and fueled a commitment to academics, as well.

b. Community

In addition to academics, participants spent a lot of time and energy finding community and safe relationships. For many, academics and community were the two most prominent drivers of outlook and success. Casey listed them nearly intertwined,

Getting good grades, um, you know, having friends, and having some, like, you know, those college memories of like, you know, hanging out with people a lot.

Cameron went beyond a social focus and named relationships as her primary commitment,

I would say my approach to life during my undergrad years is very much like relationship focused, and friendship focused.

And Charlie named relationships as essential to success, “If I was truly trying to go at it and alone, I -- for one thing I would, I would just outright not succeed.”

Many of the participants mentioned empathy as an aspect of self that grew during the undergraduate years. David noted this growth continuing even now,

One thing I've learned from college is taking a more empathetic role in the world to really understand where everyone's at... and being patient with where they're at. And I think just seeing my own journey, I think I still very much maintain an empathy-based kind of outlook on things.

This commitment to finding, building and enjoying community showed up in the data directly related to identity development work done by the participants. These relationships provided courage and companionships as many participants focused on self-discovery during the undergraduate years.

c. Identity Development

In the midst of academic performance and building relationships, all participants mentioned aspects of identity development when describing their outlook on life. Only 1 of the 11 participants was publicly out in terms of sexual identity and 8 of the 11 had not considered sexual or gender identities outside of cisgender and straight until after they arrived on their respective campuses. Participants spoke of the coming out process and common milestones experienced in the undergraduate years that brought confirmation to their sexual and gender identities. However, with regards to outlook on life, the participants more specifically remembered the conflict between faith and sexual or gender identity. As identities became more and more formed, faith began to shift or be questioned. Dorothy explained:

Surrounding queer people going to faith-based colleges is the religious trauma, and the impact that that does have on your faith. I know a lot of people who have completely walked away from any type of religion after that, or who have deconstructed their faith and just completely, you know, rebuilt it in a new way.

Part of that rebuilding for David was seeing the life of Jesus and the Bible in new ways as a result of conversations and relationships with others. He said,

I think from different experiences I've had from like, professors, or students talking about how their faith intersects with their views on social justice, or their views on healthcare justice, or environmental justice, or things like that, kind of helped me like reshape things where I was like, 'Okay, as a Christian, I think my approach is, you know, to uplift those who have been most marginalized, because that's what Jesus did.'

Jill began to question teachings heard her whole life, as well, and noted,

I started to allow myself to feel emotions... I had a lot of ideas about femininity, and I was very against modesty culture... so it was a lot of, I think figuring out things that I thought were not allowed things that I thought were not Christian, allowing myself to think those things and becoming sort of like a pretty political person in terms of feminism and like, empathy-based politics.

Along with questioning faith, participants found themselves working through internalized homophobia and dissociative patterns that had developed over time. Sam recognized his attraction to men in early adolescence but noted,

I, in that kind of preteen teen age, chose faith, and I'm kind of like a little bit proud of that, and a sense of like, like, I kind of told myself, like, I'm gonna figure out my faith first. And, like... that wasn't the best decision in terms of like repression and stuff, but like, in terms of, like, my relationship with God, it was. And, there was like a sacrifice there, um, in a sense, but I had to deal with my personal rage and, and internalized homophobia... it feels so like shameful to say, in a sense, but it was just like, I was being told you can't be gay and Christian. And, and I hate it. Like, I wanted to be a Christian. But I was gay. And that's where it kind of rooted from.

This line of questioning and identity development work also resulted in participants questioning institutional culture and climate. Cameron explained an important shift in her thinking,

I'm depressed and anxious and like, terrified all the time. Must be because I'm gay. And then like to, to make that shift from like, I am gay. That's not why I'm depressed and anxious. Inherently, I'm depressed and anxious, because like, this is a horrible place for gay people. And so I think even that shift from like, seeing myself as the problem to seeing, like, the problems that were existing outside of me, and like seeing them as things that could potentially be changed, or challenged, or like have attention drawn to them, was a huge shift for the way I saw myself and the way I saw the world.

While the traditional undergraduate years often house important stages of identity development in all students (Morgan, 2012), these points of questioning held a particular tension for the participants. The reasons for this tension were illuminated when the participants were asked how their sexual and gender identities affect their perspectives on success and overall approach to life.

d. The LGBTQIA+ lens on outlook

The data on how minoritized sexual and gender identities affect outlook on life show an internalized pressure to perform at a higher level and a significant mental health burden as a result of campus climate. As is consistent with identity development theory, the minoritized

aspects of the participants' identities came to the fore of their cognizance. This heightened awareness of these identities that felt "in contrast" to the campus climate brought on mental health challenges. Dorothy described this internalized pressure saying,

I think in a lot of ways, not only being a woman, but also being queer. I feel sometimes I feel like I have to do better than the straight girls to be like, wherever I go. And that was especially the case of union because I knew that if they found out about me, it would be within their legal rights to, you know, expel me, but I made them look too good. And that, in a way was kind of my protection. I was the only person of my major and that school. And um like I double majored and I had awesome grades and I was in charge of all these clubs and everything and I was very much -- I very much embodied what they wanted out of their students in a lot of ways except -- except who I was, as a person in general.

Casey shared these sentiments but added her faith convictions as a complicating factor to the equation,

I say an opinion that people don't agree with, people are immediately going to assume it's because I'm queer, that that's what my pain is, and to sort of write it off. And then especially coupled with the fact that I'm not Christian, that was a double whammy of like, I think people maybe could have excused one of those things. But together, I'm just like, this flaming homosexual sinner that doesn't believe in God. So, I think I had to, like, work way harder to be perceived as like a smart person with legitimate opinions and kind of a valid outlook.

This sense of pressure coupled with experiences of systemic racism and microaggressions gave David a unique perspective as he explained,

It feels like we are just taught to give in to the norm, and to kind of, quote unquote, "go on the side of the oppressor"... when you just feel so burdened about, like, maintaining this level of success, because this is what the dominant culture says, then you suffocate.

In addition to a pressure to perform or conform, was the ever-present descriptions of anxiety, fear and isolation due to campus climate. All participants described institutional behavioral codes that restricted expression of sexual and gender identities to varying degrees. Some campuses only restricted sexual expression outside the context of marriage but also reserved marriage for one man and one woman. Other campuses forbid any same-sex dating;

others forbid claiming non-hetero sexual identities or gender identities not aligning with birth sex. More than one campus also forbade expressions of allyship with persons in the LGBTQIA+ community. When asked if LGBTQIA+ students experience behavioral codes differently than straight students, Skye commented,

I mean, it's the same for straight students in that, like, straight students aren't supposed to be having sex out of marriage. But like straight students can hold hands and cuddle and canoodle in the cafeteria, or whatever, whereas queer students would just have to be friends doing that.

All participants remembered signing these behavioral codes at their corresponding institutions each year. They also were keenly aware that breaking these codes would signal disciplinary action. Dorothy explained,

The most legitimate, like fear for my, you know, ability to stay enrolled at that school was reslife... most of the Code of Conduct was enforced by residence life. You know, like I said, our campus Code of Conduct was, you know, no homosexual acts, no homosexual thoughts, no homosexual support, and none of that, no, and they were even harder on you know, anything along the lines of being transgender.

Participants all recounted some level of fear or anxiety surrounding these behavioral codes. Many stated these codes were exceptionally harsh for transgender or gender non-conforming students. So, while their outlook on life did focus on academics, community, and identity development, all of those realities were colored by these unique layers specific to identities in conflict with institutional culture. This caused a significant shift in self-perceptions and mental health throughout the undergraduate years for the participants.

e. Outliers

Outliers in the data pertaining to outlook on life showed up in cases where a heightened amount of intersectionality was present. Dorothy commented on her outlook being vastly

different from her peers due to educational background, socio-economic class, and exposure to diversity in her childhood. She noted,

But there were there were many times if I was talking to, you know, people of the group that I just mentioned, really, anyone who was a, um, you know, supposed to be there, the, you could just tell that we approached life very differently, and I actually noticed that a lot more my freshman year, coming in, I had a lot of culture shock, because I was from Memphis, Tennessee, you know, I was I was very much used to being one of the only white kids in class. And, you know, I grew up in neighbor in a neighborhood where most of my neighbors were black or Hispanic, and which is part of the reason that I wanted to major in Spanish. And my family was like, probably like, you know, lower middle class and not Baptist, you know, growing up Pentecostal by itself like that. Just that slight deviation in within evangelicalism set me apart. Not to mention the gay thing, but the biggest difference is I went to public school. And a lot of them were homeschooled or private school. And that by itself, just was so different, and made my outlook so different.

Participants who held multiple racial identities or who had dated individuals with multiple aspects of identity to consider also highlighted racial inequality and institutional fit as large factors in how they approached life.

f. Field notes and journal entries

Questions related to outlook on life seemed to generate the most pause or confusion. Interviews that occurred early were able to inform the line of questioning in subsequent interviews. Field notes from earlier interviews note more explanation and even prodding as to what the researcher meant by “overall approach to life.” Clarifications using terms like “glass half full or half empty” helped significantly. Additionally, as the journaling and analysis began, data pertaining to outlook on life consistently showed up at alternative places in the interview protocol. One journal entry noted a comment made by Dorothy that mentioned “walking on eggshells” and another from Karis about “feeling watched.” The journal entry ended with the summary statement, “They are all talking about this anxiety without naming it. I wonder if they

have ever named it? It seems pervasive to their experiences and detrimental to mental health; however, they speak about it like an old friend.”

All journal entries and field notes reported participants speaking about fear and anxiety in a matter-of-fact way with little to no emotion. Any emotion that was shown was more aligned with exasperation or hindsight humor not grief or distress. Journal entries noted this is just the way it is: participants are resigned to needing to prove themselves, fighting as the underdog, and living with a focus of not getting “caught” so they can finish school.

g. Answer to RQ1

With these themes, data and journal entries in mind, LGBTQIA+ alumnix described their remembered experiences of outlook on life as committed to academics with a desire for self-understanding, community and belonging. They also described their remembered experiences on outlook on life as fearful and anxious due to institutional behavioral codes.

2. Social connectedness

Research question two: How do LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered social connectedness at faith-based colleges?

Interview protocol related to social connected aimed to identify key pathways to belonging experienced by the participants. These questions focused on strongest remembered places of connection, as well as the ways they remembered contributing to campus during their undergraduate years. The participants were asked to explore factors that hindered connectedness and factors that acted as catalysts for it. Finally, the participants were asked to reflect on how their sexual or gender identity influenced their experiences of connection and belonging. The data show evidence of both positive and negative experiences acting as pathways to connection. The positive experiences are more relational in nature, while the negative experiences are more

cultural. Data detailing these experiences and the ways sexual and gender identity affected connectedness and belonging are described below. Outliers and researcher journal data are also discussed.

a. Positive experiences as pathways to belonging

i. Faculty/staff mentors

All but one participant spoke of the importance of faculty and staff mentors as primary pathways to connection and belonging. In addition to encouraging and supporting excellent scholarship with the participants, these persons went beyond the classroom relationships and specifically sought students out to inquire about personal well-being. Many participants were careful to distinguish the faculty from the institution. Cameron explained,

I will say that I think the sociology department was a very, a wonderful exception to campus culture. I had a lot of incredible professors in the sociology department who were affirming of LGBTQ students, and who did make space in ways that the school as a whole often didn't.

Grace also affirmed this distinction and said,

It's important to me to distinguish the institution from the faculty because I had a lot of amazing, excellent experiences with faculty at the college; a lot of them taught me like incredibly valuable things. They were very, like, openly pushing the envelope on so many different things.

Faculty were also instrumental in helping participants find additional points of connection.

Participants noted faculty helping them find research groups, clubs, and other safe spaces that provided opportunities to contribute to campus life and scholastic conversations within various academic disciplines. Dorothy specifically stated,

I also had really two really, really good professors who I talked to all the time, who really mentored me and helped me connect with other people. They were very important.

Both faculty and staff were also mentioned by participants as spaces in which they could explore their sexual and gender identities, places they could bring their whole self to the room. Often times, this would include challenging discussions on different ways to see the world. Mary noted,

She really encouraged me, in and out of the classroom, to not see people as one dimensional. She helped me to embrace all aspects of my identity.

Sam had similar reflections about his work study supervisor, but added a more personal, parental dimension,

My boss who was an LGBT ally, she was pretty much like my mother in college... I came out to her pretty early into me getting hired just because she felt safe and had always offered, you know, just like "I'm here if you need anything." And, I confided in her a lot. And she was kind of like my shelter.

All descriptions of faculty and staff mentors shared by participants included language of safety and openness. When asked what factors encouraged connectedness and belonging, all but one participant named a member of the faculty or staff or specific academic departments within the college. All of these participants also spoke of academic research or projects of which they were very proud; these projects were linked to these faculty/staff relationships.

ii. Other LGBTQIA+ students and allies

In addition to academic experiences of connectedness and belonging, all participants noted the importance of positive experiences in social connectedness and belonging with like-minded people. These experiences also provided a safe space for the whole self to be known. These peer relationships were noted as crucial pathways to belonging, specifically in living situations. All participants stressed the impact of roommates and shared similar sentiments to Dorothy who said,

Having good roommates was vital for me, because that was one place that I did not have to be in the closet. And one place that I could, you know, have my

girlfriend over, or be able to talk about things. And of course, two of my roommates were also queer in some form. So that helped as well.

Outside of roommates, participants also noted the solidarity and courage that developing relationships with other LGBTQIA+ students provided. All participants shared stories of coming out to different peers on campus and of holding the coming out stories of others. Charlie remembered the gravity of one specific conversation saying,

I came out to a friend and said, “I’m pretty sure I’m asexual not 100% certain.” And he confided in me that he was bisexual. And we had lengthy conversation about it at a coffee shop the subsequent week. And it was honestly a fascinating point in time, because at that point, I didn’t know any other queer people on campus and then gained the knowledge that I wasn’t alone.

Some of the participants specifically noted the community and safety that certain social media groups brought to them. Private Facebook groups provided a way to find other LGBTQIA+ students and alumnix who were associated with the college without putting anyone in danger. Two of the participants noted they still are active in these groups, check up on other LGBTQIA+ alumnix, and serve as mentors to current students. Overall, these peer connections whether in person or online provided a key pathway to belonging. All participants noted that this sense of community and solidarity was important in their ability to persist to graduation at their respective colleges.

iii. Cocurricular involvement

Cocurricular experiences on campus were also noted as positive experiences that served as points of connection for participants. These experiences ranged from writing for the school newspaper to singing in the choir to Greek life to participating in activism on campus. No matter the setting described, all participants noted the sense of connection that stemmed from working towards a common goal with a group of people. In these places, the connections that were formed were not exclusively with other queer students or with allies. Dorothy noted,

Getting involved with the volunteer opportunities that I did, finding people that were passionate about the same things as me, that's actually probably where I was able to make friends with people who were the most unlike me – people who shared that common interest, working alongside people being put on a volunteer team, a mentor team, for a young adult with intellectual disability.

Sam mentioned a similar dynamic in Greek life, connecting with cisgender straight men, and Skye talked about being really proud of the community she helped build in the choir, regardless of different aspects of identity. Mary and Grace noted a great sense of purpose in writing for the newspaper and leaning into the activist opportunities that sprouted from many of those articles and interviews. These latter stories began to bridge into negative experiences that also acted as significant pathways to belonging.

b. Negative experiences as pathways to belonging

i. Harassment

Nearly half of the participants noted specific instances of harassment during their undergraduate years. They described the events as extremely painful and difficult; however, they also explained how they experienced a sense of community during or in the wake of these events. All participants shared stories of non-affirming groups or speakers being invited to campus, but three of these stories resulted in harassment of LGBTQIA+ students by fellow students or community members. Cameron shared how one of these events became important connection for her,

That was kind of a catalyst for a lot of campus activism among my group of friends. It was the first time during my time there that like, they couldn't pretend that we didn't exist anymore.

And Grace also noted the survival skills gained in the midst of these events and how her race uniquely influenced her ability to see these circumstances in a positive light,

Like being queer in college was not great. But I think, especially as a white person, being queer in college gave me the opportunity to like, learn how to advocate and stick up for myself and for others. In kind of, like a, like, you're thrown into water, and you got to learn how to swim kind of way.

This resolve and momentum were also described by two other participants. These experiences of harassment revealed other students who were affected by these events, and new connections formed around mutual hurt, frustration and commitment to change.

ii. Microaggressions

All of the participants shared finding safe people and spaces by the end of their undergraduate years. However, they also all shared examples of microaggressions, specifically as freshman and specifically in the residence halls. These microaggressions varied in form. Some were thrown away comments from a peer saying they thought so-and-so was gay and expressing concern or judgement about that. Others were non-verbal cues like Casey explained,

I remember we had hung a pride flag in our dorm room. And the interactions that I had with people after that was up, were interesting, where it's like, nobody said anything to me, but there were just people that didn't make eye contact with me and didn't talk to me anymore.

Two other participants talked about believing their Resident Assistants had been charged with meeting with them, befriending them, and confirming their gender or sexual identity in order to initiate a discipline process or save them from sin. David explained how the residence life culture affected him as a person of color,

I was the only person of color. I was not the only queer person on my floor. I learned that much later on later. But it was difficult, I would say, because talking to people who had these views about race and who had a lot of microaggressions about East Asians, it was that one that was tough.

In addition to the residence halls, participants named several other campus spaces that proved to be difficult – the classroom, academic sponsored debates, and chapel to name a few.

Again, these negative experiences aided the participants in “ruling out” who was not safe and discovering others who were safe based on their reactions to similar situations.

iii. Religious services

Only one of the institutions represented in the study did not require students to attend chapel several times per week. Participants at the other institutions noted religious services as events that caused consistent anxiety, illuminating the general “otherness” felt while enrolled at the college. These services reiterated the tension between faith identity and sexual identity that many participants experienced internally. However, particularly for several participants who did not identify as Christian or who had reconciled their faith and sexual identity, these services acted as confirmation of unsafe people and bonding experiences with others. Cameron explained,

He was talking about drug addicts like being healed and you know, never touching drugs, again, talking about like, all this stuff and like in a list of things like drug, drug addicts, rapists, pedophiles, he then like offhandedly mentions, like, you know, lesbians who pray to God and walk away from the lifestyle forever, and people clapped. And like, that was not the first time something like that had happened in Chapel.

Participants noted these services as weekly reminders that they did not “fit” at the school. Some of this fit surrounded sexual ethics, but much more of it was centered on the college’s emphasis on and celebration of sexual purity, heterosexual marriage and biological procreation. Mary noted,

At least in terms of being ace/aro, I couldn’t stand the chapels on relationships, which were an annual thing, if I remember correctly. I always felt somewhat subhuman after those, like I wasn’t a real person or a real Christian because I had no interest in relationships or marriage.

This focus carried through to other participant experiences on campus, as well.

iv. Heteronormative focus

All eleven participants described what they termed a “ring by spring culture.” Some participants also noted the goal of the “M.R.S. degree” and others replaced part of the college name with “wedding” or “bride.” This focus of marriage as a primary end goal of the undergraduate years was prevalent in the participants’ memories. Finding and securing a spouse was described by many participants as a key part of being successful. Dorothy even noted its enmeshment with academics,

There were people I knew people who when they would get into new relationships would go and have lunch with some of their professors and get advice and it was just like your romantic endeavors were very intertwined with your success there.

Participants said finding other students who were not achieving this goal and not resonating with this goal was an easy way to find safe spaces and places of belonging. Many of them laughed while recounting how they would poke fun at this aspect campus climate with friends and even faculty. Jill described how one particular class released her from previous frameworks surrounding marriage and how the class encouraged her faith,

My family had been really into not just the nuclear family, but specifically, that marriage was very important to what a Christian is, um, and that was really confusing to me. So I had internalized a lot of that. And when we read Augustine in my honors course. I was like, “Oh, my gosh, wait, I can be a good Christian and then not get married?” And they were like, “absolutely.” And I was like, “Oh, thank God. That’s what I wanted, like finally.”

All participants mentioned struggling with self-worth and value against the background of this clear model of success. And those who found competing narratives also found safety. This focus on heterosexual marriage, the nuclear family, and procreation ended up being a primary experience that separated unsafe spaces from safe spaces for participants.

c. LGBTQIA+ lens on social connectedness

These various signals along with the necessity and ability to identify them was a major component of how sexual and gender identity influenced experiences with social connectedness. All participants described a need to hide parts of themselves until they knew if a space or person was safe. This disassociation or compartmentalizing became second nature. Whether a participant was out or not, they felt the need to hold back. Sam explained,

I just didn't reveal too much about myself because I didn't want to be discriminated against. I just navigated being closeted and would drop my voice a little bit, don't wave my hands or limp wrist just suppress it and try to be viewed as successful or popular and positive by other people who clearly don't support LGBT.

Dorothy expressed tiring of this and decided on a different approach,

I'm very extroverted person I could really you know, talk to anyone or pretend to like anyone for the duration of a short conversation but whether or not, we could actually be friends hinged very much on whether or not I could be out to that person. Because it was just too stressful for me to have to compartmentalize who I could tell things and who I couldn't.

Over half of the participants expressed feeling this need to hold part of them back with family, as well. The majority of the participants are out to their families but several of them did not come out to them until after the undergraduate years. Participants consistently commented that this withholding really affected how close they could get with people, campus community and family alike. Some called it a "stiff barrier" while others said it "narrowed the scope" of potential for community. In general, they expressed their sexual and gender identity was a disadvantage in the process of finding and forming community.

d. Outliers

There were two outliers in the data regarding remembered experiences of social connectedness. Two of the participants were able to find and connect with a local church that was affirming of LGBTQIA+ persons. These local congregations were significant points of

safety and connection for these participants. None of the other participants even mentioned attending a local church in the interview process.

Two different participants mentioned a campus mental health therapist as a significant point of connectedness. The therapists served as safe and encouraging spaces to process multiple dimensions of identity. While other participants mentioned therapy, it was not with specific emphasis on places of connection. Also, while these therapists are staff members, they are considered outliers in this study due to the distinctions created by confidentiality laws.

e. Field Notes and Journal Entries

Data points relevant to this research questions came from every section of the interview protocol. Reflections on outlook on life, diversity, and thriving were all impacted by connection. Because of this, a large percentage of the field notes and journal entries centered on connectedness. These entries noted a lot of expressed emotion. When describing a group of close friends, a significant roommate or a faculty mentor, the countenance of the participants lightened and softened considerably. One entry noted, “These relationships are significant enough to ‘erase’ a lot of the hard spaces.” Conversely, when describing a hard space or an instance of harassment, the participants seemed strangely emotionless. These were just events that happened that led to an important shared experience with friends.

The topic that evoked the most frustration and disgust was the focus on marriage and family. Several participants were very animated when describing this aspect of campus climate. Others were visibly angry about it, raising their voices and rolling their eyes. One journal entry quotes Dorothy saying, “The culture was just not set up for me” with a follow-up note next to it that says, “set up is an interesting choice of words. She is nonchalantly resigned to this fact. It’s just a fact. She expects little.” Participants felt this “outsider” feeling even in the midst of strong

points of belonging. Additionally, all of these points of belonging seemingly exist “outside” the institutional culture. The impact of sexual and gender identity on these experiences cannot be overstated. Journal entries liken the entire process of finding connection to a strategic board game with serious consequences for a misstep.

f. Answer to RQ2

With the data, field notes, and journal entries in mind, LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered experiences of social connectedness are tied to both positive and negative experiences during the undergraduate years. The positive experiences are tied to relationships and the negative experiences are tied to institutional culture or specific events. All of the experiences seem to be explicitly impacted by sexual and/or gender identity.

3. Diverse citizenship

Research question 3: How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered interactions with diversity at faith-based colleges?

All of the institutions represented in this study are predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The geographic location of each institution did influence the race and ethnicity of the largest minoritized group of students, but these data points did not affect the overall data pertaining to this research question. Diversity questions in the interview protocol asked participants to generally describe the college’s relationship with or commitment to diversity and inclusion. Following general statements, the questions asked students to reflect on experiences in the classroom and with peers that challenged them to think differently about something. The data collected through these questions can be divided into experiences with institutional diversity and experiences with interpersonal diversity.

a. Institutional diversity

ii. Racial diversity emphasized

All of the participants expressed some sort of commitment from the university to protect students who have minoritized racial identities. The language describing these commitments ranged from explicitly protecting to actively pursuing racial diversity in the student body and in faculty/staff representation. Regardless of where the institution fell on this spectrum of descriptions, all participants noted an exclusive emphasis on racial diversity. Two institutions had explicit policies of protection for LGBTQIA+ students (while also upholding behavioral codes attached to sexual expression) and others institutions included LGBTQIA+ protections in campus rhetoric but did not have a corresponding policy. When describing the diversity culture, Dorothy explained,

It's a necessary evil for them, in a lot of ways. They do a lot of superficial appearance-based things to diversify their enrollment. Really just for the sake of diversifying their enrollment and improving their image, but they don't really make any real efforts to put people of color in leadership or force, any type of, you know, LGBTQ diversity is not tolerated at all.

And Cameron noted, “They (administration) tried to celebrate diversity that they didn't actually have and ignore the diversity that they did have.”

As the participants reflected on the institutional commitment to diversity, there was a recurring theme of policy over practice. At several points in the data, participants remembered hearing a lot about diversity but struggling to see a lot of action in line with the policies. This lack of action was experienced in an expressed commitment to provide spaces to process but an eventual backfire in those spaces where queer students left feeling less than safe or heard. Other spaces only allowed for certain opinions or conclusions. Cameron described this,

I think there were a lot of instances of dialogue being theoretically encouraged. But oftentimes, with like, the assumption that like, this is still the conclusion, we're supposed to end up at the end.

These restricted approaches to dialog and emphasis on racial diversity nearly exclusively made it difficult for participants to see themselves in the diversity conversations at their institutions.

ii. Support groups

This spirit of restriction was also felt with regards to support groups. Five of the participants spoke about LGBTQIA+ support groups on campus and all of the data in these sections posit these groups as a secret on campus or as unhelpful. Many of these groups were not publicized or official clubs of the university. Participants described them as “secret gay club” and Casey explained,

Privately known, the university Chaplin has, like, what I call secret gay group, um, which was like a Bible study with her and all the gay students that were really in despair about their sexuality. I think it was really for the people that were like, “God hates me and I'm going to hell,” and so she would be like, “no, you're not; God loves you.” But then she'd be like, “but also, be alone forever.”

Other participants described groups that were sponsored by the university, but the purpose of the groups was unclear or unhelpful. Some felt it was a mark of shame to be invited to these groups. Some anticipated an atmosphere similar to a gay-straight alliance but then either experienced a group of straight people wanting gay students to help them legitimize the group or a group that was really for queer students albeit advertised as an awareness effort.

One of the participants did express a lot of gratitude for the group on campus and said she appreciated a designated space to bring in guest speakers to talk about gender and sexuality. This group was also open to everyone on campus but, generally, only queer students came. However, the same participant communicated a change in leadership in the group as a result of conflicting loyalties between the faculty leader and institutional policies. Other participants also noted

faculty or staff leaving due to the tension. Overall, these groups were described with conflicting purposes, but a general disappointment in the execution of the groups on the part of the institution.

iii. Feelings of betrayal

This lack of clarity, and in some cases, transparency from the university led to many participants expressing feelings of betrayal toward the institution. The data show consistent good intentions spoken by the university and consistent lack of follow-through experienced by participants. One common example of lack of follow-through was university statements. All of the participants were enrolled during national events surrounding protests, hate crimes, and death at the hands of law enforcement. Participants expressed a desire to hear from the university regarding these events but never did. Other participants described hate speech, online harassment, and public protests on their campuses that occurred without direct response from the university. All of these data points included language of betrayal. Some participants experienced this betrayal as erasure. Cameron noted,

But as far as, as far as queerness goes, it was very much a don't ask, don't tell situation. And when the queer issues were discussed, in Chapel or in class, it was the language was as if like, those people aren't here, though. It was always talking about like, this outside group of people.

In addition to erasure, other participants experienced betrayal in a lack of stated institutional protection from harassment and harm. Charlie noted,

At the very least 5% of students at the college, I would say, are in the LGBT community, and those are students that feared that their rights, their safety, and their humanity was something that was not guaranteed to be respected by others on campus.

Others experienced betrayal more broadly and more attached to themes of connection, belonging and “mission fit.” Mary explained,

I thought the mission was the gospel, that it was “Christ over all,” but it was really, at least in my experience, “Christ over some” - if you look like us, believe like us, have relationships like us, have money like us, vote like us, and act like us in excluding others, too. I think the college was trying to say that everyone is welcome. Which is really easy to say and tie Christian values to, but anytime that someone actually tries to make everyone welcome, it blows up.

This “bait and switch” feeling was expressed by over half of the participants. The data show reiterations of the college not being honest about how it really feels about LGBTQIA+ students on campus and describes a “don’t ask; don’t tell” climate. Many ended their reflections with statements that called for the institution to admit it does not want queer students on campus.

iv. Difference in the classroom

Although institutional stances on and support of queerness were wrought with confusion and tensions, all of the participants described instances in the classroom where they felt challenged to consider a subject in a new light. Most participants noted a broadening of people types encountered in the undergraduate years. Suddenly, they were sitting in classes with people who expressed different beliefs, came from different denominational backgrounds, and held different political opinions. This change in social landscape created a more diverse classroom environment, and faculty navigated this environment with a lot of intentionality and grace. Sam explained,

I encountered people that believed different than me and also made me mad. But we were very much pressed civility on us and like, respect people, essentially. And I hadn't encountered that before, just because I've never been told that and so it's kind of like, “okay, even if you literally hate my guts, if you're gonna respect me, I'll do the same.

Beyond civility, other participants noted key faculty challenging their perspectives on the creation story, the Trinity, feminism and the role of women in the church. In the midst of feelings of betrayal, the participants did remember being challenged in the classroom to consider different perspective and to respect all people.

b. Interpersonal diversity

The theme of interpersonal diversity emerged through questions about learning from others and how sexual and gender identity influenced perspectives on diversity. The tenor of these data points stood in contrast to those included under institutional diversity. When describing relationships with students who owned different identities or held different opinions, participants led with empathy. In the classroom setting, Cameron described,

I think also, in those conversations, where we were talking about people, as if they were not in the room, made me more sensitive to other issues like when we talked about race or immigration. I feel like it made me more empathetic to noticing who was in the room and imagining how they were perceiving this conversation. I don't think I would have become quite as attuned to that if it weren't for my own identity, my own experiences in that context.

This language of empathy was expressed by over half of the participants, specifically with regards to experiences of students of color. Participants acknowledged they did not know what it was like to be a person of color but did know what it was like to feel excluded. This commonality helped them be more intentional in listening to and learning from students of color.

Dorothy also had significant contact with persons living with a disability and mentioned,

Being gay isn't the same as having a disability, but we've gone through a lot of similar experiences. And I could, you know, sympathize with them, very well, because the campus culture wasn't really made for them either.

She went on to say, "I knew what it was like to be just enough like everyone else to blend in, but not enough like everyone else to actually feel like I belonged."

Other participants described this feeling of difference in the context of belonging, as well, and explained how they often found belonging with those who also felt like outsiders. All of the participants mentioned gravitating toward students who were minoritized in some way. This gravitation was motivated by more than just empathy; it was motivated by genuine commonality and connection. Data points included statements that expressed an automatic willingness to

connect if the person was different in some way. Difference was one of the strongest pathways to connection and belonging for the participants. The difference could be skin color, ableness, belief system, or shared experiences outside of the behavioral codes. Regardless, difference was the catalyst to belonging.

Being in relationship with a diverse group of students also resulted in gained perspective on different value systems, political affiliations, and experiences. More than the classroom, participants described significant change in thinking or behavior because of conversations they had with friends. Mary said,

I have friends of different racial, ethnic, socio-economic backgrounds which really helped my college experience a lot, just expanding my mind, and what the college would call my “worldview.” I’m grateful for my friends always pushing me to be a better person, sharing their experiences, and knowing that we don’t have to agree on everything to be friends.

Other participants noted significant challenges to their “white-centric” views, and three mentioned relationships with missionary kids who held a different perspective still on culture and politics due to their “third culture” experiences. Overall, the data show empathy, understanding, and even an excitement to learn from others who are different and to find belonging in those relationships.

c. Outliers

One outlier in the data spoke more of recognizing privilege and feeling called to advocacy than identifying with difference and finding belonging there. Both participants who mentioned this spoke from a more cerebral place, and detailed realizations that their experiences could have been much worse, but they were smart and white and financially stable, so they really could not begin to identify with queer students of color or students of color, in general. These

data contrasted the majority of data that focused on connection and empathy and gained perspective.

d. Field Notes and Journal Entries

Field notes taken during this portion of the interview included a lot of exclamation points and question marks. Exclamation points notated significant passion or emotion expressed by the participants, and question marks notated a perceived gap in logic or lack of understanding by the researcher. The primary emotion noted in journal entries was exasperation. Participants seemed exasperated and even cynical during conversations about institutional approaches to diversity. With some participants this exasperation turned to anger or sarcasm when describing experiences of betrayal. Others were able to express hurt and sadness. Throughout all of these emotions, there was a resilience and a pride in coming to these resolutions, one journal entry noted a participant “being the bigger man” compared to the university. Entries also communicated a resignation surrounding these interviews; the participants had little to no hope of these realities changing.

The question marks were linked to journal entries that wondered about how these experiences and perspectives intersected with campus policies. Participants spoke about policies, but why did this group of alumnix consistently see a lack of follow through? Would the institution agree? In the instance of lack of policy, can there be lack of follow through? Can a college have success in diversity without including sexual and gender minorities? With institutional statements against Critical Race Theory?

These questions were followed with questions about relational signaling. All of the participants implied they were able to find community with others who are different; some said they “just knew.” But what are the non-verbal signals that students send out resulting in connection? Is it word of mouth? Clothing? Interests? These entries were interwoven with data

pertinent to social connectedness. So many of these data points also speak to positive and negative pathways to belonging. Does it matter how one gets to a state of belonging?

e. Answer to RQ3

According to the data and journal entries, participants remembered interactions with institutional diversity to be anemic, disappointing and nearly exclusively focused on racial diversity. However, the participants remembered interactions with diverse students as a significant place of connection and belonging.

4. Thriving

Research question 4: How do LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe the general concept of thriving during college?

Because much of the interview protocol was designed around Schreiner's (2010) Thriving Quotient tool, the fourth research question aimed to explore how participants thought about this term as it relates to the undergraduate years. Questions focused on definitions of thriving, self-assessments on remembered levels of thriving, and advice participants had for other LGBTQIA+ students studying at their respective faith-based colleges.

a. Definitions

All but two participants defined thriving as something "beyond basic survival." Participants described the journey of self-acceptance as essential to thriving – paying attention to your emotions, checking in with yourself, setting boundaries, lack of shame, and the freedom to ask questions. Cameron noted,

I think thriving during undergraduate years is the ability to ask questions without fear. And I think that that applies to both the intellectual and academic aspect of undergraduate years as well as like the personal identity formation.

Others resonated with the expansion of the mind or changing throughout college. Mary explained, “You shouldn’t be the same person you were when you started college. You should be better.” For her and for others, this change was often a result of enduring hardship or persevering through tough challenges. These challenges helped to expand the mind and open up the person to new levels of knowledge and experience.

Another category of data pertaining to thriving was community. All of the participants noted having good friends and safe spaces as essential to thriving. Many named community as the key helping factor in keeping grades up and mental health in check. Community was needed in order to endure the challenges and exercise the grit. With this in mind, Casey explained his perspective on thriving at a faith-based college:

I don't think it's possible for queer students to thrive at a Christian University unless it is affirming. I think thriving is people accepting kind of your whole humanity, the idea that you can like love the love the sinner but hate the sin is completely taking away people's humanity to love other people, to have relationships. And there's no possible way for people to thrive there, even if they think it in the moment they are.

b. Self-evaluations

This statement foreshadowed many of the self-evaluation concerning thriving. Overall, the majority of participants asserted that they believe they did thrive during college. However, all but one named significant qualifiers to that assertion. Dorothy said she thrived, “but it was stressful.” David, Karis, and Jill said they thrived by their senior year because of living off campus or having settled into personal sexual and gender identity more. Charlie and Grace said yes, but probably because they had more privileges (white, het-passing, academically gifted) and their definitions of thriving were more survival-oriented.

Casey and Cameron both said they did not believe they thrived. Cameron made distinctions between thriving and survival and said,

I think a lot of thriving is just like not being in survival mode. And I guess I was in survival mode all of college. And I think that a lot of that was the fear of what am I going to learn about myself? What am I going to learn about what the world thinks of people like myself? Yeah, I think if I had been able to ask questions about the world and myself without threats, and fear and anxiety, looming the entire time, I might have been able to experience thriving rather than survival.

Casey remarked that he did “a lot of cool things on paper” but did not thrive.

These self-reflections prompted follow-up questions about whether the participants would choose to do the undergraduate years again at the same faith-based college. Despite all of the data supporting negative experiences, poor mental health, and feelings of betrayal, an overwhelming majority of participants answered, “yes.” Grace admitted that she, in general, does not like to regret anything, but the others named the relationships gained during the undergraduate years as the reason for their answer. All of them said the undergraduate experience was hard, but they could not imagine life without those years and the relationships gained made the difficult spaces worth the hurt felt. Some said they would “do some things differently,” but the overall answer was “yes.”

c. Advice to others

Although the participants answered, “yes” to doing the undergrad years again, they all had different advice for other LGBTQIA+ students choosing a college today. Of the 11 participants, 7 would advise future students to go somewhere else. Jill added emphasis specifically for trans and non-binary persons,

Don't go there and go somewhere else. But especially I'd say being queer at the college is - can be like a bad experience. I can't fathom being trans or non-binary at the college; I can't imagine that. I think that would be very damaging. Like, to any trans folk, I would say, that's like really damaging.

Other participants echoed Jill's fears of damage and, generally, wished for more acceptance and freedom for future students. Cameron even stated she hoped non-affirming theology would be a

thing of the past someday. Dorothy recognized the fact that students don't always know they are gay when they enter college and said,

If they were freshmen, I'd say don't go. And I say that, because like I said, you get trapped. Once you do your first two years at a private Christian school, you might as well stay. Otherwise, it's gonna take you six years to graduate, you're never going to get out. But I also would not have wished a lot of what I went through on anybody. And if they had a chance to bypass it, I would encourage them to go the other way to go somewhere where they can be accepted.

Participants noted they realize some students do not have a choice as to where they go to college. They named family influence, finances, and a desire to be in a Christian environment all as factors that contribute to many LGBTQIA+ students enrolling at faith-based colleges. In these cases, participants advised future students to find safe spaces as quickly as possible.

All 11 participants advised future students to “find your people” if you want a chance at thriving during the undergraduate years. Some urged students to find safe people for the purpose of belonging and connection. Others explained why having safe people is essential for safety on campus, and David qualified that your safe people should be “willing to fight for you.” All participants also cautioned students to choose community carefully, and Karis specifically said to choose people who “are not going to turn right around and rat on you.” In addition to safe peers, both Grace and Skye named specific faculty members and academic departments that are safe for LGBTQIA+ students. They encouraged new students to find these advocated right away.

d. Outliers

Two participants defined thriving more in terms of survival. These descriptions resulted in data outliers of persisting to graduation or having food, water, and shelter. Both of these participants spoke of connections, personal growth and discovery at other points in the interview, but they did not attach these themes to thriving like the other participants did.

e. Field Notes and Journal Entries

Initial journal entries for each participant interview include reflections on the definitions of thriving. In general, the reflections note a “low bar” for thriving as perceived by the researcher. About halfway through the interviews, comparative journal entries list out Schreiner’s (2010) categories that contribute to thriving – positive outlook (grit), sense of community, openness to learning from others, and academic engagement/determination. The journal entries noted the presence of these factors but they seemed to be chased by qualifiers or surrounded by experiences or reflections that were negative.

Additionally, the journal entries include an understanding to avoid regret and a difficulty in imagining a reality other than what is. Therefore, the willingness to do the undergraduate years again made some sense. However, the strong advice given to enroll elsewhere seemed important. One journal entry said, “Don’t we often wish for better experiences for those after us? And often revise our painful experiences to focus on the positive “I got through it” aspects? How does affect the emergent theory? Experiences verses realities – subjective realities verses objective realities.” Overall, journal entries questioned the alignment between Schreiner’s (2010) definition of thriving and that of the participants. Also, the importance of connection and belonging was, again, emphasized as crucial.

f. Answer to RQ4

Based on data themes and journal entries, LGBTQIA+ alumnix described the concept of thriving as some form of personal growth and development in the midst of social connectedness. They remembered the undergraduate years with a lot of pride concerning persistence, but would not advise future students to enroll at these institutions if they have a choice. If they do enroll, participants advised students to find safe spaces with peers and faculty as soon as possible.

E. Chapter Summary

This chapter gave an overview of the current study including purpose, importance and research design. The chapter also reported data collection methods and measures employed to ensure trustworthiness of the data. Outliers in the data, field notes, and journal entries were considered in the data analysis. The chapter concluded with the results of the current study, which were organized by research question.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

A. Introduction

The chapter provides a discussion of the findings, limitations, and implications for future research and practice related to the current study. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the study. Next, the findings of the study are presented via the emergent theory formed through the data analysis process. Then, the chapter presents the known limitations of the study and discusses recommendations for practice and future research. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of pertinent connections between the literature, theoretical frameworks, and themes that emerged in the study.

B. Summary of the study

Student experiences are an important part of the undergraduate college years. Studying student narratives gives important insight to successful pedagogical methods, impactful student programming and more (Astin, 1993). The purpose for conducting the current study was to explore the undergraduate experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix who attended faith-based colleges. The exploration aimed to develop a constructivist grounded theory pertaining to student experiences within the intrapersonal and interpersonal categories of Schreiner's (2010) Thriving Quotient. These categories were: positive perspective (outlook on life), diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010a).

The study was guided by the theoretical frameworks of College Students' Sense of Belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) and the Reimagined Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) (Abes et al., 2007). Strayhorn's (2019) Sense of Belonging model outlines 7 characteristics of belonging that affect undergraduate students. The RMMDI framework adds the concept of meaning-making and self-authorship to a previous study (Jones et al., 2000) that

theorized the process of negotiating identity salience in different contexts. Both of these models acted as points of reference throughout the data analysis process and helped to confirm theoretical saturation.

The study was conducted using a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) research approach. This approach is inductive in nature and seeks to identify emergent themes that then lead to an emergent theory on the social process being explored (Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2001). CGT also recognizes the existing realities brought into the research project by both the researcher and the participants. It also acknowledges the new reality being constructed in the research process itself (Charmaz, 2014).

The primary data source were semi-structured interviews that lasted 45-60 minutes. Participants were recruited through a self-select Google intake form that was distributed via social media and email by a mental health therapist who works frequently with LGBTQIA+ persons and has a national platform in conversations regarding the intersections of faith and sexuality and gender. Of 19 initial inquiries, 9 initial participants met all of the parameters of the study. These 9 participants completed an informed consent form and completed the interview process. Each participant was invited to choose a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality; if they declined to choose, a pseudonym was assigned to them. Only pseudonyms were used following the initial interview.

As is common in CGT, data analysis began after the first interview with the first participant (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher took field notes during the interview and wrote a journal entry following each interview, noting non-verbal data – emotions, facial expressions, anxious movements, etc. These notes and journal entries were constantly compared throughout the data collection process and memos were written making connections between themes

(Charmaz, 2014; Patton, 2001). All of the data were coded in three stages: initial coding (identified key words or phrases), focused coding (collapsed similar codes into fewer codes), theoretical coding (organized focused codes into categories and then themes while exploring relationships between the themes). This process continued until the point of theoretical saturation was reached and an emergent theory was formed.

The data analysis process provided the following answers to the four research questions:

RQ1: How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered outlook on life at faith-based colleges?

LGBTQIA+ alumnix described their remembered experiences of outlook on life as focused on academic success with a desire for self-understanding, community and belonging.

RQ2: How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered social connectedness at faith-based colleges?

LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered experiences of social connectedness are tied to both positive and negative experiences during their undergraduate years. The positive experiences were tied to relationships and the negative experiences were tied to institutional culture or specific events.

RQ3: How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe their remembered interactions with diversity at faith-based colleges?

LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered interactions with institutional diversity to be disappointing and nearly exclusively focused on racial diversity. However, the participants remembered interactions with diverse students as a significant place of connection and belonging.

RQ4: How did LGBTQIA+ alumnix describe the general concept of thriving during college?

LGBTQIA+ alumnix described the concept of thriving as some form of personal growth and development in the midst of social connectedness.

C. Conclusions

The conclusions of the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) study were housed in an emergent theory generated from the data. The purpose of this theory was to explain or theorize about a specific social process (Charmaz, 2014). In the current study, the social process was the undergraduate experience, and the resulting emergent theory was an explanation of LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered experiences in that process. To provide focus for these experiences, categories from Schreiner's (2010a) Thriving Quotient were used as a launching point for the interview protocol. Schreiner defined thriving as,

college students who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Thriving college students not only are academically successful, they also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college" (p. 4).

The emergent theory outlined LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered experiences as they related to this definition. The emergent theory also integrated the theoretical frameworks that guided the study overall, by using them to explain and support many of the conclusions.

The emergent theory on LGBTQIA+ alumnix experiences at faith-based colleges (Figure 1) contained two sections: Same and Different. The first section described how the remembered experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix align with the general experiences of undergraduate students, specifically students who have been included in other studies using the Thriving Quotient. Essentially, this section theorized how and why LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered experiences could lead to or contribute to thriving, as defined by Schreiner (2010a). The second section described the unique remembered experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix in each of

Schreiner's categories and how sexual and gender identity colored the "similar" experiences making them, in fact, different. This section theorized how the unique remembered experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix could act as barriers to thriving, as defined by Schreiner.



Figure 1.
Emergent theory of LGBTQIA+ alumnix experiences

1. Same

In many ways, the final theoretical codes and answers to the research questions in the study were very consistent with student affairs research focusing on student experience,

retention, and persistence (Astin, 1993). The interview protocol focused specifically on the traditional undergraduate experience. None of the participants were non-traditional students, and all of them were only 1-3 years removed from the experience. Thus, the first part of the emergent theory described how the remembered experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix were similar to other undergraduate experiences and contributed to thriving, as confirmed by literature and theoretical frameworks.

The Thriving Quotient is partially based on theories of positive psychology (Schreiner, 2010a). Positive psychology supports the notion that a positive outlook on life and a feeling of being equipped for the task at hand can affect resilience and performance (Schreiner, 2010a). Therefore, positive outlook was the first category of experiences considered in this emergent theory. LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered outlook on life as committed to academic performance and establishing social connections. Specifically, this meant a majority of time and energy was spent on getting good grades, finding a good group of friends, and finding clubs or groups on campus that allowed them to contribute to the campus community. According to Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, all people desire to connect and contribute, establishing a sense of "fit" in any given context. The fulfillment of these needs as well as academic success, specifically through demonstrated grit are documented factors of persistence and student satisfaction in students at-large (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Strayhorn, 2019).

In addition to these externally focused goals, participants were focused on figuring out who they were – belief systems, interests, sexual identity, gender identity, academic interests. Faith-based colleges specifically aim to integrate spiritual formation into all aspects of undergraduate life. The CCCU values this integration explicitly saying, "We are committed to supporting, protecting, and promoting the value of integrating the Bible--divinely inspired, true,

and authoritative--throughout all curricular and co-curricular aspects of the educational experience on our campuses, including teaching and research (CCCU, 2017a, "Christian Mission"). Specific values such as these create a campus culture that, generally, attracts undergraduate students to whom faith is already very important or, at least a familiar/non-offensive subject. All but one participant stated faith was very important to them when they entered college; the majority carried that importance through to the present day. This commitment to faith as a salient identity that informs all other aspects of identity is consistent with the culture of more conservative faith-based colleges. In addition to spiritual identity, the traditional undergraduate years often hold the height of identity development for students, in general (Hughes & Hurtado, 2018; Morgan, 2012; Nicolazzo, 2016), so this expressed desire to discover and land in a place that feels true to the individual is a common one supported by research.

Social connectedness was the next category in the emergent theory. LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered experiences in this category showed significant connection and belonging found with faculty or staff, like-minded peers, and through cocurricular involvement. The participants also found connection and belonging through difficult experiences. These spaces that provide individual encouragement, scholastic support, and in-group affirmation are important to all students. According to Strayhorn's (2019) Sense of Belonging theory, belonging (for all college students) is a byproduct of mattering and belonging begets other positive outcomes (leadership, academic performance, persistence, etc.). Therefore, it makes sense that significant relationships and campus contribution would be the most remembered spaces of social connection because they provided the basic need of belonging. Also, difficult experiences that require grit or result in a shared emotional response often act as bonding and connecting experiences (Nicolazzo, 2016).

The third category of the emergent theory was diversity and included remembered experiences with institutional approaches to diversity and remembered experiences with people or ideas different from the participant. LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered an emphasis on race, nearly exclusively, over other aspects of identity in diversity efforts. They also remembered specific events both academically and relationally where they were challenged to think differently and described significant growth from these experiences. Over the past decade, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) has focused on developing a more robust commitment to racial diversity (CCCU, 2017). This included more diverse hiring, explicit policies, and the formation of new positions dedicated to campus diversity efforts (Dahlvig & Beers, 2018; Schreiner, 2018). These efforts explained the remembered emphasis on racial diversity. Also, Schreiner's (2018) study and the Thriving Quotient tool confirmed that all students who interact with diversity consistently – in the curriculum and in relationships – were more prepared to positively contribute to society as citizens. With this in mind, LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered interactions with institutional diversity are supported by the documented focus on racial diversity within the CCCU. Additionally, the remembered experiences with curricular and relational diversity (engaging with ideas and opinions different from one's own) suggested the participants were equipped to thrive in this area much like other students who chose to engage with difference (Schreiner, 2018).

Finally, LGBTQIA+ alumnix described thriving in tandem with personal growth. All aspects of the Thriving Quotient worked together to suggest students who were completely engaged academically, socially, and emotionally were thriving (Schreiner, 2010a). The model included factors like determination and positive outlook to push through various college experiences with success. This model affirmed the presence of personal growth in thriving and

confirmed the evaluation made by most of the participants that they did, indeed, thrive, because they experienced growth as a person.

2. Different

While LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered experiences did align with and support reported experiences and theoretical models attached to larger student populations, the emergent theory suggested the remembered experiences also differed from general populations in significant ways. These differences stemmed from sexual and gender identity and the specific institutional culture at faith-based colleges.

LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered experiences included a general positive outlook focused on academic success and relationships. However, outlook on life was also significantly different for these students due to the presence of institutional behavioral codes and a heteronormative campus culture. Because of the conservative sexual ethic shared by all of the faith-based colleges in the study, all of the institutions had some level of behavioral code that students must sign and abide by in order to avoid a discipline process. At the very least, these behavioral codes prohibited sexual activity outside the marriage covenant, a covenant reserved for one man and one woman. These codes also often included a prohibition of same-sex dating and any gender identity or gender expression that did not align with the sex assigned at birth. These codes and either the experiential knowledge of or rumored knowledge of the discipline consequences for not living according to the codes created a pervasive state of fear and anxiety in LGBTQIA+ alumnix. The participants remembered fearing expulsion, placing more pressure on themselves to perform academically at a higher level to ensure some sort of protection, and questioning whether they could contribute to campus or be successful, in general, due to their sexual or gender identity. These mental health challenges have been found to be common in

people wrestling to reconcile multiple aspects of their identity (Abes et al., 2007), especially two salient identities such as faith and sexuality (Lomash, 2018; Love, 2005; Vespone, 2016; Wedow et al., 2017) and especially when one of those salient identities is deemed punishable (Hill, 2009; Snow, 2018). All 10 of the 11 participants who entered the undergraduate years as “Evangelical Christians” expressed having walked through a significant faith deconstruction process during the undergraduate years and now identifying broadly as Christian, no longer Evangelical. However, participants clarified that their families and college would not call their faith Christian. This embattlement experienced at intersection of identities also negatively affects a student’s ability to find belonging; this is of particular importance during the first years of the undergraduate experience when the need for belonging is heightened (Strayhorn, 2019). These shared mental health challenges and fears, although seemingly negative experiences, also acted as pathways to belonging as evidenced in the next section of the emergent theory.

Sexual and gender identity also created different experiences in social connectedness. LGBTQIA+ alumnix identified significant pathways to belonging through impactful relationships with faculty, staff, and students. They also found connection in cocurricular activities. However, all of these meaningful connections were possible because various individuals were willing to risk stepping outside of institutional policies. None of the participants remembered a safe space that was sanctioned by the university. Thus, although the participants did remember connection, those connections seemed dependent on others willing to assume some risk (loss of employment, discipline, etc.). LGBTQIA+ alumnix also remembered negative experiences as pathways to belonging, but these experiences went beyond grit and determination. The remembered negative experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix escalated to harassment, microaggressions, and homonegativity. These negative experiences occurred most frequently in

resident halls and at campus religious services, but they served as pathways to finding like-minded peers and mentors. These social connections often led to activism which, in turn, provided an even greater sense of connection in the form of contributions to the campus and cocurricular involvement.

Diversity experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix were different primarily due to the fact that they were members of a subpopulation recognized culturally as an important aspect of diversity, equity, and inclusion but not recognized as such on their campuses. Instead, the participants felt ignored or treated as threats and struggled to find policies that guaranteed basic safety and respect on campus. While all of them celebrated their colleges starting to discuss racial diversity, they also grieved the omission of explicit statements regarding sexual and gender minorities. In contrast, LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered uniquely impactful relationships with other students who identified with some sort of “otherness.” Unlike majority students, the participants sought out relationships with other minoritized students because they felt a solidarity and automatic connection with these students. Because of this, LGBTQIA+ alumnix experienced more interactions with diversity than majority students who easily find connection and belonging in various places and, therefore, had more opportunities to practice the openness essential to diverse citizenship.

Descriptions of thriving were also unique to LGBTQIA+ alumnix. Although one might assume that individuals who self-assess as to thriving during the undergraduate years would, in turn, advise others to study at the same location, that was not the case for these participants. In actuality, thriving for these participants seemed somewhat synonymous with surviving. Only a few participants used the term surviving, and those participants concluded that they did not thrive during the undergraduate years. Those who did say they thrived, described thriving as

building good friendships, keeping mental health in check, and completing degree requirements successfully. The interview protocol did not include a definition of thriving, but the descriptions offered by the participants seemed to assume the label of thriving because the participants did not have any comparative experiences. This set of undergraduate years were all they knew and, in the end, they could not imagine their lives without them but also would not wish them for anyone else. Because of this, LGBTQIA+ alumnix advised future students to study elsewhere or to prioritize finding safe spaces on campus if attending a faith-based college is necessary for one reason or another.

In conclusion, this emergent model of LGBTQIA+ experiences communicates that these participants experienced multiple aspects of college in the same way as many other majority students. However, ultimately, the experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumnix at faith-based colleges were significantly unique. These differences in experiences were supported by the heightened need for belonging during this season and specifically for minoritized populations (Strayhorn, 2019) and by the levels of meaning-making being constantly negotiated during the development process of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes et al., 2007).

D. Limitations

Even though the current study aimed to fill gaps in the research concerning LGBTQIA+ alumnix experiences as they related to thriving, identity development, and belonging using a constructivist grounded theory approach including member-checks and additional researchers, the study had limitations.

First, the study included 11 participants from 7 different institutions. Although the number was sufficient in legitimizing the qualitative methodology, the sample had some limitations. For the study, a broad sample of gender and sexual identities was the goal so as to

accomplish a more general, exploratory study on the entirety of the LGBTQIA+ population. However, achieving this goal also resulted in limitations concerning generalization and application to all subpopulations within the LGBTQIA+ community. Some aspects of the emergent theory may resonate exclusively with trans-alumnix while other aspects may resonate exclusively with cisgender gay men. The amount of intersectionality present in the LGBTQIA+ community makes a broader sample less applicable to all persons within the community.

Second, of the 11 participants, 6 of them attended a faith-based college in the South. The unique culture of the Southern United States often requires statistical adjustment, especially in research projects concerning religion and diversity. It is possible that majority representation from the South weighted the experiences shared by alumnix in ways that are not true for participants who attended faith-based colleges in other areas of the country. Additionally, the study did not include any colleges in the Northeast.

Third, the participants in the study included only one person of color. As mentioned, identifying intersectionality present in this discussion is imperative. Ideally, a broad, general study of LGBTQIA+ alumnix experiences should include adequate representation of persons of color so as not to produce a theory that is only applicable to White persons.

E. Recommendations for research

Based on the major themes that emerged from the study, the emergent theory, and the limitations specific to the study, the researcher offers the following recommendations for future research:

1. As previously mentioned, this subject includes a significant number of intersecting identities. Future research that focuses on experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who hold a specific 1-2 identities (i.e. gay men, non-binary, trans men, etc.) is needed. These more

specific studies would allow for the emergence of theories specifically pertinent to these individuals. Several of these specific studies could lead to comparative studies between the identities, producing more specific data and confirmed theories.

2. Comparative studies with LGBTQIA+ alumnix from non-faith-based colleges and/or from affirming faith-based colleges would be helpful in determining the uniqueness of these experiences. Eliminating significant factors such as prohibitive behavioral codes and adding specific protective policies for LGBTQIA+ individuals would change the landscape of the study in ways that would allow researchers to determine how much of the emergent theory is specific to the conservative faith-based context. Additionally, comparative studies between faith-based colleges of specific denominations could help to assign the experiences more one or more subsets of specific faith-based colleges.
3. Conducting a similar study with current students would confirm or challenge the current study's application beyond alumnix. In addition to this, a quantitative study with current students using the Thriving Quotient tool would provide important comparative data with other studies that use the tool with students of color, alumnix outside of the LGBTQIA+ community, and LGBTQIA+ students at non-faith-based colleges (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; Conn, 2017; Hill et al., 2020). Finding current student participants could be difficult given the lack of institutional data in this demographic and given the risk inherent in making minoritized sexual and gender identities known on these campuses.
4. There is a significant lack of research surrounding LGBTQIA+ college choice processes (Coley, 2018). Even fewer studies exist exploring the LGBTQIA+ college choice process for conservative faith-based colleges. This type of research would be helpful in

answering questions circling around why these students enroll at these college in the first place.

5. This cohort of alumnix (1-3 years removed from enrollment) experiences fall within a global pandemic. Research on the unique effects of this pandemic on higher education and on undergraduate students is needed. Specific research on the pandemic's effect on connection, belonging and thriving for LGBTQIA+ students is needed and could give insight into successful practices for mitigating feelings of isolation, depression, and loneliness.

F. Recommendations for practice

1. For current LGBTQIA+ students

a. Identifying safe spaces

LGBTQIA+ students enrolled at a faith-based colleges should seek out safe spaces as soon as possible in their undergraduate years. These years bring with them a heightened need for belonging, and it is probable that places of belonging will change as various other factors change while enrolled (Strayhorn, 2019). It is recommended that LGBTQIA+ students look for safe symbols, keep ears open for known allies on campus or in the residence halls, and pay attention in classroom settings to identify safe faculty. Students should educate themselves on whether or not an Office of Diversity exists or who the faculty/staff member is directing diversity efforts on campus. Students should also research these offices to know to what extent diversity efforts reach beyond racial diversity. These safe spaces can provide connection as well as potential trusted mentors and friends to walk with the student through the identity development process.

b. See a mental health professional regularly

Although stigmas surrounding mental health can often deter a student from seeking help until the symptoms have progressed significantly, it is the recommendation of this study that LGBTQIA+ students seek regular mental health counseling as soon as possible, within the first year of enrollment. Four of the participants in the current study mentioned attending therapy during the undergraduate years. All but one of those participants noted therapy sessions as an important space to process identity and to gain helpful strategies to manage mental health challenges. Most faith-based colleges have counseling service free of charge for a number of sessions and then for a small fee moving forward. Connecting with a mental health professional early in the undergraduate years not only helps as the student negotiates salient identities and considers how to pursue self-authorship of experiences (Abes et al., 2007) but can also help identify anxiety and depression and provide resources to manage those diagnoses.

c. Get involved on campus

The final recommendation for students is to find and get involved in cocurricular activities on campus. Clubs, musical groups, research cohorts, and intramural sports are a few examples of cocurricular activities that could allow students to more deeply connect with other students and faculty and to gain a sense of value to the community. A state of belonging is a natural byproduct of mattering (Strayhorn, 2019), so establishing a unique and valuable contribution to the campus community early can help to also establish belonging (Conn, 2017).

2. For faith-based colleges

a. Protective policies

Participants noted not feeling protected or seen by their faith-based college. The described institutional commitment to racial diversity lined up with the current CCCU advocacy efforts and strategic plan (Ash & Schreiner, 2016; CCCU, 2017). In addition to efforts toward

racial diversity and reconciliation, the CCCU was instrumental in drafting the “Fairness for All Act” which argues for a coexistence of civil rights for LGBTQIA+ persons and religious liberty for faith-based colleges (CCCU, 2021). While these pieces of legislation remain in a holding position within Congress, faith-based colleges need explicit language in the student handbook about protections ensured for LGBTQIA+ students. These policies should include an explanation of how to file a complaint and how to start a Title IX report. Many student handbooks speak of general safety provided for every student; however, it is the recommendation of this study that faith-based colleges explicitly name protections for LGBTQIA+ students so as to help fight incoming and quickly formed assumptions about hiding and the discipline process. These students need to know the college is for them and for their safety.

b. Commit to conversations and direct communication

Closely aligned with protective policies, it is recommended that faith-based colleges commit to frequent open dialogues about sexual and gender identity and, if possible, invite speakers of various theological perspectives on the topics to campus. Finding ways to communicate the college is not afraid of or avoiding these discussions could be instrumental in building trust with LGBTQIA+ students. Also, in an effort to build trust, the college should commit to direct communication regarding its policies on sexuality and gender identity and expression, including clear language about consequences of acting in opposition to college policies. This communication should be clear beginning with the college recruitment process and extend to what messaging is encouraged/allowed in chapel services, residence halls, etc. University counseling centers should allow employ clear language regarding the practice of or opposition to conversion therapy. In general, more opportunities for communication and more

direct communication could fight the “don’t ask don’t tell” culture described by the participants in this study.

c. Safe spaces

Faith-based colleges should consider what “safe space symbols” could exist on their campuses even while maintaining policies that follow a conservative sexual and gender ethic. Can there be a support group that is not “hidden” but easily accessible to all students with a clear purpose for the group, even if that purpose is merely a place of belonging with no agenda? Can faculty members have some sort of safe symbol in their offices without those symbols meaning malalignment with institutional mission? Additionally, faith-based colleges should consider removing allyship among students as something prohibited in college behavioral codes. Although standards of belief for faculty and staff are logical to protect institutional mission, students should be free to support and offer empathy to peers without fear.

d. Transfer pathways

Two of the participants expressed wanting to transfer but feeling trapped because few of the earned credit hours would transfer successfully to another institution. As faith-based colleges work to be more flexible for credits transferring in, it is recommended that registrars and provosts also consider how to make courses more easily transferred to other institutions in the immediate region. Developing transfer pathways and educating academic deans and student development staff on the existence of those pathways could offer significant help to LGBTQIA+ students needing to study in an alternative campus climate. Although students transferring is never ideal from a revenue perspective, it could be an opportunity for colleges to model a discernment process concerning cultural “fit” and a respectful transition that is a gift to the student.

e. Education for interested faculty/staff/students

All of the participants spoke of faculty or staff mentors as significant places of connection and belonging, along with like-minded and supportive peers. If faith-based colleges desire to develop more up-front policies concerning the care and safety of LGBTQIA+ students, providing education and training for faculty, staff, and students who wish to not only understand this unique subpopulation but also to support them mentally, emotionally, academically, and spiritually would be a good first step in the process. Topics such as identity development, sexual orientation, gender expression, mental health, and basic gender and sexuality vocabulary could provide helpful starting points for conversation as well as a designated list of safe spaces – people equipped and wanting to make space for minoritized sexual and gender identities, even while respecting the conservative policies of the faith-based college.

G. Discussion

1. Why not go somewhere else?

Perhaps one of the largest questions simmering under the entire study is, “Why do these students choose to be at these colleges?” While there is an underwhelming amount of research on the college choice process of LGBTQIA+ students, let alone LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges, the primary factors that show up in the study and also in the existent research are: proximity to home, a desire to be in a Christian environment, specific academic program offered, and financial assistance. In some cases, family influence is significant, but not regularly (Coley, 2018a). In addition to these factors, research shows the identity development process is often at its peak during the undergraduate years (Morgan, 2012). As evidenced in the current study’s participants, few students identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community when choosing or enrolling at a faith-based college (Coley, 2018a; Stratton, 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2009; Yarhouse

et al., 2018). Often, students arrive at various sexual and gender identities during the undergraduate years, but struggle to know how to come out and to whom (Morgan, 2012; Reed et al., 2020; Stratton, 2013; Yarhouse et al., 2018). Participants in this study would confirm the “easier” choice of staying and finishing the degree rather than figuring out how to transfer credits, communicating sensitive truths to parents, and finding a new college.

Moreover, faith-based colleges still rely largely on tuition dollars to fund the operating budget of the institution. Competition for students is high (Grawe 2018,2021; McGee, 2015). This competition makes it difficult for colleges to turn away students for any reason, even if the student may not be a good cultural fit for the college (Conn, 2017). Because of these realities, it is unlikely that faith-based colleges will not continue to have LGBTQIA+ students on their campuses.

2. Invisible identities

With the seeming inevitability of LGBTQIA+ students enrolled at faith-based colleges, a discussion of invisible identities seems necessary. There are many identities that are invisible in undergraduate students that affect what they need to thrive, including establishing belonging and negotiating salient identities (Huges & Hurtado, 2018; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). These identities include, but are not limited to, students living with a disability, students living with mental illness, chronic health conditions, undocumented students, and students within the LGBTQIA+ community. It is unlikely that invisible identities will ever be non-existent, but increased education and awareness could reduce the stigmas associated with them, inviting more and more students to share those identities and assume them without shame. As we move toward education and awareness, it is also important to consistently remind higher education professionals of these invisible possible realities. It would seem Christian principles would unanimously support an

increase in empathy for persons no matter where they are in their journey of personal discovery and development.

3. Competing loyalties

All participants in the study found connection and belonging outside the bounds of campus policies. Faculty and staff members risk employment and current students risk expulsion if they offer points of connection or affirmation to LGBTQIA+ students. These scenarios create significant competing loyalties, particularly for faculty and staff. Faculty and staff often feel forced to choose between student care and institutional loyalty (Scibetta, 2019). These loyalty questions can affect the strength of an institution and its poise for success in the future. Moral communities thrive on homogeneity of values/convictions (Hill, 2009, 2011). An increasing threat to this homogeneity could require action. Some faith-based colleges have begun requiring faculty and staff to sign explicit statements of belief regarding sexuality and gender; often, these statements are tied to faculty contracts (Bradley, 2017). If faith-based colleges continue to press into a separation of who is “all in” and who is not, these colleges should also ready themselves for significant changes in personnel. If faith-based colleges continue to not ask these questions of employees, a greater divide could develop within faculty and staff which, in turn, could weaken the strength of the institution, overall (Scibetta, 2019).

4. Advice for residence life employees

Residence life employees are often the starting point for both the dissemination and the initiation of behavioral code processes at faith-based colleges. This fact places these individuals in a unique position, specifically with regards to the LGBTQIA+ communities. In addition to training similar to that mentioned in implications for practice for faith-based colleges, higher education professionals in roles responsible for developing these behavioral codes would do well

to consider the philosophies that drive these codes. Faith-based colleges often focus on the idea of redemption in these codes, wishing to offer support and restore individuals to places of health and even thriving. However, these intentions are often under-communicated or not communicated at all. Additionally, residence life staff (specifically resident directors and resident assistants) are often under informed as to what actually takes place in these processes and what options are available to them and to their residents. Residence life directors should include these discussions in annual residence life training sessions before the beginning of each semester. Resident assistants and the Dean of Students should adopt common vernacular and uniformity in terms of process but also in terms of support and care available for LGBTQIA+ students. This kind of intentionality would work to eliminate the ambiguity and “don’t ask, don’t tell” climate often felt by residence life staff at faith-based colleges with conservative behavioral codes.

In addition to this robust commitment to direct communication and transparency, residence life staff should give careful consideration to personal convictions regarding sexual and gender identity. Serving in an official capacity with the understood responsibility of articulating and enforcing conservative university policies while personally affirming a more progressive ethic can produce emotional and professional stress. Many take on these roles to work for the common good and be an advocated for minoritized populations. However, residence life staff should consider the potential professional and personal costs of these competing convictions.

5. Religious freedom

With the ever-changing political landscape in the United States, conversations surrounding religious freedom continue to loom. As of now, faith-based colleges can receive

federal funding with a commitment to Title IX compliance and federal financial-aid requirements outlined in Title IV. However, definitions of “on the basis of sex” seem to shift with each new administration. Under the Biden administration, the Equality Act would force faith-based colleges to make important decisions between institutional mission influenced by specific doctrinal positions and the receipt of federal funds. But this Act is currently stuck in the US Senate with little movement forward without revisions. The CCCU has been active in proposing the Fairness for All Act which would promote civil rights for all LGBTQIA+ persons but also allow for religious freedom to determine institutional specific policies in hiring practices and codes of conduct. This national conversation very much affects the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges. These colleges already fight a culture increasingly accepting of all sexual and gender identities. National legislation in these areas would position faith-based colleges in an even more ostracized position and result in great financial constrain. Looking at this conversation with honesty while considering the narratives of LGBTQIA+ students should push these colleges toward some sort of moderate “third-way” that, at the very least, pursues harm reduction and gives all students an equal chance at thriving during the undergraduate years.

H. Closing

Student experiences are an excellent way to evaluate college programming, processes and policies. From them, we can learn what is most beneficial to meeting the institutional learning outcomes and what resources are less helpful. The participants in the study shared their experiences as LGBTQIA+ alumnix of faith-based colleges. From them, the study concluded that while LGBTQIA+ alumnix remembered experiences do share some commonalities with the general undergraduate population, they are meaningfully different, as well. These differences revealed mental health struggles, a felt need to hide who they are, and feelings of betrayal toward

the college with regards to basic protections and support. These factors, along with the entirety of the emergent theory in the study suggest much work needs to be done for LGBTQIA+ students to thrive at faith-based colleges. According to the data, these participants felt alone at times and together at times. Given the increasing political divides in the United States and even in the Christian Church, it's imperative faith-based colleges find a way to increase togetherness and decrease loneliness, if not in the name of Christian hospitality, at least in pursuit and promotion of intellectual virtues.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Email to Matthias Roberts, MA, LMHCA

Matthias,

Thank you for agreeing to serve as a connection point between myself and potential participants for my doctoral dissertation. As we discussed, my dissertation focuses on the undergraduate experiences of LGBTQIA+ students as remembered by alumnix 1-3 years removed from enrollment at the institution. These experiences will be considered with a particular focus on student thriving with an end goal of producing a grounded theory on how LGBTQIA+ undergraduate can thrive at faith-based colleges. I am attaching a self-select intake Google form link (to be sent to potential participants), an informed consent form (which I will send to participants who have agreed to be part of the study), and my interview protocol (to be used in all participant interviews).

If you have questions about this research project or the process, please feel free to contact me at jre018@uark.edu or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Michael Miller at mtmille@uark.edu.

Following the conclusion of the study, I will be more than willing to share the final research findings and discussion points.

Thanks, again, for your willingness to distribute this intake form!

Sincerely,

Jen Edwards

Appendix B – Self-select Intake Form (Google form)

Introduction

Hello! My name is Jen Edwards, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education program at the University of Arkansas. I am writing to ask if you might be willing to participate in my dissertation research.

What is the study about?

My dissertation research seeks to explore the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals who attended faith-based colleges and universities within the last 3 years. Specifically, this study takes a constructivist grounded theory approach and will hope to construct theories on what helps LGBTQIA+ students to thrive during the undergraduate years at a faith-based college.

What will I be asked to do?

The data from the study will come from individual semi-structured interviews. As a participant in this study, you commit to a 45-60 minute interview, conducted via zoom (audio and video recording). The interview will include questions pertaining to the college choice process, social connectedness or community, and experiences with diversity. In addition to this initial interview, you will be asked to review the transcript of your interview for accuracy. All transcripts will use a pseudonym that you choose during the interview process. If you do not choose a pseudonym, one will be assigned to you by the researcher. Once the transcript is deemed accurate, original recordings with actual names will be destroyed.

Who do I contact if I have questions?

If you have general questions about this research, you can contact:

Jen Edwards (primary researcher)
jre018@uark.edu

Dr. Michael Miller (faculty supervisor)
mtmille@uark.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact:

Ro Windwalker (Human Subjects Compliance Coordinator for University of Arkansas)
irb@uark.edu or 479-575-2208

Completing the form below indicates that you are interested in the study, understand the purpose of the study and agree to be contacted for possible participation via interview. *Your participation is voluntary; your participation will not adversely affect your relationship with the University of Arkansas, the primary researcher, or your alma mater. You may withdraw from participation at any point.* An informed consent form will be sent to all final participants prior to any interview.

Thank you, in advance, for your consideration. I look forward to speaking with you.

Google Form

1. First name:
2. Faith-based college attended:
3. Years enrolled:
4. Did you graduate from this school? YES NO
5. Gender identity
6. Sexual identity
7. Preferred method of contact: EMAIL or TEXT
8. Email:
9. Phone:
10. Consent: My typed signature on this form serves as my consent to be contacted for possible participation in this qualitative research study.

Appendix C – Email to potential participant

Hello!

If you are receiving this email, you expressed interest in participating in a doctoral dissertation study focused on LGBTQIA+ undergraduate experiences at faith-based colleges. Your participation in this study is valuable and important to current research efforts to understand the unique experiences of LGBTQIA+ students at faith-based colleges and to help those colleges know what might increase personal and emotional thriving in the lives LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students. Thank you, in advance, for sharing your story.

As we begin this study, please fill out the informed consent form found here (hyperlink included). Your signature at the bottom of this form serves as your given informed consent to proceed with the interview phase of the research. Once I have received your signed informed consent, I will contact you to set up an initial interview. These interviews will last approximately 45-60 minutes in length and will be conducted via Zoom (audio and video). Following the initial interview, you will be invited to review the transcription of the interview to ensure accuracy (This will take around 1 hour of time). This transcription will use a pseudonym chosen in the interview process. From this point on, your real name will not be used. Once the transcription is deemed accurate, all original Zoom recordings will be destroyed.

If you have questions regarding this research project, feel free to email:

Jen Edwards (primary researcher)
jre018@uark.edu

Dr. Michael Miller (faculty supervisor)
mtmille@uark.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact:
Ro Windwalker (Human Subjects Compliance Coordinator for University of Arkansas)
irb@uark.edu.

Again, I am so grateful for your willingness to share your story and to participate in this important research project.

Sincerely,
Jen Edwards

Appendix D – Online informed consent

Alone Together: The Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Undergraduates at Faith-based Colleges

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Jennifer Edwards

Faculty Advisor: Michael Miller

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study about the experiences of LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students at faith-based colleges. You are being asked to participate in this study because you were enrolled at a faith-based college with the last three years, and you identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?

Jennifer Edwards (jre018@uark.edu)

University of Arkansas

Who is the Faculty Advisor?

Dr. Michael Miller (mtmille@uark.edu)

University of Arkansas

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose for conducting the study will be to explore the undergraduate experiences of LGBTQIA+ alumni who attended faith-based colleges. This exploration of experiences will aim to develop theories pertaining to interpersonal thriving during the undergraduate experience as described by LGBTQIA+ alumni.

Who will participate in this study?

For the study, the sample will consist of 10-12 recent alumnix (1-3 years removed) from faith-based colleges throughout the United States. These participants will likely range in age from 23-26 years old. The colleges represented will most likely be from member institutions of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), and the study will aim to maintain a breadth of representation in terms of gender and sexual identity and geographic location.

What am I being asked to do?

Your participation will require the following:

You will be asked to participate in one, 45-60-minute interview via Zoom web conferencing (audio and video). Some participants may be asked to participate in one additional follow up interview, if deemed beneficial to the research process. You will also be asked to review the transcript of your interview to check for accuracy and validity (about 1 hour time commitment). During the interview, a pseudonym will be chosen by you or assigned to you. This pseudonym will be used from the point of transcription forward. Once the transcription is deemed accurate, original recordings with your actual name will be destroyed.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

During the interview process, you will be asked questions regarding sexuality and gender. These questions may bring discomfort, shame, or trauma response. You will be given the opportunity not to answer any question or to stop if these feelings/responses arise.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

The possible benefit of this study to you is the potential to feel more seen and known as a result of the interview and study results. Additionally, you will play an important part in potentially helping current and future LGBTQIA+ students and faith-based colleges experience greater levels of thriving as a result of your vulnerability and reflection.

How long will the study last?

Data collection for the study will last approximately six months. You will sit for one 45-60-minute interview at the beginning of this six-month period. One possible follow-up interview lasting 30-45 minutes will happen 1-2 months following the initial interview. Your review of the interview transcript will be requested within 1 month of the interview recording. Reviewing this transcript should take approximately 1 hour. You will be requested to submit any revisions or questions within two weeks of receiving the transcript.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?

You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this study.

Will I have to pay for anything?

No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. You will not be affected negatively in any way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law.

All interview recordings, transcripts, and notes will be kept in a password protected folder on a personal, password-protected laptop.

Will I know the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Michael Miller (mtmille@uark.edu) or Principal Researcher, Jennifer Edwards (jre018@uark.edu). You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Jennifer Edwards (jre018@uark.edu)
University of Arkansas

Dr. Michael Miller (mtmille@uark.edu)
University of Arkansas

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
109 MLKG Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201
479-575-2208
irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Appendix E – Interview Protocol

**Alone Together:
The LGBTQIA+ Experiences of Undergraduates at Faith-Based Colleges
University of Arkansas**

Time of interview: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Faith-based college: _____

Years enrolled: _____

Gender identity: _____

Sexual identity: _____

Graduated (yes or no): _____

THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY ABOUT LGBTQIA+ UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCES AT FAITH-BASED COLLEGES. THIS STUDY REALLY FOCUSES ON YOU AND YOUR EXPERIENCES WHILE ENROLLED AT A FAITH-BASED COLLEGE.

I AM PROVIDING YOU WITH AN INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOU TO REVIEW AND SIGN, IF YOU AGREE. AS NOTED, YOUR IDENTITY WILL BE HELD IN STRICTEST CONFIDENCE AND YOUR IDENTITY WILL NOT BE LINKED DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY WITH THE STUDY FINDINGS.

ONLY FIELD NOTES ON THIS INTERVIEW GUIDE WILL BE COLLECTED DURING THIS INTERVIEW.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS WILL BE SENT BACK TO YOU FOR ACCURACY CHECKS. TRANSCRIPTIONS WILL USE PSEUDONYMS ONLY. ONCE ACCURACY IS ESTABLISHED, ORIGINAL RECORDINGS USING ACTUAL NAMES WILL BE DESTROYED.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY AND YOU MAINTAIN THE RIGHT TO WITHDRAW AT ANY TIME.

BEFORE WE BEGIN, DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

DO I HAVE YOUR PERMISSION TO BEGIN?

Should you have questions or concerns about this survey, please contact Jen Edwards (jre018@uark.edu) or her Dissertation Director, Dr. Michael Miller (mtmille@uark.edu), University of Arkansas.

SECTION I: YOUR PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. What is your name and what faith-based college did you attend?
2. Is this the only college or university you attended during the undergraduate years?
3. What years were you enrolled at this college?
4. Did you graduate from this college?
5. What was the role of family in your life when you enrolled in college?
6. What was the role of religion in your life when you enrolled in college?
7. Were you a part of a specific religious affiliation/denomination in the years before college?
8. What is your current sexual identity?
9. What is your current gender identity?
10. What pronouns do you prefer I use?
11. Do you wish to choose the pseudonym used for this interview in the data analysis? If not, I will select a pseudonym in the transcription process.

Possible follow-up questions/topics:

SECTION II: COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS

1. Why did you choose to enroll in classes at this college?
2. How did you identify in term of sexual orientation and gender identity during the college decision-making process?
3. How did you identify spiritually during the college decision-making process?

Possible follow-up questions/topics:

SECTION III: POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE

1. Describe your overall approach to life during the undergraduate years.
2. Describe what success meant to you during the undergraduate years.
3. Did your college employ any strengths-based curriculum? If so, what were your top strengths?
4. Describe your experience with the strengths-based training (if applicable).
5. How did your sexual and/or gender identity influence your perspectives on success or overall approach to life during your undergraduate years?
- 6.

Possible follow-up questions/topics:

- Career development experiences
- Student success/TRIO program involvement

SECTION IV: DIVERSE CITIZENSHIP

1. How would you describe your college's relationship with diversity and inclusion?

2. Describe your interactions with students different than yourself during the undergraduate years.
3. Describe a time when you were challenged by a peer to think differently about something during your undergraduate years.
4. Describe a time when the curriculum challenged you to think differently about something.
5. How did your sexual and/or gender identity affect your perspective or experiences on diversity and inclusion?

Possible follow-up questions/topics:

- Extracurricular involvement
- Faculty mentoring
- Residence life/cocurricular components or programming

SECTION V: SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

1. What were the main points of connection and belonging during your undergraduate years?
2. What were the settings or experiences that brought the most struggle or conflict for you?
3. What was most helpful/encouraging to you as you continued on in education at your alma mater (university sponsored programs, faculty, staff, ad hoc encouragement, peer groups)?
4. What were the main factors that contributed to your decision to leave the school at which you were enrolled? (if applicable)
5. How would you describe your sense of community during your undergraduate years?
6. What do you feel you contributed to campus culture? Academically? Socially?
7. What gifts did you bring to the campus?
8. How do you think your sexual or gender identity influenced your social connectedness or community?

Possible follow-up questions/topics:

SECTION VI: THRIVING

1. How would you describe what it means to thrive during college?
2. Using your definitions, did you thrive during your undergraduate years?
3. What factors helped you to thrive?
4. What factors hindered your ability to thrive?

SECTION VII: FINAL REFLECTIONS/CLOSING

1. If you had the choice to do the undergraduate years over again, would you change anything?
2. What advice do you have for LGBTQIA+ undergraduate students studying at faith-based colleges that might help them thrive?
3. Are there any closing thoughts you would like to add before we close? Anything you want to make sure I hear?

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY!

Appendix F – Invitation to Member Check

Member Check: Transcript

Dear (Participant name),

Thank you for completing the interview for the study titled: Alone Together?

The LGBTQIA+ Experiences of Undergraduates at Faith-Based Colleges. I appreciate your continued willingness to participate in this study. Attached is a complete transcript of your interview. This transcript uses the pseudonym chosen or assigned during the interview process. Please read through it, and let me know if you have any questions, concerns. Also, please let me know if there is anything would like to change, add, or delete in the transcript. I want to assure that your voice and narrative has been accurately captured in this transcript. Please submit these revisions, questions, additions, etc. by (two weeks from email date).

Thank you again for participating.

Jen Edwards, PhD Candidate, Higher Education, University of Arkansas

Appendix G – IRB Approval



To: Jennifer Renee Edwards
From: Douglas J Adams, Chair
 IRB Expedited Review
Date: 05/28/2021
Action: **Expedited Approval**
Action Date: 05/28/2021
Protocol #: 1903182044
Study Title: Alone Together: The Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Undergraduates at Faith-based Colleges
Expiration Date: 05/03/2022
Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Michael T Miller, Investigator