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Learning from the Mediators: How Student Affairs Staff at Christian Colleges Combine Care and Conviction in Their Responses to LGBTQ+ Students

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between faith-based institutions and students who identify as LGBTQ+ has attracted considerable attention of late. Most of this scholarly attention, however, has focused upon the students themselves. In this article, we examine the contemporary experience of 371 student affairs leaders (SALs) who serve as the primary mediators between the desires and demands of LGBTQ+ advocates, scholars, and students, and the policies of current administrators. This article reports on previously unexplored data from a larger grounded theory study on Christ-enlivened student affairs to answer the research question: How do SALs at Christian universities approach LGBTQ+ students in light of the Christian mission of their institutions? Data were collected using a qualitative questionnaire of 301 SALs, as well as extended interviews with 70 SALs. Participants' moral/theological responses included a collection of Christian virtues and rules. They indicated a range of helpful practices—including how they handled campus groups—but generally agreed on the dearth of training and education they had received on the topic. In our discussion, we compare our findings to the recommendations of previous scholars before elaborating our own list of recommendations. Our suggestions for Christian campuses include a re-imagined policy statement, a commitment to education rather than training, a focus on the spiritual needs of students, and some recommendations for LGBTQ+ campus groups.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQ+; sexuality; student affairs; Christian colleges

Introduction

The relationship between faith-based institutions and students who identify as LGBTQ+ has attracted considerable attention of late in Christian higher education scholarship (Coley, 2017, 2018; Craig et al., 2017; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Slater, 2019; Snow, 2018; Tuttle, 2016; Wentz & Wessel, 2011, 2012; Wolff et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2009, 2018; Yuan, 2016). This attention is understandable given that the relationship is one of the most contentious moral issues for CCCU institutions (Jaschik, 2015; Weber, 2015). Most of the scholarly attention, however, has focused upon the students themselves.

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Given the way student affairs leaders (SALs) are trained to shape campus environments and culture (Reason & Broido, 2016), and the effects of campus culture on LGBTQ+ students on Christian college campuses (Craig et al., 2017), it is interesting that so few studies regarding LGBTQ+ issues have been conducted on this population. Although understandable, the professionals tasked with caring for these students should not be neglected. Thus, in this article, we sought to examine the contemporary experience of the SALs who serve as the primary mediators between LGBTQ+ advocates', scholars', and students' desires and demands, and current administrators and administrative policies. We wanted to learn about the ways in which student affairs staff negotiate this relationship. This article reports on previously unexplored data from a larger grounded theory study on Christ-enlivened student affairs (Glanzer et al., 2020) to address the following research question: *How do SALs at Christian universities approach LGBTQ+ students in light of the Christian mission of their institutions?*

Literature Review

We know very little about the answer to our research question because much of the recent research on Christian higher education and the LGBTQ+ population has focused on listening to and understanding the lived experience of students identifying as sexual minorities (Coley, 2017, 2018; Craig et al., 2017; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Snow, 2018; Wentz & Wessel, 2011, 2012; Wolff et al., 2017; Yarhouse et al., 2009, 2018; Yuan, 2016) or evaluating the collegiate outcomes for these students (Wolff & Hines, 2010; Wolff et al., 2016). Although a few of these studies touched upon the administrative responses of Christian colleges and universities or the legal issues involved (e.g., Coley, 2018; Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016), we are aware of only one article that undertook a study of this area from the perspective of student affairs staff at Christian colleges and universities (Vespone, 2016). Vespone's (2016) article simply reported on the experiences of a staff member leading a support group on one campus.

These studies of students do, however, reveal some important reasons why one should care about the response of SALs. Craig et al. (2017) and Wolff et al. (2017) found that LGBTQ+ students experienced a wide range of mental health difficulties related to individual stigma, interpersonal stigma, fear, isolation, marginalization, and reconciling their faith and sexual experiences. What efforts are SALs making to help these students?

Because SALs will be the individuals communicating the administration's position, advising student groups, and conversing with sexual minorities in the residence halls, understanding their experience addressing students' unique needs is vitally important to understanding what currently is being done and what can be done in the future (Glanzer et al., 2020). Although SALs within institutions affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU) are fairly theologically orthodox (Glanzer et al., 2020), we do not know how those theological positions have led SALs to respond to LGBTQ+ students. Thus, we first need to build a theory about what they are doing to negotiate the relationship of LGBTQ+-identifying students and Christian college policies and administrations. We chose a grounded theory approach because, as Corbin and Strauss (2015) observed, "Since persons are varied in their responses, it is important

to obtain multiple perspectives on events and to build variation into analytic schemes” (p. 28). We then used the concepts we discovered to build a theory.

Still, no grounded theory moves forward without prior conceptual guideposts. As we coded our qualitative data, we did have in mind a certain normative framework that had been indicated by previous scholars. When it comes to admonitions related to student affairs practice, all of the scholars referenced above (Rockenbach & Crandall, 2016; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wolff et al., 2012, 2017) argued for SALs at Christian institutions to think about the needs of students who identify as LGBTQ+ in an ascending progression:

1. Ensure safety and freedom from harassment, bullying, and mistreatment.
2. Provide staff training and counseling resources in this area.
3. Address students’ unique spiritual well-being.
4. Allow the identification of faculty and staff allies.
5. Allow LGBTQ+ groups to organize.
6. Allow LGBTQ+ advocacy.

As revealed by this list, they hoped for the increased care and spiritual development of these students. In addition, some of the scholars also hoped that administrators at Christian colleges would allow LGBTQ+ student groups to advocate for changing the current Christian sexual standards. In other words, we used these six admonitions as the suggested normative theoretical framework for practice and then evaluated the degree to which Christian SALs engaged in these practices. Furthermore, we examined why they (SALs), or their institution, do or do not use these normative perspectives and suggested activities.

Method

This article is part of a larger grounded theory study exploring how Christianity informed the student affairs practice of Christian SALs (Glanzer et al., 2020). The critical realist ontological commitments (e.g., Gorski, 2013; Smith, 2010) guiding the larger study led us to collect and analyze various forms of data in multiple stages. This approach provided us with the opportunity to allow participant responses to shape and define the next phase of inquiry at each stage of the process in accordance with the grounded theory process of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014).

For this article, we examined qualitative responses from interviews and questionnaire responses to questions related to sexual education, discussions about identity (in relation to sexuality), and LGBTQ+ topics that were not included in earlier publications. We analyzed these responses in light of a constructionist epistemology, which holds that the meaning humans make of their unique experiences is not created independently (Crotty, 1998). To explore the social construction of reality embedded within individual responses, we used an interpretivist theoretical approach (Crotty, 1998). This approach provided the necessary framework for capturing the cultural and historical meanings situated within participants’ individual constructions.